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NEGOTIATING COURTSHIP:

Reconciling Egalitarian Ideals with Traditional Gender Norms

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Traditional courtship norms delineate distinct gendered behaviors for men and women based on the model of a dominant, breadwinning male and a passive, dependent female. Previous research shows, however, that as women have increased their access to earned income, there has been a rising ideological and behavioral commitment to egalitarian relationships. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 38 college-educated women, this article explores how women negotiate these seemingly contradictory beliefs in order to understand how and why gendered courtship conventions persist even as heterosexual romantic relationships become more egalitarian. My findings show that while the women reference essentialist beliefs about men's "nature" to explain their commitment to courtship conventions, they draw on narratives of choice, individualism, and personal autonomy to assert that the symbolic gendering of courtship will not interfere with their desire for an egalitarian marriage. However, women's behaviors and narratives reinforce notions of gender difference, potentially providing support for other forms of gender inequality.

Keywords: *gender; dating; courtship; relationships; egalitarianism*

Courtship conventions delineate distinct gendered behaviors for men and women based on the model of an active, breadwinning male and a passive, dependent female (Bailey 1988; Cate and Lloyd 1992). These

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norms situate men as the initiators in relationships. Men are responsible for asking women out, paying for dates, determining when the relationship will shift from casual to committed, and proposing marriage, while women are limited to reacting to men's overtures (Bogle 2008; England, Shafer, and Fogarty 2008; Laner and Ventrone 2000; Sassler and Miller 2011). Yet, as women have increased their access to earned income, there has been a rising ideological and behavioral commitment to egalitarian relationships (Bianchi, Robinson, and Milkie 2006; Gerson 2010). College-educated women expect to pursue lucrative and rewarding careers and form peer relationships that provide room for independence and self-development (Coontz 2005; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009). In spite of these destabilizing shifts, traditional gender ideologies remain remarkably resilient, as courtship conventions symbolizing men's dominant, breadwinning status stubbornly persist (Eaton and Rose 2011). These competing sets of behavioral rules create a "moral dilemma" (Gerson 2002) for women as they seek to negotiate romantic relationships in what has been referred to as an "uneven" gender revolution (England 2010), with women's employment opportunities changing more rapidly than gendered patterns in the home. This study looks at how a sample of highly educated women navigate this contradiction, examining how their economic resources and their expressed support for egalitarian relationships intersect with persisting gender norms to shape their contemporary courtship behaviors and attitudes.

Since the courtship period may influence couples' expectations regarding gendered behaviors during marriage (Humble, Zvonkovic, and Walker 2008; Laner and Ventrone 2000), it is important to understand how courtship conventions may impede women's equal status in romantic relationships and where openings for change, and greater equality, may be occurring. While some scholars have speculated that the intransigence of these norms may not be critical to achieving equality (Graf and Schwartz 2011), others posit that they contribute to the power imbalance between men and women (England 2010; Sassler and Miller 2011). Given that the focus of recent research on middle-class women's relationships has been on the college years (Bogle 2008; England, Shafer, and Fogarty 2008; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009), little is known about how women are negotiating conventional scripts in the changing social landscape as they exit college and begin the process of forming long-term partnerships. By looking at how college-educated women navigate courtship and the narratives they use to make sense of their behaviors, this study reveals the contradictory processes of social change among middle-class women.

SYMBOLIC GENDERING AND THE CHANGING CONTEXT OF COURTSHIP

Gender scholars have pointed to the ways that gendered meanings continue to influence social relationships, even as the material dimensions that support inequality erode (England 2010; Ridgeway 2011; Tichenor 2005). Ridgeway asserts that gender remains a primary frame that men and women use to define who they are, how they will behave, and how they expect others to behave. Individuals draw on cultural knowledge, or “shared,” “common” knowledge that “everybody knows,” to coordinate their behavior and facilitate social cohesion (Ridgeway 2011, 35). This knowledge reflects cultural stereotypes about how men and women behave as a result of their sex category and emphasizes the perceived differences between the two groups. As Ridgeway shows, most adults continue to believe that men and women are innately different with either complementary or conflicting needs and desires, especially in heterosexual romantic relationships where sex differences are highlighted. In particular, many studies reveal the existence and pervasiveness of beliefs about men’s and women’s relative levels of assertiveness versus responsiveness and interest in casual sex versus a committed relationship (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Ridgeway 2011). These perceived differences are especially salient during courtship, when people tend to fall back on scripts to ease uncertainty and reassure themselves and others that they conform to normative sexual standards (Eaton and Rose 2011).

Scripts that become culturally hegemonic tend to enshrine the behavior of white, middle-class heterosexuals, who remain the dominant social group (Bailey 1988; Ridgeway 2011). As a result, research on dating and courtship shows remarkable stability and agreement between men and women in support of the traditional, and highly gendered, courtship script (Eaton and Rose 2011; Laner and Ventrone 2000). This script demonstrates men’s status as active economic providers and women as more passive dependents, dictating that men initiate, plan, and pay for first dates while women limit themselves to reactive behavior, such as accepting physical contact and being walked to the door (Laner and Ventrone 2000). Relationship progression, including decisions about exclusivity and engagement, also favors the man’s desired timetable, with women less empowered to openly seek their desired outcomes (Bogle 2008; England, Shafer, and Fogarty 2008; Sassler and Miller 2011). According to the prevailing narrative, women are looking for commitment, while men are trying to avoid it (Bogle 2008), but women’s lack of power to define the

terms of courtship holds true even when women do not desire commitment. Hamilton and Armstrong (2009) thus show that women are often coerced into a commitment they do not desire. Alternatively, women who act “too forward” are often passed over for future dates (Bogle 2008) or face relationship destabilization (Sassler and Miller 2011). Even college students who describe themselves as egalitarian engage in these inequalitarian dating patterns, as beliefs about men’s assertiveness and women’s responsiveness continue to function “unconsciously” (Laner and Ventrone 1998, 475). Drawing on Goffman’s (1976) argument that individuals symbolically enact cultural beliefs about men and women through “gender displays,” I use the term “symbolic gendering” to refer to the cultural practices associated with courtship. These practices are used to represent what are assumed to be essential, biological differences between women and men, making them appear inevitable while obscuring how they privilege men (Bourdieu 1998).

Yet changes in U.S. women’s educational and employment opportunities challenge conventional beliefs about gender difference. As women’s wages become increasingly important to attaining middle-class status, romantic relationships based on women’s financial dependence appear increasingly less desirable to both men and women (Gerson 2010). Middle-class parents prepare their daughters for professional careers (Lareau 2003), and, with women’s college graduation rates now exceeding men’s, these women are far more likely to expect career trajectories that mirror those of their male counterparts (Damaske 2011). Among highly educated women, successes in the workplace have undermined the use of gendered self-descriptions, with women more likely to think of themselves as agentic than in the 1960s (Twenge 2001).

The changes have prompted new approaches to relationships. College-educated women expect to pursue career opportunities in young adulthood while delaying marriage until their late twenties or early thirties (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009). The hook-up culture on college campuses allows young adults to engage in sexual encounters outside the context of a relationship, which are often viewed as too time consuming by women hoping to succeed at school and in careers (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009). When relationships *are* formed, women thus expect room for independence and self-development (Cancian 1987; Coontz 2005). The majority of young women seek a relationship in which both partners share work and home responsibilities, while many say they would rather forgo a relationship than be in an unequal one (Gerson 2010). Although women continue to do the majority of housework and child care, men have increased their contributions, while women have

decreased theirs (Bianchi, Robinson, and Milkie 2006), and there is some evidence that indicates that this shift is at least partly due to women's increased earnings relative to men's (Bianchi et al. 2000).

As women form stronger attachments to paid labor, conflicts between a commitment to self-development and personal relationships (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009) create a "moral dilemma" with no clear socially sanctioned solutions (Gerson 2002). This dilemma provides an opportunity to challenge conventional gender norms, which no longer represent an obvious, or necessarily viable, pathway. This tension between convention and change can be found in the contrasting findings on hooking up and dating, which highlight the constraints on women's ability to negotiate their desired ends (Bogle 2008; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009), and the literature on relationships, which points to women's efforts to reject inequality in the home and find value in their personal achievements (Graf and Schwartz 2011). These cultural messages are especially likely to clash for college-educated women, who face pressures both to achieve autonomy and to defer to men. In this study, I ask: How does women's commitment to self-development and economic independence intersect with traditional gender norms to shape their courtship narratives and behaviors? To explain how middle-class women negotiate these conflicting norms, I argue that women have disassociated the two scripts, drawing on cultural narratives of choice, individualism, and essentialism to assert that the symbolic gendering in courtship is unrelated to the equality they seek in their married lives as high-achieving professionals. In this manner, however, women inadvertently perpetuate ideologies of gender difference, a basis of inequality in both the household and the workplace.

METHODS

I conducted in-depth interviews with 38 women engaged in primarily heterosexual dating and relationships. To obtain a middle-class sample with diverse economic and social backgrounds, I sampled the respondents from alumni lists of two universities in the greater San Francisco Bay area—a large, urban, selective public university and a midsize, suburban state university with a high acceptance rate. I sent emails to subjects randomly chosen from the lists, inviting them to participate. I selected the respondents if they reported being heterosexual or bisexual, were aged 25 to 40, held an undergraduate degree from one of the two universities, and lived within two hours of San Francisco.¹ This group is old enough to have established a varied relationship history but young enough to be

grappling with the competing logics of gender and self-development. While a few respondents were at the lower and upper ends of the age range, the majority were clustered within a few years of the mean, 31, an age when most college-educated women seek to form or have formed a long-term or marital relationship (England and Bearak 2012). And while their age at time of interview varied, their accounts of their dating history tended to cover the same span of years. Descriptive information for the sample is provided in Table 1.

I collected the interviews between June 2010 and June 2011. They lasted an average of three hours and took place at the location of the respondent's choosing (with only three conducted by telephone rather than in person). Each respondent provided an overview of all of her past and present romantic relationships, along with detailed descriptions of her five most significant heterosexual relationships.² Questions focused on the many dimensions of courtship, including first date behaviors, relationship progression, and the decision to marry, if relevant. The interviews concluded with general questions about what behaviors respondents felt *should* happen on a date and in romantic relationships, making it possible to compare actual behaviors to ideals. (See Appendix 1 online for a complete list of interview questions.) The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. I analyzed the interviews using themes identified in previous literature (e.g., male initiation, female initiation, negotiation; Sassler and Miller 2011), looking for these behaviors in each area of courtship. I focused on the entire process by which each courtship event occurred, including "backstage" work (Goffman 1959). Finally, I examined how women interpreted the meaning of each event to ascertain how gender norms influenced their understandings. All names are pseudonyms in order to protect confidentiality.

The women in this study were significantly more educated than the general college-educated population, with 58 percent completing some form of graduate school or professional training, such as a teaching credential. All but three of the respondents were employed full-time and 76 percent were employed in a managerial or a professional occupation. While there was variation in class background, with 29 percent stating that they had working-class origins, the sample was of high status given their educational accomplishments. Of the 32 women who reported their income, 75 percent earned above \$40,000 a year, the median income for women, ages 25 to 34, with a bachelor's degree (National Center for Education Statistics 2011). All but one of the participants identified as socially liberal. This is a privileged sample of progressive women who attended college in a progressive

TABLE 1. Sample Description.

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Class background		
Middle to upper middle	27	71
Working	11	29
Educational attainment		
Bachelor's	22	58
Master's	9	24
Professional degree	5	13
Doctorate	2	5
Personal income		
>\$200,000	3	8
\$150,000-199,999	1	3
\$100,000-149,999	2	5
\$80,000-99,999	2	5
\$60,000-79,999	7	18
\$40,000-59,000	9	24
\$20,000-39,000	4	11
<\$20,000	5	13
Decline to state	5	13
Relationship status		
Single	15	40
Cohabiting	6	16
Married	13	34
Previously married	3	8
Remarried	1	2
Field of employment		
Management/professional	29	76
Sales and office	5	13
Service	1	3
Production	1	3
Student	2	5
Parental status		
Children	5	13
No children	33	87
Age		
Mean age	30.6	
Standard deviation	3.9	

metropolitan region of the country, and although the findings cannot be generalized, the study provides an examination of the continuing power of conventional gender norms even in the context of high earnings potential, significant educational investments, and liberal social beliefs.

Few differences emerged across demographic groups in the sample. Although there were some non-white women (mainly Asians) in the

sample, race did not prove to be a significant differentiating factor. There was, however, some limited variation in accounts based on income, in that women with higher personal incomes and professional achievements were more likely to undermine at least some gender norms. In addition, women who did not want marriage and children were less likely to express support for traditional courtship conventions. Still, the majority offered remarkably similar courtship narratives, indicating the persistence of strong traditional gender norms in this arena with which women had to contend. Thus, I focus on the disparity in how women talk about symbolic gendering versus their desires for egalitarian long-term relationships. While I note where divergences to the general patterns described do occur, I also demonstrate how even counternarratives and behaviors frequently speak to the same cultural beliefs and, thus, provide a limited challenge.

FINDINGS

The majority of the women expressed a preference for conventional courtship behaviors and expected men to ask and pay for the first date, confirm the exclusivity of the relationship, and propose marriage. Drawing on the interview data, I illustrate how women justified their support for these conventions in spite of their desire for egalitarian relationships. First, I show how women employed narratives of gender difference to explain why they want men to ask for dates. Next, I discuss how women used courtship conventions to gauge men's level of interest in the relationship, given the belief that men are less interested in commitment than women. In both sections, I indicate where narratives and behaviors differed from the norm and why these subversions of the dominant script did not meet their disrupting potential. Finally, I demonstrate how women conceived of symbolic gendering as a mere preference and choice, enabling them to reconcile their commitment to courtship conventions with their desire for egalitarian relationships. Throughout the discussion, I link women's narratives of gender difference to their courtship behaviors and preferences to illustrate the persistent power of traditional gender ideologies.

Narratives of Gender Difference

Women referred to popular, essentialist beliefs about men's need to be the assertive, dominant partner to explain why they preferred men to ask for dates. Over a third indicated that they did not ask men on dates because

it was in men's nature to like "the thrill of the chase" or it was the man's "role" to do the pursuing. Jenna, 26, a research assistant, said, "It's just partly biological. In animals, the guy always flashes. The male bird always flashes his colors—his feathers or something—to go after what he wants." By locating behavioral differences in biology, women framed these behaviors as natural, inevitable, and legitimate and so did not challenge them (Bourdieu 1998). And because they assumed that men need to be the dominant partners, they argued that women who took that away from men would be considered unappealing partners. Caroline, 31, a marketing director, said, "I feel like men need to feel like they are in control and, if you ask them out, you end up looking desperate and it's a turn-off to them." Anna, 40, a high school teacher, said, "I know that with a man they like to take charge." Although Anna admitted that she, too, really liked to be in control, saying that she liked to ask men out, she attributed this to her personality, rather than to her nature. As a result, women believed they must adjust their behavior to men's natural, unchanging desires.

Only two women made essentialist arguments about women's needs. Instead, like Anna, women discussed their own preferences in terms of their personalities. Indeed, almost one third of the women explained that their unwillingness to ask for a date was due to their personality. Olivia, 26, a lawyer, said she didn't like to approach men "more because I'm shy than out of traditional gender roles or anything like that." Breanna, 36, an internal auditor, said, "I would never approach a guy. I think one is, I'm shy. Two is I've never felt like 'Oh, I'm gorgeous,' so it would be fear of rejection." As Ridgeway (2011) argues, people are more likely to explain the behaviors of others using stereotypes than their own, making gendered self-reports more progressive. Yet, while these women didn't explicitly discuss gendered expectations as a factor, they still attributed to themselves a level of acceptable passivity. Women did not view this passivity as a hindrance to getting dates, a position not possible for men. None of the women acknowledged that men, too, might be shy and afraid of rejection, and none of these women admitted to shyness in their professional lives, indicating that their courtship narratives are potentially unconsciously gendered.

Women's passivity provided assurance of men's interest and protected them from rejection. Amelia, 33, an environmental consultant, said, "I think it's just because I'm old-fashioned that way. I want to know the guy is interested in me." Only 10 of the 38 women had ever asked a man out, and half of them described their actions in less than empowering terms. Their experiences reinforced the cultural stereotype

that if a man is actually interested, he *will* pursue, and that women are better off waiting for the man to take the lead. Abby, 33, a postdoctoral fellow, said, "I tended to be the one to approach guys, but those were usually the ones that didn't like me." Heather, 27, an operations technician, said that she had stopped contacting men on an online dating site:

When I have, they're not interested. There was this one time I saw this guy was looking at my profile two or three times. He was kind of a dick. He was like, "Yeah. Sometimes I just click on people's profiles. It doesn't mean I want to date them." It's funny. The times I've contacted people, I've never ended up meeting them.

Women experienced men's negative reactions as sanctions for transgressing appropriate gendered behavior. Because people know what is expected of their gender and can anticipate these sanctions (Rudman and Fairchild 2004), many women focused on making their interest clear in ways other than suggesting a date. While only a handful of women reported asking a man out on a first date, half reported at least one partnership in which she had pursued a man. Ariana, 30, a doctor, described aggressively pursuing a man she was interested in dating: "I called him and told him to come to a party and that I would make it worth his while. I told him to sit next to me, and took his arm and put it around me. I said, 'Finally, I have all of your attention.' He said, 'You sure do' and kissed me. Then he asked me out." Caroline said, "I approached him at a bar and flirted with him and then invited him [and his friends] to go to a strip club with me and my friends. While we were there, I sat on his lap. . . . But I let him call me the next day. He did and he asked me out on our first date." In this manner, women were able to test the boundaries of appropriate gender behavior without completely challenging them. This approach allowed women to clearly express their interest while protecting them from charges of desperation or outright rejection and preserved men's prerogative to initiate a date. At the same time, however, their actions clearly subvert women's submissive, receptive script by directly asserting interest in these men. Indeed, the women who engaged in this dating approach were more likely to be highly paid professionals than those who asserted passivity, perhaps because they were more experienced in behaving assertively at work. At the same time, though, these women still said that they preferred to be asked out, as they were focused on determining men's levels of interest. As we shall see, this was tied to their belief that men's desire for commitment is less assured than women's.

Ensuring Men's Commitment

The ubiquity of the hook-up culture on college campuses continued to influence women's understandings of men even after they exited college and entered adulthood. While they may have felt ambivalent about long-term commitment during college (Bogle 2008; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009), as adults in their late twenties and early thirties most of the women were looking for a partner interested in the possibility of marriage. Because many of the women viewed men as still commitment phobic or more interested in casual sex than a relationship, a belief that was reinforced by popular narratives of men's "nature" (Geller 2001), they used an adherence to courtship norms to confirm men's genuine interest in them. Thus, women used the formal date, with its attendant rituals, to distinguish men who were interested in the possibility of a relationship from men who were just looking for a casual sexual encounter.

Since women frequently cited "chivalry" as a sign that the man was respectful, caring, and interested in more than sex, many wanted the man to ask for, plan, and pay for the first few dates. Olivia said, "I tend to like a formal date, like asking me out on a date. Like, 'Would you like to go to dinner?' It just seems like a more clear idea of what's going on. And I also think I like the chivalry of the formal date invitation as opposed to 'Let's just see what happens, maybe we'll hook up.'" Ariana also alluded to chivalry, saying,

I mean, usually the first time they go out with me I'll offer to pay. I'm like, "Oh, let me split it with you," you know? And it's really honestly a test. I don't want them to say, "Okay." I want them to say, "No, I'll get it," you know? But I usually offer to split it. And then if we go out, like, four times, by the fourth time I'll be like, okay, this is my turn now. Like I want to make sure the guy offers to pay, the guy opens my door, the guy, you know, doesn't just walk ahead of me. Things like that. And that's become more important to me, how gentlemanly they are. I've talked to guys about it before. If you like a chick and you want to impress her, you do everything you can. [If a guy doesn't pay] they just probably don't like you that much.

More than two thirds of the women said that all their first dates were paid for by men. Just like Ariana, many of the women referenced payment of the first date as a test. If the man took them up on their offer to pay or split the check, it was a sign that he wasn't someone they wanted to date, assuming he wasn't "out to impress" and must not be sufficiently interested in them. Only a handful of the women indicated that men's payment was a way to confirm breadwinning ability, perhaps because men who

weren't able to take on this responsibility in the long run were screened out before the date even took place, as the majority of the women dated men with similar career opportunities. Instead, men's payment for the first date appears to have taken on new meanings as women have gained their own breadwinning abilities.

These dating conventions became less important to women over the course of their relationships. Most of the women reported, for example, that, once they started dating a man regularly, payment for dates frequently alternated between the two of them. The conventions acquired significance again, however, during moments that were highly scripted and where assumptions about men's commitment to the relationship became salient. Therefore, women expected men to confirm the exclusivity of the relationship and propose marriage as a signal that let women know they were committed to the relationship, as there was a consistently stated belief that men were reluctant to commit. As a result, women initiated fewer than a fifth of the conversations on the exclusivity of the relationship. Consistent with previous findings on gender performance (Sassler and Miller 2011), when women did bring up the exclusivity of the relationship, they tended to do so in an indirect manner, asking questions such as "Where is this relationship going?" or "What are we?" This approach provided women with the ability to initiate the conversation topic, protecting them from a more direct rejection of their desired ends, but gave men the power to confirm or deny an exclusive commitment.

In addition, because many of the women believed that men who were interested in commitment were rare because of essentialist beliefs that men are naturally promiscuous, when men initiated conversations about exclusivity, women sometimes ended up committing to a relationship before they were ready (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009). Nicole, 28, a marketing manager, described how the man she had been dating gave her an ultimatum after he found out she was also having sex with other men: "He said that he wanted me to be his girlfriend and that I couldn't see other people." She agreed because his insistence on commitment "made me see how much he cared about me." Because of the cultural belief that women always want commitment, they worried that their attempts to secure exclusivity could be construed as desperation. In contrast, because of the cultural belief that men avoid commitment, men who did commit were viewed as especially devoted. As a result, women frequently ended up prioritizing men's desires.

Women were even more reluctant to propose marriage. Men proposed in each of the 22 cases analyzed in this study; in addition, all the unmarried women expected men to do the proposing. Again, women discussed men's

initiation of the proposal as a sign of commitment to her and to the marriage. Caroline said, "I wanted him to do it since he was really the one who had been slower to be there emotionally. I wanted him to be the one to drive it." Jane, 31, a student who was waiting for her boyfriend to propose, said, "I want to feel adored and I feel like if I was doing the proposing, it was kind of like, 'What, I'm not special enough that you're willing to put yourself out there and be vulnerable for me?'" The act of being chosen remained a powerful draw for the women in this study. To be chosen meant to be considered worthy of love and a lifelong commitment. Rather than view a female-initiated proposal as an expression of valid desire and unwillingness to remain passive, women viewed it as embarrassing reflection of their partner's lack of love or their own desperation. When I asked Ashleigh, 29, a stay-at-home mother, if she would have been willing to propose to her husband, she said, "Never. In my mind, that's not my role. Like, I would feel like he didn't really value me if he wasn't going to propose to me," while Alice, 34, a computer programmer, said, "I think I wouldn't do it because I want to make sure the other person loves me as much, if not more."

Yet the majority of the engagements occurred on a mutually agreed on timetable. Most of the couples discussed marriage extensively before getting engaged, often going over how they envisioned their lives together, as this was considered pragmatic. After the couple decided when they wanted to get engaged, the man was expected to "surprise" the woman with a proposal. Ashleigh said,

I knew we were going to get engaged eventually. We went ring shopping. I had a picture of a ring from when I was 13 that I wanted. So I knew something was coming, but [not when]. . . . He surprised me and proposed that weekend, before I went out of town. So it was just a little surprise-ish.

This approach allowed women to preserve the narrative of the male-initiated proposal, cementing their "chosen" status, while protecting their inclusion in the decision-making process.

Only three women said that they "waited it out" until their partner was ready to propose. In fact, a quarter of the women in the study were aggressive in influencing the timing of the engagement, often giving their boyfriends ultimatums and timelines for proposing. Just as with women who pursued men for first dates, these women were more likely to be highly paid professionals than the women who took a more "hands-off" approach, potentially indicating that their careers empowered them to be more assertive. Alice moved out of state when her boyfriend failed to propose on her timetable and agreed to move back only after he

expressed a willingness to propose within the year: "I told him, 'If I move back, there better be a ring on my finger.'" He proposed one year later. Caroline also expressed her frustration to her boyfriend:

I was fed up with him for not figuring out what he wanted. I felt like he didn't appreciate me and wasn't making me feel good about myself. I confronted him and told him I was sure I wanted to marry him, but if he wasn't, I was done waiting and suggested we see other people. He freaked out and brought out a ring and said he wanted to marry me.

Thus, the women in this sample were almost always able to negotiate desired outcomes.³

However, because of the often repeated sentiment that proposals initiated by women, whether directly or indirectly, were coercive and indicated a lack of interest by the man, women felt conflicted about issuing ultimatums or otherwise influencing the timing of the engagement, again citing the fear of negative reactions for transgressing gender norms. As a result, while women were willing to play a decisive role in the timing of their marriage proposal, they preferred to keep the illusion of surprise with their peers. Caroline said, "I didn't tell any of my friends what actually happened. I told him to put the ring away so he wouldn't feel like he was backed into a corner. I said he should do it the way he wanted to and that I would say yes. He proposed three weeks later on a boat. That's the story our friends know." In this manner, women's "official" stories of their marriage proposals rarely acknowledged the "backstage work" that took place (Goffman 1959).

The narratives of the women who did not embrace courtship conventions show how support for these norms is rooted in women's desire to secure men's commitment. Only nine women expressed reservations about these conventions and only four uniformly rejected them. These women were not any less likely to express essentialist beliefs about men, but the four who voiced the strongest objections to gendered courtship did not want to get married and have children. Keira, 36, a researcher and recruiter for a tech company, said,

I never fantasized about the wedding the way my friends did in school. . . . I wanted to see what I could do with my life. Getting married and having kids were probably, if they were even on the list, they were like number 99 and 100 on the list of 100. . . . I think the men I was with knew. It would just be ridiculous if they were on a bended knee offering me a ring.

As a result, they didn't need to rely on courtship conventions to ferret out which men were truly interested in commitment, nor did they have to

worry about scaring men off by appearing too interested in commitment, because they weren't.

Yet, even though these women disavowed courtship rituals, they often found themselves engaging in them anyway because the men they dated fell back on these patterns and they "just didn't care enough" to challenge them. Rachel, 26, a vice president of business development, said that she let men ask her out because she "wasn't someone who always needed a boyfriend." Keira always brought money to pay her share on dates, but said her partners were "old-fashioned" and insistent on paying. And while her ex-husband did indeed propose to her, she argued that it was because she "didn't want [marriage] enough," not because she saw it as his role: "He definitely felt more strongly about me than I did about him." Thus, this group of women described their courtship behaviors as the result of men's desire for convention and explained their de facto conformity as the result of their disinterest in the assumed relationship goals of women. Still, consistent with the narratives of the women who wanted men to propose, Keira associated the initiation of the marriage proposal with the strength of her partner's love and commitment. His level of interest in her was reflected in his willingness to ask for long-term commitment.

Competing Narratives Reconciled

Although most of the women supported conventional courtship through symbolic gendering, almost all of them also described their ideal relationship as one in which partners shared breadwinning, housework, and child care relatively equally. Consistent with other findings (Damaske 2011), among the 32 women in the sample who wanted or had children, three quarters reported they had not interrupted or would not interrupt their careers. Caroline broke up with the man she dated during business school when it became clear that they had different visions of their life together. While he wanted a wife who would stay home and raise their children, Caroline planned on staying in the workforce and supporting herself financially, arguing, "I don't want to be in a dynamic where anyone is mooching on anybody or anybody feels entitled to other people's stuff." She finally decided to break up with her boyfriend when she saw the way his father treated his stay-at-home wife:

It was clear that the power dynamic was such that his father kind of ruled the roost and his mother was working really hard and was underappreciated, and I felt like she felt a little bit trapped. I could just see [my boyfriend] wanting to emulate this situation where the wife kind of does his bidding.

Not only did Caroline enjoy her work, she also recognized that, without a job, she would have less power to negotiate a fair division of housework, a goal shared by 33 of the women in the sample.⁴

As Gerson (2010) found, if an egalitarian relationship seems unlikely, women are more likely to choose self-reliance than a traditional partnership that poses “the dangers of domesticity.” Caroline expressed the fear experienced by many that, without financial independence, she would lose power in her relationship and the ability to leave if necessary. Ariana grew up watching her mother suffer physical and emotional abuse by her father and wanted to avoid the same fate, so she attended medical school to become a surgeon: “My mom was a stay-at-home mom and my dad had a lot of financial control over her and she always emphasized be independent, get a good education so you have your own financial independence and so no man can use that to control you. So that’s always been embedded in my brain.” After observing their parents’ relationships or learning of the challenges faced by women without money, many of the women not only wanted access to their own incomes, but also their own bank accounts. Just over two thirds said that it was important for them to have a separate bank account in order to protect their assets and provide them with greater control over their personal finances. While this was aspirational for the unmarried, more than half of the married women had their own bank accounts, including three of the five women with children. When asked why she kept all her money separate from her husband of 18 years, Anna replied, “I needed to have my own money. I don’t need [my husband] looking over my shoulder and telling me what to do,” echoing the sentiments of many others. This approach provided women not only with income, but with control over it.

Interestingly, the nine women who planned to leave the workforce for more than a year after having children or who planned to take on a greater share of the household labor in their marriages were no more likely to express support for courtship conventions that symbolized men’s dominant, breadwinning status than women who desired an egalitarian partnership. Rather, the women in this study differentiated between the symbolic gendering of courtship and gendered behaviors in the home and workplace, most of them denying a relationship between the two. Thus, while the egalitarian narratives expressed by the majority appear to contradict their commitment to courtship norms, they did not perceive that symbolic gendering would undermine these goals. Seeing symbolic gendering as either a personal preference or a mere convention (Hamilton, Geist, and Powell 2011; Swim and Cohen 1997), it appeared inconsequential to interpersonal power relations and any goals for an

egalitarian marriage. Many echoed the sentiments of Mia, 39, a substitute teacher, who said,

In the past few years I've realized I'm appearing very . . . or "manifesting" very traditional. So, I feel like I'm a feminist in the sense of equality, but I'm not very much a feminist in the sense that . . . a lot of things don't bother me. Like opening the door for me. I like it. I consider it part of manners. I don't consider it an insult or a gender issue.

Because stereotypical representations can purportedly provide benefits to women, such as "the belief that women should be protected and taken care of by men," there are fewer incentives to challenge symbolic gendering than to address overt sexism or discrimination in the workplace (Becker and Wright 2011, 63). Aashi, 29, a marketing associate, explained:

I feel like men and women should be treated equally as far as in their career and their political day-to-day lives, things where they should be treated as equals. But when it comes to biology and manners, it's not like a woman can't open the door, it's not like she can't pay for herself, but when a man does it, it's a nice gesture and it's just . . . it's a nice thing.

This interpretation of equality draws on liberal feminist themes, such as women's legal and economic rights, and is consistent with ideologies of American individualism (England 2010). Focused on women's entry into formerly "male" spheres, the women downplayed how difference narratives in personal relationships contribute to inequality. Caroline, who had broken up with the boyfriend who wanted a gendered division of labor, wasn't as opposed to symbolic gendering: "I am okay with the fact that the gestures [my fiance] makes are not identical to mine . . . sort of in the same way that I know he'll never carry our child for nine months in his belly, but I trust that he'll do other things to be a great father." Thus, even though women and men were expected to engage in distinct behaviors, this was not viewed as inherently unequal.

In addition, because most women were able to support themselves financially, they did not see gestures that grant men symbolic dominance as a risk to their autonomy or power within relationships. Anna was pleased when her now-husband asked her father for permission to propose: "Not that it would really matter because I'm a pretty independent, liberal-thinking woman, but . . . it is what it is." Breanna said,

I obviously easily could take over. I am, like I mentioned, independent and self-sufficient. So obviously if I wanted to put my foot on the ground and he

didn't want to go my way I could walk away—I'm not dependent on him. I don't need him for anything. But I *choose* not to take that position. . . . I do like a dominant man. . . . [I don't want] them to be submissive in any way. Gross. That would totally turn me off that guy. I even came to see where some women were insisting on paying on the dates to establish their independence. I think it's totally wrong. I mean, I think it's good to be strong and independent, but then to, like, you know . . . kind of . . . force it out there, like "I'm letting you know I'm independent." Like, "I don't need you"—that kind of thing. I don't think that's the best. Even if he's not truly dominant, even if you're his equal, I still think you should let him feel like a man, that kind of thing.

Breanna's argument again reflects the essentialist belief that men need to be in charge in their romantic relationships in order to be happy. She frames men's symbolic dominance as a charade that allows men to "do gender" in spite of women's increased economic independence (West and Zimmerman 1987). But she also states that *she* finds this enactment of gender difference attractive, too, revealing the "cathexis" experienced by many of the women that results from this "social patterning of desire" (Connell 1987, 112). By emphasizing this behavior as chosen, however, she denies an association between her behavior and the reproduction of gender inequality.

As Stone (2007) found, "choice rhetoric" is used by high-achieving women to disavow the constraints women continue to face. A narrative of choice is appealing because it draws on "the language of privilege, feminism, and personal agency" and is, therefore, consistent with how they have constructed understandings of themselves (Stone 2007, 125). By emphasizing symbolic gendering as a choice rather than a requirement, and by reaffirming their autonomy, women were able to take comfort in the courtship conventions that felt "safe" and "right," without sacrificing their sense of an independent, empowered self. As McCall (2011) speculates, the educational and professional attainments of privileged women transgress enough gender boundaries in the workplace and the home to allow them to downplay gender inequality as a relevant social problem.

CONCLUSION

This study shows how college-educated women's commitment to courtship norms reinforces narratives of gender difference even as they lay claims to gender equality. New norms about gender equality and women's autonomy now compete with more traditional courtship scripts,

creating a cultural contradiction for women as they seek to reconcile discrepant sets of behavioral rules. Women's narratives reveal the interactions between the processes that promote both social change and social persistence. They are encountering men on new terms and creating relationships that challenge the assumptions underlying a gendered division of labor. They express comfort asserting financial independence, personal autonomy, and a desire for an egalitarian partnership. The progress they have made, however, has perhaps led them to believe that they can pick and choose between gendered meanings with no consequences. These findings demonstrate that, to ease the conflict between a desire for equality and a persistence of conventional courtship rituals, women conclude that the symbolic gendering of courtship does not contribute to the perpetuation of gender inequality. They construe men's participation in unequal courtship patterns as natural and inevitable and they explain their own participation as a personal choice that is rooted in their personalities and preferences. In this manner, women are able to reaffirm their autonomy and deny the significance of inequality in courtship, demonstrating how narratives of empowerment based on ideologies of individualism can be used to conceal the continuation of male privilege in ways that make individuals feel good about their conformity. Unfortunately, this approach not only limits the options for more privileged women, it also reinforces norms for women whose limited resources provide them with fewer opportunities to challenge gender inequality. When solutions are framed as individual rather than structural, the inability to negotiate a preferred arrangement, often the result of a lack of bargaining power, instead becomes framed as a personal failing, discouraging a broader challenge to the norms that structure relationships.

Although women assert that personal choice governs their courtship behavior, their efforts to conceal nonconforming behavior indicate that gendered expectations guide their decision making. As we saw with Ariana, who pursued a man whom she then credited with the first date, or Caroline, who demanded a marriage proposal and got it then and there, these women were often forcefully agentic. Yet while their behaviors often undermined stereotypes about women's natural passivity, they anticipated social sanctions if they acted as the initiator. Internalizing the belief that proactive behavior would make them a less worthy partner, they either policed or concealed their behaviors in an effort to conform to the presumed needs and desires of men, revealing just how constrained women continue to be in their romantic relationships, even as they appear to take genuine pleasure in these conventions. This approach benefited men at the expense of women, as women were left waiting around and

subverting their own goals or creating narratives that hid their agency. That said, the women in this study (as opposed to what many working-class women might be expected to be able to negotiate; Sassler and Miller 2011) were frequently able to negotiate their stated desired ends in this manner, possibly indicating that their resources in the form of high levels of education and often high incomes were linked to some power in their relationships.

Finally, although the women's behaviors frequently subverted the conventional passive script, they nonetheless did not challenge gender stereotypes. Viewed from the outside, these relationships appeared to proceed in gender-typical ways. The only women who fully and openly questioned courtship scripts were those who were not seeking to marry and have children. These women provide potential alternative models for courtship, but they also send the message that equality is attainable only for those who do not wish to form families. At the same time, these women frequently fell back on courtship conventions anyway, and their narratives spoke to similar cultural beliefs of gender difference. Further research should more systematically explore how women's commitment to gender difference in courtship translates to the division of labor and decision making in the home. In addition, it is important to examine how assertions of gender difference in personal relationships influence understandings and enactments of gender difference in the public sphere, especially given that women in the workplace continue to face the assumption that they are less committed than men because of the expectation that they will prioritize their families. Based on this study, however, it is clear that notions of gender equality need to be extended to courtship in order to prevent the reinforcement of difference narratives in marriage and other areas of life. Denying the link between difference narratives and broader gender inequality prevents women from viewing their desires as legitimate, openly pursuing these desires, and addressing the myriad ways they continue to be disadvantaged in romantic relationships.

NOTES

1. Of the 500 women I contacted by email, 337 did not respond, 117 said they did not meet the qualifications of the study, and 49 expressed interest in participating. Of these 49, I interviewed 38.

2. Consistent with previous studies on similar subjects (Gerson 2010), I asked the respondents detailed questions on their five most significant relationships in order to gather an extensive relationship history. I allowed the respondents to

decide which relationships were their most significant, and they chose based on the length of the relationship, what they learned from the relationship, how much they cared about the other person, and how much they felt the relationship had changed them.

3. This finding is in contrast to Sassler and Miller's (2011) study of working-class couples, where women found their efforts to secure desired marriage proposals mostly rebuffed, indicating that well-educated, middle-class women may be better positioned to challenge gender norms successfully.

4. Given space limitations, I do not present findings on how married couples enact gender difference symbolically, although this was discussed by the 17 women who were married or had been married. But activities such as initiating and planning recreation and gifting were more likely to be performed by women, as they took over the bulk of the "relationship work." Household labor remains gendered, as well, and the majority of the married women took their husband's last name.

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