

The Casanova-Myth: Legend and Anxiety in the Seduction Community

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Abstract

The word Casanova is often treated as a synonym for womaniser, variously interpreted in a positive or negative light depending upon the audience. The Seduction Community (SC) largely comprises young heterosexual men who follow and adapt the teachings of commercial pick-up artists, typically in an effort to embody the Casanova-myth. This paper reports and analyses findings from a qualitative study of the SC. Drawing from life history interviews ($n=29$) and understandings generated during fieldwork in California in 2009 and 2013, the paper explores the meanings of the Casanova-myth qua urban legend. As explained in studies that view modern society as a 'folk community', urban legends help mediate anxieties following the Great Transformation in American community life. However, this paper contends that such legends may also produce the same gender anxieties they aim to ameliorate. Lascivious myth-making, which finds clear expression within the rationalised SC, constitutes a double-edged sword under conditions of rapid social change comprising confluent intimacies and the potential marketisation of everything.

Keywords: *Heterosexualities, Masculinities, Urban Legend, Seduction Community, pick-up artists*

Introduction

- 1.1 A largely theoretical literature considers the changing meanings of love, intimacy and sexual relations in high modernity (e.g. [Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995](#), [Giddens 1992](#)). Qualitative researchers interested in masculinities and sexualities are also increasingly shedding light on themes such as: men's socially constructed fantasies, desires and dating scripts in urban settings; the collective nature of homosocial rituals surrounding pick-up; gendered identity work; and, the objectification of women's bodies (e.g. [Frank 2002](#), [Grazian 2007](#), [Mooney-Somers and Usher 2010](#), [Seal and Ehrhardt 2003](#)). The increasing trend of solo-living (analytically distinct from 'being single') among men is also discussed in this journal amidst calls for more qualitative research on men's intimacies and subjectivities ([Jamieson et al. 2009](#)). Such writings are noteworthy, extending a largely forgotten heritage that challenges sexual essentialism (see [Heap 2003](#)). However, in extending Jamieson et al.'s (2009) call, we would stress that gaps remain in our knowledge on the plurality of male heterosexualities, i.e. the heterogeneity and vicissitudes of heterosexual cultures as lived by different groups of men who are negotiating sometimes difficult, emotionally charged terrain ([Monaghan 2002](#), [Monaghan and Robertson 2012](#), for other research on heterosexualities, albeit with a sample that largely consisted of women, see [Hockey et al. 2007](#), also, [Suen 2010](#)). This paper helps to redress these lacunae through a study of the Casanova-myth.
- 1.2 Although the word Casanova and womaniser are often treated as synonymous, the Casanova-myth may be defined ideal typically as the embodiment of an adventurous urban male heterosexuality ([Monaghan and Robertson 2012](#)). This sexuality is open to and instrumental in creating multiple erotically charged opportunities. If realised in practice, this type of sexuality is selective, non-exclusive and reproduces situationally dominant constructions of masculinity that also risks being discredited in societies that institutionalise monogamous heterosexuality. As an ideal type, adventurous urban male heterosexuality implies stepping outside of the mundane in order to pursue a 'fantastic' vision of an 'enviable' sex life, as judged by other young men, and which

is increasingly promoted by a commercialised dating industry. Scripts associated with this sexuality promise a life replete with opportunities for casual sex that is divorced from emotional commitment to and self-sacrifice for any one particular woman (the hallmarks of monogamous male heterosexuality as institutionalised in marriage). Readers might think here of the type of sex life, real or imagined, associated with Charlie Sheen, James Bond and Hugh Hefner. The Casanova-myth prioritises the pursuit of heterosexual opportunities with conventionally beautiful women in a mediated consumer culture that often objectifies bodies and grades them hierarchically. We explore this myth further by drawing from research on the Seduction Community (SC) in California.

- 1.3 The SC largely comprises young men who seek to improve their success in the highly competitive mate market, described by many participants as a game. The SC originated on the West Coast of the United States and has increasingly become a global phenomenon, spreading, especially via the internet, to most Western countries plus parts of Asia, Latin America and Africa. While the SC is accessible online, with thousands of men sharing advice about dating, it transcends cyberspace. Many forums, called lairs, consist of men residing in a particular geographical area. Lairs therefore not only enable men to exchange advice online but also allow them to meet up and 'sarge', that is, go out and put their acquired seduction techniques into practice in the real world. Some lairs also organise offline events, such as: seduction workshops, lectures and 'in field' training sessions. This is a potentially lucrative business with some leading pick-up artists (PUAs) charging several thousand dollars per workshop as described in *The Game* (Strauss 2005), a book to which we will return. SC texts have started to attract politicised critique on the grounds that the subculture embodies neoliberal ideology and naturalises masculine domination (Baker 2013, Denes 2011), though grounded sociological knowledge of the group remains scant.
- 1.4 As part of our analysis, we are particularly interested in two distinct bodies of sociological literature. First, we are mindful of the influential de-traditionalisation thesis (e.g. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995, Giddens 1992), which theorises changing intimacies in terms of disembedded institutions, changing gender relations (notably following second wave feminism, women's increased labour market participation and the individualisation of their biographies), the increasing frailty of human bonds and the importance of reflexive self-development. In response to what are seen as 'revolutionary' changes in people's intimate lives – 'the transformation of intimacy' (Giddens 1992) - such literature deems heterosexual relationships to be increasingly plastic (subject to choice and experimentation), uncertain, chaotic and 'confluent' (only good until further notice). Yet, intimacy is also considered important for people's emotional lives or 'ontological security', providing anchorage in a world where everything seems to be in flux. Such writings, reviewed and critiqued elsewhere (e.g. Jamieson et al. 2009; Monaghan and Robertson 2012), offer some useful sensitising concepts that we will draw from. However, in remaining critical we are also interested in the possible endurance of tradition, or co-existence of traditional and modern concerns. Accordingly, we will utilise studies of folklore in post-industrial societies.
- 1.5 In his study of folklore beliefs, Fine (1980) relates the 'social psychological condition of urbanism' (p. 223) to the Great Transformation of US society following the Second World War. In so doing, he locates personality, cultural meanings and folk beliefs in the context of social structural transformations such as: increased urbanisation, an emphasis on technical specialisation in the division of labour, changed values (e.g. concerning the nuclear family and women's roles) and impersonalised commercial dealings as corporations increasingly cater to personal needs. Similar to other folklorists who see continuity amidst social change, Fine maintains that 'tradition thrives in post-industrial society' (p. 222) and is, in part, a reflection of the collective desire for lost community. Viewing 'modern society as a "folk community"' Fine adds: 'Contemporary folklore themes are the attempts of people to negotiate their current reality, and to deal with changes in their personal environment' (ibid.). Fine discusses folklore with reference to food contamination beliefs, specifically the urban myth concerning 'the Kentucky Fried Rat' where somebody (usually a woman) inadvertently eats poisoned vermin from a fast-food outlet. Such myth-making is defined by Fine as 'a means of dealing with anxieties in disguised form', such as concerns about urban decay and ceding responsibility for food preparation to impersonal profit enterprises rather than female kin. Conservative in implication, urban legend is thus a response to environmental change where people feel they have less control over their lives. We think Fine's argument is useful, especially with regards to urban male heterosexualities and how beliefs about legendary womanisers reassert traditional visions of masculine dominance, control and female subordination, though we would also extend his thinking. As will we will argue, the Casanova-myth may function as a powerful motivating narrative while also setting an overly rationalised performative standard that is not only difficult for many men to attain but also no guarantee of a mutually satisfying love life. Urban myths therefore are not only stories that mediate anxieties and outline possible strategies; they may also produce the same anxieties and problems they aim to ameliorate. In short, urban myths may constitute a double-edged sword under conditions of rapid social change, comprising confluent intimacies and the potential marketisation of everything.

The Research

- 2.1** The research reported below is part of a yet to be completed international study on 'hookup' culture, i.e. an increasingly common practice comprising 'intimate interaction' and which has been defined in the context of US campus life as 'the primary means for initiating sexual and romantic relationships' among young people (Bogle 2008: 25). In the larger study Jitse Schuurmans (JS) aims to explain the global upswing of hookup culture, with an empirical focus on young men's sexuality within various (sometimes overlapping) domains; namely: on campus, via internet dating applications and in SCs in the USA and Hong Kong. The present paper is limited to the US phase of the study, with a specific focus on the SC.
- 2.2** JS undertook two fieldwork stints in California: a three month period in 2009 and one month in 2013. The bulk of the research, undertaken in 2009, focused on two SC lairs: The Bay Lair and The Palo Alto Lair (all names are pseudonyms). Both had an online presence. The Bay Lair was selected first because it was one of the largest and most active groups in the world, with over 6000 registered members and an estimated 300 active users. During the first fieldtrip the research also came to include The Palo Alto Lair, a small group of around 20 men who met regularly and who also participated in The Bay Lair's online forum. By 2013 both lairs had ceased to exist following internal strife. However a new lair had emerged, with over 4000 members and an estimated 200 active users, plus a Facebook group with 151 active members.
- 2.3** Both The Bay Lair and The Palo Alto Lair organised two types of offline event: a lecture by an experienced member or a professional pick-up trainer, and an outing in which experienced members would take out newbies in order to share knowledge in the field. The Bay Lair held these events monthly, while The Palo Alto Lair organised them on a weekly basis. Informed consent was sought from the moderators of the two lair forums, who subsequently acted as gatekeepers and locators who introduced JS to members at offline events. During fieldwork JS, who is in his early thirties and Dutch, participated in these interactions as an overt ethnographer. This entailed accompanying informants in their attempts to meet women in the city nightlife, on high streets and in shopping malls. JS also spent time with respondents outside of a pick-up context to build rapport and understand their daily life. Mainly in their twenties and early thirties and economic migrants, SC members accepted JS as a researcher who was interested in learning about their community. Since 2009 JS has remained in contact with a number of informants (currently 5 men) who keep him updated about their romantic and sexual experiences and life plans.
- 2.4** It became apparent early in the research that these SCs had a pyramid organisational structure: a large body of neophytes at the bottom, a smaller amount of medium term members (1-3 years) and a few long term members (over 3 years), this latter group mainly consisted of pick-up coaches and forum moderators. JS conducted 19 life history interviews with SC members in 2009. He chose this method in order to investigate men's vocabularies of motive for gravitating towards the SC. In a later stage the focus of the research shifted to an ethnographic approach to grasp the interactional dynamics of hooking up and the processes of learning within the SC. These observational data will be presented in a forthcoming paper, though some of the insights from the ethnography inform our analysis. Most interviewees were recruited via The Bay Lair forum. Only two interviewees were born and raised in California. The rest were transnational or interstate migrants. Interviews included cases in different membership stages: neophytes ($n=7$), medium term members (1-3 year cohort) ($n=6$) and long term members (forum moderators ($n=2$) and pick-up coaches ($n=4$)). Men's ages ranged from 18 to 44 and the mean age was 26 (ages were not recorded for three interviewees). The overwhelming majority were solo-living or living with housemates. Most interviewees were recruited via snowball sampling, all of these but two were members of two local lairs. The least experienced and most isolated members of the forum responded to a message posted by JS seeking participants for an ethnographic study. Four of these 19 interviewees were key informants in the ethnographic study, one from each of the aforementioned categories.
- 2.5** In 2013 an additional three men were interviewed and seven of the previous 19 men were re-interviewed (the other 12 interviewees from the 2009 sample did not respond to calls for continued involvement). All interviewees were active participants in the local communities, with the exception of one key respondent who features prominently in our analysis: John who, by 2013, had ceased participation after working as a pick-up coach. The mean age of this sample was 30. Re-interviewing was useful insofar as it provided further insight into the shifting temporal meanings of SC membership among seasoned participants. (The year the data were generated is cited below in our analysis.) All interviews were audio-recorded. Interviews conducted in 2009 were fully transcribed and those from 2013 have been part-transcribed; the material was analysed using an inductive approach. JS indexed emergent themes (e.g. 'reasons for involvement', 'meaning of seduction community' and 'processes of learning') using coding software (Atlas.ti) and both authors subsequently analysed these data.

2.6 Given the interconnections between the virtual and actual worlds (the transvirtual world), JS also conducted a content analysis of the lair forums, the Facebook group (which was the main focus of research in 2013) and one forum linked to a seduction company, focusing in particular on his key informants' posts. The content analysis entailed distilling emergent themes relating to masculinities, heterosexualities and in-group dynamics. In addition, he explored the SC's archived materials, including pick-up manuals and video lectures, which his key contacts had also seen and read. This entailed watching over 50 hours of pick-up lectures and reading various seduction manuals and articles. This enabled him to obtain a deeper sense of the culture and provided a shared platform with SC members. Lee Monaghan (LM) also spent over a year learning about the SC through virtual ethnography (reading online forums, watching videos, signing up to regular email alerts and accessing e-books). This research, in addition to earlier ethnographic fieldwork conducted by LM on urban male heterosexualities (Monaghan 2002), facilitated his understandings and discussions with JS.

2.7 Finally, during fieldwork, in settings such as the nightclub, JS inevitably interacted with women who were approached by SC members and this raises ethical issues concerning the researcher's role and appropriate (non-exploitative, overt) field relations (similarly, see Heap (2003) on problems with early voyeuristic studies of non-normative sexuality). Whilst we recognise moral and ethical controversies - as discussed in our empirical section - practical issues also had to be negotiated in order to ensure the feasibility of the study. For example, it was impractical and would have been disruptive, if not destructive, of the interaction for JS to have immediately announced his status as a researcher to everybody he encountered. However, this did not bar him from discussing his research interests with contacts, notably in response to questions as to why he was in California. Upon disclosing his research interests, many contacts interpreted this as a reason to sustain the interaction (the research foci often generated genuine interest). In observing these and other ethical concerns, we only use data that were generated with the informed verbal consent of all field contacts.

Entering 'the Game': The Promises and Pitfalls of the Casanova-myth

3.1 The following explores the Casanova-myth in the context of the SC under four sub-headings: (1) the seductions of the SC, (2) shifting motives, relevancies and rationalisation (3) making manhood and homosocial community and (4) emergent and amplified anxieties.

The Seductions of the SC: A Contested Means of Self-Improvement?

3.2 While men with contrasting life circumstances and experiences gravitated to the SC, the vision of becoming (far more) successful at attracting women was a recurrent theme. Aligned with traditional gender scripts where men are initiators of 'heterosexual courtship, romance, and sexual behavior' (Seal and Ehrhardt 2003: 309), many new participants hoped that immersion in the SC would increase their sexual capital and open up exciting opportunities (an aspiration that PUA coaches happily exploited). However, just as 'success' was a relative concept - which, as we will go on to elaborate, varied according to changing experiences and life histories - the sexual prospect was not the sole motivator. Many also regarded pick-up as a route to self-development, often expressed as 'working on the self' with John's account very much capturing what Baker (2013: 9) terms an 'up-by-your-bootstraps mission of self-improvement' with reference to competitive neoliberal US values:

This [involvement in the SC] has done so much for me on so many different levels. I came into the game with very low self-esteem, I didn't like who I was, the direction in my life. This totally changed that direction, this taught me how to be a man, take possession of what I want, to have fucking balls and do cool things in my life. (John, 24, in 2009)

3.3 Similar to others researching men's heterosexual cultures (Frank 2002; Seal and Ehrhardt 2003), we agree that 'non-sexual' dimensions cannot be ignored or trivialised. And, once placed in the general cultural milieu of Northern California, with its endorsement of reflexive self-development, the SC reportedly attracted widespread support:

I believe the cool thing about [this city] is that there's a lot of support for this community. It is a very accepting thing, that if you take a course it doesn't mean you're bad in something, but you're just improving yourself. (Simon, 32, in 2009)

3.4 We begin with such data because they illustrate that the SC has broader meanings, which are irreducible to sex. For John and Simon, the SC was an important means through which they developed confidence, assertiveness and a sense of mastery of their external environment - a narrative commonly used in much self-help literature (McGee 2007). In short, members positively framed the SC as a 'cool' means of developing character and a life worth living. Yet, during the 2013 fieldtrip, some PUAs recounted feeling

stigmatised because of their immersion in an increasingly visible SC that was equated with deception of women, sexism and commercial exploitation of naive and insecure men. John reflected on stigma and moral dilemmas, particularly given his commercial involvement as a coach:

There's a lot of misunderstanding about what it is and at times I thought 'am I a bad guy for teaching guys this, like is this wrong for me to teach guys and get money for it?' I actually felt guilty for taking guys money for this. And a lot of times I didn't even ask for money. (John, 28, in 2013)

John's immersion in the SC also strained some of his significant relations, especially with his sister who considered pick-up misogynistic (for a feminist critique of a popular seduction text, see [Denes 2011](#)). Even so, the seductions of the Casanova-myth, especially for young single heterosexual men, meant that there was no shortage of recruits.

- 3.5** Most contacts initially learnt about the SC by reading *The Game* (Strauss 2005), usually after a friend recommended the book. This narrative is a contemporary account of the Casanova-myth that taps into the adventurous heterosexual masculine fantasy where men learn to master the art of seduction as part of their broader repertoire of competencies. *The Game* tells the story of Neil Strauss, a journalist who immersed himself in the SC for two years. Strauss presents the story of how he changed from being an 'Average Frustrated Chump' (AFC) who was rejected by women to a 'Master Pickup Artist' (MPUA). Eventually, Strauss, who, as with other PUAs, took a pseudonym, transformed himself into Style who then earned an income advising other men on pick-up. This developmental narrative accords not only with adventurous constructions of urban male heterosexuality and masculine hegemony. It also accords with the highly specialised division of labour in the USA where urban legend proliferates ([Fine 1980](#)). For many SC members, reading Strauss (2005) seeded the idea that pick-up can be mastered through diligent study, application and tireless practice. The book also appealed to young men who lacked 'physical capital' in a body oriented culture where masculinities are thoroughly embodied ([Connell and Messerschmidt 2005](#); [Monaghan and Robertson 2012](#)). As stated by John when discussing his initial and rather modest goals:

It was about three years ago. I've always been really girl crazy, but I was completely inept with women. I was really fat in high school and had low self-esteem and I felt really awkward with women. So this friend of mine told me: 'have you heard about this book called The Game?' I went to the library and I think I read it in one straight sitting. I was like, 'Oh my God I can actually meet women. This is amazing!' I got into this community 'cause I wanted a girlfriend, 'cause I never had one. I always have been a total romantic, holding hands etc., but I could never do that. This was very much a process of learning about myself. (John, 24, in 2009)

- 3.6** After reading Strauss (2005) most contacts felt that their seduction skills were poor (relatively speaking) and various obstacles had to be surpassed. Similar to Frank's (2002) observations on men frequenting strip clubs, an escape from 'an Otherness within themselves' such as 'ugliness, lack of social skills, or intimate failures' (p. 111), had relevance for some SC initiates. And, regardless of past failures or successes, most men felt that considerable work was necessary in order to emulate Strauss. Such work might entail, for example, a fashion make-over and/or exercising in order to improve the physique, though affective work was crucial in line with dating industry scripts and an essentialising view of the sexes, i.e. a vision where men learn about the emotional dynamics of communicating with women with the goal of generating attraction regardless of his looks, wealth, age etc. Accordingly, mundane interactions with women qua potential sexual partners were framed as opportunities for 'action' ([Goffman 1967](#)), resulting in the creation and testing of character.

- 3.7** Given the broader cultural circulation of the Casanova-myth it is difficult to detangle the extent to which these men's dissatisfaction with their past dating experiences was antecedent to reading *The Game* (Strauss 2005), and the extent to which reading this text produced anxieties. Style reportedly achieved seduction skills that far surpass most men's abilities and the amount of sexual liaisons he claimed to initiate with beautiful women is in the collective imagination only associated with iconic celebrities. The point is that in comparison with Style's reported success, many young heterosexual men would likely feel inadequate. And, adolescence or the period shortly thereafter is an especially critical stage in the life course in that regard - a point also raised in [Grazian's \(2007\)](#) study of heterosexual mythology among 18-to-24-year-old men. Consider an exchange with Craig, aged 18, who, similar to John, had modest goals when first entering the SC. What is also interesting here, following [Fine \(1980: 227\)](#) on the acceptance and diffusion of beliefs, is that legend is credible if it is 'grounded in the folk's worldview [and] human baseness':

*Craig: Do you believe The Game is real? I mean Style is absolutely amazing with women?
JS: I don't know. What do you think?*

Craig: It sounds pretty convincing, but all I know is that I will never get to that level.

JS: So what do you hope to get out of this community?

Craig: I just want a girlfriend. (Interviewed in 2009)

- 3.8** Craig and John, sexually inexperienced before entering the SC, were not aspiring Casanovas or, more contemporaneously, Style wannabes. Stated more formally, men embodying unsuccessful heterosexuality may aspire to achieve monogamous heterosexuality, i.e. form an exclusive romantic dyad, perhaps with a longer term view to getting married and forming a family in accord with 'respectable' (middle-class) heteronormative ideals (Monaghan 2002). Slightly older newcomers, who were more sexually experienced and perhaps well versed in the vicissitudes of 'the separating and divorcing society' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995), often reflected on their own biography and used their emergent knowledge of the SC (its techniques, scripts, meanings and lessons) to explain their previous failures. Ramon, aged 30 and recently divorced when interviewed in 2009, stated Strauss's (2005) book was a real 'eye-opener'. As a trained psychologist, and aspiring PUA, Ramon was convinced that the tactics and routines contained therein worked. After reading the book and its 'recipes for action' (Schutz 1964) (such as the need to qualify a woman as worthy of the man's interest and build mutual attraction), Ramon 'realised' what he had been doing wrong in all the previous years that he had been dating: 'I show interest way too early, I'm always full of sexual energy and I don't build comfort enough'. Drawing from the Casanova-myth, Ramon reconstructed his own history with women and felt he was seriously inept. Accordingly, entering the SC became a self-transformative project, of becoming a better player, if not an actual Casanova. Of course, given the fluidity of social life and career contingencies, motives may change.

Shifting Motives, Relevancies and Rationalisation: From 'Supermodels' to Making a Career

- 3.9** As observed, young men voiced various motives for entering the SC, incorporating what Schutz (1964) would call retrospective 'because motives' (e.g. 'I was really fat in high school and had low self-esteem') to future oriented 'in-order-to motives' (e.g. 'I'd just like to get a girlfriend'). The latter goal was shared by many newbies. However, motives often changed during the course of experience and most long-term members opted for a variety of sexual affairs. Indeed, standards were typically raised in line with a 'phenomenology of desire' (Waskul and Plante 2010) comprising heightened erotic expectations (which, we would add, could also result in future disappointment if these goals were unrealistic and unrealised). Restated, enhanced sexual capital - notably an emergent feeling of confidence and belief 'I can do this' (dubbed 'inner game') - resulted in some men expanding their sexual choices. And, such processes were typically rationalised (especially subject to calculability), much akin to sportsmen who measure their progress and status through competitive endeavour.
- 3.10** Wayne, aged 24 when interviewed in 2009, reflected on his improved abilities to attract women after being in the SC for three years. He had enjoyed some success with what he defined as reasonably attractive women, adding: 'My ultimate goal is to fuck the supermodel type'. Rather than talking about 'making love' with a woman with whom he was emotionally close, Wayne's reference to 'fucking' typifies adventurous more so than monogamous heterosexuality. Wayne was re-interviewed in 2013 and his ambition remained unfulfilled despite his continued immersion in the SC. Using quantitative criteria to objectify and evaluate women, Wayne was convinced 'bedding 9 and 10's [the most beautiful] in the Bay Area is impossible due to scarcity and intense competition from men with money'. Edward, aged 26 and a SC member for two-and-a-half-years when interviewed in 2009, commented: 'I've been pretty successful so far, but I want to improve my game so I get the super hotties'. By 2013 he had become even more selective. With an eye on a longer-term relationship through 'partner-seeking courtship' (Seal and Ehrhardt 2003: 305), Edward wanted a '10 with a good career'. As with other men, women's looks thus remained important. For example, Grazian (2007) notes young men's evaluation of 'erotic prestige' was related not only to the number of conquests during the 'girl hunt' but also feminine beauty. Critically, the power of feminine beauty is discussed by Frank (2002: 111) with reference to feminist writing on sexual desire and how men may be 'haunted' by beauties they hope to 'win' or have lost.
- 3.11** In short, the SC promotes the view that men should become skilled at picking up beautiful women, ideally becoming real life Casanovas or at least never be left without options. Ultimately, though, the PUA, as part of a longer-term quest for emotional intimacy, may decide to abandon his 'playboy lifestyle' in favour of a script valorising monogamous heterosexuality with a special, deserving and attractive partner. Simon, who moderated The Bay Lair's online forum, described such processes as such:

Many guys go through a stage in life where they are not very social and don't meet a lot of women. And they start learning just a little of this material and then they start to realise they can actually get women. And for a while that is very powerful. You get numbers, you get dates, then you start dating two, three, four, five dates simultaneously, and then after a while it gets old, and you can't keep them all happy at the same time, and eventually you come to the conclusion that what you really want is just one girl, and I see that happen with a lot of guys here. (Simon, 32, in

3.12 John's story illustrates such processes in a more specific sense, albeit with a twist within a broader dating-industrial complex where there is the promise of making money from sexual careers and career contingencies. As noted, 'just wanting a girlfriend' initially spurred John's SC membership but after experiencing his first successes, embodying adventurous heterosexuality became a realisable goal and one that he subsequently exploited commercially. Within his local lair he had a reputation for 'fast escalation' in which the time-span between acquainting and sexual intercourse is short. Several such stories qua 'sex narratives' (Seal and Ehrhardt 2003: 311) circulated where John had casual sex with beautiful women in bar bathrooms, outside alleyways and in threesomes. This, of course, is the stuff of urban legends; for example, note how 'the urban restroom is a prototype of the anonymous urban setting' (Fine 1980: 226) where 'anything' can happen. Speaking in 2009, John reportedly had sex with over 80 women during the past year. Having sex with five different women during the span of one night was his record, though by 2013 he said he became disillusioned with being 'the biggest swinging dick in the room'. As with Seal and Ehrhardt's research (2003), the 'sex as conquest discourse' is an organising yet always revisable script where men seek to 'get the most ladies' in a given time frame (the reoccurrence of calculable concerns and the rationalisation of sex; see also Jackson and Scott 1997). Critically, though, as suggested by John's subsequent dissatisfaction, none of the above says anything about the quality of heterosexual lives and how satisfaction may be derived from the largely *mundane*, rather than out-of-the-ordinary, nature of human intimacy (Hockey et al. 2007).

3.13 While we will comment more on the costs of pursuing the Casanova-myth below, it is also the case that costs imply benefits (e.g. monetary gain as well as heterosexual capital) at least for a privileged few in a world where vocabularies of the neoliberal economy are ever more pervasive. In highlighting the marketing of a more exciting erotic life, and the general entrepreneurial spirit running through the SC, we would return to John who used his sexual and social capital to obtain economic capital. During the 2009 fieldwork trip, John had established his own seduction company that offered pick-up boot camps, charging \$400 for a one day in-the-field training session. John's in-order-to motive had changed from simply wanting 'a girlfriend', to something entirely different. And, one should not ignore the social construction of masculinities through such enterprise and the 'doing' of gender by talking candidly about this with a male fieldworker, notably when a narrator with previously limited sexual experience self-presented as a changed man who now coached others. Immediately after stating the SC enabled him to improve his 'self-esteem' and by implication his manhood via a no-nonsense willingness to go where the action is, he remarked:

And I want to give that to other guys. When I taught guys in the past, guys that were totally new and totally nervous, awkward and they don't know how to talk to girls at all. And you can guide them through all that. When guys like that get their first phone number that is awesome. I mean, they are good guys. They had bad social experiences in the past, so they just don't know how to do it. (John, 24, in 2009)

3.14 Interestingly, not all men gravitating to the SC had the initial goal of 'just getting a girlfriend'. Mahesh, for example, had a more fantastic vision from the outset. This 31-year-old had migrated from India to America in 2006 to work as a software engineer. The adventurous masculinity he idealised, of becoming a real-life Casanova, was entangled with his reasons for migrating. Interviewed in 2009, Mahesh said the salary informed his decision to migrate, but more important than the money had been the longing for an adventure. As with adventure more generally (Simmel 1997 [1911]), Mahesh dreamed of leaving behind his quotidian reality, the typically mundane stuff of everyday life – a fantasy that Frank (2002: 105) also flags with reference to the amorous adventure, 'the perfect adventure' which entails 'travel away from the safety of the home'. At an ideological level, California, with its promise of the American Dream, fired Mahesh's imagination; it triggered images of a glamorous lifestyle with opportunities for a fantastic nightlife, sunshine and beaches, material wealth and sexual affairs with gorgeous women. In short, Mahesh desired a utopian life in 'the promised land', comprising hedonistic pleasures, splendid beauty and thrill-seeking. Such a vision accords with permissive US values as outlined by Fine (1980: 227) when discussing the conditions under which urban legend has proliferated; for example, an emphasis on 'play as opposed to work' and 'increasingly open sexuality'.

3.15 While the above fantasy accords with the Casanova-myth and attendant social psychology, Mahesh was a 'negative' or 'deviant case'. Unusually, he was cohabiting with a girlfriend when entering the SC. One of Mahesh's colleagues informed him about the community and had shown him an online seduction forum with pick-up advice. Mahesh found the material intensely interesting, seductive even, and was spurred by the 'fantastic' idea that any man is capable of attracting women, provided he uses the right routines. Henceforth, he started practicing pick-up techniques with women he encountered, along with his colleague, George, who often acted as a 'wingman' (similarly, see Grazian 2007: 233). Both men also attended a pick-up boot camp (which

cost them \$2,500 each). Mahesh and his girlfriend split up not long after because she refused to accept his 'new lifestyle'. To draw from Frank (2002: 111) on the shaping of men's heterosexual desires, we would surmise that Mahesh's girlfriend felt like an 'inferior fix' that he had simply 'settled with'. Her decision to end the relationship is also unsurprising 'given larger societal expectations of monogamous heterosexuality' (Monaghan 2002: 440). Reproducing sex and romance narratives comprising a desire for conquest and enduring intimacy (Seal and Ehrhardt 2003), Mahesh subsequently deepened his SC involvement, in the pursuit of 'sexual encounters and finding a pretty wife'. Such goals, if realised, could bolster masculinity under challenging circumstances.

Making Manhood and Homosocial Community in a Potentially Lonely World: From Ontological Insecurity to Brothers in Arms

- 3.16** Social isolation and loneliness, or general dissatisfaction with one's life, are powerful reasons for seeking human contact. For many men in this study, such feelings were amplified because of migration. However, there were also other triggers for specifically entering the SC. Of particular relevance was the ending of a long-term intimate relationship that was experienced as hurtful and undermined their self-confidence. Interestingly, it is through community and the collective pursuit of the Casanova-myth that men such as Simon sought to take charge of and improve their lives through the learnt ability to meet, attract and date multiple partners:

Before the community I was a monogamist, relationship after relationship, and then I had a really bad relationship that crashed my confidence. In the community I regained my confidence. I believe at my most active time I dated about five girls at the same time. The community gave me a new skill set. It also made me look at myself more. I started to do more developmental work and realised that a lot of things inside you, you start to realise you're not good in this, or that, that you're pissed off about this, and then you can do some work on it. (Simon, 32, in 2009)

- 3.17** Confluent love and ontological insecurity, themes flagged by Giddens (1992) when discussing the transformation of intimacy, also figured in Taylor's narrative. Taylor gravitated to the SC shortly after breaking up with his girlfriend of four years. His account spoke of emotional pain that was compounded by work-related isolation. This 34-year-old financial trader worked from home, spending most of his time alone in front of his computer. Although he had lived in California for three years he had few friends at the time of his breakup, which made him feel even more isolated and out of control: 'The breakup caused me a lot of emotional pain. From that day on I swore never to feel out of control again'. In short, deprived of the connections provided by his previous intimate relationship, Taylor lacked ontological security. However, Taylor, similar to others, claimed his life changed after reading *The Game* (Strauss 2005), with its promise of sexual adventure and masculine control. This would perhaps come as no surprise to folklorists who relate urban legend to a general 'human desire for mastery and personal control' (Fine 1980: 237), though we would add that control of others (women's responses) is crucial here when interpreting the SC as a relational/gendered practice. Taylor confided that the book had given him the belief that he could become the puppeteer of his own social network; i.e. the man who pulled the strings and directed the plot, to echo Goffman's (1959) dramaturgy of everyday life.

- 3.18** To return to Mahesh, the SC had added appeal given his feelings of social isolation and loneliness after parting from his girlfriend and losing their shared network of friends. During fieldwork in 2009, JS accompanied Mahesh to a mixed-sex workshop of the Authentic Man Program, a company that promises its clients a heightened ability to connect with women. The introductory workshop, attended by 41 people, entailed everybody stating their reasons for participating. Mahesh, who was willing publicly to display his own vulnerability, told this group: 'I'm not feeling very well, I felt a bit lonely and wanted to meet other people tonight'. Mahesh did not have an active social life and, at the time of fieldwork, JS was the only person he had much contact with. Ramon had similar experiences. He had recently moved to California and confided that he found it very difficult establishing contacts in his new surroundings. During his first night out with JS, Ramon confessed that meeting other men had been one of the good things about entering the SC. More generally, male bonding through talk about and practicing pick-up was important in this homosocial community. Armed with seduction techniques, going out together to 'sarge' was one of the most binding masculine-validating experiences these men had. Indeed, the more active and experienced SC members had established intensive friendships with others on this basis.

- 3.19** In summary, young men voiced a variety of motivations for aligning themselves with and immersing themselves in the SC. As a general pattern, motives changed during the course of membership: while men like Mahesh wanted to embody the Casanova-myth from the outset, a more modest desire to obtain 'a girlfriend' and the longing for social contact were more common in-order-to-motives among newcomers who often lacked forms of capital (notably social, sexual and physical capital). As men gained more experience and competence, the promises of adventurous urban male heterosexuality often became motivationally relevant. This emphasis on

what Jackson and Scott (1997) call 'the sexual fix' in a rationalised world must also be understood in relation to a more general focus on emotional wellbeing or ontological security (Giddens 1992). Such security and attendant feelings of control over one's life circumstances, previously obtained by slightly older men through presumably monogamous relationships, was also commonly sought with a special partner after a period of immersion in the SC and 'playing the field'. And in capitalising upon career contingencies and circulating fantasies, some of the most successful participants ultimately found an economic rationale for deepening their involvement by becoming coaches. In connecting these themes with gender and sexuality studies, and research on urban legend, we would suggest that such processes figure in the shared construction of masculinities in a context of social change and uncertainty. As observed, the SC promises to attenuate or mediate anxieties and other negative emotions (e.g. loneliness and feelings of isolation) that young men might experience, especially when migrating to a large city and/or losing the security of a pre-established relationship. The Casanova-myth, advanced in the SC, gave these men the scripted belief that seduction could be mastered. Significantly, immersion in the SC also meant bonding with other men, and for many young migrants this attenuated the angst of social isolation. However, the dark-side of the myth, hinted at above with reference to John and Mahesh, also warrants further attention. After all, as Connell and Messerschmidt (2005: 852) contend, strategies for maintaining gendered power have their costs and 'hegemonic masculinity does not necessarily translate into a satisfying experience of life'.

Emergent and Amplified Anxieties: Pick-up and Urban Legend as a Source of Insecurity

- 3.20** The SC creates problems, including but also going beyond the reproduction of an objectifying sexist culture (Denes 2011) and perhaps upsetting significant others who condemn pick-up. Here we will focus on the potentially all-consuming nature of the SC and its costs in terms of time, money and men's general wellbeing. Our primary interest is to highlight the double-edged nature of urban legend, understood as a performative narrative of masculine self-transformation that demands ongoing rationalised validation. In short, we will address the meanings and consequences of aspiring to realise and reproduce the myth, something that may not only mediate but also *fuel* gender anxieties.
- 3.21** The dominant script within the SC, consonant with neoliberal ideology, is that any man can become successful through personal investment and hard work. He may even become a Casanova, regardless of possible 'personal flaws' and limiting factors. All of JS's key informants held this belief. While this ideology can inspire men to work on their communicative abilities and help them find rewarding relationships, it may also promote unattainable ideals. Mahesh, for example, was not very successful with women, something he attributed to his Indian phenotype and American women's disdain for Asian men. The discrepancy between the Casanova-myth and actual experience generated a set of conflicting beliefs for Mahesh qua 'marginal man' (Park 1928, cited by Heap 2003: 479). On the one hand Mahesh believed that becoming a Casanova was possible, on the other hand he repeatedly experienced the gap between ideals and reality. Mahesh tried to bridge this divide by investing ever more time, energy and money into this project. He reportedly spent over \$10,000 on pick-up training and products between 2007 and 2009, and studied SC material and practiced pick-up for at least four hours each day. While this case was extreme, other SC members told similar tales about their disappointment as myth and reality diverged.
- 3.22** Furthermore, the marketisation of the Casanova-myth is a pressured and divisive practice. It is fuelled by crude dichotomies and an already existing cultural tendency among urban men, as reported in US research, to perceive 'their sexual conquests as proof of their own superiority over other non-conquering males' (Seal and Ehrhardt 2003: 303). As noted above, SC argot distinguishes between PUAs and AFCs, with the latter referring to any man who does not embody Casanova's mythic courtship skills - what Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) would refer to as marginalised or subordinated masculinities. Elitist SC discourse about frustrated and incapable men 'who have no pickup skills or understanding of what attracts women' (Strauss 2005: 475) is used by commercial enterprises for economic gain. Indeed, the SC is colonised by an industry that offers myriad products that proclaim to deepen men's knowledge and courtship skills. Pick-up companies' sales tactics can be quite extreme. Simon, who moderated The Bay Lair's forum, stated that such enterprises sometimes 'slammed' new participants online. Individuals in the pick-up business sometimes created accounts on the forum in order to criticise new members' written reports before urging them to learn about (and buy) their material. Advertisements for pick-up related products often exploit men's insecurities about their relative (in)abilities to attract women, when measured against some mythical ideal. Hence, anxieties may emerge from the outset:

Tim: I always thought I was quite successful with women, but if you read about what some of these guys do... I know I'm just a beginner. It will take a lot of practice for me to get anywhere near them.

JS: How does that make you feel?

Tim: I don't know, I guess it's a challenge. But, I've the feeling that all these routines and advice really fuck up my

3.23 The masculinity constructed in the SC is status focused and demands continuous reassurance. PUAs endeavour to retain their status by (repeatedly) proving they are successful at seducing beautiful women. For PUAs, like John, who earned his living providing seduction workshops, such expectations could prove stressful given inevitable failures:

John: You always have your off-days, days that nothing works. When things like that happen when I'm working with clients, it really sucks.

JS: What do you do, when things like that happen?

John: Well, what can you do? It makes me feel bad, but so far it hasn't affected the business. I always give a money back guarantee, but no one has ever asked for it. (Interviewed in 2009)

3.24 While John apparently dealt well with such contingencies, at least in 2009, his situation changed following online degradations from other men in 2011 which effectively ended his business. Other men also found such contingencies stressful. Ben, for example, experienced strain in the absence of an appreciative male audience. As observed during fieldwork in 2009, when things went well in Ben's life he exuded confidence and, when boasting about his conquests, other PUAs supported this. Yet, when he did not receive in-group validation Ben felt seriously inadequate. This 26-year-old had been involved in the SC for over two years and he aspired to work as a pick-up instructor for one of the big US-based seduction companies. This aspiration amplified the felt pressure to prove his qualities as a PUA. In order to make himself known to the company that he hoped to work for, Ben posted intensely on their online forum. He spent on average three to four hours each day writing his own field reports and commenting on other members' reports. One of Ben's posts received many hits and positive comments and he responded to all these complements with 'I seriously can't thank you guys enough for all the encouragement and support. It brings me truly more happiness than fucking girls and I want everyone to know that'. On other occasions Ben's posts were ignored, which was a source of distress. The need to constantly obtain reassurance of one's standing (confirmed through objective indices such as numbers of comments on a post, number of women bedded in a given period) highlights the fragility of the Casanova-myth.

3.25 Outside of formal career ambitions (i.e. becoming a paid instructor), it is evident that some men's need to constantly reaffirm masculinity through pick-up and associated rituals can be immensely time consuming, possibly resulting in economic insecurity. Mahesh, an IT specialist, was fired after investing too much time in pick-up. Mahesh's conflict with his employer started shortly after he arrived in California. He and his friend, George, went out most days for several hours at a time to 'game', in line with his vision of American values where play, consumption and sexuality take precedence (Fine 1980). Mahesh mostly worked from home and, with no direct managerial supervision, it was relatively easy for him to spend considerable time practicing seduction techniques in 'the city as a sexual laboratory' with its opportunities for leading a 'double life' (Heap 2003: 478). According to Mahesh, the reason for his dismissal was not only because he invested too little time in work, but also his lack of focus due to intense gaming: 'Gaming takes up your whole nerve system and after gaming you're all over the place, so you can't focus much'. Mahesh said he knew two other men who had also lost their jobs because of their preoccupation with the SC. Such cases might be extreme, but they show the potentially all-consuming nature of pick-up and negative consequences on other key aspects of life – aspects which, ironically, may make men more successful at dating given the not-to-be-underestimated significance of economic security.

3.26 Finally, the SC reproduces conventional gender ideology which, if acted upon, could strain interactions outside of the mate market. Indeed, the conservatism that Fine (1980) notes in relation to folklore beliefs is also a core feature of SC legend with its repeated injunction to embody hegemonic masculinity. Thus, Mahesh had a big argument at work with his manager after she asked him to complete jobs that he felt were beneath him. Mahesh was prepared to let the conflict escalate and involved the Human Resources department. In the meantime he also refused to perform allocated work. JS asked him if he reacted so strongly because his supervisor was a woman. His response was affirmative: 'Real men' do not take orders from a woman. Although Mahesh's views were extreme, the SC's belief system seeks to reaffirm hegemonic masculinity where 'Alpha males' are strong, assertive, in charge, and leaders of both men and women. Accordingly, the teachings of the SC, if dogmatically pursued, may result in men placing themselves in difficult positions, especially when traditional gender ideology clashes with the reality of the modern workplace. This supports Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005: 853) point that 'gender relations are always arenas of tension' as part of a process which, we would add, is enmeshed with plural heterosexualities and mythology.

Conclusion

4.1 Foregrounding embodied heterosexual masculinities, Monaghan and Robertson (2012) note the paucity

of data and call for more sociological research. Their call echoes that made by Jamieson et al. (2009: 5.3) who bemoan the lack of qualitative work on men's modes of living, their 'motivations and subjectivities' amidst theorised transformations in heterosexual intimacy. Drawing from qualitative data generated among SC members in California, this paper furthers the social study of urban male heterosexualities and the Casanova-myth. Paralleling research on 'the myth of the pickup' (Grazian 2007), it offers empirical insights into the meanings of urban legend in a largely unexplored community, the search for adventure, intimacy, control and homosociability. As observed, the SC promises heightened heterosexual capital, opportunities and pleasure – lived realities for at least some men who became successful Lotharios. Meshed with commercial imperatives, the SC is part of a promissory culture that may seduce young men hoping to master confluent intimacies and construct masculinities.

4.2 In line with an ethnographic sensibility, we endeavoured to understand men who were engaged in reflexive 'self-development' under changing and disorienting social conditions. For men contacted during this research, labour migration and lack of social capital often played a role in their SC involvement. The relation between mobility and sexuality is worth flagging because it is a recurrent observation in urban sociology (Heap 2003), and one that is likely to remain significant given flows of immigration and domestic migration. Sometimes bodily capital was also thematic for participants, reflecting the increased significance of normative embodiment (size, shape, weight, appearance) in the reflexive construction of identity in high modernity; for instance, some had suffered the stigma of obesity, which undermined self-confidence and felt ability to attract a (desirable) partner prior to entering the SC (for a broader discussion on men and obesity discourse, see Monaghan 2008). We observed that men with different life experiences, expectations and relationship careers entered the SC, including men previously involved in what were defined as monogamous relationships (including marriage). However, the SC, with its hyper-masculine and conservative folk beliefs was particularly seductive for sexually inexperienced and/or socially isolated young men who felt out of control, lonely, inept and adrift, i.e. subordinated and marginalised masculinities that are conterminous with unsuccessful male heterosexuality. Thereafter men's motives and dispositions for participating in the SC often changed, sometimes radically. Indeed, seasoned contacts positively reconstructed their erotic lives and selfhood, revealing the dynamics of masculinity as a reflexive project. As observed, their project included efforts to expand heterosexual horizons and homosocial connections. Male solidarity also sometimes took precedence over emotional and sexual intimacy with women. This chimes with the growing importance attached to adult friendships over the hegemony of being coupled as reported in other research (Jamieson et al. 2009: 4.8). For some men, formal career aspirations as PUA coaches emerged and were occasionally realised, reflecting and reproducing the power of urban legend and commercial imperatives.

4.3 The SC, comprising members who promote and profit from the Casanova-myth, is a highly gendered phenomenon that is increasingly visible in reflexive modernity. Understandably, there is a tendency for the SC to be viewed with suspicion and even disdain in societies that institutionalise monogamous heterosexuality, the myth of gender equality and inter-personal authenticity. Efforts by educators to promote ethics in sexual relations, incorporating care of the other amidst problematic constructions of masculinity (Carmody 2013), should also be acknowledged here. Under such conditions, and as observed in our research, SC membership sometimes invites censure from significant others regardless of much lauded non-sexual dimensions (e.g. men's professed interest in becoming more sociable and socially integrated). In line with Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) discussion on hegemonic masculinity, the dynamic construction of masculinities is fraught (and further exploration of this with a focus on heterosexualities would benefit from international research given variations in cultural values, welfare policies and economic organisation (Baker 2013)). Nonetheless, in nations such as the USA, the Casanova-myth has mass appeal insofar as it promotes a 'fantastic' vision of an 'enviable' sex life as judged by other young men who endorse pick-up and the broader casualisation and rationalisation of sex. This is a configuration of real and imagined practices where he has the 'pick of the ladies' (graded in terms of looks) while perhaps eventually deciding to follow the script of monogamous heterosexuality with a 'rated' woman (beautiful and perhaps financially secure). Accordingly, the urban legend, exemplified and marketed by charismatic PUAs in a crisis prone society, promises men the means to overcome anxieties and confusion and give them the illusion that they could have 'the upper hand' (Strauss 2005: 263). The social psychological meaning of this legend was tied to male peers' recognition, with some participants' egos remaining fragile in the absence of repeated validation. Critically, then, we would stress that the reproduction of the myth remains tenuous, a paradoxical configuration of practices that promises benefits (character building affirmation, adventure, fun, connections, money) but which also has costs for those (who risk being) subordinated on gendered (and other social) hierarchies.

4.4 In short, our exploration of urban legend - the Casanova-myth - also highlights the dark-side of such

processes. While Fine (1980) makes some excellent points concerning the role of urban legend in mediating or 'addressing fears' (p. 236) in rapidly changing post-industrial USA, he neglects the performative and double-edged features of urban folklore. More research is needed on the dark-side of the SC, including suggested lines of questioning on the potential overlap between seduction scripts and rape scripts (Denes 2011). However, what interested us in this paper was how urban legend may fuel young men's anxieties and (re-)create gender inadequacy in a performative masculine culture that promises the mastery of intimacy and ultimately the contingencies of adult life. This is amidst rapid social change, incorporating increased solo-living (especially among men) and the potential commodification of everything, ranging from the body to mundane interactions. Indeed, the increasingly commercialised SC, despite some coaches' intentions to 'help' their customers, manufactures and amplifies ontological insecurity in a relational field that is irreducible to men's varied motivations and biographies. On the latter point, one need only note the ways in which the vocabulary of the neoliberal economy has penetrated men's heterosexual lives. Such a vocabulary manifests in the quest for sexual capital through ongoing (literally scripted) work on and by the entrepreneurial self (fee-paying customer).

4.5 Such observations are relevant when reviewing influential sociological literature on shifting heterosexual relations. The often cited theorisations on modern intimacies (e.g. Giddens 1992, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995) are rather abstract and sterile, offering broad claims and sweeping generalisations with little concern for empirical detail. Hence, such theorists are not in a position to appreciate various gendered dynamics on the ground, notably men's plural heterosexualities, ranging from adventurous to unsuccessful and what all of this might mean in practice. One upshot from our study, contra more optimistic advocates of the de-traditionalisation thesis, is that one should not assume women are spearheading reflexive changes in intimate heterosexual relations, with domesticated eroticism taking centre stage. Indeed, there is much here to suggest that groups of young men are devoting considerable time, money and energy into their attempts to reassert traditional masculine dominance. Fighting to retain entrenched masculine advantages is by no means a peculiar observation, as seen, for instance, in recent qualitative research on cohabiting couples where men benefit from what they admit is an unfair division of labour (Miller and Sassler 2012). And, while the reproduction of masculine dominance within the SC depends upon repeated peer approval, it also centres on men's attempts to fulfil their erotic desire to access women's sexualised bodies, or simply enter women's lives for a short time in order to practice their pick-up skills. Such instrumental practices, intended to fuse men's collective heterosexual fantasies with social reality, are understandably condemned by various onlookers for being deceptive, sexist and misogynistic. Nonetheless, such practices have proliferated through innovative techniques and technologies in a transvirtual world. Furthermore, there is added complexity because ideas about men's hegemony (e.g. being stoical, dominant and in control) emerge alongside evidence of emotional expressiveness and vulnerability, including a willingness to reveal one's insecurities and failures. Nonetheless, what on one level might be viewed as the transformation of intimacy - men engaging in reflexive self-development in order to learn how to emotionally connect with themselves and others – could be read as the complex reproduction and creative appropriation of longstanding conservative folkloristic beliefs, albeit under changed conditions following the sexual revolution, second wave feminism, restructuring of the labour market and (not necessarily realised) expectations of equality. *Plus ça change plus c'est la même*. All of the above underscores the importance of going beyond abstract theorisations that posit increased democratisation in heterosexual lives in favour of empirical research. In so doing, we may be better placed to understand the complexities of gendered myth-making (including the marketisation of intimacy), the endurance of tradition and the plurality of urban male heterosexualities in high modernity.

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