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Christine Falvey
Grand Valley State University

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CHRISTINE FALVEY

“Pop Psych’s” View of the War Between the Sexes

The best sellers in the pop-psych book market have titles revealing a common thesis: *The Peter Pan Syndrome: Men Who Have Never Grown Up*¹; *Sweet Suffering: Women as Victim*²; *The Cinderella Complex: Women’s Hidden Fear of Independence*³; *Women Who Love Too Much: When You Keep Wishing and Hoping He’ll Change*.⁴ The latest best seller is, *Smart Women, Foolish Choices: Finding the Right Men, Avoiding the Wrong Ones*⁵. It has occupied a top spot in the “Advice, How-to and Miscellaneous” section of *The New York Times Book Review*’s list of paperback best sellers in November and December of 1986. The latest addition to this collection of same theme books is *Men Who Hate Women and the Women Who Love Them: When Loving Hurts and You Don’t Know Why*⁶. I have no doubt that this will also be a long standing top best seller as soon as it comes out in paperback. What accounts for the astounding popularity of these books? Why is the same message being repeated over and over, saleable again and again with but a title change and new versions of the same old “case histories?”

I think that the appeal of the books comes from a need to make sense out of the changing world of relationships between women and men. They present a “world view” or theory about the nature of relationships at a time when the old ways no longer hold.

There are common elements to this model that can be seen in each book. Each book is addressed to women. Even the books that are ostensibly about men (such as *The Peter Pan Syndrome* and *Men Who Hate Women*) are written for women. They are all about women who have experienced great unhappiness in their relationships with men. The purpose of each is to tell their readers how to avoid or escape a similar fate.

Each book is composed primarily of case studies, dozens of little stories about women and men the author-therapist has, presumably, seen as patients. There is Nancy who sits in her bedroom practicing the right way to say things to her husband so she can

avoid his wrath; Jessica who sold her house and had a fourth baby (she had three from a previous marriage) to please her husband and then gave him \$13,000 to pay off his debts; Caroline, a “brilliant lawyer” who agreed to have occasional sex on the firm’s conference table with a co-worker who barely spoke to her outside this context; Joanne who desperately pursued a married man after he broke off a brief affair with her. The stories all have the same elements: a woman who wants love, marriage, a family and a man she can feel safe with; a woman who unwisely chooses a man who cannot meet her needs, a man who is selfish, demanding and, underneath, more insecure than she is; the man either runs off scared before a relationship really begins, or “uses” her for awhile and then drops her, or, worst of all, marries her, condemning her to years of subservience to his needs. Women who meet or marry nice, normal men (an event rarely discussed in this genre) mess things up by dismissing the good men or by becoming so needfully dependent on them that the relationship is endangered.

The thesis hardly varies. Basically women, or some portion of them, are seen as having the problem of being too nice, too giving, self-sacrificing, willing to do anything to get and keep the man they love, choosing men who will exploit their weakness and, finally, too dependent on the emotional security of the relationship (however bad it may be) they are in. While none of these books characterizes all men as bad, they all describe defective men in the same insidious way. Bad men are immature, demanding, manipulative, selfish and unreliable. They are certainly lots worse than the troubled women whose main flaw is that they allowed themselves to be victimized.

The authors are unanimous in attributing women’s self-sacrificing, dependent nature to their upbringing. Women are not, they agree, masochistic in the sense that they enjoy their suffering; nor is it in women’s biological nature to be the giving sex. The specifics of what sort of upbringing leads to the women depicted in the books varies from a general cultural expectation, adopted by parents, that girls are weaker, less competent and more in need of protection than boys, to specifics of pathological families ruled by domineering and abusive fathers.

Since women are made dependent, not born that way, the authors all agree that they can be unmade. Through various advise on how to change one’s attitude and behavior each author proposes the same solution: women must reclaim their independence, learn to love themselves, to take care of themselves, to be assertive about their own needs, and to make wiser choices in men.

With the exception of *The Cinderella Complex*, which presents dependency as a common problem for most women, these books are about people with pathological difficulties in their relationships with others and in their lives in general. The men are sadistic,

brutal manipulators or childlike, ineffective weaklings; the women are helpless victims who are emotionally, physically, sexually and financially exploited, or are love junkies, cursed with incredibly poor judgment and doomed to choosing unworthy scoundrels as lovers. How can books about such deeply disturbed people have achieved their wide appeal? Certainly there are women who are victimized, who are emotionally or physically abused by their mates; but the readership of these books is far too wide to assume such women are their only audience. Nor is a kind of psychological voyeurism — the solace that comes from reading about someone worse off than you — a convincing explanation for the popularity of this particular kind of self help book.

The books are popular because the way men and women relate to each other has changed and the books provide a model or explanation for why things are not as we expect. Our expectations are based on traditional customs where women married young, had several babies, stayed home to be wives and mothers, or perhaps worked part time when the children were older, and stayed married forever. Woman's role as a wife and mother was highly valued, a role begun early and played out for a life-time.

The new customs are different. In 1960 the median age of first marriage was 20.3 for women⁸, in 1985 it had risen to 23.3. A whopping 56.9% of women in the 20-24 age group had never been married in 1984; in 1960 only 28.4% of this age group had never been married⁷.

Not only do women marry later but once married they have fewer children. In 1960 the average number of children born to married women in the 15-44 age group was 2.31; in 1980 it was 1.93. Women's participation in the labor force has also increased, from 37.7% in 1960 to 52.9% in 1983⁸. Current estimates are the 50% of marriages contracted in the 70s will end in divorce, whereas of those contracted in the 50s less than 30% will do so⁹.

The crux of the problem, then, is that demographic changes have meant a substantial change in the marriage, family and work lives of American women in the last 25 years. They imply, too, a significant change in the dating lives of women. However, the cultural expectations of the 1950s and 60s are still with us. Women (and perhaps men too, but that is another story) still often expect to marry the first man they fall in love with and the first man they have sex with; and they marry expecting the marriage to last a lifetime. Instead the later age of first marriage means they find themselves dating a number of different men over a longer period of singlehood. Each new relationship means an old one left behind that did not work out. Once in a marriage, women experience the frustration of trying to balance having children with working. The few children the average woman does have do not constitute a long career of mothering. And finally the marriage itself often turns out to be a failure,

at least a failure in the sense that its termination violates the woman's expectations of what should have happened. The psychological picture is one of almost guaranteed failure and disappointment in women's relationships with men, as the new reality is quite different from the old ideals.

Women's lives are made even more problematic when the economic difficulties of being a female single head of household combine with the sense of personal disappointment that one's life didn't work out as planned. Women's wages are still low compared to men's and our country's daycare provisions are shamefully inadequate.

The dream is lost and such a loss must be explained. One solution would be to have a different dream in the first place. This will undoubtedly happen as our cultural expectations catch up with our culture's behavior in mating patterns. The next generation of women may well have a different dream, although I won't try to guess what it will be. But a new dream is hindsight advice for a woman whose current life is, in her eyes, a shambles. She has, perhaps, been disappointed in love several times. If she is a bit older she may now be disappointed by a dissolving marriage; if she is divorced she may be in for another round of love affairs that don't "work out." how can she explain all this to herself? Blaming herself will not happen. Blaming someone else is easier. Better yet, blame a whole class of someone else. This requires labels for the class, preferably dramatic labels emphasizing the pathology of that class of people, labels like "the Peter Pan syndrome" and "men who hate women". It is a comfort to think that you are not alone, that your problem is similar to that of a whole group of women who have also experienced deep disappointments in their expectations. It is no problem if the stories in the book are about experiences more extreme than yours. You can still recognize yourself, because there are enough generalizations and exceptions that almost anyone who has been through a disappointing love affair or marriage can see herself, even if somewhat dimly. Better yet, you can see HIM, the man of your disappointments.

So, the widespread appeal of these self-help books is that they provide a way for women to think about and understand the confusing and unexpected circumstances of their lives. But they provide a wrong kind of world view. Why is a viewpoint, which I claim is incorrect, so readily adopted by so many? The answer lies in the typical ways people think about their social world. Psychologists who study social cognition, the way people think about social situations, have identified several common "errors" in the way people think about others. One of these is known as "the fundamental attribution error." This is the tendency to overdo attributing the cause of another's behavior to his personality (or, more formally, to internal or dispositional causes). The other choice is to attribute another's behavior to the situation — that is, to see

behavior as simply called forth by the demands of the situation rather than as an expression of one's disposition. But we less often make situational attributions when contemplating the behavior of others. I am likely to see my irritability as due to the fact that I had a hard day at work (a situational attribution) and your irritability as due to your basically grumpy personality.

A closely related mistake in thinking is known as the "actor-observer" bias, which refers to the tendency to assume that our own behavior is quite variable and that the behavior of others is stable. For instance, if I ask you to rate a friend on a number of traits you'll have no trouble saying, yes, he's cheerful, intellectual, thrifty and introverted. When I ask you to rate yourself you are more likely to give answers that put you in the middle — the sometimes I am, sometimes I'm not sort of answer. I'm somewhat introverted and somewhat extroverted, cheerful but serious, sometimes stingy and sometimes generous and so forth.

A third common error in our thinking is the "self-serving bias" in which we attribute our successes to our skill and our failures to bad luck. If I do well on an exam it is because I'm smart and I studied hard. If I do poorly it is because the room was too noisy or the exam was unfair.

These common ways of thinking about others certainly come into play as a woman thinks about why her last love affair didn't work out, why she got divorced, or even why she just had that fight with her husband. In circumstances where life is not working out as expected, one spends time thinking about why, time trying to create a new cognitive scheme that will account for the events in one's life. Failed expectations create a disruption in one's mental equilibrium that can only be restored by creating new theories (or schemata, as cognitive psychologists call our mental constructs about the world). The new schemata are compatible with the new data; equilibrium is restored. A difficult marriage, a failed love affair, or a divorce can be explained many ways; but they must (from a cognitive standpoint) be explained and they are likely to be explained in predictable ways.

Specifically, one is likely to see things in ways that protect one's own self-esteem, to see whatever bad things one's self did as due to the transitory demands of the situation, and/or to the bad luck of having gotten hooked up with a poor mate. One sees the behavior of one's (no longer admired) partner as arising from his defective personality and from a personality that shows stability — in the sense that his flaws are more or less permanent. I will return to this point later but first, since I am proposing that the books are popular because they give women a way to explain why the mating patterns in their lives are not the mating patterns they expected, I must turn to the question of why the dating, marriage, child bearing, etc., patterns have changed.

Many hypotheses have been proposed. The technology of improved contraceptive techniques must be one influence on these patterns. A common hypothesis is that new attitudes of and about women are responsible for the mating pattern changes. I find this to be an inadequate answer because it leads me to ask why the attitudes changed. One hypothesis, which I find compelling, is Guttentag and Secord's¹⁰. They proposed that the sex ratio exerts a strong influence on the relationship between the sexes. When the sex ratio (number of men divided by number of women) is high there is an "excess" (if you will) of men. During such times traditional family life, with a high value on women as wives and mothers, prevails. When the sex ratio is low there is an excess of women. People marry later, are more likely to never marry at all and are more liberated in their sexual behavior. Women's roles as wives and mothers are less valued. Some women may become embittered by this turn of events; but in such times women also have more freedom, they are more liberated, more independent and develop ways to take care of themselves.

Guttentag and Secord's hypothesis seems especially useful in trying to explain our puzzle of the popularity of finding-the-right-man-getting-rid-of-the-bad (and are there ever a lot of them) type books. Demographic changes have changed our dating and mating patterns so that women are disappointed in their expectations of early and lasting marital bliss, and these books provide an explanation as to what went "wrong". But if things have changed for women, must not they also have changed for men? Aren't men unsettled by the new patterns? And if so, where are the books for men that explain away their dating and marital difficulties?

Yes, the world of relationships is different for men too, but it is not different for them in a way that is as difficult and unsettling. The imbalanced sex ratio means not only that marriage, divorce and family patterns have changed dramatically but also that women have more difficulty in meeting appropriate mates than men do:

1. There are fewer men than there are women in the United States. For the population age 15 and over the sex ratio is 91.2 men for every 100 women⁷.

2. The baby boom generation phenomenon, in combination with the practice of hypergamy ("marrying up", in this case women marrying men who are older than they) makes the marriage and dating prospects less favorable for women. There are 89 men in the 30-34 age group for every 100 women in the 25-29 age group⁷.

3. Despite the fact that, statistically, men have more women to choose from, more men than women remain permanently unmarried. In 1984, 11.6% of the men in the 35-39 age group had never married, while only 7.5% of the women were never married⁷. On the surface this makes prospects for women in this age group look brighter, but they are not. Most of these men are permanently out of the marriage market. Some

portion of them will marry, but most never will.

4. There are more men than women who are considered unsuitable marriage partners due to criminality, homosexuality, or birth defects. Undoubtedly, some portion of the never-married men mentioned above are in one of these categories.

The imbalanced sex ratio, then, has had two effects: it has changed marriage patterns, and it has changed them in a way that may be seen as more unfavorable to women, at least for women who expect to marry early to men a few years older than themselves and to stay married for a life-time. Books like *The Peter Pan Syndrome*, *Women Who Love Too Much*, and *Men Who Hate Women* provide the basis for creating the new schemata disenchanting women must inevitably seek. Furthermore, the books provide a theory that fits with the type of attributions people are most likely to make in any case. Unfortunately, the theory is a destructive one. It is destructive because it aggravates relationships between the sexes, because it creates and perpetuates the very conditions it purports to remedy, and because it is wrong.

The authors recognize that the needy women they describe are not necessarily typical, that the women had at least some hand in their own undoing and that all men are not "bad." But these messages are, I believe, overlooked. Instead, readers focus on the idea that there was something terribly wrong about the way they were raised that created a pathology in them that stands in the way of healthy relationships. And they focus even more on the notion that there is something wrong with men in general that prevents them from being loving boyfriends and husbands. A few weeks or months after reading, the book's message has been reduced to our culture's new mythology that "explains" the difficulties between the sexes: women are responsible, loving, giving, and emotionally open; men are irresponsible, afraid of commitment, and emotionally closed, or worse, they are wimps, misogynists, or psychopaths. Unfortunately, this myth makes matters worse. Men and women are now seen as almost two different species, with one being somewhat less human than the other. There is little hope that these two different creatures could live together in harmony.

What the authors and the readers do not recognize is the extent to which the difficulties between men and women are simply a product of changed demographics and their effect on changing our relationships. The cause of the "problems" is attributed to the personal inadequacies of the players instead of where it belongs: the circumstances of the social stage on which we play out our lives.

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3. Dowling, C. (1982). *The Cinderella Complex: Women's Hidden Fear of Independence*. New York: Pocket Books.

4. Norward, R. (1986). *Women Who Love Too Much: When You Keep Wishing and Hoping He'll Change*. New York: Pocket Books.
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