The Limited Construction of an Egalitarian Masculinity: College-Educated Men's Dating and Relationship Narratives

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Abstract

According to dominant cultural representations, masculinity in heterosexual relationships is signified by men's dominance, aggression, sexual promiscuity, and emotional unavailability. Yet, the preferred way of doing masculinity is context-specific, and middle-class men face increasing expectations that they engage in egalitarian relationships. In this study, I use in-depth interviews with thirty-one college-educated, heterosexual men to examine how they construct their masculinity under changing social conditions. My findings show that men use egalitarian narratives as a form of identity work in which they construct understandings of themselves as progressive, caring, and respectful of women, in contrast to the majority of men, whom they ascribe with stereotypical male traits. However, these egalitarian narratives serve as a shield, allowing men to dismiss inequalities that emerge in their romantic relationships as the result of individual preferences so that gendered outcomes are allowed to go unquestioned, thereby leaving gender inequalities intact.

Keywords

class, family, gender equality, hegemonic masculinity, identity

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Cultural norms governing sexual and romantic heterosexual relationships ascribe men with an aggressive and predatory sexuality in which they are expected to want and pursue all sexual opportunities, irrespective of the context, while scrupulously avoiding commitment and emotional intimacy (McCaughey 2007; Pascoe 2007; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009; Taylor 2005). A guiding assumption is that men are superficially focused on women's appearance over traits such as personality, compatibility, or career prospects (McCaughey 2007). When men do date or form relationships, they are expected to play the dominant role by asking women out, paying for dates, initiating sex, and formalizing the level of commitment (Bogle 2008; England, Shafer, and Fogarty 2008; Eaton and Rose 2011; Lamont 2014). Women, on the other hand, face a relational imperative where they are presumed to always want a loving and committed relationship with their sexual activity limited to such a state (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009), while dating scripts position them to merely react to men (Eaton and Rose 2011; Sassler and Miller 2011; Lamont 2014). These norms clearly differentiate acceptable behaviors and emotions for men and women, which are assumed to be either complementary, as with the belief that men like to pursue and women like to be pursued, or at odds, as with the assumption that all women are looking for the commitment at which men chafe, but never egalitarian. Thus, conventionally, masculinity in sexual and romantic relationships is signified by men's dominance, aggression, sexual promiscuity, and emotional unavailability (Pascoe 2007; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009).

Yet, while dominant culture broadly shapes the preferred ways of enacting masculinity in a given society, it is constituted at the "local level" (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), resulting in a variety of ways of constructing manhood or challenging dominant meanings. Middle-class and upper-middle-class men, in particular, are increasingly expressing a desire for egalitarian relationships (Gerson 2010; Laner and Ventrone 1998), and many position themselves in contrast to the misogynistic and dominating displays associated with certain male subcultures (Dellinger 2004; Ray and Rosow 2009; Wilkins 2009). Drawing on in-depth interviews with thirty-one college-educated men in the progressive social environment of the San Francisco Bay Area, this research investigates how men construct masculinity in their romantic relationships, given the emerging emphasis on egalitarianism among professional men and women. I argue that men use egalitarian narratives as identity work to position themselves as progressive and benevolent men, thereby signifying their classed, gendered selves. But instead of translating into egalitarian relationships, I find that these narratives serve as a mask, allowing men to claim a particular identity without fully challenging the privileges they claim in their romantic relationships. Indeed, these "egalitarian" men are then able to justify inequality in their romantic relationships as the result of personality, arbitrary circumstances, or benevolent sexism (Glick and Fiske 1996), inadvertently reifying gender difference, and leaving relationships relabeled, but still unequal.

Local Constructions of Masculinity

Hegemonic masculinity comprises the dominant ideals of what it means to be a man, delineating how men ought to behave given a particular cultural context (Connell 1987, 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). In the United States, these cultural ideas privilege men over women, as well as certain men over others, emphasizing the perceived superiority of the white, middle- to upper-class, heterosexual male (Chen 1999; Eastman and Schrock 2008; Kimmel 1996; Pascoe 2007). Men signify masculine selves through ''manhood acts,'' the behaviors and identity work in which men engage in order to demonstrate their inclusion in their gender group, and their fulfillment of the hegemonic ideal (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). While manhood acts encompass a wide range of behaviors, they aim to demonstrate the ability to control and avoid being controlled (Ezzell 2012; Johnson 2005). Because most men cannot embody the entirety of the masculine ideal, they may engage in compensatory manhood acts, emphasizing certain elements of hegemonic masculinity in order to offset the ways in which they fall short (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009; Sumerau 2012). For example, research on working-class men shows how they engage in exaggerated displays of masculinity due to their inability to embody the breadwinner ideal, allowing them to differentiate themselves from women and justify their privileges for being male (Collinson 1992; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Messner 1994).

But hegemonic masculinity is also constituted at the local level, meaning that the ideal way to be a man may differ from group to group (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Dellinger 2004). In particular, middle-class men seek to distance themselves from the displays of masculinity enacted by lower status men, especially as men's dominance and emotional stoicism have come under attack (Messner 1993). Dellinger (2004) found that a group of male accountants who worked at a pornographic magazine differentiated themselves from the working-class ''slimeball'' readers. Pyke (1996) shows how middle- to upper-class men position themselves in contrast to lower-class men by disguising ''themselves as exemplars of egalitarianism in their interpersonal relationships with women'' (p. 532). Indeed, ''talk is a form of identity work'' that people use ''to fashion views of themselves, link themselves to others, and create symbolic boundaries'' (Wilkins 2012, 166–67). In this manner, men construct and present narratives of their identities to signify who they are, and who they are not, as men.

Scholarship on masculinities has documented the shift to a more inclusive masculinity that allows room for behaviors coded as ''feminine'' or ''gay'' (Anderson 2009; Bridges 2010; Messerschmidt 2010). Higher status men, in particular, have more flexibility in their gender performances, as their high status traits ''allow'' them to also exhibit lower status traits (Bridges 2014; McGuffy and Rich 1999; Pascoe 2007). Certain peer groups also function to affirm alternative masculinities and provide a safe space for those who engage in them (Heath 2003; Wilkins 2009). In her study of Christian and Goth men, Wilkins (2009) finds that they look down on predatory masculinities, linking respect for women and intimacy talk with

what it means to be a man. As such, men can create a masculine identity through avenues other than hyper heterosexuality, aggression, and the denigration of women. This is certainly true in the San Francisco Bay Area, where the dominance of the tech industry links masculinity to technical knowledge, innovation, and business success, and the microcommunity deemphasizes conventional displays of masculinity with a ''Revenge of the Nerds'' mentality (Cooper 2000).

While this can create challenges to certain restrictive elements of masculinity, these often remain compatible with male privilege (Bridges 2014; Messerschmidt 2010). Upper-middle-class men often employ egalitarian narratives while still using their higher earning power to extract deference from their partners (Pyke 1996). Wilkins (2009) shows that while the local masculinities of Christian and Goth boys emphasize respect for women, they also reinforce normative beliefs about men's sexual desires and women's sexual availability to men. In addition, while there has been an emerging expressed desire for gender equality in romantic relationships (Gerson 2010; Lamont 2014), men are still subject to the expectation that they distinguish themselves from women, especially in romantic encounters (Eaton and Rose 2011), and the majority fall back on ''neotraditional'' relationships when egalitarian relationships appear hard to achieve (Gerson 2010). College-educated women expect men to take the lead during courtship, fulfilling their expected role as the dominant partner (Lamont 2014), and, while girls want boys to be respectful in educational interactions, they expect them to engage in masculine displays during romantic encounters (Talbot and Quayle 2010). Thus, while both women and men engage in egalitarian narratives when discussing their romantic relationships, they tend to unconsciously fall back on traditional relationship patterns in practice (Laner and Ventrone 1998). As such, what some scholars view as a genuine shift in acceptable masculinities (Anderson 2009), others see as a shift in presentation of self that doesn't challenge the underpinnings of gender equality and allows it to persist covertly (Messner 1993; Messerschmidt 2010). In either case, men are forced to grapple with the changing norms of what it means to be a man.

This research examines how college-educated men construct masculinity during courtship, defined broadly as the period from when the pair meets until they marry, to understand how they negotiate competing scripts that dictate they be both egalitarian partner and traditional man. I show how these men, who are economically privileged, create narratives of equality surrounding their romantic relationships in an effort to situate themselves as ''good guys'' in contrast to those with conservative, restrictive gender views. However, I also show how these narratives serve as a screen for men's inegalitarian relationship behaviors. As I argue, by constructing an identity as a progressive partner, men are able to dismiss any inequalities that occur in their relationships as the result of something other than their own behaviors and attitudes, which they view as the ''correct'' ones. In this manner, an understanding of societal gender inequality fails to translate into individual-level egalitarian relationships.

Method

This study is based on in-depth interviews with thirty-one college-educated, heterosexual men. The respondents were recruited through the alumni lists of two universities in the greater San Francisco Bay Area—a large, urban, selective public university and a mid-size, suburban state university with a high acceptance rate. I randomly selected subjects from these lists and e-mailed them the details of the project, inviting them to participate. Those who did not live in the region were excluded from the study. I limited the sample to men between the ages of twenty-five and forty. This group came of age after the feminist and sexual revolutions and is thus grappling with the messages that came out of them, but is old enough to have established a varied relationship history, given that most college-educated men marry in their late twenties and early thirties.

By focusing on college-educated men, I was able to obtain a group of middle-class men with high earnings or high earnings potential, but with diverse social backgrounds. Previous research shows that professional men are more likely to express egalitarian beliefs than working-class men, even if these beliefs do not translate into practice (Pyke 1996). In addition, the high incidence of educationally homogenous relationships means that college-educated men are dating and marrying college-educated women, who are pursuing career opportunities and therefore placing pressure on them to create more egalitarian partnerships (Graf and Schwartz 2011). Finally, selecting college graduates in the Bay Area, known for its progressive social beliefs, provided a group of men who either expressed a commitment to these beliefs or who were at least regularly exposed to them.

Given the challenges inherent in collecting a sample through e-mail (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2012), I had a response rate of 10 percent, which is consistent with Pew response rates. As the sample demographics show, the men in this study had higher than average incomes and levels of education and were almost exclusively in management and professional fields. While I am unable to generalize from this study, this exploratory research focuses on how a relatively privileged group of heterosexual men grapples with the competing logics of conventional masculinity and the egalitarian ideals to which they have been exposed through their upbringings, educations, and social networks. Thus, this study provides an examination of how men negotiate the tensions associated with the competing scripts that emerge in periods of social transition (Gerson 2002), using a sample consistent with previous studies of privileged masculinities (Anderson 2009; Bridges 2014; Wilkins 2009). Descriptive information for the sample is provided in Table 1.

I conducted the interviews in the San Francisco Bay Area in 2010 and 2011. Interviews lasted one to three hours and took place at the location of the respondent's choice. All but two of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, with the remaining interviews conducted over the phone. Respondents provided an overview of all their past and present romantic relationships. I then followed up by asking more

Table 1. Sample Description.

Characteristic	N	Percent
Race		
White	20	64
Asian	8	26
Hispanic	3	10
Class background		
Middle to Upper-middle	21	68
Working	10	32
Educational attainment		
Bachelor's	22	71
Master's	5	16
Professional degree	4	13
Personal income		
US$100,000–US$149,999	9	29
US$80,000–US$99,999	3	10
US$60,000–US$79,999	7	23
US$40,000–US$59,999	4	13
US$20,000–US$39,999	2	6
<US$20,000	1	3
Decline to state	5	16
Relationship status		
Single	10	32
In a relationship	2	6
Cohabiting	9	29
Married	6	19
Previously married	2	7
Remarried	2	7
Field of employment		
Management/professional	30	97
Unemployed student	1	3
Parental status		
Children	5	16
No children	26	84
Age		
Mean age	31.5	
Standard deviation	3.8	

detailed questions about what they considered to be their five most significant relationships. Questions focused on aspects of sexual and romantic relationships that have traditionally been directed by men, collecting information on initiation of and payment for first dates, relationship progression, initiation of sex, and the marriage proposal, if applicable. For those who had cohabited or married, I also asked questions about daily decision making and the division of household labor. I then asked specific questions about the desirability of each partner—what made her attractive to him, what traits he

did not find appealing, and why he felt she was a good long-term partner. I concluded each interview with general questions on what behaviors they felt *should* happen on a date and in romantic relationships. This allowed me to compare actual behaviors to ideals and narratives and allowed me to piece together their overarching narrative of how they viewed and conducted themselves in romantic relationships. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and then coded thematically. All names used in this article are pseudonyms in order to protect confidentiality.

Findings

The majority of the men in this study constructed narratives of themselves as egalitarian partners. The few who didn't still expressed a respectful and compassionate view of women in which they saw themselves as caretakers and protectors. Both approaches, however, functioned as masculine identity work, rather than creating gender equality in relationships. First, I examine how men engage in egalitarian narratives to signify respect for the trope of the ''strong, independent woman.'' Next, I look at how they conceive of their masculinity in opposition to other men, whom they view as dominating, predatory, and superficial, thereby positioning themselves as ''good'' men. Finally, I show how their attitudes fail to translate into egalitarian relationships, given their continued commitment to benevolent sexism and their use of personality, preference, and other individualistic explanations to justify inequality in their relationships. Thus, I argue that men's conceptions of egalitarianism remain too limited to lead to egalitarian outcomes. I do note, however, where variation in accounts occurs, indicating where attitudes are changing.

Egalitarian Narratives

As Talbot and Quayle (2010) show, women can shape men's behaviors to some extent by promoting certain masculinities as desirable in romantic relationships. As such, men may construct their masculinity in relation to what they believe women want. Because they were seeking out and dating well-educated, ambitious women who, in general, express a desire for egalitarian relationships (Gerson 2010), the men in this study were forced to grapple with these relationship expectations. Consistent with the current findings on mate selection (DiPrete and Buchmann 2006), an overwhelming majority of them ($N = 28$) wanted and expected their partners to be accomplished, ambitious, and independent, just as they were. Discussing what he wanted from a spouse, Gavin, age 31, a lawyer, said, ''I expected her to be like strong, educated, have her own career.'' Ishan, age 29, a computer programmer, echoed these sentiments, saying, ''Probably very much an independent type, not very dependent on others to achieve whatever she wanted to achieve, that kind of thing.'' Jake, age 34, a driving range manager and golf instructor, broke up with a girlfriend he felt was not ambitious enough. When I asked Jake what he would look for in a future partner, he said, ''Ambition is huge . . . . I'm looking for someone who can

support themselves and is surviving on their own. I understand that once you're a team, you're a team, and things go together, but I would want someone who regardless of me, is surviving." Thus, the men sought partners who were achievers and, therefore, not reliant on them for either income or interests.

As such, a strong personality was also frequently cited as a desirable quality. Matthew, age 29, an investment banker, explained why he started dating his current girlfriend, "I liked her because she had a really strong personality, like she was very outspoken, had a lot to say, and was, again, very interesting." Indeed, there was some concern that a woman who wasn't accomplished wouldn't be interesting. Dave, age 34, a computer programmer, worried when he started his current relationship because she had less education than he did, "I never had a relationship with someone who wasn't on the same intellectual level as me. How would that work out?" These narratives were consistent throughout the sample and even the three men who wanted their wives to eventually stay at home emphasized the value of these traits. In this manner, men constructed their understanding of themselves as secure enough in their masculinity not to be threatened by an outspoken, career-oriented woman who might challenge them—*an equal partner*. In fact, not only would the men not feel threatened, but they would relish this type of relationship.

Only a few men questioned the desire for a "strong woman" and expressed a preference for a more traditional partnership, in which the man was the dominant partner. Dave, who had gone through a divorce, compared his first wife to his second:

> Looking back . . . I would call [my first wife] the more dominant party . . . . With [my second wife] I would say I'm the more dominant party. I like it. [Laughs] You know, a lot of stereotypes come up—how men aren't comfortable marrying a stronger woman necessarily. I've read articles about men not being comfortable with a stronger woman. And I kind of understand, having been with a strong woman—I kind of understand where they are coming from.

Dave recalled feeling emasculated by his first wife, to the point that he had trouble getting an erection when they had sex. He attributed this to what he felt were her constant put-downs of him. Aaron, age 40, an engineer, had similar feelings, also born of a problematic, and now ended, first marriage in which an overbearing wife and mother-in-law were seen as the main obstacles to a happy marriage. But Dave and Aaron were the exceptions. Even the few men who wanted a traditional breadwinner–homemaker division of labor didn't argue that they expected more power in their relationships.

Many men also expressed support for feminism as an example of their commitment to gender equality. William, age 32, a nonprofit fund-raiser, said, "I very much believe in the equality of the sexes. And the inequality of society to the sexes. And I actually strive for a world, like I want to see a world where men and women have equal places of power in society and influence." Matthew said, "I'm very pro-women female organizations. I haven't done anything specific for but I'm

part of, I go to women—there's this women's initiative or I don't know what it's called, it's at work and there's this women's network and they have events and I go to some of those events, so very pro-women in that way, yes." Jake said, "I love women. The more power is in a woman's hands, the better life is and I witness that all the time . . . . There's so much positiveness that emanates from a woman's perspective, that you really can't go wrong in a woman-dominated society, in my mind." While many of their narratives were superficial and underdeveloped, or essentialized women's "goodness," they were an important part of their understandings of themselves as progressive, egalitarian men.

While not all the men considered feminism to be part of their identity, only two expressed direct hostility toward it. But only one of them considered feminism to be a problem for men. The other man couched his distaste for feminism in concern for women. Paul, age 34, a paralegal, said, "I think some [feminist] ideas have kind of hurt women, sometimes, over the years. I think a lot of women have kind of experienced a lot of heartache in relationships. And a lot of women have been abandoned and suffered a lot of abuse because of some feminist ideas." In this manner, Paul expressed a desire to protect women and saw this as a form of support for women and a way of caring about their well-being, rather than as hostility toward women's equality.

Given that the majority of the respondents wanted a woman whom they saw as an equal partner, they also expressed the view that both men and women should be involved in breadwinning, caregiving, and housework, stressing that they did not want financially dependent partners. In fact, rather than viewing the breadwinner role as a privilege, many of the men found the expectation to be the only earner a burden. Ryan, age 28, a marketing manager, said, "At the beginning, you have the conversation, 'Do you want kids? Where do you see yourself going?' She basically said up front, 'I want a guy that will let me not work and let me travel all the time.' I wasn't really cool with that." In fact, he broke up with his previous girlfriend because she supported traditional gender norms, "I didn't like having to sort of pay for everything or be alpha for everything. I didn't like how she kind of expected me to take the burden for everything. I think I realized I was looking more for a partner as opposed to just take care of somebody and be someone's sugar daddy." Brad, age 32, a master of business administration (MBA) student, said, "I don't want to take that role upon myself, feeling like the only breadwinner . . . . I don't want to fall into these traditional roles that I have in the past. It's not my responsibility to take care of somebody." Mark, age 32, a software engineer, said of his relationship with his fiancé, "I don't want to feel that I have to hold the entire family financially together. That responsibility . . . I seem to have that in my relationships. With us, it would be nice to be relieved of that responsibility for a period of time. But . . . I make more money." Indeed, the majority of the men said that they didn't have an issue with a partner who made more money and many even discussed this as a positive due to their limited earning power in a profession they enjoyed.

While most of the men didn't envision themselves as stay at home parents, they also didn't want their wives to stay home. William said, "I would like for us both to be equal in the parenting. It's a little hard to imagine a life with a stay home mom." Consistent with the value men placed on women's ambition, he added, "I would like someone who has an idea of what they want to accomplish in their career, not just working because they have to." Indeed, staying at home indicated a lack of ambition and indicated that a woman might end up too financially and emotionally dependent. As Christopher, age 34, a high school teacher, said, "I don't want my wife to just get lost in me and the family. I want her to be her own person and do her 'thing', too."

In fact, only three of the men in the sample wanted a wife who would definitely stay at home. The remainder presented this as either a negative, as discussed earlier, or a personal choice for the woman to make based on her own feelings about work and motherhood. That said, the choice for women to work or stay at home is often presented as "permission granted," in which men speak of being supportive of women's careers while not taking on the amount of child care that allows them to flourish (Gerson 2010; Stone 2007). However, a few of the men went so far as to express a desire to take time out of work for childrearing. Mark, who chafed at breadwinning expectations, also wanted the opportunity to stay at home with his child, stating, "So I really want the privilege of being able to stay home. But it seems more practical that she's willing to stay home. She really wants to stay home . . . . I guess the fact that I want an equal stay at home time with the kids is . . . and maybe I won't get it, is kind of annoying." Because of his higher income, Mark felt that it didn't make sense for him to stay at home with his children, even though that was something he wanted from his family life. He seemed genuinely upset that his fiancé was scaling back her career goals (she had been working toward a PhD in chemistry) in anticipation of having children, thereby boxing him into the breadwinner role in their family.

In many of the cases in which a man expressed a willingness to stay at home, however, it was as though my question on the matter had raised the issue for them for the first time, giving them something to think about, or that this was something they were willing to consider in the abstract. As Christopher said when I asked him who would watch the kids if his wife wanted to work full time, "Sure, I would be willing to stay at home . . . . I'm not against it. I'm not against being a stay at home dad." Only a handful of men, like Mark, seemed truly invested in the prospect and only one of the men (out of five who were parents) had actually scaled back his career ambitions temporarily to stay at home with his infant daughter three days a week while his wife worked full time. This was especially significant, given that he had high earnings potential with a master of science (MS), an MBA, and a career in start-ups.

Counternarratives

In order to construct a progressive masculinity, the majority of the men in the study not only offered egalitarian narratives of what they wanted from relationships, they

also distanced themselves from the image of the sexually predatory and promiscuous, dominating, disrespectful, and superficial male. In this manner, they positioned themselves as different from the stereotypical behavior reflexively attributed to most men. Jake said,

> So I have a high respect for women being attacked all the time. Like if you go out and you're dressed up, chances are guys are hitting on you all night and you're wading through drunk dudes hitting on you. I totally appreciate that. And having been hit on by aggressive gay dudes, I totally know there's nothing worse than unwanted male attention. And I know women. I know women have already scanned the crowd and they know who they want to talk to and not talk to and so I'm just observant of that. Like a woman will let you know if she wants to talk to you and I wait for that.

Like 90 percent of the sample, Gavin wasn't interested in being a pursuer:

> I know there's guys that like the thrill of the hunt is what matters and that kinda thing. Like, I'm not like that at all. I had the flip view. If like you were into me that's a huge plus. And so in the beginning, even when I've been the actor, sometimes it's been just sort of superficial layer because I wait till I get a really strong signal that someone's interested before I'll even do anything. I don't want to creep someone out.

While the men who used this strategy were certainly wary of the rejection that could come from an unwanted advance, they also discussed the issue in terms of women's comfort level. They acknowledged that women receive a lot of unwelcome attention from men looking for romantic and sexual involvement and that many of these men are not respectful of women's desired boundaries and frequently act in an aggressive and intimidating manner that women often experience as threatening. In this manner, they expressed an understanding of women's desires and boundaries and empathy toward their situation as the receptive, rather than active, partner.

While many of the men engaged in or had previously engaged in casual sex, the majority now emphasized the importance of emotional connection in their sexual relationships, especially now that they were older. Again, this approach distanced them from the typical man, a ''slimeball'' (Dellinger 2004) who was only out for sex and didn't appreciate women as individuals. As Pascoe (2007) found, in one-on-one interactions, men frequently take pains to emphasize how they are more respectful of women than men in general, even if they then replicate disrespect in group settings. Many prefaced their statements by saying, ''I'm not like other men . . . .'' Gavin reported that he stopped having sex with a woman he was dating because he felt the emotional relationship wasn't developing fast enough: ''We'd had sex, which I consider to be very serious . . . . [I said,] 'I can't be having sex with you and then feel like I hardly know you' . . . . [S]ex kinda means you're in love or it's kinda serious. The sort of thing that we were, you know, not super close, but having sex, is weird for me.'' Christopher said, ''And for me, if I'm going to be

with somebody, I'm going to invest a lot emotionally. I'm not like a casual sex person, because if I'm going to get that close to somebody, I really care about them. And it's like sharing a moment. I'm not just like getting off . . . ." Paul said,

> I just wish there were more of a focus on how, you know, love is really hard, that commitment is hard, and relationships are serious and you can't just treat people as objects, you know, you can't just hook up and use people to have fun and then disregard them because there are always long term consequences of that. So I guess my focus is on love rather than—love and commitment rather than sex for recreational fun, hooking up and all that stuff.

In addition, all but a couple of the men emphasized that they found commitment more rewarding than casual sex. Henry, age 28, a computer programmer, said, "I wanted a very serious committed relationship in the sense of like, 'I'm committed to this person. I really wanna date this person. I wanna spend a lot of time with her.' I was not happy being single at all. I do not like being single at all." Jake said, "I didn't want to get back into that casual dating sex thing. I did it. Ok, I saw that lifestyle. It's not good. I mean it's enjoyable . . . . [but a] committed relationship beats it hands down. Hands down. Quality of life is so much higher." Peter, who had engaged in frequent casual sex in his twenties, made a similar point when discussing a long-term relationship that was in the process of ending: "I've never felt so loved in my life. I think that's something I needed. I never recognized that . . . . I really enjoyed that. I learned also that I'm capable of loving and being nurturing towards someone." Rather than return to casual sex, he expressed the hope of finding another long-term relationship, but with someone more compatible. In this manner, men's narratives about commitment were a far cry from the common narrative in the media that men shy away from commitment and emotional intimacy in favor of casual hookups and women must scheme to obtain an exclusive relationship (Geller 2001).

Many of the men also eschewed their role as both the dominant partner and the initiator and readily admitted that their partners' desires often established the pace of the relationship. Christopher didn't want to rush in to a sexual relationship with his current girlfriend: "[W]hen we first started dating, we were talking about things and I was like, 'Hey, let's keep things PG-13 for a while.' And she was like, 'Okay, I'm down with that.'" According to Christopher, he wanted to wait longer, but she wanted to have sex on their fourth date: "She seriously threw herself at me. She was like, 'Forget that PG-13 shit. Yeah, I mean, she was not going to take no for an answer. But it was, I don't know, it wasn't really, it was a bit early." What might have been understood as coercive sex had the roles been reversed was instead experienced as an assertive woman who knew what she wanted.

The timing of the marriage proposal, in particular, was heavily influenced by women, with men's accounts of how they came about very similar to women's (Lamont 2014). Mark said, "We had discussed getting engaged, but then I starting getting pressure. She brought it up a lot. She picked out the ring, she designed it, and

then she let me know when I could purchase it. She even let me know I was expected to propose on a specific weekend." Dave, who also planned to propose, reported a similar situation: "She put a deadline on me proposing. One night she was stressed out because the deadline was approaching and was losing it in a meltdown. So I proposed right then and there." William, whose ex-fiancé, had told him to plan a dinner party and propose to her in front of her friends, said, "I planned this dinner party and got down on one knee and proposed and she acted surprised." Men didn't express much concern that women were influencing the timing of the marriage proposal. Indeed, this approach did two things for the men. First, they were able to demonstrate their comfort with commitment, again distancing themselves from the image of the typical male "commitmentphobe." Most said that they had been planning to propose eventually, so it wasn't a concern *when* it actually happened. Second, it allowed them to show that they didn't mind a woman in the driver's seat. As such, almost all the men said that they would be fine with a woman proposing. As Brad said, "I'd be open to being proposed to. Again, that would just reaffirm the type of woman I'm attracted to, a strong, independent, so yeah, I'm open to it." Of the few who expressed reluctance, most discussed it as something fun that they wanted to do, but not as their right. These findings are in contrast to Sassler and Miller's (2011) study of working-class men and women, indicating that middle-class men may very well be more open to women establishing the level of commitment, even though it remains superficially framed as the man asking the woman for marriage.

Finally, a number of men even emphasized their acceptance of supposed undesirable physical traits in women as evidence that they were not superficial, but instead progressive and focused on what was important in a partner. While describing an ex-girlfriend, Gavin said, "She was cute, and I came to appreciate her more. But she was probably the least attractive [woman I dated]. She didn't have the most attractive face or nothing really distinguishing about her. And didn't dress really well . . . . Sort of ordinary looking . . . . It wasn't a selling point." Instead, he emphasized that he was drawn to her because, "She was book smart. She was probably the sort of book smartest girl I ever dated." And Dave said of his current wife, "I will never tell her this. She's not the most beautiful woman I could have got. But that doesn't matter." Rather, he was attracted to her because she's "funny," "gregarious," "good with people," and "forgiving." Mateo, age 33, a high school teacher, said that he felt like his ex-wife had all the physical specifications that he needed, but that he wasn't as physically attracted to her as he could have been due to how she presented herself: "She was super skinny, which was a plus. Physically she was pretty, she just didn't try . . . . She wore really baggy jeans and baggy shirts. She hardly ever put on makeup. I think it's important that we try to look our best . . . .I didn't need her to do a 10, but the difference between a 0 and a 2 would be nice." Still, he felt other stuff (such as her personality) outweighed her appearance. Yet, while the argument made was that appearance was not important, the implication was that appearance was indeed important, but that they were

enlightened enough to know that other traits were more important and thus were willing to "settle" for less than they deserved in terms of appearance.

Still, there were a few men who insisted on conventional notions of female beauty in their partners. Ryan asked out his current girlfriend because they had similar interests in computers, gaming, and comics, which he thought was rare in women. Yet, he enforced a particular type of appearance. Ryan described his girlfriend as "normal sized," but trying to lose weight because he wanted her to be skinny: "I do like a thin woman so she has to stay thin . . . . I try to be nice about it, but I don't believe it's right to hold back. She's really nice about it. She's trying." Ryan framed his request for his girlfriend to lose weight as an example of the value he placed on honesty and communication in his relationships. In addition, men who wanted a particular body type simply reframed their desire in terms of health and physical fitness to distance themselves from men's perceived superficiality. In this manner, men were able to enforce traditional norms without acknowledging their behavior as such.

Justifications for Inequality

Even though the majority of the men in this study provided egalitarian narratives and distanced themselves from the image of the stereotypical man, gender inequalities did emerge in their relationships. Since this contradicted their understandings of themselves as progressive men, they had to find ways to reconcile their behaviors with their identities. Thus, the men took three approaches. First, they emphasized their desire to take care of women. This approach relies on understandings of gender difference, but in a manner that allows men to continue to view themselves as "good guys." Second, they created dubious narratives of equality reminiscent of Hochschild's (1989) findings, in which inequality went unrecognized and was recast as fairness. Finally, when men did acknowledge an inequality, they emphasized all the ways in which they *were* egalitarian to make the issue seem less relevant. Thus, the egalitarian identity that they had constructed allowed them to perpetuate inequality in other forms.

While the majority of the men resisted the image of the man as the sole breadwinner, they were less ambivalent about the symbolic representation of this in their dating lives and relationships. As previous research shows, symbolic inequalities are less likely to be questioned than others because they are viewed as mere convention (Hamilton, Geist, and Powell 2011) and reflect a positive, although sexist, attitude toward women (Glick and Fiske 1996). Indeed, payment for dates was viewed as a kind gesture that men could do for women and reflected role expectations that they took seriously. Matthew said, "I'm not against her paying some of the time, but I would probably want to pay most of the time. I think it goes back to the me wanting to show my gentlemanly chivalrous side that I wanted to be the provider or at least willing to take care if you want." Brad made a similar point, "I just think it's a generally accepted norm. I think it would be hard for me to

actually allow my date to pay on the first date or to try to pay. I just think it's such a traditional norm that I think I'd fulfill it out of a gentleman's norm." Jeremy even framed paying for dates as a feminist gesture in order to compensate for the wage gap:

> So paying for things because of chivalry, what I mean is that like it happens that I'm making enough money to be able to pay for it. And that I'm intellectually aware of the fact that there's a pay gap in this country. And like I think the *New York Times* had an article a few years ago about the difference between men's money and women's money, so I guess it was some sort of meme or something in New York in the dating scene a couple years ago. So the pay gap is conceptualized like men's money is worth more than women's money . . . . So basically I feel like if I'm initiating the date especially then I should be willing to pay for, I should be able to pay for it, and I should just be considerate. If she wants to pay, I don't want her to feel uncomfortable, so of course if she wants to pay, I'm going to welcome her paying for her share. But in general I want to live a life as like a male feminist ally.

Because both men and women saw these types of symbolic gestures in a positive light, men didn't feel the same pressures to be egalitarian in this manner. Women understood the practice as a sign that they were special and cared for, consistent with research that shows that women are less likely to challenge unequal practices that position them in a positive light (Becker and Wright 2011). Thus, men were able to engage in this practice while retaining their understanding of themselves as nice, caring, and respectful guys, again in contrast to men who use and abuse and throw away.

Unfortunately, this approach to gender norms, which Glick and Fiske (1996) refer to as benevolent sexism, uses positive attitudes toward women to justify restricted roles for them and often masks hostility for women who don't conform to gendered expectations. For example, Gavin said, "I always offered, and I always probably did pay in those couple of dates I was doing around that time." But when confronted with the hypothetical of dating a woman with more sexual experience, he said, "That's been tough for me. Like I'm insecure about that. I prefer being in a situation where I'm more experienced. There is a number [of former sexual partners] at which point I go, like, whoa."

Only a few of the men strongly resisted paying for dates and this was especially true of the first date, when every man said that he was willing to pay. Jake was one of the men who took a firmer stance:

> 50-50. I'm a dutch guy. Because of the type of women I'm attracted to, they usually insist on paying every other time, like it's a point of pride to them. Like don't act like you're taking me out. I want to hang out with you too and this is my choice so don't act like you're buying my company by taking me out. It was a very independent woman thing for sure. And I was like, thank you. That's what I like about you . . . . That goes right in line with my theory of the person I consider my equal. Just because I carry the penis does not mean that I need to buy your food for you. You're a woman, you're

educated or want to be educated, you want to be independent, take your stance .... If every time we went out to dinner, they just sat there and let me pay for them, I would look at them like have you no self respect?

But Jake was one of only a handful of men who linked symbolic inequality with gender inequality. Still, even Jake admitted that he always offered to pay for the first date and had no qualms about doing so. Thus, while a few of the men continued to resist the breadwinner role as symbolized through the payment of dates, the majority enjoyed paying for dates as it was easily framed as a positive, and caring, act to which women reacted well.

Next, many of the men reverted to dubious notions of equality when they moved in with or married their partners. Dave said,

> There are issues that we care about, where we will stake out a definite position. Like, she cares more about the décor of the house. I don't particularly care. I might stake out a position on some things. So therefore she gets the dominant say. I care more about . . . I'm better at finances than she is. So by that logic, I think that I should have a dominant say. And I will have a dominant say—I will argue stronger for that. With kids, I'm going to defer to her. Because she knows—

As Coltrane (1989) found, men allow women greater authority in areas that are perceived as feminine and are, therefore, undervalued. But Dave was able to use this division to discuss their relationship as egalitarian rather than question the relative value of decision making in each area and the assumptions around where women's expertise lies.

In addition, many of the men resisted an equal division of household labor, even though they either failed to see it as such or came up with excuses as to why it wasn't. Brad said,

> Once I moved in, I'm not a great cook, but I can do a couple things. I would do one or two meals a week and she would do the others. She doesn't have a dishwasher, so we both do dishes every night. I also hate doing dishes .... She'll do the dishes and I do the drying. [She] also does all the laundry. That's not something we ever communicated. She also does my laundry. I'm a grown man. I've done my laundry. I've lived on my own. It's something she does .... She does all the cleaning, too.

According to Brad, severe asthma and allergies gave him a "great excuse" not to divide the housework evenly, although this could not be applied to cooking, laundry, and dishes, of course. But he also attributed her behavior to her gender: "She's also a woman. She *loves* a clean house. I *like* a clean house, but I'm willing to let things go much longer than she is." Thus, a focus on gender difference and the desire of women to have a cleaner house also served as an excuse not to do half the housework. Gavin fell back on a similar justification. In spite of a hired house

cleaner to deal with housework, he and his girlfriend still had to negotiate the dishes and the laundry. Gavin said,

> She really, really hates having dirty dishes in the kitchen for whatever reason. It really bothers her. So she wants the dishes done right after dinner . . . . After dinner I want to just relax and watch TV, and I'll clean the dishes tomorrow. That's something I had to do as a kid [that I now reject] because I always hated doing that. Before dinner, maybe, like I'll just do whatever. But she needs to have them done right away. What ends up happening is she does them, I let her do them, and then she kinda resents that after a while. So there's that kind of thing. And she'll do the laundry, it's sort of a nice thing to do, but eventually I'll just kind of let her do it . . . . So she'll just want to start doing the laundry all the time and get resentful. Or I'll say like, 'Hey, I really need T-shirts. I thought you said you were gonna do the laundry.' 'Cause she'll say she's gonna do it, but then can't. And she'll say, 'Well, you can do it.' I get that kind of [reaction]. But again, with the house cleaners, it's really down to dishes and laundry. And frankly, we can work those out.

Rather than address his girlfriend's desires as valid, he attributed her demands to a personality quirk and his desire to avoid these chores as mere preference, as well. In fact, he explicitly states that their division of labor isn't about gender: "I always looked up to strong women so it was never a hard leap for me to see women [as more than] people who just cooked and cleaned . . . . I don't like cooking, but it's not really a gender thing. Like [my girlfriend] loves to cook, she cooks all the time and it's sort of domestic, but it's like you don't have to, but I like it when you do and I'm not gonna do it." This narrative, in which his girlfriend's cooking was defined as a hobby, and his distaste of it was a personal preference, allowed him to justify his unequal share of household duties, while preserving his understanding of himself as a "feminist."

In addition, like Gavin, and consistent with Gerson (2010), many of the men in the study referenced housekeepers as the ideal solution to conflicts over the division of labor. This approach allowed men to shirk an opportunity to reject a gendered division of labor, while allowing them to view themselves as egalitarians. They failed to see their use of hired help as a continuation of gender inequality, but now with a classed and racial element, and, even with this help, they were unwilling to divide the remainder of the housework fairly. Finally, they relied on notions of fairness rather than equality to divide up household chores. This allowed men with greater incomes or workloads to divide the labor unequally. In a humorous turning of the tables, however, one man discussed his anger at how his wife used her greater earning power to hire someone and thus "buy her way out of" her share of the duties.

Finally, men stressed the many ways in which they were egalitarian in order to justify their preferences for certain gendered conventions. Christopher, for example, was adamant that his wife should take his last name: "Why are we married

then? You're not going to take my name? You know, you'll take my ring, you'll have my kids, but you won't take my name?" When I pushed him on why this was important to him, he said,

> Well, because it's a gender role. And it's a traditional gender role that I'm against being broken, personally speaking. Again, not like, I don't want to put down other people, but me, personally, there's some gender roles that I don't, I wouldn't mind being a stay-at-home dad, but I want her to have my last name. You know what I'm saying? Like I don't care if she makes more money than me, but [if you are just going to keep your name], why are we married then? Like a marriage is like you're bringing things together . . . . It's property. It's saying this belongs to me. It's why do you wear the ring, and you take the last name, it's that this is off limits, it's now mine.

Mateo, whose wife was pursuing a PhD and opted not to take his name, said, "I think it would have been a nice gesture to do it, even if she didn't want to, for all that I had done for her, but I understand why because I wouldn't have wanted to change mine either." It was important to him, however, that their daughter be given his last name: "I feel like we had already broken tradition a little bit with her keeping her last name. At one point, we did discuss giving her last name, but I just felt like that's weird. Ok, fine, you don't have last name, but at least give it to my daughter." Thus, while men were able to acknowledge the inequality of family names, they were unable to shed the discomfort that goes with bucking tradition. There was a sense that men could only be expected to change so much. At the same time, gender norms became more important as relationships turned familial. Suddenly, roles and obligations took on greater significance to men as they became less willing to buck with the symbolic traditions that established men as the heads of households.

In addition, by focusing on these desires as personal preferences and individual choices, rather than as a reflection of gender inequality, they were able to dismiss the implications of said choices. Gavin said, "I've always sort of wanted the person to change her last name. It was a traditional way to do things, I thought it was romantic; it was nice to have the same last name. So anyway, it's one of those things where we decided, this is okay for us because we liked it and it's romantic. But we don't think someone *has* to do that." Thus, as previous studies have shown (Lamont 2014; Gerson 2010; Stone 2007), narratives of choice serve as a form of ideological work to justify unequal outcomes while preserving egalitarian identities. But when "cornered," men made light out of the situation in a manner that allowed them to dismiss concerns and end the conversation. Christopher said, "I'm the man. See? And in my double standard, sexist world, that's how it works. It's not rational, but I understand it. I mean I'm admitting to it at least. I'm not going to try to dance around it. It is sexist. It's a double standard and I'm okay with it." Gavin took the same approach, "It's totally arbitrary and largely unfair. I'll cop to that." In this manner, men acknowledged the pattern of gender inequality

that persists across society from which they consistently benefited as soon as they chose to, while failing to challenge their personal complicity.

Conclusions

This study shows how college-educated men construct their masculinity in the context of their romantic relationships. Professional men, in particular, have been increasingly exposed to egalitarian ideals, especially as they seek to form relationships with highly accomplished professional women who aim for relationships in which they share work and family responsibilities with their partners (Gerson 2010). As a result, the men in this study provide narratives of a progressive, egalitarian masculinity. They express a desire for accomplished, ambitious women, thereby signifying their acceptance of and security with an equal partner. They express solidarity with feminists, reject the notion that women should stay at home, and even toy with the idea that they might stay home themselves. The men also contrast their own behaviors and beliefs with the stereotypical image of the domineering, emotionally unavailable, and promiscuous man. Not only are they sensitive to women's feelings and respect their boundaries, they also seek out commitment and emotional intimacy, reject superficial evaluations of women, and are more than happy to allow women to take the lead in relationships. These changes are not insignificant and indicate an increasingly egalitarian approach to courtship and relationships among middle-class men.

However, these egalitarian narratives also allow persistent gender inequalities to function within their relationships as men fail to view themselves as only partially changed. While the men in this study were willing to acknowledge gender inequality as a structural feature of society affecting the behavioral expectations of women and men in relationships, their individual-level discourses obscure how they are privileged by these norms within their own relationships. Unequal practices then get dismissed as personal preference, given their so-called progressive views, or recast in a positive light, again confirming their understandings of themselves as respectful of women. In this manner, I argue that egalitarian narratives serve as a form of identity work that allows men to think of themselves as better than the average man without having to fully challenge gender inequality. Consistent with previous research, privileged men continue to "talk the talk," but fail to "walk the walk," as progressive definitions of manhood remain compatible with male privilege (Bridges 2014; Pyke 1996). In particular, egalitarian narratives may actually serve to perpetuate gender inequality, demonstrating, as Messerschmidt (2010) argues, that progressive masculinities not only fail to challenge gender inequality, but allow it to function in hard to recognize, yet still pernicious, ways.

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