Shrinking Violets and Caspar Milquetoasts: Shyness and Heterosexuality from the Roles of the Fifties to "The Rules" of the Nineties
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“Shyness . . . touches all our lives in some way. What we each thought was our own secret hang-up is actually shared by an incredibly large number of people. And we can take great comfort in knowing that we are not alone in our suffering.”

This statement, made by American psychologist Philip G. Zimbardo in the late 1970s, signaled the discovery of adult shyness as a serious and wide-ranging social problem in the United States, one that had previously escaped the detection of the medical community and the media.\(^1\) The response was swift: professionals and non-professionals alike offered the shy a number of “cures,” including social skills training, group therapy sessions, self-help, and, more recently, drugs such as Prozac and Paxil.\(^2\)

What was notable about these efforts was that they were, and continue to be, directed at white middle-class women, as well as white middle-class men. Traditionally, shyness had been considered a problem only when white middle-class men suffered from it; for white middle-class women, shyness was a “normal” aspect of femininity, a performative demonstration of their subordinate position in the gender hierarchy.\(^3\) In the mid-nineteenth century, for example, the “Cult of True Womanhood” celebrated privileged white women’s shyness and timidity as symbols of sexual purity and submissiveness to male authority.\(^4\) Although this ideology was challenged in the early twentieth century by the more independent and sexually expressive “New Woman,”\(^5\) at mid-century, shyness remained a powerful symbol of female deference, particularly within the context of heterosexual relationships, where it provided ideological support for the suppression of middle-class white women’s emotional needs and desires in favor of men’s. Yet in the late 1970s, this tradition was turned on its head, so that “timidity and unassertiveness” were now regarded as “just as healthy for the average young female as . . . a thrice-daily dose of cyanide.”\(^6\)

In this essay, I explore this dramatic shift in the representation of white middle-class women’s shyness, contrasting it with representations of white middle-class men’s shyness, and focusing on the ideological implications of both for heterosexual power dynamics. My goal is to understand whether the loss of shyness as a sanctioned form of white middle-class women’s deference signaled support for greater emotional equality in white middle-class women’s and men’s intimate relationships. To that end, I contrast representations of shyness in the 1950s with those in the 1970s and the contemporary era (1985–1995). As evidence of how shyness has been represented over time in the popular media, I analyze a sample of popular self-help, etiquette, and advice books that devote some or all of their contents to the topic of shyness.\(^7\) These books provide a set of standards and ideals that help shape how individuals define, interpret and express shyness.\(^8\) Although there is a distinction to be made between emotional ideals and indi-
viduals' actual experiences of emotion, a number of studies of self-help readers have shown a link between the two, with readers frequently relying on these books as authoritative guides for their own feelings and behavior. In addition, the growing profitability of the self-help genre suggests that these books are a source of cultural knowledge widely consulted by adults, an effective means of producing and securing individuals' consent to the cultural conventions governing shyness.

I confine my analysis to those self-help and advice books written for a white middle-class audience, since much of the concern about shyness evident in the 1970s was generated by privileged whites. By emphasizing the class and race of the intended audience throughout this essay, I hope to underscore the fact that the emotional and behavioral ideals self-help authors advocated were not necessarily shared by everyone. This is particularly true in the case of shyness, since, historically, assertiveness, rather than shyness, was one of the qualities thought to distinguish black women from white women.

Although it would be convenient to produce a formal definition of shyness at the outset, to do so would remove much of the ambiguity surrounding the concept. Self-help authors frequently failed to define shyness; instead, through their discussions of symptoms and causes, as well as their use of synonyms (such as “bashful” or “timid”), they provided readers with a general sense of the term. The one consistent theme in their discussions was that feelings of shyness were related, in some way, to feelings of nervousness or fear in social interactions, in this case, social interactions involving women and men.

The Fifties: “Build Him a Dais”

Recent scholarship has dispelled the notion that 1950's popular culture was entirely devoted to preaching the white middle-class gospel of domesticity and motherhood known as the “feminine mystique.” Instead, historians examining the era's music, films, and popular magazines have found them to contain both radical and conservative messages about women's proper place in society; indeed, the two were often reconciled by using evidence of femininity or domesticity to legitimate other behavior that challenged traditional gender norms. The advice books I examined reflected this tension: authors of courtship and dating manuals (most of whom were women) frequently acknowledged young women's competence and independence, yet they insisted that in the arena of courtship, male privilege had to be preserved. As one author succinctly put it, “[b]oys know you for modern, self-sufficient, car-driving, job-holding, money-making, vote-getting women. You can and you do take everything into your own hands except love and courtship and marriage” (emphasis added).

Given the traditional association between shyness and white middle-class femininity, one might expect shyness to have been regarded as the ideal emotion for white middle-class girls to experience around boys. But the advice texts told a more complex story, one in which successful heterosexual relationships required that white middle-class girls resist any inner feelings of shyness but at the same time adopt certain characteristics associated with it. According to the advice books, a girl who yielded to internal feelings of shyness experienced self-
consciousness, fear, and feelings of inferiority. She communicated these feelings to boys non-verbally, through bodily tension, silence, a “scared expression” in the eyes, and fidgeting. These tell-tale signs of shyness made her seem unfriendly, unapproachable, and aloof, characteristics which “chase(d) the boys away.”

Boys were easily frightened since they themselves often felt shy around girls: according to several authors of advice texts, feeling self-conscious and ill at ease around girls was a stage that most, if not all boys went through. Bashful boys had a difficult time speaking to girls, let alone asking them for dates. If they were faced with an equally shy girl, the “fun and friendship of dating” was stalled before it could begin.

Instead of a “quiet mouse,” boys required a friendly, outgoing, and talkative girl who was sensitive to their special, albeit temporary, problem. Yet she could not be too friendly or outgoing, because then she might easily cross the line into bold and aggressive behavior, such as calling a boy on the phone for no apparent reason, or asking him to dance. Such behaviors marked her as “cheap,” “forward,” or a “flirt,” and also chased boys away, for although boys preferred “self-confident, poised girls” to those who were “always at a loss to know what to do,” they did not like “aggressive girls who too obviously [took] the initiative.”

The key to a girl’s behavior when faced with a bashful boy who was slow to take the initiative was subtlety: she could take as much initiative as she wanted, as long as it could be classified as “undercover . . . quiet promoting.” Her strategy was to “make it look as though he, rather than she, is the pursuer . . . [It] is all right for a girl to ‘chase a fellow until he catches her.’” Once she was “caught,” the success of the date that ensued depended upon the girl donning a mask of shyness—including such behaviors as reticence, silence, and meekness—in order to preserve the illusion that the boy was in control of the date. In essence, the boy and girl now switched roles, so that he, formerly shy, was now the talkative one, while she, the active initiator, was now a quiet, appreciative foil. Thus, she allowed him to take the lead in conversation—after initially prodding him along with “leading questions about himself, his hobbies, his school activities, or any work he may be doing.” Her flattering attention was guaranteed to make her “a big hit” with her date, who, despite his initial feelings of discomfort, “[would] love to tell [her] all he knows.”

In donning the mask of shyness, a white middle-class girl was required to hide not just her voice, but also her intelligence, which, like boldness or any hint of aggression, threatened the boy’s masculine pride. Instead of impressing him with her knowledge, she devoted her energy to “build[ing] him a dais,” a firm foundation for his sense of superiority:

BUILD HIM A DAIS: . . . give him a chance to lead the conversation. You know—men suffer from an odd sense of inferiority. They’re often terrified by smart women. This doesn’t mean you have to act the idiot role or the cute little “Oh, aren’t you smart!” role. But it does mean that you can let him feel he is superior. This is a good start for a first date . . . The first evening you are together, don’t let him know you read Greek. (emphasis in original)

Here, the author figuratively “winked” at his female readers, acknowledging that they were indeed smart, and that men were silly to be afraid of women's
intelligence. But he suggested that the truly smart woman would do better to surreptitiously manipulate her date into thinking he had the upper hand rather than prove to him how smart she was. Such behavior was justified since the stakes were so high: future dates and ultimately, marriage. Though unspoken, the specters of spinsterhood and lesbianism lurked behind his and others' advice to girls to tone down their intelligence and any other "manny" qualities or behaviors that might turn men against them forever. With spinsterhood popularly associated with lifelong unhappiness, and lesbianism associated with deviance and immaturity, many women were only too happy to comply: a study conducted in 1950 found that 46% of female students at Stanford University "played dumb" on dates because they thought the men preferred it.

A white middle-class girl built up her date's sense of superiority not only by letting him lead the conversation, but also by contrasting his masculine wisdom with her air of feminine meekness. She achieved this effect by moderating her tone of voice and limiting her talk to humble requests for advice. Thus, girls were cautioned to "be careful how you say things. You are in the habit of knowing. Your voice may have a positive sound. If it has, tone it down with 'I think.'" Clearly, a girl had to be extremely careful about hiding her intelligence—an intelligence this author, too, takes for granted—since it could slip through in the confident way she expressed herself. To completely sniff out a boy's smoldering inferiority complex, a girl had to assure him that any thoughts she did have were only opinions, easily changed by his superior knowledge, and not well-researched facts.

For these authors, white middle-class masculinity was an extremely fragile achievement that could crumble under prolonged exposure to any girl or woman who displayed ostensibly male characteristics, such as boldness, initiative, and intelligence. To protect this delicate masculinity, white middle-class girls had to hide their resourcefulness, intelligence, and cunning behind a mask of shyness. Ironically, their assumption of shy behaviors also ensured that the real shy feelings of white middle-class boys did not become a problem serious enough to threaten heterosexual relations: by stifling their own voices, girls drew bashful boys out of their shells and created an intimate environment in which boys could feel powerful, in control and confident of their own appeal and interest. The behavior prescribed for young girls on a date can be viewed as a form of emotion work—the work of building self-esteem, understanding and managing emotions, and providing emotional support. The fact that only young girls were expected to perform this labor in the 1950s is consistent with recent scholarship, which has found that women are seen as largely responsible for it; it is another form of "women's work" that men take for granted and fail to supply in return. Because men receive this caregiving as "a kind of entitlement," women's provision of emotion work has been described by one feminist scholar as "a collective genuflection by women to men" that legitimates male power and authority in heterosexual relationships. From this perspective, then, the 1950s' emotional culture of shyness helped to enforce the gender hierarchy. By invoking strategic displays of shyness as a resource on which young women could draw to perform unreciprocated emotion work for young men, self-help authors reaffirmed women's lack of power in heterosexual relationships. Thus, shyness remained a powerful symbol of female deference in the 1950s.
The More Things Change . . .

Between the 1950s and 1970s, attitudes towards “proper” gender behavior underwent remarkable changes, spurred in large part by events of the 1960s, particularly the “sexual revolution” and the women’s movement. For young women and men, dating was no longer a highly structured ritual that conferred prestige, but was simply “one form of social contact among many”; when they did date, they did so at a later age and for “the intrinsic satisfaction the relationship provided.” The women’s movement also contributed to Americans’ changing conceptions of proper gender behaviors; through both word and deed, feminists challenged traditional conceptions of (white) femininity and highlighted the exploitative nature of heterosexual relationships. Feminists encouraged women to speak up and out with one another, in consciousness raising sessions devoted to uncovering the political nature of seemingly individual experiences of oppression.

Self-help texts published during the 1970s were not deaf to the challenges to traditional conceptions of white femininity posed by the sexual revolution and the women’s movement, but they did not embrace them until the second half of the decade. Authors writing in the first half of the decade tended to resist calls for equality in male-female relationships: their advice on courtship and dating echoed the conservative tone of the 1950s in which male privilege in initiating dating had been defended as natural and proper. These authors insisted that the white middle-class woman who had the best chance of appealing to white middle-class men was not a “woman’s libber” but a woman who deferred to men, particularly when it came to the initiation of a date. Author Barbara Walters, the well-known television journalist, argued that while feminists were to be commended for some of their views regarding male-female equality, she drew the line at women asking men for a date:

It seems to me that, Women’s Liberation Movement aside, women come on awfully strong these days and men are unhappy about it. A college lecturer told me he was amazed at the applause, cheering and stamping from the young men in his audience when he criticized the aggressiveness of the modern woman. I agree with some of what the new feminists are saying, but I think they’re way off in trying to change the biological roles as they apply to the sexes. Why spoil all the fun? It’s terribly old-fashioned of me, I know, but I still feel that a woman who wants to win a man should allow him the initiative. Her best bet is to concentrate on making him want it.

Like advice authors of the 1950s, Barbara Walters suggested that the preservation of male privilege in the dating arena would compensate for white middle-class women’s gains in other traditionally male arenas, thus reassuring white middle-class men (and women) that these changes posed no real threat to conventional heterosexual relations. Her words also served as a warning to white middle-class women, cautioning them that being “too aggressive” in any arena could earn them the enmity of men; women who wanted to appeal to men should defer to men’s “natural right” to initiate.

Author Helen Andelin considered a strategic display of shyness, or, as she put it, “timorousness,” to be the primary means by which a woman signaled her
submission. She described timorosity as "an air of timid fearlessness, of self-conscious modesty and of pretty confusion," and encouraged women to practice it around men by "first unconsciously performing some task, then when you realize that the man is noticing you, suddenly becom[e] self-conscious and confused. Look first directly up in his face for a moment, and then hastily down or to the side." She assured her readers that this seemingly innocent show of bashfulness would not only make the man to whom it was directed conscious of the woman's femininity but, more importantly, gratifyingly conscious of his own masculinity, which was devoid of such delicate timidity. Confident that he had found a woman in need of his "manly care and protection," the man would most certainly be smitten. Thus, a display of shyness was one method by which white middle-class women could reassure men that they had no intention of challenging the traditional power dynamics of the heterosexual relationship.

Yet like the advice givers of the 1950s, Andelin cautioned that a woman's air of timidity was to remain at surface level only; middle-class white women were not to succumb to inner feelings of shyness, since the fear and confusion they engendered would interfere with a woman's calculated performance of femininity. A middle-class white woman was to devote her energies towards appearing fearful and helpless in order to attract a man. A woman who actually experienced fear and helplessness around men squandered whatever advantage she gained in authenticity by her inability to "play to" the audience—to exaggerate, downplay, or refine her shy performance according to the man's response.

Once a woman had attracted a man through a display of shyness, she was required to maintain the fiction of shyness on the date itself. Andelin expanded the elements of the 1950s' mask of shyness, advising white middle-class women not only to be reticent about expressing their own views, but also to display a timid fearfulness "in the presence of small dangers" such as mice, insects, or heavy traffic, and to adopt an air of bashful incompetence when confronted with a "masculine" task, like lifting a heavy object. As in the 1950s, such behavior was a form of emotion work: by pretending to be shy and timid, white middle-class women inspired a sense of "strength and manliness" in their date, building his ego by making him feel useful and important. Men were not obligated to reciprocate; women's emotional needs were satisfied simply knowing that they had succeeded in serving men's needs. From this perspective, an unequal division of emotional labor was not particularly troubling; indeed, it guaranteed happiness for both women and men. It was not until the end of the decade that self-help authors began to question this assumption.

The Turning Point

By the end of the decade, the women's movement was no longer a point of contrast for advice givers, but a seeming source of inspiration. Many authors now rejected the old valorizaton of middle-class white women's shyness and enthusiastically embraced women's assertiveness, which was considered the very opposite of shyness. Middle-class white women were no longer told that their desirability hinged upon their ability to sustain an illusion of meekness and silent awe in the presence of a man; in a dramatic switch, women were assured that men now preferred women who took a more assertive approach to dating.
Women were given permission to ask men out, to buy them a drink, to ask them to dance—in short, to boldly approach men without fear of being labeled cheap, flirtatious, or forward. Such behavior, once beyond the pale of white, middle-class respectability, was now the trademark of modern, liberated white womanhood. Of course, not every man welcomed this new approach, but advice-givers who advocated it calmed women’s fears by arguing that only “stupid” and “weak” men with “hang ups” were threatened by a woman’s outspoken attentions.49

Under this new dating regime, white middle-class women who remained shy in the misguided belief that it was an appropriate strategy for snaring a man, or who experienced genuine shyness on a regular basis were doomed to a life of celibate loneliness: not only did a woman’s shyness interfere with her ability to make social contact with men, but it also inhibited her from making sexual contact.30 Unlike the dating manuals of the 1950s, those of the 1970s (which were also written for a slightly older audience) assumed that sexual activity was an important, indeed, necessary part of dating. In this, they were in line with widespread public opinion, which embraced (hetero) sexuality for women and men as a “valued, worthy, even necessary component of the good life, a prime means of attaining self-discovery.”51 The shy woman, then, was missing out on an important source of self-knowledge. Albert Ellis, author of The Intelligent Woman’s Guide to Dating (1979), put it somewhat more crudely, arguing that the shy woman’s “tied tongue and locked legs are no longer attractive in a world where women commonly open up their heads and hearts to new acquaintances as well as would-be lovers.”52 Now that sex was sanctioned as an important means of establishing rapport while dating, a white middle-class woman’s displays of shyness no longer signaled deference to men’s emotional needs and desires, but prudery, a quality that was guaranteed to turn men off and to destroy a woman’s chances of establishing a heterosexual relationship. According to Ellis, the woman who persisted in being shy and unassertive was committing social and sexual “suicide”:

Timidity and unassertiveness are just as healthy for the average young female as is a thrice-daily dose of cyanide. Being alive and kicking means, in the first and final analysis, being and expressing oneself. Self-imposed inhibitions on self-expression are equivalent to suicide; only, in terms of extended suffering, much worse. The woman who sells her soul for a mess of pusillanimous pottage is, whether she mates or not, a zero. And what man in his sound mind wants to marry and live with a cipher?53

Ellis’ caustic remarks highlight an interesting shift in authors’ attitudes towards their female readers. In the 1950s, both female and male authors of self-help books openly acknowledged that their female readers were smart, competent, and capable. Their aim was to help women play down those qualities in order to win a hopelessly insecure man. But in the mid- to late 1970s, female and male authors viewed their women readers less generously: they assumed that they were damaged, insecure, and in need of help. The authors’ goal was to make their female readers smarter and more competent by the time they finished reading the book. Thus, in an ironic twist, the late 1970s middle-class white woman—a woman who had presumably benefited somewhat from the activities of the women’s movement—was perceived as weaker than her 1950s counterpart. In
teaching her to become stronger and more assertive, self-help authors assumed that their advice was essential in order for her to overcome the social training that had made her timid and unsure of herself. Where 1950s self-help authors regarded white middle-class femininity as a performance a step removed from the performer, late 1970s authors regarded it as an identity that middle-class white women had all-too eagerly embraced.

How did the shy, heterosexual middle-class white male fare in this environment? Was he, too, committing sexual “suicide,” or did he simply reap the benefits of the demand that women take some responsibility for initiating a date? Despite the change in expectations regarding women’s behavior, this shy man did not suddenly find his dating problems solved. Self-help authors portrayed him, like the shy woman, as suffering from a chronic lack of dates; however, his datelessness stemmed not from an appearance of sexual prudishness, but from his inability to take the initiative with women. Self-help authors argued that shy men—unlike some shy women—desired sexual contact, but were simply too timid to make the first move. Yet authors refused to absolve shy men from responsibility for initiating a date by suggesting that newly assertive women would come to their rescue. Fearful, perhaps, that women would fail to find shy men worthy of their attention, authors sternly cautioned shy men that unless they overcame their fears, they faced a lifetime of loneliness and sexual frustration. Thus, in the 1970s, both women and men, shy and not shy, were expected to take responsibility for their dating destinies by directly approaching those who interested them.

Self-help authors’ adoption of an “equal opportunity” approach to dating held the promise of a commitment to greater equality in heterosexual relationships. Authors’ insistence that white middle-class women and men adopt similar behaviors at the beginning of a relationship could have heralded an insistence that they do so at all stages of the relationship. In what follows, it becomes clear that this promise was not realized; white middle-class women may have been free to boldly pursue men, but they were not free from the expectation that they were responsible for performing the emotional labor that sustained the relationship.

The Joy of Self-Disclosure

1970s self-help authors’ instructions to middle-class white women to be more assertive did not stop at the initiation of a date. In order to nurture long-term heterosexual relationships, middle-class white women were also required to master new assertive communication skills, skills that were often at odds with shyness. In intimate relationships, assertiveness took the form of self-disclosure, the verbal expression of feelings and emotions. Most self-help authors regarded self-disclosure as essential for heterosexual intimacy, arguing that the verbalization and discussion of emotion fostered not only mutual trust and understanding but also individual emotional growth. A relationship without such disclosures was considered superficial at best, emotionally dishonest at worst. White middle-class men, too, were expected to self-disclose to their female partners since “men have as much need to express their emotions as women.”

This emphasis on self-disclosure represented a remarkable development in attitudes towards heterosexual intimacy among middle-class whites. The marriage
manuals of the 1950s that I examined did not even use the term “self-disclosure,” let alone suggest that long-term heterosexual relationships required this type of emotional expression to thrive. In fact, 1950s advice givers seemed quite wary of emotional expression for both men and women. Rather than sharing negative emotions such as anger with their husbands, wives were told to find an alternate outlet for their aggression—like scrubbing the kitchen floor, pulling weeds, or kneading bread.\footnote{Men, too, were advised to divert their negative feelings—perhaps into a letter to be burned upon completion—rather than succumb to the temptation of telling others their troubles.} Men, too, were advised to keep their negative feelings.

The fact that verbal self-disclosure had moved to center stage in white middle-class heterosexual relationships in the 1970s may help to explain why shyness—whose many symptoms included the failure to self-disclose—became an issue of such concern in the 1970s, for both women and men. Self-disclosure allowed a couple to drop their masks, to become “transparent,” “authentic beings” with one another; shyness was one of the masks to be discarded in the pursuit of unfettered emotional closeness.\footnote{But at the same time that self-disclosure was being touted as the route to intimacy, authors of self-help books that dealt with interpersonal relationships frequently noted that male silence was becoming a serious problem between marriage partners.} It appeared that many men would not, or simply could not satisfy the new demands to talk about their feelings, and lapsed into stubborn silence at home. Women, on the other hand, seemed quite equal to the challenge to self-disclose, since there were no corresponding complaints from men about female silence. Men’s silence was not labeled shyness despite many similarities to it, both in terms of symptoms (silence) and causes (fear of negative evaluation); rather, it went by the fairly neutral term of “reserve” or “reticence.”

Ironically, given the fact that shyness was under increased scrutiny during the 1970s, male silence was placed in a separate category altogether. One author went to great lengths to deny any connection between the two. She insisted that while most men were reserved, they were decidedly not shy. For her, male reserve was “a barrier that a man builds around himself, making it difficult to get next to him.” By reserve we do not mean bashfulness or timidity. The latter peculiarities apply to comparatively few men. Reserve, on the other hand, is an attribute of all.\footnote{She went on to explain the source of his reserve:

His reserve is caused by fears, the fears of ridicule, contempt and indifference—those things that we learned about in connection with a man’s pride. Because of fears, he forms a wall of reserve which makes it difficult to get him to talk. Although he may long to confide, so that he can be appreciated for his masculinity, he hesitates because of his reserve, or his fear of ridicule. Nothing is so frightening to a man as making a fool of himself.} Psychologists writing popular manuals on how to identify and overcome shyness attributed its cause to a similar fear of ridicule. For example, Dr. Philip Zimbardo claimed that “at the core of shyness is an excessive preoccupation with the self, an overconcern with being negatively evaluated,” while Dr. Arthur Wassmer made much the same point, stating that “the roots of shyness are negative thoughts that people hold about themselves.”\footnote{Since both male reserve and shyness...}
stemmed from a man's fear that he was making a negative impression on others, the only real difference between the two was in the term used to describe the man's condition.

The choice of the term "reserve" rather than "shyness" to describe male silence was significant for two reasons. First, it allowed self-help authors—most of whom did not acknowledge the fear at the heart of reserve—to suggest that men's silence was a rational response to a poor communication environment rather than an emotional response to the new demands for feeling talk. Where the term "shyness" invoked images of a powerful, involuntary emotion that "overwhelmed" its sufferers and paralyzed them with fear, the term "reserved" suggested a calm, objective decision to remain silent. Second, the use of the term "reserve" allowed self-help authors to blame women for male silence, and thus make them responsible for ending it. In the 1970s, shyness was regarded as a psychological problem whose resolution was the responsibility of the individual sufferer; reserve, on the other hand, could be overcome by the efforts of either conversational partner—one or both could take responsibility for changing the conversational environment in order to facilitate speech. Since self-help authors identified women as the primary source of the poor communication environment, they carried the burden of improving it. Women were instructed to stop the behaviors that resulted in male silence—interrupting, over-empathizing, sniping, nagging, unfavorably comparing their husbands to more successful men, and trying to change their husbands;\textsuperscript{67} they were to replace these behaviors with acceptance, admiration, compliments, praise, discretion, brevity, and conversational skill.\textsuperscript{68} Self-help authors could feel fairly confident that women would perform this emotional labor since they simultaneously drove home the point that both women's and men's happiness depended on meaningful talk. Unlike men, white middle-class women could blame no one but themselves for failure.

Thus, middle-class white women in the late 1970s were still responsible for performing the conversational and emotional labor necessary to maintain heterosexual relationships despite changing attitudes towards female shyness. No longer bound by demands that they adopt shy behaviors to shore up a fragile masculinity, middle-class white women might have expected to become equal partners in heterosexual intimacy. Instead, despite the recognition that self-disclosure by both women and men was necessary to achieve intimacy, women continued to shoulder most of the burden of performing this emotional labor, thus preserving the power inequities in heterosexual relationships. Their talkative dating partners of the 1950s were now afflicted not with a temporary bout of shyness, but with a lingering "reserve," a label that signaled the transformation of male shyness into a quality that demonstrated not emotion, but its absence or suppression. The removal of male shyness from the realm of the emotional distanced middle-class white men from the chaotic and illogical arena of the emotions, an arena associated with women, one that provides justification for a gender hierarchy in which (rational) men wield power over (emotional) women.\textsuperscript{69} As Jack Sattel has pointed out, "[w]hat better way is there to exercise power than to make it appear that all one's behavior seems to be the result of unemotional rationality?" (emphasis in original).\textsuperscript{70} The link between white middle-class womanhood and shyness may have been loosened in the late 1970s due in part to the pressure of the women's movement, but the shift in men's
relationship to shyness ensured that the balance of power in white middle-class heterosexual relationships remained undisturbed.

Backlash, But No Turning Back

With the rise of the New Right, the cultural climate framing gender relations in the 1980s and 1990s was more conservative than that of the 1970s. Organized around a “pro family” ideology that defended traditional family and gender roles, members of the New Right opposed sex education in schools, teenage sexuality, abortion, and gay rights. Feminism was a favorite target, blamed for the rising divorce rate and for women’s continued entry into the paid labor force. The sexual revolution likewise came under attack by conservatives, who blamed the spread of AIDS, teenage pregnancy, and sexually transmitted diseases on its excesses. Conservative legislators attempted to ban abortion, prohibit the use of certain forms of contraceptives, and cut off funding for schools whose curriculum “denigrate[d], diminish[ed], or den[ied] the role differences between the sexes as they have been historically understood in the United States.”

Despite the conservative cultural landscape, most advice givers continued to tell middle-class white women to be more assertive in initiating relationships with men. Their justifications included the fact that some men now expected it, and that it was an empowering move for women to actively search for Mr. Right rather than simply wait for him to arrive on their doorstep. One author neatly summed up the ideal approach as the following: “[T]he key is not in developing artificial tricks or ploys that will allow a man to feel that he is taking the lead; rather, it lies in developing enough self-confidence to go after what you want without giving off the message that you are needy, dependent, and desperate.” At the same time, however, advice givers did place some limits on women’s “bold” behavior; unlike their counterparts writing in the late 1970s, they were concerned that women not be too aggressive in their pursuit of men. Perhaps white middle-class women had taken their relatively new freedom to pursue men to dangerously “unfeminine” lengths so that some restrictions were now in order. But these limits did not consist of strategic displays of shyness; instead, they revolved around the ability to recognize when to stop pursuing a man who was uninterested—for example, when a man has turned down three invitations in a row. Instead of invoking displays of shyness to curb middle-class white women’s “aggression” as in the 1950s, self-help authors now appealed to women’s sense of dignity and self-respect.

But while shyness lost its connection to white middle-class femininity, surprisingly, it was being re-evaluated by some self-help authors as a potentially superior form of white, middle-class masculinity. A small minority of authors offered “very worthwhile but . . . shy men” as a reward to middle-class white women who approached men of their own accord. These authors reminded their female readers that not every man found it easy to approach women; in fact “lots of guys” were “as intimidated and tongue-tied” as women. Rather than marking them as undesirable, their bashfulness was indicative of a gentle, sensitive, loving nature, superior to that of the more uninhibited, aggressive male. In the previous decade, male shyness was exclusively symptomatic of a deeper malaise, but now, for some, it hinted at security and safety for women. Indeed,
men who were untroubled by shyness were suspected of lacking all feelings, and, in fact, all sense, since they seemed to be oblivious to the dangers awaiting them in making the first romantic move.

It is important to note that these men were described as “shy,” not “reserved.” In contrast to the majority of descriptions of reserved men, descriptions of shy men acknowledged the fear that they experienced. This fear did not necessarily manifest itself as an unwillingness to talk about feelings as reserve did, but rather as an unwillingness to make the first move. Once that barrier was overcome, shy men may, in fact, have been better able to self-disclose than not-shy (and “reserved”) men, given their more “complex” and “sensitive” natures. Thus, these authors contributed to the sense—established by self-help authors in the 1970s—that male “reserve” had little in common with male shyness: where reserve was rational, shyness was emotional.

Ruled by Biology

The political conservatism of the period was noticeable in the tendency of some self-help authors to justify their advice through recourse to biology. A prominent example of this trend appeared in 1995 with the publication of The Rules, a dating advice book for white middle-class heterosexual women that quickly made its way to the bestseller list, and into the popular imagination. Its premise was that women who took the initiative with men took away the thrill of the chase. Authors Sherrie Fein and Ellen Schneider used vague references to biological difference to justify their advice, claiming that “[i]n a relationship, the man must take charge. He must propose. We are not making this up—biologically, he’s the aggressor.” Their “time-tested” rules for finding and keeping Mr. Right included letting the man take the lead in conversation, and refraining from phoning a man or speaking to him first—all familiar female dating tactics from the 1950s. But unlike the 1950s, they did not tell white middle-class women to do any “quiet promoting” from the sidelines; since “nature” ensured that men would aggressively pursue women in whom they were interested, such tactics were unnecessary.

Fein and Schneider’s advice hinged on the assumption that the only obstacles to white middle-class men’s pursuit of women were those posed by rule-breaking women. They rejected outright the notion that men might suffer from shyness: “[p]erhaps a therapist would say so, but we believe that most men are not shy, just not really, really interested if they don’t approach you. It’s hard to accept that, we know.” In other words, “naturally aggressive” men were biologically incapable of being shy; therefore, white middle-class women had no excuse for taking the initiative with men.

Yet being relieved of this burden did not relieve white middle-class women of the responsibility for overcoming any tendencies towards shyness. Fein and Schneider argued that a woman needed to be cool, calm, and collected in the presence of a man, not shy and timid. At a singles’ bar or party, she circulated with brisk purposefulness, hiding her nervousness, and acting “as if everything’s great” even if she was quaking with fear on the inside. When approached by a man, she was to smile and be “nice,” but say very little; such a strategy made her seem “demure, [and] a bit mysterious” and left him “hungry for more, as opposed
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to bored."85 Her silence was intended to be alluring and seductive, a signal not of feminine meekness, as it was in the 1950s, but of feminine self-confidence. It was central to The Rules strategy of playing hard to get, since it left men off-balance and unsure of the woman's interest. According to Fein and Schneider, this uncertainty was the very spark that awakened men's innate "ambition and animal drive." Ironically, however, silence did not come naturally to women, who "love[d] to talk."86 It appeared that in the world according to The Rules, only men were ruled by biology; women who wanted to find and keep Mr. Right had to train themselves to accommodate men's "instinctual" behavior.

Biological arguments were also popular explanations for differences in white middle class women's and men's propensity to self-disclose. To an even greater extent than in the previous decade, advice givers of the 1980s and 1990s were committed to the idea that men were naturally reserved when it came to their relationships with women, while women were naturally loquacious. But where inadequate practice communicating about feelings was seen as the cause of men's reserve in the 1970s, now the cause was believed to be a biological difference in the way men and women communicated.87 Not only were men naturally quieter than women, but when they did speak, they spoke different languages.88 Author John Gray suggested that their communication differences were so great that, figuratively-speaking, men were from Mars, women were from Venus. He summed up the fundamental difference between them by claiming that "[s]ilence is a man's birthright, while talking is a woman's."89 When men chose to break silence, they spoke in the ancient "Male" tongue, "a language of few words" created by contemporary man's warrior ancestors to meet the minimal verbal requirements of the hunt.90 Unlike women's language, which was indirect and emotional, men's language was rational and logical: "Men are more focused on results and completion, or closure, than women. Women are more concerned about relationships and the process of communication than men."91 In contrast to the 1970s, when neither middle-class white women nor men were presumed to have a natural advantage in "feeling talk," it was now a well-established fact that middle-class white women were, and always had been, better at it than men.

Of course, given that every author agreed that self-disclosure was essential to intimacy, men were not relieved of the burden of speech despite their supposed "natural" deficiencies. It fell to middle-class white women—naturally, given their inborn proclivity for speech—to teach men "female" and, at the same time, to learn "male." This advice had serious implications for heterosexual relationships. If women spoke "male," they would lose their distinctive difference from men; they too would lapse into silence, and neither partner would perform the emotional work that was now required to sustain the relationship. The other possibility was that women would be unable to speak male—given the apparently intractable biological imperative that compelled them to speech in the first place, this was not an impossibility. Instead, they would turn away from uncommunicative men and look to women to satisfy their intimacy needs.92 Gray dealt with these issues by arguing that women need only learn "male"—they were not required to actually speak it with their male partners. At the same time, they had to teach men how to properly interpret their speech, and how to listen.93 Through this apparent compromise, Gray rescued men and women from a communication impasse that seemed to require the abandonment of
heterosexual relationships, and thus ensured men’s continued access to women’s bodies, as well as their emotional labor.

The development of an ideology of natural communication difference between middle-class white women and men marked the rupturing of the traditional relationship between “proper” white, middle-class femininity and shyness. No longer required of middle-class white women to help secure heterosexual relationships as it had been in the 1950s and early 1970s, shyness ceased to be invoked as a means of women deferring to men. Instead, it was replaced by the very different conviction that middle-class white women were naturally talkative, possessing verbal skills that dictated their dominance in an arena increasingly defined as feminine—the arena of talk about one’s emotions. Although the recognition of this feminine skill suggests that middle-class white women may hold some power over men within heterosexual relationships, several scholars suggest that such verbal and emotional power is illusory, since men undervalue such skill and deny their need for it.94 In fact, given that women report a great deal of dissatisfaction in heterosexual relationships in which men silently withhold from them the emotional caregiving they desire, it appears that many women do not experience their apparently superior skill at feeling talk as a form of power.95 Researchers Duncombe and Marsden conclude that women appear to win only limited and precarious victories through emotional or “relational” power. And while these may soften the face of male power, the overall balance is tilted not only by men’s greater “extrinsic” economic or “structural” power, but also usually by a gender asymmetry which leaves women more emotionally vulnerable.96

Conclusion

This history of shifting representations of shyness has shown that as ideas about how to achieve emotional intimacy in heterosexual relationships have changed over time, so too have ideas about white middle-class women’s and men’s ideal relationship to shyness. What has not changed is the idea that women are primarily responsible for performing the emotional labor deemed necessary to achieve intimacy. In the 1950s, when the arena of courtship was regarded as the last bastion of male privilege, ideas about how to achieve intimacy on a date were explicitly one-sided. Young middle-class white women were expected to suppress their own interests and adopt certain shy behaviors to create an intimate environment in which even bashful, awkward young men could feel powerful, confident, and in control. In the mid-1970s, when feminists were challenging male privilege in many arenas, mutual self-disclosure was established as the new standard of intimacy. Yet given that white middle-class men were increasingly afflicted with a shyness labeled “reserve,” women were still considered responsible for performing most of the emotional labor in heterosexual relationships, disclosing their own emotions while at the same time attempting to elicit emotions from their silent male partners. In the conservative 1980s and 1990s, mutual self-disclosure continued to be held up as an ideal, but it was undermined by the development of a biological explanation for middle-class white men’s and women’s communication differences. With men’s
tendency towards silence rooted firmly in biology, white middle-class women's unreciprocated emotional labor was not only necessary for a satisfactory relationship, but impervious to challenges by women demanding change. In doing this labor, white middle-class women faced the prospect of disempowerment not only by performing labor without compensation, but, more importantly, by consistently placing men's interests and needs before their own, thus colluding in their own oppression.97

In the move from shyness facilitating white middle-class women's performance of emotional labor to shyness interfering with it, middle-class white women were transformed from relatively silent actors performing a role scripted by society into more vocal creatures possessing a "natural," emotional language. This transformation had contradictory implications: on the one hand, white middle-class women's assumption of speech had liberatory possibilities, including the ability to speak for and about themselves; on the other hand, their association with the "chaotic" and "irrational" language of emotions offered further justification for their subordination to "rational" men.98 White middle-class women may have gained a voice, but it wasn't necessarily a powerful one. As white middle-class men so ably demonstrated in the 1970s and 1990s, silence may sometimes be more powerful than speech. Perhaps, therefore, feminists need to reconsider women's relationship to silence and speech, to claim the power of both in undermining patriarchy. As Edith Wharton pointed out, "silence may be as variously shaded as speech."99 Thus, heterosexual women might, at strategic moments, choose silence as a form of resistance, a way of refusing to provide verbal emotional sustenance to men—a new form of "shock" therapy for men and self-improvement for women.

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ENDNOTES


7. I limited my analysis to those self-help, etiquette, and advice books that could be considered to offer influential representations of shyness given their popularity with the reading public. Since sales figures were not publicly available, I measured popularity by three criteria: the publication of multiple editions, favorable reviews in trade journals consulted by librarians and booksellers, and an appearance on The New York Times' list of best-selling advice and how-to books (available only from 1984 onward). A total of 476 books published in the three time periods under consideration met one or more of these criteria; I chose a random sample of 183 to be included in my study; 36 were published between 1950 and 1960, 60 between 1970 and 1980, and 87 between 1985 and 1995.


10. In 1945, of active readers (approximately one-half of the total population aged 15 and over, a proportion which remained relatively stable into the 1980s), 10% had read a self-help or psychology book in the last month (Henry C. Link and Harry Arthur Hopf, People and Books: A Study of Reading and Book-Buying Habits [New York, 1946], 74). By 1978, 46% of book readers had read at least one in the last six months, and by 1983, 54% of book readers had read at least one in the last six months (Yankelovich, Skelly and White, Consumer Research Study on Reading and Book Purchasing [New York, 1978], 142; Research and Forecasts, Inc., 1983 Consumer Research Study on Reading and Book Purchasing [New York, 1984], 34).

11. I identified the race of the intended audience by looking for racial markers in the text. The small number of self-help books written for non-whites tended to signal their intended audience in the title (e.g., Satisfying the Black Men Sexually Made Simple, and Friends, Lovers, and Soul Mates: A Guide for Better Relationships Between Black Men and Women). Texts written for a primarily white audience often contained photographs exclusively of white people or included advice to readers to avoid racial prejudice. More often, self-help texts had no explicit racial markers; since silence about race generally signifies whiteness in much the same way that silence about gender signifies maleness, I concluded that these books were written for a primarily white audience (see Judith Shapiro, "Women's Studies: A Note on the Perils of Markedness," Signs 7 [1982]: 718). The class bias of self-help books is evident in their distinctly middle-class theme, the notion of self-improvement through individual striving (Benjamin DeMott, The Imperial Middle: Why Americans Can't Think Straight About Class [New York, 1990], 43), as well as in the occupations of characters in the authors' vignettes: doctors, lawyers, teachers, etc.


16. Women wrote 47% of the books in the 1950s sample, but 64% of the actual text devoted to dating.

17. Frances Bruce Strain, _Love at the Threshold: A Book on Social Dating, Romance, and Marriage_ (New York, 1952), 75. Given the low average age of first marriage in the 1950s, texts on dating were directed primarily at teenage girls and boys. In later decades, as the age of first marriage increased, as well as the divorce rate, authors directed their advice to women and men of all ages.


19. Evelyn Mills Duvall, Ph.D., _The Art of Dating_ (New York: Association Press, 1958), 11. Self-help authors' views of the negative effects of aloofness were shared by most high-school girls. A study relying on a national sample of 2,005 girls in grades six through twelve conducted in the mid-1950s found that the majority of those aged 14 and over rated "snobishness" as the primary source of unpopularity in girls (Elizabeth Douvan and Joseph Adelson, _The Adolescent Experience_ [New York, 1966], 402).


22. Lillian N. Reid, _Personality and Etiquette_ (Boston, 1950), 224.


29. Loeb, _She-Manners_ , 123.
30. These “mannish” qualities included sports prowess, male attire (i.e., anything other than a dress or skirt), physical strength, swearing, and a lack of grace. See Allen and Briggs, *Behave Yourself: Etiquette for American Youth*, 90; Beery, *Manners Made Easy*, 194; Bryant, *Miss Behavior: Popularity, Poise, and Personality for the Teenage Girl*, 30–31; Newton and Nichols, *How to Improve Your Personality*, 89.

31. Fewer than one American in ten believed that an unmarried person could be happy (Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life* [New York, 1988], 180).


33. Paul Wallin, “Cultural Contradictions and Sex Roles: A Repeat Study,” *American Sociological Review* 15, no. 2 (1950): 288–83. This was a replication of Komarovsky’s 1946 study of 153 women college seniors (with data collected in 1942 and 1943) which found that 40% occasionally “played dumb” on dates “in obedience to the unwritten law that men must possess [intellectual] skills to a superior degree.” (Mirra Komarovsky, “Cultural Contradictions and Sex Roles,” *American Journal of Sociology* 3 [1946]: 187).


39. Although I focus here on the impact of the women’s movement on conceptions of white femininity, women of color were also involved in the women’s movement, participating with white women both in large, mainstream feminist organizations like the National Organization for Women, and in smaller ones (see Paula Giddings, *When


41. Barbara Walters, How to Talk to Practically Anybody About Practically Anything (New York, 1970), 144.

42. Helen Andelin, The Fascinating Girl (Santa Barbara, CA, 1970), 152–53.

43. Andelin, The Fascinating Girl, 77.

44. Andelin, The Fascinating Girl, 203.


46. Andelin, The Fascinating Girl, 263.


48. Emily Coleman and Betty Edwards, Brief Encounters (Garden City, NY, 1976), 68; Ellis, The Intelligent Woman’s Guide to Dating, 111; Robert L. Williams and James D. Long, Toward a Self-Managed Life Style (Boston, 1979), 80.


52. Ellis, The Intelligent Woman’s Guide to Dating, 29.


60. Robert C. Dodds, Two Together: A Handbook for Your Marriage (New York, 1959), 89–90; Elizabeth Fetter, Help Your Husband Stay Alive (New York, 1957), 212. This finding is consistent with Cancian and Gordon's historical analysis of representations of love and anger in American women's magazines, which found that, prior to the 1960s, wives were advised that the repression of anger was the epitome of love for their husbands (see Francesca M. Cancian and Steven L. Gordon, "Changing Emotion Norms in Marriage: Love and Anger in U.S. Women's Magazines Since 1900," Gender and Society 2, no. 3 [September 1988]: 308–42).


63. Dr. Joyce Brothers, How to Get Whatever You Want Out of Life (New York, 1978), 208; Lasswell and Lobsenz, No Fault Marriage: The New Technique of Self-Counseling and What It Can Help You to Do, 142; Pierre Mornell, M.D., Passive Men, Wild Women (New York, 1979), 19; Ellen Peck, The Baby Trap (New York, 1971), 224; Dorothy Sarnoff, Speech Can Change Your Life: Tips on Speech, Conversation, and Speechmaking (New York, 1970), 121; Shedd, Talk to Me!, ix. Although it seems unlikely that this phenomenon was unheard of in the 1950s, self-help texts devoted little space to the topic; wives were not counseled on how to cope with or overcome it, suggesting that it was either considered normal, and hence unremarkable, or it was indeed not a widespread problem. In fact, Thomson's analysis of best-selling 1950s self-help manuals suggests that authors were simply not likely to address any kind of difficulty in love relationships, an omission she attributes to the low divorce rate (see Irene Taviss Thomson, "Individualism and Conformity in the 1950s Vs. the 1980s," Sociological Forum 7, no. 3 [1992]: 506).

64. Andelin, The Fascinating Girl, 61.


76. Lovenheim, Beating the Marriage Odds: When You Are Smart, Single, and Over 35, 58.


78. Cowan and Kinder, Smart Women, Foolish Choices: Finding the Right Men and Avoiding the Wrong Ones, 158; Grice, How to Find Romance After 40, 195.


81. Cowan and Kinder, Smart Women, Foolish Choices: Finding the Right Men and Avoiding the Wrong Ones, 158.

82. Authors may have been willing to portray some men as emotional and non-aggressive given critiques of masculinity emerging from various wings of the "men's movement" during the late 1970s and early 1980s (see R.W. Connell, Masculinities [Berkeley, 1995], 78; Michael Messner, Politics of Masculinities: Men in Movements [Thousand Oaks, CA, 1997], 41–44).

83. Ellen Fein and Sherrie Schneider, The Rules: Time-Tested Secrets for Capturing the Heart of Mr. Right (New York, 1995), 9. Although the authors never explicitly say so, their reliance on biological arguments also suggests that they regard homosexual relationships as "unnatural."

84. Fein and Schneider, The Rules: Time-Tested Secrets for Capturing the Heart of Mr. Right, 27.
85. Fein and Schneider, The Rules: Time-Tested Secrets for Capturing the Heart of Mr. Right, 24.

86. Fein and Schneider, The Rules: Time-Tested Secrets for Capturing the Heart of Mr. Right, 7, 45.


95. Duncombe and Marsden, “‘Workaholics’ and ‘Whingeing Women’: Theorising Intimacy and Emotion Work—the Last Frontier of Gender Inequality?” 158; Rubin, Worlds of Pain: Life in the Working-Class Family, 114–33.

96. Duncombe and Marsden, “‘Workaholics’ and ‘Whingeing Women’: Theorising Intimacy and Emotion Work—the Last Frontier of Gender Inequality?” 161.

