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### **Advice, Self-help and media advice about relationships**

Given the value of relationships for personal happiness, the well-being of families, and the cohesion of groups and societies, it is perhaps not strange that various popular media such as television talk-shows, fashion magazines, and self-help experts have made big business of telling people what is needed to reach “relationship nirvana”. Likewise, it is understandable that the mass population these media target is hungry for information and opinion – for great power can be gained from information that truly facilitates relationship success. However, this can only be the case if self-help and media advice is based on valid and reliable evidence. This entry briefly explores the nature and quality of self-help advice available to consumers of mass media.

While rigorous analysis of the content of self-help and media advice about relationships is lacking, much can be learned from anecdotally exploring the messages portrayed in prototypic media outlets. Indeed, a survey of television talk show and self-help focused programming, popular magazines, and self-help literature revealed both some interesting common trends and distinct differences. It is clear that advice in popular media is dominated firstly by a focus on romantic relationships and secondly by child/parent relationships and so this entry too focuses on these forms.

Most media advice regarding romantic relationships overestimates differences between men and women, with pervasive stereotypes of men as autonomous and withdrawing from intimacy and women as anxious and emotional. While gender differences do occur and need to be considered, research has demonstrated that gender differences tend to be fairly small in comparison to differences attributable to the stage of the relationship (e.g., attraction, initiation, long-term), to interpersonal processes (e.g., communication and attribution styles), and to other individual traits (e.g., personality differences, emotional intelligence, beliefs and attitudes, attachment styles). Yet, a common thread across much popular advice is the clear impression that men and women approach romantic relationships from extremely differing viewpoints. The problem with this assumption is that, while there are gender differences in research that studies averages across groups of men or women, it is a fallacy to give practical advice regarding how to relate to any one particular individual man or woman. While there is some truth to stereotypes of men and women's relationship behaviors, the likelihood is great that any particular individual will differ quite substantially from the stereotype.

Titles of commonly found self-help literature such as "How to get a guy by thinking like one", "How to talk to women", and "Why men never remember and women never forget" emphasise the notion of differences between the sexes and leave the impression that there are "correct" ways to understand the different motives of men versus women. Furthermore, the image of a battle between the sexes is conjured up with titles such as "101 lies men tell women" and "Seven things he'll never tell you". Media targeting men seem to perpetuate stereotypes of women as "sex objects" and "gold-diggers" who are needy and vulnerable, while media targeting women perpetuate

stereotypes of men as sex-crazed, deceitful, and emotionally immature. This notion that people are usually calculating and disingenuous in romantic relationships, especially men, seems heavily prevalent. Advice is given on how to “beat” the opposite gender by pre-empting their motives. Some self-help literature goes as far as to propagate the idea that the only way to “stay ahead” in relationships is to learn how to read into what your partner “really wants” or to interpret what it means when he or she behaves a certain way. Even such potentially dangerous ideas as “women really mean yes when they say no” and women can “change their men” are sometimes embraced in self-help media. The pervasive stereotype in popular media is that men are not emotionally developed enough to deal forthrightly with relationships and hence need to be guided and coached by women. Relationship research however indicates that the practice of such misguided advice will most likely be problematic.

Ironically, by perpetuating the above stereotypes, much popular self-help advice would seem to be emphasizing ideas that may do more harm than good. Relationship research suggests that ideas such as “men and women differ greatly in their personalities and relationship needs”, “either people are meant for each other or they are not” and “if you love me you’ll understand what I need without me telling you” are not only harmful to relationship functioning and individual happiness, but are also beliefs typically endorsed by couples in therapy. Even more ironic, what is often lacking in media advice is the basic notion of honesty and open communication without using pre-conceived motives to read into partners’ behaviours.

While much self-help and media advice about relationships is inconsistent with or overestimates the findings in relationship research, there is evidence of television

programming and literature that focus less on stereotypes about gender differences and more on the processes involved in relationship formation and maintenance. This literature seems more in line with general scientific findings, outlining processes that occur in relationships at various stages across the lifespan and focusing on practical solutions for various problems occurred (e.g., how to deal with lack of time in a busy world; what to consider in a relationship before marriage or before having children). Likewise, some talk-show television programs advise couples to seek professional counselling to resolve issues stemming from differences in communication style, problems with self-esteem, or lack of trust. Even these forms of self-help however occasionally propagate stereotyped norms of relationships. The advice seems to ignore the plurality of sexual and relationship orientations as well as the complex nature of most modern-day families.

In contrast to advice regarding romantic relationships, some self-help and media advice regarding relationships between parents and children seem more in line with developmental research. In particular, much self-help literature describes the development of the mother/infant bond and the maintenance of healthy bonding throughout childhood. Such literature for the most part is generally sound in its practical advice. However, some reality television programs over-dramatise the troubles of “monster-children” with suggestions for draconian “tough-love Super-Nanny” tactics for parents to emulate.

In conclusion, rigorous content analyses of media depictions of relationships are needed. Little is known about the effects of self-help and media advice on the consumer. Ironically, if the anecdotal observations presented here are correct, then one might expect

the cultivation of or reinforcement of themes found in self-help advice to be more harmful than helpful.

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(see also Beliefs About Relationships, Gender Stereotypes, Information Seeking, Media Influences on Relationships, Media Depictions of Relationships)

### **Recommended Reading**

Alberoni, F. (1983). *Falling in love*. Random House.

Bowlby, J. (2005). *The making and breaking of relationships*. Routledge.

Buss, D. (1995). *The evolution of desire: Strategies of human mating*. Basic Books.

Goleman, D. (2006). *Social Intelligence: The new science of human relationships*. Bantam Books.