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The Vulnerability of the Relational Self: The Implications of Ideals of Gender and Romance for Female Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence

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The battered woman's response to danger ... cannot be understood in a vacuum ... but was molded by the passivity in which women have been trained. A battered woman who does not leave her husband, seek help, or fight back is behaving according to societal expectations. (Crocker 135)

No subject posits itself spontaneously and at once as the inessential from the outset; it is not the Other who, defining itself as the Other, defines the One; the Other is posited as Other by the One positing itself as One. But in order for the Other not to turn into the One, the Other has to submit to this foreign point of view. Where does this submission in woman come from? ... Women could not even dream of exterminating males. The tie that binds her to her oppressors is unlike any other. ... This is the fundamental characteristic of woman: she is the Other at the heart of a whole whose two components are necessary to each other (Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* 7–9).

Introduction

In the last few decades, feminists have argued that sexual assault should be understood, not as an aberration of cultural norms, but rather as an expression of their fulfillment (see Buchwald, Fletcher, and Roth; Hinck and Thomas; Katz). Indeed, the term “rape culture,” that is, the celebration of untamed male sexual aggression and domination (Katz 149), has made itself into the mainstream. Recently, rape cases on select college campuses have been thrust into the national spotlight and questioning of victim blaming tendencies is on the rise (see Dockterman; Krakauer). Intimate partner violence (IPV),¹ however, has been less focal in public debates and media coverage in the past decade. Victims of IPV today are viewed with a mixture of perplexity and pity. Consider former Ravens football player Ray Rice's wife, Janay, for example. Why an intelligent young woman would marry the man who knocked her unconscious and then dragged her out of an elevator one month after the attack seems to be beyond understanding. Like their abusers, women like Rice are viewed as deviant. Against such perceptions, I

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¹Intimate partner violence will be abbreviated to IPV in the rest of the essay.

propose that discourses regarding masculinity, femininity, and the structure of ideal relationships actually set the stage for women to stay in abusive relationships. Our cultural discourses regarding gender and romance are interwoven with notions of violence and inequality; thus, a woman's ability to separate abuse from romance is thrown into question. Furthermore, the discourses that mediate a woman's self-understanding as a woman in love give her few resources through which she could assert herself. I will seek to show how women are actually acting out their feminine destiny by capitulating to abuse.

This article consists of two parts. First, in order to understand the phenomenon of IPV it is necessary to understand how identity is mediated and sustained by social-historical discourses regarding self-other relations. To this end, the first section consists of Simone de Beauvoir's discussion of the ways in which identity is an expression of the social-historical world. In addition, Beauvoir's theory that selfhood emerges in the struggle for recognition will also be called on to help explain the tie between romantic partners. Second, I will present six cultural discourses that prime women to accept IPV. Last, I will point to first person descriptions of experience from survivors of IPV wherein we find these discourses at work.

This article is not meant to be an exhaustive explanation of why women stay in relationships of IPV. A multitude of different factors are at work in each survivor's story. Childhood abuse or neglect, past abusive relationships, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), fear of retaliation, gas-lighting, fears surrounding one's children, traumatic bonding, and unwillingness to give up on the relationship, and so on must all be considered when investigating why women stay (e.g., see Anderson and Saunders; Griffing et al.; Herman; Peled et al.). My focus is merely on the way in which cultural discourses surrounding masculinity, femininity, and romantic relationships create an overall situation of feminine submissiveness and acceptance of domination.

Recognition, mediation, and identity in the work of Simone de Beauvoir

The theme of social recognition features prominently in Beauvoir's philosophical and literary works. It is worth noting that Hegel's "each consciousness seeks the death of the other" is the quotation that opens her philosophical novel *She Came to Stay* (1943), written one year before her first philosophical essay "Pyrrhus and Cineas." A decade later, in the introduction to her seminal feminist work, *The Second Sex* (1952), she writes: "The category of *Other* is as original as consciousness itself ... [it] can be found in the most primitive societies ... alterity is the fundamental category of human thought. No group ever defines itself as One without immediately setting up the Other opposite itself" (*Beauvoir, The Second Sex* 6; emphasis in original). Thus, for Beauvoir, following Hegel, there is no fully formed or self-sustaining self that

then appeals to the Other; instead, the self constitutes itself through its relation to the Other. Such a model of selfhood makes the struggle for recognition central.

While our identity is relational, Beauvoir retains a belief in individual agency. She affirms the fundamental ambiguity of the human condition; rather than total dependence or utter independence, she writes that we find ourselves inheriting a mixture of the two. She characterizes the independent dependence of human reality as that which is “at once *Mitsein* and separation” (Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* 57).

Beauvoir stresses repeatedly in *The Second Sex* that human existence is mediated (88). Following Hegel, spirit reaches self-consciousness through the mediation of others. While at first the self is hostile to the fact that the other has the power to confer meaning on its facticity, it realizes that if the other is destroyed, it loses the possibility to get itself back from the other. Beauvoir, echoes this notion in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*: “... by taking the world away from me, others also give it to me ...” (71). The self is not sovereign; it must appeal to others for recognition.

Given Beauvoir’s view that the Other’s recognition is integral to the individual’s self-conception, *The Second Sex* can be read as concretizing this claim. She does this by showing how the patterns of self-other interactions, especially those between men and women, are grounded in historical situations. One’s situation, for Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, is comprised of one’s social roles within public and private realms, material opportunities, political rights, and cultural discourses. Broadly, *The Second Sex* demonstrates the ways in which human existence, in particular female existence, is mediated by these variables (88). Beauvoir’s guiding question throughout is, “what about woman’s historical situation led her to occupy the role of Other to man?” and the text itself provides a model of the ways that social discourses and concrete historical positions heavily determine the situation out of which identity arises.

More specifically, Beauvoir’s analysis of the psychological ties between men and women in *The Second Sex* can be used to illustrate the ways in which self-other relations determine the self. These are given in vivid detail in Beauvoir’s descriptions, gathered from interviews with women and examples from literature. For example, summarizing her findings with regard to man’s relation to woman, Beauvoir writes:

A husband looks for himself in his wife ... he seeks in her the myth of his virility, his sovereignty, his unmediated reality... . But he himself is a slave to his double: what effort to build up an image in which he is always in danger! After all it is founded on the capricious freedom of Woman. Man is consumed by the concern to appear male, important, superior. He play acts so that others will play act with him. (*The Second Sex* 756)

In passages describing woman, Beauvoir writes, “She does not separate man’s desire from love of her own self” (350). Or, similarly: “[Woman] wants to feel like a woman for her own personal satisfaction. She only succeeds in accepting herself from the perspective of both the present and the past by combining the life she has made for herself with the destiny prepared for her by her mother, her childhood games, and her adolescent fantasies” (725). While these rich passages illustrate how men and women possess the deep-seated desire to be recognized by each other, they also illustrate how the way in which each wants to be recognized depends on the social discourses of his or her situation. Both quotations describe individuals who act in bad faith by seeking confirmation of a fixed image of themselves from the Other. But the deeper point is that the weight of one’s situation compels one to relate to oneself by seeking recognition of these discourses from the Other. This comes out strongly in the first line of the latter quotation: “[Woman] wants to feel like a woman for her own personal satisfaction.” While we may think of discourses as thought patterns that we can enter into at will, Beauvoir suggests that the discourses are internalized to such a degree that woman’s desires propel her to live them out; they “satisfy” her in her core.

Beauvoir privileges individual freedom, or transcendence, because she thinks that the possibility of ethics rests on one’s capacity to choose the right course of action in every new situation. She also locates authenticity in assuming one’s freedom; an authentic self-relation occurs only when one glimpses oneself in one’s “free” act (Beauvoir, *The Ethics* 156). However, the implication of such a view when put into relation with the two preceding passages is that projects are not entirely of the individual’s own making; the projects themselves are influenced by these same discourses. Moreover, we saw above that one’s projects are only made meaningful when they are affirmed by others. Therefore, regardless of whether we speak of an authentic form of existence or one that seeks to affirm a fixed image of oneself, identity emerges in relation to the discourses and practices of one’s situation and is radically dependent on the whims of the Other; the self is thus utterly vulnerable. We see this clearly in the passage above when fulfillment is described as hinging on woman’s free projects as well as the degree to which she lives out her role as “woman.” If we think of the way that the self “gets itself back from the Other,” in the scenario that Beauvoir presents, than woman does not just seek recognition of “the life she has prepared for herself”; she seeks recognition on the basis of discourses of femininity.

In the “History” and “Myths” sections of the *Second Sex*, Beauvoir writes that “there is no ideological revolution more important in the primitive period than the one replacing matrilineal descent with agnation” because it elevates man’s status to absolute master while relegating woman to the role of eternal servant. At this moment when man is identified as the sovereign possessor and dispenser of life to each generation, “when he asserts himself

as subject and freedom,” woman’s existence becomes “Other” and “mediatory” (*The Second Sex* 87–88). Woman, seen as matter and passivity, becomes a convenient placeholder for all of the traits that man does not want to claim; she is the object against which man experiences the power of his will.

Beauvoir’s project in *The Second Sex* involves describing the numerous, contradictory myths that shape the idea of femininity throughout history. The problem that Beauvoir stumbles on is that despite feminism’s triumphs, the concept of femininity carries historical meanings and “the individual is not free to shape [it] at will” (*The Second Sex* 724). One of the myths, or discourses, in question for our purposes is precisely the notion that woman is the being who acts in service to man’s desires. In order to fulfill her identity as a woman she must win man’s approval. Throughout the *Second Sex*, Beauvoir emphasizes that women do not by nature strive to be objects; but, rather, their situation tends to make them inessential. Part of a woman’s situation is the bombardment of messages and images that she receives regarding what it is to be a “real woman.” These myths become culturally engrained beginning in childhood. It is impossible to reduce the problem to a mere discourse that women can either buy into or discard because the myth is part of a woman’s very identity. Woman recognizes herself in these discourses and finds satisfaction in living them out. Therefore, any attempt to simply eradicate such myths runs the risk of unraveling a woman’s very identity.

Six discourses

Now that we have become familiar with Beauvoir’s thesis that women’s historical situation causes them to seek recognition as objects, I will now unpack specific cultural discourses that structure male-female interactions. First, I will explore discourses pertaining to masculinity and femininity, then I will turn to discourses regarding ideal romantic relationships. In order to highlight the long history of these discourses in the West, I will examine texts from the eighteenth century as well as twentieth- and twenty-first-century texts. Last, I will demonstrate examples of these discourses in testimonies of survivors of IPV.

Masculinity, femininity, and complementarity in the eighteenth century: Discourse #1: Woman charms and refines man

This discourse appears in two eighteenth-century texts by Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (1764) and “The Character of the Sexes,” which appears in *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1798). While Kant is a monumental figure in the Western philosophical tradition, arguably best known for his critical turn as well as his

moral philosophy, his writings on gender differences are less well known. In these essays, Kant delineates essential and natural differences between men and women: men are termed the “noble sex” while women are the “beautiful sex.” Men and women have opposing, and ultimately *complementary*, characteristics. While man is coarse and unrefined, (Kant, *Observations* 48) woman is “delicate,” “cheerful,” and “modest” (41, 48). The very countenance of the male, when he is a perfect instance of the sublime, is one of seriousness and even rigidity. The female’s look, by contrast, is one that literally “shines” with “mirth” (16).

Kant goes on to discuss gendered forms of understanding. Women’s reasoning abilities are connected with sensation and moral feeling about particular situations whereas men’s ways of reasoning are connected to the intellect and general and abstract principles (*Observations* 36–38). Men are capable of “genuine,” or noble virtue, which is based on reason and principles, while women are capable of manifesting “adopted,” or beautiful virtue, which rests on benevolence, sympathy, and complaisance (24–25, 39).

According to Kant, both men and women should strive to become perfect instances of their sex, but, they depend on each other’s recognition to reach this perfection. For example, woman ought to strive to be loved by man for her beautiful nature, while her greatest failure would be to be perceived as disgusting or haughty. Man, on the other hand, should seek to be esteemed by woman (and other men) for his noble character, while his greatest failure would be to be called a fool (*Observations* 40, 48–49). Indeed, Kant writes that, in themselves, sublime characteristics arouse esteem while beautiful ones arouse love (20). Returning to physical differences and corresponding sentiments, Kant writes that the male’s larger stature inspires respect, while a smaller one inspires intimacy (20). Mutual appreciation of each other’s character, thus, seems fated to be a non-existent possibility in Kant’s notion of love between the sexes; love does not appear reciprocal, and it precludes respect. Kant’s remarks concerning intimacy leave the question open as to whether or not intimacy is reciprocal either. The ideal relationship is lopsided: the woman *respects* man while the man *loves* woman.

What stands out in Kant’s essays is that his descriptions of women are always in reference to how such characteristics are beneficial or harmful to men. In particular, Kant repeatedly describes women as “refining” man’s coarser nature with their own delicate and kind demeanor. In “The Character of the Sexes,” Kant writes that women are, in fact, capable of arousing respect through their natural ability to “restrain all man’s importunities,” *but* Kant is quick to add that the female sex intrinsically “claims the privilege of respect even without deserving it” (220). While respect may be possible, it is only inspired when woman is able to influence man’s behaviors. Furthermore, women’s natural charms are effective in motivating man to indulge her wishes. Kant writes of a “secret power of enchantment by which she makes

our passion inclined to a judgment that is favorable for her” (*Observations* 35). He even speaks of woman’s tendency to instigate conflict in the marital union and her ability to dominate man through her charms: “she does not shy away from domestic strife which she carries on with her tongue, and for which Nature has provided her with loquacity and passionate eloquence, which together disarm the man” (Kant, “Character” 217). Here, woman is presented as one who wields power and influence. However, such behaviors are not held up as examples of feminine excellence. Instead, Kant writes that woman’s virtue and part of her perfection as woman lies in her complaisance. Basically, woman captivates, charms, and refines man’s coarseness through her passivity and kindness. In Kant’s words, she is “beautiful and engaging, and that is enough” (*Observations* 48). Enough, for man, that is.

Since true virtue depends on general principles, Kant writes that woman relies on man’s guidance in order to be truly virtuous. Her complaisance is necessary:

The second sort of kindly feeling which is to be sure beautiful and lovable but still not the foundation of a genuine virtue is complaisance: an inclination to make ourselves agreeable to others through friendliness, through acquiescence to their demands, and through conformity of our conduct to their dispositions... . [T]he malleability of such a heart is kindly. Yet it is so far from being a virtue that unless higher principles set bounds for it and weaken it, all sorts of vices may spring from it. (*Observations* 23–24)

It is also interesting to note that complaisance also inspires love. Woman finds herself in a truly difficult position here. In order to be loveable and virtuous, woman must exhibit complaisance. However, she is also naturally equipped to refine both man’s coarseness as well as society in general (“Character” 219). She thus appears to influence others through her mere feminine being; somehow her passivity actively influences men. For Kant, femininity is childlike; perhaps the image of the adorable child holds together these contradictory aims (i.e., passive complaisance and active “refinement” through charm):

Nature made women ... demand gentle and polite treatment from men, so that they would find themselves imperceptibly fettered by a child due to their own magnanimity and they would find themselves brought, if not quite to morality itself, then at least to that which cloaks it, moral behavior, which is the preparation and introduction to morality. (“Character” 220–21)

While woman needs man’s guidance in order to be virtuous (i.e., bound by principles), she is naturally endowed with moral *feeling*. Kant explains that woman has a refining effect on man; she leads him toward morality.

In “The Character of the Sexes,” Kant argues that the differences between the sexes are in place in order to meet certain natural ends. The relationship

of inequality between the two is considered natural and necessary in order to preserve an enduring union:

A harmonious and indissoluble union cannot be achieved through the random combination of two persons. One partner must subject himself to the other, and, alternately, one must be superior to the other in something, so that he can dominate or rule... . In the interest of the progress of culture, one partner must be superior to the other in a heterogeneous way. The man must be superior to the woman in respect to his physical strength and courage, while the woman must be superior to the man in respect to her natural talent for mastering his desire for her. (216)

There is clearly an asymmetry within the complementarity. Again, woman's "superiority" only exists in relation to man's desires. What is more, the woman, according to Kant, exercises her power by making herself a desirable object. Ever weary of losing her security if her spouse should die, women strive to be desirable to all men of means as a precautionary measure. Kant writes, "The man develops his own taste while the woman makes herself an object of everybody's taste" ("Character" 222). She is naturally predetermined to appeal to man; she has a knack for influencing his feelings toward her. While the union benefits from the asymmetrical complementarity, Kant takes no pains to hide that the position of the noble sex is clearly more desirable than that of the beautiful. He admits that while women with means openly wish that they were men so that they might exercise their freedom with "freer latitude," "no man, however, would want to be a woman" (221).

Masculinity in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: Discourses #2 and #3: Man is both gentleman and beast and masculinity is tied to the capacity to act violently

The reader may object at this point that the former discourses are simply products of Kant's time. However, Susan Bordo, a contemporary feminist philosopher, demonstrates instances of a similar discourse regarding the unrefined man and the woman who can tame him in the late 1990s. In *The Male Body: A New Look at Men in Public and in Private* (1999), Bordo suggests that boys and men today face a double-bind in which they are expected to be both beasts—that is, aggressive, powerful, and ruthless—and gentlemen—that is, caring and respectful of women's wishes (234, 242). Upon closer inspection, the seeds of this image are already within Kant's picture of the sexes. The noble sex is described as rigid, coarse, and unrefined. However, he bends to the beautiful sex's charm; she leads him to "moral decency." Bordo argues that sports culture, especially high school, college, and professional football, encourages men to consider their own bodies as "fierce, unstoppable force[s] of nature" (234). The image of the uncivilized, animalistic male has thus become a cultural icon that possesses "magnetic appeal" (235). Bordo alludes to an episode from the '90s sitcom

Ally McBeal, where the take away message about masculinity is “not ‘Men are animals; if you want one of them, you’re just going to have to learn to live with it,’ but ‘Men are animals. And ain’t it just grand!’” (235) Here we glimpse a celebration of the untamed male.

Bordo’s conception of the ideal of masculinity at the end of the twentieth century departs from Kant’s “noble sex” in that man is not only coarse, compared to the refined beautiful sex, but now masculinity is powerfully linked to his capacity for violence. He is admired for his aggression, while, at the same time, he is required to respect woman’s wishes. Bordo argues that the difficulty of embodying both is covered over by fictional characters in movies and books like Tarzan, the Beast (from *Beauty and the Beast*), and Mel Gibson’s *Braveheart*, for example (242–43). Interwoven into the double-bind is the notion that a special woman can tame the beast. She is thus, in a way, responsible for controlling his beastly nature; one implication of this dynamic can be witnessed in victim-blaming rhetoric.

In addition to fictional characters, Bordo examines the way that athletes, especially boxers, football and basketball players, are rewarded and praised for their raw power. Citing celebrated athletes who committed sexual assaults like Mike Tyson and the Glen Ridge high school football players convicted of gang rape, she argues that the aggression that is praised on the field in many instances spills out into athletes’ interactions with women outside the field (236–38). In Bordo’s view, we, as a culture, should not be taken aback when high profile athletes are charged with sexual assault more frequently than “any other group of financially and socially successful males” (236). However, fictional gentleman-beast characters replayed ad nauseam continue to hold the contradiction of being both a beast and a gentleman together: “That’s the lie ... that a culture can celebrate untamed male aggression and keep it nicely, sexually contained at the same time” (236).

The sex appeal of the untamed male is dramatically expressed in the book and movie series *Twilight*, according to another contemporary feminist philosopher, Bonnie Mann. In the series, the main character, Bella, attracts and then keeps Edward the vampire’s aggression at bay through her fragility, kindness, and self-sacrifice (Mann 133). Significantly, when Bella first learns that Edward is a vampire, she does not run away, but remains committed to the relationship, even though she knows that Edward is dangerous and could very well kill her. Choosing to see Edward’s constant surveillance as an expression of his desire to protect her and failing to problematize Edward’s secrecy and habit of deciding what they will do without asking for Bella’s input, Bella only sees a gentlemanly beast who is enthralled with her. Similar to Tarzan and William Wallace, Edward holds together the seeming contradictions of being both a gentleman and a beast: his good manners and thoughtful nature appear alongside displays of his violent vampire nature. It’s important to note that the beast discourse is not simply the ugly side of

the gentleman; the beast's romantic appeal is tied to his capacity to act violently, which is restrained by his gentlemanly nature.

While Kant affirms male strength and stature, in comparison to woman's, he only briefly mentions man's capacity for violence. He does so in conjunction with his argument that conjugal love is naturally defended by violence:

Conjugal love, however, is by its nature intolerant. Women occasionally ridicule this intolerance, but, as has already been mentioned above, they do so in jest; because if a husband would be tolerant and lenient toward the incursion of a stranger into his own rights, the result would be contempt aroused in his wife and also hatred toward such a husband. ("Character" 224)

Kant asserts that women expect men to defend them from a stranger's advances. This seems to remain such a common assumption in contemporary times that it is almost too obvious to state. Men must be capable of defending their female companions with violence and both men and women are aware of this expectation. When we discussed Bordo in my undergraduate Philosophy of Love and Sex class, one of the male students asked the female students if they would expect their male partner to stand up for them, with violence if need be, if they were insulted or threatened by another man. All of the female students who responded agreed that they would want their date to defend their honor, violently if need be. The covered over assumption behind valuing the man's capacity and willingness to act violently, if the need arises, seems to be that women are in need of male defense and incapable of defending themselves.

Discourse #4: "The pleasing woman" in the twenty-first century

Lynn Phillips, another contemporary feminist author, explored young women's views on femininity and romantic relationships by conducting interviews with thirty college-age women. One of the common strands that ran throughout the young women's reflections is what Phillips terms the "Pleasing Woman" discourse. Surprisingly, this discourse seems to be taken straight out of Kant's reflections on femininity in the eighteenth century. Images of women embodying self-sacrificing, passive, pleasant, and "innocent" qualities appeared in the women's magazines that the participants read as they grew up. Such magazines offered articles with advice on how to "catch men" through coyness and passivity (Phillips 39). In her book, *Flirting with Danger: Young Women's Reflections on Sexuality and Domination* (2000), Phillips not only details the discourses that appeared in the interviews; she also remarks on which discourses were absent. For example, she writes that the notion that women could be sexual agents who seek the fulfillment of their own desires was missing: "The messages conveyed the notion that women's bodies are not the sites of active desire, but rather objects to be admired and kept under control" (40).

Phillips astutely notes that women “derive their sense of power” from being desired by men (39). Being too forward was considered off-putting and “slutty” (45). However, Phillips notes that her participants also received messages from a competing discourse, the “Together Woman,” which suggests that ideal women are actually self-assured, “in control,” and sexual agents who “know what they want” (47). Such an ideal is en vogue in the twenty-first century and is exemplified by strong and powerful female heroines in films like *Tomb Raider* and the 2000 version of *Charlie’s Angels*. While these characters are physically strong, their power misfires in that their very strength is performed for the male gaze. While women who embody this discourse may feel a sense of power over the men whom they captivate, their power is still dependent upon the whims of men. Thus, neither the “Pleasing Woman” nor the “Together Woman” discourse provides young women with an image of feminine agency.

The discourses that we have explored thus far reveal that women are expected to be both the gatekeeper and the inciter of men’s passions. Women are taught to experience their femininity and sexuality purely relationally (i.e., in response to men’s desires). This leads to self-objectification. In Phillips’s conversations with young women about their sexual experiences, many reported the sensation that they were watching intercourse unfold above and outside of their own bodies. In the words of one woman, she was “... so busy observing myself that I don’t even feel what I’m feeling” (108). Simone de Beauvoir writes in the 1940s about the consequences of such a dynamic: women are left to experience their bodies as objects of desire, which may lead to narcissistic tendencies or disassociation (*Second Sex* 321, 667).²

Women’s expectations for love in the twenty-first century: Discourses #5 and #6: “Love conquers all” and “the normal/danger dichotomy”

Now I will turn to two additional discourses that express women’s expectations regarding heterosexual relationships that also surfaced in Phillips’s interviews: “Love Conquers All” and the “Normal/Danger Dichotomy.” Last, I will examine first person accounts of survivors of IPV with an eye to how they express the former discourses.

The discourse “Love Conquers All,” expresses the notion that love can overcome any odds and is the ultimate fulfillment of female lived experience. Phillips writes that this discourse affirms that “finding the right man will somehow solve all of life’s problems” (73). We as individuals come to self-understanding by locating our place within cultural narratives. Indeed, it is unsurprising that women who have grown up with fairy tales, women’s

²See Beauvoir’s chapter on the “Narcissist” in *The Second Sex* (667–82).

magazines, and romantic comedies are in love with being in love. In many romantic and action movies alike, the female lead's main role is to be the alluring woman who is "chosen" by the lead man. A woman's role is to wait for the "one" who will complete her life. Despite the gains that women have made in the public realm, the need for a man's love remains an undeniable piece of feminine fulfillment. In the words of one of the interviewees, summarizing the messages she received from women's magazines growing up:

Even though they said in one place, "You can be self-reliable and strong and independent," they'd still have the articles about how love is great and how it's all really about relationships and men. That's what they all really come down to, I think, is that you do all these things, whether it's great recipes or how to lose twenty pounds or what to wear this season, it's that you do all these things to get a man, and then you'll be all set. (Phillips 75)

Significantly, the "Love Conquers All" discourse makes it difficult for women to acknowledge abuse. In a study of 20 female heterosexual survivors of domestic violence, Julia Wood identifies a romance narrative similar to Phillips's "Love Conquers All" in the women's reflections on their abusive relationships (250). Wood writes, "Infusing all women's accounts was a romance narrative ... which authorized specific beliefs that women used to sustain a coherent narrative of their relationships as viable and acceptable" (249). She notes that many of the interviewees were unwilling to let go of their fairy tale visions of what a relationship should be and were deeply puzzled about how aspects of fairy tale qualities of the ideal man could co-exist with violence. When the dissonance between the two surfaced, survivors often minimized the violence (Wood 243). While it is common for both abusers and survivors to minimize abuse (see Whiting et al.; Wood), the strength of the "Love Conquers All" discourse seems to be one contributing factor to survivors' minimization of the abuse that they suffered. One woman recounts the beginning of her relationship:

I wanted to feel loved and desired; he was obsessed with me... I created an image of the better life I would have with this man—a perfect panacea designed to escape some of my own problems, while oblivious to his shortcomings. I was so wedded to this illusion of a better life that I ignored the early warning signals. (Goetting 39–40)

While the failure to recognize warning signs is a complex issue, failing to see warning signals of abuse indicates the tremendous value our culture places on "happily ever after." The promise of a "better life" with her partner was blinding.

While the former account does not detail what the warning signs consisted of, with respect to warning signs in general, if men are expected to be

aggressive given discourses #2 (Man is Both Gentleman and Beast) and #3 (Masculinity is Tied to the Capacity to Act Violently), when they exhibit such behavior at home in the form of verbal outbursts or breaking things, women may be unlikely to see these behaviors as “red flags” of potential abuse. Instead, these actions only represent “boys being boys.” However, once the violence is directed at them, a struggle to make sense of—or explain away—the deviance ensues.

In another account from a survivor, the woman’s ability to recognize abuse was restricted and complicated by the fact that the abuser expressed his love for her. The fact that he had said “I love you” made her doubt her own perceptions about his worrisome behavior:

I know that I blocked out a lot of memories. He was verbally aggressive. Through—not, not in the first six months of the relationship, but it started the senior year ... he started to be a bit more verbally aggressive, but this was also at the time when he told me for the first time that he loved me. And, there was one instance where he slapped me on the leg, and it hurt me. And he convinced me that it wasn’t meant to be like that, saying my perception was wrong. I shouldn’t have felt hurt and there was only two of us in that situation, so I just kind of wrote it off. (Montalbano-Phelps 77)

The fact that this woman “kind of wrote it off,” does not appear so surprising given the cultural discourses that involve women both setting aside their own desires to please men and deferring to men’s opinions. We saw this behavior prized in Kant’s and Phillips’s discourses about the pleasing and accommodating ideal woman. The need for a man’s love and desire appears to be so strong that women are willing to question their own perceptions. In Wood’s study, survivors described their partners as men who exhibited romantic, caring behaviors, which were interspersed with seemingly anomalous verbal, physical, and sexual abuse. Confusion about the contradiction between the two was a persistent theme in their narratives. Survivors had difficulty letting the abuse overshadow the good parts of the relationship. Perhaps due to the their unwillingness to let go of the “Love Conquers All” discourse or the stigma of accepting the role of the battered woman, women attempted to defend their partners and showcase their good qualities in addition to the bad ones. One participant recalls: “Most of the time he was real nice and thoughtful and everything, so I just tried to put it [being hit in the face] into perspective.” Another reflects “Oh, but a week ago he was so nice” (Wood 251). As Wood notes, this testifies to the strength of romance narratives: “Women may also preserve the belief in a romance narrative by focusing on the times when their partners are loving and minimizing the times when they are not” (243). While the message that it’s never permissible for men to strike women undoubtedly circulates in the media, when physical violence is combined with romantic behaviors, while we may expect women to quickly leave the relationship, in actuality, the existence of the latter seems

to often overrule the former. While the “Love Conquers All” discourse is one factor that helps to shed light on why some women stay in abusive relationships, there are additional cultural discourses at work that can unpack this phenomenon.

Our culture has images of the “good guy” and the “bad guy,” but rarely do we see the two blurred together. Phillips writes that young women are taught that it is easy to tell apart the good from the bad; sadly, with the frequency of abuse from family members and date rape, it is not so unambiguous. While cautioned to be on the lookout for the “man in the bushes” and take precautions with strangers, young women receive few messages that cause them to suspect mistreatment from men they love. Phillips terms this cultural message the “Normal/Danger Dichotomy” discourse; reinforced by the legal system that only convicts men who commit overt and clear-cut crimes against women, this discourse states that there are only two kinds of men out there (i.e., good guys and bad guys). Phillips points out how such a view falsely dichotomizes “consent versus coercion, and normal versus deviant behavior” and thus misses all of the grey areas that male power operates within (52–53). In a culture with such rigid notions of the ideal man and woman, it is no wonder that women cannot make sense of their experience when they witness both the good and the bad together.

While the rugged and uncivilized cowboy image peppers movies and books, the idea of actual physical violence toward women is reserved for villains and low-lives. Alongside so many cultural images of the man who is capable of violence but keeps it contained, the fact that women are not given an image of the man who abuses his partner, aside from vilified ones, makes it difficult for women to comprehend their situations should they find themselves with an abusive partner who also exhibits gentlemanly qualities. One woman explains, “I didn’t leave ... because abuse wasn’t supposed to happen to women like me. ... A man would have to be a large, hairy, semiliterate alcoholic to be a wife beater, we all imagined—assuming that anyone ever gave the matter any thought” (Weiss 21). Here the abusive man—and the abused woman—were assumed to fit certain “types.” Recalling the earlier accounts of women who minimized their partner’s violent actions due to their co-existence with caring actions, it seems that women are lead to believe that abusive men would be easily recognizable and only violent (i.e., lacking any positive traits).

One of the recurring themes Wood found in the testimonies was the idea that the abuse each woman suffered was “not as bad as” unacceptable violent behaviors that they could imagine or that they had witnessed in other abusive relationships. Wood theorizes, “Against a constructed standard of what would be ‘bad enough’ to end a relationship, these women judged the violence inflicted on them as ‘not so bad’” (251). One survivor reflects:

... I thought like, what do you mean abuse, I've only been punched in the nose or had my face slapped or been pushed. And even when he was choking me the night I left home, I didn't even think that was abuse really but rather, what the hell, he's just grabbed me round the neck. I was scared to death, mind you. That was more like emotional abuse. But the odd punch isn't abuse. No, abuse is when someone is completely knocked out somewhere. So I guess I didn't see it that way, as an "abusive relationship." (Enander and Holmberg 219)

Enander and Holmberg found in a 2007 study that 9 out of the 10 survivors interviewed "did not identify themselves as abused at the point of breaking up" (218). While there are certainly a number of factors that lead women to deny or fail to identify their relationships as abusive, the "Love Conquers All" and the "Normal/Danger Dichotomy" are two discourses that appear to contribute to this phenomenon.

Ideals of femininity, masculinity, and romantic relationships in survivors' narratives

While we have examined several testimonies from survivors that express discourses #5 and #6, I will now analyze additional first person accounts that reveal discourses #1–4. Discourse #3 indicates that the ideal man should be ready and able to act violently; however, such violence should only be directed at attackers. In the following summary of the early stages of a survivor's relationship, Dutton and Gondolf describe her ambivalence surrounding her husband's machismo actions:

Joan met her husband, Ben, when she was in her early twenties. He seemed to her to be a strong man who knew what he wanted, and he wanted to marry her within a month of their meeting. Joan was reluctant but was persuaded by his apparent intense affection for her. Evidence of Ben's violent nature was apparent from the beginning. He expressed intense anger in response to Joan's spending time with another man shortly after she and Ben met... . When Ben found out about it, he dragged her from the other man's house, "claiming his woman." Joan was both confused and flattered by his attention. Shortly thereafter, Ben said he wanted to marry Joan and she agreed. (Dutton and Gondolf 325–26)

Ben's "take charge" manner and the fact that he treated Joan as a being in need of his protection both fall within the image of the ideal man and relationship evident in the first three discourses. Significantly, Joan was both "confused and flattered" when he laid claim to her through a violent action. The fulfillment of these discourses brings some measure of satisfaction to Joan: she is "flattered." However, the confusion perhaps stems from Joan's firsthand realization that the discourses of masculinity and romantic relationships themselves are interwoven with violence and inequality.

As we have seen, femininity is linked to pleasantness, kindness, and attractiveness geared toward earning man's affections. Women expect to

earn a special place in man's heart through the force of their charms. Their power and self-expression are tied to captivating man. If man is not captivated, women may blame themselves. In Kant and Phillips's discourses, complaisance and submissiveness are prized whereas a woman's expression of her own desires (free of man's) is absent. Acting only to please or charm man leaves woman in a situation where she is subordinate and at risk of being manipulated and abused. The following accounts from survivors reveal the women's struggles to please their partners:

I didn't understand that the mental abuse started at that point, did I? I just thought he wanted to save the plastic bag so I'd better start tying them like he does. And then life became more and more like that everything he did was right. In order to avoid the rows, you had to try to change yourself. I had to become who he wanted me to be. (Enander and Holmberg 209)

Everything I did was wrong no matter what I did, and I kept trying to please him. I laid in bed every night and thought, "Oh my gosh, what are all the things I didn't do that day that maybe would make him happy?" (Goetting 112)

These survivors report devoting considerable energy to adjusting their own actions to try to please their partner. If women buy into Kant or Phillips's discourses that ideal women are pleasing and charming, when their male partners *are not* charmed, women may find fault in themselves rather than their partners. The following account from another survivor reveals how this woman blamed herself when her husband no longer found her captivating and pleasing:

I didn't leave ... because I thought it was my fault... . I didn't leave ... because I believed I could fix it. During our two year courtship Melvin was tender and affectionate. He told me I was the most wonderful girl in the world. After we married, he told me that I had changed—that I was no longer the cute, bright girl he had married—and I assumed he must be right. Rational people don't suddenly turn violent for no reason, so I must be giving him a reason. I clung to the image of the man Melvin had been before our marriage. I thought that if I could just get it right he would love me again. (Weiss 22)

Here, one way of analyzing why this woman did not leave her partner could be due to her internalization of the notion that she should be able to "master his desire" for her. If she could only please him, then he would love her again. Here we see a possible intermingling of discourses #1, #4, and #5, in that not only was Melvin's love the key to solving all of their relationship problems, but that the survivor could gain this love if she was more pleasing.

Conclusion

When these discourses are distilled, it is not difficult to see how they prepare women to put up with mistreatment. The discourses place woman's locus of control outside of herself and squarely into man's hands. Furthermore, when

ideal forms of masculinity include aggression, women may find take-charge behavior unsurprising and perhaps even sexy. With respect to the “Love Conquers All” discourse specifically, woman may feel as if she has to reconcile herself to men’s inevitable misbehavior because being loved by man is the deepest affirmation of her selfhood.

In conclusion, I have sought to show how eighteenth and late twentieth and twenty-first-century discourses regarding gender and relationship norms contribute to a culture where aggression and dominance are normalized while abuse is seen as deviant. When ideal forms of masculinity and romance are a hair’s breadth from IPV, it is no doubt that women are ill-prepared to identify abuse when they undergo it. As feminists who describe rape culture attest, rape does not occur in a vacuum. The prevalence of sexual violence can only be fully understood if we examine the surrounding cultural context of male entitlement and female objectification. Rather than looking to individual survivors’ decisions to stay in abusive relationships, we would do well to examine the cultural models of femininity in order to locate the resources or lack thereof that would prepare women to be independent agents.

Moreover, given the close tie between identity and the historical world theorized by Beauvoir, I have emphasized how such cultural discourses are embedded deep in our desires and conscious and unconscious expectations for and ways of behaving in romantic relationships. My hope is that by unpacking how our discourses regarding gender and romance are interwoven with concepts of violence and inequality, we will come to understand a small fraction of the inherited situation of female survivors of IPV.

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