

Cultural Models of Intimate Life in Contemporary Urban Mexico: A Reading of Self-Help Texts

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1. Introduction

This article explores cultural representations of couple relationships and social change in four Mexican self-help books. These texts reflect in an emblematic manner current cultural and political tensions in Mexico regarding the social organisation of intimate life and the legitimacy of different forms of couple relationships and sexuality. My analysis contributes to debates on transformations of intimate life in contemporary Mexico in the context of wider processes of social change and modernisation. Moreover, it adds to discussions on the 'political economy of love' in the Global South (Padilla et al., 2007) and the ways in which new cultural models of intimacy[1] emerge and established models are reworked through the locally and historically specific intersection of socio-economic, political, and cultural modernising and globalising processes (Castells, 2004, Plummer, 2003).

Far-reaching transformations of couple relationships and family life have taken place in Mexico since the late 1970s (Chant and Craske, 2003). The socio-economic, demographic, and political dimensions of these changes have been widely explored, whereas the reorganisation of cultural meanings of intimacy has received only limited attention (Ariza and de Oliveira, 2004, Nehring, 2005). Specifically, there is a notable lack of research that explores in depth the transformation of large-scale cultural models and public discourses on matters of intimate life. The relatively few culturally focused studies mainly look at the subjective experiences specific of individuals in specific sectors of Mexican society, such as peasants (Hirsch, 2003) and the urban working classes (Gutmann, 1996). With this article, I seek to address these omissions.

I use my analysis of four self-help texts to explore salient features of large-scale cultural models and public discourses on intimate life in urban Mexico. These books form part of a larger research project on the cultural dynamics of intimacy in contemporary urban Mexico which involved the exploration of respective cultural representations in a sample of 93 self-help texts. Scholars in other Western societies have used self-help texts in a similar manner as indicators of cultural trends towards a reflexive individualisation of intimate relationships (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, Giddens, 1992) and the increasingly weak and tentative character of 'cold modern' intimate attachment (Hochschild, 2003, Illouz, 2007). My reading of self-help texts follows these examples. I analyse four self-help texts written by Mexican authors in the last fifteen years. These four books I examine in this article all share a vocal concern with the disorienting, demoralising effects of recent social changes for couples and families in Mexico. At the same time, through the advice they give to their readers, the various authors also recognise the need to challenge central dimensions of traditional patriarchal relationship models in order to allow individuals to construct intimate ties that are both lasting and personally fulfilling. Taken together, these texts seem to reflect in an emblematic manner central cultural tensions and conflicts over the social legitimacy and meaning of different forms of different practices of couple relationships and sexuality.

This article has an exploratory focus. It provides an initial, unprecedented examination of the phenomenon of therapeutic discourses of intimate life in Mexico by sketching some of their salient dimensions. My respective analysis will address two complementary questions: First, how do the texts reflect recent socio-cultural changes in Mexican society and their impact on the dynamics of couple relationships? Second, what do their narratives reveal about the constitution of large-scale cultural models of intimate relationships[2] in contemporary Mexico? The first question focuses my analysis on discursive representations of the range of social, economic, and political processes that have challenged traditional patriarchal configurations of gender relations since the late 1970s. The second question concerns the beliefs, values and norms at the base of different cultural models of intimate life in urban Mexico. Pursuing these questions will generate important insights into the cultural response which recent transformations of intimacy have received and the cultural models of intimate life that are emerging from these transformations.

2. Intimacies and Social Change in Contemporary Mexico

Until the 1970s, the Mexican gender order was largely shaped by hegemonic patriarchal cultural models related to Catholic morality. These cultural models were characterised by the exclusive legitimacy of a nuclear family model characterised by clear power differentials and divisions of labour along gendered lines (Olcott et al., 2006, Tuñón Pablós, 1987, Villafuerte García, 1998, McGinn, 1966). They furthermore involved a strong belief in the exclusive legitimacy of affective and sexual ties between unrelated men and women in the context of religiously sanctioned marriage[3]. Another important ideological element was the organisation of individuals' biographical trajectories in terms of a set of mandatory steps leading from ritualised courtship (*noviazgo*) to lifelong marriage.

Since the late 1970s, these models have lost their influence on Mexicans' practices in everyday life to a substantial degree, and, as a result, a pluralisation of the cultural models of intimate life seems to be taking place. Factors such as economic crises and neoliberal structural reforms, a notable decline in women's fertility rates, women's massive incorporation into the labour market, feminist movements, and experiences of migration have contributed to this challenge to the hegemonic status of patriarchy (Chant and Craske, 2003, García and de Oliveira, 1994, García and de Oliveira, 2005, Gutiérrez Castañeda, 2002, Hirsch, 2003). Recent research has pointed to substantial local variations in the social organisation of gender relations and individuals' day-to-day management of intimate relationships, and there is evidence of a partial trend towards companionate, love-based and egalitarian relationship forms (González-López, 2005, Hirsch, 2003, Hirsch, 2007, Hirsch and Wardlow, 2006, Gutmann, 1996).

At the same time, patriarchal understandings and practices of couple relationships and family life retain considerable social and political influence in Mexico. This is visible, for instance, in the activities of the still very influential Catholic Church, the conservative governing National Action Party (PAN; *Partido Acción Nacional*), and prominent social movements, such as the National Union of Parents (*Unión Nacional de Padres de Familia*), which campaign against family planning, abortion, and sexual education in schools (González Ruiz, 1998, González Ruiz, 2002, Human Rights Watch, 2006).

The tensions between patriarchal and alternative emergent cultural forms of intimate life are evidenced by various emblematic events in recent times, such as the fierce public controversies over the introduction of gay civil unions in Coahuila and Mexico City in 2005 and 2006 and the comprehensive legalisation of abortion[4] in Mexico City in 2007, as well as subsequent legal challenges to the latter measure (Consejo Nacional para Prevenir la Discriminación, 2007b, Consejo Nacional para Prevenir la Discriminación, 2007a, Avilés, 2008a, Cuenca, 2007, Avilés, 2008b).

Changes and tensions in the social organisation of gender, families, and couple relationships have been examined in a substantial number of studies (e.g. Amuchástegui Herrera, 2001b, Amuchástegui Herrera, 2001a, Carrillo, 1999, Carrillo, 2002, García and de Oliveira, 1995, García and de Oliveira, 1997, Gutmann, 2007, Cravey, 1997). However, many of these studies are characterised by socio-economic perspectives and devote little attention to the cultural dynamics of intimacies in contemporary Mexico. The relatively few studies with a cultural outlook (e.g. Gutmann, 1996, Hirsch, 2003, LeVine and Sunderland Correa, 1993, Hirsch, 2007) in turn largely have focused on individual-level experiences of couple relationships, sexuality, and family life in particular settings. As a result, there is hardly any in-depth research on the large-scale cultural models and public discourses in relation to which women and men in Mexico come to understand, experience, and practice their intimate lives[5]. To achieve a comprehensive understanding of the socio-cultural dynamics of intimacies in contemporary Mexico, it seems important to close this gap.

3. Methodological rationale

This article is based on a larger multi-method study on cultural constructions of couple relationships and sexuality among young male and female middle-class professionals from Mexico City[6]. First, it involved 43 life story interviews with university-educated men and women aged 25 to 35 working in a range of professional and academic occupations. Second, it involved a brief questionnaire survey on my participants' socio-economic background and consumption of a range of cultural products, such as TV programmes, books, newspapers, websites, and magazines. From my respective findings, self-help texts emerged as a particularly salient source of inspiration for my participants' thinking about matters of intimate life. I therefore gathered a sample of 93 self-help texts in book and magazine form, including known bestsellers, texts read by my participants, as well as similar publications.

Among the media genres available for my analysis, self-help texts are of particular interest as many of them discuss in great detail the cultural models according to which couple relationships are practiced or should be practiced in contemporary society. Self-help texts articulate these discourses and tensions in a particularly explicit

form, and their analysis may provide theoretically relevant insights into broad cultural tendencies in the organisation of intimate relationships. In line with Hochschild's (2003) analysis, I understand them as texts which propose, first, a systematic self-examination of certain aspects of individuals' lives in terms of a 'didactical description' of moral and social reality established by the author and, second, in response to this self-examination, the incorporation into individual conduct of certain formal techniques or substantive modes of behaviour with the finality of achieving 'success' within particular areas of social life. In this sense, following Gauntlett (2002) and McGee (2005), self-help texts are geared towards the narrative re-construction of self-identity, i.e. the diagnosing and 'helping', improving, or regulating of the self with regard to a particular area of social life: first, in terms of encouraging the consolidation of certain aspects of individuals' ways of thinking, feeling, and acting, second, in terms of the achievement of self-transformation to successfully manage these aspects of daily life, and, third, in terms of a related amendment of one's view of oneself and others.

In order to document as fully as possible the wide range of discourses on couple relationships, sexuality and family life current in urban Mexico, I obtained such texts in a wide variety of settings, ranging from *Sanborns* and *Liverpool* department stores typically frequented by middle-class customers to newspaper stalls in different neighbourhoods and bookshops in the Mexico City underground network. I then conducted an analysis of the texts' trajectories of production and circulation, from their authors and publishing houses to their circulation in Mexico and other areas of the world. This analysis was based on the editorial notes in the texts themselves, as well as on publicly available information, such as authors' and publishers' websites[7]. My analysis of the texts' trajectories, as well as ethnographic observation I conducted in Mexico City and other urban areas suggest that self-help products are widely consumed beyond the middle classes. They are practically ubiquitous in bookshops and newspaper stands in Mexico City (and many other Mexican cities)[8], their price range of often as little as twenty pesos makes them accessible to readers with a wide range of backgrounds, and they address a variety of concerns about the management of couple relationships, family life, and sexuality. They explicitly address a wide variety of audiences and concerns, such as housewives having to come to terms with divorce and re-marriage, single professional women, married men, or teenagers facing their first love relationship.

My findings on the salience of self-help texts in urban Mexico therefore warrant their treatment as indicators of cultural models and public discourses of intimate life. My sampling strategy and the amount of data I possess as to the texts' production, circulation, and consumption are not geared towards the formulation of empirical generalisations to the universe of cultural models of intimate life in Mexico or inferences as to the specific ways in which those texts are interpreted by their readers. I instead treat the texts as indicators of public discourses, debates, tensions, and conflicts over transformations of intimacy in contemporary Mexican society. This mode of analysis and interpretation[9] corresponds to those previously used, for example, in the USA by Hochschild (2003) and Illouz (2007, Illouz, 2008), in Australia by Potts (1998), and in Western Europe by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) and Giddens (1992).

In order to focus my argument on the central concerns of this article, I selected for it a sub-sample of four books written by Mexican authors within the last fifteen years. The defining feature of these texts is that they all address in great detail, and more than the other texts in my sample, contemporary changes of intimate life in Mexican society, formulate explicit value judgements regarding these changes, and derive from these judgements normative prescriptions as to the socially legitimate and personally fulfilling management of couple relationships and sexuality in everyday life. Furthermore, the chosen texts are all characterised by a strong narrative tension between, on the one hand, a critique of the loss of patriarchal values and the dangers of individualisation and, on the other hand, the need for more egalitarian and individually satisfying relationships beyond the normative boundaries of traditional, religiously grounded patriarchal relationships. The chosen sub-sample of texts seems to exemplify in an interesting manner the cultural tensions that exist in Mexican society between different cultural models of intimate life, as well as the attempts made in public debates to bridge those tensions and formulate viable narratives of intimacy in line with the needs, wishes, and desires of contemporary Mexicans. In this sense, the four books correspond to the exploratory focus of this article and the need to establish central dimensions of the phenomenon of therapeutic discourses of intimate life in Mexico.

4. Self-Help Culture in Contemporary Mexico

Just as in many other Western societies (Giddens, 1992, Hochschild, 2003, McGee, 2005), self-help texts in book and magazine form are widely sold in Mexican cities. Their perceived widespread circulation, at least in urban spaces, might indicate to some extent Mexicans' need for guidance on matters of intimate life in a cultural environment characterised by the erosion of patriarchal cultural models and the gradual emergence of alternative options. On the one hand, the widely varying accounts of and prescriptions for intimate life provided by these texts[10] may be understood as reflections of the increasingly diverse and often conflicting cultural models of intimate life in urban Mexico. On the other hand, self-help texts also may play an important role of their own in

shaping these cultural models, in so far as they seem to provide a substantial number of contemporary urban Mexicans with 'cultural options' for making sense of their intimate lives. For these reasons, self-help texts constitute an important source for addressing the issues raised in the preceding sections. I will begin my respective account by providing an overview of some general features of self-help culture in Mexico and the general argumentative tendencies in the sample of self-help texts I gathered during my fieldwork. I will then go on to analyse a sub-group of texts that seem particularly emblematic of the dynamics and tensions of intimate life in contemporary Mexican culture.

My findings on my overall sample of 93 books suggest a pluralisation of the cultural models of intimate life in urban Mexico as manifest in self-help texts. First, I found a large number of 'individualistic' texts. These texts strongly acknowledge the importance of egalitarian, negotiable gender relations and the importance of individual autonomy within couple relationships. Their frame of reference, in contrast to the second group, is not the 'normal relationship'; rather they explicitly or implicitly seem to acknowledge the equal legitimacy of a multiplicity of heterosexual or homosexual relationship forms. The normative underpinnings of these texts lie in the recognition of individual autonomy and the pursuit of personal fulfilment as general principles for successful lives and happy relationships. Rather than prescribing particular substantive ways of leading relationships, these texts propose formal techniques for the monitoring of the attitudes and actions of oneself and others and behavioural adjustments that enable individuals to autonomously pursue their goals for self-fulfilment within relationships. Second, I found a version of self-help in the form of often religiously motivated patriarchal-conservative manuals of moral orientation, such as the works of Arturo Cuyas Armengol (1981) and Elizabeth Cantú de Márquez (2001). These texts are characterised by a mostly reactionary stance towards changes in gender relations in recent decades and the defence of patriarchal arrangements in couple relationships, which they describe as 'normal' and exclusively legitimate in moral terms. Third, I discovered a group of 'conventionalist' texts. Their authors acknowledge, to a certain extent, the mentioned social changes and the importance of egalitarian arrangements in couple relationships, while at the same time tending to accord exclusive legitimacy to 'normal' heterosexual relationships in potentially lifelong marriage. The patriarchal-conservative and conventionalist texts thus emphasise to different degrees similar sets of normative precepts making substantive prescriptions for different aspects of relationships. Successful self-actualisation, according to these texts, lies completely or to a large extent in the adjustment of individual behaviour to universal moral standards derived implicitly or explicitly from 'tradition' or religion.

In the following, I will develop the preceding arguments further through an in-depth analysis of four books from the conventionalist group. Among all texts in my sample, these books are particularly strongly concerned with the consequences recent social changes in Mexico have had for patterns of couple relationships and family life. In normative terms, they occupy an ambivalent position between the patriarchal-conservative and individualistic tendencies in my sample of texts. To a certain extent, they acknowledge the discussed social changes and the importance of egalitarian arrangements in couple relationships, while at the same time tending to accord exclusive legitimacy to 'normal' heterosexual relationships in potentially lifelong marriage and 'normal families'. Their ambivalent and sometimes contradictory stance between these two poles reflects central aspects of current public debates on the nature of family life and couple relationships in Mexican society and therefore makes them a worthwhile object of further exploration. I will begin my exploration of these texts by looking at their assessment of recent transformations of intimate life in Mexican society. On this basis, I will then go on to discuss the prescriptions they make for the appropriate management of couple relationships.

5. Conventionalist self-help texts in urban Mexico

The four chosen books all focus in one way or another on issues of relationship management. 'Youth in sexual ecstasy' (Cuauhtémoc Sánchez, 1994) deals with couple relationships and sexuality among young adults, while 'Full-time lovers' (Jaramillo, 1994), 'Friends and lovers: the perfect couple' (Hernández, 2001), 'Seven keys to happiness for couples' (Miller, 2003) deal with the management of couple relationships in generic terms, offering advice on a wide range of issues, from the negotiation of the domestic division of labour to maintaining a satisfactory sex life and the management of divorce.

These texts frame recent changes in gender relations in Mexican society in terms of issues such as a supposed increase in the cultural influence of feminism and the massive incorporation of women into the labour market as well as sexual liberation. Their authors value these processes ambivalently, rather than in a wholly negative way, as in the mentioned group of patriarchal-conservative texts. On the one hand, most of the eight conventionalist books are explicitly critical of a perceived loss of religious values and deplore an alleged threat to an established 'natural' or 'traditional' gender order they regard as central to social and personal stability and order. On the other hand, while the eight books in this group insist on the exclusive legitimacy of, for instance, the 'normal' heterosexual family built around a couple engaged in lifelong marriage, they also acknowledge the importance of more egalitarian, open and less patriarchal arrangements within families and couples.

These ideas are clearly visible in the first volume of 'Youth in sexual ecstasy' by Carlos Cuauhtémoc Sánchez. The book is addressed to young men and women whom it advises regarding the responsible management of their sexuality and couple relationships in general. Written in the form of a novel, the book tells the story of the university student, Efrén, whose promiscuous sexual conduct leads him to face a variety of personal problems, including a sexually transmitted disease, until he seeks medical and moral help from the sex therapist Dr. Asaf Marín, who represents Cuauhtémoc Sánchez's voice in the story. Efrén's 'sexual disorientation' is related by Cuauhtémoc Sánchez, whose voice in the story is represented by Dr. Marín, to the social disorientation provoked in Mexico by feminism and 'libertinous' foreign cultural influences. Consider Dr. Marín's justification of sexual abstention before marriage:

'If before marriage you live in a balanced way, having fun, but in a clean and measured way, it is difficult that after getting together with a woman you will be corrupted. On the other hand, if you live unhealthily and without control, when marital problems arise, you will have the tendency to flee through the wrong door of licentiousness. In the developed countries the juvenile environment has been degraded so much that it is now very difficult to find successful young marriages; young people are used to so much depravation that after marrying – as seems logical – they do not manage to overcome their promiscuous habits.'

(Cuauhtémoc Sánchez, 1994: 38f.; author's translation)

In a similar way, Peter Miller in 'Seven keys to happiness for couples' criticises feminism and recent trends towards unstable short-term relationships:

'Twenty-five years ago, the majority of couples married for life. The term 'divorce' was rejected by all sectors of the population, because it amounted to an attack against familial unity, the base of society. Then the hippie movement arrived with its proclamations of free love without prejudices, whose duration was determined by the couple according to the feelings of both. For the first time in history, the woman was given the opportunity to rebel against masculine domination, to leave the home to contribute to its sustenance, [and] to express her opinions. [...] And thus the divorce epidemic began. [...] Diverse factors of modern life, apart from the described ones, threaten the union of couple relationships to the degree that many young people today prefer to dedicate themselves to a profession, travelling, and insignificant relationships without making any commitments, and the couples which decided to take the risk out of love shiver in the face of social changes, which have given greater importance to materialism than to lasting emotions between men and women. Nevertheless, not everything is lost. People know that the fundament of society is the family, and that if this fundament suffers a great crisis, then we will face grave problems. Mexico, just as all Latin American countries, is distinguished by the warmth of its residents, and although the panorama appears desolate, in reality we are in a very interesting transitory phase [...]' (Miller, 2003: 7f.; author's translation)

Similar arguments can be found in most of the conventionalist self-help books. They are generally critical of social changes that have threatened the primacy of the model of the 'normal' family built around potentially lifelong marriage. However, at the same time they also value positively recent changes towards a greater level of gender equality within relationships, as long as these relationships conform to the 'normal' model. For instance, Carlos Cuauhtémoc Sánchez clearly regards the model of the 'normal' family as 'natural' and morally superior, but the same time is critical of 'traditional' patriarchal arrangements within couple relationships and welcomes recent changes that have allowed women to lead independent lives inside and outside their homes and to pursue professional careers.

The ideological underpinnings of these assessments consist of a mixture of essentialist assumptions about the fixed 'nature' of intimate life and claims about, at least to some extent, the historically and situationally contingent character of couple relationships. Essentialist assumptions are present in the conventionalist texts in the form of assumptions about a divine moral 'order of things' and in the notion of the biologically grounded 'nature' of men and women. Religious essentialism, for example, is clearly visible in 'Youth in sexual ecstasy'. The text's plot is built around the binary opposition between Efrén's errant promiscuous behaviour, leading to illness and unhappiness, and his subsequent progression towards happiness and success based on his acknowledgement of Christian values and the moral superiority of love-based marital relationships and sexual abstinence before marriage.

Biological essentialism with religious overtones, in contrast, is clearly visible in Horacio Jaramillo Loya's relationship guidebook 'Full-time lovers'. Jaramillo draws on a proto-psychoanalytical approach to construct an

account of the 'nature' of men's and women's psychological constitution and social behaviour:

'Sex and genitality cannot be evil simply because they were invented by Nature, and their use is perfectly structured in the Divine Plan. Another issue would be the abuse or the misuse of one of the most important axes of love. In this sense, the companions have to reach an agreement in order to regulate and enhance this fuel of love according to their values and in agreement with their needs.' (Jaramillo, 1994: 154; author's translation)

'How many relationships would fall apart straight away today if we took away his guilt and deleted her fear of being out in the street without capital if she was to divorce? Because of these doubts, it becomes clear that among men and women one cannot find pure love in the depth of their soul; there are always mixtures of love and violence in the depth of the human being, [and] due to this everybody has a wife, a child, a little dog, a divine belief in which he deposits sometimes his heart of sweetness and chocolate. However, equally, humanity has somewhere some figure it criticises [and] attacks in silence or reproaches with screams, and it jealously keeps ideas against different people, [such as] easy women or disoriented men, in whom it deposits all the violence and the bad smells which emanate from a dirty heart. Love and violence live together in the heart. [...] Deep down in us [*en el fondo de nosotros*], there is a mixture of emotions that emerges into the mind from the bottom of the soul in the form of bubbles of life, but something happens, and for some reason the mind is shocked and twists them until it experiences them as violence and destruction against itself and against others.' (Jaramillo, 1994: 11ff.; author's translation)

In Jaramillo's account, this problematic psychosocial makeup of men and women entails a clear disjunction between the ideal of romantic love and the often conflictive dynamics of 'real love' in everyday relationships. In this context, Jaramillo also introduces the notion of the 'marital career', i.e. the idea that long-term relationships are potentially unstable in terms of their development and require careful, conscious management by both partners in order for them to remain attached to each other and avoid conflicts. According to Jaramillo, the development of couple relationships is shaped both by a number of human traits fixed by 'nature' or a 'divine plan' and individuals', to some extent, unpredictable management of their relationships in the context of variable social circumstances.

However, this problematic in Jaramillo's account is culturally invariant in so far as it follows from men's and women's general 'natural' makeup rather than from locally specific social situations. In this sense, the transformation of Mexican patriarchy, which Jaramillo explicitly acknowledges, only means that the context has changed in which, at least to a large extent, the essentially invariant and naturally fixed dynamics of couple relationships take place. While the unpredictability of the 'marital career' allows for certain variations in the dynamics of couple relationships, these variations are constrained by invariant human nature. This reduces the significance of social changes in gender relations and the degree to which patterns of couple relationships can be voluntarily modified by individuals. Self-actualisation, i.e. the achievement of control over one's self and one's life as the objective of 'self-help' (Whelan, 2004) in Jaramillo's account, therefore, can only mean the adjustment of individual behaviour to this pre-existing framework.

Thus, there is a definite affinity between Jaramillo's model of self-actualisation and that of the aforementioned group of patriarchal-conservative texts. However, in contrast to the texts in the patriarchal-conservative group, Jaramillo's evaluation of these changes is fairly positive; he sees the waning of Mexican patriarchy as an opportunity for more stable marital careers, as long as relationships do not deteriorate into short-term, casual forms. Jaramillo's combination of essentialist and historicist assumptions is typical of the respective pattern among the conventionalist self-help texts in general.

A corollary of this argumentative mixture between essentialist assumptions and insights into the historically and situationally contingent dynamics of couple relationships lies in the conventionalist authors' tendency to mix collectivist assumptions about appropriate relationship management with strongly individualistic, rationalistic understandings of human agency. A good example of this pattern can be found in Carlos Cuauhtémoc Sánchez's 'Youth in sexual ecstasy'. On the one hand, as among the conservative-patriarchal texts, Cuauhtémoc Sánchez seems to assume that successful and fulfilling relationships can only be achieved by adhering to certain collective standards and 'laws of life'. Efrén, the novel's protagonist, is unhappy and even endangers his health as long as he deviates from the laws of life. In contrast, as soon as he learns these laws, he finds his 'true path' and settles into a happy and stable relationship.

In this account, there ultimately is only one valid way of life, and individuals such as Efrén have little choice with regard to the kind of couple relationship they ought to lead if they wish to be happy. On the other hand, in contrast

to texts such as 'The challenges for today's woman', the discovery of the 'true path' of relationship management is not a matter of simply obeying divine commandments or other collective standards. Rather, Efrén discovers what kind of relationship he should look for and how he should deal with it through introspection, rational reflection, and the wilful re-adjustment of his practices and outlook on life. Such introspection, for instance, is the outcome of watching a video depicting a bloody and savage abortion. Dr. Marín had given it to Efrén without predisposing him as to its content, but Efrén on his own comes to reconsider his previously positive attitude towards abortion after watching it:

'I turned off the TV in a sea of confusion. How could I have accepted something like this for such a long time? I did not have the slightest doubt that the origin of all sins of man lies in ignorance. Even the doctors who practise abortion do it with their eyes covered, smelling the delicious aroma of money. But man is not bad when he knows. He is bad out of ignorance. I felt terribly much like lying down and crying. Just six months ago, I had asked my mother for a loan, telling her that it was for a fee the university had asked for. I gave it to my ex-girlfriend Jessica...so that she could abort my child...' (Cuauhtémoc Sánchez, 1994: 45; author's translation)

Thus, in Cuauhtémoc Sánchez's account, the structure and dynamics of couple relationships cannot be managed by simply following collective standards imposed from the outside; they result from the beliefs held by individuals and the actions they take on their base. In this sense, the influence of social structural factors seemingly is not acknowledged by Cuauhtémoc Sánchez either; the course couple relationships take entirely seems to be a matter of men's and women's respective attitudes and wilful practices.

This partly voluntaristic approach is equally visible in 'Full-time lovers'. In line with his outlined notion of the 'marital career', Jaramillo assumes that the success of relationships, i.e. their permanence and the achievement of individual fulfilment, can be achieved through rational reflection on the part of both partners and the conscious management of their day-to-day interaction. For instance, Jaramillo argues with regard to the possibility of avoiding divorce in spite of serious conflicts among a couple:

'It is healthy to fight for a relationship until the end in spite of her errors [and] in spite of his mistakes and [in spite of] the human limitations of both, so that love does not die like a foul tooth, and for this one has to talk, analyse, look for third parties who help both in couple talks more than in separate interviews with each of them.' (Jaramillo, 1994: 40; author's translation)

As the notion of the 'marital career' already implies, healthy and 'normal' couple relationships for Jaramillo are limited to the realm of marriage sanctioned by church and state, and individuals have to adhere to this collective standard in order to achieve a successful relationship. However, the marriage essential collective standard for couple relationships is not sufficient for guaranteeing their success; whether a couple will experience lasting happiness ultimately depends on their respective agency and their ability to 'fight for a relationship until the end'.

This ideological ambiguity between voluntaristic self-actualisation and the attempt to mould individuals' intimate lives according to set collective moral standards has direct implications for the structure of the prescriptions the different authors make for the achievement of successful couple relationships. On the one hand, the conventionalist books and magazines provide sets of concrete substantive prescriptions for the construction of couple relationships that meet collective moral standards. On the other hand, they also focus to a large degree on outlining abstract formal techniques of behaviour management that are meant to allow individuals to achieve self-fulfilment on their own terms, as long as they adhere to the minimal standards of collective morality.

This is evident in Helen Hernández's book 'Friends and lovers: the perfect couple'. Based on her own experience of divorce, a small empirical survey she conducted, and a reading of relevant psychotherapeutic literature, Hernández pursues the question whether viable long-term relationships are at all possible. Hernández establishes a clear basic framework by stating that 'in the human being, there is an inborn need to share one's life with someone else' and backs up this statement with an appropriate quotation from the Bible. In line with patriarchal belief systems with deep roots in Mexican history, Hernández's model of viable couple relationships is clearly limited to ideally lifelong marital relationships as base for the establishment of families, which in turn serve as the fundament of society:

'The couple may understand love as a compendium of beliefs and attitudes that tend to strengthen a relationship in order to make it lasting and satisfactory. It is important to prepare our young people for this large phase of life, in which the basic unit [*célula*] of society can be found: the family.' (Hernández, 2001: 19; author's translation)

As the remainder of the 'Friends and lovers' shows, Hernández likewise understands by 'the family' specifically a nuclear family consisting of husband, wife, and children. Throughout the text, she clearly advises her readers to adhere to these collective standards for relationships and family life and provides them with concrete respective prescriptions. However, as the preceding quotation already shows, Hernández also argues that the internal dynamics of couple relationships in terms of the power relations, task divisions, and affective and sexual ties between the partners are fluid and variable. In this sense, just like Horacio Jaramillo, she writes of a 'marital career' that needs to be carefully managed and negotiated by both partners in an ongoing manner. According to Hernández, the complex and sometimes conflict-laden dynamics of couple relationships result from the following set of assumptions about the historically contingent character of intimate relationships:

'Marriage as we know it nowadays is something relatively new. Our concept of exclusivity and ownership of our partner did not exist as it does now for millennia. Polygamy was a common and generally accepted practice, and it was considered normal since before the time of the Biblical narratives. Gradually, legal polygamy was eradicated for economic and social reasons, and the union among couples was finally established.' (Hernández, 2001: 43; author's translation)

In so far as monogamous relationships and marriage are not essential characteristics of human intimate relationships, they require, according to Hernández, careful nurturing and continuous actualisation. This argument about the historical contingency of the forms intimate relationships may take directly seems to contradict Hernández's earlier point regarding the fundamental importance of 'the family' to Mexican society. Just like the other conventionalist authors, Hernández never resolves this contradictory co-existence of essentialist and historicist perspectives on couple relationships and family life.

The historical side of her argument, however, leads her to conclude that the internal dynamics of couple relationships may legitimately change and that, in contemporary Mexican society, couples should adhere to the egalitarian cultural models that are becoming dominant:

Traditional marriage, i.e. the legal union between a man and a woman, in which the man is 'the head' of the home and the woman the heart is also now disappearing, in order to be substituted by a conjugal society in which both partners share everything: responsibilities, labours and satisfactions. Each couple decides freely who has [a certain] authority regarding certain issues.' (Hernández, 2001: 43; author's translation)

Given that couples are to decide freely how to manage their relationships, Hernández does not provide concrete instructions for the management of particular aspects of marital relationships. Rather, she limits herself to providing couples with advice on appropriate general strategies to adopt when negotiating daily life with their partner in an egalitarian setting. For instance, she places great emphasis on the need for a high level of communication between the partners, as well as on mutual respect and the rational negotiation of disagreements:

'Being conscious that the man and the woman differ in terms of tastes, interests, sensibilities, etc., it becomes necessary to establish transparent communication that furthers mutual understanding. In order to improve our relationships, it is very important to ask our partners for their views, abandon authoritarian attitudes, and frequently resort to: 'Would you like it if...' and 'What do you think about...'. [...] We all like to be taken seriously, particularly by our partner, and when we feel that the dog or friends or whatever is more important [to our partner] than ourselves, feelings and enthusiasm are notably diminished.' (Hernández, 2001: 13; author's translation)

These features of Hernández's account are generally shared by the conventionalist self-help authors. They clearly seek to limit couple relationships to the 'normal' traditional form of an ideally lifelong marital union serving as base for the establishment of a nuclear family. However, they also acknowledge that relationships in contemporary Mexican society increasingly tend to take the form of contractual bonds based on love, enthusiasm for each other, and personal affinity, whose persistence requires ongoing, conscious efforts by both partners.

Conclusions: Modernity with limits

The analysed self-help texts construct an ambivalent cultural model of couple relationships. They acknowledge the exclusive legitimacy of the 'natural' model of heterosexual, marital, potentially lifelong couple relationships and the need to maintain it in spite of recent transformations of gender relations in Mexico. However, they do not tie their defence of this relationship model to a call to adopt it unquestioningly in fulfilment of respective norms regardless of

their own situation and feelings. Being in a long-term relationship, for authors such as Hernández, Cuauhtémoc Sánchez or Jaramillo, is not an end itself, but rather a privileged means to achieving happiness for both partners. In the logic of the conventionalist texts, the model of the long-term marital relationship, historically central to the social organisation of patriarchy in Mexico, is reinterpreted in individualistic terms, in an often ambivalent and potentially contradictory manner, as a means for individual self-realisation.

In this sense, it might be possible to understand the conventionalist self-help authors as proposing a kind of 'modernity with limits' as the most appropriate cultural model for couple relationships in contemporary Mexico. On the one hand, they acknowledge the trend towards individualised relationships based on love, companionship and a relatively high degree of equality between both partners that has resulted from the processes of modernisation and globalisation that have re-shaped Mexico and other Western countries in recent decades (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, Giddens, 1992, Hirsch and Wardlow, 2006, Therborn, 2004). On the other hand, the authors seek to closely constrain the manifestations of these individualising trends and limit them to the 'normal' long-term marital relationships and nuclear families they regard as fundament of Mexican society. As shown throughout this article, their respective arguments never achieve full coherence, and substantial tensions and contradictions remain between assertions of the essential nature of religion (e.g. Cuauhtémoc Sánchez) and one particular kind of 'Family' (e.g. Hernández) in Mexican society and acknowledgements of the fluid, negotiable, and historically variable character of intimate relationships. In this sense, the conventionalist texts occupy a tenuous middle ground between the aforementioned patriarchal-conservative and largely individualised cultural models of intimacy manifest in other sections of the analysed sample of self-help texts.

This tenuous middle ground and its co-existence with other more radical forms of understanding couple relationships reveal important features of the cultural dynamics of intimacy and gender in contemporary Mexico. To begin with, my analysis tentatively points to a far-reaching pluralisation of the respective cultural models current in Mexican society. The patriarchal logics of couple relationships that constituted common sense throughout Mexico until recently seem to be losing much of their binding power, being reinterpreted in more individualistic terms by the conventionalist authors and being abandoned altogether in the individualistic texts. At the same time, in co-existence and interpenetration with other cultural models, they continue to be widely influential, as evidenced by the conventionalist authors' claims as to the centrality of lifelong marriage to individual happiness and social stability.

From this interpenetration of different, often seemingly contradictory cultural models, new, hybrid^[11] understandings of couple relationships may emerge, as the conventionalist texts show. Even though the conventionalist authors typically make strong links between their arguments and what they describe as fundamental, deeply historical traditions of family life in Mexico, their actual prescriptions for the management of couple relationships to a large degree differ significantly from historical patriarchal family forms documented in respective research (Gonzalbo Aizpuru and Rabell Romero, 1996, Olcott et al., 2006, Tuñón Pablós, 1987). Rather, their accounts consist of a complex *mélange* of claims about the importance of lifelong marriage and the formation of nuclear families with to a large extent individualised and egalitarian proposals for the management of relationship dynamics. In this sense, my findings suggest that a binary opposition of 'traditional' and 'modern' cultural models is insufficient for understanding the cultural changes in gender relations in contemporary Mexico. Given the heterogeneity of the positions on intimacy and social change taken by the different texts and the wide variety of cultural resources and belief systems on which their authors draw in their construction, it does not seem possible to clearly locate either a pure 'traditional' or a pure individualistic or 'modern' discursive pole in the texts. My findings suggest that current changes in the large-scale cultural models of intimacy in Mexico might better be understood in terms of processes of diversification and the emergence of new, hybrid cultural models than in terms of a linear tradition from traditional patriarchal to modern individualised cultural forms.

With regard to the interpretation of the direction this process of cultural diversification is taking, the central question clearly is to what extent it entails an erosion of the patriarchal cultural models of intimate life that dominated Mexican society throughout the twentieth century (Amuchástegui Herrera, 2001b, Olcott et al., 2006). In this sense, the four analysed texts could be read as providing evidence of emergent cultural forms of intimate life that fundamentally contradict and gradually erode patriarchal dominant culture. The extent to which the four authors acknowledge the need for egalitarian, mutually satisfactory couple relationships that leave behind the constraints faced by previous generations is notable in this context. However, at the same time, the texts could also be read as an attempt at the incorporation of some aspects of emergent forms of intimacy into established, historically hegemonic cultural models, precisely in order to shore up against social change the socio-cultural primacy of the heterosexual nuclear family based on ideally lifelong marriage (Williams, 2005). The vocal defence of this model of intimate life by authors such as Carlos Cuauhtémoc Sánchez and their acerbic critique of the pernicious effects of social change and foreign cultural influence provides ample evidence in this regard. Ultimately, I believe that the analysed texts present, in this regard, a fundamental discursive ambivalence reflecting wider cultural tensions in

the Mexican public sphere that remain as yet unresolved. Just as much as the four books provide evidence of both emergent cultural models of intimate life and the persistent importance of patriarchal norms and values, political debates in contemporary Mexico are characterised by both unprecedented reforms, such as the aforementioned legalisation of abortion and gay civil unions in Mexico City, and by a fierce backlash against these reforms driven by powerful social movements and the religious-conservative national government. The open-ended, ambivalent character of these developments and the current lack of research on cultural models of intimate life in Mexico point to the need for substantial further research. With this article, I have attempted to provide a starting point for this endeavour.

Notes

[1] By cultural models, I understand the general, collectively shared, systematic discourses that provide individuals with a repertoire of cultural meanings by which they account for their experiences and practices in everyday life (Swidler, 2001). [\[Return\]](#)

[2] As a matter of narrative convention, I will use the terms 'intimacy', 'intimate life', or 'intimate relationships' in a narrow sense as synonyms for 'couple relationships'. [\[Return\]](#)

[3] See, however, Carrillo (2002) for a discussion of the socio-cultural complexities underlying these overt normative standards and the dynamics of a sexual double standard enabling men to engage, within certain limits, in extramarital sexual activities. [\[Return\]](#)

[4] Also see Taracena (2002) and Kulczycki (2007). Abortion is legal in all Mexican states under strictly limited conditions, specifically rape (Human Rights Watch, 2006). [\[Return\]](#)

[5] Two noteworthy exceptions are Salles and Tuirán (1998) and Salles and Valenzuela (1998), as well as to some extent Amuchástegui (2001b). [\[Return\]](#)

[6] The main stage of fieldwork took place in Mexico City between September 2004 and June 2005. It was followed by several additional fieldwork trips between July 2006 and October 2008. A final phase of data collection is planned for late 2009. This project has been supported by research grants from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the University of Essex, and Valdosta State University. [\[Return\]](#)

[7] Publishers and authors of the analysed self-help publications generally failed to respond to requests for information, frequently citing the confidentiality and commercial value of information about the Mexican self-help market as reasons. [\[Return\]](#)

[8] in line with González-López (2005), I assume the historical fragmentation of the Mexican gender order into a variety of closely localised gender regimes. Two of the main respective axes of differentiation concern the divide between rural and urban gender regimes, as well as regional variations in gender relations and intimate life. Given the urban focus of my research, it is at present impossible to apply it to rural settings. My fieldwork has mainly taken place in Mexico City, but also involved a variety of fieldtrips to other parts of Mexico during the past two decades, which have provided me with a base for my description of self-help as a salient urban phenomenon. [\[Return\]](#)

[9] This approach moreover corresponds to a long-standing tradition in qualitative sociological research of using the in-depth analysis of a limited number of cases to generate theoretically relevant insights into the socio-cultural dynamics of everyday life. For general methodological discussions of this issue, see, for instance, Donmoyer (2000), Gomm, Hammersley and Atkinson (2000), Lieberman (1992), Plummer (2001), and Shaw (1966). [\[Return\]](#)

[10] These variations also seem to be related to differences in the texts' trajectories of production and circulation. Due to the limited scope of this article, I will not consider this issue here. [\[Return\]](#)

[11] My understanding of hybridity follows that of Pieterse: 'With respect to cultural forms, hybridisation is defined as 'the ways in which forms become separated from existing practices and recombine with new forms in new practices' (Rowe and Schelling, 1991: 231). This principle also applies to structural forms of social organization' (Nederveen Pieterse, 2004: 64). For a further discussion of hybridisation, culture, and social change, see Kraidy (2005). [\[Return\]](#)

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