TOGETHER AND ALONE: INTIMACY AND ALIENATION

IN THE AGE OF COMPETITIVE INDIVIDUALISM

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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I begin by discussing structural alienation in the United States and its relationship to the pursuit of romantic love. I argue that romantic love is idealized due the lack of community inherent in a competitive, individualistic society; the romantic partner becomes a replacement for the community individuals once relied on for material and psychological needs. Despite the allure of romantic love, the norms and values associated with it often undermine the development of intimacy, as does the larger society in which the relationship is situated. I refer to this phenomenon as the romantic contradiction. I then discuss some of the factors that contribute to the romantic contradiction, such as the commodification of relationships in a market-based economy, impression management in dating, and the role of gender in heterosexual relationships.

Central to this dissertation, I investigate the dominant ideology of romantic love by conducting a textual analysis of the ten most popular romantic comedies and self-help books on romantic relationships from 2006-2010. My findings suggest the dominant ideology of romantic love promotes long-term, monogamous relationships as the primary way to meet a person's psychological and physical needs. Furthermore, the ideal relationship is based on gendered needs and responsibilities: men are expected to provide

material and physical protection, while women are expected to provide emotional support and sexual intimacy. The ideology encourages a dependency between women and men and various forms of inequality. It also reinforces individualism in relationships by placing greater emphasis on meeting needs rather than developing intimacy (e.g. knowledge, empathy) for its own sake. I conclude with a discussion of competitive individualism and romantic alienation, and suggest avenues for reducing gender dependency and alienation in relationships.

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To Mom, who taught me never to quit.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Samantha Hess offers a somewhat controversial service: clients pay $60 an hour for cuddling and other types of physical intimacy, such as holding hands and having their hair stroked. Her clients mostly consist of men unable to find intimacy elsewhere: "She's nuzzled lonely 24-year-olds who toil at graveyard shifts. She's pet the chronically depressed. She's spooned single dads. A lot of single dads, Hess said" (Kavanaugh 2013). During the first month of business she received almost 10,000 emails a week from potential clients (Hooton 2014). A similar business, The Snuggle Buddies, recruits professional cuddlers from around the country and is operating in at least 30 states (Levine 2015). There are other services, both legal and illegal, that provide intimacy to those in need. Therapists offer a certain level of emotional support to clients, and prostitution is commonly referred to as "the world's oldest profession." Professional cuddling represents a new type of intimacy somewhere between the emotional support received from a therapist and the physical intimacy experienced during sex. The emergence of this phenomenon indicates that many who lack intimacy have turned to the only place left for help: the marketplace.

Social scientists have become increasingly concerned about social isolation and loneliness in the United States. In his research on social networks, Putnam (2000) found that Americans have retreated from almost all areas of social life: participation in community organizations, religious groups, and informal socializing have all declined since the 1960s. Conversely, individualized forms of entertainment such as watching television have increased. McPherson et al. (2006) found similar trends in their analysis of General Social Survey data from 1985 and 2004, noting a significant decrease in average network size. Not only are people physically isolated, they *feel* isolated. There was a 50% increase in the number of people who felt they could only confide in their spouse, which suggests that as social networks decrease the burden for support is placed on fewer people, particularly romantic partners. As social networks have declined, so has social trust. According to General Social Survey data from 1972, 46% of respondents

indicated that "most people can be trusted," with 50% indicating that "you can't be too careful in dealing with people." In 2006, this had shifted substantially: 32% believed people can be trusted and 62% believed that they could not be trusted, which represents a 14.0% decrease in trust, and a 12% increase in distrust.

People are not only physically isolated, they *feel* isolated. Loneliness is a "social pain" that occurs from a lack of social connection (Rokach 2013). While data on the prevalence of loneliness in the United States is lacking, a 2010 national study published by the American Association of Retired Persons found that 35% of adults 45 years and older experienced loneliness, 77% of which reported feeling lonely for one year or more (Wilson and Moulton 2010). Loneliness is associated with a number of psychological issues, such as depression (Matthews et al. 2016; Cacioppo et al. 2006), anxiety (Cacioppo and Patrick 2008), and suicidal thoughts (Stravynski and Boyer 2001). These issues are compounded by the social stigma attached to being lonely: "Loneliness carries a significant social stigma, and the social perceptions of lonely people are generally unfavorable. Lonely people have, often, very negative self-perceptions, and their inability to establish social ties suggest that they may have personal inadequacies, or socially undesirable attributes" (Rokach 2015:3).

Loneliness also substantially increases the risk of early mortality: "Substantial evidence now indicates that individuals lacking social connections (both objective and subjective social isolation) are at risk for premature mortality. The risk associated with social isolation and loneliness is comparable with well-established risk factors for mortality, including those identified by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services" (Holt-Lunstad et al. 2015:235). The authors found that social isolation is associated with a 29% increased risk of early mortality; loneliness is associated with a 26% increased risk in early mortality. Individuals who are lonely experience greater levels of stress, leading to increased risk of heart disease. Loneliness also undermines the individual's ability to lead a physically healthy lifestyle, and often results in poor diet and exercise (Cacioppo and Patrick 2008).

People need to feel connected to institutions as well as individuals. A related concept, sense of belonging, is the feeling of being a part of something larger than oneself, a combination of group acceptance and finding meaning in one's social role: "…sense of

belonging is experienced when an individual feels valued, needed, and important by a group of people, and has a sense that she or he fits in with them (Friedman 2007:7). Lack of belonging is associated with depression, anxiety, loneliness, and suicidality (Hagerty and Patusky 1995). Like loneliness, lack of belonging is often experienced by those who are social connected. One study on depression and belonging found that social network size had little effect on level of belonging (Hagerty et al. 1992). In other words, an individual can be surrounded by others yet feel alone.

There is also an epidemic of psychological disorders in American society. According to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America, major depressive disorder is the leading cause of disability for individuals 15-44 years old, affecting 6.9% of the total population. Additionally, 18% of the population suffers from at least one anxiety disorder. The National Institute of Mental Health currently notes that 46% of Americans experience at least one mental disorder in their lifetime. To cope with the psychological strain, individuals self-medicate using both licit and illicit drugs. The 2013 UN Drug Report found that Americans have some of the highest rates of drug use in the world. 52.2% of the population reported using alcohol in the past month, with 25.5% using tobacco and 9.4% using illicit drugs such as cannabis, heroin, or cocaine.[1] In their analysis of insurance data, Medco Health Solutions (2011) found that "the number of Americans on medications used to treat psychological and behavioral disorder has substantially increased since 2001; more than one in five adults was on at least one of these medications in 2010, up 22 percent from ten years earlier. Women are far more likely to take a drug to treat a mental health condition than men, with more than a quarter of the adult female population on these drugs in 2010 as compared to 15 percent of men." Antidepressants were the third most used prescription drug in the U.S. from 2005-2008, and the most common among individuals 18-44 years of age, representing a 400% increase in antidepressant use overall from the previous two decades (NCHS 2011).

In the 1980s the Partnership for a Drug Free America ran a series of commercials on the dangers of drug addiction. The ads featured "a rat in close-up licking at a water bottle, as the narrator says: 'Only one drug is so addictive, 9 nine out of ten laboratory rats will use it. And use it. And use it. Until dead. It's called cocaine. And it can do the

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[1] It should be noted that cannabis is currently legal in four states and Washington D.C.

same thing to you.' The rat runs about manically, then—as promised by the scary music—drops dead. Similar rat experiments had been run to prove the addictiveness of heroin and other drugs" (Hari 2015:171).

There is a similar experiment, however, that challenges the notion that drug use is primarily motivated by physical cravings. The original experiments placed the rat in social isolation, with nothing to occupy its time other than the heroin or cocaine water provided by the researchers. The new experiment placed multiple rats together in a single cage and provided them with food, water, and heroin. At the same time, a rat was isolated in a separate cage with only heroin and water. The isolated rat consumed five times the heroin as the rats who lived together. To further test the results, a rat that had been isolated while using heroin for 57 days was placed in a cage with the other rats. In time, they began to use less heroin and eventually started behaving normally (Hari 2015). This experiment demonstrates the power of environment to influence drug use:

> It isn't the drug that causes the harmful behavior—it's the environment. An isolated rat will almost always become a junkie. A rat with a good life almost never will, no matter how many drugs you make available to him…Addiction is an adaptation. It's not you—it's the cage you live in (Hari 2015:172).

Research on subjective well-being supports this insight. Although material wealth has a positive effect on well-being to a certain degree, it is overshadowed by the need for social ties, civic participation, and trust in others (Helliwell and Putnam 2004).

Sometimes social pain is turned outward in rage. Mass shootings have become increasingly common in recent years, a phenomenon largely isolated to American society. These shootings are typically orchestrated by a lone gunman in a public setting (e.g. shopping mall, movie theater), and the victims are targeted somewhat indiscriminately. While undoubtedly a complex phenomenon, it is reasonable to assume that social disconnection plays some part in it. The act of killing another human being requires a certain level of detachment from the victim—the act of killing large numbers of strangers implies a high level of detachment from people in general. Detachment, coupled with violent rage.

The 2015 shooting at Umpqua Community College in Roseburg, Oregon underscores this point. The shooter, Chris Harper Mercer, felt socially isolated and disconnected from others. He made attempts to connect to others online through blog posts and dating sites,

but ultimately decided there was no hope for a meaningful connection with others (Healy and Lovett 2015). In one of his blog posts he was sympathetic to another mass shooter whom he likely identified with: "People like him have nothing left to live for, and the only thing left to do is lash out at a society that has abandoned him…I have noticed that so many people like him are all alone and unknown, yet when they spill a little blood, the whole world knows who they are" (Miller and Wang 2015). Taken together, trends in social isolation and loneliness, drug use, and indiscriminate violence suggest that many Americans feel alienated from institutions, others, and the self.

Romantic Love and Alienation

Arguably the leading scholar on the sociology of love, Illouz has written two major works on how romantic experience is shaped by society. *Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, examines the fusion of romantic love with consumerism in the 20th century and how advertising commodified romance and romanticized commodification. First, Illouz explores why people find romantic love so compelling. She argues that romantic love allows individuals to experience a "utopia" where oppressive circumstances are temporarily transcended through intense emotional union with another person, similar to the collective effervescence experienced during religious rituals. Next, Illouz analyzes advertisements from the early 20th century, demonstrating that advertisers increasingly depicted romantic encounters alongside forms of consumption. As a result, commodified rituals such as dining out or walking along the beach became the dominant way Americans understood and experienced romance. Moreover, the commodification of love creates a contradictory experience, where individuals frame romance in terms of commodified rituals, yet their everyday lives conflict with the images found in advertisements. Through interviews of middle-class and working-class heterosexual whites, she finds that even when individuals are critical of romantic imagery as being inauthentic or unrealistic, they still frame romantic experiences in relation to them.

In addition to advertisements, Illouz analyzes women's magazines, noting they take a more rational and pragmatic approach towards romantic relationships. The texts depicted love in terms of meeting needs *and* intense emotional union, attempting to balance

pragmatic relationship strategies with consumption and romance. Like the economic sphere, needs are "achieved through control, negotiation, and compromise" which "foster the same values required for success in business: independence, self-reliance, aggressiveness, and the ability to project one's personality and needs" (194). Her critique of romantic love is not centered on how individualism and consumption affect intimacy, however, but the inability of working class individuals to attain the romantic utopia. Romantic rituals serve to initiate or reinforce the romantic bond between individuals, yet participating in romantic rituals requires both time and financial resources, which the working class lack in comparison to middle class Americans. The problem is therefore not commodified romance, but unequal access to it.

In *Why Love Hurts: A Sociological Explanation*, Illouz examines romantic love in cultural works, ranging from the 19th century novel *Pride in Prejudice* to modern television shows such as *Sex and the City*. She notes two major shifts. First, while family members and neighbors traditionally participated in the courtship process, individuals are now expected to compete for romantic partners in the dating marketplace, where personal attributes such as wealth, sexual attractiveness, and personality largely define a person's worth. This increases the individual's freedom, but also makes her solely responsible for her success in finding a marriage partner. Second, romantic love became the primary source of social validation for the individual, which had been traditionally provided by the larger community. As a result, "love is more than a cultural ideal; it is a social foundation for the self" (247). Romantic suffering, she argues, is caused by the loss of social validation that occurs when a relationship ends.

The social critique here is gender-based. Illouz argues that sexual desirability plays a dominant role in the dating market, and that success in dating increases the likelihood of finding a marriage partner. Illouz argues that men have two advantages over women in the in the dating market. First, the emphasis on sexiness in choosing a partner and unequal gender standards of beauty allow men to retain their value in the dating marketplace much longer than women, which in turn increases their chance of finding a marriage partner. Second, while men are more apt to find social validation in sexual intimacy with multiple partners, women are more likely to experience social validation in a committed relationship. The dating marketplace, she argues, represents a new form of

male domination, where men reap most of the rewards of modern romance at women's expense.

My research on romantic love diverges from Illouz's work in three important ways. First, while I am interested in examining the relationship between gender inequality and romantic love, it is not my primary focus. Instead, I investigate whether romantic love actually encourages intimacy between people. If individualism and commodification are central features of modern romance, one would not expect relationships to be based on intimacy, but personal gain. I also examine whether the larger society promotes intimacy, situating romantic love within many of the macro and micro structures that shape the individual's relationship with the self and others. Second, while I agree with Illouz's assertion that social validation is central to the pursuit of romantic love, it does not entirely explain the institution's resiliency and importance to individuals. She notes that communities had traditionally provided social validation to the individual, but does not investigate why communities no longer perform this function. In contrast, I explore the potential for community in American society by examining the degree to which institutions facilitate a sense of shared responsibility, which is a necessary precondition for building community.

The final difference is methodological. While most of Illouz's research is based on the analysis of texts, there was no sampling procedure or analytical strategy employed to prevent bias. This stands in contrast to my study, which used a textual analysis to examine the ten most popular romantic comedies and self-help books on romantic love. My goal was to uncover a coherent ideology not only among popular texts within a medium and genre, but *across* them as well. Thus, I would argue that my analysis of texts is both more in-depth and more representative of dominant ideology.

Alienation as a Structural Issue

While social isolation and loneliness are important concepts for studying human connection, this dissertation focuses on the broader concept of *alienation*. Alienation denotes more than feeling alone; it includes *any* form of disconnection from the self and others, many of which the individual is unaware. Indeed, the individual can experience alienation and subjectively feel connected to others. Another difference is alienation is

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inextricably linked to an analysis of social structure. Rather than focusing on the individual, alienation requires examining the social context in which it takes place.

One problem with researching alienation is the abstract nature of the phenomenon: it defies traditional social-scientific methods by being too broad to directly measure or quantify. Instead of analyzing alienation directly, I use romantic ideology as a case study in alienation. In Western culture, particularly the United States, romantic love is popularly considered one of the highest form of intimacy between two people. Romantic love thus provides a window into the nature of relationships that are generally viewed as less intimate. If romantic love encourages alienation, it is likely that other relationships do as well. I argue that romantic love is an adaptation to alienation, as well as one of its causes. Competitive individualism in American society creates a social environment where people are expected to look out for their own interests, often at the expense of others. Without community based in mutual obligation, individuals turn to romantic love as a solution to the alienation and lack of support experienced in the larger society. Yet, because romantic love is a product of competitive individualism, romantic relationships reflect many of the same problems experienced in other relationships, while also creating new ones.

In Chapter 2 I explore competitive individualism and other macro-structural sources of alienation in American society, such as commodity fetishism and consumerism. In Chapter 3 I focus on alienation at the interactional level, discussing the role of impression management, emotion work, and other micro-structures that encourage alienation from the self and others. Chapter 4 is a theoretical inquiry into the phenomenon of romantic love, discussing the inherent contradictions within romantic relationships and the barriers to intimacy in the culture more generally.

In Chapters 5 and 6 I analyze self-help books and romantic comedies for dominant romantic ideology. Instead of examining romantic relationships directly, I am interested in the cultural model for romantic love. That is, what is considered the ideal romantic relationship? What are the rights and responsibilities of romantic partners, and how are these in turn influenced by gender? Moreover, why should people pursue romantic relationships in the first place? In Chapter 7 I conclude with a summary of my findings

and a discussion of the limitations of my research. I offer suggestions for future studies, and potential individual and collective solutions to alienation going forward.

I should note two things before proceeding. First, although I focus on macrostructural causes of alienation in Chapter 2 and alienated interaction in Chapter 3, in reality they are difficult to separate, as macro and micro phenomena are intertwined and often operate simultaneously. That being said, there is some discussion of interaction in Chapter 2 and macrostructure in Chapter 3. The focus on one or the other is for purposes of analytical clarity only.

One final note: I need to emphasize that alienation is not a binary condition, but one that exists on a spectrum. It is not a question of whether one is alienated, but rather the *degree* to which one is alienated. The same is true for institutions. No institution automatically results in alienated relations, nor do they entirely estrange the individual from the self. For example, while I argue in Chapter 2 all workers experiences some form of alienated labor, the extent individuals are alienated varies from person to person and context to context. I also believe it is important to note that people have agency and often resist alienated circumstances. In other words, I do not believe that a pure state of alienation exists in *any* context. Indeed, some degree of alienation is necessary for society to function. My goal is this dissertation is to highlight institutions that *encourage* alienation from the self and others, regardless of the individual's perceptions or behavior.

CHAPTER II

STRUCTURE, ALIENATION, AND COMMUNITY IN AMERICAN SOCIETY

Marx (1969) believed that in order to understand the self it is necessary to locate the individual within the concrete social relations of his time. He argued that under capitalism workers are alienated from the self and others, identifying three major aspects of alienation: alienation from the labor process, alienation from the product of the worker's labor, and alienation from other workers. In this chapter I review Marx's analysis of capitalism and alienation, using contemporary examples to illustrate its continued relevance to sociological inquiry. Alienation, however, is not limited to economic structures and processes. I expand on Marx's theory of alienation in this chapter by including non-economic structural factors that contribute to alienation in American society, such as individualism and the organization of physical space.

Many of the structural factors that encourage alienation also undermine community. Community psychologists use the concept "community capacity" to assess the health of a given community. Community capacity is based on two core elements: *shared responsibility* for the community's welfare and its members, and *collective competence*, which refers to a community's ability to meet members' needs, take advantage of opportunities, and overcome adversity (Huebner et al. 2009). While there is no measure of community capacity at the national level, we can examine the potential for community capacity in American society based on the theoretical framework established by community psychologists.

One of the key components of collective competence is the strength of formal and informal social networks. The greater the number, diversity, and overlap of networks, the more effectively community members can address individual and collective concerns (Goodman et al. 1998). Related to network robustness is the need for high levels of member participation. If members do not participate in informal networks and community organizations, collective competence is severely undermined. As noted in Chapter 1, average social network size in the U.S. has decreased in recent years (McPherson et al. 2006), and civic participation in general has declined significantly

(Putnam 2000). Increased social isolation in American society represents a significant barrier to building communities capable of addressing members' needs. Equally important is community members' shared sense of responsibility. In American society, however, a number of structural factors encourage self-interest at the expense of responsibility to others or the larger society. These factors will be discussed throughout the chapter and summarized in the conclusion.

Alienation from the Labor Process

In 2014, 52% of employed Americans had "checked out" at their jobs, putting little "energy or passion" into their work. Perhaps more concerning, 18% were "actively disengaged" at work, channeling their dissatisfaction into undermining the efforts of co-workers (Gallup 2015). The lack of engagement on the job is at least partly explained by the capitalist labor process. Marx noted the unique ability of humans to creatively manipulate nature, and consequently their surroundings. Instead of being programmed by instinct to alter nature in a particularly narrow way, human beings are limited only by their imagination. The creative process is therefore an essential human activity; under capitalism, however, the worker is alienated from this process. Instead of freely using her creativity to manipulate the environment, the worker is instead told what to produce, and how to produce it (Marx 1969).

The division of labor in capitalism contributes to the alienating nature of work, where each aspect of the labor process is broken into multiple parts. This improves economic efficiency as it ensures that more can be produced with the same amount of labor, but it degrades the individual's work by making it monotonous, resulting in the work being less creative and satisfying. The division of labor also estranges the worker from their labor by limiting access to only one small part of the production process. Worker may not even be aware of how their labor contributes to the overall production process, or the overarching goals of the institution that employs them. Mental and physical labor are separated under capitalism as well, creating an artificial distinction between white collar and blue collar workers (Schmidt 2002). The labor process under capitalism also alienates workers from the larger community. This is evident in the shift from viewing work as a *calling* to viewing work as a *career*. A career is largely focused on personal

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ambition and reward without concern for the welfare of others. In contrast, a calling "not only links a person to his or her fellow workers. A calling links a person to the larger community, a whole in which the calling of each is a contribution to the good of all" (Bellah et al. 2008:66). In other words, a calling establishes work primarily as a way to contribute to the welfare of others and the larger society.

Hochschild (1983) identifies an additional aspect of alienated labor: emotional labor. Not only is the worker alienated from her body and intellect, but her emotions as well. Hochschild argues that the work of flight attendants exemplifies this process. In order to perform their job effectively, flight attendants have to artificially induce an emotional state that embodies genuine concern and interest for the needs of passengers. They are not simply pretending to be concerned; they truly become concerned. Flight attendants are still expected to maintain this emotional state even if passengers behave in a rude or offensive manner. This is also true in many other occupations that rely heavily on social interaction. The retail salesperson, the waiter, and the teacher are equally expected to modify their emotions in the course of their work. This is not only expected, but demanded by both customers and employers.

Emotional labor is perhaps the most damaging form of alienated labor, as emotions are what ground people in their reality. Emotions act as a signal function, indicating there is a problem that needs to be addressed, such as feeling angry after suffering abuse from others. When a person loses touch with his inner emotional life, his ability to evaluate relationships with others becomes undermined. Sometimes it is appropriate to feel angry or sad; negative feelings alert the individual to circumstances that may be exploitative or harmful in other ways. Without the guidance of spontaneous feelings, the individual can become unsure of how he truly feels about others.

It is important to note, however, that individuals are not automatically alienated by capitalist labor processes. Despite oppressive conditions, workers can and often do exert agency in the workplace. For example, studies on manufacturing workplaces have found that upper management often demands levels of productivity that are impossible to meet while following the official rules and procedures, forcing workers to break the rules to meet their quotas. The informal rules are opposed by upper management, but tacitly supported by shop managers who also feel pressure to maintain a high level of

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productivity (Roy 1954; Burawoy 1979). This dynamic is also present in service sector work. Lopez (2007) found that aid workers in nursing homes break official rules to complete all of their assigned tasks, even though breaking rules meant putting themselves and residents in greater danger. In the process of creating informal rules, workers use their creativity to develop new skills necessary for completing tasks on time.

Alienation from the Fruits of Labor

The worker is not only alienated from the labor process, but the product of labor as well. The worker's labor power is an essential characteristic of himself. Every time he puts his mental and physical energies into manipulating nature and creating something of value, he is infusing a part of himself into the final product. Once the object has been created, the capitalist not only decides what will become of it, but also benefits from the value that the worker has created. The worker's labor power becomes objectified and felt as separate from himself (Marx 1969). The capital accumulated from the worker's labor becomes what Marx (1990:342) refers to as *dead labor*: "Capital is dead labour, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks." Once the worker's labor has been turned into capital, it is experienced as alien to him. Instead of benefiting from the capital created by his labor, the worker toils endlessly in the service of capital accumulation. Not only do workers serve capital, they are often replaced by it: corporations often use capital to invest in automation, making the worker's role in the production process obsolete.

Alienation from the fruits of labor is most evident in the current disparity in wealth between rich and poor. The top 1 percent in the U.S. own more than 40 percent of the total national wealth, which is more than the combined wealth of the bottom 90 percent. Even more startling, when you take into account debts and mortgages, the bottom 90 percent of Americans own little or nothing (Parenti 2010). Income inequality is on the rise as well. According to the Congressional Budget Office (2011), from 1979 to 2007 incomes for the top 1 percent increased 275 percent. In contrast, the bottom 80 percent of the population experienced only a 58 percent increase.

The product of labor can also be rendered ineffectual or used in a manner that undermines the worker's values or goals. For example, although scientists are generally

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presumed to have full control over their work, they too are subjected to alienated conditions. As Sperber (1990:228) notes, scientists have limited control over how their research is used: "Scientists themselves usually have at least an implicit awareness of their essentially powerless position: they are usually cynical about the fact that they can offer all the expert advice and consulting services in the world to those in positions of real command (in corporations, in state power), but their advice turns out to be indeed advisory–subject to whatever discounting, revision, or reinterpretation might suit the conveniences of actual decision makers." Even if a worker is well-compensated and has complete control of the labor process, it is ultimately an alienated act if she does not also control the product of her labor.

Commodity Fetishism

We have now seen how the labor process and the product of labor are essential aspects of the worker, and that through the capitalist mode of production the worker becomes alienated from both. Labor not only has individual meaning to the worker, but social meaning during the process of exchange. In many non-capitalist societies people have a more direct connection to each other as producers: they know the people who produce the goods they use, and the conditions under which they work. The social relations of production are therefore embedded in goods: "Indeed, in many traditional societies, the exchange in goods was literally an exchange of people, in that people had embedded something of themselves in the goods that they produced. In giving a good that you produced, you were giving a part of yourself. Inherently, goods are communicators of social relations" (Jhally 2006a:87).

Under capitalism, these social relations are made invisible when the product is transformed into a commodity: "To the producers, therefore, the social relations between their private labors appear as what they are, i.e. they do not appear as direct social relations between persons in their work, but rather as material relations between persons and social relations between things" (Marx 1990:165-166). The social conditions in which the commodity was produced and the relations between producers become invisible on the marketplace, where the only meaning attached to a product is its monetary value.

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Commodity fetishism also takes place at the global level: citizens of wealthy countries are disconnected from the conditions of labor in the developing world where most consumer products are made. For example, many apparel companies have factories in Indonesia where the minimum wage is only half of a living wage: "In these factories are thousands of workers earning the equivalent of seventy-two pence a day, about a dollar. This is the official minimum wage in Indonesia, which, says the government, is about half the living wage; and here, that means subsistence, bordering on a working pauperism. Nike workers get about 4 percent of the retail prices of the shoes they make, which is not enough to buy the laces" (Pilger 2002:18). The daily economic reality Indonesian people experience is not the outcome of random forces or hidden market directives, but the calculated result of a U.S. supported coup in 1965-1966 which led to the death of over a million people and the destruction of cultural life in Indonesia:

> In some parts of the country up to 40 percent of the teachers were killed, with many others imprisoned. Reading rooms and libraries were destroyed; books were burned; film studios and theaters were shut down; intellectuals were either murdered, incarcerated, or driven into hiding. Cultural life all but disappeared. After decades of military dictatorship, Indonesia ended up with one of the most under-funded and dismal educational systems in the world" (Parenti 2011:79).

The previous ruler was an economic nationalist who refused to let foreign corporations operate in Indonesia. A year after the coup the new rulers of Indonesia met with representatives from U.S. and British corporations during a two day conference in Geneva to negotiate the trade policies that would come to dominate Indonesian economic life (Pilger 2002).

The average American consumer feels little connection to this history or the continued economic deprivation experienced by Indonesian workers and others in the developing world. This is true for students, faculty, and staff at the University of Oregon as well. Phil Knight, co-founder and chairmen of Nike, has contributed large amounts of capital over the years to the renovation and construction of buildings on campus – capital that was partly derived from the exploitation of Indonesian workers. Despite benefiting from Indonesian labor, campus members are largely unaware of this relationship. If campus members felt directly connected to Indonesian workers, it would be much more difficult for them to support Nike and its labor practices. Instead of being connected through an

exchange process where the social relations are visible, workers in Indonesia and the U.S. are alienated from one another through the commodification of Indonesian labor.

Reducing all products of labor to commodities also has the effect of giving people a false sense of economic independence. Once the social relations and conditions of production are made invisible, the individual buying the product can falsely believe she acquired it through personal initiative alone, instead of being the outcome of exchange relationships between people across many countries. When an individual purchases a package of coffee he does not see the farmer who grew the coffee beans, the various workers involved in the shipping process (e.g. dockworkers, truck drivers), or the factory workers who packaged it for sale. All of these people made the coffee possible, yet the individual customer only sees a price, thus hiding the interdependence inherent in the economy. This allows people to disconnect from the suffering of workers who are responsible for the goods and services they use every day. It also allows them to disconnect from others more generally, as everything one needs can be purchased. When the only thing required for survival is money, there is less motivation to rely on others or build community. Commodification thus serves to lessen the bonds between people by shrouding the daily reality of economic interdependence and encouraging a false sense of independence.

Consumerism

Prior to the 1920s, most people bought goods they needed and saved what little money they had; luxury goods were only purchased by the rich. After WWI U.S. factories began producing goods in unprecedented quantities. It was understood by business leaders that citizens needed to change their consumption patterns to match the growth in production. Paul Mazur, at the time a leading banker at Lehman Brothers, best articulated this belief: "We must shift America from a needs to a desires culture. People must be trained to desire, to want new things, even before the old have been entirely consumed. [...] Man's desires must overshadow his needs" (cited in Curtis 2006). To facilitate endless desire advertising changed from giving factual information about products to using psychological methods of persuasion to sell consumer goods. Traditional advertising was essentially informational, describing the product and its function to potential buyers. The

psychological approach, however, appeals to people on an unconscious emotional level, linking social fears and desires to consumer products (Ewen 1996).

Because commodification strips products of their social meaning, it is necessary to project meaning onto goods to motivate consumption: "The world of goods in industrial society offers no meaning; meaning has been emptied out of these goods. The function of advertising is to refill the emptied commodity with meaning" (Jhally 2006a:89). More than selling a single product or service, advertising sells consumption as a way of life. Through the cumulative effect of advertising, people are led to believe that products are the primary source of happiness. The implicit message is that only through buying the right products can one attain love, social status, and personal empowerment (Jhally 2006a). Advertising takes the real need for meaningful relationships and suggests that products are the best way to attain them: "[Advertising] taps into our real emotions and repackages them back to us as connected to the world of things. What advertising really reflects, in that sense, is what I call the *dreamlife* of the culture…they *translate* our desires (for love, for family, for friendship, for adventure, and for sex) into our dreams. Advertising is like a fantasy factory, taking our desires for human social contact and reconceiving it, reconceptualizing it, connecting it with the world of commodities" (Jhally 2006b:104-105).

Advertisers keep individuals in a constant state of social anxiety to motivate consumption. People are made to feel that there is always something wrong with them, and that only through buying the "right" products can they find social acceptance. This state of constant anxiety and self-scrutiny creates an environment where the individual never feels safe or that they truly belong, as they are potentially always one misstep from humiliation and social ostracization (Ewen 2001). Moreover, advertising paints a rather dark view of society by convincing people that there are no shared values or interests binding them to others beyond fashionable consumption. According to this worldview, society is comprised solely of individuals looking out for their self-interest. Instead of fostering solidarity and community between people, consumerism encourages fear and selfishness (Jhally 2006b).

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Finally, the more energy people put into acquiring commodities, the less they put into their relationships with others. Commodities can never bring social fulfillment, and in fact undermine the ability to foster relationships with others:

> "The great irony is that as advertising does this, it draws us further away from what really has the capacity to satisfy us (meaningful human contact and relationships) to what dose not (material things). In that sense, advertising *reduces* our capacity to become happy by pushing us, cajoling us, to carry on in the direction of things. If we really wanted to create a world that reflected our desires, then the consumer culture would not be it. It would look very different – a society that stressed and built the institutions that would foster social relationships, rather than endless material accumulation" (Jhally 2006b:105).

By investing their time, money, and emotional energy to the pursuit of consumer goods, individuals are building relationships with objects instead of people, which only reinforces their alienation from others.

Competition in the Labor Market

As a consequence of self-alienation in the labor process and competition in the labor market, the worker is alienated from other workers (Marx 1969). In order for people to compete over limited resources it is essential that they see others as separate from themselves. In a competitive economy there will always be losers: when a person succeeds in securing resources, they are ultimately depriving someone else. If workers felt connected to one another it would be difficult for them to compete over resources knowing their gain comes at another's expense. Alienation from others, therefore, is essential to functioning in a competitive economy.

A competitive, market-based economy undermines individual freedom as well as the development of community. Fromm (1941) identifies two types of freedom experienced by individuals. The first type, negative freedom, is the reduction or elimination of coercion in society; the individual is free from certain restraints (e.g. censorship, geographic mobility, forming associations). The second type, positive freedom, is concerned with the individual's agency in the environment. Examples of positive freedom include access to healthcare, education, meaningful work, and decent living conditions. The individual in a capitalist society is guaranteed only negative freedom, while positive freedom is secured through competition in the marketplace.

In Fromm's view, both positive and negative freedom are necessary for true human liberation; he argues that a lack of positive freedom in capitalist societies leaves the individual with a permanent sense of insecurity and fear. When individuals are afraid that their life chances are not guaranteed they begin to see others as a potential threat to their own survival: "The more individuals have to accept responsibility for their own economic well-being within a context of economic uncertainty, the more they are averse to otherness – as they see the other as a hostile competitor" (Asmanova 2011:410). There are always a large number of unemployed (or underemployed) workers that are willing to accept substandard working conditions and low pay out of desperation, which Marx (1969) referred to as "the reserve army of labor." Even if one is lucky enough to secure employment, advancement is dependent on one's ability to compete with others, be it co-workers or workers in other companies.

Economic inequality increases the distrust among workers. Over the past few decades wealth and income inequality have increased in the U.S., while social programs that protect the poor have been significantly reduced (Parenti 2010). Neoliberal ideology has been used to reinforce worker alienation by blaming the poor, and the threadbare social safety net, for the rise in poverty. According to the ideology, the existence of a safety net encourages dependence and laziness – if the poor were left to fend for themselves, they would be motivated to work harder and therefore lift themselves out of poverty (Bellah et al. 2008). This turns the more affluent members of the working class (i.e. the middle class) against less privileged members by linking social spending to tax policy. The poor are not only viewed as responsible for their poverty, they are seen as stealing resources from middle-class workers whose taxes pay for social programs (Parenti 2010). In essence, neoliberal ideology is a divide-and-conquer strategy that turns one segment of the working class against another, preventing both from building solidarity and uniting in common cause. Under these circumstances it becomes increasingly difficult to build community, as trust and concern for others are essential for establishing a sense of shared responsibility between individuals.

Individualism

"…there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families."
   ─ Margaret Thatcher

Individualism has long been one of the defining traits of American society. When Tocqueville traveled to the U.S. in the early 19th century, he noted how Americans retreated from the larger society while creating a micro-society of their own society among friends and family: "Individualism is a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself" (Tocqueville, Bevan, and Kramnick 2003:587). Alongside individualism at that time, however, were religious and civic oriented ideologies that served as a buffer against alienation by encouraging sacrifice for the larger community. With the rise of industrialization and the increased division of labor in the latter part of the 19th century, Americans became more economically interdependent, yet paradoxically more disconnected from their fellow citizens: "Perhaps the crucial change in American life has been that we have moved from the local life of the nineteenth century – in which economic and social relationships were visible and, however imperfectly, morally interpreted as parts of a larger common life – to a society vastly more interrelated and integrated economically, technically, and functionally. Yet this is a society in which the individual can only rarely and with difficulty understand himself and his actions as interrelated in morally meaningful ways with those of other, different Americans" (Bellah et al. 2008:50). By the 20th century individualism had become the dominant ideology regarding the self, particularly for white, middle-class Americans (Bellah et al. 2008).

The industrial economy created a distinction between work and leisure which ultimately led to the development of a fragmented self, shaped by two forms of individualism: *utilitarian individualism* and *expressive individualism*. Devotion to work or career to advance personal goals is representative of utilitarian individualism, while developing values, personality traits, and interests off the job is representative of expressive individualism. Utilitarian individualism justifies a competitive economy by

arguing that all social and material rewards in society are earned through personal initiative alone. Wealth and income are achieved through hard work and superior talent, while poverty is the result of laziness or incompetence and therefore deserved. By facilitating an unequal distribution of resources, the market rewards those who contribute the most to society, and punishes those who do not. Personal greed, so it is argued, brings public gain (Bellah et al. 2008).

Expressive individualism is also concerned with maximizing individual self-interest in relationships. Instead of material gain, expressive individualism is focused on psychic goods such as well-being and creative self-expression, and largely fits into the modern therapeutic culture's emphasis on personal growth and choice. Like utilitarian individualism, it interprets relationships with others in terms of personal satisfaction and happiness instead of moral commitments: "In its own understanding, the expressive aspect of our culture exists for the liberation and fulfillment of the individual. Its genius is that it enables the individual to think of commitments – from marriage and work to political and religious involvement – as enhancements of the sense of individual well-being rather than as moral imperatives" (Bellah et al. 2008:47). The only commitment one has to others, from the perspective of the expressive individualist, is to communicate an honest, authentic self in interaction.

Despite their differences, both expressive individualism and utilitarian individualism place self-interest at the heart of all relationships, rejecting lasting ties in favor of transitory needs and preferences:

> "For the classic utilitarian individualist, the only valid contract is one based on negotiation between individuals acting in their own self-interest. For the expressive individualist, a relationship is created by full sharing of authentic feelings. But both in hard bargaining over a contract and in the spontaneous sharing of therapeutically sophisticated lovers, the principle is in basic ways the same. No binding obligations and no wider social understanding justify a relationship. It exists only as the expression of the choices of the free selves who make it up. And should it no longer meet their needs, it must end" (Bellah et al. 2008:107).

With no moral obligation to others, people spend their time with those they find interesting and/or useful, and base their social networks on similarities in lifestyle, occupation, and income. Freedom for the individual is rooted in self-sufficiency and a lack of obligation to others, which inhibits developing lasting social ties based on mutual

responsibility: "[I]f the entire social world is made up of individuals, each endowed with the right to be free of others' demands, it becomes hard to forge bonds of attachment to, or cooperation with, other people, since such bonds would imply obligations that necessarily impinge on one's freedom…freedom to be left alone is a freedom that implies being alone" (Bellah et al. 2008:23). By emphasizing self-interest and autonomy, individualism discourages empathy and obligation to others, undermines the development of community, and isolates the individual.

Alienation and the Physical Environment

Human consciousness not only shapes the built environment, it is influenced by it. Colonial development in North America was rooted in the practice of neutralizing space: the built environment was stripped of any social or aesthetic value so Protestants could more easily turn inward in their quest for religious salvation, which also meant turning away from the outside world and other people. Development was based on a grid structure and is perhaps most emblematic of the neutralization of space. The grid approached the natural environment as something to be conquered, ignoring natural boundaries such as forests and rivers (Sennett 1990). The grid also assumed no connection between spaces, idealizing private property at the expense of the public realm:

> In terms of rural life, the grid institutionalized the trend toward scattered farms, rather than agricultural villages, giving physical expression to the powerful myth that only lone individuals mattered in America. The new towns of the Middle West were more often than not laid out on grids that echoed the larger U.S. survey grid of the surrounding countryside, with some unfortunate results. The grid was primarily concerned with the squares of private property that lay within the gradients, not with gradients themselves, or how the two related with one another. This dictated a way of thinking about the community in which private property was everything and the public realm – namely, the streets that connected all the separate pieces of private property – counted for nothing (Kunstler 1993:30).

Modern development is based in the neutralization of space as well. The built environment has largely been shaped by business interests unconcerned with creating spaces that facilitate social interaction or the building of community. Each space is designed for a specific purpose, allowing little spontaneity or creativity of use (Kunstler 1993). Even when diversity is present in the built environment, it generally takes on a linear form that allows little interaction of difference; there are clear boundaries to each

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area that separate different architectural styles (Sennett 1990). Each area of a city or town is also designated a specific purpose (e.g. residential, industrial), physically marking the distinction between different functions (Kunstler 1993). This reflects the artificial distinction under capitalism between work and home, as well as the alienation that occurs from a specialized division of labor.

People are also highly segregated in U.S. society: residential neighborhoods are largely comprised of individuals of a similar race, ethnicity, and class, significantly reducing the time spent around those from a different social group (Low 2010). The growth of gated communities in recent decades reinforces the long-standing pattern of class and race segregation. Historically a trend of the rich, modern gated communities house individuals from the lower classes as well: "Gated communities now include high-rise apartment complexes for the working and lower-middle classes; townhouses and garden apartments for the middle class; retrofitted housing projects for the urban poor; and single-family enclaves for the upper-middle class" (Low 2010:28). White middle-class residents of gated communities often express a fear of crime as the primary reason for living in a gated community, fear of "crime" being a code word for fear of racial/ethnic minorities, particularly those from the lower class. Instead of providing a feeling of security to residents, withdrawing into gated communities reinforces the perception of a dangerous world by constantly reminding them they are being "protected" from the outside world by walls and constant surveillance: "While the architectural features of gated communities, reinforced by guards and video cameras, are perceived as comforting symbols of protection by residents, they are also producing a landscape of fear by reinforcing perceptions, among both residents and outsiders, that only life inside a 'fortress' and physical separation from people of other racial, cultural, and economic groups can keep one safe" (Low 2010:35).

Interactional diversity is essential to stepping outside of oneself and seeing the world from the perspective of others. By interacting with people from different social groups, individuals become more empathetic and open-minded in general (Sennett 1990). Familiarity humanizes the other and encourages people to be open to new ideas and develop solidarity with those they had once feared or mistrusted, which in turn promotes the building of community. While usually considered anti-social, cities in fact hold the

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most promise for community. Cities force people to interact with one another on a daily basis because of their close proximity, whereas people in rural areas are more able to withdraw from others (Kunstler 1996). As Jacobs (1993) notes, the development of mixed use areas is essential to creating public spaces that encourage interactional diversity. People need different reasons to be occupying a space at different times, which increases the number of people inhabiting a space and, most importantly, the types of possible social interactions. By creating neighborhoods with diverse uses and types of people, individuals are more likely to interact on regular basis with those from a different race or class background.

Instead of striving to build vibrant communities, living apart from others has long been an American ideal: "The idea of a modest dwelling all our own, isolated from the problems of other people, has been our reigning metaphor of the good life for a long time. It must now be seen for what it really is: an antisocial view of human existence" (Kunstler 1996:33). This was not always the case. The Puritans originally based their towns on the European village where everyone lived within close proximity. The village center served as the main source of community where most daily interaction took place. This changed by the late 17th century. Settlers often came from different parts of Europe and had different languages and customs. The cultural differences created conflict among settlers, and people began to build isolated homes in the wilderness. By the 18th century living away from others had become common (Sennett 1990).

The development of middle-class suburbs after WWII can be seen as the modern fulfillment of this ideal. Suburbs were sold on the basis of escaping the problems resulting from poor city planning, such as pollution and overcrowding. Far from a homestead in the wilderness, people who moved to the suburbs were only able to obtain a small plot of land with some natural scenery, surrounded by others with whom they had little connection. Suburbs also contain many of the disadvantages of modern U.S. cities, such as the separation of functions. This is made worse by the greater distance between areas, which in turn requires driving a car:

> "Today, we have achieved the goal of total separation of uses in the man-made landscape. The houses are all in their respective income pods, the shopping is miles away from the houses, and the schools are separate from both the shopping and the dwellings. Work takes place in the office park – the word park being a semantic

gimmick to persuade zoning boards that a bunch of concrete and glass boxes set among parking lots amounts to a rewarding environment…The extreme separation and dispersion of components that use to add up to a compact town, where everything was within a ten-minute walk, has left us with a public realm that is composed mainly of roads. And the only way to be in that public realm is to be in a car, often alone" (Kunstler 1993:118-119).

Much of the physical infrastructure has been designed with cars in mind, which means the physical environment is generally not hospitable to pedestrians, reducing the possibility of face-to-face interaction with strangers. The interaction that does occur takes place between individuals inside a car, sometimes resulting in the phenomenon known as "road rage." Road rage is an extreme form of aggressive driving, which includes "threats, assaults, and other violent behaviors" directed at other motorists during an "acute driving event motivated entirely by anger" (Asbridge and Butters 2013:603). While data on the frequency of road rage is inconclusive, the fact that it is a phenomenon at all says a great deal about the physical and emotional distance that exists between motorists – there is no comparable phenomenon such as "sidewalk rage" for pedestrians. Pedestrians are forced to inhabit the same space as others, which is more likely to elicit empathy and discourage conflict during interaction.

Communications Technology and Alienation

The telephone was initially seen as an inferior substitute for face-to-face interaction; it was used solely out of convenience and necessity. With the advent of the internet, email became the desired method of communication when making a telephone call was too difficult. For many Americans, texting has now replaced telephone calls and email not only out of efficiency, but preference. Once a temporary aid, interactions mediated through technology have become the norm. Overworked adults see telephone calls and face-to-face interaction as too demanding on their time, and children who grow up always "connected" to others via cell phones and the internet lack the social skills and confidence needed to interact outside message boards, chat rooms, and texting (Turkle 2012). In a study on internet use and social interaction, Shklovski, Kraut, and Raineie (2004) found a negative relationship between internet use and frequency of visits to friends and family: heavy internet users were 30% less likely to visit those closest to them than those that did not use the internet.

When people do meet face-to-face, technology degrades the quality of interaction. The face-to-face conversation (and by extension the person) becomes less important than the virtual others and activities with which one is engaged. In their study of face-to-face conversations, Misra et al. (2016) found that the mere presence of a phone during interaction reduced empathetic concern and the level of connectedness between participants. Participants who were closer prior to the study reported a greater decrease in connectedness and empathetic concern than those who were strangers, which suggests that close relationships are the most harmed by communications technology. One reason for this is people often multitask during conversations (e.g. checking email, web browsing) and rarely give others their full attention:

> Mobile technology has made each of us "pauseable." Our face-to-face conversations are routinely interrupted by incoming calls and text messages. In the world of paper mail, it was unacceptable for a colleague to read his or her correspondence during a meeting. In the new etiquette, turning away from those in front of you to answer a mobile phone or respond to a text has become close to the norm. When someone holds a phone, it can be hard to know if you have that person's attention. A parent, partner, or child glances down and is lost to another place, often without realizing that they have taken leave (Turkle 2012:161).

Being connected to countless others, however, ultimately means *feeling* connected to no one. Indeed, people have shifted towards wanting greater detachment in their interactions:

> In corporations, among friends, and within academic departments, people readily admit that they would rather leave a voicemail or send an e-mail than talk face-to-face. Some who say "I live my life on my BlackBerry" are forthright about voiding the "real-time" commitment of a phone call. The new technologies allow us to "dial down" human contact, to titrate its nature and extent…A thirteen-year-old tells me she "hates the phone and never listens to voicemail." Texting offers just the right amount of access, just the right amount of control. She is a modern Goldilocks: for her, texting puts people not too close, not too far, but at just the right distance. The world is now full of Goldilockses, people who take comfort in being in touch with a lot of people whom they also keep at bay (Turkle 2012:15).

People also use technology to shield themselves from those they do physically encounter. Whether waiting in a grocery store line, using public transportation, or sitting in the reception area of a doctor's office, people would rather listen to music through headphones, browse the internet, or chat with others in virtual space than engage in face-to-face interaction with those physically present. Using technology in public lets others know that one does not want to be bothered and serves as a means of *preventing*

interaction. The most extreme example is the individual wearing headphones while looking down at a smartphone screen, seemingly oblivious to the world around them.

Because of the mass shift in communications technology, people also expect less in their interactions with others – in this context, virtual relationships seem just as fulfilling as those based on physical proximity. For some, virtual worlds are more satisfying than real life:

> Second Life is a virtual "place" rather than a game…You can, among other things, get an education, launch a business, buy land, build and furnish a home, and, of course, have a social life that may include love, sex, and marriage. You can even earn money—Second Life currency is convertible into dollars.

> As all this unfolds, you hang out in virtual bars, restaurants, and cafés. You relax on virtual beaches and have business meetings in virtual conference rooms. It is not uncommon for people who spend a lot of time on Second Life and role-playing games to say that their online identities make them feel more like themselves than they do in the physical real (Turkle 2012:158-159).

There are of course benefits to online relationships. Individuals can find like-minded people at any time of day, from almost any physical location. And for those without physical community, certainly *some* connection is better than none. Regardless, virtual communities are not grounded in mutual obligation nor are they able to provide the level of support found in physical ones: "Virtual places offer connection with uncertain claims to commitment. We don't count on cyberfriends to come by if we are ill, to celebrate our children's successes, or help us mourn the death of our parents. People know this, and yet the emotional charge on cyberspace is high" (Turkle 2012:153). Online relationships require little commitment to others but also provide less in return. If one has no commitment to the people they meet online, then others have no obligation in return.

Virtual reality (VR), a new consumer technology that emerged in 2016, is likely to have an even greater effect on interaction. For decades VR was consigned to the realm of science fiction, a promise technology was unable to realize. Speaking at a video game developer conference in Seattle, engineer Michael Abrash (2014) discussed the primary appeal of VR, the phenomenon known as "presence":

> This feeling of being someplace real when you're in VR is well known to researchers, and is referred to as "presence," and it's presence that most distinguishes VR from 3D on a screen. Presence is distinct from immersion, which merely means that you feel surrounded by the image of the virtual world; presence means that you feel like you're in the virtual world…it's flipping the switch that makes you believe, deep in

your lizard brain, that you are someplace interesting. Presence is one of the most powerful experiences you can have outside reality, precisely because it operates by engaging you along many of the same channels as reality. For many people, presence is simply magic.

By fooling the perceptual system through auditory, tactile, and visual stimuli, VR subjectively teleports the individual to another place. It can take people to locations they would never be able to visit in real life, such as the surface of the moon, as well as those that only exist in their imagination. VR allows for any fantasy, potentially making it the ultimate form of escapism.

VR is expected to become a dominant entertainment and communications medium over the next decade. A recent analyst note from Goldman Sachs predicts that VR will outpace the television industry by 2025 with an estimated revenue of $110 billion (Ranj 2016). Facebook recently acquired leading VR firm Oculus for $2 billion with the assumption that virtual reality will eventually become the dominant form of digital interaction (Coldewey 2016). When asked about the potential for VR to encourage social isolation, Oculus founder Palmer Luckey has responded that virtual reality will be "the most social technology of all time" (Ensor 2015):

> "I think that virtual reality is the first technology in a long time that makes digital communication a lot more human. I'm not necessarily talking virtual reality as it exists today, where we have fairly limited avatars and voice chat. I'm talking about a few years down the line as virtual reality progresses to its natural conclusion. Eventually we're going to be able to — if not perfectly — do a really good job of simulating people actually being together in the same space. To me, that's going to connect people a lot more than isolate people. It's just going to connect them in a different way" (Spoonauer 2016).

In addition to humanizing online interaction, VR promises other social and individual benefits. Research suggests that virtual reality can be used to help patients with anxiety disorders, such as fear of flying and fear of heights (Meyerbröker and Emmelkamp 2010). Even more promising is the potential for VR to increase empathy. One journalist referred to VR as an "empathy machine":

> What if you really could walk a mile in someone's shoes? Shared perspective breeds understanding…Virtual reality represents a giant leap forward in mankind's propensity for compassion. You don't just walk in someone's shoes, but see the world through their eyes. In essence, a virtual reality headset is an empathy machine (Constine 2015).

The reporter described two scenarios he experienced in VR: a bombing in Syria, and a dramatized rape at a college party. Despite being overwhelmed initially, the party scene affected him so deeply that he felt the need to get more involved in fighting sexual assault: "I wanted to crawl somewhere dark and disappear. Once I began to digest the emotions, though, I wanted to mobilize against campus sexual assault" (Constine 2015).

VR will also give individuals full control over their identity in interaction. They will be able to choose their race, gender, or any other aspect of the self. On the surface this is incredibly empowering. People could enter virtual interactions without any indication of their race, thereby preventing others from treating them in a discriminatory manner. The downside is that one of the foundations of intimacy, honest self-disclosure, is undermined in the process. If anyone can be anybody, individuals are never sure who they interacting with, which could undermine social trust.

The larger problem is that face-to-face interaction will continue to decline in both frequency and depth if VR becomes the primary way people interact with one another. Virtual reality, by definition, requires a severing from the real world. Like cellphones today, VR may eventually become the preferred method of communication – interaction that closely mimics reality, without unpredictability or obligation to others. Sharing physical space helps bind people together. You cannot truly touch a person in virtual reality; something as basic as a handshake connects people in a way that online chatrooms never will.

Community is ultimately rooted in sharing physical space. Although online communities do offer emotional support to members, they are generally unable to provide the material assistance necessary for true community, such as providing financial support or caring for sick members. Finally, while the internet has undoubtedly been a powerful tool for social movements, people are limited in their ability to organize and fight against oppression without occupying the same physical space. Women and people of color may have the ability to hide their sex or race online, but in the real world they will continue to face both personal and institutional discrimination. Without organized physical resistance, social change becomes difficult, if not impossible.

Conclusion

In this chapter I discussed both economic and non-economic macro-structural causes of alienation in American society. First, individuals experience self-alienation in the course of their daily work: employers largely determine the labor process and its objectives, and control the product of labor. Workers are also alienated from each other: they are forced to compete over limited resources, reducing themselves and others to commodities in the process. Worker alienation is exacerbated by structural factors outside wage labor, such as individualism and communications technology. Economic competition and individualism are arguably the most significant macro-structural causes of interpersonal alienation, as they tend to dominate individuals' perception of the world and the way they relate to others. Economic competition without a meaningful social safety net encourages individuals to be less empathetic and always wary of others; individualism justifies a cutthroat approach to economic survival while simultaneously situating personal relationships in terms of mutual self-interest.

Many of the same institutions also undermine community capacity. Rather than evoking a sense of community, individualism and economic competition discourage shared responsibility between workers by encouraging distrust and undermining feelings of empathy and solidarity towards others. Individuals also develop a false sense of independence through the commodification process, reducing the motivation for building community and strengthening social support for members. Moreover, the physical landscape lacks diversity and encourages social isolation, reinforcing feelings of distrust towards others engendered by capitalist processes. Finally, face-to-face interaction, which is essential for building community, is also undermined by communications technology, which facilitates (and in some ways encourages) a retreat from physical interaction.

As I noted earlier in the chapter, in most contexts individuals have some agency. Agency, however, can be directed towards reinforcing structure, even when individuals are actively working to change or disrupt institutions. For example, people can believe their actions are contributing towards social change, yet in reality undermine movement goals. Slacktivism, the act of giving token support to a cause (e.g. wearing a pin/ribbon, "liking" a Facebook page), often discourages subsequent participation in social

movement actions. After analyzing experimental data from both real-world and controlled studies, researchers found that individuals who publicly gave token support for a cause or organization were no more likely to contribute time or money than those who did not give token support. Individuals who gave token support in private, however, were more likely to participate in future actions. The authors argue that individuals who publicly gave token support were not lazy or uncaring, but rather believed public support was a meaningful contribution to the social movement or organization (Kristofferson, White, and Peloza 2014).

Returning to the discussion of workplace alienation, workers who break official rules to meet quotas may be demonstrating agency, but their actions ultimately support the interests of employers and reinforce the institution of wage labor. Even when workers go on strike in the U.S., the underlying power structure is rarely challenged. Instead of questioning the legitimacy wage labor, most unions aim to improve pay and working conditions within the institution. While better pay and working conditions certainly reflect social progress, the ultimate goal should be to abandon institutions that fundamentally constrain agency in ways that are harmful to the individual or larger society and replace them with ones that maximize individual agency while maintaining democratic values.

CHAPTER III

INTERACTION AND ALIENATION IN AMERICAN SOCIETY

If alienation is encouraged by aspects of social structure, it should also be evident in interaction. Social structure is created and recreated daily through interaction. Human behavior often forms patterns, and when repeated over time these patterns become institutions (Berger and Luckman 1966). Individuals, however, do not act freely in their environment. Once a set of behaviors are institutionalized, they influence subsequent thought and behavior, particularly that of future generations: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living" (Marx 1978:595). Individuals can either reproduce institutions by adhering to social norms, or they can engage in alternative behavior and establish new institutions, resulting in social change (Berger and Luckman 1966).

The relationship between the individual and society is a dialectical one: humans shape the social environment but are also influenced by it. Despite human agency and the potential for social change, interaction largely reproduces social structure. The internalization of norms and values is the most common mechanism by which social reality is reproduced. Through the socialization process individuals come to see existing social relations as an objective reality that cannot be altered:

> In the early phases of socialization the child is quite incapable of distinguishing between the objectivity of natural phenomena and the objectivity of the social formations. To take the most important item of socialization, language appears to the child as inherent in the nature of things, and he cannot grasp the notion of its conventionality. A thing is what it is called, and it could not be called anything else. All institutions appear in the same way, as given, unalterable and self-evident…Empirically, of course, the institutional world transmitted by most parents already has the character of historical and objective reality. The process of transmission simply strengthens the parents' sense of reality, if only because, to put it crudely, if one says, "This is how these things are done," often enough one believes it oneself (Berger and Luckman 1966:59-60).

In addition to experiencing society as an objective reality, individuals assume the social order is a just one. Institutions produce ideology that justifies their existence on moral grounds, such as the belief that economic rewards are based on personal initiative alone. Social reproduction, therefore, is largely accomplished without the need for external controls (Berger and Luckman 1966).

In this chapter I begin by examining social control in everyday interaction and how it potentially alienates the individual from the self and others. Next, I discuss how impression management, emotion work, and feeling rules encourage alienation. Finally, I explore how competitive individualism promotes attention-seeking behavior, using celebrity culture and increased narcissism in American society as examples of this trend.

Social Control and the Self

Social control is evident in everyday interaction. Although individuals subjectively experience their actions as spontaneous, they are in fact unconsciously conforming to socially expected behavior in most interactions. They obey norms they do not know exist, effectively reproducing the existing social structure (Berger and Luckman 1966). When individuals act in accordance with social norms they become alienated from their behavior to a certain extent, as their actions are largely guided by a fear of social disapproval, rather than internally motivated. The more the individual is unaware of his behavior or why he engages in it, the greater the alienation experienced.

One way individuals are alienated from the self is through the process of imagining how others view them during interaction. As Mead (1934:142) notes, the self is a product of social interaction: "it is the social process itself that is responsible for the appearance of the self; it is not there as a self apart from this type of experience." The social process allows the self to be both subject and object: a person experiences their own emotional and behavioral reactions to situations (subject), but also has the ability to view oneself from the perspectives of others (object). Cooley (1902) coined the phrase "the looking glass self" to explain this process. In every social interaction the individual imagines how others view her and how she will be judged. As a result, people modify their behavior in advance to receive affirmation from others.

Related to Cooley's work, Mead (1934) separates the self into two aspects: the "I' and the "me". The "I" is the *spontaneous aspect* the self, while the "me" represents the internalized attitudes of others and the larger community as a whole. In Mead's framework the "me" represents the socialized aspect of the self: it is the part that recognizes social norms and acts in accordance with them. The "me" can be in reference to a specific other or a *generalized other*. The generalized other represents the group or community. When thinking of the generalized other, a person imagines the expectations of society in general, such as the inappropriateness of appearing naked in public. While many specific others would agree that it is improper to appear naked in public, this view is held by the larger society regardless of the specific individuals involved in the interaction.

The "I" represents the spontaneous part of the self, the aspect of a person's behavior that is novel and not determined by the real or imagined expectations of others. In every interaction, an individual's behavior is a combination of the "I" and "me." The more a person conforms to social expectations, the more the "me" directs behavior. While most interaction contains some novelty (the "I"), it is usually overshadowed by behavior that conforms to social expectations (Mead 1934).

One of the primary ways individuals conform to social expectations is through role behavior. Americans occupy multiple social positions, each with a given set of expected behaviors. This requires a great deal of compartmentalization, as two roles may be incompatible with one another. In one moment the individual is a caring mother, the next a ruthless manager with little concern for the welfare of subordinates. As Horney notes (1950), compartmentalization prevents psychological strain that would likely result from the awareness of such contradictions, allowing the individual to maintain the illusion of a consistent self across social contexts.

Taken together, the above processes alienate the individual from their behavior in two ways. First, the individual is largely unconscious of these processes and subjectively experiences them as spontaneous behavior. A lack of awareness or sociological understanding of one's behavior is a form of self-alienation, as it is difficult to be connected to actions that one does not consciously control. Second, these processes are directed towards conformity to the imagined expectations of others, which may not even

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be real. By directing behavior to meet social expectations, individuals inevitably lose some control, and therefore connection to the self.

Impression Management

Role behavior is analogous to a theatrical performance: in every social encounter people make use of props, setting, body language, facial expressions, and speech to manage the impressions they give to others. Aspects that undermine the presentation of self are minimized or omitted, while aspects that support it are highlighted (or even exaggerated). The goal of impression management is to project an idealized self; one that is based on the imagined and real expectations of others.

A successful performance is one that is deemed authentic by others in the interaction. This is accomplished through the *appearance* of spontaneity, which ironically requires a consistent, well-rehearsed performance: "As human beings we are presumably creatures of variable impulse with moods and energies that changes from one moment to the next. As characters put on for an audience, however, we must not be subject to ups and downs… A certain bureaucratization of the spirit is expected so that we can be relied upon to give a perfectly homogeneous performance at every appointed time" (Goffman 1956:56). There are two types of performances: sincere and cynical. A sincere performance is when the individual truly believes in the authenticity of the self being presented; a cynical performance is when the individual is consciously aware of impression management. The cynical performer is only concerned that others believe in the authenticity of the idealized self, while the sincere performer is equally concerned with self-appraisals (Goffman 1956). When the individual successfully manages their impression and receives positive appraisals from others, they feel pride. If unsuccessful, they feel shame (Scheff 1998).

According to Goffman, people engage in impression management for two reasons. First, by managing their impressions, a person can control the behavior of others to maximize self-interest. For example, the student that always arrives to class on time, is attentive, and demonstrates intellectual seriousness is more likely to receive support from a teacher than the student who does not exhibit such qualities. Second, impression management is expected of individuals during interaction. By projecting an idealized self

during interaction, others are able to easily assess the situation and determine the appropriate behavior in response. When impression management is not utilized, others become uncomfortable and unsure how to proceed. Impression management therefore serves as a way to make social interaction more efficient and fluid.

While the above reasons may be accurate, Goffman fails to investigate the structural origins of impression management. He notes that impression management is likely not a universal phenomenon, but does not go further with the analysis. I argue that impression management is an extension of competitive individualism, where people are expected to compete over resources with little concern for the welfare of others. In this case, the "resource" is the goodwill of others, and it is attained through manipulation often without concern for the interests of those being manipulated. Goffman also spends little time reflecting on whether impression management negatively affects interpersonal intimacy or the individual's relationship with the self. He does, however, note that insincere performances are likely to result in alienation from the self and others: "And to the degree that the individual maintains a show before others that he himself does not believe, he can come to experience a special kind of alienation from self and a special kind of wariness of others" (Goffman 1971:229). While I agree with this statement, I would argue that sincere performances are *more* alienating that insincere performances, as the individual is largely unaware he is managing his impression, which indicates a greater disconnection from the self. Also, both sincere and insincere performances promote interpersonal alienation by treating others as objects to be manipulated, rather than individuals with equally valid needs and concerns. Though he never uses the term explicitly, Goffman does briefly mention the potential for impression management to encourage alienation more generally:

> We come now to the basic dialectic. In their capacity as performers, individuals will be concerned with maintaining the impression that they are living up to the many standards by which they and their products are judged…*individuals are concerned not with the moral issue of realizing these standards, but with the amoral issue of engineering a convincing impression that these standards are being realized*. Our activity, then, is largely concerned with moral matters, but as performers we do not have a moral concern with them. As performers we are merchants of morality. Our day is given over to intimate contact with the goods we display and our minds are filled with intimate understanding of them; *but it may well be that the more attention*

we give to these goods, then the more distant we feel from them and from those who are believing enough to buy them (Goffman 1959:251).[1]

Impression management then presents a dilemma: if the individual projects an idealized self, he becomes alienated from both his actions and others during the interaction. If he rejects impression management in favor of spontaneous expression, he risks alienating others by making them feel uncomfortable. This leaves the individual perpetually caught between two approaches to interaction, both with potentially negative outcomes: spontaneous self-expression that could alienate himself from others, or the presentation of an idealized self that alienates him from his own actions.

Feeling Rules and Alienation from the Self

People are not only expected to control their behavior, speech, and dress during interaction, but their display of emotions as well. In every interaction a person encounters "feeling rules" that set the expectations for both the experience of emotion and the outward display of it. For example, a person is expected to appear concerned when a friend tells them they are having personal difficulties. *Being* concerned is not enough (or even necessary); one must *appear* concerned to be viewed as sincere (Hochschild 1983).

Like impression management, emotion work is both a conscious and an unconscious process. Individuals who have internalized feeling rules usually manipulate their emotional state unconsciously to display the required emotions, and are therefore able to retain the illusion of spontaneous feeling. The primary emotional mechanism that motivates the individual to conform to feeling rules is guilt: "Guilt upholds feeling rules from the inside: it is an internal acknowledgment of an unpaid psychological debt. Even 'I should feel guilty' is a nod in the direction of guilt, a weaker confirmation of what is owed" (Hochschild 1983:82). Despite largely conforming to feeling rules, people sometimes experience inappropriate emotions during an interaction (i.e. emotions that conflict with a feeling rule). When this happens the person engages in "surface acting" or "deep acting". When engaging in surface acting the individual is aware of giving a performance; his only concern is to convince others of his sincerity. Deep acting

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[1] My emphasis.

involves the individual recalling an image or experience that evokes the appropriate emotional response, effectively tricking himself into feeling the correct emotion. Returning to the example of a friend experiencing financial difficulties, the correct emotional display would be one of sadness and concern. If the individual does not actually feel sad, they might remember a scene from a film or a previous experience that made them sad. This helps the individual avoid feelings of guilt while simultaneously creating a more convincing emotional display for both the individual and his audience.

Although Hochschild's theory is insightful, it nevertheless normalizes general emotional alienation by not spending enough time critically examining emotion work outside the economic sphere. She notes that people manipulate their emotions in everyday situations, yet either sees this as normal or unproblematic. In her view, emotion work and emotional labor are only alienating when performed under conditions of exploitation:

> Any functioning society makes effective use of its members' emotional labor. We do not think twice about the use of feeling in the theater, or in psychotherapy, or in forms of group life that we admire. It is when we come to speak of the exploitation of the bottom by the top in any society that we become morally concerned…It is not emotional labor itself, therefore, but the underlying system of recompense that raises the question of what the cost of it is (Hochschild 1983:12).

As long as there is not a power imbalance between individuals, emotion work is considered integral to a "functioning society." Moreover, Hochschild does not consider that if people were not alienated in the first place, it would not be necessary for them to project an idealized self to convince others of their sincerity. This is particularly true in more informal situations. If two friends felt connected to one another, they would not need to project heightened concern and empathy; they would simply feel concern and empathy and would be confident that the other did as well. Individuals use impression management and emotion work to convince others of their sincerity, but the irony is they may not be sincere at all. By doing so they are at least partly alienated from their actions and the other person, as the interaction is being mediated through a performance. The individual is not sharing a spontaneous, authentic self, but rather a facsimile of one.

Emotion work is of course not always alienating. Hochschild (1983) notes that emotion work can also be viewed as a gift to others, depending on the context. If an individual freely and consciously controls her emotional display in service to others,

emotion work can strengthen interpersonal bonds. For example, it is a kindness to control one's emotional display when helping a friend experiencing personal difficulties, if the genuine display of emotions would undermine supporting the friend. In this case the individual may be partly alienated from her emotional display, but she will also strengthen her bond with the friend. Moreover, by choosing to control her emotional display out of concern for her friend, the individual still remains connected to her behavior, as it is consciously self-directed.

One feeling rule that permeates American society is that individuals should project a happy and optimistic self at all times. For those who are unable to modify their feelings, there is great pressure to display a positive outlook regardless of their actual emotional state:

> The rewards for exuding a positive manner are all the greater in a culture that expects no less. Where cheerfulness is the norm, crankiness can seem perverse. Who would want to date or hire a "negative" person? What could be wrong with him or her? The trick, if you want to get ahead, is to simulate a positive outlook, no matter how you might actually be feeling (Ehrenreich 2009:52).

Positive thinking, the ideological expression of this feeling rule, is virtually unchallenged in the mainstream culture. Self-help books, DVDs, and seminars on positive thinking have grown in recent years, as have its influence. The central tenet of positive thinking, that one can achieve anything through the power of belief alone, is especially attractive amidst growing economic insecurity. Self-manipulation is encouraged, as conditioned happiness is considered authentic. All that truly matters is how one consciously feels (Ehrenreich 2009).

While positive thinking may temporarily allay the individual's anxiety, it actually increases it over the long-term. Positive thinking undermines the ability to overcome obstacles by diverting energy away from the real work necessary for change, leading to greater disappointment and anxiety when the illusion is no longer sustainable (Hedges 2009). Moreover, it leaves individuals feeling responsible for their circumstances by ignoring the structural issues they face: "For those who run into the hard walls of reality, the ideology has the pernicious effect of forcing the victim to blame him or herself for his or her pain or suffering. Abused and battered wives or children, the unemployed, the depressed, the mentally ill, the illiterate, the lonely, those grieving for lost loved ones,

those crushed by poverty, the terminally ill, those fighting with addictions, those suffering from trauma, those trapped in menial and poorly paid jobs, those facing foreclosure or bankruptcy because they cannot pay their medical bills, need only overcome their negativity" (Hedges 2009:119). Positive thinking also channels individualism, resulting in a loss of empathy for others and a reluctance to offer support to those suffering from personal difficulties:

> [I]n the world of positive thinking other people are not there to be nurtured or to provide unwelcome reality checks. They are there only to nourish, praise, and affirm. Harsh as this dictum sounds, many ordinary people adopt it as their creed, displaying wall plaques or bumper stickers showing the word "Whining" with a cancel sign through it. There seems to be a massive empathy deficit, which people respond to by withdrawing their own. No one has the time or patience for anyone else's problems (Ehrenreich 2009:56).

Advocates of positive thinking often instruct individuals to remove all people from their lives deemed "negative," which means anyone who is critical, pessimistic, or unhappy. People are even encouraged to avoid the news altogether because it is depressing, which furthers enables a retreat into fantasy (Ehrenreich 2009).

Forced positivity alienates the individual from her emotions by suppressing feelings of anger or sadness. It also makes it more difficult to foster intimacy between people: "The nagging undercurrents of alienation and the constant pressure to exhibit a false enthusiasm and buoyancy destroy real relationships. The loneliness of a work life where self-presentation is valued over authenticity and one must always be upbeat and positive, no matter what one's actual mood or situation, is disorienting and stressful" (Hedges 2009:138). Like impression management and emotion work more generally, the individual is caught between the need for authentic self-expression versus the need for social acceptance. In striking the balance between both, neither is truly achieved.

Empathy and Interaction

Empathy is a trait rooted in human biology. When watching another person *mirror neurons* in the brain mimic the activity being observed; if the individual does not have enough direct experiences to draw from, she engages in "cognitive empathy" by imaging the person's circumstances (Olson 2013:22). Mirror neurons allow the individual to see the world from the perspective of others and are potentially the biological basis for

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prosocial behavior. The ability to empathize with others serves a vital evolutionary role. Without empathy human civilization might not exist, as cooperation increases the chances of individual and species survival (Olson 2013).

One psychology study suggests that Americans may lack empathy for other adults. Subjects (female college students) read a brief article on one of the following: an adult dog, a puppy, a human adult (similar in age and sex to the subjects), and a human child. In each scenario, the subject of the article has a broken leg and is undergoing rehabilitation. In their survey responses afterwards, respondents that read the article on the human child reported the greatest levels of empathy, followed by the adult dog and the puppy. The human adult received the lowest empathy scores of all, despite closely resembling the respondents in terms of age, sex, and student status (Batson et al. 2005).

A recent study on the relationship between individualism and empathy also raises concerns. The research examined differences in empathetic concern between Korean teenagers and Korean-American teenagers. Predictably, Korean-Americans showed higher levels of individualism, and Koreans indicated higher levels of collectivism. Moreover, individualism was negatively associated with empathetic concern, while collectivism was positively associated with empathetic concern (Yoon 2016).

Indeed, competitive individualism acts as one of the primary ideological barriers to empathy in American society by extoling self-interest and discouraging concern for the welfare of others: "American individualism…provides little encouragement for nurturance, taking a sink-or-swim approach to moral development as well as to economic success. It admires toughness and strength and fears softness and weakness. It adulates winners while showing contempt for losers, a contempt that can descend with crushing weight on those considered, either by others or by themselves, to be moral or social failures" (Bellah et al. 2008:xiv). Many interactional norms also discourage empathy. For example, the norms governing the use of shared space both reflect and reinforce the emotional distance between Americans. The U.S. is considered a "non-contact culture" by anthropologists. Compared to contact cultures (e.g. Latin America), individuals in non-contact cultures (e.g. North America, Western Europe) maintain more distance during interaction and engage in less touching and eye-contact (Baldassare and Feller 1975). A variety of norms in the U.S. require giving people ample space. For example, it

would be considered rude to sit down at a stranger's table in a busy restaurant, where in other countries it would be seen as rude to not share one's table.

Greeting norms reflect a lack of genuine concern for others as well. Americans commonly greet others with the phrase, "How are you?" Taken at face value it denotes concern, yet it is often not meant as a sincere question, especially between strangers. The expected response, no matter how one is truly feeling, is "Good, how are you?" Individuals thus become accustomed to others expressing artificial concern for their well-being as a matter of course, thus encouraging little empathy in return. When something as basic as inquiring about a person's well-being is commonly assumed to be insincere, it calls into question the level of empathy people have for others more generally.

Celebrity Culture and the Competition for Attention

Attention is an important psychological resource needed by all people, but in the U.S. it is often obtained through competition with others. Derber (2002:xii) argues that attention "plays a role in social interaction as does money in the economy: people hunger for it and suffer terribly from its deprivation; many compete subtly but fiercely to get it and it is one of the social badges of prestige and success." In his study of formal and informal interactions in U.S. society, Derber identifies the pursuit of attention as the dominant theme in everyday conversation. He argues that as a result of living in a competitive economy, individuals are also expected to compete for attention in their personal lives. The social world becomes a marketplace, where those with the right qualities are likely to receive the most attention. The more attractive, aggressive, intelligent, or humorous a person is, the more likely she will receive attention from others. Individuals who are less adept at social competition, however, are expected to give attention.

This occurs in two different ways. First, those with the most resources (personality/physical traits) tend to dominate conversations. They are granted the most speaking time, and others are expected to pay attention to them. Second, in a more subtle way, the focus of the group conversation is always on the experiences and feelings of dominant members. Even when a subordinate member of the group is afforded the chance to speak, they will usually focus on the interests and experiences of dominant

members. This disproportionately affects women, who are expected to be caregivers and respond to the needs of others, especially men. As a result, they often receive less attention than men in a mixed-sex group (Derber 2002).

Celebrity culture is one of the dominant expressions of competitive individualism in American society: it idealizes competition for material and psychological rewards while showing little concern for the welfare of others. The individual is commodified by celebrity culture, as are others in the competition for wealth and fame:

> Human beings become a commodity in a celebrity culture. They are objects, like consumer products. They have no intrinsic value. They must look fabulous and live on fabulous sets. Those who fail to meet the ideal are belittled and mocked. Friends and allies are to be used and betrayed during the climb to fame, power, and wealth. And when they are no longer useful, they are to be discarded (Hedges 2009:29).

People admire celebrities and long to be like them, hoping they too will be admired one day. This is especially true of younger adults: "In 2006, 51% of 18-to 25-year-olds said that 'becoming famous' was an important goal of their generation—nearly five times as many as named 'becoming more spiritual' as an important goal (Twenge and Campbell 2013:93).

In recent years reality television has become a way for ordinary Americans to achieve celebrity status. Reality television gives "normal" people the chance to become a celebrity by competing with others for the audience's entertainment. The shows promote materialism and competition at the expense of values that encourage intimacy and solidarity with others:

> "The moral nihilism of celebrity culture is played out on reality television shows, most of which encourage a dark voyeurism into other people's humiliation, pain, weakness, and betrayal. Education, building community, honesty, transparency, and sharing are qualities that will see you, in a gross perversion of democracy and morality, voted off a reality show…Compassion, competence, intelligence, and solidarity with others are forms of weakness. And those who do not achieve celebrity status, who do not win the prize money or make millions in Wall Street firms, deserve to lose. Those who are denigrated and ridiculed on reality television, often as they sob in front of the camera, are branded as failures" (Hedges 2009:30).

A more common way people seek attention is through the use of social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter. The goal for those seeking attention is to get as many "likes" (electronic votes of approval) for their posts as possible, regardless of the content being shared. The likes become a source of social validation, indicating that one is in fact

liked, respected, and possibly admired by others. The same is true for the number of "friends" a person has listed on their profile. In an environment that normalizes competing for attention, the quantity of friends becomes more important than the quality of relationships.

The prevalence of narcissism in American society is a reflection of celebrity culture and the competition for attention. Narcissism is characterized by an exaggerated view of the self, attention-seeking behavior, and a lack of empathy for others (Twenge and Campbell 2013). An analysis of survey data from 100 countries found that the United States has the highest prevalence of narcissistic traits in the world. The authors also found a significant relationship between individualism and narcissism (Foster, Campbell, and Twenge 2003).

Social networking media encourage narcissism by creating a platform for attention-seeking behavior:

> Social networking sites reinforce narcissism in an endless loop. Narcissists have more "friends" and connections on these sites, and narcissistic behavior and images are rewarded with more comments and more "adds"…in addition to the site structure facilitating narcissistic self-promotion, the way users are connected may pull the norm for behavior and self-presentation toward narcissism (Twenge and Campbell 2013:110-111).

One way individuals seek attention on social networking sites is by posting "selfies", which are defined as "amateur self-portrait photographs...taken with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website" (Weiser 2015:477).   A study on the frequency of selfie posts and narcissism found that individuals with narcissistic characteristics posted more selfies than those that did not (Weiser 2015), which supports the argument they are primarily used as a form of self-promotion.

Conclusion

In this chapter I discussed the dialectical relationship between individuals and society, and how self-alienation occurs when people modify their behavior in accordance with social norms. I argued that the more the individual is unaware of this process, the greater the level of alienation experienced. Every aspect of the individual's appearance and behavior is turned into a performance intended to manipulate others, and feeling rules alienate the individual from his inner emotional life, instilling a forced positivity that

denies the very existence of negative thoughts and feelings. Instead of thinking and acting independently, individuals largely conform to the group and obey those perceived as having legitimate authority, which itself is defined outside the individual's control.

Individualism also discourages empathy for others and responsibility for their welfare, placing an unfair social and economic burden on the individual while estranging her from others. Moreover, competitive individualism is encouraged in the social sphere, where individuals are expected to compete for attention among friends, family, and co-workers. The pursuit of attention is further encouraged by celebrity culture and reality television, where individuals chase wealth and fame at the expense of all other values. Despite these conditions, the individual still needs meaningful social support and intimacy. As we shall see in Chapter 4, the most common solution, romantic love, produces alienated relations of its own.

CHAPTER IV

TWO AGAINST THE WORLD: THE PROMISE AND BETRAYAL OF ROMANTIC LOVE

Humans are at their essence social beings. They need other people not only to survive external threats and help produce the basics of life, but for their psychological well-being as well. Humans are also characterized by their ability to adapt; under the most difficult circumstances they will find a way to endure. Whether it is genocide, economic deprivation, or other adverse environmental conditions, humans usually make the best of their situation. In contemporary U.S. society, the individual adapts to isolation by idealizing and pursuing romantic love.[1]

The romantic relationship serves as a replacement for the lack of community inherent in a competitive, individualistic society. In essence, the relationship becomes a community of two, where both partners agree to meet the other's psychological and material needs in the context of a social environment perceived as hostile. It is therefore commonly considered the most important relationship in a person's life, as so much depends on its success or failure. It is not a relationship based on love, but one motivated by the need for social support and human connection. As Fromm (1964:81) notes, "the main emphasis is on finding a refuge from an otherwise unbearable sense of aloneness. In 'love' one has found, at last, a haven from aloneness. One forms an alliance of two against the world, and this egoism *à deux* is mistaken for love and intimacy." The beliefs, norms, and values associated with romantic love, however, undermine the stated goals of intimacy and support, as does the culture in which the relationship is situated. Romantic love is idealized as a solution to alienation, yet individuals often lack the ability to create intimate, mutually supportive relationships because of alienation in both the relationship and the larger society. I refer to this phenomenon as the *romantic contradiction*.

The romantic contradiction produces an endless cycle of disappointment, as individuals continually pursue romantic love despite an accumulation of negative experiences (e.g. divorce, violence), always hopeful the next relationship will bring the intimacy and support they seek. Paradoxically, each negative experience reinforces the individual's need for social support,

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[1] Although I am explicitly referring to heterosexual relationships, the recent trend towards marriage equality suggests that romantic love as a cultural ideal applies to many same-sex relationships.

which is then channeled into renewed efforts at finding a romantic partner. The quest for romance not only undermines the individual's immediate need for intimacy and support, but the social conditions necessary to build community outside the relationship, a subject I return to in the conclusion.

The Sociology of Love

Sociologists have identified three primary reasons individuals pursue romantic relationships. First, individuals pursue romantic relationships to establish a feeling of closeness with others. Illouz (1997:143) refers to romantic love as a modern "utopia" where individuals temporarily transcend gender and class hierarchies through a "state of intense emotional fusion" that allays the individual's sense of isolation. The author argues that a decline in religious rituals have transferred the need for human connection from religious institutions to romantic relationships. Like religion, romantic love has its own rituals that affirm the romantic bond, such as intimate dinners and walks in nature. The romantic utopia is also attained through sexual intimacy, which often follows romantic rituals.

Second, romantic relationships are central to the individual's need for recognition. Recognition is "the process by which one's social worth and value are ongoingly established in and through one's relationships with others" (Illouz 2012:120). In pre-modern times recognition was attained through one's status within a community, whereas the modern individual attains recognition primarily through interactional performances. Romantic interactions are the primary site where recognition is achieved and maintained: "…romantic love is central to the recognition order by which in modernity social worth is accrued to a person through interaction ritual chains. This is because it is the most intense and total way of producing emotional energy, an effect of the ego-enhancement induced by love" (Illouz 2012:120).

Finally, romantic relationships provide a way for individuals to meet their psychological and physical needs (Illouz 1997). Marriage in particular "solves many problems of life organization simultaneously. In general, marriage settles one's living arrangements – with whom one shares a household, and usually income and expenses; one's sexual obligations and opportunities; with whom one socializes; who will care for one if one is sick" (Swidler 2001:130).

Missing from the literature is a discussion of how the individual's lack of community is fundamental to the pursuit of romantic love. Communities are a source of material and

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psychological goods: they can help provide for the individual's physical needs, as well as the need for recognition, a sense of belonging, and interpersonal connection. In a competitive, individualistic society, people are expected to look out for themselves without concern for the welfare of others. Because individuals cannot provide everything they need on their own, strategic partnerships become necessary for their physical survival and emotional well-being.

Most sociological research on romantic love has also not asked whether romantic relationships really do foster greater intimacy between men and women. Feminist scholars have discussed female inequality in heterosexual romantic relationships (Jamieson 1999), but not how gender affects intimacy more generally. Additionally, the commodification of love has also been discussed in some detail (Fromm 1964; Illouz 1997), but the authors never explicitly examine *how* commodification undermines intimacy in romantic relationships. Further, there is almost no discussion of the interactional processes associated with romantic love and how they affect intimacy. In this chapter I explore some of the barriers to intimacy in romantic relationships and examine interactional processes that encourage alienation from the self and others. My central argument is that although romantic love offers the promise of greater intimacy, it in many ways undermines it from the very beginning.

The Allure of Romantic Love

Lindholm (1998) argues that romantic love is only present in societies with competitive social structures where individuals are under severe social and/or ecological strain. The drive to form romantic relationships in a competitive society is a way of creating an emotional bond that does not exist otherwise. If the community or larger society can no longer satisfy the individual's needs, the only recourse is to develop an intense bond with a single person. Neal and Colas (2000:3) describe the appeal of this strategy:

> Romanticism is an ideology that promises happiness, sexual pleasure, and self-affirmation from building an intrinsically rewarding relationship with another person. Such a relationship is idealized as one that places a high reward on a specific person, that promotes expressiveness and emotional intimacy, and that promises a caring about the well-being of each other. Through such a relationship, individuals expect to find a sense of belonging, membership, self-fulfillment, and a type of attachment that will serve as a buffer against the many forms of loneliness that frequently prevail in our culture.

Americans have good reason to prioritize monogamous romantic relationships. Dush and Amato (2005) found a positive relationship between relationship status and well-being, with married

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individuals reporting the greatest levels of happiness and self-esteem, followed by co-habiting couples and dating couples. Individuals who were single or dating multiple partners experienced lower levels of happiness and self-esteem. In other words, the greater the level of commitment in a person's relationship, the greater their subjective sense of well-being.

Romantic love, however, contains its own contradictions. Although individuals yearn for a relationship that lasts their entire lives, most assume relationships will eventually end. Moreover, individualism is at odds with the very idea of a committed relationship, as individual needs are expected to outweigh obligations to others, including romantic partners. Like friendships, the only obligation in a romantic relationship is the honest expression of feelings. When needs are no longer met, the relationship is expected to end (Bellah et al. 2008). As noted previously, romantic relationships are a key source of recognition, which in turn affects the individual's sense of self-worth. The contradiction between personal autonomy and commitment leaves the individual in a perpetual state of anxiety because the threat of rejection is always present, resulting in a precarious sense of self-worth (Illouz 2012).

The quest for a romantic partner is so pervasive that those who are unable to find one feel a sense of personal inadequacy and shame, which only compounds their suffering. While never openly stated, the assumption held by many is that a person who does not have a romantic partner is somehow deficient or undesirable. This is especially true for those who are unmarried at a certain age after many in their age cohort have "settled down" and started a family (Neal and Colas 2000). Even if one is lucky enough to find a marriage partner, many eventually end up divorced and feeling as though they have "failed at one of life's major undertakings" (Neal and Colas 2000:29). Therapeutic discourse also inadvertently places blame on the individual for "failed" relationships by emphasizing the role of personal choice in relationships. The individual is expected to take responsibility for making poor relationship decisions, which only further undermines her sense of self-worth (Illouz 2012).

There are other signs that "love" is not the solution many hoped it would be, such as the frequency of violence in romantic relationships. In 2010, 24.3% of women and 13.8% of men in the U.S. reported severe physical violence from a romantic partner in their lifetime; additionally, 9.4% of women reported being raped by a partner (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control 2011). If we include non-physical forms of aggression the picture becomes even darker: "Unfortunately, the Justice Department does not compile statistics on emotional violence or

subcriminal forms of non-lethal intimate behavior: verbal abuse, or public undermining, or emotional blackmail, or everyday manipulation (often involving children), or all the other varieties of less-than-stellar couple conduct in our midst" (Kipnis 2003:55). Indeed, 48.8% of women and 48.4% of men have experienced psychological aggression from a partner at some point in their lives (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control 2011), calling into question the level of intimacy and support in the typical romantic relationship.

Romanticism and the Rise of the Consumer Society

Despite its current ubiquity, romantic love is a unique phenomenon of Western Civilization that did not fully emerge until the late 18th century. Before then, the only form of comparable love was *passionate love*, an experience characterized by intense sexual and emotional union based on desire:

> Passionate love is marked by an urgency which sets it apart from the routines of everyday life with which, indeed, it tends to come into conflict. The emotional involvement with the other is pervasive – so strong that it may lead the individual, or both individuals, to ignore their ordinary obligations. Passionate love has a quality of enchantment which can be religious in its fervor. Everything in the world seems suddenly fresh, yet perhaps at the same time fails to capture the individual's interest, which is so strongly bound up with the love object (Giddens 1992:37).

Marriage, on the other hand, was contractual in nature and mostly concerned with the creation of a stable household (Giddens 1992).

There are two things that distinguish passionate love from romantic love. First, passionate love is a transitory phenomenon that is not expected to last one's lifetime. It is an intense experience that lovers are unable to maintain: the more time spent with the beloved, the more likely passion will decrease (Kipnis 2003). Moreover, many societies have myths and stories about the dangerous nature of passionate love, where lovers are inevitably doomed to a horrible fate. It was seen as anything but an ideal state of being. Second, though intimacy and sexuality are still essential to romantic love, they are perceived as somewhat independent of one another. Romantic love is typified by the selection of a specific person who will "complete" the individual and help with the process of self-realization, a phenomenon that goes well beyond temporary sexual passion (Giddens 1992).

By the 1920s dating became the primary expression of romantic love. Freed from the constraints of arranged marriages, individuals were now allowed to select their romantic partner.

For the first time a distinction was made between dating and courtship. Men and women were now able to choose a romantic partner, and if the relationship seemed mutually satisfying, continue on the path towards marriage.[2] If not, they would simply seek a more fulfilling relationship with someone else (Brown 1995).

At the same time mass consumerism became a way of life for many Americans. One common method used in advertisements was to link products with the individual's desire for romance (Ewen 1996). Advertising not only linked romance to consumer products, it shaped the way romantic love was understood. Before consumerism, love was expected to develop over time between people; love was associated with values such as trust, loyalty, and security. With the rise of modern advertising, love came to be associated with passion, leisure, and consumption. Advertisements showed men and women within intimate distance of one another having fun while engaged in leisure pursuits. This led people to expect a romantic relationship that involves endless passion and consumption, instead of the more realistic belief that love is something that should develop over time (Illouz 1997). Love became a feeling, rather than an obligation.

In order to further explore the relationship between romance and consumerism, Bachen and Illouz (1996) conducted a study of how children between the ages of 8 and 17 view love. The authors found that children of all ages overwhelmingly associated romance with leisure time and consumption. As children got older, however, their experiences of love modified their perception of romantic relationships. While the children still retained their earlier definitions of love, they also acknowledged the need for love in everyday situations such as watching TV with a partner. This creates a contradictory model of love in their minds. They expect love to revolve around romantic dinners and exotic vacations, yet they also understand that love generally does not involve consumption and leisure activities. Adults also hold this contradictory view of love; they are critical of mainstream cultural representations of love as not being realistic, yet define their romantic experiences in relation to them. When asked to describe a romantic memory, individuals are more likely note experiences involving romantic rituals rather than everyday romantic encounters (Illouz 1997).

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[2] Despite this newfound freedom, it should be noted that other limitations continued to exist, such as the person's race, class, and gender.

The Commodification of Love

In the Communist Manifesto, Marx and Engels (1978:475) argued that capitalism "left no other nexus between people than naked self-interest, than callous cash payment." In Marx's view the economy was the central institution of any society and bound to shape all other institutions to some degree. Even cultural institutions, such as the family, are transformed to meet the needs of the capitalist economy (Marx 1978).

Much can be learned about a society by examining the language used in everyday conversations. According to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, language is largely a product of the society in which it is situated, shaping both human perception and cognition (Kay and Kempton 1984). The language used to describe the pursuit of love reflects the economic reality of living in a consumer society where almost everything is turned into a commodity. People talk of the "dating market", and describe themselves in terms of "what they have to offer" a potential mate, or how much they have "invested" in a relationship. Even the term "partner", which on the surface has an egalitarian connotation, reflects the mentality of a business relationship. Before I further discuss commodification in romantic relationships, it would be useful to define what love is in its basic form.

Fromm (1964) outlines four aspects of love that are interdependent and equally essential, regardless of the type of relationship: care, responsibility, respect, and knowledge. *Care* is the "active concern for the life and growth of that which we love" (Fromm 1964:26). Regardless of how much one professes love for another, if they abuse or neglect the person they do not truly love them. *Responsibility* is the voluntary act of meeting the expressed and unexpressed needs of another person. One does not act as a result of an imposed duty but genuinely sees the needs of another human being as equal to their own. *Respect* is an awareness of the person as a unique individual and is characterized by a concern for their independence and growth. This ensures that a person is not only helpful and caring, but wary of using the other for personal gain or allowing an unhealthy dependency to form in the relationship. *Knowledge* is the reflexive understanding of the self and other. This goes beyond surface understanding such as patterns of behavior, and looks deeper into the motivations and perceptions of individuals. The ability to love is greatly hindered when one lacks a deeper understanding of the self and others.

Giving, not receiving, is also the basis for love in Fromm's view. Unfortunately, finding a suitable companion more often reflects an exchange of commodities than a sincere desire to

foster intimacy between people. Because the larger society does not provide adequate intimacy and social support, men and women enter into a partnership where mutual needs can be met (Fromm 1964). This arrangement objectifies both people to an extent, as each becomes a vital resource for the other's emotional and physical well-being, instead a person with equally valid rights and needs. If a person's needs are not met, however, they can look to the marketplace for a suitable replacement:

> At their core, Americans are a consumer society. We indulge ourselves in a vast array of designer clothes, exotic foods, expensive electronics, etc. Unfortunately, this consumer mentality is increasingly being applied to our interpersonal relationships (especially prospective dating partners). Today, individuals enter relationships focusing on what they themselves can get out of it, not what they can give their partner. Moreover, if individuals' needs and expectations are not satisfied they either refuse to buy the "product" or attempt to return it (Brown 1995:98).

While the individual subjectively experiences "falling in love" as a mysterious and somewhat intuitive process guided by emotions, behind the scenes an economic rationality is also at play. Prior to the 20th century arranged marriages were common. Marriages were seen as economic alliances that would benefit both families while creating a stable household for the new couple. With the rise of industrialization and the modern individual, openly discussing the economic aspects of partner selection became taboo, as marriage was now seen as a path to personal fulfillment and happiness (Kipnis 2003). In American society individuals both consciously and unconsciously select partners who are similar to them in terms of class, physical attractiveness, and intelligence: "Despite all the putative freedom, the majority of us select partners remarkably similar to ourselves – economically, and in social standing, education, and race. That is, we choose 'appropriate' mates, and we precisely calculate their assets, with each party gauging just how well they can do on the open market, knowing exactly their own exchange values and that of prospective partners" (Kipnis 2003:62-63). This is a highly gendered phenomenon, where women are primarily sought for their physical beauty and ability as caretakers, while men are evaluated on their capacity to provide economically (Fromm 1964).

One way to examine the extent of economic rationality in romantic coupling is through social exchange theory. Social exchange theory assumes that individuals are concerned with maximizing their interests in social interaction. Whether they are concerned with material gain or humanitarian feelings is not important, as each person may value something completely different. The more individuals receive from others, the more they are likely to give in return.

Patterns of exchange develop over time, and consequently previous exchanges influence future ones (Molm and Cook 1995).

One interesting application of social exchange theory concerns the exchange of sexual favors between romantic partners. van de Rijt et al. (2006) found that the quantity of sexual acts a person performed was based on the perceived sexual contributions of their partner. The greater the perceived level of a partner's contribution, the more people were willing to give in return. This lends empirical support to the idea that even the most intimate acts between people in a capitalist society are based on the principal of exchange.

Impression Management and the Halo Effect

Fromm (1964) argues that individuals in modern capitalist societies are more focused on being *lovable* than learning how to better love others. As previously discussed, people see themselves and potential romantic partners in terms of commodities in a marketplace. In this context the individual is encouraged to sell her positive qualities in order to attract others, while at the same time minimizing or omitting any qualities that would deter a prospective "buyer". But as the saying goes, let the buyer beware.

The primary way individuals maximize their value in the dating marketplace is through impression management. According to Goffman (1959), individuals engage in impression management primarily to maximize personal gain in social interactions. In every social encounter people make use of clothing, setting, body language, facial expressions, and speech to manage the impressions they give to others. The goal is to successfully project an idealized self: a self that is based on the imagined and real expectations of others. Applied to dating, a person who appears optimistic, happy, attractive, and financially secure is more likely to attract a romantic partner than a person who lacks such qualities.

In recent years many Americans have turned to internet dating websites to find a romantic partner. Rosenfeld and Thomas (2012) found that middle-aged heterosexuals are increasingly likely to utilize online dating websites. This is true for two reasons. First, they do not encounter enough potential partners in their everyday interactions, as most people in their age cohort are already in a committed relationship. Second, the role of family, friends, and co-workers in introducing potential romantic partners has decreased dramatically since the 1940s, forcing people to increasingly rely on their own resources.

Impression management in online dating is qualitatively different than in face-to-face interactions. According to Guadagno et al. (2012) the distinguishing characteristics of impression management in online dating are its anonymous nature, greater control over the presentation of self, and the lack of non-verbal cues such as speech patterns and body language. This makes it is much easier to project an idealized self and also places more emphasis on the remaining cues, such as photographs, emails, and the written section of a person's profile.

In a study of online dating participants, Ellison et al. (2006) differentiate between a person's *actual self* and their *idealized self*. The actual self is the attributes a person objectively possesses, while the idealized self is the person they aspire to be. There is a certain tension in creating an online profile. On the one hand individuals have a vested interest in presenting a reasonably honest image of themselves, as one of the goals of romantic love is intimacy. On the other hand, complete honesty may put them at a disadvantage in a market where others are perceived as misrepresenting themselves to some degree. For example, respondents believed that most people lie about their age on dating sites, so they felt the need to lie as well in order to remain competitive and attract a desirable partner. It was also common for people to describe themselves as thinner, happier, and more adventurous than they saw themselves, as these are perceived as desirable traits. The way most people dealt with this discrepancy is by believing that they *will* someday be their idealized self, therefore it is not considered lying.

In addition to controlling their presentation of self, individuals often project qualities onto others they find romantically desirable. Because little is known about individuals when first meeting them, people are left to fill in the blanks using the limited information available. There is a tendency during this process to assume positive qualities when a person has demonstrated certain attributes one finds desirable; this is known as the *halo effect*. For example, if a person is rich or considered physically attractive, her date might assume she has other desirable qualities, such as being honest, kind, or intelligent (Neal and Collas 2000).

Taken together, impression management and the halo effect are a serious impediment to the development of intimacy. According to Fromm (1964), *knowledge* of the other is essential to developing a loving relationship. In the modern dating scene, however, people are constantly projecting an idealized self while simultaneously assuming traits that others may or may not possess. This creates a situation where people are largely interacting based on mutual

projections, a process that varies in terms of conscious awareness. Under these circumstances it is a wonder that people are able to develop intimacy at all.

Another problematic with impression management is the contradictory goals of intimacy and control. By using impression management, one hopes to manipulate the behavior of others to achieve personal goals. This goes against Fromm's (1964) assertion that love is based on mutual *care* and the *respect* of each person as a unique individual with their own feelings, needs and goals. Manipulating another person is the very opposite of the care and respect found in a loving relationship: it sees the other as an object to be controlled in order to meet one's physical and emotional needs. Although this arrangement between people may be functional and mutually satisfying to an extent, it is not one motivated by love.

For many the theme of control continues once a relationship is successfully established, particularly in cohabitation and marriage. It is generally accepted that a degree of control is legitimate in long-term relationships, and therefore individuals willingly relinquish some autonomy in order to achieve harmony in their relationship. In practice, this means exerting some control over one's partner through localized interdictions. Kipnis (2003:75) notes "both parties must be willing to jettison whatever aspects of individuality might prove irritating, while being allowed to retain enough of it to feel their autonomy is not being sacrificed, even as it's being surgically excised…What matters is that the operative word is *can't,* and that virtually no aspect of everyday life is not subject to regulation and review, and that in modern love acceding to the mate's commands is what constitutes *intimacy,* and that the 'better' the couple the more the inhabitants have successfully internalized the operative local interdictions" (Kipnis 2003:92-93). Individuals are ideally their truest selves in a romantic relationship, yet they are expected to check spontaneity and self-expression in order to maintain the relationship.

Gender as a Barrier to Intimacy

Gender is largely considered a social construct by sociologists; that is, the characteristics and behaviors assigned to people born as male or female are largely the result of socialization, not biology. Men and women are born into a society that tells them how to look, act, and feel based on prevailing norms (West and Zimmerman 1987). This creates a situation where men and women perceive and relate to the world differently, making intimacy more difficult than it would be otherwise.

One area of difference is communication styles. Gilligan (1982) notes that men tend to speak in terms of individual responsibility, while women tend to emphasize social connections when talking about themselves or others. According to Brown (1995), female speech patterns are more likely to foster intimacy, while male speech is more utilitarian in nature. For example, when engaged in conversation designed to help another person, men and women have very different approaches. While women use active listening skills in order to better emphasize with the person, men offer strategies on how to fix the problem being discussed. Men are also less likely to disclose their feelings or discuss problems, making it difficult for women to develop intimacy with them. In short, male speech patterns more often than not inhibit intimacy in male/female relationships.

Men and women also experience sex differently. When emotions are involved for men, they tend to be experienced at different times than women: "For a woman, there is no satisfactory sex without connection; for a man, the two are more easily separable. For her, the connection generally must precede the sexual encounter. For him, emotional closeness can be born of the sexual contact" (101). Thus, women are more likely to feel unsatisfied during and after sexual encounters, as men are not as motivated to establish an emotional bond prior to sex.

Another barrier to intimacy in heterosexual romantic relationships is violence against women. Women are much more likely to experience rape than men: 17.6% of women have been a victim of an attempted or completed rape, compared to 3.0% of men (Ruch and Wang 2006). When including other forms of physical violence and stalking, 30% of women have been affected. Kilbourne (1999) notes that the single greatest cause of female injury is domestic violence, and more than one third of female homicides are committed by boyfriends and husbands. Beyond the physical harm caused by intimate violence, women experience a wide range of negative psychological effects, such as PTSD, anxiety, substance abuse, and depression; 60% of women who are depressed have experienced abuse at some point in their lives (Lacey et al. 2012). Taken together, intimate violence damages the ability of many women to engage in romantic relationships with men. Even if a woman has not experienced abuse directly, she may still approach romantic relationships more cautiously due to the experiences of other women, potentially inhibiting the level of intimacy with a romantic partner.

The sexual objectification of women in the media also represents a barrier to cross-gender intimacy. In order to sell products, advertisers routinely use images of scantily clad women to

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associate female sexuality with consumer goods. Female models are often put into sexually provocative poses, accompanied by suggestive phrases such as "push my buttons." In many cases, only a single body part of a woman is shown, underscoring the point that women are nothing more than objects meant for male sexual gratification (Kilbourne 1999).

When male models are included in a sexually suggestive ad the situation does not improve. Generally speaking, the women in the ads are there to please men. Worse still, many ads are suggestive of violence against women. On the softer side are ads that humorously depict sadomasochistic scenes where women have their hands or legs bound. In some ads, more violent images of men threatening women are used to sell products. While the link between ads and violence against women is not simple cause and effect, a media environment that routinely objectifies women is likely a contributing factor; the first step towards justifying violence against people is to view them as objects (Kilbourne 1999).

Beyond its gender implications, ads ultimately depict a sterile form of sexuality that does not involve intimacy or the individuality required for the truly erotic:

> When we think about it, the people in ads aren't sexy because of anything unique to them. They have no personal histories. They mostly look alike and are interchangeable. They very rarely look at each other…People in ads like these aren't lovers – they are the users and the used. They are sexy because of the products they use. The jeans, the perfume, the car are sexy in and of themselves. The answer to the question posed by one ad, "What attracts?" is the perfume being advertised, which means these particular partners are irrelevant. They could easily be with anyone else who happened to be wearing Jovan musk (Kilbourne 1999:262-63).

The constant use of sexual imagery in ads has an objectifying effect on people generally. It is a climate that promotes the idea that people are simply commodities to be used by others, not human beings with needs and feelings of their own. Indeed, the products are imbued with more humanity than the people using them.

Another factor in female objectification is the widespread use of pornography by men. Pornography use has continued to increase in recent years and is widely accessible through magazines, videos, and the internet. Women are primarily the characters in mainstream pornography, while men are the intended audience. It is also common for women in pornographic videos to be the target of physical and verbal aggression, which rarely provokes a negative reaction from them (Stewart and Szymanski 2012). While interviewing an adult film actress, Hedges (2009:62) uncovers the violence and degradation present in some pornography:

The male stars are encouraged to be rough and hostile. Some, she says, "hated women. They would spit in my face. I was devastated the first time it happened, but I thought it was good they were rough because of my abusive relationships. I thought roughness in porn was OK. I would say, 'Treat me like a little slut,' or 'I'm your bitch,' or 'Fuck me like a whore.' I would say the most degrading things I could say about myself because I thought this was what it meant to be sexy and what people wanted to hear, or at least the people who buy the films. You are just a slut to those who watch. You are nothing. They want to see that we know that."

Given the degrading and violent nature of much pornographic content, it should come as no surprise that it has an effect on men's attitudes towards women. In a meta-analysis of research on the link between pornography consumption and violence towards women, Hald et al. (2010) found a positive relationship between pornography use and men's support of violence towards women. Pornography also has negative psychological effects on women: the use of pornography by a male partner negatively affects self-esteem, relationship quality, and sexual satisfaction (Stewart and Szymanski 2012).

As a result of prolonged struggle, women are no longer the property of their husbands and have gained a great deal of sexual freedom. Nevertheless, whether it is doing the emotional work necessary for creating and maintaining a healthy relationship, or fostering sexuality based on mutuality and respect, there is still a long way to go towards true equality in heterosexual romantic relationships. The persistence of gender norms has also served as an obstructing factor in creating intimacy within romantic relationships. Knowing how another human being perceives the world is central to intimacy; gender artificially separates people and creates a sense of communicating across cultures. Under such circumstances, it is a wonder that men and women are able to achieve *any* degree of intimacy.

Conclusion

Romantic love is a cultural response to the lack of community in competitive, individualistic society, and the only avenue many individuals have for developing strong social bonds. The romantic contradiction, however, largely undermines these efforts. Because individuals live in a market-based economy, they approach interpersonal relationships primarily from the standpoint of self-interest, which conflicts with their genuine desire for greater intimacy. Moreover, the acceptance and expectation of impression management in dating and marriage inhibit the development of intimacy: projecting an idealized self to manipulate the behavior of others is not an ideal foundation for love. Lastly, female inequality in heterosexual relationships limits the

development of intimacy between partners, as do gender norms and characteristics more generally.

Romantic love also discourages community by focusing attention on the romantic partner (and children) at the expense of relationships with friends, neighbors, and co-workers. The modern couple barely has enough time to maintain a household and raise children – time spent outside the home often comes at a cost. It is easy to appreciate how the loss of time can undermine a person's goals, but the benefit of increased social connections is not always so clear. When given the choice, most people prioritize the needs of their immediate family at the expense of building community. The irony is that if individuals had a community that provided emotional and material support, they would no longer be so reliant on romantic relationships to fulfill their needs.

Despite the romantic contradiction, it is indeed still possible to form a supportive and mutually satisfying romantic relationship. No person can fight the world alone, and romantic love under ideal circumstances does provide much needed relief for individuals in an increasingly alienated society. It will take conscious effort towards building community to reduce people's reliance on romantic relationships; until that happens, people will likely continue pursuing romantic love at the expense of making genuine strides towards greater intimacy and social connectedness.

CHAPTER V

ADDICTED TO LOVE: GENDERED DEPENDENCY IN ROMANTIC IDEOLOGY

On April 7, 2014, June Rogers joined her husband Norbert in death after 72 years of marriage. Norbert passed away the day before, prompting a family friend to speculate he had died of a broken heart:

> "I believe he willed himself to go before she did because there were no visible signs that he was sick. So you could say, I guess, that he died of a broken heart…For some folks, it's just a piece of paper. June and Norbert were a testimony of what marriage is supposed to be about. Till death do us part, and that is what parted them" (Greenville News 2014).

Another married couple of 72 years, Gordon and Norma Yeager, died only hours apart while holding hands (Times-Republican 2011). For many, dying with (or for) one's romantic partner is an ideal to be emulated. Like Romeo and Juliet, death is preferable to life alone without the beloved. Romantic or not, this phenomenon can be viewed as an indication of dependency in relationships. From this perspective, a person is not motivated by a desire to honor their partner but by fear of life without them; such a strong dependency forms that the thought of being alone is unbearable.

There are other indications of dependency in romantic relationships. When a relationship ends, it is common for individuals to seek an immediate replacement, commonly referred to as a "rebound" relationship. Moreover, although romantic love is sometimes associated with pain and loss, it is also intermixed with feelings of great joy. Much like an addictive drug, the high from romantic love is so powerful individuals continue to pursue it, despite the inevitable low: "There are certainly some striking similarities between love and addiction: addicts feel incomplete; they obsess, crave, and feel out of control; they experience severe mood disturbance (oscillating between euphoric 'highs' and desperate 'lows'); they become dependent and, when denied, suffer from a withdrawal syndrome" (Tallis 2004:217).

Research on heterosexual romantic relationships has been largely framed in terms of inequality between men and women, where men are assumed to hold most of the privilege and power in the relationship. As Illouz (2012:5) notes, however, "In reducing women's love (and desire to love) to patriarchy, feminist theory often fails to understand

the reasons why love holds such a powerful sway on modern women as well as on men and fails to grasp the egalitarian strain contained in the ideology of love, and its capacity to subvert from within patriarchy." In this chapter I argue that romantic ideology promises to exclusively meet specific gendered needs: men's need for sexual intimacy and emotional support, and women's need for economic and physical protection. Because these needs cannot be met outside the romantic relationship, an artificial dependency is created between women and men, where each experiences a form of inequality. Moreover, instead of framing romantic relationships in terms of male domination, romantic ideology suggests a power struggle between women and men where both struggle for control of the relationship.

In this chapter I examine dependency in relationships by analyzing romantic ideology in self-help manuals. Romantic ideology establishes the cultural model for romantic relationships: the rights and responsibilities of each partner, and the rationale for pursuing relationships. While not a direct analysis of romantic relationships, this approach has the advantage of distilling romantic love to its ideal–that is, the standard by which individuals judge their own relationships. I begin with a review of previous research on romantic love in mass media.

Romantic Love in Popular Culture

Culture is the set of symbolic vehicles through which people share norms and values. These symbolic vehicles include stories, rituals, and art forms (Swidler 2001). Culture and social structure are linked by "strategies of action": "Strategies of action are the major links between culture and social structure. Culture powerfully influences action by shaping the selves, skills, and worldviews out of which people can build life strategies" (Swidler 2001:87). During times of social stability, culture acts as a model for reality, outlining the various strategies available to individuals to meet institutionalized goals. In this case the relationship between culture and strategies of action is largely invisible to the individual. In times of social change, however, individuals self-reflexively use culture to develop new strategies of action (Swidler 2001).

Culture should not be seen as a purely causal mechanism for human behavior, but rather an expression of existing human relations and a socializing agent that reinforces

them (Vannini and Myers 2002). Moreover, individuals also have the ability to construct subjective meanings from their exposure to culture, internalizing some aspects and modifying or rejecting others (Swidler 2001; Wilding 2003). People also hold contradictory views on aspects of culture. As noted in Chapter 4, people can consciously reject cultural symbols while simultaneously framing their experiences in relation to them (e.g. criticizing the association of romance with leisure and consumption, yet recalling past romantic experiences in these terms).

One of the primary vehicles for the portrayal of romantic love is the mass media. In a content analysis of the Billboard top 100 love songs of all time (1958-1998), researchers examined how the expression of love in songs has changed over time. The authors found a statistically significant decrease in the use of love words in songs, and a significant increase in references to sex (Dukes et al. 2003). In their analysis of teen pop music, Vannini and Myers (2002) discovered particular themes in how love was portrayed. First, love in teen pop involves a longing for a beloved, usually generated by "loneliness, boredom, and depression." Second, love is characterized as a feel good fix for a person's problems. Much like the romantic passion portrayed in films and advertisements, the songs reinforce the concept of love at first sight. Also, love is portrayed as necessary, without which life would be empty and meaningless. Finally, love is synonymous with dependency. Lovers cannot imagine life without their beloved, and fall apart if the relationship comes to an end.

As its popular appeal has grown in contemporary society, researchers have increasingly focused on self-help books to find insight into how the self is constructed and the lines of action proscribed to readers. Seear (2009) examined self-help books on coping with endometriosis to ascertain how they communicated ideas about health risks and what solutions they presented to readers. The author found that the literature is emblematic of neo-liberal ideology: the books assume there is an autonomous self capable of overcoming any obstacle. Consistent with the larger culture, it is assumed that individuals are in control of their own lives and that solutions to personal problems do not require institutional intervention.

Focusing on how conceptions of the self has changed over time, Thompson (1992) conducted a comparative analysis of best-selling self-help books from the 1950s to the

1980s. She found that in earlier self-help books, the self was characterized as being confronted by internal conflicts; more specifically, the idea that people lived compartmentalized lives as a result of the conflict between their social roles (e.g., an executive who is also a mother). From this perspective, the self is limited by external factors. By the 1980s, however, the self was seen as the creator of its own destiny with the power to develop independent of external constraints.

Hazleden (2004) analyzed self-help books on relationships to determine the extent to which relationships greater equality between the sexes. While these books on the surface are concerned with improving relationships, Hazleden found that they in fact encourage individualism and emotional detachment from others. For example, caring for one's partner is seen as controlling and neglecting the self. The best way to help one's partner, readers are told, is to emotionally detach from them so they can solve their own problems. Also, open emotional disclosure is framed as amateur therapy and probably more likely to do harm than good. Instead of encouraging intimacy, the relationship manuals reinforce neo-liberal conceptions of an autonomous self that is bound to no one.

Zimmerman et al. (2001) examined self-help books on romantic relationships for feminist therapeutic values: viewing gender as a social construct, promoting equality in relationships, the empowerment of non-traditional roles and behaviors, and a non-hierarchical relationship between therapist and patient (in this case author and reader). They found that the top-selling books tended to be non-feminist and that newer self-help books were less feminist than older ones. Also using a feminist framework, Tyler (2008) analyzed self-help books dealing with sexual relationships. Despite claims of empowering both men and women in their sexual relationships, the texts instead reinforce the idea that women should sexually perform for men. Moreover, women are encouraged to engage in sexual acts despite emotional or physical discomfort. The books legitimize the idea that marriage requires women to perform sexually and the men should be the focus during intercourse.

In this study I examine romantic ideology within self-help books to uncover the dominant ideology of romantic love. For example, what do the texts say about the need for romantic love and why men and women pursue it with such tenacity? What is the ideal relationship, and what are the rights and responsibilities of each partner? Finally,

does romantic ideology encourage intimacy and self-knowledge, or is it more likely to promote alienation from the self and others?

Data and Methods

The ideology of romantic love in self-help books was ascertained using a textual analysis. While it is common for researchers to use "textual analysis" interchangeably with "content analysis," it is in fact a distinct method with its own theoretical assumptions and analytical strategies. Content analysis in media research is more quantitative in nature, while content analysis is social research is more interpretive and can examine data for both manifest and latent meaning. Researchers using content analysis develop a coding procedure that is applied to the text, which allows for greater reliability and increases the ability to verify findings by replicating the study (Bengtsson 2016).

Textual analysis, however, is focused on uncovering ideology, and adopts an analytic strategy that not only examines text for manifest and latent meaning, but also what is not communicated by the text. It is primarily concerned with the dominant cultural beliefs and values the text is referencing in order to effectively communicate a message. The emphasis is not on what the text is communicating but the (often implicit) shared meanings used to communicate the message (Hall 1975). Ideology is often expressed as cultural assumptions that are not communicated by texts. While it is possible to code texts for latent meaning, a coding scheme could miss important ideological components by solely relying on words or images contained in the text to signify meaning (McKee 2003). For example, the self-help books in this study never refer to romantic love as a heterosexual phenomenon or discuss same-sex relationships, yet heterosexuality is a central component of romantic ideology. Heterosexuality is never explicitly or implicitly discussed, only assumed by the authors (and probably much of the audience).

The theory guiding textual analysis, Encoding/Decoding, also makes the method better suited for uncovering ideology. According to the theory, ideology is encoded into texts during production. Audiences then decode texts from one of three standpoints: dominant, oppositional, or negotiated. A dominant reading (otherwise known as the "preferred reading") results in the individual decoding the text in accordance with the

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producer's intended meaning, accepting the ideology at face value; an oppositional reading results in the individual rejecting the preferred meaning entirely; a negotiated reading results in the individual's acceptance of certain aspects of the preferred meaning, and a reinterpretation of those that conflict with internalized beliefs and values (Kropp 2015). Although the process of decoding varies from person to person, texts that contain dominant ideology are more likely to be decoded in accordance with the preferred meaning than those that contain non-dominant ideology.

Identifying dominant ideology is central to a textual analysis. The transmission of dominant ideology not only allows a common frame of reference to effectively communicate a message, it shapes individual consciousness to reinforce existing social relations. The producers of texts draw from dominant ideology, which in turn limits the range of thought around a particular event or issue and consequently how it will be understood (Hall 1980). Using romance films as an example, Dowd et al. (2000:565) note that "films remain sociologically interesting inasmuch as they are filled with indicators of the culture's center of gravity. When a movie's story concerns romance, the movie must be understood as both incorporating those norms and understandings governing romance that exist in the actual world and, in reciprocal fashion, retransmitting them back into the culture reinforced or reenergized. Film, like art, is inseparable from the wider social relations between filmmakers and their audiences." Texts are produced and consumed within a specific historical context. To understand the ideology of a text, one must also analyze it in relation to other texts produced and consumed during the same historical period (Curtin 1995).

The main principle in a textual analysis is to "decenter" the text (Curtin 1995:9). Meaning is not inherent in the text itself, but in "its production and consumption" (Curtin 1995:10). The first step is to deconstruct the text by "working back through the narrative's mediations of form, appearance, rhetoric, and style to uncover the underlying social and historical processes, the metalanguage that guided its production" (Curtin 1995:11). The analyst also looks at the narrative structure of the text, including the examination of metaphors, metonyms, and synecdoche (Curtin 1995).

The last step in a textual analysis is to reconstruct the text and determine its preferred reading. When reconstructing the text the analyst is equally concerned with omission: the

reader's understanding is dependent not only on what is said, but what the producer has decided to omit from the text (Hall 1975). Finally, the analyst places the text in historical relation to both the producer and consumer. This is done by comparing the text to other "hegemonic cultural forms experienced by the reader" (Curtin 1995:18).

My analysis deviates from a traditional textual analysis in a few key ways. First, instead of examining a single text, I conducted a detailed analysis of multiple texts. The goal was not only to uncover ideological themes *within* each text, but more importantly, themes *across* texts. If a theme is indeed representative of dominant ideology, it would likely be present in numerous texts. Second, my research explored ideological themes across two entirely different mediums and genres: self-help books on romantic relationships and romantic comedy films. Just as dominant ideology should be represented by ideological themes across multiple texts within the same medium and genre, they should also be represented across different mediums and genres. Finally, unlike a traditional textual analysis, I weighted each text according to its popularity: the more popular the book or film, the more it is assumed to be representative of dominant ideology. In this chapter I focus on romantic ideology in self-help books, continuing to a comparison of romantic comedies in Chapter 6.

For my sample I selected the ten most popular self-help books on romantic relationships over a five year period (2006-2010; Table 1). I used Publisher's Weekly's annual report on book sales to determine which books were the most popular during the sample period. Table 1 includes the title and author of each book, the intended sex of the reader, the percentage of total sample sales, and the number of copies sold during the five year period. Five of the books assumed the reader was a woman, four were intended for either sex, and one was directed at a male audience. The total sales ranged from 2,264,138 copies to 163,104 copies, with a mean of 678,405 copies and a median of 256,064 copies. Each book was weighted according to its overall sales: books that sold the greatest number of copies should be more representative of dominant ideology than those selling fewer copies.

A cursory analysis of films and popular music during the sample period reveals that romantic love is an important theme outside of relationship self-help books and romantic comedies. Out of the top ten grossing films in theaters during the sample period, a

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median of seven films per year featured a protagonist's romantic relationship as part of the plot. The films spanned multiple genres, including comedy, action/adventure, and science fiction. A median of two films per year featuring romantic relationships were animated and likely targeting children and their parents, exposing younger and older moviegoers alike to romantic narratives.

Similarly, romantic relationships are a central theme in the top 10 songs of the Billboard Hot 100 Chart; a median of eight songs per year focused on heterosexual romantic relationships. Some songs were about the pain experienced after a relationship has ended, while others were about a new or potential love interest. A median of one song per year reduced romantic relationships to sexual intimacy, in some cases explicitly conflating love and sex. The chorus to "I Wanna Love You", an ode to an exotic dancer with whom the singer wants to have sex, exemplifies this tendency:

> I see you windin' n' grindin' up on that pole
> I know you see me lookin' at you, and you already know
> I wanna fuck, fuck you, you already know
> I wanna fuck, fuck you, you already know

It is worth noting that the sexually oriented songs were largely written from a male point of view, underscoring the expectation that women provide sex to men.

While it is difficult to determine with certainty the primary audience of different mediums and genres, the available data do provide some insight. For example, according to the Motion Picture Association of America's "2010 Theatrical Market Statistics" report, individuals age 18-39 comprise 47% of all tickets sold. Individuals 39 and younger were also more likely to go to the movie theater than individuals 40 and older. The single largest group of filmgoers is 25-39 and represents 28% of all tickets sold, and men and women comprise 48% and 52% of ticket sales respectively. Songs on the Billboard Hot 100, on the other hand, are mostly consumed by younger audiences; as adults become older they are less likely to listen to popular artists (McAuslan and Waung 2016).

According to the website Box Office Mojo, the film industry has seen relatively stable growth over the past decade. Romantic comedies, like self-help books on romantic relationships, are a minor genre within the film industry. Even at its most recent peak in 1999, romantic comedies represented only 9.84% of total box office sales. While

financially successful, none of the romantic comedies in my sample made the top 10 grossing films in the year of their release, though *Sex and the City* did earn the 11th spot in 2008. Since 2013 the genre has seen a steady decline, with a total share of 1.22% of film sales in 2016. This decline is largely the result of studios no longer wanting to make romantic comedies, rather than a decline in audience demand. In fact, because of their lower budgets, romantic comedies are generally more profitable than action films. The reason studios are not as interested in making romantic comedies is that action and science-fiction films appeal to wider audiences and generate larger revenues, which is more important than profitability to publicly traded corporations in the film industry (Stokes 2015).

In addition to books and audio books, the self-help industry includes seminars, motivational speakers, personal coaches, weight loss and stress management programs, and infomercials; infomercials and weight-loss programs earn the most revenue (LaRosa 2013). The self-help industry is profitable even during times of recession, and is projected to grow well into the future. Its main product is selling hope to people, helping to identify personal deficiencies that can be overcome only if they follow an expert's advice (Salerno 2005). The target demographic for self-help products and services is middle-aged affluent women, though 30% of the market is estimated to be men. Customers are most interested in practical self-improvement advice on dieting, exercise, and personal finance advice. Weight-loss programs are the largest segment of the industry, followed by infomercials and personal coaching (LaRosa 2013). While self-help books and audiobooks are a substantial portion of the market, books on improving relationships are a less popular sub-genre. According to Publisher's Weekly sales data, relationship self-help books rarely making the top 10 non-fiction bestsellers list. In contrast, one of the highest selling self-help books during the sample period was *The Secret*, which focuses on using positive thinking to achieve financial success.

It is also important to note that the production of the self-help books on relationships and romantic comedies in my sample was dominated by men. Seven of the romantic comedies were written *and* directed by men, with one female director and two female screenwriters split between the remaining three films. The self-help books were also produced primarily by men, with six books featuring men as the primary author, and only

three with women as the primary author. Data on audience sex was not available for either romantic comedies or self-help books, but women are assumed to be the primary audience for both. In summary, the books and films are primarily written by men and largely assume a female audience.

The books explicitly communicate their target audience, while the belief that women are more interested in romantic comedies stems from the cultural assumption that women care more about relationships than men. McDonald (2007:17) argues, however, that romantic comedies may also interest men because they "do not actually speak solely to female interests and desires but are aimed more inclusively at both genders. The myth of perfect love appeals to both sexes, and the narratives of romantic comedy films themselves demonstrate that *both* women and men have to change and adapt to deserve love."

There are also significant differences between the books and films. First, reading a self-help book is a solitary experience, and watching a movie in a theater is usually a social one. Women may be more interested in films about relationships, but men often accompany them as dates. Considering the romantic comedies in my sample focused equally on the perspectives and concerns of male and female characters, it seems likely that screenwriters tailor scripts to appeal to both men and women to increase box office sales. Second, romantic comedies are meant to be light entertainment, while self-help books are consciously sought out for serious relationship advice. The genres are therefore polar opposites in terms of audience intent, and while the content is likely to reflect this to an extent, the underlying themes should be similar if the books and films reflect dominant romantic ideology.

Understanding how the capitalist economy shapes social relations is important to this study. In his theory of historical materialism Marx (1978) identified the economy as the key institution in any society. In his view the economic system shapes the ideology of other institutions, which subsequently influences behavior and reifies the existing social order. Marx (1978:4) notes:

> In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of

society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.

I argue that the hegemonic ideology of romantic love is in part shaped by market logic and the competitive individualism that results from it. If correct, the ideology contained within the texts will frame romantic love in terms of commodification and the satisfaction of individual needs, instead of seeing love as a way to better understand the other and develop a sense of shared concern and responsibility.

Initial analytical categories were influenced by the theory and research discussed in Chapter 4 (e.g. objectification of self and partner, gender inequality). In addition, I examined texts for the class, race, and gender characteristics of romantic ideology, as well as idealization of romantic relationships. Using Fromm's four aspects of love (care, responsibility, respect, and knowledge) as a framework, I also searched for evidence that romantic ideology encourages intimacy. I completed a close reading of each book twice, taking detailed notes at every stage of the analysis. During the first reading I noted any aspect of the text that was potentially related to romantic ideology, no matter how seemingly insignificant. After reading each text I expanded and revised the analytical categories, adding new ones as I discovered them. Once I had completed a close reading of each text I examined my notes to look for larger themes that comprised dominant ideology. I then completed a second reading of each book to verify the validity of the categories and made adjustments as needed. Finally, after writing up the analysis I examined the texts and notes one more time for disconfirming evidence.

Although I expected to find different forms of objectification in romantic ideology, I nevertheless was open to the possibility that the theory guiding my research was incorrect. At each stage of the analysis I looked carefully for any evidence that might conflict with my bias, resulting in numerous modifications to the ideological themes over the course of my research. One of the biggest surprises was the centrality of gender in romantic ideology, in particular the concept of gender dependency and the depiction of romantic relationships as a power struggle between men and women–only after multiple readings and carefully examination of my notes was I able to discover these themes.

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Idealization and Naturalization of Romantic Love

90.4% of book sales depict romantic love as highly desirable and/or part of the natural life course. All of the books assume romantic love is a monogamous relationship between members of the opposite sex; the only mention of a non-heterosexual relationship is when one author noted that her survey excluded gay men. 81.7% of book sales view marriage as the end goal of a romantic relationship; some authors argue marriage is biologically rooted (42.6% of book sales; Table 2a), while others believe it is ordained by God (7.3% of book sales; Table 2b) or simply inevitable (28.0% of book sales; Table 2c). Not only is marriage naturalized, it is seen as positive for individuals and the larger society (Table 3a). By having their emotional and physical needs met, individuals are able to unlock their full potential: "I dream of the day when the potential of the married couples in this country can be unleashed for the good of humankind, when husbands and wives can live life with full emotional love tanks and reach out to accomplish their potential as individuals and as couples" (Chapman 2004:169).

42.9% of book sales depict the romantic relationship as the most important relationship in a person's life (Table 3b). For example, two books (12.5% of book sales) describe romantic love as the highest form of intimacy, which implies that one's most important relationship is with one's romantic partner:

> We all long for that one special relationship. We all want someone who is on our side, do or die. We long for the one person who will stand up for us and be our absolute ally in the world. That's why marriage holds such a unique place. It's a closer, deeper, more intimate bond than any other. It is often experienced as finding a missing piece of oneself, which is why lovers will say "You complete me" or "You are my soul mate." Lovers speak of being destined to find each other, as if they were separated at birth only to be joyfully reunited as adults (Smith 2006:70).

Other authors (30.4% of book sales) explicitly advise the reader to prioritize their romantic partner: "The caller had asked what she could do about her husband, who felt that he wasn't the number one priority in her life. I quickly told her that she needed to make him the number one priority or, in essence, her marital vows were hollow" (Schlessinger 2004:17). Given the importance placed on romantic love for personal happiness and growth, and the degree to which it is naturalized by the larger culture, it is no surprise that people exert so much energy in its pursuit (including reading self-help books). The question remains, what does the ideal romantic relationship look like?

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Love as Equal Exchange

Another dominant theme is that successful relationships are focused on meeting needs. All of the books in the sample encouraged readers to identify their partner's needs in order to effectively meet them; the more a person's needs are met, the more they feel loved. When a person's needs have been met they are more motivated to meet their partner's needs, creating a mutually satisfying reward loop. In essence, meeting a partner's needs is the equivalent of expressing love: "Love is the attitude that says, 'I am married to you, and I choose to look out for your interests.' Then the one who chooses to love will find appropriate ways to express that decision" (Chapman 2004:34). The books also argue that a healthy relationship is one where both person's needs are *equally* met. If a person takes advantage of their partner and fails to meet his or her needs, the relationship is likely to suffer:

> How much do you invest in your marriage in time, activity, and goodwill? How much do you "spend"? Does one of you tend to invest more and the other spend more? If you try to withdraw cash from the ATM and you haven't deposited money into your account, you'll receive a message: "Insufficient funds." The same is true in marriage. Often one person makes most of the deposits (of time, money, and love), while the other is always withdrawing those funds (Smith 2006:126).

By focusing their relationship advice on meeting a partner's needs, the authors assume that people are self-interested and best motivated by personal gain. One author, however, explicitly makes this claim: "**While many people do not consider it to be an admirable trait, most people do enter any situation considering, "What's in this for me?" I suppose this is selfish, but it is grounded in deeply entrenched survival instincts**" (McGraw 2005:128).[1] The key to motivating someone, therefore, is providing them with something of value which they would like to continue to receive. This encourages reciprocity, as the person's interests are now aligned with one's own.

The Dating Market

Three of the books (45.9% of book sales) focused on finding a romantic partner, all of which were aimed at a female audience and described dating using commodifying

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[1] Emphasis in original.

language. One author encourages women to create a list of traits they are looking for in a partner, even being as specific as the number of dates they expect to be taken on a given week:

> What specific kind of man are you looking for? For example, funny? Hardworking? Generous?...How do you expect to be pursued? Do you want regular phone calls? Text messages? Dates at least three times a week? Do you want him to always pick up the tab (Harvey and Miller 2009:125)?

If a man has personal problems women are encouraged to leave him and pursue someone else, even for something as non-threatening as having a bad relationship with his mother: "If a man is at odds with his mother, it's a safe bet that he's going to be at odds with you. If you hear any part of 'Man, me and my mother? We just don't get along…' in his answer, erase his number and texts from your phone and keep it moving" (139). Like a defective product, the person is tossed aside to make room for something new and more rewarding.

Women are expected to engage in impression management, taking their best qualities and highlighting them while downplaying less desirable ones. It is even suggested that they see themselves literally as a product to be marketed:

> Write an online dating profile…Even if you are not interested in Internet dating, consider this step practice in self-promotion. After all, online dating is all about marketing yourself. That's why they call the ads personals. If you're having a hard time coming up with things to say, then you are still not clear about your product (McGraw 2005:107).

The author also advises women to plan out every aspect of their interaction on a date, including practicing body language in the mirror to give off a sense of confidence.

Overall, dating is reduced to a commodity market where each person looks for the best exchange based on desired qualities. Not surprisingly then, the books focused on dating use more commodifying language than those focused on maintaining and improving relationships. They also take a more cynical view on relationships by assuming that a person's primary objective should be getting the best value in the marketplace, while saying little about improving intimacy or developing a sense of mutual responsibility.

Gendered Needs

In addition to discussing romantic love in terms of meeting mutual needs, 62.8% of book sales depict male and female needs as distinct: men are expected to provide women

with economic and physical security, and women are expected to provide men with admiration and sexual intimacy. This idea is best characterized by the familiar *knight in shining armor* trope: "Deep inside every man there is a hero or a knight in shining armor. More than anything he wants to succeed in serving and protecting the woman he loves (Gray 2009:138)." As a result, men and women feel desirable only when they fulfill their obligations to one another: men want to be seen as able providers, while women want to be desired for their physical attractiveness.

Men are expected to be the major breadwinner in a romantic relationship (Table 4a), especially from a religious point of view: "Paul of Tarsus said that the man who doesn't provide for his family is 'worse than an infidel.' As a woman I always assumed that was a command: 'Provide for your family or you are worse than an infidel'" (Feldhahn 2005:83). Additionally, men are expected to protect women from physical harm (Table 4b), even dying for them if necessary. This is either attributed to religious dictates or evolutionary biology, both of which suggest that men are *designed* as protectors, giving the expectation moral legitimacy: "Designed as protectors, men evolved in such a way as to ensure that they were strong so they could deal with procuring food, building lodging and combating threats to safety. It was a matter of basic survival. The male survival instinct has persisted and differs sharply from the female nurturing instinct precisely because males and females are built for such different tasks" (McGraw 2005:128).

Women, on the other hand, are expected to provide men with sex (Table 5a) and emotional support. One author describes the expectation of sex as an explicit commodity exchange: "See, we men understand this much: there's a 'cost' – direct or indirect – associated with sex. We can buy it at the strip club or at a brothel or online, or we can take you to dinner and the movies, pay your rent, buy you some jewelry, send you to get your hair done on our dime, or hand you money. Either way, we fully expect that if we're spending money, we're going to get something in return: sex (Harvey and Miller 2010:56-57). Sex is considered a central need for men, so important that ignoring it could negatively affect the relationship. Five of the books take this a step further by encouraging women to have sex even if they have no desire for it (47.7% of book sales). While sex is treated as a separate need by most authors, for some it is an extension of men's need for emotional support: "For your husband, sex is more than just a physical

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need…In a very deep way, your man often feels isolated and burdened by secret feelings of inadequacy. Making love with you assures him that you find him desirable, salves a deep sense of loneliness, and gives him the strength and well-being necessary to face the world with confidence" (Feldhahn 2005:92-93).

Related to sex is the expectation that women provide visual stimulation to men through their appearance and behavior. This includes buying fashionable clothing, getting their hair done regularly, and wearing revealing clothing to bed. One author even suggests that women should get plastic surgery if it helps them "feel beautiful," evoking male biology to justify the social pressure placed on women to provide visual stimulation: "… men are visual beings. They fall in love with their eyes. Blame it on the thousands of years they spent as hunters and gatherers, making their eyesight into the sharpest sense" (McGraw 2005:102). Because men are assumed to be more visually-oriented, women are expected to compete with other woman for men's attention. This creates a climate where women are under constant pressure to conform to social expectations of female beauty, however unrealistic or unattainable they may be. As one author argues, it is especially true for women on the dating market:

> I get that not every woman is going to want to get dolled up from head to toe every time she looks at the front door, but can you afford not to? Because let's not forget there is competition out there. And she will work it; everything from her hair and outfits to the shape of her body to her pedicure will be together. And when a man sees that, he's going to be attracted to her (Harvey and Miller 2010:119).

Women are also expected to provide emotional support to men through appreciation and respect (Tables 5b and 5c), both of which allow men to feel good about their role in the relationship. According to these texts, men want their partners to look up to them for their ability to provide and protect; they want to be seen as their partner's "hero." This need requires overt praise from women and a willingness to defer to men's judgment in making decisions that affect them both. Taken together, the ideal romantic relationship is a symbiotic union where both partners' needs are equally met. The struggle for power in heterosexual relationships, however, makes this a difficult goal.

Love as a Power Struggle

89.8% of book sales depicting gendered needs (56.4% of total book sales) assume that men and women are locked in a power struggle, though there is some disagreement

about who should head the relationship. Two of the religious-oriented texts, *Love and Respect* and *For Women Only* (12.9% of book sales depicting gendered needs), argue that God designed men to be in the leadership position. According to the concept of biblical submission, men are expected to put the physical safety of their wife and children before their own, which gives them the right to lead the family. If there is a disagreement on an important matter, men are empowered to have the final say: "As a wife places herself under her husband's protection and provision, there will come moments when disagreements arise. Honest stalemates can still happen. If a decision must be made, the wife is called upon to defer to her husband, trusting God to guide him to make a decision out of love for her as the responsible head of the marriage" (Eggerichs 2004:218).

Four books (76.9% of book sales depicting gendered needs), which are aimed solely at a female audience and not explicitly religious, believe women should be at the head of the relationship. The authors explicitly advise women to get the upper hand: "I want you to be in the power position in your relationship so that you are the one pursued, rather than the pursuer. And trust me, that is what you need to go for" (McGraw 2005:61); "If you're married and you want to regain control and strengthen your bond, or if you're tired of being played with, then I want you to use this book as a tool – to take each of the principles, rules, and tips in this no-nonsense guide and use them to anticipate a man's game plan, and to counter with an offense and defense that's unstoppable" (Harvey and Miller 2009:6-7). The authors also argue that women generally hold the most power in a romantic relationship. Women give men the illusion of being in charge by deferring to them on lesser matters, but in practice make many of the family's important decisions: "It's no secret that you allow us men to believe we're the head of the household, but it's you who makes all the key decisions in the house and with the kids. It's no secret to us that no matter who's bringing in the most money, it's you who ultimately handles the finances and allocates how the cash is going to be spent. It's no secret that when we argue, we may act like we're right, but we know that ultimately, if we want to restore the peace, you're going to get your way" (Harvey and Miller 2009:183). One author claims that women are better off letting men think they are in charge:

"Right or wrong, **women seem to fare pretty well when they manage their relationships with men in a way that allows the man to think that decisions such**

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as whether to make a commitment or not are totally *his* idea. Dishonest or just good management? Manipulative? Maybe. Effective? Most assuredly (McGraw 2005:125).[2]

Ultimately, it is unclear where power is truly supposed to reside in the relationship. Women on the surface are expected to defer to men sometimes in decision making, yet are assumed to have the final say because of men's emotional dependence on them. Regardless, this power struggle undermines any sense of real equality in relationships, as both partners are looking to either overtly control or unconsciously manipulate the other, neither of which are a strong foundation for intimacy.

Inequality in Romantic Ideology

As discussed earlier, the dominant ideology of romantic love assumes an equal exchange between romantic partners. The needs of men and women are argued to be different, but they are nevertheless given equal importance. Despite an overt concern for equality in relationships, the ideology places unfair burdens on each partner based on their sex. For example, in their role as protector men are expected to put the lives of women ahead of their own in a dangerous situation, even if it means their death:

> [T]he husband is to be considered "first among equals." By that I mean he is her equal, but he is called upon to be the first to provide, to protect – and even to die if necessary. This is graphically illustrated on any sinking ship as lifeboats are put over the side. The cry is always, "Women and children first!" (Eggerichs 2004:53)

The responsibility of providing economic security is also unfairly placed on men's shoulders. Not only do the authors argue that men are compelled to provide because of their "nature", they argue that women should *expect* men to provide for them. While this is stressful even under the best of circumstances, it is an especially heavy burden to bear during an economic downturn. When men are unable to provide according to their expectations, they feel ashamed and undesirable. This leaves men in a disproportionate state of anxiety concerning material security, a situation over which they may have little control.

Women confront a different set of issues in relationships, some of which complement those of men. For example, while it is unfair to expect men to unilaterally provide for

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[2] Emphasis in original.

women and protect them at the risk of their own life, encouraging women to seek protection from men generally places them in a physically subordinate position. If women do not need a protector and provider, one author suggests should at least act like they do by "being a girl":

> We know you're strong enough to move the television set. But you should let him do it; say it's too heavy for you – it's a man's job…at some point , you're either going to have to accept that you're going to be the big ol' strong, lonely woman, or you're going to have to back down and just be a lady. Women play roles all the time – why is it when it comes to this, you're so unwilling to play the role, even when you know it's going to give you what you want and need? In the long run, being a girl allows you to relax (Harvey and Miller 2009:188-189).

Women also have their contribution to the relationship largely reduced to maintaining a stimulating physical appearance and performing sexually for their partner. They walk the constant tightrope of being considered attractive and physically appealing without appearing promiscuous or overly sexualized. Otherwise, they will be seen as unworthy of a committed relationship (and therefore denied love): "A woman who is dressed appropriately – has her goodies reasonably covered, but is still sexy, is a keeper; a woman who is scantily clad and dripping sex is a throwback" (Harvey and Miller 2009:79). Moreover, they are pitted against other women in the never-ending quest to hold their partner's attention. This creates a competitive spirit among women that discourages solidarity, making it more difficult to challenge conventional norms of feminine beauty and other forms of inequality.

For the most part women are also the ones burdened with the responsibility of cultivating and maintaining romantic relationships. Five of the books in the sample were written specifically with a female audience in mind, while only one was written for men, implying that women are perceived as both more capable and more likely to work on their relationships. One author explicitly states that women are naturally more relationship oriented than men and therefore more responsible for the health of the relationship:

> Marital communication would go much better if women would accept without rancor that men simply have different communication styles and imperatives. I realize that his sounds like I'm putting the burden of communication problems on women, but perhaps there are some good reasons to do so. Verbal communication is much more important to women, and essential to their being – and that, it appears, is all in the wiring. The differences between men and women begin in the womb. At first, all

fetuses' brains are virtually the same. At about nine weeks of gestation, though, testosterone surges through the male (XY) fetus, changing the direction of general development toward masculinity (Schlessinger 2004:92).

Finally, while men are encouraged to *help* with domestic labor, women are still expected to perform the majority of it (50.9% of book sales).

Romantic ideology encourages gendered inequality in relationships. Both men and women have unfair expectations placed on them, some of which involve resources they lack because of biological or social constraints. This leaves individuals in a constant state of anxiety, as they are always afraid of not being able to meet their partner's "needs" and being replaced by someone who can meet them. As I shall now discuss, this anxiety stems from a high level of dependency in romantic relationships.

Gendered Dependency in Romantic Ideology

Romantic ideology encourages mutual dependency in relationships. Men and women are assumed to have inherent psychological and physical needs that cannot be met by other relationships, giving romantic love a specific function: social stability. By having their needs met at home, men and women are able to more fully contribute to society and consequently feel more content. Although functional, this arrangement to some extent reduces men and women to commodities meant to satisfy the needs of the opposite sex.

Romantic ideology creates further problems by inhibiting the growth and independence of both men and women by naturalizing gender. Given the important function romantic love performs for individuals, men and women are highly motivated to internalize gender norms. The implicit threat is that if one does not conform to gendered expectations they will end up alone, unable to satisfy their needs. The internalization of dominant masculinity leaves men less able to reflect on and communicate their thoughts, feelings, and needs. Moreover, they automatically feel most responsible for protecting and providing for their family, which is an especially heavy burden to bear in the current economy. Internalizing dominant femininity, on the other hand, encourages women to be deferential to men and participate in the commodification of their bodies; it also burdens women with the primary responsibility of maintaining their relationships, often at the cost of their own well-being.

Ultimately, women depend on men for material and physical safety, and men rely on women for their emotional needs. Being the main (if not sole) provider of economic or emotional support in a relationship gives men and women some power over their romantic partners, but it comes at a price: their partner also has power over them. In a competitive, individualistic society this dynamic creates a situation where individuals feel entitled to have their needs met first, often at the expense of others. Even if the relationship achieves a perfect symbiosis, it nevertheless constrains the freedom and independence of both men and women by placing inordinate value on the romantic relationship, and consequently gender conformity. People are less likely to engage in behavior that might upset their partner out of fear of losing them. They are also more likely to exert control in the relationship to further their self-interest, thereby denying their partner a certain level of agency. This is not the model for an empowered relationship.

In addition to being important for equality in relationships, the development of *both* masculine and feminine traits is essential to establishing a fully developed personality. Different situations require different approaches; no interactions are best served through a strict adherence to dominant ideas of masculinity or femininity. Indeed, such adherence has more in common with neurotic compulsion than thoughtful behavior grounded in self-knowledge. Only reacting to situations with aggression is just as damaging as only being able to react with empathy or compassion; if a person is being abused they *should* confront the person responsible, just as people in close relationships should behave empathetically before engaging in conflict. Only through embracing both "masculine" and "feminine" traits can individuals fully participate in social life by utilizing aspects of their personality most appropriate to a given situation.

Finally, as discussed in the previous chapter, the idealization and pursuit of romantic love inhibits the development of community by placing undue emphasis on the romantic partner at the expense of other relationships. It both increases the individual's dependence on one person for much of their needs and limits personal growth by preventing interaction with different kinds of people. The goal is best expressed by the image of two lovers alone on a desert island, where neither one is forced to interact with or rely on the larger society. In essence, they create their own private community to

shelter themselves from the outside world, which they interact with only out of necessity. This results not only in social impoverishment, but precludes any possibility of organizing communities in collective self-interest. Interaction with others outside of commercial activity is essential to cultivating solidarity and community, the foundation of any social movement. Without solidarity individuals feel isolated when confronted by increasing economic and social strain, seeing others as a threat to be avoided. Instead of reaching out to others individuals further retreat to the home, reinforcing dependence on the romantic partner and enabling the further deterioration of the social environment.

Counter Ideological Themes

Although gendered dependency is central to dominant romantic ideology, it is worth discussing a secondary ideology contained in the highest-selling book in the sample, *The Five Love Languages*, which sold 2,264,138 copies and comprised 33.4% of total sales. Unlike the other books in the sample, the author does not discuss gender explicitly *anywhere* in the main text. Instead, he discusses the different needs people have in their relationships and the different "languages" one can use to communicate affection to one's partner. He breaks the languages into the following five categories: words of affirmation, quality time, receiving gifts, physical touch, and acts of service.

Despite not discussing it, most of the examples he provides conform to dominant conceptions of gender, such as men being providers and needing physical intimacy from women, and women desiring gifts and quality time from men. For example, when discussing quality time as an expression of love, the author largely uses examples of women desiring quality time from men:

> Patrick's wife had been pleading for quality conversation. Emotionally, she longed for him to focus attention on her by listening to her pain and frustration. Patrick was not focusing on listening but on speaking. He listened only long enough to hear the problem and formulate a solution. He didn't listen long enough or well enough to hear her cry for support and understanding (Chapman 2004:63).

> A wife says to her husband, "How did you feel about what Steve did?" And the husband responds, "I think he was wrong. He should have…" but he is not telling her his feelings. He is voicing his thoughts. Perhaps he has reason to feel angry, hurt, or disappointed, but he has lived so long in the world of thought that he does not acknowledge his feelings. When he decides to learn the language of quality conversation, it will be like learning a foreign language. The place to begin is by

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getting in touch with his feelings, becoming aware that he is an emotional creature in spite of the fact that he has denied that part of his life" (Chapman 2010:65).

The same is true when discussing physical touch – two out of three examples are men that desire more physical intimacy from their partners. Interestingly, in the latest edition the author briefly addresses gender in an appendix, stating that he does not believe there are major differences between men and women:

> I have never done the research to discover if the love languages are gender-slanted. It may be true that more men have *Physical Touch* and *Worlds of Affirmation* as their love language and more women have *Quality Time* and *Gifts*. But I don't know if that is true. I prefer to deal with the love languages as being gender-neutral. I do know that any one of these love languages can be the primary love language of a man or the primary love language of a woman (Chapman 2010:179).

On the one hand this can be viewed as a progressive stance, as it does not limit men and women to specific characteristics or gender roles. By not placing individuals in a box, they are freer to relate to others without the interference of culture expectations. On the other hand, by not explicitly discussing gender and instead implicitly acknowledging it through examples, the author only serves to reinforce dominant conceptions of sex and gender. Like any social construct, an explicit discussion and understanding of gender is necessary before individuals (and society) can evolve beyond it. In a way, the books focused on gendered needs provide a better understanding of gender than *The Five Love Languages* – at least the authors acknowledge the importance of gender and offer some insight into the role it plays in romantic relationships.

There were also themes in the texts that encouraged intimacy. Despite defining relationships in terms of equal exchange, 38.4% of books sales encourage readers to be more empathetic towards their partner and willing to forgive transgressions:

> Love doesn't keep a score of wrongs. Love doesn't bring up past failures. None of us is perfect. In marriage we do not always do the best or right thing. We have sometimes done and said hurtful things to our spouses. We cannot erase the past. We can only confess it and agree that it was wrong. We can ask for forgiveness and try to act differently in the future. Having confessed my failure and asked forgiveness, I can do nothing more to mitigate the hurt it may have caused my spouse. When I have been wronged by my spouse and she has painfully confessed it and requested forgiveness, I have the option of justice or forgiveness. If I choose justice and seek to pay her back or make her pay for her wrongdoing, I am making myself the judge and she the felon. Intimacy becomes impossible. If, however, I choose to forgive, intimacy can be restored. Forgiveness is the way of love. (Chapman 2010:44)

Jesus said, "He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:7)…Forgiveness comes when we see our own unrighteousness. How can we refuse to forgive an offense when we, too, have offended? (Eggerichs 2004:103)

In their own way, the books focused on gendered needs (62.8% of book sales) actively sought to help readers understand how gender affects thinking and behavior, albeit through the lens of traditionalism and religion. Regardless of the empirical validity of the authors' insights, the goal is enhanced knowledge of the romantic partner, which Fromm argues is an essential element of love. 56.2% of book sales also encouraged open communication, which is the antithesis of manipulation:

Indeed, we men sometimes create the distance without even knowing it because we're so busy going about the business of manhood. How do you remind him? Talk. Most times it's that simple. (Harvey and Millner 2009:135)

It may not feel as good to tell a guy that you love getting flowers or that you want to do something ridiculously romantic on Valentine's Day, but if you want something bad enough, you'll need to tell your guy as much (McGraw 2010:148)

Finally, although biology was mostly emphasized to explain gender differences between men and women, 45.9% of book sales briefly mention social influences:

From the moment we come out of the womb, [men are] taught to protect, profess, and provide. Communicating, nurturing, listening to problems, and trying to understand them without any obligation to fix them is simply not what boys are raised to do. We don't let them cry, we don't ask them how they feel about anything, we don't encourage them to express themselves in any meaningful way beyond showing how "manly" they are. (Harvey and Millner 2009:52)

A woman is programmed from the time she sees her first Disney movie to expect that a knight in shining armor will ride in on his big white horse and whisk her off to their big wedding day, with all the doves chirping, the flowers blooming, and the townspeople cheering her on as she rides off into the sunset with Prince Charming – right on into her happily ever after. This is part of the female culture and you start getting messages even as a toddler: you should expect to get married, have a family, and grow old with someone you love who loves you back. (Harvey and Millner 2010:80)

Ideology of Romantic Love

To summarize, the dominant ideology of romantic love promotes monogamous, heterosexual relationships as the primary way to meet psychological and physical needs, some of which can *only* be fulfilled by a romantic partner. Moreover, the relationship is

based on *gendered* needs: men are expected to provide economic security and physical safety, and in return women are expected to provide men with emotional support and physical intimacy. In the ideal relationship men and women meet each other's needs equally, but this is undermined by a (perceived or real) power struggle where each partner vies for control of the relationship.

The gendered nature of individuals' needs also places unfair burdens on each partner: even in a perfectly equal relationship one person is left alone to struggle with certain issues, negating much of the potential support found in a romantic relationship. Men feel undue pressure to provide economically and protect their partners, while women are unfairly burdened with unrealistic (and potentially harmful) expectations regarding physical appearance while being given the primary responsibility of developing and maintaining their relationships with men. Finally, the gender specific expectations in romantic relationships, along with the great value placed on romantic love, encourage individuals to internalize gender characteristics appropriate for their expected roles. This in turn limits the development of personality and encourages dependence on the opposite sex to feel "complete."

There are of course limitations to this study. To start, ideology says little about actual behavior. Despite being a dominant cultural model for sexual coupling, romantic ideology may be internalized to a greater or lesser degree depending on the person and their immediate circumstances. Ideology certainly guides behavior, but without studying relationships directly it is hard to establish the nature and extent of its influence. The data is also limited by the sample period (2006-2010); it is unknown whether the ideology has been largely stable over the past few decades or is in a state of flux. Finally, because dominant romantic ideology assumes heterosexuality, little can be said about the influence on same-sex couples, particularly in relation to gender roles and expectations. The advantage of my research strategy, however, is that I was able to examine romantic love in its ideal form while negating the participant bias present in qualitative studies involving human subjects. Also, unlike most qualitative research my sample is representative, making the findings arguably more generalizable.

Conclusion

The pursuit of romantic love is deeply influenced by pervasive alienation in American society, where individuals are forced to rely on limited social networks to meet their psychological and physical needs, many of which cannot be satisfied by the marketplace. Romantic love is an understandable adaptation to difficult circumstances. The romantic relationship becomes a replacement for community, where one is expected to meet their partner's needs in a symbiotic relationship. While functional, it creates new problems by promoting dependency in relationships and discouraging efforts to build community. Intimacy is also undermined by objectification in the relationship: people treat themselves and others as commodities meant to satisfy needs, not individuals with their own valid thoughts, feelings, and goals. Moreover, romantic love results in self-alienation by promoting the internalization of gender roles and characteristics, leaving individuals less able to express the wide range of traits and behaviors necessary to reach their full potential as human beings. Instead of a being grounded in mutual concern, responsibility, and self-knowledge, romantic love ultimately constrains individuals while undermining intimacy in their relationships.

CHAPTER VI

ROMANTIC IDEOLOGY AND GENDER ROLES
IN ROMANTIC COMEDIES

While watching a scene from a teen romance film, the main character in *He's Just Not That Into You* has an epiphany: her friendship with Alex resembles the relationship between the film's protagonists. On the surface they are just friends, but in reality they are secretly attracted to one another. The next day she excitedly shares this revelation with one of her co-workers, comparing her situation with the one portrayed in the film:

> It's totally clear to me now…I'm Eric Stoltz. Alex is Watts because Watts helps Eric Stoltz go on a date with Amanda Jones. But really, she's in love with Eric Stoltz herself…The point is he's into me.

Through novels, films, and other works of fiction, individuals expand their experiences beyond those afforded by their race, class, gender, or nationality. Fictional experiences influence how individuals view the self and others, and consequently how they approach relationships.

Televised reality influences real world perceptions, beliefs, and expectations. The effect is both cumulative and moderated by real-life experiences (Edison 2007). In their study of television viewing and marriage beliefs, Segrin and Nabi (2002) found that watching romantic comedies and soap operas led to an increased idealization of marriage. Similarly, Edison (2007) found that participants were more likely to idealize romantic love and marriage after reading romance novels and watching romantic comedies. The greater the idealization of marriage, the less likely people believed they would experience divorce in the future.

Individuals are influenced by fiction through perspective-taking and experience-taking. Perspective-taking allows people to consider the beliefs, values, and experiences of fictional characters without a loss of self; the words, thoughts, and actions of characters are still contrasted with those of the self. Experience-taking, however, minimizes the individual's self – the person no longer evaluates fictional events from the standpoint of the self, but from the perspective of the characters (Kaufman and Libby 2012). Because individuals are influenced by fictional works, analyzing them can

provide insight into their beliefs, values, and behavior. In this chapter I analyze romantic comedies for romantic ideology, comparing and contrasting my findings from Chapter 5 in the conclusion.

Romantic Love in Film

In an analysis of popular G-rated films from 1990-2005, Martin and Kazyak (2009) found that the films promoted heterosexuality by depicting romantic relationships as magical and transformative. The authors argue that heterosexuality is not simply taken for granted in the films, it is actively promoted. Wilding (2003) discovered a similarity between themes expressed in romance involving films involving weddings and peoples' narratives of their own weddings. She noted that a major theme in the films was the requirement of romantic love for the couple to get married. Consistent with the analysis of films, engaged couples expressed the decision to marry in terms of romantic love.

Dowd and Pallotta (2000) examined romantic films from the 1930's to the 1990's and found that romantic dramas had declined over the years, with romantic comedies becoming the dominant subgenre of romance film. The reason for the decline in romantic dramas, the authors argue, is the lack of believable external obstacles preventing a couple from being together, such as taboos regarding interracial relationships. As a result of decreased institutional constraints on partner selection, personal differences became the primary obstacle keeping lovers apart, which made the romantic comedy more suitable.

Romantic relationships are idealized in romance films, particularly romantic comedies. Romantic comedies generally have a happy ending to provide moviegoers with a more satisfying experience, and are therefore a more reliable investment for studio producers. They only focus on the courtship phase of the relationship, omitting many of the real problems experienced in romantic relationships: "Because the Hollywood romance invariably focuses on the courtship, preferring to leave the routinized 'forever after' for sociologists and other realists to study, the films are often criticized as being reactionary. For their neglect of the later moments in the relationship when the couple has aged and the woman, in particular, has become accustomed to the realities of the 'second shift' of household work, the romantic film perpetuates the myth of romance as

an ideal form of intimacy and one that need never be extinguished" (Dowd and Pallotta 2000:565).

In an analysis of romantic comedies from 1970-1995, Rubinfield (1997) found that films produced in the 1990s were more likely to idealize traditional gender roles and marriage than those produced in the 1970s. In fact, 84.5% of all romantic comedies produced from 1984-1995 reinforced traditional gender roles and marriage while relegating female characters to a secondary status. Overall, the highest grossing films idealized romantic relationships and traditional gender roles; films that questioned social conventions were less financially successful.

Mythic Love and Prosaic-Realism

Swidler (2001) identifies two "cultures of love" utilized by individuals: mythic love and prosaic-realism. Mythic love is characterized by

> … (1) a clear, all-or-nothing choice; (2) of a unique other; (3) made in defiance of social forces; and (4) permanently resolving the individual's destiny. To put it in different terms: "They met, and it was love at first sight. There would never be another girl (boy) for him (her). No one could come between them. They overcame obstacles and lived happily ever after" (Swidler 2001:113-114)

In contrast, prosaic-realism views romantic relationships in more pragmatic terms. It is assumes love takes time, is uncertain, requires constant work and compromise, and does not last. Moreover, it questions the notion of true love or soul mates, instead opting for the view that one can love many people throughout one's lifetime. Finally, it views external obstacles as likely to undermine relationships, and assumes successful relationships are based on interpersonal compatibility rather than intense emotions (Swidler 2001).

Despite their contradictions, romantic mythology and prosaic-realism are both used by individuals to develop strategies of action in their relationships, though each one is utilized in a different context:

> "Two cultures of love persist, neither driving out the other, because people employ their understanding of love in two very different contexts. When thinking about the choice of whether to marry or stay married, people see love in mythic terms. Love is the choice of one right person whom one will or could marry. Therefore love is all-or-nothing, certain, exclusive, heroic, and enduring. When thinking about maintaining ongoing relationship, however, people mobilize the prosaic-realistic

culture of love to understand the varied ways one can manage love relationships. Prosaic love is ambiguous, open-ended, uncertain, and fragile." (Swidler 2001:129) What Swidler does not investigate, however, is whether romantic mythology and prosaic-realism share a similar underlying ideology that guides behavior in both contexts. If the ideological themes discovered in Chapter 5 are in fact representative of dominant ideology, we should expect to find similar themes in romantic comedies.

Data and Methods

A textual analysis was used in this study to ascertain the dominant ideology of romantic love in popular romantic comedies. Because I am specifically interested in romantic ideology within American society, the sample was limited to films produced by U.S. companies. Moreover, only the highest grossing films in the genre were chosen for the study, as popular films are more likely to contain dominant ideology; as a socializing agent, it also seems reasonable to assume that the more popular the film, the greater its influence on people's conception of love.

As noted previously, romantic dramas have been in decline in recent decades, which is why I decided to focus on romantic comedies. I selected the top ten grossing romantic comedies for my sample using the same five year period as the self-help books (2006-2010; Table 7). I obtained box office sales data from the website Box Office Mojo. Table 1 includes the title of each film, total box office sales (adjusted to 2014 dollars), and the percentage of total sample sales. Total box office sales ranged from $97,386,600 to $178,431,300 with a mean of $133,017,490, a median of $114,952,850, and a standard deviation of $32,020,230.

I used the same procedure from the analysis of self-help books, with two minor differences. First, in addition to analyzing dialogue for both latent and manifest meaning, I observed the body language, facial expression, and vocal tone of characters in each scene. Second, while I adopted the same initial analytical categories from Chapter 4, I searched for evidence of the ideological themes I discovered in the analysis of self-help books (e.g. gendered needs, love as a power struggle). I also examined the films for evidence of ideological themes that were different or contradictory to those found in the self-help books, including ones that promoted greater intimacy or knowledge of the self and other.

Race, Class, and Sexuality

83% of film sales (eight films) featured white protagonists; in 63.1% of film sales people of color only played supporting roles (Table 8). Nine films (91.5% of film sales) featured heterosexual protagonists (Table 9), and only two films (20.2% of film sales) had gay or lesbian supporting characters. The one film that did have gay protagonists, *Valentine's Day*, was comprised of an ensemble cast where each character received minimal screen time. Moreover, one of the gay characters is only revealed to be gay at the end of the film; his status as a gay man is used to shock the audience instead of being used as an opportunity to explore relationships outside the dominate framework.

Almost all of the characters were reasonably affluent are: most were either self-employed or had professional jobs, and only one character had financial difficulties or displayed any signs of poverty. In *Knocked Up* the male protagonist is unemployed and running out of money, but the female protagonist is economically privileged, making poverty less of an issue overall. Instead of being a real concern, the male character's poverty is used as a source of comedy; men are expected to be financially successful to attract a partner, so the opposite situation is presumed to be funny. Taken together, characters are typically, white, affluent, and heterosexual, potentially limiting the audience by only appealing to dominant social groups while simultaneously promoting their beliefs, goals, and experiences as the only legitimate ones.

Idealization of Romantic Love

While some films offered criticism of romantic relationships, most assumed they are either desirable or natural (Tables 10 and 11). In *Failure to Launch* the male protagonist is repeatedly attacked by wild animals throughout the film, including a dolphin. His friend argues that the attacks are caused by being out of balance with nature:

> You were bitten by a chuckwalla. That shouldn't have happened. It's a reptile of peace...This isn't the first time that nature's lashed out at you like this. I believe it's because your life is fundamentally at odds with the natural world. Therefore, nature rejects you.

At the end of the film the protagonists become a couple and are sailing together, when the man falls out of the boat into the water. Instead of being attacked by a dolphin that

appears, this time he is able to pet it before it peacefully swims away. Thus, the film indicates that romantic love has restored his connection to nature.

71.8% of film sales depicted marriage as the primary goal of a romantic relationship (Table 12). In *The Proposal* marriage is portrayed as a rite of passage: the male protagonist's grandmother passes down her wedding dress to her grandson, which had been made by her mother. Here the implication is that the grandson will likely give it to one of his children when they decide to marry. In *Knocked Up* the main reason the protagonists decide to pursue a relationship is because the female protagonist is pregnant, the assumption being that parents have a responsibility to get married for the sake of their child. When the female protagonist's sister is questioned by her children about marriage, she responds by saying "people who love each other get married and have babies," which reinforces the idea that relationships should ideally end with marriage and children. Even characters who are critical of marriage ultimately come around in the end. In *He's Just Not That Into You* one of the male protagonists initially sees marriage as being shallow and insincere:

> People who get married are not to be trusted...You know why? Because if you are so legitimately happy, honestly, you wouldn't feel the need to make a big show out of it. You wouldn't have to broadcast it. They do it because they're insecure, and they think getting married's what they're supposed to be doing. So they're lying to themselves and to other people.

By the end of the film, however, he changes his mind and proposes to his longtime girlfriend. This demonstrates that people who are critical of marriage should not be taken seriously, because deep down everyone wants to be married, whether they realize it or not.

Commodification of Romantic Relationships

Similar to the self-help books, the films commodified relationships in a few ways. First, the main reason characters pursue a romantic relationship is to meet one or more needs; 79% of film sales have at least one protagonist viewing romantic relationships as a way to meet needs (Table 13a). Perhaps the greatest single need characters express is the need for companionship (54.7% of film sales). This was demonstrated in *Norbit* when

the male protagonist describes how his need for family was met once he started dating someone:

> Everything changed once I had Rasputia as my girlfriend. We took care of each other, and the other kids started to respect me…And because of Rasputia, for the first time in my life, I had a real family.

In *Failure to Launch* the female protagonist admits that her life was "empty" before she met the male protagonist, implying that life was without meaning prior to the relationship:

> I had a good life before you. Well, not good, but it was okay. Well, it was empty, actually, but at least I was blissfully unaware of how miserable I was. Whereas now, because of you, I am acutely aware of how completely and totally unhappy I am.

Companionship is also a way to meet physical needs. In *It's Complicated* a group of women in their 50s and 60s discuss the female protagonist's lackluster sex life, when one friend suggests dating someone just for sex:

> Friend: You know it's not healthy not to have sex – for however long it's been.

> Woman: Trust me, I'm not not doing it on purpose.

> Friend: You want to fix your situation? Just date someone. Seriously. Anyone.

Romantic relationships are sometimes pursued to meet the needs of others. In *Knocked Up* the protagonists would never have spoken again had the female protagonist not become pregnant. Nevertheless, they agree to attempt a romantic relationship for the sake of the child:

> Woman: We have seven months before the baby comes. We don't have to rush it…We should really just try to get to know each other and give this a real shot. You know, we got ourselves into this situation. We kind of have to.

> Man: For the baby, right?

> Woman: Exactly.

Although the need to provide a supportive environment for their child is an unselfish one, it nevertheless reduces the relationship to utilitarian ends.

Commodification was also present when characters compared themselves to others, noting when someone was of lesser or greater value in terms of wealth or attractiveness (21.5% of film sales; Table 13b). For example, in *Knocked Up* the protagonists are having sex for the first time when the male protagonist suddenly exclaims "Oh, man. Oh,

man. You're prettier than I am," as if he cannot believe his good fortune. This implies that people generally expect to date someone with a similar (culturally defined) level of attractiveness. In *Sex and the* City and *Sex and the City* 2 (20.2% of film sales; Table 13c) the romantic relationship itself is treated as a commodity. In *Sex and the City* the protagonist compares shopping for an apartment to looking for a romantic partner: "Finding the perfect apartment in New York City is like finding the perfect partner. It can take years." In *Sex and the City 2* the protagonist asks her husband why he gave her a black diamond, to which he responds "because you're not like anyone else." When individuals and their relationships are directly compared to commodities, love is arguably no longer the primary goal of the relationship.

Male Role in Romantic Relationships

As noted in Chapter 5, romantic ideology assumes that men in a heterosexual relationship are responsible for the economic and physical security of their partner. This aspect of romantic ideology is found in romantic comedies as well, with the added expectation that men provide emotional security to their partner. The male role in the romantic relationship is best summarized in the popular self-help book *Act like a Lady, Think like a Man*:

> A man's love fits only into three categories. As I've explained, I call them "The Three Ps of Love – Profess, Provide, and Protect." A man may not go shopping with you to buy the new dress for your office party, but a real man will escort you to that party, hold your hand, and proudly introduce you all around the party as his lady (profess); he may not cuddle you and sit by the bed holding your hand while you're sick, but a real man who loves you will make sure the prescription is filled, heat up a can of soup, and make sure everybody is in position until you are better (provide); and he may not willingly change diapers, wash the dishes, and rub your feet after a hot bath, but a real man who loves you sure will walk through a mountain and on water before he'd let someone bring any hurt or harm to you (protect). This much you can believe. (Harvey and Millner 2009: 36).

One way men offer emotional security is by communicating their affection and commitment through words or actions (profess). By saying "I love you" or the equivalent through symbolic acts (e.g. giving flowers), men reassure women of the stability and importance of the relationship. 82.9% of film sales depicted male characters declaring their love either verbally or through symbolic gestures (Table 14a). Verbal declarations of love generally fell into two categories: those made immediately before a

marriage proposal (56.1% of film sales), and those meant to persuade a woman to begin or continue a romantic relationship (62.7% of film sales). 43.1% of film sales depicted both types of verbal declarations within the same film or scene.

He's Just Not That Into You demonstrates some self-awareness of this phenomenon through the main character and narrator: "Every movie we see, every story we're told, implores us to wait for it. The third act twist: the unexpected declaration of love." Though indirectly expressed, she does in fact receive such a declaration at the end of the film:

> Woman: A wise person once told me that if a guy wants to be with a girl he will make it happen, no matter what…But when I was hurling my body onto yours, you did not seem to want to make it happen.

> Man: Here's the thing about that: you were right. I've gotten so used to keeping myself at a safe distance from all these women and having the power, that I didn't know what it felt like when I actually fell...for one of them. I didn't know.

In *The Proposal* the sentiment is more directly expressed after the male protagonist suddenly realizes he loves the woman he has hated for years:

> Three days ago, I loathed you. I used to dream about you getting hit by a cab. Or poisoned…Then we had our little adventure up in Alaska and things started to change. Things changed when we kissed. And when you told me about your tattoo. Even when you checked me out when we were naked…But I didn't realize any of this until I was standing alone, in a barn...wife-less. Now, you can imagine my disappointment when it suddenly dawned on me that the woman I love is about to be kicked out of the country. So Margaret, marry me. Because I'd like to date you.

In the above examples the men were successful. This indicates to viewers that not only are men *expected* to declare their love, but that the act itself is likely to yield positive results. *The Breakup*, however, leaves the audience with a more complex appraisal of such strategies. At the end of the film the male protagonist openly expresses his feelings of love, only to be rejected:

> I know that I've caused you a lot of pain. And the funny thing is, all I really want to do is make you happy. I just want to make you smile. Now, I've had a lot of time to think about some of the things that went on, and I know, Brooke, that I don't always do the right thing or always say the right things, but I am willing to try to do things differently...I've missed you so much. I promise you, Brooke, I will do whatever it is that I have to do to never hurt you again. I love you and I'm sorry.

The other type of declaration involved making a romantic gesture to demonstrate affection (28.7% of film sales; Table 14b). For example, the main character's partner in

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Sex and the City and *Sex in the City 2* prepares candlelit dinners and writes love letters. In *Valentine's Day* one of the subplots involves a little boy delivering flowers to a woman he loves (who later on turns out to be his teacher), signifying the intergenerational expectation of boys and men to demonstrate their affection through symbolic gifts.

The expectation that men should *provide* for women is evident in the films in a few ways. First, 34.2% of films sales depict men assuming responsibility for a major purchase on behalf of the couple or explicitly suggesting the idea (Table 15a). In *Sex and the City*, the main character's partner offers to pay for an expensive apartment that she cannot afford, to which she ultimately agrees. She later notes to her friends that it was "like he was picking up a check for coffee." In *He's Just Not That Into You* one of the male protagonists offers to buy a house on the condition his girlfriend agrees to eventually move in:

> I have an idea. For this house. For me. And hopefully, if you like it...I know where my life is going, and I want you to go with me. I'm not saying I want you to move in right now, but I don't want to buy this place unless, at some point, you could see yourself moving in.

In *Knocked Up* the expectation to provide economically is highlighted by the male protagonist's guilt at not being able to afford an engagement ring for his girlfriend:

> Look, Allison, I'm sure this isn't how you pictured it being, exactly, and it's not how I wanted it to be, but that is why I'm presenting you this empty box. It's a promise, Allison. It's a promise that one day I will...I will fill this box with a ring that you deserve, a beautiful ring. And I can't afford it yet. I've picked it out already, though, and it's at De Beers, and it's really nice. So basically I'm asking you, will you marry me?

Another way male characters provided is through giving small gifts meant to demonstrate their *ability* to provide (37.3% of film sales; Table 15b). In *Knocked Up* the protagonists first meet in a busy nightclub; both are waiting at the bar while being ignored by the bartender. After some frustration, the male protagonist finally says "watch this" and grabs two beers from behind the bar in an effort to impress her. The woman then realizes she needs another beer for her sister, so he offers to give her a second beer. When she declines, he says "Please, I very rarely look cool. This is a big moment for me. Just take it." In this scene the man provides the woman with something of symbolic value, demonstrating his ability (and eagerness) to provide for her in general.

The male characters also provided for women in non-economic ways, such as giving advice and sharing knowledge (29.7% of film sales; Table 15c). For example, In *He's Just Not That Into You* one of the female protagonists receives sincere advice about dating men from a guy with whom she becomes friends. At the end of the film the man realizes he is in love with her and they become a couple, which suggests that giving dating advice was his way of looking out for her prior to the romantic relationship.

Finally, men are expected to *protect* women from physical and emotional harm; 35.4% of film sales depicted men protecting women from physical danger (Table 16a). In *The Proposal*, the female protagonist falls out of a boat and is unable to swim. The male protagonist then jumps into the water to save her, after which he holds her and says "it's okay" while displaying a loving, protective expression. *It's Complicated* has a less dramatic (and probably more common) example of male protection. While climbing ladders that are side-by-side, one of the male characters puts his hand on the female protagonist's back for support, and later steadies her when she begins to lose her balance. Like purchasing small gifts, the act is more symbolic: by offering protection in more subtle ways, he was demonstrating his desire and ability to protect in general.

Male characters were also concerned with protecting women from psychological harm (62.3% of film sales; Table 16b). One way this is evident in the films is the assumption that men are directly responsible for their partner's happiness. This was sometimes directly expressed, such as the speech at the end of *The Breakup* where the male character says "[A]ll I really want to do is make you happy." In *Norbit*, the main character's duty to make his wife happy is made explicit by the woman's brother:

> Brother: Look, just so we clear. If you ever hurt my sister in any way, make her cry, even make her sad one time, I'm coming at you with razor blades and lemon juice… I'm talking pain, boy. Searing, mind-numbing pain.

> Husband: I understand.

This belief is also indirectly expressed through behavior. In *Sex and the City* the female protagonist's male partner goes along with her decision to have an elaborate public wedding because he is afraid of disappointing her. He finally explains he was unable to tell her the truth because he did not want to make her unhappy:

> Woman: [W]hy didn't you say anything sooner?

Man: You wanted all of this…I want you. That's what I want. I could have just gone down to city hall.

Woman: I think it's too late for city hall now.

Man: Well, No, I wasn't suggesting that...I was just saying. (Sad expression on woman's face)
See, that's the face I've been trying to avoid.

In *Knocked Up*, the female protagonist goes into labor at the end of the film and calls the male protagonist to drive her to the hospital. Once they arrive a combative doctor refuses to honor the woman's request for a drug-free birth, which increases her anxiety. The guy then pulls the doctor aside and pleads with him to treat the woman nicely:

Look, man, will you help us out? I have no idea what I'm doing. You can be as big a dick to me as you want. Just be nice to her, man. That's all I ask. Just please be nice to her.

Beyond the responsibility to offer physical and emotional protection, the films often had male characters in charge of decision making and planning (64.6% of film sales). Returning to the dancing metaphor, men are expected to lead in the relationship. For example, proposing marriage was more often assumed to be a male responsibility (56.1% of film sales; Table 17a); women had the option of accepting or declining the proposal, but initiating the marriage process still fell on the shoulders of men. In some films men handled other aspects of planning in the relationship, such as financial management or making dinner reservations for a date (30.2% of film sales; Table 17b). In *Norbit*, a male character explains that it is his *job* to manage his fiancé's money:

Man: This is her nest egg, you know. I don't want her making any hasty decisions that she might regret later, you know? She worked too hard for this money.

Woman: Deion, you take such good care of me, baby.

Man: It's my job.

In *Valentine's Day*, one of the male protagonists becomes worried when he is suddenly reminded of his responsibility to plan a date for Valentine's Day:

Man: Whoa whoa whoa…it's Valentine's Day?

Co-worker: …You do have something planned for tonight, right?

Man: How could I have something planned for tonight? I just found out right now!

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As noted previously, the plot of romantic comedies is often centered on one or more characters overcoming personal obstacles to find love. What is most interesting and unique about four of the films is the obstacle to a happy ending: the male protagonist's lack of masculinity (43.4% of film sales). In order for the guy to get the girl he had to "be a man," though the masculine ideal was different in each film. In *Norbit* the male protagonist (Norbit) is depicted as timid and unwilling to take control of his life. His wife dominates and abuses him, and he is afraid to stand up to her and her physically intimidating brothers. Only at the end does he truly become a man by taking charge of his life and declaring his love for another woman:

Norbit: This wedding is a sham and I'm here to stop it.

Kate: Norbit, what are you doing?

Norbit: I'm being a man for the first time in my life. Kate, I love you.

In *Failure to Launch* the male protagonist exhibits dominant masculinity in most ways except one: he lives with his parents and therefore lacks independence. To remedy this his parents hire the female protagonist to pretend to be his girlfriend, who argues that being in a romantic relationship will motivate him to move out of the house:

Many young men who should be able to move out simply can't. It's called "failure to launch." And that's where I come in. Young men develop self-esteem best during a romantic relationship, so I simulate one. We have a memorable meeting. We get to know each other over a few casual meals, he helps me through an emotional crisis, then I meet his friends, if he has any, then I let him teach me something...But the bottom line is, he bonds with me. He lets go of you. He moves out.

He falls in love with the woman (and vice versa) by the end of the film and finally establishes his independence, thus becoming a man.

One of the four films, *The Proposal*, offers a more expansive take on the role of gender in romantic relationships. Instead of the focus being solely on the man overcoming his lack of masculinity, the film suggests women also challenge gender norms at their own risk. The female protagonist is a publishing executive and the male protagonist is her assistant. While she comes across as aggressive and lacking empathy at the beginning of the film, he is subordinate and more caring towards others. By the end of the film, however, he is bolder and she is more caring. In the final scene he

declares his love for her in front of their co-workers, which is followed a passionate kiss. Everyone applauds and one male co-worker shouts "show her who's boss, Andrew!" At the end both characters had assumed their proper roles, which suggests to the audience that challenging dominant conceptions of gender will likely result in being alone. Conforming to gender norms, however, results in romantic bliss and applause.

Female Role in Romantic Relationships

One of the more prominent themes regarding women was the concern over being in a long-term, monogamous relationship. 75.5% of film sales reflected one of the following categories related to this concern: the desire for marriage (28.5% of film sales; Table 18a), fear of being alone (38.5% of film sales; Table 18b), and fear of infidelity (36.9% of film sales; Table 18c). For example, in *Sex and the City* the main character hints to her longtime partner that she would like to get married:

> Woman: Come on, I have to be smart here. We're not married, I'd have no legal rights...you know, to...To this home that I built...with you.
>
> Man: Did you wanna get married?
>
> Woman: Well, I didn't...I didn't think that was an option…Is that what you want?
>
> Man: I want you.

Her partner then agrees to marry her, though it is clear from the exchange that he was happy with the original status of their relationship. A similar scene occurred in *He's Just Not That Into You*, though the woman's desire for marriage is met with resistance:

> Woman: …You don't ever feel like we're going against nature, or something...by not getting married?
>
> Man: No…You and I are just two people who happen not to be married. Let me tell you something. People who get married are not to be trusted…You know why? Because if you are so legitimately happy, honestly, you wouldn't feel the need to make a big show out of it. You wouldn't have to broadcast it.
>
> ...We're very happy, I love you, I'm committed to you. We have a great life, you know?...Why can't we just be happy?

There are also more subtle examples. In *Valentine's Day* one of the female protagonists visits a male friend after learning he proposed to his girlfriend. In addition to offering her

congratulations, she indirectly complains about not being married to her current boyfriend: "I'm so sick of dating, I'm so jealous of you guys."

Related to the desire for commitment is the fear of infidelity; the only thing worse than not having a partner is losing one. Interestingly, only female characters suspected their partner of having an affair. In *Knocked Up*, the female protagonist's sister follows her husband because she believes he is dating another woman, despite having little evidence to warrant such concerns:

> Sister: I think he's cheating on me…He's always going off to these business meetings at odd hours. And then I try to call him on his cell phone, and he says that he's in bad cell phone reception areas when he's in good cell phone reception areas.
>
> Woman: Maybe he's working late. You know, I mean, maybe he's just working really hard to sign a new great band or something. I can't imagine Pete doing something like that.
>
> Sister: There's no part of you that thinks that maybe he's a dirty little scumbag?…I think he might be.

Sometimes the concerns were grounded in reality. In *He's Just Not That Into You*, one of the female protagonists suspects her husband is smoking cigarettes behind her back (he claimed to have quit smoking). She becomes increasingly suspicious of him, at one point noting he smelled "weird" when he came home one night. Finally, while shopping for new flooring she uses the topic of fake wood to convey her feelings of marital distrust, after which he admits to having an affair:

> Wife: I still wanna go with the real wood.
>
> Husband: What? You can't even tell the difference.
>
> Wife: It's not the point…I don't like the way it's pretending to be wood. If you're not wood,
> don't try and look like wood…This is a lie, Ben. Just be up front and tell people what you really are.
>
> Husband: Okay, you're right. You're right…I slept with someone.
>
> Wife: …I knew it. I knew it.

Another way the desire for commitment was reflected in the films is the sadness and fear associated with being alone. In *It's Complicated* the female protagonist is in her 50s

and divorced for almost a decade. When discussing plans to remodel her bedroom with an architect, she indirectly reveals that living alone makes her sad:

Woman: In my bathroom...no his and her sinks…Just hers.

Architect: And you don't think in the future you might want a his?

Woman: The truth is, in my current bathroom, I have two sinks and sometimes the other sink makes me feel bad.

In *Valentine's Day*, the holiday is depicted as cruelly reminding single woman they are alone. One of the female protagonists finds the day particularly stressful and imagines her future status as a spinster:

I just want to know, if in fact I am the only freaking person on the planet who is completely and 100% alone on Valentine's Day…You know who has always been there for me? My best friend, candy… and there isn't a shortage of it on Valentine's Day. And that is my future: I'll be a lonely old lady with rotting teeth and a chocolate mustache.

Another theme regarding women was the importance of physical appearance; in 62.2% of film sales female characters were explicitly concerned with their physical appearance (Table 19a). In *Knocked Up*, the female protagonist works at a news station as is offered the chance to be a correspondent. Before she can begin the position her manager strongly implies that she has to lose weight:

Manager: [T]here's gonna be some things that you're gonna be able to get that other people in the office don't get. One of them, gym membership.

Woman: You want me to lose weight?

Manager: No, I don't want you to lose weight...We didn't say lose weight. I might say tighten.

In *The Proposal*, the female protagonist is initially at odds with the male protagonist. Later in the film they stay up talking one night before going to bed, sharing intimate details with each other. The next morning she wakes up before him and is worried about her appearance: she quickly fixes her hair and applies lip gloss before waking him. The female protagonist's sudden concern over her physical appearance was the film's way of communicating her attraction to the male protagonist.

Another way female characters were concerned with appearance was the fear of getting old (42.2% of film sales; Table 19b). In *Sex and the City* the main character

becomes engaged at 40, which is seen as a source of inspiration to other single women over 30. The assumption is that once a woman reaches a certain age she is unlikely to find a husband, hence the concern with appearing young. In *Knocked Up* the female protagonist's sister expresses a fear of aging after being rejected from a club for not looking young enough:

> You look beautiful. And you're young and you're tall, and you got the good lips and boobs, and you're young still. I'm gonna be alone…Fucking men! I get worse-looking and he gets better-looking, and it's so fucking unfair.

Related to the fear of getting old is the infantilization of women through language. In 50.4% of film sales female characters referred to themselves and other women as "girls," including women in their 50s and 60s (Table 19c). It is also worth noting that the fear of getting old and being alone is not irrational: in three films (25.3% of film sales) male characters cheated on a partner with a younger woman, establishing women's fear of aging as a valid concern.

As noted in the analysis of self-help books, the reason women need to be concerned with their physical appearance is because it is essential to attracting men and keeping them in a committed relationship. Men are assumed to be largely motivated by sex, and women are expected to provide it. 58.2% of film sales either depicted men as being preoccupied with sex or implied that it is a woman's responsibility to provide sex in a relationship (Tables 20a and 20b). As previously discussed, in *Failure to Launch* the female protagonist is paid by the male protagonist's parents to simulate a romantic relationship so he will move out of the house. When asked if she will have sex him, the woman responds "I don't have sex with clients. Besides, I need to keep Trip motivated, and let's face it…after men have sex…" to which the mother knowingly sighs in agreement. In *Sex and the City 2* the male preoccupation with sex is illustrated when a group of married men blatantly stare at a young nanny's breasts while she innocently plays with children. Female characters also assume that providing sex to men is their responsibility. In *He's Just Not That Into You* one of the female protagonists assumes partial responsibility for her spouse's affair, believing she had failed in her duty as a wife by not having sex with him:

> Woman: It's my fault, you know…I just think I need to take responsibility for my share in the whole mess…We don't have sex anymore.

Friend: Lots of couples go through lulls.

Woman: No, I mean, we never have sex. I mean, realistically, what do I expect him to do, you know?

As noted in Chapter 5, romantic ideology assumes a power struggle between men and women: while some of the books expected me to lead in decision making and planning, most assumed that women were ultimately in control of the relationship. In the films women were more likely to attempt to control a partner than men; 67.5% of film sales depicted female characters exerting control over a partner or the relationships itself. For example, 32.6% of film sales depicted women using manipulation or advocating its use to get men to change unwanted behavior (Table 21a). In *Knocked Up*, the female protagonist's sister suggests that criticizing men will improve them:

Sister: You need to train him…Oprah said that when two people meet, they are forced to point out each other's differences and flaws.

Woman: I thought you were supposed to just accept people for who they are, love them anyway.

Sister: You criticize them a lot, and then they get so down on themselves that they're forced to change.

Woman: Really? You don't think that would just make it worse? That'd be, like, naggy.

Sister: And then in the end, they thank you for it.

Later in the film the she tells the male protagonist that he should not have to change for her:

I don't want to force you to be what I think you should be. That's wrong of me because you're great. You really are. I mean, you like to get high, and you like to do shrooms in Vegas…Who am I to stop you? Who am I to tell you that that's wrong? It's not wrong. It's who you are.

Despite the woman's protests, the man does in fact change so she will be in a relationship with him: he moves out of the house he shares with friends and rents his own place (thus establishing independence), and finds a job to show he is responsible and able to provide for her. Only after his transformation is she willing to be in a relationship with him, leaving hollow her earlier disapproval of criticizing men to change them. In *The Breakup* the female protagonist ends her relationship with the male protagonist hoping it would

change his behavior (e.g. not helping around the house). Instead, he takes her literally and assumes the relationship is over for good. Later in the film her sister validates the use of manipulation by suggesting that men should be treated like children:

> Men are like children…they're gonna test boundaries to see what they can get away with. I think there's three things that Gary needs to know. One, this type of behavior is not unnoticed. Two, it's not acceptable. And three, you know, you're definitely not gonna tolerate it.

Continuing this strategy, she tries to make her boyfriend jealous by looking attractive and going on a date with another man, in hopes it would motivate him to change and ask for her forgiveness. Only after multiple failed attempts at manipulation does she communicate her true feelings to him:

> Woman: And all I want is to...is for you to just show me that you care.

> Man: Why didn't you just say that to me?

> Woman: Gary, I've tried. I've tried.

> Man: Yeah, but never like that. You might've said some things that you meant to imply that, Brooke, but I'm not a mind reader.

To its credit, instead of condoning the use of manipulation in a relationship the film leaves the viewer with the sense that honestly communicating one's feelings is the best way to resolve a relationship conflict.

Although men are expected to lead, 29.1% of film sales depicted married women as exerting direct control over a partner (Table 21b). In *Sex and the City 2* the female protagonist wants her husband to take her to a film premiere, despite the fact that he is tired after working all day and recently attended a wedding with her over the weekend. After an unsuccessful attempt to persuade him she shoves a drink in his hand and orders him to get dressed:

> Woman: You just don't want to get your ass off the couch. All right, fine. Stay. I'll go with Stanford.

> Man: Okay.

> Woman: …Throw this back (hands him a glass of whisky). We're going.

> Man: I thought you just said...

> Woman: I changed my mind…Bottoms up. I'll put out a fresh shirt.

In *The Proposal* the male protagonist was at odds with his father for years. While visiting his family the mother finally intervenes and tells her husband to support their son's wish to marry:

> He is my son. I only get to see him every three years because of you. Because of you. I've had enough. You are gonna be supportive of him marrying Margaret, and that is that…You are going to fix this, Joe. I mean it. Fix it now.

Perhaps most important, female protagonists were more often in the position of deciding whether a relationship begins, continues, or ends (67.2% of film sales; Table 21c). In both *The Proposal* and *Norbit*, the male protagonist makes a speech at the end of the film to persuade the female protagonist to date him. In *Sex and the City*, *The Breakup*, and *Knocked Up* the female protagonists unilaterally end the relationship, and the men are expected to win them back. In the above examples women hold ultimate power in the relationship, whereas men are in this position in only two films (16.8% of film sales), *Valentine's Day* and *Failure to Launch*.

Romantic Ideology Revisited

Many of the central ideological themes in self-help books were also present in romantic comedies. First, both idealized romantic love. Even when a book or film offered criticism of romantic relationships, it was never willing to question the desirability of one. Second, the films and books almost uniformly focused on heterosexual relationships, the only exception being the two gay protagonists in the film *Valentine's Day*. Third, and most important, both treated romantic relationships primarily as a way to meet needs. Moreover, they promoted traditional gender roles by assuming men and women have different needs and roles in the relationship: men are expected to provide women with physical protection and economic security, and in return women are expected to provide men with physical intimacy.

There were also subtle ideological differences between the books and films. In addition to viewing men as a source of physical and economic security, the films portrayed men offering emotional security to women. Absent from the films, however, are women providing emotional support to men, something the self-help books took for granted. Overall, there is much ideological overlap between the films and books, which strengthens the validity of my findings and demonstrates that romantic mythology and

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prosaic-realism, while on the surface very different, do in fact share an underlying ideology. If similar ideological themes exist across disparate mediums and genres, they are likely representative of dominant ideology. Romantic ideology provides individuals a model of relationships to emulate (to a greater or lesser degree), but it also gives us a window into how they perceive romantic relationships and gender.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

In this dissertation I have argued that alienation is encouraged by numerous macro and micro structures in American society, and that community based on shared responsibility is also undermined. Individuals adapt to these conditions by idealizing romantic love, essentially creating a community of two. Instead of promoting intimacy and self-knowledge, romantic ideology encourages a pragmatic individualism that places personal needs above obligation to others and undermines the ability to develop community capacity both within and outside the romantic relationship. The ideology also reinforces traditional gender roles by outlining the rights and responsibilities for men and women in romantic relationships. Under ideal conditions, the solution creates a gendered dependency that commodifies individuals while restricting their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors to those deemed socially appropriate for their sex. At worst, it increases the individual's alienation and creates new forms of inequality, or leaves him lonely and isolated when unable to find a romantic partner.

Romantic love is an individual solution to the collective problem of community. Individual efforts at building a "community of two" are unlikely to transcend alienation because of the inherent contradictions in romantic ideology. By establishing relationships on the basis of individual self-interest, intimacy and commitment become more difficult to realize. Moreover, romantic ideology compels individuals to prioritize the romantic partner at the expense of other relationships. Without a larger sense of community, individuals are more susceptible to isolation, loneliness, and other forms of psychological suffering should they lose their partner. Finally, even under ideal circumstances romantic relationships are only a temporary coping mechanism for structural alienation, and a partial one at that. No matter the level of intimacy and commitment between partners, individuals still have to interact with those outside the romantic relationship, including neighbors, friends, and co-workers. If much of a person's time is spent engaged in alienated interaction with others, it is likely to negatively affect interaction with the romantic partner as well.

This dissertation contributes to the field of sociology in a few ways. First, I have introduced theoretical insights to the phenomenon of alienation by highlighting macro and micro structures that encourage alienation outside the economic sphere, such as individualism and impression management. Second, my analysis represents the most systemic attempt to date at uncovering dominant romantic ideology, in terms of both the sampling procedure and the scope of my findings. I have examined the most popular cultural works that represent romantic fantasy (romantic comedies), as well as those that outline strategies for day-to-day living (self-help books), in the process uncovering a cohesive ideology that goes beyond both mediums and genres. People watch romantic comedies for entertainment and escape, and read self-help books on romantic love to find practical strategies for finding (or keeping) a romantic partner, yet both communicate ideas about romantic love using a similar ideological framework. Third, I have empirically demonstrated that romantic ideology reinforces individualism by framing relationships in terms of meeting needs, and that it often encourages alienation between romantic partners while simultaneously discouraging the building of community. Finally, my findings show how romantic ideology encourages both female *and* male inequality, resulting in what I refer to as gendered dependency. I argue that the importance of romantic relationships encourages heterosexuals to internalize gender characteristics and norms necessary for attracting a romantic partner, thereby limiting the development of the individual and the range of expression and behavior.

There are a number of limitations to this study. First and foremost, little can be said on how the audience decodes these texts, let alone how romantic ideology affects beliefs, values, and behavior. Individuals have the ability to interpret texts differently, or reject the ideology in part or whole. For example, despite depicting romantic relationships in terms of traditional gender roles, the author of *Love and Respect* notes that heterosexual couples often tell him they identify with the opposite gender roles. Second, by virtue of focusing on dominant ideology, this study has not examined romantic love in the context of same-sex relationships, or relationships with one or more transgender partners. Same-sex partners may be more willing to challenge dominant gender norms, and transgender individuals may be more likely to internalize gender roles than those who are not transgender, or vice versa.

Third, while uncovering a cohesive ideology across mediums and genres does seem to indicate a dominant ideology, an analysis of other cultural works is necessary to be certain. As I noted in Chapter 5, men dominated the production of texts analyzed in this study, and they were largely written for a female audience. Does greater female participation in the production of texts result in a similar ideology, or one that challenges or modifies dominant romantic ideology? How is romantic love depicted in novels, television shows, or other film genres where romantic relationships are not the focus of the plot? Finally, the sample period only provides a five-year snapshot of romantic ideology. The public conversation on gender has changed significantly since 2010, which may also have affected romantic ideology, either strengthening or challenging traditional gender roles in romantic relationships.

The above limitations suggest avenues for future research. Although this dissertation is focused on the encoding component of textual analysis, an examination of how individuals decode texts is equally important and would give more insight into how ideology is perceived and internalized by individuals, especially those from disparate social groups. For example, do white heterosexual men decode texts differently than transgender women of color? Another important area of research is exploring the relationship between romantic ideology and behavior. This could be accomplished two ways. The most practical strategy would be interviewing individuals about their romantic relationships, both past and present. To what extent do individuals act on their romantic beliefs? Are they self-reflexive about their relationships, and the role of gender in their lives? While logistically challenging, participant observation of relationships would shed more light on the degree to which individual behavior aligns with self-appraisals. Study participants should include people with different types of romantic relationships, not simply heterosexual monogamous ones. Lastly, a textual analysis of other popular mediums and genres could shed light on the extent to which romantic ideology in romantic comedies and self-help books reflects dominant ideology. Does romantic ideology change when romantic love is not the subject of a cultural product?

Competitive Individualism and Romantic Love

   The most important finding of this dissertation is that even relationships perceived as extremely intimate encourage alienation in numerous ways. Romantic intimacy, I have argued, is significantly undermined by competitive individualism in American society. Before the relationship begins, individuals perfect an idealized self to attract a romantic partner, resulting in self-alienation. Once the relationship begins, the individual feels obligated to maintain the idealized self for fear the romantic partner will no longer love her if she were to abandon the facade. The individual is not only self-alienated in the process of creating and maintaining an idealized self, she becomes estranged from others as well. As I discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, impression management is ultimately about controlling the perceptions and behaviors of others. Control, or attempted control of others, is the opposite of *respect*, one of the foundations of love.

   The dating market is also rife with competition, with those who are youngest, wealthiest, and most attractive commanding greater value than those who do not possess such qualities. Individuals during the dating process treat themselves and others as commodities to be traded in a marketplace, encouraging relationships between objects rather than people. Competition in the dating market also creates conflict among heterosexuals of the same sex, as other women and men are potential rivals. The pervasiveness of jealousy in romantic relationships is just one expression of the distrust individuals often have towards partners and other heterosexuals of the same sex.

   Once a relationship begins, competition in the dating market morphs into a power struggle within the relationship. Romantic ideology assumes that women and men naturally compete for power: the religious-oriented self-help texts mostly argue that women should defer to men whenever possible, while the non-religious books generally advise women to be the one in control of the relationship. Instead of assuming direct control, however, women are encouraged to use impression management to control the behavior of men in a kind of benevolent dictatorship. Because women are assumed to have better relationship skills and be more attuned to the needs of others, this arrangement is seen as in the best interest of everyone.

   Individualism also undermines intimacy and community in romantic relationships. Dominant romantic ideology frames love in terms of meeting needs, not concern, respect,

and responsibility towards another person. The self-help books advocated for greater knowledge and care of a partner, but not for its own sake. Instead, caring for a partner and knowing her better is portrayed as a means to an end: the satisfaction of personal needs. By prioritizing self-interest in relationships, the individual is also rejecting lasting responsibility towards others. Individuals unwittingly undermine community and intimacy in their relationships by assuming they will someday end when it no longer serves the purposes of either partner. Without mutual feelings of loyalty and assurances of support that derive from community, individuals can never truly feel secure in their relationships with others and be certain their needs will be met in the future.

Romantic Alienation and Gender

Gender adds an additional layer of alienation to romantic relationships. Romantic ideology assumes women and men have unique needs that can only be satisfied by the opposite sex. To reintroduce the *Knight in Shining Armor* metaphor, women need to feel physically and economically protected, and men need to be cared for emotionally and sexually in return. Relationships are expected to uniquely meet women and men's needs, implying that each sex can never be complete without the other. I have argued that these beliefs encourage dependency between women and men that limits each sex's behavior and expression of personality.

Returning to Fromm's conception of love, *dependency* undermines intimacy between people. If you truly love another person, you want him to have as much independence and agency as possible. Dependency is ultimately a form of control. The more dependent a person is on an individual, the more power that individual has over the person. Even if a woman and man are equally dependent on one another, it is still a relationship based on mutual control and self-alienation, not intimacy. Regardless of intent, the better an individual can meet a partner's needs, the greater the dependency on him. The more dependent the partner becomes, the more control the individual has over her.

Religion has long played a central role in idealizing romantic love and gender roles. Marriage, the assumed end goal of romantic love, is perceived by many religious denominations to be a sacred relationship. Moreover, weddings usually take place in a

church with the marriage ceremony being performed by a religious official, even when couples are not particularly religious or spiritual themselves. Religious institutions also play a large role in upholding traditional gender roles and heterosexuality. If we examine the history of gender and sexuality in North America, we find that many Native American tribes considered gender to be fluid instead of binary. Women and men who exhibited both female and male qualities were considered normal, now referred to as "two-spirits" by scholars. Two-spirit people represented a diverse expression of gender and sexuality and were valued members of the tribe, as the individual was considered to be gifted with abilities beyond those who identified with only one gender (Smithers 2014). With the arrival of Europeans, gender and sexual diversity among indigenous people ultimately came to an end. Colonial forces systematically eradicated two-spirit people and/or those engaged in same-sex relationships: "In the centuries that followed, Native people who were considered 'deviant' in terms of gender and/or sexuality continued to be targeted by missionaries, Indian agents, boarding school teachers, and other representatives of the dominant non-Native society, who used violence and ridicule to make such people conform to European norms" (Lang 2016). The legacy of this cultural genocide can be seen in many Native American communities today, where homophobic and gender-binary attitudes still persist (Lang 2016).

Evolution and religion were guiding metaphors used in the texts to explain the existence of gender roles in romantic relationships. Some texts argue romantic love and gender roles naturally evolved from hunter-gatherer societies (e.g. men as protectors), while others believe marriage is ordained by God. Although evolutionary and religious explanations are usually at odds with one another, in this case both achieve the same function: naturalizing and idealizing romantic love and gender roles. Both explanations treat gender as immutable and an ideal which individuals should strive to realize. This is especially important when considering constraints on agency. If gender is biologically derived, how can one fight one's nature? Change is significantly more difficult if the individual believes there is no point in trying in the first place.

The belief that gender roles are natural also introduces a double standard for women and men. The texts portray men as simply acting according to their nature, yet simultaneously expect women to manage their emotions and behavior in service of men's

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needs (including satiating men's egos). If gender is indeed natural, why are women routinely expected to act in ways contrary to their own spontaneous wishes and desires? This double standard potentially results in greater levels of self-alienation for women, as impression management is generally more expected from them. The primary beneficiaries of this arrangement, of course, are men. This stems from larger patriarchal relations where women are expected to serve the interests of men, regardless of their own wishes. Whether as a daughter, wife, or employee, women have long been expected to be subservient to men in both public and private life. If anything, modern romantic ideology only reinforces this longstanding inequality.

Resistance, Past and Present

What is most striking about contemporary romantic comedies is how strongly they cling to essentialist depictions of gender and love from the past. There have of course been many challenges to the gender status quo over the years. Most notably, women's and men's liberation discourses emerged in the 1970s discussing the alienating nature of gender roles and the inequality that resulted from them. While the women's movement was focused on female liberation from male domination at home and in the public sphere, the men's movement concentrated on how masculinity harmed men and women. The movement eventually split into two major factions: those who believed that gender negatively affected men and women equally (though in different ways), and those who sided with feminists that believed female oppression should be the primary focus of discussion and action. This culminated in a feminist backlash against men who perceived gender to be equally oppressive, and by the 1980s the men's liberation movement had transformed into the conservative men's rights movement. Instead of viewing gender oppression as something affecting men and women equally, men's rights advocates claimed that men were in fact *more* oppressed than women, often calling into question empirically substantiated patterns of sexual and domestic violence against women (Messner 1998). At the same time, conservative religious and political groups began to attack feminism as being narcissistic and anti-family, creating a caricature of feminism that depicted women's liberation as selfish and anti-male. By the 1980s this caricature

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became the dominant image associated with feminism, one that persists to this day (Tyler 2007).

The period of the late 1960s to the early 1980s signified not only a change in gender discourse and practice, but a shift in the narrative content of romantic comedies. As a result of countercultural efforts in the 1960s that questioned gender and romantic relationships, films like *The Graduate* and *Harold and Maude* emerged to challenge many conventions in the genre. Instead of the couple ending up together at the end of the film, these romantic comedies often eschewed happy endings and other conventions of the genre:

…the radical romantic comedy, for a short period, was interested to see what became of the genre if more realistic elements were permitted space. Loss and death were allowed alongside the stories of love and marriage, and the traditional happy ending in these films might be subverted, conclusions occurring without the central union preserved or even with it prevented by death or failure. This acceptance of more realistic elements in the films' narratives was matched by more realistic language, with a marked increase in swearing and the discussion of sexual matters. There is a very noticeable emphasis on the importance of sexual satisfaction to women, as well as men, and the acknowledgement of female sexual desire (McDonald 2007:70).

For example, in *The Graduate* the two lovers get on a bus together at the end of the film, but as the camera focuses on their faces, it is clear they are not sure they are doing the right thing, or even happy about their decision. They may have ended the film as a couple, but the film leaves the audience doubtful about their prospects as one. A film that would be daring even today, *Harold and Maude* is the story of a romantic relationship that develops between a young man in his early 20s and a free-spirited, elderly woman. Not only is the relationship consummated between them, the woman commits suicide at the end of the film (McDonald 2007).

Despite the backlash against feminism, many of its social critiques have become part of the larger society in terms of increased female participation and recognition within the workplace, reproductive rights for women, and the continued challenge to hegemonic gender norms in the home (e.g. women should perform domestic labor). The LGBTQ movement has also made progress challenging heterosexuality as the basis for romantic relationships, with same-sex marriage making great legal strides in recent years.

Challenges to gender norms and sexuality are also present in modern cultural works. One of the romantic comedies in my sample, *The Breakup*, did not end with the couple

together. Better still, the film questioned many of the gendered practices assumed by romantic ideology, such as women using manipulation in their relationships with men, or men relying on women to manage relationships and the household. At the end, the male protagonist comes to terms with his selfishness and endeavors to improve his relationships with others (including men) going forward. Heterosexuality as the default sexuality in romantic relationships is also being challenged in films. Romantic dramas such as *Blue is the Warmest Color* and *Brokeback Mountain* feature same-sex relationships between women and men respectively, and *Moonlight* is a coming-of-age drama featuring a gay black man as its protagonist. All three films were both critical and commercial successes, demonstrating there is a broad desire to experience different types of romantic narratives.

The main limitation of these social movements, and by extension the critiques of romantic love imbedded in popular culture, is they largely fail to question individualism as the basis for romantic relationships. Greater equality between people is no doubt desirable, but it will only alleviate some of the alienation experienced in relationships if individualism remains unchallenged. While radical feminists have long viewed heteronormative romantic relationships as a site of oppression (with justification), less thought has been given to the potential positive functions served by them. If romantic relationships did not offer anything to individuals, they would not pursue them with such tenacity. Indeed, as I argue in the final two sections, before we can consider abandoning romantic love, we must first recognize the needs that it serves, and build alternative institutions that can provide those needs.

Heart of a Heartless World

When people discuss Marx and religion, they usually focus on Marx's criticism of religion as a tool of class oppression. His most famous quote on religion, however, denotes a more complex relationship between religion, alienation, and suffering: "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people" (Marx 1970:1). Although Marx was critical of religion and advocated for its abolition, he also empathized with those in the working class who were religious, understanding that under oppressive circumstances

religion fulfilled a human need. For Marx, religion is both oppressive and a source of comfort to the alienated individual.

The same can be said for romantic love. As my dissertation has shown, romantic ideology encourages the objectification of women and men in different ways, and assumes both sexes are locked in an eternal power struggle. These conditions may be far from ideal for creating intimacy or agency, but it is nevertheless possible for individuals to have a rewarding and loving relationship within the confines of heteronormative love. It would be unrealistic to expect people to abandon romantic love without first addressing the underlying conditions of their suffering, which I argue is a lack of community. However imperfect, a "community of two" is better than no community at all.

Instead of abandoning romantic love, it would first be useful to continue encouraging greater self-reflexivity regarding romantic relationships and gender roles. The more people are aware of how gender has shaped who they are and influenced their relationships, the greater their ability to break free from its constraints and improve their relationships with others. Greater gender equality in all areas of life would also increase the potential for intimacy in heterosexual relationships. Even if gender is flexible at home, women and men will still feel pressured to conform to gender ideals if they are not also confronted in the workplace or public spaces. Equally important, romantic relationships have the potential to become the primary site where individualism is challenged. The more people become aware of individualistic attitudes towards loved ones, the easier it will be to abandon them, eventually extending anti-individualistic attitudes towards those outside the relationship. As long as the individual feels threatened and alone, it would be unrealistic to expect greater change from him.

A Revolution of Values

In order to truly transform social relations both within and outside the romantic relationship, people will need to eventually build new institutions that reflect alternative values. In the 1968 antiwar speech *Why I Oppose the War of Vietnam*, Martin Luther King called for a "revolution of values." He argued that the United States needed to "rapidly begin the shift from a 'thing-oriented' society to a 'person-oriented' society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more

important than people, the giant triplets of racism, economic exploitation, and militarism are incapable of being conquered." Not only should the U.S. become a more "person-oriented" by challenging materialism and economic exploitation, it should also move from a competitive, individualistic society to one that encourages sharing and responsibility towards others—both are necessary preconditions for building intimacy and community. Until people are willing to reject self-interest at the expense of others and form communities based in mutual concern and obligation, alienation will continue to persist. Understanding how one has been shaped by the social environment brings new possibilities. Individuals not only transform themselves, but those around them. Individuals are a model of behavior for others, particularly those who are closest to them. If a person changes her behavior, over time she will eventually influence others through positive example.

Personal transformation must also lead to social transformation. Because work is central to the human condition, it is necessary to transform the economy to reflect values based on democracy and social solidarity. As long as individuals are forced to compete over resources and engage in alienated labor, it is difficult to speak meaningfully about enhancing individual agency or building community. Although a political revolution is possible, I believe the best way forward is creating alternatives within the current economic system that demonstrate new modes of interaction and work. If individuals were able to see functioning alternative models that reflect different values, it could inspire them by demonstrating a different way of life is possible.

I believe worker cooperatives, where workers democratically share ownership and decision-making power, is the best short-term solution towards building alternative economic institutions that foster community. First, individuals in a worker cooperative have more direct control over their own labor, while also having influence over other aspects of the business, such as the products or services being offered and their prices. Individuals in a worker cooperative are also less alienated from the fruits of their labor, as they receive the full value of their work and have a say in what is done with the final product.

Equally important, worker cooperatives transform social relations. Instead of competing with others over jobs or income, individuals work together for the good of the

cooperative and its members. Shared economic interests are an effective way to bind people together. Furthermore, worker cooperatives are based in mutual obligation. If a worker is sick or disabled, others provide economic support and other forms of assistance. The feeling of "being in this together" could potentially override feelings of isolation and loneliness while offering crucial material support to the individual in times of need, which in turn promotes positive feelings towards the group and encourages reciprocity in social relations.

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APPENDIX A

SELF-HELP BOOKS

The Five Love Languages

Written by a male pastor and marriage counselor, it is not only the highest selling book in

the sample, it is also the only one that does not focus on the role of gender in romantic

relationships. While the author has a religious background, the book rarely mentions

religion or God. The author argues that there are five "languages" that communicate love

to one's partner: words of affirmation, quality time, gifts, physical touch, and acts of

service. The key, according to the author, is figuring out which languages best fulfill a

partner's need for love. By meeting a partner's need for quality time or gifts, the

individual is in fact communicating love. Moreover, if the individual meets her partner's

needs, her own needs will likely be met in return. While he gives many typical gendered

examples (e.g. women prefer gifts, men prefer physical touch), he never makes explicit

reference to gender or how men and women might differ in terms of love languages.

Act Like a Lady, Think Like a Man

The only romance self-help book besides *The Five Love Languages* to sell over a million

copies during the sample period. The author is a male comedian writing for a female

audience, and the only author of color in the sample. The advice is peppered with

comedy and mainly focuses on providing women insight into male thinking and behavior

to successfully find a marriage partner. He argues that women have real power over men

and they can be in control of the relationship if they follow his advice; romantic

relationships are a "game" to be won. The book largely assumes that traditional gender

roles and characteristics are biologically rooted, though there is brief mention of masculinity being influenced socialization. He encourages women to be overly concerned with their physical appearance, going as far as suggesting plastic surgery to "feel beautiful." Although the author is black, he does not directly address black women or other women of color. There are a few times he uses Black Vernacular when referring to "baby's mommas", but overall he seems to be including white women in his target audience.

Straight Talk, No Chaser

Written by the author of *Act Like a Lady, Think Like a Man* and a follow-up to that book. The advice is largely the same (e.g. women should get control of relationship, love is a game to be won, women need to be attractive), though he goes into more detail on certain topics. For example, while both books advise women to be concerned with their physical appearance, *Straight Talk, No Chaser* takes this a step further in the section "You'll Make Us Look Good" by emphasizing that women not only need to look attractive because sex is important to men, but to impress men's friends, family, and co-workers. Both books overwhelmingly essentialize gender, though *Straight Talk, No Chaser* briefly mentions the media's influence on women's concern for marriage and commitment, referring to it as "programming".

Love Smart

Written by a male psychologist who is also a celebrity therapist and entertainer, the book directly targets women who are interested in finding or maintaining a romantic

relationship with a man. Like the author of the preceding two books in the sample, he encourages a practical philosophy, advising women to engage in extreme impression management and outright manipulation to achieve their relationship goals. Moreover, both authors discuss romantic love as a game that must be won by gaining the upper hand in a relationship, advising women to take control of their relationships with men. Finally, both authors heavily emphasize the role of biology or destiny when discussing gender, yet give brief mention to the existence of social forces.

Love and Respect

One of four books in the sample that is written from an explicitly Christian perspective, the author is a male pastor addressing both men and women seeking to improve their relationships. He argues that successful relationships depend on men feeling respected and women feeling loved. If a man does not feel respected, he acts in an unloving manner; if a woman does not feel loved, she will act disrespectful. Acting in a "respectful" manner at its core is about women being deferential towards men, which is explained by the concept of biblical submission: men are expected to provide physical protection to women, which gives them the right to be in charge. Here the author underscores the idea that gender is ordained by God, and that deviation from gender roles only leads to unhappiness for both men and women. As a matter of emphasis, however, the author seems to place more of the blame on women not acting in a respectful manner towards their partners than men acting in an unloving manner, citing "feminists" and "feminist-dominated culture" as undermining the natural order.

Lies at the Altar

The only book in the sample to offer a feminist perspective on male/female relationships.
The author is a female psychologist addressing a general audience, though most of her
insights are about women and seem to be directed towards them. Although she depicts
romantic relationships as a way to meet needs like other books in the sample, her advice
is a significant departure regarding gender and gender roles. Not only does she give
multiple examples of gender and romantic love being socially influenced, she encourages
individuals to challenge deeply ingrained beliefs and values if they do not help sustain a
positive and rewarding relationship. Moreover, the author advises open communication
between partners (with an emphasis on listening), honest self-reflection, and never
suggests the use of control or manipulation in a relationship.

Men are From Mars, Women are From Venus

The author is a male relationship counselor addressing both a male and female audience.
The book is focused on the different characteristics of men and women and how they
affect heterosexual romantic relationships. The goal of the book is for men and women
to better understand the opposite sex so they can improve communication and meet each
other's needs more effectively, which in turn produces a stable and rewarding
relationship. Men are seen as more focused on problem solving and sex, and women are
seen as more relational and empathetic. Like most books in the sample, the author
essentializes gender and in fact takes it a step further: by referring to men as "Martians"
and women as "Venusians", he is not only implying that gender is biologically rooted,
but that men and women are different species. Unlike *Act Like a Lady, Think Like a Man*

and *Love Smart*, the author never once discusses the influence of culture on gender and romantic love.

For Women Only

The book is written by a woman and targets a female audience. According to the biography on her website, the author is a former Wall Street analyst turned social researcher, despite having no background in the social sciences or previous experience conducting research. It is the second of four books written from a Christian perspective, and mostly focuses on helping women understand male needs and characteristics. Like *Love and Respect,* the author assumes the primary needs of men are respect and sexual intimacy, which women are expected to provide. The author also advocates biblical submission and encourages women to defer to men whenever possible to ensure they feel respected. Finally, the only discussion of cultural influence on gender is when she briefly criticizes the media's role in shaping the ideal body type for women.

For Men Only

The book is co-written by the author of *For Women* Only and her husband, a self-described attorney-entrepreneur. The book is written in the male author's voice and addresses a male audience. It is the third book in the sample to be written from a Christian perspective. The authors focus on explaining how women think and feel, and how men can best meet their needs. Male readers are advised to spend more time listening to women and are encouraged to be actively involved in domestic labor. While men are expected to provide economic security, the authors prioritize emotional security.

Men are advised to be more actively involved in women's lives by engaging in empathetic listening, helping around the house, and any other behavior that affirms their commitment. Like *For Women Only*, there is only brief mention of cultural influence on gender when discussing the media's role in influencing the ideal body type for women.

The Proper Care and Feeding of Husbands

The author is a female marriage and family therapist addressing a female audience. It is the fourth book in the sample written from a Christian perspective, and focuses on helping women understand men and their needs in a relationship. The author argues that men primarily require sexual intimacy, respect, and admiration from women, and men's responsibility in a relationship is to provide economic and physical protection. Unlike the other religious-oriented books, the author unconditionally accepts dominant masculinity and does not suggest that men should learn to communicate better with women or provide more help with domestic labor. The author argues that women should accept and value men as they are, and that feminism and "feminized culture" are largely to blame for current marital difficulties; this is the only time she discusses culture and gender in the entire book. Instead, she repeatedly argues that male and female differences are innate, and certain roles (e.g. caregiving) are more natural to women. By challenging the gender order, she argues, women are inevitably creating their own unhappiness by not supporting and respecting their husbands. Finally, the author criticizes power struggles between women and men, yet later contradicts herself by advising women to use manipulation to take control of their relationships (responsibly, of course).

ROMANTIC COMEDIES

<u>The Proposal</u>

A male secretary is forced to marry his female boss so she can obtain a work visa. Over the course of the film they go from hating each other to being in love. The comedy is mostly derived from male and female roles being reversed: the woman is assertive, emotionally cold, and holds power over her male secretary, while the man is more empathetic, supportive, and deferential. By the end of the film the woman is more emotional, and the man is more assertive and takes charge of the relationship.

<u>Knocked Up</u>

A heavyset, unemployed man who lives with a group of male friends has a one-night-stand with an attractive female reporter. The woman accidentally becomes pregnant, and the two attempt a romantic relationship for the sake of their child. Like *The Proposal*, much of the comedy lies in the man not exhibiting expected qualities, such as the ability to provide economically or offer physical protection. The woman is not only more attractive than the man, she is also financially successful. Over the course of the film the guy changes and eventually wins over the female protagonist by demonstrating his new masculine qualities, such as being more independent and taking charge when she goes into labor.

<u>Sex and the City</u>

An ensemble cast featuring four female friends and their relationships. The main protagonist and narrator is a 40-something writer that wants to be married to her longtime romantic partner, concerned that she will someday end up alone. Her partner is reluctant at first but finally agrees to marry her, then backs out right before the ceremony. He writes her a series of love letters in an attempt to win her back, and at the end of the film they get married.

The other protagonists were featured in several subplots. One woman's husband has an affair after they stopped having sex, for which she leaves him. After a long breakup and counseling she decides to forgive him and renew their relationship. Another woman has become unsatisfied with her long-term relationship and eventually decides to end it. Both characters display qualities more traditionally associated with men. The married woman is a lawyer and main breadwinner of the family, and is also more assertive and less emotional than her husband. The other woman is extremely open about her sexuality and prefers multiple partners, which runs contrary to the dominant theme of women focused on being in a committed relationship.

<u>The Breakup</u>

A cohabiting couple have a fight because the woman feels like her partner is not helping enough, after which she ends the relationship. Although she initiates the breakup, she secretly hopes the man will apologize and try to win her back. Despite being devastated, the male protagonist assumes she sincerely wants the relationship to end, and makes no effort to repair it. The female protagonist eventually communicates her feelings, but by

then it's too late. Unlike most other films in the sample, this one does not end with the couple reuniting. It instead offers a critique of men expecting women to perform domestic labor, and women relying on manipulation of men rather than directly communicating their thoughts and feelings.

It's Complicated

A divorced woman in her 50s/60s begins to experience loneliness after her last child moves out of the house. Soon after she meets a divorced architect whom she starts dating. At the same time, she has an affair with her ex-husband who is now married to another woman. The architect ends the relationship after discovering the affair, after which the woman decides to stop seeing her ex-husband. The film ends with the woman and the architect walking under an umbrella, indicating the possibility of a new romance.

Norbit

The male protagonist is married at a young age to a woman who physically abuses and dominates him, until one day a childhood friend returns to town and romantic feelings are rekindled. Like *The Proposal* and *Knocked Up*, he learns to become a man over the course of the film and eventually wins over the female protagonist and marries her. This film leans heavier on comedy than it does romance, and is not meant to be taken too seriously. The comedian Eddie Murphy wears makeup and plays many of the roles, including both the protagonist and his wife. The film is also notable for being the only one in the sample to feature a mostly non-white cast.

Valentine's Day

The film takes place on Valentine's Day and features an ensemble cast with numerous plotlines, such as an older married couple working through a recently discovered act of infidelity from the past, an adolescent boy trying to deliver flowers to his female teacher and proclaim his love, a man and women discovering romantic feelings for each other after years of platonic friendship, and a single woman who hates Valentine's Day finding a man who shares her feelings. Everyone works out their relationship issues by the end of the film and no one is alone.

Failure to Launch

This is the fourth film in the sample to feature a male protagonist overcoming a lack of traditional masculinity (in this case independence) to provide comedy and drive the plot forward. A man in his 30s lives with his parents and prefers to date without long-term commitment. His parents want him out of the house and to become more independent. They hire a woman to pretend to date him, believing that a committed relationship will motivate him to leave home. Despite her professional code, the woman ends up falling in love with the man. When he learns the truth he is angry and decides to not see her anymore, but at the end of the film they become a couple after communicating their true feelings for each other.

He's Just Not That Into You

The third of four films in the sample featuring an ensemble cast. Like *Sex and the City* and *Sex and the City 2*, there is a main protagonist who also serves as the film's narrator:

a single woman in her 20s/30s who is looking for a romantic partner. She befriends a man that shows no interest in her romantically, despite her attraction to him. He gives her dating advice throughout the film and offers insight into how men think so she can better protect herself emotionally. She eventually confronts him about her feelings, after which he initially rejects her. At the end of the film he communicates his true feelings of love and his desire for them to be a couple, after which they kiss.

There are also multiple subplots. A man who is unhappy with his marriage develops a relationship with a single woman and eventually has an affair; the wife discovers the infidelity and ends the relationship, and both characters are alone at the end of the film. Next, a happy couple who have been together for years experience tension when the woman communicates her desire for marriage. After a short breakup, the woman decides that the relationship is more important to her than being married, and the couple is reunited. Once they are together again, the man proposes of his own accord. Finally, a single man and woman experience difficulties on the dating market, only to discover each other and become a couple at the end of the film, implying that they simply needed to meet the right person.

Sex and the City 2

The film features the same protagonists from *Sex and the City*. The main protagonist is now married, but finds her relationship becoming routine and lacking excitement or passion. She decides to go on a trip to Dubai with the other protagonists. There she meets an ex-boyfriend and decides to join him for dinner one evening. They briefly kissed, but she immediately feels guilty and goes home alone. She decides to tell her

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husband, and while he is initially upset, he forgives her and renews his commitment to her at the end by giving her a black diamond ring.

Her friends have their own subplots. The female protagonist who is fixated on sex experiences menopause and a loss of libido, which she tries to mitigate through a variety of hormones. Her open sexuality is also a source of conflict in Dubai, as women are more restricted in their appearance and behavior. The group of friends is ultimately forced to leave the country when she is arrested for public indecency. Another woman is concerned that her husband is having an affair with their nanny, which at the end of the film proves to be unwarranted, as the nanny is revealed to be a lesbian.

APPENDIX C

TABLES

Table 1. Best Selling Self-Help Books (2006-2010)

Book	Author	Audience	Sales	% of Total Sales
The Five Love Languages	Male	Male/Female	2,264,138	33.4
Act Like a Lady, Think Like a Man	Male	Female	1,897,978	28.0
Straight Talk, No Chaser	Male	Female	626,732	9.2
Love Smart	Male	Female	590,000	8.7
Love and Respect	Male	Male/Female	329,303	4.9
Lies at the Altar	Female	Male/Female	259,481	3.8
Men are From Mars, Women are From Venus	Male	Male/Female	252,647	3.7
For Women Only	Female	Female	220,233	3.2
For Men Only	Male/Female	Male	180,438	2.7
Proper Care and Feeding of Husbands	Female	Female	163,104	2.4

Table 2a. Naturalization of Marriage (Biological)

Book	Author	Audience	Sales	% of Total Sales
Five Love Languages	Male	Male/Female	2,264,138	33.4
Straight Talk, No Chaser	Male	Female	626,732	9.2
Love Smart	Male	Female	590,000	8.7

Table 2b. Naturalization of Marriage (Religious)

Book	Author	Audience	Sales	% of Total Sales
Love and Respect	Male	Male/Female	329,303	4.9
Proper Care and Feeding of Husbands	Female	Female	163,104	2.4

Table 2c. Naturalization of Marriage (Fatalistic)

Book	Author	Audience	Sales	% of Total Sales
Act Like a Lady, Think Like a Man	Male	Female	1,897,978	28.0

Table 3a. Idealization of Romantic Love (Good for Society)

Book	Author	Audience	Sales	% of Total Sales
Five Love Languages	Male	Male/Female	2,264,138	33.4
Lies at the Altar	Female	Male/Female	259,481	3.8

Table 3b. Idealization of Romantic Love (Most Important Relationship)

Book	Author	Audience	Sales	% of Total Sales
Act Like a Lady, Think Like a Man	Male	Female	1,897,978	28.0
Love Smart	Male	Female	590,000	8.7
Lies at the Altar	Female	Male/Female	259,481	3.8
Proper Care and Feeding of Husbands	Female	Female	163,104	2.4

Table 4a. Male Role (Physical Protection)

Book	Author	Audience	Sales	% of Total Sales
Act Like a Lady, Think Like a Man	Male	Female	1,897,978	28.0
Straight Talk, No Chaser	Male	Female	626,732	9.2
Love Smart	Male	Female	590,000	8.7
Love and Respect	Male	Male/Female	329,303	4.9
Men are From Mars, Women are From Venus	Male	Male/Female	252,647	3.7
For Men Only	Male/Female	Male	180,438	2.7
Proper Care and Feeding of Husbands	Female	Female	163,104	2.4

Table 4b. Male Role (Economic Security)

Book	Author	Audience	Sales	% of Total Sales
Act Like a Lady, Think Like a Man	Male	Female	1,897,978	28.0
Straight Talk, No Chaser	Male	Female	626,732	9.2
Love Smart	Male	Female	590,000	8.7
Love and Respect	Male	Male/Female	329,303	4.9
For Women Only	Female	Female	220,233	3.2
For Men Only	Male/Female	Male	180,438	2.7
Proper Care and Feeding of Husbands	Female	Female	163,104	2.4

Table 5a. Female role (Sexual Intimacy)

Book	Author	Audience	Sales	% of Total Sales
Act Like a Lady, Think Like a Man	Male	Female	1,897,978	28.0
Straight Talk, No Chaser	Male	Female	626,732	9.2
Love Smart	Male	Female	590,000	8.7
Love and Respect	Male	Male/Female	329,303	4.9
For Women Only	Female	Female	220,233	3.2
For Men Only	Male/Female	Male	180,438	2.7
Proper Care and Feeding of Husbands	Female	Female	163,104	2.4

Table 5b. Female role (Appreciation)

Book	Author	Audience	Sales	% of Total Sales
Straight Talk, No Chaser	Male	Female	626,732	9.2
Men are From Mars, Women are From Venus	Male	Male/Female	252,647	3.7
Proper Care and Feeding of Husbands	Female	Female	163,104	2.4

Table 5c. Female role (Respect)

Book	Author	Audience	Sales	% of Total Sales
Love and Respect	Male	Male/Female	329,303	4.9
For Women Only	Female	Female	220,233	3.2
Proper Care and Feeding of Husbands	Female	Female	163,104	2.4

Table 6a. Love as a Power Struggle (Men Head Relationship)

Book	Author	Audience	Sales	% of Total Sales
Love and Respect	Male	Male/Female	329,303	4.9
For Women Only	Female	Female	220,233	3.2

Table 6b. Love as a Power Struggle (Women Head Relationship)

Book	Author	Audience	Sales	% of Total Sales
Act Like a Lady, Think Like a Man	Male	Female	1,897,978	28.0
Straight Talk, No Chaser	Male	Female	626,732	9.2
Love Smart	Male	Female	590,000	8.7
Proper Care and Feeding of Husbands	Female	Female	163,104	2.4

Table 7. Top Grossing Romantic Comedies in Theaters
(2006-2010/adjusted to 2014 dollars)

Film	Sales (in dollars)	% of Total Sales
The Proposal	178,431,300	13.4
Knocked Up	175,581,900	13.2
Sex and the City	172,631,700	13.0
The Breakup	147,155,800	11.1
It's Complicated	116,988,600	8.8
Norbit	112,917,100	8.5
Valentine's Day	112,848,200	8.5
Failure to Launch	109,979,700	8.3
He's Just Not that into You	106,254,000	8.0
Sex and the City 2	97,386,600	7.2

Table 8. Films with Only White Protagonists

Film	Sales (in dollars)	% of Total Sales
The Proposal	178,431,300	13.4
Knocked Up	175,581,900	13.2
Sex and the City	172,631,700	13.0
The Breakup	147,155,800	11.1
It's Complicated	116,988,600	8.8
Failure to Launch	109,979,700	8.3
He's Just Not That Into You	106,254,000	8.0
Sex and the City 2	97,386,600	7.2

Table 9. Films with Only Heterosexual Protagonists

Film	Sales (in dollars)	% of Total Sales
The Proposal	178,431,300	13.4
Knocked Up	175,581,900	13.2
Sex and the City	172,631,700	13.0
The Breakup	147,155,800	11.1
It's Complicated	116,988,600	8.8
Norbit	112,917,100	8.5
Failure to Launch	109,979,700	8.3
He's Just Not That Into You	106,254,000	8.0
Sex and the City 2	97,386,600	7.2

Table 10. Idealization of Romantic Love

Film	Sales (in dollars)	% of Total Sales
The Proposal	178,431,300	13.4
Knocked Up	175,581,900	13.2
Sex and the City	172,631,700	13.0
Norbit	112,917,100	8.5
Valentine's Day	112,848,200	8.5
Failure to Launch	109,979,700	8.3
He's Just Not That Into You	106,254,000	8.0
Sex and the City 2	97,386,600	7.2

Table 11. Naturalization of Romantic Love

Film	Sales (in dollars)	% of Total Sales
The Proposal	178,431,300	13.4
Knocked Up	175,581,900	13.2
Norbit	112,917,100	8.5
Valentine's Day	112,848,200	8.5
Failure to Launch	109,979,700	8.3

Table 12. Marriage End Goal of Relationship

Film	Sales (in dollars)	% of Total Sales
The Proposal	178,431,300	13.4
Knocked Up	175,581,900	13.2
Sex and the City	172,631,700	13.0
Norbit	112,917,100	8.5
Valentine's Day	112,848,200	8.5
He's Just Not That Into You	106,254,000	8.0
Sex and the City 2	97,386,600	7.2

Table 13a. Commodification in Romantic Relationships (Meeting Needs)

Film	Sales (in dollars)	% of Total Sales
The Proposal	178,431,300	13.4
Knocked Up	175,581,900	13.2
The Breakup	147,155,800	11.1
It's Complicated	116,988,600	8.8
Valentine's Day	112,848,200	8.5
Failure to Launch	109,979,700	8.3
Sex and the City 2	97,386,600	7.2

Table 13b. Commodification in Romantic Relationships (Self-Commodification)

Film	Sales (in dollars)	% of Total Sales
Knocked Up	175,581,900	13.2
Failure to Launch	109,979,700	8.3

Table 13c. Commodification in Romantic Relationships (Relationship Treated as Commodity)

Film	Sales (in dollars)	% of Total Sales
Sex and the City	172,631,700	13.0
Sex and the City 2	97,386,600	7.2

Table 14a. Male Role – Profess (Verbal Declarations of Love)

Film	Sales (in dollars)	% of Total Sales
The Proposal *^	178,431,300	13.4
Knocked Up *^	175,581,900	13.2
Sex and the City *	172,631,700	13.0
The Breakup ^	147,155,800	11.1
Norbit ^	112,917,100	8.5
Valentine's Day *^	112,848,200	8.5
He's Just Not That Into You *^	106,254,000	8.0

* before marriage proposal
^ used to persuade

Table 14b. Male Role – Profess (Romantic Gestures)

Film	Sales (in dollars)	% of Total Sales
Sex and the City	172,631,700	13.0
Valentine's Day	112,848,200	8.5
Sex and the City 2	97,386,600	7.2

Table 15a. Male Role – Provide (Major Purchases)

Film	Sales (in dollars)	% of Total Sales
Knocked Up	175,581,900	13.2
Sex and the City	172,631,700	13.0
He's Just Not That Into You	106,254,000	8.0

Table 15b. Male Role – Provide (Small Gifts)

Film	Sales (in dollars)	% of Total Sales
Knocked Up	175,581,900	13.2
Sex and the City	172,631,700	13.0
The Breakup	147,155,800	11.1

Table 15c. Male Role – Provide (Advice/Knowledge)

Film	Sales (in dollars)	% of Total Sales
Norbit	112,917,100	8.5
Failure to Launch	109,979,700	8.3
He's Just Not That Into You	106,254,000	8.0

Table 16a. Male Role – Protect (Physical Harm)

Film	Sales (in dollars)	% of Total Sales
The Proposal	178,431,300	13.4
Knocked Up	175,581,900	13.2
It's Complicated	116,988,600	8.8

Table 16b. Male Role – Protect (Psychological Harm)

Film	Sales (in dollars)	% of Total Sales
Knocked Up	175,581,900	13.2
Sex and the City	172,631,700	13.0
The Breakup	147,155,800	11.1
It's Complicated	116,988,600	8.8
Norbit	112,917,100	8.5
Valentine's Day	112,848,200	8.5
He's Just Not That Into You	106,254,000	8.0

Table 17a. Male Role – Lead Relationship (Propose Marriage)

Film	Sales (in dollars)	% of Total Sales
The Proposal	178,431,300	13.4
Knocked Up	175,581,900	13.2
Sex and the City	172,631,700	13.0
Valentine's Day	112,848,200	8.5
He's Just Not That Into You	106,254,000	8.0

Table 17b. Male Role – Lead Relationship (Planning and Decision Making)

Film	Sales (in dollars)	% of Total Sales
Knocked Up	175,581,900	13.2
Norbit	112,917,100	8.5
Valentine's Day	112,848,200	8.5

Table 18a. Female Role – Focus on Commitment (Desire for Marriage)

Film	Sales (in dollars)	% of Total Sales
Sex and the City	172,631,700	13.0
Valentine's Day	112,848,200	8.5
He's Just Not That Into You	106,254,000	8.0

Table 18b. Female Role – Focus on Commitment (Fear of Being Alone)

Film	Sales (in dollars)	% of Total Sales
Knocked Up	175,581,900	13.2
It's Complicated	116,988,600	8.8
Valentine's Day	112,848,200	8.5
He's Just Not that into You	106,254,000	8.0

Table 18c. Female Role – Focus on Commitment (Fear of Infidelity)

Film	Sales (in dollars)	% of Total Sales
Knocked Up	175,581,900	13.2
Norbit	112,917,100	8.5
He's Just Not That Into You	106,254,000	8.0
Sex and the City 2	97,386,600	7.2

Table 19a. Female Role – Physical Appearance (Overt Concern)

Film	Sales (in dollars)	% of Total Sales
The Proposal	178,431,300	13.4
Knocked Up	175,581,900	13.2
The Breakup	147,155,800	11.1

Table 19b. Female Role – Physical Appearance (Fear of Getting Old)

Film	Sales (in dollars)	% of Total Sales
Knocked Up	175,581,900	13.2
Sex and the City	172,631,700	13.0
It's Complicated	116,988,600	8.8
Sex and the City 2	97,386,600	7.2

Table 19c. Female Role – Physical Appearance (Use of Infantilizing Language)

Film	Sales (in dollars)	% of Total Sales
The Proposal	178,431,300	13.4
Sex and the City	172,631,700	13.0
It's Complicated	116,988,600	8.8
He's Just Not That Into You	106,254,000	8.0
Sex and the City 2	97,386,600	7.2

Table 20a. Female Role – Sexual Intimacy (Men Preoccupied with Sex)

Film	Sales (in dollars)	% of Total Sales
Knocked Up	175,581,900	13.2
Valentine's Day	112,848,200	8.5
Failure to Launch	109,979,700	8.3
He's Just Not That Into You	106,254,000	8.0
Sex and the City 2	97,386,600	7.2

Table 20b. Female Role – Sexual Intimacy (Woman's Responsibility)

Film	Sales (in dollars)	% of Total Sales
Sex and the City	172,631,700	13.0
He's Just Not That Into You	106,254,000	8.0

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Table 21a. Female Role – Control of Partner (Manipulation)

Film	Sales (in dollars)	% of Total Sales
Knocked Up	175,581,900	13.2
The Breakup	147,155,800	11.1
Failure to Launch	109,979,700	8.3

Table 21b. Female Role – Control of Partner (Direct Control)

Film	Sales (in dollars)	% of Total Sales
The Proposal	178,431,300	13.4
Sex and the City	172,631,700	13.0

Table 21c. Female Role – Control of Relationship (Determine Relationship Status)

Film	Sales (in dollars)	% of Total Sales
The Proposal	178,431,300	13.4
Knocked Up	175,581,900	13.2
Sex and the City	172,631,700	13.0
The Breakup	147,155,800	11.1
Norbit	112,917,100	8.5