Individualized intimacy? : the negotiation of self and other in heterosexual relationships

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Individualized intimacy? The negotiation of self and other in heterosexual relationships

by

Daniel Santore

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# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements...........................................................................................................iii

Abstract...............................................................................................................................v

Introducing the Notion of Individualized Intimacy.........................................................1

Chapter One: Theorizing Intimacy and Individualism.................................................7

Chapter Two: Empirical Studies of Contemporary Intimacy.................................42

Chapter Three: Rethinking Intimacy – An Original Research Project.................65

Chapter Four: Research Methodology.....................................................................72

Chapter Five: Locating the Language of Individualized Intimacy – Sex, Money and Gender.............................................................................................................86

Chapter Six: The Particularities of Social Class in Intimacy.................................136

Chapter Seven: Communication and Solidarity in Individualized Intimacy...........................................175

Chapter Eight: A Cultural Sociology of Contemporary Intimacy.......................208

References.......................................................................................................................230

Appendix: The interview guide...............................................................................238
The dissertation project began while I was immersed in the study and teaching of social theory and concluded while I worked as - among other things - a regular research methods instructor. Much like my graduate career, the project was an excursion into what is sweeping and precise in sociological inquiry. Regarding theory and empiricism, that methodological rigor should now strike me as the more exacting task is either because one comes more easily, or because one is actually more difficult, or both. At any rate, I hope the dissertation has given each its due.

It is customary at this point that thanks be given: My dissertation committee, Steven Seidman, Glenna Spitze and Ron Jacobs saw to it that I received an honest-to-God graduate education and professional training, and for that I am very thankful. The intellectual standards they erected for me over the past eight years - as my teachers, editors, supervisors and sparring partners - have taught me a lot about the academic enterprise and about professional obligation in general. What better preparation there could be for an academic career, I don’t know. Steve, Glenna and Ron are also my friends, and that is gratifying as well, though it’s in my nature to be more moved by their professional modeling.

I am also grateful to my wife, Kirsten Lauber. It used to annoy me that she had a knack for social theory in spite of her professed lack of keen interest in the same. But her abilities turned out to be very helpful during this project. She has come around quite a bit on theory appreciation, and I’m happy for that, too.

Finally: a thank you to Nancy Denton and the Arts and Sciences Graduate School. For there are observable indicators and there are our senses; in the matter of my
admission to our graduate program, Nancy and the Graduate School paid just the right attention to each. They both have my thanks.
Abstract

Sociologists working in various scholarly traditions posit an individualization of contemporary romantic relationships occurring in Western societies over the passed several decades. This dissertation uses North American and European theoretical perspectives on “individualized intimacy” as the basis for a qualitative interview study of 45 women and men involved in heterosexual relationships. In keeping with the theoretical perspectives that ground the study, the interviews focus on how concepts of self-development, communication, gender and social class collide with one another in, and serve to shape, respondents’ narratives of self and other in intimacy. Findings demonstrate that: (a) regarding gender, women and men prioritized individual autonomy within specific realms of intimate life as opposed to as a generic concept, and two particular facets of relationships - money management and sexual freedom - were narrated in both gender-typical and -atypical fashion; (b) social class differences correlated with higher and lower levels of interest in projects of self-development, and with different understandings of how a relationship may foster or hinder self-development; and (c) communication was nearly universally praised by respondents as fostering intimate togetherness, even as it was also described as having implications for individualism in relationships. In the conclusion of the dissertation I draw on the substantive findings in order to argue for a more cultural sociological approach to the subject of individualized intimacy, as well as for a more supple conceptual language of individualism writ large.
Introducing the notion of individualized intimacy

Sociologists interested in ‘intimate relationships’ study a variety of interpersonal bonds – between parents and children, among siblings, friends, co-workers, and many others. Romantic relationships in particular have received much attention of late when it comes to talk of intimacy. In popular discourse as in scholarly work, the term intimacy is more likely to refer to the terrain of romantic life rather than that of, say, friendship or sibling bonds; it has become one of the most important concepts organizing the current milieu of romantic relationships.

Though intimacy carries multiple definitions, several common elements can be discerned in most scholarly accounts. Intimacy typically refers to a heightened emphasis on ‘knowing the other’ and on reciprocal consideration; disclosure of the self through communication is prioritized in intimacy (Jamieson, 1998). A culture of intimacy means for many individuals the recognition - and perhaps even the deep belief - that relationships require toil and effort on the part of individuals if they are to survive (Bauman, 2003; Kipnis, 2003; Illouz, 1997). For sociologists today, to examine intimacy is to engage the idea of an original playing field for romantic relationships. If in the past heterosexual romantic bonds in the U.S and Europe were organized by taken-for-granted traditions (e.g., unequal gender roles), or understood as the outcome solely of attractions and impulses, today’s culture of intimacy is quite different. It derives its originality from an emphasis on increasingly rationalized decision making (e.g., about everyday tasks), and its ability to introduce questions about the way rights and responsibilities (e.g., obligations toward one another and one’s self) are to be shared between partners (Cherlin, 2004).
Where has this culture of intimacy come from? Like so many topics of sociological research, intimacy is cast as having undergone significant changes over the years, especially since the 1950s. The social history and evolution of romantic intimacy is told and retold in many works; to summarize greatly these characterizations, Western societies are viewed as having experienced a shift from pre-industrial family relations of economic necessity, to, during industrialization, privatized, more autonomous intimate relations in which warmth and affection were the standard, and finally to a late modern (contemporary) culture of relationships that augments the process of family privatization that began during industrialization. It is with the last stage of ‘intimate development,’ which I term individualized intimacy, that this dissertation concerns itself.

It can be argued that, in North America and much of western Europe today, Victorian notions of a spiritually derived “true love” (Seidman, 1991) no longer aptly describe individuals’ orientation to romantic bonds. Neither is it accurate to assume simply, as popular culture often persuades us, that irrational forces of physical attraction are the glue that holds together romantic interests (Kipnis, 2003). Love and romance, and the ways these concepts inform views on marriage and dating, have been rewritten time and again over the past 100 years, often by cultural industries, consumer or otherwise, with their own stake in the game (Illouz, 1997). At any rate, in place of past conceptions of relationships I along with a host of researchers argue that the attachments between romantic partners today take place in the context of a culture of intimacy complete with its own unique features and social genesis.

The individualization of intimacy is a sprawling concept. Among its supposed incarnations are the acceptance of self-help principles in marriages, delayed marriage and
childbirth, gender egalitarianism, ongoing personal disclosures between partners, and many others. To be sure, there is good reason to be skeptical about a concept that engenders such diverse interpretations; it seems a vague catch-all. The debate over intimacy also provokes polemical statements. Social critics express concern about a profane discourse of ‘rationality, rights, and partnerships’ invading a sphere of supposedly warmer and more instinctual relations, perhaps begging the question whether the new rules of intimacy are merely an expansion of capitalist logic (Hochschild, 2003; Marcuse, 1955). On the other hand, such developments may be a progressive force, in that they prioritize the democratic airing of needs and wishes within relationships (and especially those of women), and challenge the demands of constraining social norms (Giddens, 1991; 1992). Less political questions abound as well: How should scholars understand commitment to a romantic relationship amidst forceful imperatives for self-fulfillment (Cherlin, 1999; 2004)? Also, intimacy – at least heterosexual intimacy – involves not simply abstract ideals but real relations between women and men. What then is the fate of gender and gendered performances in a mutually negotiated and potentially egalitarian romantic partnership?

These broad questions are part and parcel of various theories of intimacy which have emerged over the past half-century. This dissertation builds to a large degree upon these theoretical traditions. Specifically, I aim to explore the complicated relations between individualism and obligation in contemporary intimacy1. As in any bond between two parties, romantic relationships demand that individuals reconcile the needs for self-fulfillment and solidarity. This dilemma of self and other is hardly new ground

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1 Relations of intimacy (defined as ‘close’, or ‘loving’, or otherwise) have existed throughout time; by “contemporary intimacy” I refer to the emergent internal dynamics of romantic relationships as defined and described here.
for sociologists, but theorists suggest that contemporary intimacy, especially in its wedding to ideologies of “the self” and self-development, may represent a unique milieu in which old tensions are played out in new ways. A culture of intimacy has been shaped by late-20th century developments which promised to reorganize the structural and cultural configuration of society. The proliferation of expert discourses, the individualization of formerly social concerns, changed gender relations (including but not limited to women’s increased labor participation, diversified family arrangements, and feminist ideologies) - theorists argue that these and other changing features of contemporary social life have played a large role in creating the present conditions of ‘intimacy’, and the complicated relationships to which they give rise. In examining this field of social life my work addresses fundamental sociological questions - about individual rights and social obligation, about new social guidelines replacing traditional norms – brought into relief by the current landscape of intimacy.

The first chapter outlines four strands of theoretical work on intimacy. One strand is comprised of North American cultural theory and finds its origin in mid-1970s commentaries on the interrelationships among the cultural contradictions of capitalism, individualism, and an emergent “cult” of intimacy. I next discuss the place of U.S. ‘family sociology’ perspectives in debates over contemporary intimacy. The third theoretical tradition treated in Chapter One includes European interpretations of intimacy, theories which are more recent than certain of their American counterparts, but concerned with similar themes. The clearest difference between the two traditions comes in the form of an explicit European preoccupation with the relationship between modernity and intimacy, and the notion of reflexivity in contemporary romantic relationships. The final
strand of theory comes in the form of feminist and gender-oriented perspectives on intimacy and society. Feminist arguments confront directly several presumed deficiencies arising in North American and European frameworks owing to their relative inattention to the persistently gendered organization of romantic relationships.

Chapter Two is devoted to relevant current empirical research on intimacy. I divide the empirical record into two types of research: research on the relationship between individualism and intimacy, and research examining how gender coexists with new, supposedly egalitarian and individualized ideals of intimacy. To be sure, this typology works to obscure a certain degree of overlap by bracketing off the gendered character of romantic relationships. This strategy serves to highlight a very real distinction between the two kinds of research. The first empirical research thread tends to examine individualism and intimacy in a manner that renders gender of secondary interest, while the second line of work remains studiously attentive to the gendered character of enduring inequalities in intimacy.

A justification for and method of original research are presented in Chapters Three and Four, respectively. The current study centers on the meanings which surround individualism and solidarity in contemporary heterosexual relationships; it is concerned with individuals’ accounts of how personal and partnered pursuits are managed in romantic relationships. Existing research tends to be concerned with (a) documenting the amount of individualism in various relationships, and (b) gendered inequalities in heterosexual relationships, the latter sometimes taken as evidence that little has changed about relationships. As my interest is first and foremost about individual ‘meaning-making,’ I employ qualitative interview methods as the primary data collection tool. By
focusing on individuals’ articulated accounts of individualist and ‘solidaristic’ pursuits, I tap into the constructed meanings of these key concepts rather than measure amounts of either. Moreover, while gender is a concern in my research, and while I do in fact observe gendered patterns in individuals’ accounts, I also pay close attention to the class-based dynamics of intimacy as described by the respondents. Full methodological details are included in Chapter Four.
CHAPTER ONE: Theorizing intimacy and individualism

North American cultural perspectives

North American social theorists in the mid 20th century gave special attention to the notion of ‘intimacy’, in the context of a more general discussion of therapeutic culture and individualism. This section highlights some of these arguments suggesting a connection between therapeutic culture, individualism and an emergent culture of intimacy; such perspectives continue to inform current debates. The internal dynamics of romantic relationships which today are taken for granted as the very stuff of intimacy (e.g., self-fulfillment through another, shared understanding and appreciation of our authentic personalities) were at one time - and seem to be again – carefully examined by theorists skeptical of, or conversely, optimistic about their impact. The roles of therapeutic culture and individualism were central concerns in these cultural perspectives on intimacy, though the interrelationships between these concepts are not immediately clear.

The concept of a therapeutic culture is not easily defined. It refers to individual dispositions, to institutional arrangements and to a generalized ethos of self-management. The individualist bent of therapeutic culture has been interpreted negatively by some social thinkers (e.g., Rieff, 1966; Bell, 1976) and positively by others. Read positively, it encourages self-improvement and self-awareness, and honest communication in social relationships. On the other hand a cultural demand for deep, intimate and psychologically meaningful relationships can undermine the norms of detachment that previously governed public social engagement (Sennett, 1977). Anyway, it is a mistake
to think of critiques of therapeutic culture as merely lamenting the rise of what has been
derisively called “psychobabble”; therapeutic culture is understood by analysts as an
outgrowth not simply of the institutionalization of one-on-one psychotherapy sessions –
in which romantic and other interpersonal relations receive much attention – but also of a
generalized 20th century tendency for citizens to cede control over their lives to experts in
the political, family and economic realms (Lasch, 1978).

A treatment of two relevant North American thinkers works to clarify the
relationship between therapeutic culture, individualism and intimacy. Along with a host
of other late-20th century American social critics, Christopher Lasch (1978) and Robert
Bellah (1986) perceived the role played by therapeutic culture and ‘new individualisms’
in shaping ideals of intimacy. For Lasch, therapeutic culture is a cultural outgrowth of
the advance of industrial capitalism in Western societies. As bureaucratic capitalism
reduces the chances for individuals to exercise “everyday competence” and private
control over their lives, there emerges a heightened degree of dependence upon various
expert apparatuses (1978:10). Past (or ‘traditional’) authorities are undermined as a
market of experts holds sway over and guides the political, family, work and other
spheres of life. Thus far, Lasch’s argument is consistent with an orthodox Marxist
critique of capitalism and modernization’s tendency to break down and reorganize
traditional ways of life. His account of late-20th century psychological concerns with
well-being, and the rise of therapeutic models of self-development, however, constitute a
more original perspective. Alienated from a social system which has lost its traditional
moorings, Lasch argues that individuals turn to psychotherapy to provide for the single
“diminished expectation” remaining in such a society: mental health (1978: 13). Instead
of engaging in collective action against economic injustice, or seeking eternal religious transcendence, individuals orient their lives around the more immediate and, to Lasch, ultimately less meaningful goals of personal peace and health.

What does Lasch’s argument about therapeutic culture have to do with a culture of intimacy? To Lasch, modern society nurtures the belief that any management beyond self-management, any project beyond the self, is hopeless. Political bureaucrats and even ex-radicals would have individuals believe that the problems of governance are beyond the common person’s abilities (1978:77-79), or that political action is not as rewarding as personalized experiences of self-exploration (1978:14-16). Personal relationships are not beyond the scope of this therapeutic dictum; indeed, romantic relationships come under direct therapeutic guidance. As a result, consumption with “the self” stunts the ability for intimate partners to act selflessly within a relationship (1978:13), instead advising partners to examine what they can reap from a (romantic) relationship before acting for another. Just as therapeutic culture turns politics into a vessel for self-realization as opposed to common action for future common good, Lasch argues that familial and romantic relationships are similarly affected. Intimacy is the cultural logic of self-oriented relationships.

Therapeutic culture and individualism also are central to Robert Bellah and his co-researchers’ (1986) explorations of American society. Arguing along lines similar to those of Lasch, Bellah et al (hereafter Bellah) theorize therapeutic sensibilities in America originally as a reaction to the economic shifts of the middle and late 19th century, a period in which “…a national market was depriving the small towns and regional cities of their effective independence…” (1986:118). Previously, individuals
could relate to employers and colleagues on socially recognized grounds of kinship, community or lineage; the terms of social interaction were well-established and easy to discern. But a diversifying market presented a world of unfamiliar and transient alliances, governed by principles of self-presentation and individual ability. In place of durable old bonds there sprung up provisional and difficult-to-navigate relationships, which generated new anxieties about self-management, and the beginnings of a rationale for therapy and self-management.

Bellah views current incarnations of therapeutic culture as modeling an ideal type of interpersonal interaction in which individuals’ own “wants and satisfactions” are “coordinated by cost-benefit calculation” (1986:127). This rather ‘economistic’ imperative organizing interpersonal relationships is understood as a correlate of the instrumental logic contained in, among other locations, the bureaucratized work world, in which alliances are only as good as the personal rewards they can return. Although certain bonds (e.g., to family) may still arouse feelings of obligation and solidarity that transcend self-interest, Bellah et al argue that such “altruism” is extended mostly to personal connections and “one’s own” (1986:111-112). In the therapeutic model, and in a culture of intimacy, obligations toward distant others are increasingly difficult to fathom. In this sense, Bellah’s analysis differs from Lasch’s; the former detects in intimacy the tendency to become overly immersed in the prioritized ‘party of two’, while the latter envisions intimacy as a debasing of more idealized one on one relationship.

More specifically, Bellah argues that therapy encourages ideals of independence and detachment in marriage and other love relationships. Citing advice to couples provided by marriage counselors, Bellah observes that therapeutic practitioners
understand obligation in relationships as little more than the requirement that individuals know their own needs and be accepting of the ever-changing needs of their partner – a rather individualized model of obligations (1986: 101-102). Moreover, the communicative ideals of intimacy may encourage acceptance and understanding of another’s personality, but are divorced from broader traditional or institutional bases of obligation. If notions of obligation in romantic relationships become restricted to the boundaries of the intimate bond, Bellah questions how such relationships can stay connected to a broader moral framework. For under such arrangements, “the only morality that is acceptable is the purely contractual agreement of the parties: whatever they agree to is right.” (1986: 139). If therapeutic ideals of intimacy allow people to reach consensuses about how to organize their relationships (e.g., amounts of time spent together and apart, whether to separate) which are free of external social coercion, the agreement is necessarily detached from wider social regulation. What is more, such an arrangement is laborious: to the extent that relationships operate independently from socially agreed-upon standards, they are doomed to “incessant renegotiation” of their own internal guidelines (140).

Although Lasch and Bellah are not known first and foremost as theorists of romantic or family relationships, the constellation of ideals which today are termed ‘intimacy’ - full and open communication, personal fulfillment through another, demands for psychic connection, etc. - received ample and incisive attention in their analyses. Their normative positions are similar but do not include identical interpretations of intimacy. Both Lasch and Bellah argue that the increasingly self-oriented dynamics of family and romantic relationships – propelled by an emphasis on self-development in
popular culture and ascendant psychotherapy – mark the darker side of individualist ethics. To these critics, therapeutic culture is associated with a certain type of individualism (for Bellah, “expressive individualism”) that encourages the nourishment of inner selves to the exclusion of broader social engagement. Contemporary intimacy’s ideals trend too closely toward this model. Contrary to Lasch, however, Bellah rejects the idea that therapeutic culture breeds narcissism, a label he finds curious in light of intimacy’s requirement of constantly monitoring others’ feelings. Bellah also praises, if only in passing, therapy and intimacy’s efforts to turn back certain coercive social norms. Yet he insists that therapy generally undermines notions of morality, as it persistently challenges any reference to a moral code not tailored to personal experience.

***

This ‘cultural tradition’ of theory and its attention to therapeutic culture, individualism and intimacy has not disappeared. Less prominent in shaping North American research and debate during the 1990’s (with a few notable exceptions to be discussed in succeeding sections), recent years have witnessed renewed theoretical and empirical interest in these earlier perspectives (e.g., Gross, 2005; Orrange, 2003a and 2003b, Swidler, 2001).

Seeing romantic relationships through family sociology

For roughly the past 25 years, prominent family sociologists in the U.S. have engaged in a lively debate over the status of family and marriage. The debate has involved the supposed emergence of a new culture of intimacy. Focusing on a range of late 20th century family-related developments - some considered unique for their degree
of progression (e.g., accelerated divorce rates) and others for their very emergence (e.g., cohabitation) – family sociologists in the U.S. have attempted to explain and interpret such events. In addition to matters which sometimes provoke inflamed debate, less popularized issues like ‘below replacement’ fertility rates and delayed age-at-first-marriage are also relevant to these scholarly discussions.

Family sociological theory addresses the origins of these family changes. It questions what such developments mean for family life - family decline, family change, or something else? This section treats several influential voices engaged in the debate over family change. Though these sociologists do not give to these changes the title ‘new intimacy,’ the character of their scholarly interest in family change, and the interpretations they advance, overlap considerably with other non-family-based theorists of ‘intimacy proper’ addressed in this paper.

There is general agreement among family sociologists that recent changes in orientations to marriage and family are linked to economic, institutional and cultural shifts occurring since the 1950’s. Even in instances of extreme disagreement about the normative meaning of family change, scholars appear to find common ground when articulating the factors that explain the advent of late-20th century family developments. Judith Stacey’s (1990) and David Popenoe’s (1993; 1996) early 1990’s works serve as a good example of such overlap in explanation and difference in interpretation. Throughout each scholar’s account of family change there is a sustained focus on the role of economic, institutional and cultural factors shaping the changes in divorce rates fertility and other matters mentioned above.
As context for her intensive ethnographic study of two “postmodern” families, Stacey (1990) outlined the preconditions for late-20th century (Western) family upheaval. According to Stacey, the post-1950’s weakening of “modern” marriage and family arrangements in the U.S. was borne of economic and cultural developments 100 years in the making. The takeoff of industrial capitalism during the 19th century brought with it the separation of economic production from the family setting and, for middle-class families especially, the gendered assignment of out-of-the-home paid, and domestic unpaid labor. Culturally, the ideal of ‘dual-sphere’ modern family life – with women in the home and men at work – buttressed 19th and early-20th century economic conditions which allowed such arrangements to exist for middle-class white families.

As history shows, the economic and cultural conditions propping up this idealized modern middle-class American family would not hold. Stacey explains that in the aftermath of WWII an amalgam of social factors – e.g., capitalism’s search for cheapened service labor (which more often than not found women), increasing consumer demand, expanded educational opportunities for women and burgeoning feminist ideologies - generated a complicated pathway to profound family change (1990:6-12). Middle-class women’s necessary movement into paid labor, coupled with (a) their awareness of the possibility of divorce and (b) progressive feminist ideals, made for a situation in which the bindings of ‘conventional’ modern family life appeared hopelessly incompatible with the vagaries of “postmodern life”. Today, then, as the structural underpinnings of idealized modern families erode, a diversity of family forms take shape. Women and men struggle to cope with the economic and cultural uncertainties of downsizing.

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2 Stacey notes, ironically, that this ‘family ideal’ declines at precisely the moment working-class women and men make substantial gains in achieving such a model of family organization.
deunionization, profamily vs. feminist ideologies, divorce and many other life-altering social phenomena.

Though at times bewildering for individuals to comprehend, Stacey argues, the contemporary family arrangements emerging in response to this fluid life-setting may have positive attributes. Stacey sees “brave new families,” for women especially, as exercises in creative autonomy. Her description (1990:16) of the creative potential of postmodern families, based on ethnographic research with two such extended families, presents an optimistic interpretation of family change:

Out of the ashes and residue of the modern family, (women and men) have drawn on a diverse, often incongruous array of cultural, political, economic and ideological resources, fashioning these resources into new gender and kinship strategies to cope with postindustrial challenges, burdens, and opportunities.”

For example, Stacey finds:

…people turning divorce into a kinship resource rather than a rupture, creating complex, divorce-extended families…(and) religious “transcendentalists” who draw on biblical and human potential movement precepts to form communal households that join married and single members of an evangelical ministry.

In this portrait individuals demonstrate remarkable agency, fashioning family lives for which reliable scripts have disappeared or been rendered inadequate. Women and men tie, untie and tie again familial (and often extended familial) bonds; they perform this dance, appropriately, in an unpredictable style not entirely different from the flexible machinations of “postindustrial” capitalism with which they must daily engage.

David Popenoe (1993) traces the explanatory factors of post-1950’s family change back to many of the same sources alluded to by Stacey, though he does so working toward an entirely different interpretation of such changes. Popenoe delineates institutional and cultural developments contributing to the declining strength of what Stacey termed “modern” families. Institutional developments include the erosion both of
economic interdependence between women and men, and of the traditional authority exercised by families, especially over children. As women have moved in large numbers into paid labor, economic dependency lessens as a rationale for forming or maintaining marriage bonds (1993:536). Popenoe also cites what he sees as the partial but steady supplanting of familial and elder authority by other reservoirs of social influence like mass media, and expert discourses like psychotherapy and family counseling (536-537). These economic and authoritative changes result in marriages and families that are less socially engrained institutions, instead becoming unions of elective affinity increasingly subject to external influence.

Changes in cultural values also rank as contributing factors in Popenoe’s portrait of family decline. Gesturing toward the work of prominent cultural theorists (e.g., Robert Bellah and Christopher Lasch), Popenoe stresses a weakened ideal of “familism” undermining commitment to marriage and family. For all the popularity of profamily rhetoric in the early and mid-1990’s, Popenoe argues, there is afoot a steady turn toward self-fulfillment and the shirking of communal obligations (1993:538). It should be noted that he does not often document empirical evidence of such an individualist turn in relationships or society more generally. In later work (1996) he expands on his ‘culturalist’ position on individualism, commenting on how (feminist) ideals of androgyny and gender egalitarianism weaken marriage and family commitments. Such ideals inevitably come up against and weaken the functional importance of certain natural/biological sex differences, the maintenance of which being necessary for sustained attraction in marriage (1996:260-262). And regarding commitment in society more generally, Popenoe expresses in more polemical work a deep skepticism about an

\[3\] Popenoe (1993) does not provide empirical evidence of such an individualist turn.
American culture that “promotes a throw-away attitude toward life” (2006:69), breeding individuals who are “reluctant to make strong commitments if they don’t have to” (70).

Popenoe consistently directs his interpretation of and concerns about “family decline” toward outcomes for children. He is far less convinced than is Stacey about the resiliency of children and other family members affected by divorce and family upheaval; certain empirically demonstrated costs for children of divorce support his claims. The two scholars converge, however, in their accounts of how such family change has come about; similar economic and cultural factors are cited by Stacey and Popenoe as creating the conditions for family change/decline.

Family sociologist Andrew Cherlin treads a middle ground between Stacey and Popenoe. To be sure, there is a good degree of overlap among these three scholars’ work. Cherlin’s well-known work on divorce and remarriage (1992) sought to weigh the benefits of increasingly varied family forms against the costs for children they carried with them. Throughout the 1980’s and 1990’s, he pointed to the same factors influencing transformations of family life that were emphasized in Stacey’s and Popenoe’s research. Again similar to Stacey and Popenoe, Cherlin (1990) has drawn on economic explanations (e.g., women’s increased role in paid employment) and cultural theories (highlighting increased individualism and ideals of self-fulfillment in society) in order to interpret falling fertility rates, rising rates of divorce and overall change in family arrangements.

When it comes to assessing the impact of myriad family changes, the financial and emotional costs for children of divorce prevent Cherlin from adopting a triumphalist view of family change, yet he is hesitant to lament sorely the evils wrought by an
“excessive individualism” on family ties (1999:515-518). After all, individualism is a constitutive element both of enhanced social productivity and progressive cultural movements (e.g., feminism). Cherlin speaks in a more even tenor (relative to Stacey’s and Popenoe’s) regarding the implications of family change and the role of individualism in marriage.

This effort at balance is on display in Cherlin’s most recent writings on family change. In a 2004 essay appearing in The Journal of Marriage and Family, Cherlin turns his attention specifically to the contemporary status of marriage. Of course, marriage is hardly new scholarly ground for Cherlin. What is original about this work, however, is the way it examines the implications of (what Cherlin calls) marriage’s “deinstitutionalization”. With an eye explicitly toward the changing meanings of marriage and commitment in contemporary society, Cherlin speculates as to the future of marriage in society. His thesis of deinstitutionalized marriage is as much (if not more) about the cultural milieu in which marriage takes place as it is about the economic context of marriage.

The central argument in Cherlin’s 2004 essay is that, over a period of 30-odd years, marriage in the U.S. has become simultaneously “deinstitutionalized” and yet culturally valorized. Since the 1980’s, old forces of marriage deinstitutionalization (e.g., women’s labor force participation) have combined with new forces\(^4\) (e.g., viable cohabitation and the changing cultural meanings of marriage and commitment) to create an original context for marriage. Recent changes in marriage’s cultural context – which to Cherlin

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\(^4\) Although Cherlin includes political and social debate about same-sex marriage as another emergent force of deinstitutionalization, it does not appear that he makes a persuasive case for its lasting impact on marriage. It is questionable to assume, as he does, similar effects on marriage generated by a widespread phenomenon like cohabitation, and by political/legal debates about same-sex marriage which are often abstracted from everyday social settings and action.
gained steam in the 1960’s and 1970’s - result in what he terms the “individualized marriage” model. Drawing on American and European cultural theorists, and on his own previous work, Cherlin argues that marriage today is “individualized” not simply in the sense that wives and husbands pursue careers, but also in that the contemporary evaluation of marriage by individuals depends upon “the development of their own sense of self and the expression of their feelings (in marriage), as opposed to the satisfaction they gained through building a family and playing the roles of spouse and parent” (2004:852). For those already married or who may ever be, marriage is seen increasingly as a vessel for self-development and cultivating personal identity; it is pursued for potential personal benefits (e.g., egalitarianism, deep emotional connection, and personal recognition) as much as it is for institutional reasons. Marriage, then, is still quite important to people, but the bases of this importance have more to do with the promise of self-realization than with the prospect of, say, finding economic support or socially legitimizing sexual relationships.

It begs asking: what distinguishes Cherlin’s description of individualized marriage from Popenoe’s notions of corrosive individualism in families? For one, Popenoe advances an almost wholly negative view of individualism whereas Cherlin has been consistently careful (not just in the 2004 essay but throughout the 1980’s and 1990’s) to remain attentive to the progressive potential of individualism. Moreover, Cherlin appears to take seriously some of the more balanced (and at times favorable) theoretical interpretations of how relationships are negotiated amidst individualization and the culture of “late modernity” (e.g., Giddens, 1991; 1992). These other balanced accounts of intimacy and commitment come for the most part from European scholars like
Anthony Giddens, and Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim. Whereas Popenoe accepts unquestioningly the notion that American culture is corrosively individualized and impacts family life in uniformly bad ways (2006), Cherlin sees far more grey area.

Intimacy *per se* is not the central conceptual term employed by the family theorists discussed in this section. Yet almost as a rule their explanations of the roots of changes in marriage and family latch onto features of late-20th century society central to other perspectives which explicitly articulate notions of intimacy. Women’s role in the labor force, feminism and individualism all play prominent roles in explaining family/marriage change, and in bringing about the ‘culture of intimacy’ other theorists describe. In spite of interpretive/evaluative differences, Cherlin, Popenoe and Stacey all argue that family and marriage transformations are best explained by a ‘three-pronged’ framework which includes post-1950’s economic, institutional and cultural developments. Culturally, the dominant forces at play for family sociologists are individualism and feminist movements/ideologies. These cultural features, and the structural characteristics of the late-20th century with which they share a symbiotic relationship, constitute the agreed-upon setting for family change and the rise of intimacy.

**European perspectives on intimacy, self and modernity**

The above perspectives on intimacy, the roots of family change and individualism are given context by a range of post-1960’s developments. The rise of U.S. ‘counterculture’ movements, for example, is of the principal concern in Lasch’s theory; it is difficult to fully appreciate Lasch’s arguments about self-directed intimate
relationships without engaging his general critique of late-20\textsuperscript{th} century self-absorption, (manifested in ‘new left’ politics and other areas of social life). Similarly, family sociologists’ accounts of family change and individualism draw heavily upon the ‘big shifts’ of the late-20\textsuperscript{th} century, although tending to focus more on structural and demographic developments (e.g., labor force participation and fertility rates) than cultural change. In either case, one of the dilemmas associated with presenting these ideas about intimacy is how to remain faithful to wide-ranging commentaries while focusing specifically on their discussions of romantic relationships.

A similar dilemma is encountered in addressing recent European treatments of intimacy. To be sure, the task is made somewhat easier owing to the fact that these European works assess romantic relationships in a more sustained and nuanced fashion than the reader finds in Lasch’s work, at least. Yet European theories of intimacy, individualism and society are also located in the context of an often sweeping and wide ranging analysis. The terrain of contemporary intimacy, according to many European thinkers (e.g., Giddens, 1991; 1992; Beck and Beck Gernsheim, 1995; 2002; Bauman, 2003), merits attention due largely to its being a distinct and instructive feature of the move from “first” (or “solid”) modernity to “second” (or “liquid”, or “late”) modernity. To these theorists, the valorization of contemporary intimacy and its internal dynamics represent a study in the logic of post-modern\textsuperscript{5} social arrangements. Intimacy ranks as one

\textsuperscript{5} Theorists have coined a number of terms to capture the distinctions (or lack thereof) between the modern era and what has come after. By “post-modern” I refer chronologically to the post-WWII period, and conceptually to the numerous institutional and sociocultural arrangements (e.g., class-based social movements, the role of the welfare state, production vs. consumer capitalism) which have been modified, challenged and generally complicated since the 1950s. Theorists who diverge in terminology agree nonetheless about the emergence of these social changes (e.g., Bauman, 1991; Bell, 1976; Lash and Urry, 1988; Giddens, 1991)
more social location, if not the premier site, in which the turbulence of post-modern life is played out.

I begin this section detailing Anthony Giddens’s work on “late modernity” and intimacy6. In two early 1990’s works (*Modernity and Self-Identity*, and *The Transformation of Intimacy*) Giddens has sketched the contours of contemporary western societies and how certain features bear on personal relationships. He highlights a host of late-20th century shifts in modernized western societies on his way to providing an original reading of romantic relationships in late modernity. Late modernity is a period in which revolutionized systems of communication and new forms of expert social authority profoundly affect the staging of everyday lives (Giddens, 1991). Giddens acknowledges that every large-scale social shift (e.g., from the pre-modern to modern era) brings with it a new types of authority and order, but notes that late modernity reorganizes authority and information in a uniquely accelerated fashion.

In late modernity, disparate individuals are bound by a proliferation of globalized, expert systems of information exchange. We are all called upon to stage all facets of our lives – when/whether to have children, choosing a career, how much contact to have with parents - in an increasingly reflexive manner, heeding (or not) clues and information that circulate in our everyday worlds. In this new world order, individuals are creative crafters of their lives. Giddens’ optimism about the unique late modern context of human

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6Giddens’s sketch of the relationships between the structural and cultural features of late modernity, and intimacy, is in important ways the most developed of current theories on offer (Gross, 2005). Their conceptual richness makes Giddens’s perspectives a useful starting point. While the positions on modernity and post-modernity adopted by other European theorists discussed in this paper are hardly uniform (see e.g., Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994 for distinctions), they overlap considerably and are certainly the most influential in guiding intimacy scholarship in Europe and, more recently, have made their way into American research programs.
action and agency (1991: 175-176) comes through in his description of the relations among individuals, institutions and personal identity in late modernity:

Modern social life impoverishes individual action, yet furthers the appropriation of new possibilities; it is alienating, yet at the same time, characteristically, human beings react against social circumstances which they find oppressive. Late modern institutions create a world of mixed opportunity and high-consequence risk. But this world does not form an impermeable environment which resists intervention. While abstract systems penetrate deeply into day-to-day life, responses to such systems connect the activities of the individual to social relations of indefinite extension.

Thus where Lasch sees (therapeutic) expertise crushing out individual autonomy, Giddens sees a reciprocal and potentially innovative dynamic existing between individuals and the knowledges generated by expert systems. Expert information may or may not be put into action by people, but is never imposed unfailingly on them from the outside.

Giddens (1992) argues that late modernity transforms the way we comprehend our general life trajectories and our intimate bonds in particular. Structural changes (e.g., women’s labor force participation and increased access to education) signal the possibility for new conditions of intimate cooperation. Moreover, older cultural signposts of our romantic life-paths erode: sexual activity separates from necessary and enduring commitment and is pursued for its own good; cohabitation becomes more acceptable; and traditional gender roles in relationships are challenged as the gendered distinctions between public and private spheres erode. As a result, individuals are called upon more than ever before to negotiate for themselves the field of romantic bonds. But we are not completely alone. In *The Transformation of Intimacy* (1992) Giddens documents how the expert discourses of psychology, self-help literature and even sociology provide a play-book from which individuals script their own romantic lives.

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7 Giddens’ treatment of intimate relations refers almost exclusively to romantic or sexual relations as opposed to relationships of friendship or non-romantic familial bonds.
This individually negotiated landscape of intimacy, envisioned by Giddens as a “transformed” (Western) intimacy, is not merely different from past orientations to personal relationships. Romantic bonds in today’s world are seen as a potentially emancipating, if complicated, social field. As they demand fair negotiation and heightened recognition of personal needs, contemporary romantic relationships are an improvement upon their past incarnations, which were constrained by obligations toward tradition and unquestioned power imbalances. Today, greater acceptance of sexual experimentation, expectations of emotional expression (on the parts of men as well as women) and egalitarian ideals are more tenable and even encouraged by many of the expert discourses in circulation. Thus ideals of intimacy, with their emphasis on self-realization, are likely to be mutually enhancing for relationship partners: guided by an ethic of egalitarianism and deep communication, intimacy demands - lest the bond be severed - that both parties are emotionally and sexually satisfied. Conceived of this way, intimacy is democratized according to Giddens (1992: 188-92). Romantic partners make arguments and state their case, aided by widely disseminated expert knowledges of material gender inequality, of psychic health, and of self-development. Of course, as will be discussed in detail later, Giddens’ portrait of intimacy opens itself up to criticism from feminists who question how much progress has actually been made in the realm of heterosexual relationships. There are indications that for many straight couples, relationships are not simply characterized by increased equality and reciprocal disclosures of inner selves.

While Giddens stresses the democratizing potential of “pure relationships” in a culture of intimacy, other theorists are more ambivalent. The German sociologists Ulrich
Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim portray the relationship between “second modernity” and intimacy as a bond characterized by what I will call ‘anxious freedoms’. Their reference to second modernity is in many ways consistent with Giddens’ sketch of late modernity; in particular, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim share with Giddens the view that contemporary society places unprecedented demands upon individuals to act on their own in staging their lives. They employ the term “individualization” to capture not only the independence granted by cultural transformations to which Giddens alludes (e.g., deterioration of old gender norms, innovative life strategies based on popularized expert discourses) but also the social ambiguities and contradictions generated by structural matters like flexible labor and a receding welfare state (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Individualization, they are quick to point out, does not signify a self-centered society; it does not connote a socially corrosive individualism. Rather individualization is an institutionally engrained context for life in second modernity, in which people are advised and socialized to rely on themselves, seeking “biographical solutions to systemic contradictions” (2002:xxii).

To Beck and Beck-Gernshiern, the intimate ideals that govern relationships are a logical outcome of contemporary processes of something called ‘individualization’. It is easier to see the connection between intimacy and individualization if one considers that romantic relationships are tied (at least implicitly) to the possibility of permanent bonds in the form of marriage and family. Many romantic relationships even in the early going are considered, by the partners themselves or by their friends and family, to be potentially permanent bonds. The expectation of family formation, even if no longer a prescribed *de facto* outcome for romantic relationships, still hovers over dating and ‘hooking up’ - at
least for those old enough to be considered ready for marriage and cohabiting. But family formation becomes in fact less certain and precarious business in individualized society (Beck-Gernsheim, 1998). In a labor market that demands flexibility and maneuverability on the part of individuals (Crompton, 2002; Sennett, 1998), deep family attachment is something of a liability. Conjuring images of Arlie Hochschild’s (1989) gender revolution “stalled” in the homestead, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995:35) neatly summarize what is just one emerging facet of the vexing relationship between institutionalized individualization and intimate relationships that struggle to keep up:

This contradiction between the pulls of personal relationships and commercial demands could remain concealed only as long as it was taken for granted that marriage for women meant renouncing a career, taking over care of the children, and agreeing to move whenever her husband’s career demanded it. Now that both want or have to earn a living, they are faced with this predicament. It would be perfectly feasible for the state to offer solutions or assistance, say in the form of a minimum income for all its citizens…There is however no sign of any such official plans. Accordingly a couple has to find private solutions, which under the options available amount to distributing the risks between them…

Faced with such a situation and with the very real possibility of divorce, individuals interested in romantic relationships, and especially women, must protect themselves. Professional paths and potential emotional burdens must be carefully considered, for ‘society’ surely does not have ready the safety nets which would save people from impulsive decisions.

According to this position, it is not surprising that ‘intimacy’ – with its prioritizing of mutual disclosure and empathy between partners, and rational language of democracy – aptly describes contemporary romantic bonds. For it is only through careful negotiation and reciprocal consideration that individuals can join forces successfully in a world increasingly absent of social supports. This absence is not merely the erosion of support…

\[8\] Indeed, that age is rising, as evidence of delayed marriage indicates (Schoen and Canudas-Romo, 2005).
previously lent by traditional norms, to which Bellah might refer, but also the lack of material and institutional supports like comprehensive health care, day care services, living wages and the like. Thus it may not be simply, or even primarily, expert psychological discourses that encourage standards of close personal comprehension in romantic relationships. Rather, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim understand such standards as, at least partly, *structurally generated* and necessary responses to the receding welfare state and rising insecurity. If there is anxiety or at least hesitancy in approaching romantic relationships, if individuals seek self-protection when it comes to intimate commitments, this trend is less the product of a therapeutic culture of self-absorption than it is a reaction to (potentially) finding oneself in a family setting that “more and more becomes the rubbish bin for all the *social* problems…that cannot be solved in any other way” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002:xxiii; italics added).

However these European theorists name the contemporary setting for intimacy – second modernity, late modernity or otherwise – the emphasis in any case is on the place of *reflexivity and ambivalence*. Reflexivity refers to the adoption of personal ‘life strategies’ in the face of eroding ‘traditional’ social structures (e.g., gender roles or a paternal welfare state). These strategies for finding a job, a mate or even a retirement savings plan are reflexive in that individuals strive to incorporate and weigh various sources of expert information which always stand to be altered by emerging ‘data’⁹. To these theorists, the rationalized intimate dynamics of contemporary romantic

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⁹ As an example, dietary experts confound many by revising pronouncements about the risks or acceptability of eating certain foods. Such revisions are, of course, part and parcel of slowly progressing scientific knowledge - but potentially vexing for individuals who must make sense of tentative and sometimes contradictory truths.
relationships are consistent with a reflexive milieu; individuals negotiate for personal interests and for their partnership, set against the backdrop of larger social forces.

Reflexivity enhances personal autonomy at the same time that it produces ambivalence. When individuals’ options are multiplied, and paths to a ‘good life’ are complicated, one may never be certain about which is the best path. In the context of intimacy this means that in choosing a long-term romantic partner, or in establishing rules and obligations within a relationship, it is difficult to be sure to avoid making a misstep. This uncertainty is exacerbated by the recognition that information exists which may have improved decisions. Bad decisions are attributable to deficient or incomplete ‘research’, the onus for which falls in historically unprecedented proportions on individuals (Beck, 1992). This argument, posed by Giddens as well, suggests that ambivalence is found in increasing proportions in intimacy, to the extent that reflexivity and contingency dominate our social lives.

**Feminist perspectives on intimacy: The question of gender**

North American and European theories of intimacy are concerned with issues that have occupied sociology since its beginnings: the balance between individual autonomy and collective interest, solidarity and disintegration. Throughout these perspectives there is an emphasis on how individuals manage self-fulfillment alongside commitment in relationships. It is in their normative claims that the starkest differences emerge between these traditions. Critics like Lasch, Bellah and Popenoe maintain that individualism runs rampant in new ideals of intimacy, making for a contractual and short-sighted commitment to another person. European theorists and family sociologists like Stacey
are more supportive of the democratic ideals of intimacy, or at least reserve judgment one way or the other, noting that intimacy’s egalitarian and rationalized bent is a reasonable response to a destabilized society.

It may be asked, amidst all this debate about the social meanings and consequences of contemporary heterosexual intimacy, what is the role of gender? To be sure, all the above theories allude to enormous changes since the mid-20th century in the structural and cultural configurations of gender and gender rights. In general, these theories hold that ‘traditional’ - Anglo middle-class - gender roles are receding as heterosexual relationships become unions in which women and men are on more equal footing. Whether the roots of intimate ideals are thought to be found in therapeutic culture or institutional individualization, the general assumption is that contemporary intimacy relies less on gender (and perhaps more on rationalized discourse) as a means for organizing heterosexual relationships. And yet, a sustained consideration of the gendered elements of both romantic relationships and a culture of intimacy is lacking, particularly in the work of Lasch and Bellah.

These theories of intimacy have been challenged by feminist thinkers. Gender-focused theories of intimacy address three principle shortcomings in the American and European perspectives. First, regarding North American cultural theories that lament the rise of a new intimacy, feminists have stressed the problems associated with previous ideals of love and commitment that made relationships the responsibility solely of women (Cancian, 1987). Second, more recent feminist positions question the pervasiveness of democratic intimate ideals assumed by some (e.g., Giddens) to be making more or less unimpeded progress in relationships (Jamieson, 1998; 1999). This perspective takes
seriously the questions of power and inequality which are neglected in other theories of intimacy. Finally, feminists have confronted the gendered character of solidarity and individual freedom in romantic relationships. Whereas North American cultural and certain family sociological theories of intimacy view individualism as having corroded obligation in relationships – through the spreading of instrumental logic into the private sphere – feminist sociologists like Kathleen Gerson (2000; 2002) argue that the “problem” of solidarity in intimacy is defined as such only when society no longer accepts without challenge the traditional divisions between women’s and men’s spheres of life (e.g., private/public, other/self, work/family, etc). The ‘crisis’ of solidarity vs. commitment in intimacy is itself gendered, as its emergence is linked to structural and cultural changes in gender relations.

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In *Love In America*, Francesca Cancian (1987) pointed out a twofold problem in previous (masculinist) analyses of intimacy: they fail to fully consider the gendered character of women and men’s approaches to intimate relationships, and they are overly skeptical of the psychotherapeutic model and its alleged ideology of self-protection. Presaging Giddens’ later work, Cancian would eventually maintain that by embracing an “interdependent” philosophy of love, women and men could pursue individual fulfillment within the context of a shared, mutually reinforcing relationship.

Cancian argues that the dominant understanding of love in romantic relationships was love as a woman’s enterprise; love is about emotion, caring, giving, dependence and all things constructed as feminine. Although men also have styles of love, which emphasize more practical and less expressive behaviors (for example, running errands or
pitching in on housework), Cancian argues that the “feminized” conception of love tends to dominate popular notions. As a result, ‘women and expressiveness’ are associated with the responsibilities of love, while men are entrusted with the individualist tasks of ‘work’ and ‘public life’ and unexpected to excel in the endeavors of love (1987:69-79).

To Cancian, this traditional ideology is limiting and damaging to both sexes: women are encouraged to be dependent on relationships while men’s lives are bound to the sphere of labor, outside of love relationships. Women and men have distinct dispositions toward love and relationships, yet only the feminized traits are included in the popular definition of love; as a result women are overly immersed ‘in love’ while men’s orientation to love is incomplete.

One solution to this problem is for women to adopt the ‘independent’ disposition toward relationships that men have been conditioned to embrace, thus placing women on more equal footing with men. Mirroring an argument Hochschild (1994) would later make, Cancian rejects this option on the grounds that it merely capitulates to a masculinized and incomplete version of love. Instead, Cancian suggests an “interdependent” model of love, in which masculine and feminine styles of love are nurtured in women and men alike, leading to a more mature bond and true self-development. The interdependent couple realizes that expressive actions of love are no more important than practical actions, and that responsibility for maintaining a relationship is dually held, not the province of women.

Drawing on the principles and dynamics of psychotherapy, Cancian points toward a ‘mutually supportive’ ideology of relationships. The therapeutic model, while limiting in some respects (e.g., in privileging emotional expression, the feminized conception of
intimacy), nonetheless provides a useful context for creating egalitarian and nurturing relationships. It encourages communication, acceptance, and openness traits that many individuals would like to see in their relationships (Cancian, 1987:118). For very practical reasons, therapy does not provide a perfect model of relationships, but Cancian (ibid) finds its general principles to be rather useful:

> Therapy is a questionable model of love, not because it lacks affection and commitment, but because it is asymmetrical and is limited to talking. It is unrealistic to expect one’s partner in everyday life to be as consistently supportive and understanding as a therapist, and to make so few demands...Therapy can be a useful guide to good relationships, but only if both partners take the role of therapist to the other...

Thus Cancian is attentive to limitations of therapeutic love, as it is associated more with discursive matters than with more tangible relations between partners. Still, ideals of mutual consideration and empathy are worthwhile in intimacy.

It is clear that Cancian’s arguments in *Love in America* – her claims about love, therapeutic culture and gender – are partly a response to positions previously advanced by Lasch and Bellah. They also constitute a challenge to conservative family sociologists like Popenoe whose work would later become more prominent. Rather than encouraging a self-absorbed or contractual intimate bond, Cancian maintains that self-development and therapeutic culture more generally can in fact engender stronger heterosexual relationships. Asserting one’s needs within a relationship does not necessarily imply self-obsession or narcissism. Cancian demonstrated through interviews with “androgynous” couples – couples who eschewed traditional gender roles in organizing love relationships – that intimates could navigate a moderate path between the opposite poles of slavish gender roles and isolating independence. To Cancian this hopeful possibility, provided in large part by the ascendancy of reflective therapeutic discourses, is overlooked in the overly critical positions held by Lasch and Bellah. In this way, her
work represents the most direct challenge to more pessimistic and sometimes anti-
feminist conceptions of changing gender roles and self-development in romantic
relations.

Although he had little to say specifically about Cancian’s work, Giddens’ early
1990s analyses of intimacy, therapy and pure relationships touch on very similar themes.
Indeed, the egalitarian trend in intimacy celebrated by Giddens bears a strong
resemblance to the “interdependence” blueprint for relationships that Cancian advocates.
They also share a positive reading of the therapeutic model’s influence on intimacy;
therapeutic discourse to both Cancian and Giddens engenders a democratized and
egalitarian forum for intimate relationships. In assessing heterosexual intimacy, each
theorist emphasizes the role of enhanced communication and negotiation, resulting in the
potential for steadily increasing equality between the sexes.

The limits, for women and men alike, of notions of feminized love are clearly
outlined by Cancian. Yet it remains to be seen whether theorists of intimacy (Cancian
included) explore thoroughly enough enduring gender inequality and the place of power
in contemporary relationships. For instance, even if one grants the rise of communicative
ethics in organizing certain dimensions of intimacy, it is not a necessary outcome that
these norms be accompanied by increases in gender equality; changes in discursive
practices within intimacy do not by themselves negate material imbalances.

British sociologist Lynn Jamieson has forcefully articulated just these sorts of
concerns. Focusing on Giddens’ interpretations of post-modern intimacy and his concept
of the “pure relationship,” as well as on other theories of intimacy, Jamieson argues
(1998; 1999) that heightened cultural emphases on self-disclosure and shared awareness
of ‘the other’ within relationships do not necessarily imply egalitarian arrangements. On the contrary, empirical research suggests that gendered inequality is an enduring feature of intimacy.

Jamieson marshals an impressive volume of empirical findings to support her claims. When it comes to everyday interactions between heterosexual partners, a culture of intimacy seems not to have fully penetrated relationships. Women still perform more of the housework, and men are still viewed within relationships as the primary economic earners, even when women work (1998:138-141). The supposed emotional connectedness prized in contemporary intimacy is gendered as well: studies demonstrate that, well into the 1990s, women persist in reporting deficits of emotional engagement on the part of their male partners (ibid: 146-147). Jamieson cites research suggesting that women in relationships report displeasure with inequalities in material practices (e.g., housework), but emotional distance remains as the key underlying problem in many dissatisfied marriages. In sum, she finds reason to doubt the rise of egalitarianism and the adoption of intimate ideals in most relationships.

Why is a culture of intimacy – with its emphases on self-disclosure and understanding - failing to return the fruits that certain optimistic theorists envision? Jamieson poses two answers to this question. On one hand, leaving aside whether or not “disclosing intimacy” (the prioritization of self-disclosure and communication) does or will ever promise greater equality, it remains to be seen whether such practices are the central focus of actual relationships. Jamieson seems to argue that theorists have overstated the case when they stress the dominance of therapeutic and disclosing ideals in relationships. Concluding from her own and others’ research, she argues (1998:160) that:
...there are other ways of being intimate and several possible dimensions of intimacy which can be distinguished from ‘knowing and understanding’. Hence, it is possible to conceive of social change such that relationships are felt to be more intimate without necessarily being based on ‘disclosing intimacy’….Research suggests that there is a greater emphasis on ‘knowing’ and ‘understanding’ than in early decades, but that ‘knowing’ and ‘understanding’ are not necessarily becoming the key or central focus of personal life. Love, practical caring and sharing remain as or more important than the dynamic of disclosing intimacy.

Jamieson also makes the case (1999: 481-482) that it is theoretically unlikely that structurally unequal arrangements between women and men would be shaken merely through changing discursive ideals in intimacy: “It is not clear…that change in the quality of heterosexual relationships would shatter the interconnection of gendered labour markets, gendered distributions of income and wealth, and gendered divisions of domestic labour.” In her opinion, both the prevalence and liberatory promise of “disclosing intimacy” are debatable. As a result, the scholarly direction proposed by Jamieson is toward more concrete and less sweeping empirical analysis attuned to the persistently stable character of gender inequality in intimacy.

There are similarities between Jamieson and Cancian’s assessments of contemporary intimacy. Each of their perspectives argues for the importance of maintaining an eye on the gendered character of romantic relationships; this point may seem elementary, yet gender is noticeably absent as a meaningful category of analysis in previous theories of intimacy. Rectifying this weakness is clearly part of Cancian’s agenda and shapes her counterarguments against Lasch and Bellah. And while Giddens is clearly more attentive to gender than were the American theorists, he still falls short of fully considering of feminist critiques intimacy and gender (Jamieson, 1999)\(^{10}\).

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\(^{10}\) Gender scholars have questioned whether theories of change in intimacy (and in society in general) paint in such broad strokes that they run the risk of exaggeration or oversight (e.g., Sullivan, 2004). The European tradition in particular is implicated here. According to Oriel Sullivan, many theorists, in
Yet these theorists diverge in at least one significant regard: their evaluation of the role of therapeutic discourses (or self-development) in organizing intimacy. Jamieson, in her critique of Giddens, comes across as rather skeptical of therapeutic discourses. If Cancian and Giddens each share an optimistic take on the democratizing potential of therapeutic culture for gender relations in intimacy, Jamieson is less certain. For one, as discussed above, she notes that there is reason to believe that the communicative ideals of “disclosing intimacy” are far from universal within romantic relationships. And even if we accept that therapeutic discourse does in fact shape expectations in intimacy for many people, this does not mean it is a necessarily positive influence. Jamieson is wary – and here she shares a concern with Lasch and Bellah - of relying on individualized therapeutic dictates to resolve inequalities and other problems within relationships that are social in origin. This is a point on which Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) also have been in explicit agreement. Finally, to the extent that the therapeutic skill-set (enhanced communication, self-awareness, reflexivity) is not possessed in equal measure across different social strata, the ‘keys to the kingdom’ of good relationships are not universally available. Jamieson has less to say about this matter than do others (e.g., Illouz, 1997) but her argument must raise questions about the class-bound quality of intimacy’s ideals.

As has been made clear, many theorists claim that intimate ideals today involve an ideology which is protective of personal rights and individual freedom; relationships attempting to lay bare the salient features of tremendous social shifts (e.g., from modernity to post-modernity), fall prey in their theoretical narratives to “masculinist” tendencies, and reside mainly at a macro level of analysis (2004:209). Though useful in some respects, this approach is inadequate to address certain types of shifts in gendered practices in intimacy. For (as Dorothy Smith might put it) it is in everyday activities and practices rather than in more abstract frameworks that we may see the gendered advances and shortcomings of contemporary intimacy.
today are understood to be guided by personal negotiation and mutual consideration, as opposed to adherence to traditional norms. Lasch, Bellah, Popenoe and Cherlin are quite clear on this point. Moreover, even Giddens claims - as do Bauman (2003) and others - that the continuance of a relationship is essentially contingent upon the individual returns (e.g., psychic health, fun, sexual exploration) it yields. While this type of intimacy might ensure individual rights, it begs asking: what does this portrait of intimacy mean for togetherness and solidarity in relationships? What obligations are due one another in a relationship, and how might partners go about managing competing interests?

Kathleen Gerson (2000; 2002) suggests that reconciling dichotomies between commitment/self-development, and solidarity/individualism in intimacy, involves a reconsideration of gender. To Gerson, these sets of seemingly contradictory ideals have for years been managed through appeals to a gendered social order; presumed gender differences route women and men, respectively, into other- and self-directed dispositions. These presumptions extend beyond popular beliefs, as even social theorists have reasoned through the problem of individual autonomy and obligation to others by assuming that women should and do possess affinities toward collectivism as opposed to individualism, while men’s dispositions are just the opposite (for a discussion, see Gerson, 2002). To understand individuals’ obligations toward self and other in this gender-dichotomized fashion is to fall back on the belief that gendered attitudes and behaviors are “inherent traits”, as opposed to culturally and structurally constructed (2002:10). To the extent that theorists critique individualism and solidarity in intimacy without considering the gendered connotations of the terms, Gerson argues that their analyses remain partially blinded.
The case of work/family dilemmas provides one basis of justification for Gerson’s claims. She calls attention, as have many family sociologists discussed in this paper, to cultural and structural developments that have forced women and men in relationships to reconfigure commitments to self and other. Ideologies of personal development have been extended to include women; it has become increasingly necessary for both partners to work; and individuals (especially women) must think of their personal options in the event of separation or divorce (Gerson, 2002). These dilemmas bring into sharp relief the contradictions previously smoothed over by ‘un-gendered’ understandings of individualism and solidarity.

Gerson points out that, for the American middle class, selflessness and obligation toward others were traditionally the provinces of women. This allowed men an unimpeded and autonomous life-path. Of course, men were obliged to provide economically for their families, but generally speaking were independent subjects living under an ideology of individualism. As the 20\textsuperscript{th} century social changes have allowed women to pursue their own self-development paths, there are no easy answers to how families and intimate partners should come to agreements about shared care-giving, obligations toward a partner’s needs, and the pursuit of self-development. Yet there are possibilities for innovative solutions. Gerson proposes a dual resolution for the challenges of individualism and solidarity in contemporary intimacy. For one, she advocates a particular cultural outlook, a ‘family philosophy’ of “equality, tolerance for diversity and balance between the often competing needs of caring for others and developing the self” (2000: 181). Of course, the struggle to do so stems largely from forces outside of individual control. So Gerson is quick to point out that institutional
changes (e.g., in gendered labor markets, in time-sapping work demands, in unmanageable child care policies) must accompany progressive cultural imperatives if we have any hope of providing individuals with a less ambiguous and risky strategies for waging intimate and family lives.

Conclusion

This chapter highlighted four strands of social theory that bear upon the study of intimacy. A ‘culture of intimacy,’ first described in the 1970’s, has received increasing attention from social theorists throughout the past several decades. The social consequences and internal dynamics of intimacy find their fullest articulation in the work of social theorists concerned with close personal relationships, especially marriage and other romantic bonds. This is not to say that there is complete agreement as to what constitutes these new intimate ideals, or about their pervasiveness. Nonetheless, regarding romantic relationships, most theories of intimacy concur on certain common features of contemporary heterosexual intimacy: (1) emphasis on self-disclosure and mutual understanding between partners; (2) grounding in an ideology of self-development, sustained partly by the ascendancy of therapeutic discourses; (3) efforts to balance individual rights and gender egalitarianism against the demands of a shared, committed partnership. That intimacy contains these particular features is not happenstance; theorists point to a range of late-20th century cultural and structural shifts as providing the impetus for the current incarnation of romantic relationships.

North American (cultural and family), European and Feminist perspectives include differing interpretations of intimacy, even as they all point to similar reasons for
its emergence. For Lasch and Bellah, and later Popenoe (1993) and Hochschild (1994; 2003) intimacy as it exists today prizes individual rights over a more social set of values. Expert therapeutic systems and commercialized capitalist ideologies teach individuals to manage relationships as one would any economic or market decision. On the other hand, Cherlin (1999), who would be in agreement about the roots of family change, adopts a more balanced normative position on individualism. And European theorists have expressed optimism about intimacy's progressive potential (e.g., Giddens, 1992), or, at least, ambivalence about the benefits and costs of contemporary ideals (e.g., Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). For this latter group of scholars, intimacy is not an artifact of a corrosive individualist culture; rather it is an adaptive set of ground-rules for personal relationships in uncertain times. On balance, Giddens, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, and family sociologists like Stacey (1990) hold out hope for the innovative 'relationship scripts' women and men may construct in this culture of intimacy.

Feminist theories of intimacy call into question certain elements in each of the other traditions, usually citing a lack of full consideration given to gender. Cancian claims that ideals of self-development in intimacy - understood as a full realization of one's potential, not as self-absorption - flow from mutually supportive relationships in which each party understands that love is not the natural province of women but instead a shared accomplishment. The egalitarian ideals about gender roles contained in a culture of intimacy allow for the full self-development of each partner. Gerson’s position is not entirely dissimilar from Cancian’s, as the former maintains that critics like Bellah and Lasch are wrong to posit a ‘crisis’ of commitment or obligation generated by an increasingly ‘self-interested’ heterosexual intimacy. Rather, as Stacey would put it, we
find in a culture of intimacy women and men who struggle to establish equitable and solid arrangements amidst social change – through dual earner households, feminist ideologies, and generalized detraditionalization. Finally, Jamieson challenges the very idea that heterosexual intimacy is best defined as a self-disclosing bond, increasingly negotiated by equals. She doubts whether the adoption of certain intimate ideals, assumed by Giddens to engender egalitarian relationships, actually delivers equality between women and men.
**CHAPTER TWO: Empirical studies of contemporary intimacy**

**The social context of intimacy today: an empirical overview**

The theories of intimacy discussed in the previous chapter span more than four decades. These North American and European perspectives were crafted against the backdrop of important demographic, cultural and structural transformations occurring in many western societies in the decades following WWII. Foremost among these shifts, without question, were (1) women’s increased participation in paid labor, and (2) the emergence of progressive political movements and new egalitarian ideologies about gender. Recent empirical research indicates that the contemporary social context of intimacy is marked by some degree of continuity with those demographic and cultural shifts that began some 50 years ago. Attitudes favoring gender egalitarianism steadily increased throughout the 1990s in many western nations, although many still believe there are harmful consequences associated with women’s work outside the home (Scott, Alwin and Braun, 1996). In Germany as in the United States, the average age of marriage for women has steadily increased, and work and career for many women are prioritized as much if not more than family formation (Adler, 2004; Goldstein and Kenney, 2001). While marriage remains a highly valued form of romantic relationship (Cherlin, 2004; Waite and Gallagher, 2000), rising rates of cohabitation in the U.S. (Raley, 2000) and general approval of cohabitation among young adults (Axinn and Thornton, 2000) indicate that alternative romantic arrangements also hold appeal. That cohabitation has risen alongside contemporary ideals of intimacy is not coincidental; cohabitation appears as having certain strategic (e.g., economic) advantages in a flexible
and fluid life-setting (Sassler, 2004), as well as providing opportunities to ‘test out’ relationships before committing more permanently.

As we’ve seen, theorists of intimacy have paid special attention to therapeutic instructions for self-development. Empirical research has examined the content of therapeutic messages, paying particular attention to those that guide romantic relationships. Research focusing on publications (e.g., women’s magazines and relationship manuals) which deal with relationship management are among the more prominent empirical investigations of the ‘cultural forms’ of intimacy (Cancian and Gordon, 1988; Hochschild, 1994; Hazelden, 2004). The goal in much of this work has been to outline the beneficial or negative (from a feminist standpoint) messages in popularized relationship instructions. Some analysts argue that the content of relationship manuals throughout the 1960’s and 1970’s supported a (piecemeal) shift toward more gender-neutral conceptions of emotional expression in love relationships and toward expanded individualism for women (Cancian and Gordon, 1988), while others have interpreted 1980’s sexual advice literature as advocating a return to ideals of sexual regulation and repression (Seidman, 1991). More recent research suggests that relationship manuals teach emotional protection and detachment (Hochschild, 1994) and pathologize women who would seek a dependent or naively idealized kind of love (Hazelden, 2004). In one the few studies to connect exposure to therapeutic discourse to lived relationships, Orly Benjamin (1998) found in small-sample interview research that women employed in occupations allowing greater access to therapeutic discourses (e.g., social work or marriage counseling) enjoy more success than otherwise employed women
when it comes to marital negotiation of financial arrangements, housework and other issues.

Though it aims primarily at evaluating therapeutic relationship messages, this research is important as it is suggestive of the enhanced role of the individual in fashioning intimate relationships. To the extent that self-development ideals and ‘relationship literature’ are analyzed and taken seriously by academics as key strategic resources for individuals, the implication is that negotiating intimacy is an increasingly ‘do-it-yourself’ project. Of course, the cultural resources used by individuals in navigating romantic relationships are always multiple and generate a range of possible ‘scripts’, of which therapeutic dictates are only one (Swidler, 2001). Yet even if individuals are discriminating in their consumption of self-help and therapeutic literature, it is instructive to note that such discourses may be tapped into in order to replace traditional - perhaps collectivist - sources of advice and counsel that have receded in the late-20th century (Lichterman, 1992).

The current social context of intimacy reveals certain empirical features which correspond more subtly with intimacy theorists’ accounts. To the extent that social thinkers have emphasized the ambivalent nature of social bonds in the late-20th century Western world (e.g., Bauman, 2003), such perspectives find support in research demonstrating that close and durable interpersonal relationships (e.g., between primary family members) are experienced as more problematic – associated with stronger negative emotions - than distant or fleeting bonds with acquaintances (Fingerman, Hay and Birditt, 2004). Close bonds can be rewarding, but also generate heightened discomfort due partly to their very proximity and intensity. Moreover, if intimacy today
is understood as an increasingly rationalized endeavor, certain empirical findings support such a claim. The growth of internet-based and other types of evolving matchmaking services (Bulcroft et al, 2000; Hardey, 2002) allow for what has been termed a highly strategic “marketing of the self” (Jagger, 1998) whereby individuals negotiate the acquisition of romantic partners with requisite personality traits and adequate potentials for psychic connection. Of course, it should be noted that contemporary methods of managing romantic bonds are in many ways reinventions of older techniques; indeed, the machinations of Jane Austen’s turn-of the 19th century mate-seekers were portrayed as no less rational than today’s internet users. Yet these new methods bring with them original opportunities and anxieties (Bulcroft et al, 2000).

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From this demographic and cultural data, one gets a general sense of persistent and emergent social factors affecting the field of romantic relationships, but less a careful exposition of how a culture of intimacy is practically negotiated by individuals. Nor is it clear exactly how the core concepts of interest to theorists (e.g., individualism, solidarity, self-development, gender) are involved in the ‘real world’, or lived reality, of romantic relationships. In the remainder of this section, I survey empirical research that does shed light on the central themes articulated by theorists of intimacy. Theorists have provided abstract maps for exploring a contemporary culture of intimacy; here I trace out some of the directions they suggest. Close inspection of the empirical record is especially important in this case, so as to avoid the shortcomings associated with certain theories of intimacy which have been criticized for their breadth and level of abstraction (Sullivan, 2004). In that much of the research examined below focuses on the concrete...
interpersonal dynamics of romantic relationships, my review represents agreement about the need for close-up characterizations of (the presence or absence of) new intimate ideals.

I survey empirical work on romantic relationships with an eye toward two central themes: individualism and gender. First, I survey research that sheds light on manifestations of individualism in contemporary heterosexual relationships. Whether understood as a search for therapeutic self-development or the result of a broad social process of “individualization”; whether given expression through “pure relationships” or creative ‘new’ family forms; the theoretical message has been the same: individualism (or pluralized individualisms) thrive in contemporary intimacy. As such, I turn to the empirical record to examine how individualism does or does not exist in romantic relationships.

To be sure, there are countless ways in which individualism may exist within intimacy. To complicate matters, the theorists discussed above have not always been careful to define clearly what is meant by individualism; empirical researchers have done little more in this regard (Kalmijn and Bernasco, 2001: 640). Thus it would seem difficult to draw justifiable lines around individualist behaviors and attitudes in relationships which are more or less relevant to my discussion. I resolve this difficulty by examining a range of relationship dynamics (both attitudes and practices) which shine light on the kinds of phenomena in which theorists of intimacy have been most interested. Specifically, the next portion (entitled ‘Research on individualism and intimacy’) of this chapter reviews research that tells us about: (a) personal autonomy in relationships, (b) the individualist vs. collectivist sentiments expressed in relationships, and (c) the status of
relationship commitment amidst presumably expanded individual pursuits. Overall, the research included - on money management, leisure time use, attitudes about relationship commitment and other matters - has been chosen for its ability to illuminate certain features of self-development and relationship attachment in intimacy.

The last portion of this chapter reviews research on the role of gender in organizing contemporary intimacy. As feminist theorists suggest, research on heterosexual intimacy would be incomplete without attention to gender. I present empirical evidence that suggests individualism in intimacy is shaped by gender, and that women and men still have different and unequal access to the ‘fruits’ (or ills) of individual autonomy. As Jamieson would point out, heterosexual relationships are played out between bodied, gendered individuals, subject to and grounded in social relations of power, dependence, struggle and inequality. Gerson too has explored the gendered character of individualism in family bonds. Drawing upon evidence from family and marriage research, I describe how the ideals of contemporary intimacy (as articulated in theoretical accounts) do not necessarily represent women and men’s gendered social positions in actual relationships.

I alluded in the introduction to the weakness of separating research ‘on individualism and intimacy’ and research ‘on gendered individualism in intimacy’. Analytically, there is conceptual overlap between gender and individualism; and empirical research sometimes dips into themes of both gender and individualism. Nonetheless, different strands of research tend to adopt either of these key terms as central conceptual concerns. Thus, there is some research curious about individualism in heterosexual relationships which is not so curious about its gendered dimensions, and
there is some research that stresses limits on women’s autonomy in heterosexual relationships relative to men, but without investigating potentially richer notions of individualism. This difference informs how I have structured the remainder of this chapter.

**Research on individualism and intimate bonds**

*Time-use and money management in relationships*

Everyday dynamics within relationships suggest the presence of certain individualist tendencies, but not overwhelming support for the idea of rampant individualism in relationships. If autonomy, or freedom to act on one’s own, is considered as a marker of individualism in romantic relationships, two ways of exploring such a notion are through (a) couples’ time use and (b) their financial arrangements. Time spent together or apart is clearly bound up with questions of relationship individualism. Sharing more or less time with a romantic partner may be interpreted as one indicator of individualism. Similarly, the ways in which couples arrange money and access to money gesture toward either pooled or individual preferences.

If one accepts time spent apart from a romantic partner as evidence of individualism, it is clear that within marriages such separation has been on the rise for nearly half a century. Large-scale survey and qualitative interview data alike show that, due to increased overall work demands and dual careers for women and men, married couples have struggled for years to spend as much time as they would like with one another (Kingston and Nock, 1987; Jacobs and Gerson, 2004). For both women and men, long work hours and the lack of external social supports (e.g., from family or coworkers)
have lead to a deficit of time to spend with one’s partner and family (Roxburgh, 2006; Jacobs and Gerson, 2004). Through in-depth interviews, Hochschild (1997) has shown that working-class as well as middle-class women and men in the U.S. may seek individual fulfillment through greater participation in work if family life becomes too challenging and unmanageable. Time spent at ‘the grind’ of work, and away from home and romantic partners, may bring with it new kinds of emotional rewards. The fact that women and men in Hochschild’s sample make and define themselves through work may be interpreted as an indication of individualist dispositions.

To the extent that middle-class, educated married women and men both seek more time with one another (Roxburgh, 2006), however, individualist impulses appear less important than desires for personal connection and attachment. Contrary to suggestions that families and marriages are increasingly independent endeavors for women and men, nationally representative survey research on couples’ leisure time-use finds that large proportions of married and cohabiting couples spend most of their free time together in entertainment, outdoor or family activities (Kalmijn and Bernasco, 200111). Moreover, arguments which lament the rise of individualism in marriage and family are challenged by the fact that when married couples do have free time to spend, it is not necessarily the case that spending it together improves relationship satisfaction. In a sample of 117 married couples, Crawford et al show through survey questionnaire data that the kind of leisure activity, and whether it is wife or husband’s preferred activity, bears significantly

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11 This research is based on survey data collected from couples in the Netherlands, but provides an insight into the general role of individualism in romantic relationships.
upon the felt satisfaction\textsuperscript{12} of time spent jointly (Crawford, Houts, Huston and George, 2002). Thus, while there may be little debate about a work-related “time divide,” less clear is whether attitudes about time-use imply a trend of individualism within romantic relationships.

Whether couples pool or keep separate their money is another potential marker of individualism in intimacy. Money management practices between coupled women and men are particularly salient in light of women’s increased - and still increasing - paid labor force participation (Fullerton, 1999). Much research on money management in heterosexual relationships maintains a focus on implications for gender inequality and power (e.g., Vogler and Pahl, 1994). More pertinent to the discussion of individualism and intimacy here, Carolyn Vogler (2005) points out the connection between recent theories of intimacy and the handling of money in heterosexual relationships. As shown earlier, various perspectives on intimacy maintain that autonomy and independence are valorized ideals in contemporary relationships (Cancian, 1987; Giddens, 1992). Such ideals, coupled with women’s growing economic viability, mean that money management between partners may be among the principle relationship practices affected by such trends.

Predictably, whether couples keep their money separate or pooled varies according to type of relationship. In American and Sweden, cohabiting couples are more likely than married couples to keep money separate (Heimdal and Houseknecht, 2003).

\textsuperscript{12} Relationship satisfaction may have little necessary relation to the presence of individualist ideals in intimacy. The normative bent of certain theories of relationship change, however, inevitably leads to assessments of the costs and benefits of contemporary intimate ideals. Relationship satisfaction is only one means of such assessment, and at any rate is not the primary concern of this paper. For exemplary studies of the ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ features of egalitarian intimate ideals, see Gross and Simmons (2002) and Wilcox and Nock (2006) respectively.
Research based on the first wave of the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) found that most married couples in the U.S. – two-thirds of a nationally representative sample of married couples – keep only joint accounts (Treas, 1993). Decisions to maintain separate accounts appeared to be based partly in beliefs about the stability of marriage (e.g., a previous divorce was associated with wives maintaining separate accounts) and in women’s access to education - the higher a woman’s educational level, the more likely a separate account (ibid). Qualitative interview research indicates that cohabiting women in particular may turn to separate finances (“independent money management”) in a conscious effort to increase autonomy and freedom from a romantic partner’s scrutiny (Elizabeth, 2001). Ironically, though, independent money management in cohabiting relationships still may lead to feelings of obligation, as “the amount of money an individual has available to contribute to joint expenses is dependent, in part, on the “personal” spending decisions s/he makes” (ibid: 401). The inevitably of there existing at least some joint expenses for those partners living together (e.g., rent) imposes unspoken controls on independent money management.

Of course, it should be noted that this independent strategy of financial management is not universal. Importantly, it is largely dependent upon women and men’s relative earning capacities; equal earnings are the best guarantor of independent money management, but persistent gendered earnings gaps mean this condition is by no means typical (Kenney, 2006). Thus, socioeconomic inequalities affect individuals’ ability to enact independent money management. Nonetheless, the increased cultural
legitimacy of such practices, even if limited in actual practice, may indicate some kind of relationship individualism.

Studies of individualism, collectivism and cultural difference in relationships

Theorists of intimacy, and especially family sociologists like Popenoe, tend to assume that the individualism which shapes romantic relationships runs counter to more ‘collectivist’ ideals. According to this (sometimes vague) argument, the neoliberal, freedom-endorsing West encourages individuals to think first of one’s self, not ‘the group’. Empirical research suggests, however, that broad theoretical notions of individualized intimacy struggle to capture certain cultural differences in relationships. For example, while European theorists point to the contingent character of contemporary relationships, qualitative interview research indicates that “transnational families” (i.e., European families of “non-Anglo” heritage) do in fact draw on tradition-specific cultural scripts when staging their intimate relationships (Smart and Shipman, 2004). In deciding to marry partners of the same religion, or to remain single after being widowed, a sample of transnational women and men living in Britain expressed attachment to relationship norms not yet eroded by the pushes and pulls of late modernity (ibid). Attachment to the collective culture, in this instance, remains relatively strong.

Cultural differences and their bearing on individualist intimate ideals cut other ways, as well. Western ideals of individualism are presumed by most theorists of intimacy to be fertile ground for an egalitarian culture of intimacy. Studies of couples in ‘collectivist societies’ (e.g., Singapore), however, demonstrate that ‘other-oriented’ family norms may in fact facilitate egalitarian relationship practices (Quek and Knudson-
Martin, 2006). For example, collectivist imperatives to marry one’s equal make for relationships in Singapore in which partners are routinely on relatively even social footing (61). This evidence speaks to the malleability of individualist and collectivist cultures in the hands of active individuals, and to the difficulty of drawing clear distinctions between large social groups/territories. In the U. S., measures of individualism and collectivism among immigrated Chinese-American, native North American and Chinese native couples do not yield clear cross-cultural differences in levels of relationship individualism (Fitzpatrick et al, 2006). Attitudes about independence and family obligation do not fall neatly into clear-cut collectivist/individualist (i.e., Chinese/U.S.) categories. North American men, for example, display more collectivist attitudes about family obligations, and less attitudinal attachment to independence than do their Chinese (native or American-immigrant) counterparts (ibid: 117-117).

Individualism and commitment\textsuperscript{13} in intimacy

The fate of committed relationships, and of commitment as an ideal in a today’s culture of intimacy, has been a principle concern for many theorists of intimacy (Smart and Shipman, 2004). In the first chapter I outlined most of the key perspectives on individualism and commitment in romantic relationships. Following in the tradition of Bellah’s argument, recent critics of contemporary intimate culture worry that commitment to relationships is increasingly enacted as little more than fuel for “the self,”

\textsuperscript{13} Michael Johnson’s (1991) conceptual framework for understanding relationship commitment is relevant to the discussion but will be included more substantially in the following section on ‘gendered individualism and intimacy’. I include Johnson this way because empirical research employing his framework has implications for grasping the \textit{gendered} features of commitment and individualism in relationships.
or as personal experimentation, rather than as a broadly important social attachment (e.g., Popenoe, 1993). Others, for example Bauman (2003), interpret reluctance about relationship commitment as a rational response to the vagaries of a “liquid modern” life-setting in which conditions can change at a moment’s notice - rendering durable bonds more of a liability than loosely tied connections (Jacobs, 2004). For Giddens and Cancian, who view intimate culture more positively, commitment may in fact be strengthened in the long run as women and men more democratically negotiate the terms of their relationships in a culture of intimacy.

Unless defined clearly, the status of “commitment” in relationships is difficult to trace through existing research findings. Johnson (1991) has done much to clarify conceptually the different dimensions (e.g., structural and moral) of relationship commitment, and a slew of family researchers have pointed out the importance of individual attitudes and beliefs about commitment (for an excellent review of scholarly conceptions of relationship commitment, see Surra and Gray, 2000). In this section I treat literature addressing individual attitudes about attachment to relationships; I highlight evidence related to divorce, commitment to personal vs. relationship pursuits, and cohabitation (believed by some to be a relationship type lacking in ideals of commitment).

Not surprisingly, the findings of empirical research do not paint a completely clear picture of whether ideals of commitment are or not lacking in contemporary heterosexual relationships. High divorce rates may stand as a simple indicator of commitment breakdown, but whether or not such a trend constitutes a crisis of commitment, or is an outcome of ‘increased individualism’ is difficult to ascertain.
Family sociologists tend to associate high divorce rates with increasing expectations placed on marriage (Gillis, 2004); they contend that lofty beliefs about what marriage is ‘supposed to be’, if not satisfied, spur decisions to divorce. Commitment lasts only as long as the marriage returns the expected emotional rewards. Nationally representative survey research (in the Netherlands) shows that individuals today tend more than they did in the past to rationalize their separations using psychological rhetorics associated with self-development (e.g., lack of emotional attention, breakdowns in communication) (deGraaf and Kalmijn, 2006). These kinds of rationalizations square with the new communicative ethics of intimacy, but whether they actually produce divorce is less clear. Research on small samples finds that divorced women across a range of socioeconomic statuses cite a lack of psychological support as contributing directly to their divorce (Dolan and Hoffman, 1998). Whether psychologically-based rationales for divorce are indicative of individualism and dwindling commitment will ultimately depend upon how individualism is defined. At any rate, such rationales do imply a concern with personal fulfillment through marriage.

It is also unclear that individuals no longer view marriage and family as important “institutional” commitments, as some have argued (e.g., Berger, 2002; Cherlin, 2004; Popenoe, 1993). Qualitative research indicates that women and men view intimate (marriage and family) relations as having importance at a social-institutional level (Orrange, 2003a; 2003b), not simply as fuel for self-development. Interview data shows that professionally employed men and women in early adulthood express an appreciation for the social role of intimate and family engagement, facilitating as it may connection to broader communities (Orrange, 2003a). And for couples that choose to live apart from
one another (often termed ‘distance relationships’), such arrangements may be less an indicator of fear being ‘too committed’ than of practical or even collectivist motives. For example, qualitative research finds that middle- and upper-middle class couples’ rationales for living apart range from employment availability to the desire to remain close to other family members who need care – hardly evidence of ambivalent attitudes toward intimate commitment (Levin, 2004). Indeed, even if individuals do opt for a time to live apart from romantic partners, as protection against the difficulties of physically proximate relationships, this is sometimes done as an effort to ensure the longer term success of the relationship (Levin, 2004).

The case of cohabitation

For some scholars the rise of cohabitation, and its adoption by a racially and class-diverse part of the U.S. population (Cherlin, 2004), stands as both an indicator and facilitator of lessened relationship commitment. Cohabitation is viewed by some as possessing certain characteristics (e.g., ease of dissolution) suited to “less committed” individuals (Popenoe, 1993). It is true that cohabiters who eventually marry have a higher risk of divorce than those who did not cohabit before marriage (Bennett, Blanc and Bloom, 1988; Heaton, 2002), though this association may be attributable to factors other than ideologies of individualism. Interestingly, cohabitation today enjoys far higher levels of institutional support than it once did (Cherlin, 2004) - for example, in the form of shared health coverage between domestic partners. This has led some researchers to explore the interpersonal rather than institutional dimensions of commitment in cohabitation (e.g., Stanley, Whitton and Markman, 2004). That is, researchers have
turned attention to cohabiters’ attitudes about commitment rather than institutional factors which compel individuals to either marry or cohabit. Overall, much of the attention paid to cohabitation and commitment examines the differences in expressed commitment levels between married and cohabitating relationships.

It is not clear that cohabitation embodies individualism and retreat from commitment. Attitudinal research using nationally representative samples has shown that women and men’s willingness to remain in a cohabitating relationship is lower than in marriage (Nock, 1995). In this work, individuals express less concern over the “exit costs” (e.g., financial or personal) of leaving a cohabitating relationship as opposed to a marriage. Other large-sample research shows that married women and men from a range of socioeconomic statuses exhibit greater prioritization of their relationship than do cohabiters, even after relationship satisfaction is held constant (Stanley, Whitton and Markman, 2004). It should be noted, however, that in Stanley et al’s (2004) survey research, cohabiters made up only 6.3% of their sample, and were compared with married couples of significantly longer ‘relationship durations’.

Complicating matters, qualitative interview research finds that cohabitation is associated with presumptions of future marriage and long term commitment (Jamieson et al, 2002). Rather than seeing cohabitation as a “bet-hedging” strategy, most of the sample of 93 class-diverse cohabiters (aged 20-29) in Jamieson’s work saw cohabitation as leading to a more permanent bond (ibid: 370-374). And although large-scale survey data shows that a substantial minority of cohabiting relationships do not end in marriage but instead dissolve (Bumpass and Lu, 2000), this may not be an indication that cohabitation is a rejection of long-term commitment. Rather, interview research suggests
that cohabitation may be more accurately described as a practical strategy for dealing
with immediate economic and other material insecurities (Sassler, 2004).

**Gendered individualism and relationships**

The potentially changed character of contemporary intimate culture (specifically heterosexual intimacy) hinges by and large on changes in how gender organizes
marriage, cohabitation, and dating. Whether in Giddens’s hopeful portrait of
democratized intimacy, or Lasch’s pessimistic interpretation of the intersection of 1960’s
identity politics, self-development movements, and intimacy - the structural and cultural
configurations of post-WWII *gender relations* are central in each case. If theorists have
not been in agreement as to their normative positions on contemporary intimacy, they at
least accept that several large developments – most notably women’s increased labor
force participation, shifting norms of sexual propriety, diversified family forms, and
flexible capitalism – have fundamentally shaped the field of gender relations, with
important implications for intimate relationships. In articulating these positions, theorists
have highlighted ‘expanded individualism’ as a concomitant cause and result of changes
in intimacy.

The relationship between individualism and new intimate ideals is not fully
fleshed out until gender is seriously considered. Jamieson (1998; 1999) has critiqued
recent theories of intimacy for their inattention to gendered inequalities in relationships.
Her general concern over the ‘absence of gender’ shined a light onto concrete instances
of inequality in relationships, and pointed to the theoretical limits of arguing that new
intimate ideals could mitigate structural inequality. For all its usefulness, however,
Jamieson’s rethinking of a culture of intimacy does not allow for certain other analytical matters concerning intimacy and gender to come to the fore; these other matters have to do with understanding individualist ideals in contemporary intimacy as a gendered phenomenon. Keeping in mind this distinction, this section reviews empirical literature which displays not just instances of enduring gender inequality in romantic relationships, but also the ways in which individualism (broadly construed) in contemporary intimacy is itself gendered. This body of work is distinct from its counterparts in the preceding sections on individualism in that it elevates gender as the primary analytic through which to observe contemporary heterosexual intimate culture.

Stacey (1990) and many others (e.g., Hartmann, 1981) have pointed out that intimate relationships – and the family formations of which they are part – were for over 100 years considered by scholars (e.g., Lasch, 1976) and the public alike to be outside the realm of capitalist individualism, instrumentalist logic, and other ‘cold’ ideals. The private sphere, so went the argument, inhabited by women, should be governed by selflessness, care and ‘warmer’ traits. Of course, from a gender perspective, dichotomizing private/public spheres is problematic and tends to reify the concept of distinct social systems suited to women or men (Sanchez, 1995). As Gerson argues, competing ideologies (of individualism and other-directedness) correspond respectively to public and private life, work and family; women bear the burden of reconciling the contradictions generated by such gendered dichotomies. Recent empirical research demonstrates the difficulties faced by women who, having moved into the paid workforce (and sometimes into powerful positions), struggle to navigate a tricky balance between the individualist demands of paid work and the still-feminized expectations of family
devotion (Blair-Loy, 2001; Edwards, Callender and Reynolds, 2005; Hays, 1996). These gendered contradictions between self and other, obligation and autonomy, must be at the very heart of current investigations of intimacy. The widespread movement of U.S. women into paid labor is routinely cited as a driving force behind “transformed” late-20th century intimacy. Research suggests that a presumably ‘gender neutral’ expansion of individualist ideals encounters certain *gendered* obstacles: women still feel pressure to be other-directed by night (at home) even as by day (at work) they display the self-direction of Weber’s industrious Protestants (Blair-Loy, 2001; Hays, 1996).

Are there other ways, though, that a contemporary culture of intimacy, with its presumed emphases on self-development and individualism, might challenge gender inequality in relationships?14 The research results are mixed. At the level of self-awareness, there are indications that individuals today are conscious of gendered inequalities romantic relationships and of the egalitarian potential offered by “pure relationships” (Hughes, 2005). Qualitative interviews show that young women and men alike tend to agree that men benefit most from marriage due to women’s continuing responsibilities as ceaseless family caretakers (Dempsey, 2002). Such evidence of gender-awareness may be a positive development but no guarantee that men and women are actively incorporating information about gender inequalities in crafting their relationships.

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14 Jamieson’s (1998) work draws on empirical research to demonstrate that a range of relationship practices (e.g., housework), attitudes (e.g., emotional attachment to the relationship) and structural features (women’s economic dependence) remain gendered and unequal. One of the drawbacks in her work is that she draws primarily on sources from the 1970’s and 1980’s which are somewhat dated. Moreover, she investigates intimacy and gender without attention to some of the central points of interest (e.g., reflexivity and individualism) in theories of intimacy, instead focusing on a multitude of persistent inequalities. Changes in gender inequality would be only one of a variety of implications associated with a culture of intimacy.
Rather than indicating relationships of reciprocal influence in which women and men each shape one another, research finds that pathways of influence within marital and cohabiting bonds continue to be imbalanced. Married men prefer that women wield less control within marriage (e.g., over how men spend free time), while women tend to embrace a reverse dynamic in which being controlled signifies connectedness to another (Stets and Hammons, 2002). In cohabiting relationships, men’s preferences for marriage remain somewhat better predictors of eventual marital union than do women’s (Waller and McLanahan, 2005). This persistent, gendered disparity in influence in heterosexual relationships may have something to do with Michael Johnson’s (1991) three-pronged notion of relationship commitment, based on structural, personal and moral determinants. For women, commitment to romantic relationships is still defined to a certain extent by dependence and a lack of viable alternatives; economic investments in marriage as well as ties to established friendships compel women to remain in relationships (Kapinus and Johnson, 2002). Men’s commitment, by comparison, is more personal and idealistic than financially necessary (ibid). The economic resources men are able to bring to bear in relationships, though no longer far exceeding women’s, still may ensure greater leverage in relationships.

Moreover, women struggle to reconcile desires for egalitarianism in heterosexual relationships with lived realities that fall short (Dryden, 1999). Social-psychological research shows through interviews with working- and middle-class married couples that women rely upon gendered rationales about behavior in relationships (e.g., women relying on ‘boys will be boys’ explanations for husband’s displeasing behavior) in attempts to smooth over conflicting preferences and actual events (ibid). And in spite of
the potential for increasingly “do-it-yourself” scripts in romantic relationships (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995), small sample research on “well-educated and politically aware” women and men offer rather clichéd accounts of their orientations to intimacy: both sexes conceive of men as having to “work at” being a good romantic partner, while emotional intensity in women is viewed by both sexes as a given (Burns, 2002).

In addition, heterosexual couples still find it challenging to balance certain everyday responsibilities in a gender-neutral way. Working women continue to perform more housework than do their male partners, with married relationships only exacerbating this trend relative to cohabitation (Baxter, Hewitt and Western, 2005). Interestingly, even in marriages that actively aspire to gender-neutral housework arrangements, the rationale for such divisions of household labor is less likely to be driven by mutual recognition of rights to self-development, or by egalitarian ideals, than by more practical matters like time availability (Risman and Johnson-Sumerford, 1998). Even romantic relationships involving partners separated geographically due to divergent career paths - bonds that would appear to be fertile ground for enacting innovative gender arrangements - more often than not reproduce imbalanced agreements about whose career and comfort is prioritized (Holmes, 2004). Interviews with individuals involved in these ‘distance relationships’ show that women express more reluctance than do men to pursue jobs that reinforce geographic separation, and spend more time at their male partner’s residence than men do at theirs. This leads the author of this research to pose the rhetorical question: for which sex, exactly, is individualization in romantic relationships actually taking place?
Conclusion

Empirical research on heterosexual relationships sheds some light on the features of intimacy described by social theorists. It seems reasonable to say that the pursuit of self-development and ideals of egalitarianism shape the current context of intimacy. While one can detect in this body of research attention to certain key concepts (namely individualism and gender), I argue in detail in the following chapter that there are important gaps between theoretical perspectives and research on intimacy. Ideals of individualism and egalitarianism surely exist in contemporary heterosexual relationships, but the character of these ideals has not been fully explored. Research suggests that gender still plays a role in relationships, but this does not mean that the milieu of contemporary relationships is the same as it always has been.

For all the theoretical attention to individualism in theories of intimacy, empirical work has not incorporated complex notions of individualism into research projects. In particular, research has paid little attention to the varied meanings and forms of individualism which circulate in romantic relationships. Theory suggests that individualist ethics in a culture of intimacy stem from therapeutic culture, labor shifts, the changing role of the state, feminism, and other large-scale phenomena. Such a multifaceted portrait means that individualism in intimacy must exist in multiple forms, and convey different things to different people. The research discussed in this chapter represents by and large an effort to measure amounts of individualism in intimacy. These approaches involve somewhat limited or ad hoc conceptualizations of individualism. In the following chapter I outline my own research approach which investigates individualism in relationships with an eye toward multiple meanings of individualism.
The project prioritizes the connection between theoretical accounts of intimacy and empirical analysis. The research questions of interest have to do with the ways that individuals make sense of desires for individualist and solidaristic action in relationships, and how such ‘sense-making’ varies by gender and social class.
CHAPTER THREE: Rethinking intimacy: an original research project

This dissertation seeks to improve on three principle shortcomings in previous intimacy research. For one, empirical research on individualism in heterosexual relationships has worked primarily to clarify *how much* individualism exists in relationships, or which kinds of relationships (e.g., married vs. cohabiting) exhibit greater or lesser amounts of individualism. Far less attention is given to the potentially multiple *meanings* of individualism and solidarity circulating in relationships. That is, previous research has been equipped to “measure” individualism and commitment/solidarity rather than explore the various meanings people in relationships give to these concepts. Secondly, research on intimacy, and especially research addressing the originality of a culture of intimacy, is narrowed by a heavy emphasis on the presence or absence of gender egalitarianism in relationships. In some cases, evidence of gender inequality is interpreted as incompatible with the notion of a new culture of intimacy. Finally, it is the case that even research which manages to avoid these shortcomings (i.e., research which is attentive to meaning and which investigates intimacy beyond the question of gender inequality) still suffers from a middle class-bound empirical focus; at times, such a focus appears attributable to similarly middle class-bound theoretical perspectives on contemporary intimacy. In detailing these shortcomings, this chapter outlines the present a study, one that promises improvements on past weaknesses and gaps. Chapter Four details a research methodology for the project.
Exploring the meanings of individualism and solidarity in intimacy

My attention in this study centers on meanings of individualism and solidarity in the context of heterosexual relationships. Cultural social analysts have argued persuasively about the importance of meaningfulness in understanding social life (Alexander, 2003; Geertz, 1973). Researchers interested in love and intimacy adopt methods of cultural analysis (e.g., Hays, 1996; Illouz, 1997; Lewis, 2001; Swidler, 2001) explicitly geared toward uncovering the meanings of love and family obligation. While these kinds of sociological approaches are not the standard-bearer in North American family sociology, which is skewed toward quantitative, and attitudinal qualitative research, there is much to be gained from a meaning based approach to intimacy. My research stresses meaning-making within the context of heterosexual relationships in culture of intimacy.

Rather than attempting to measure a fixed conceptualization of individualism, I aim instead to explore the ways individuals make sense of and talk about certain relationship spaces where impulses toward individualism and solidarity may be played out and wrestled with. The term “intimate solidarity” captures this relationship between individualism and solidarity I wish to explore in relationships. By intimate solidarity I refer to individuals’ efforts to navigate relationships in which the pursuit of self-development and individuation coexists alongside, and may even be expected to be fueled by, solidarity with and obligation to another.

I understand self-development as the need for personal individuation and pursuit of individual projects. For individuals in relationships, this need is at times only realizable through a partner’s cooperation. Self-development may include the need to
spend time alone or with friends, or to pursue a career. Of course, not many people would understand time spent with friends at the bar, or alone reading a book, as ‘self-development’. By employing this abstract term, I seek to capture with a broad concept the different ways that individuals articulate their pursuit of personal projects that may complement, fortify, or complicate relationships.

Self-development also refers to individuals’ desires for a partner’s sincere recognition, as well as the space to act “authentically” and to “be themselves”. In any case the key is that self-development always implies an emphasis on individuating, even in instances when its fulfillment demands the implicit or explicit support of a partner. This cooperative element of self-development suggests why a concept of solidarity also requires examination. The effort to stage an individual life while in connection with and obliged to another - complete with her or his personal rights to individuation - means that individuation and obligation relate symbiotically; it is reasonable to think that one cannot be accomplished without the other.

In this project, then, the question of individualism in relationships is less about degrees or quantities of individualism than about the negotiation and ‘rationales’ of individualism. Existing research tends to examine practices (e.g., money management or time-use) and attitudes (e.g., about commitment) in relationships with an eye toward measuring a preconceived and necessarily limited notion of individualism. In such cases, individualism is defined and then sought out. My research turns this approach somewhat on its head. While I will explore some of the same practices and beliefs as have other researchers, my goal is not to hold up such practices as evidence of more or less individualism. Rather, I seek out in various ‘relationship spaces’ (practices, negotiations,
beliefs) the character and meanings of individualism. My project begins, from the standpoint of ‘research process,’ inductively; if the project is successful, it will provide clarification as to how individualism(s) in romantic relationships may be conceptualized, rather than measuring a certain conceptualization.

**Gender, class and other identity considerations**

Exploring the meanings individuals in relationships give to intimate solidarity and individualism brings to mind classic sociological concerns over the relationship between individual and society, self and other. Of course, these classical issues are always lived out by embodied beings – by women, by the working-class, by the young, etc.

And so this study will expose the gendered understandings of individualism and solidarity in relationships - understandings which have often served as an aid for (inequitably) resolving the problems of obligation toward self and other in familial and romantic relations. The negotiation of intimate solidarity in heterosexual relationships must surely involve the management of gendered appeals to women and men’s presumed independent/dependent dispositions. I fully expect that this management is played out in complicated ways in heterosexual relationships, forcing women in particular to (re)interpret gendered contradictions between expectations and acts.

And yet a culture of intimacy may complicate solidarity in ways that go beyond merely the struggle to come to terms with gendered beliefs whose rationales have fallen out of favor for divvying up obligation and independence. Intimate solidarity today is complicated by a contemporary culture that valorizes individuation at the same time it generates string desires for deep connections. Self-development through and alongside
intimate bonds, individual rights nourished by a committed partnership - some of the maxims of contemporary intimacy - generate a tension in contemporary intimacy between connection and individuation that has not been included meaningfully in most research on romantic relationships. Focusing more on the extent to which family and marriage have become detraditionalized (Gross, 2005) or remain gender-unequal, current research remains inattentive to the broader cultural backdrop of intimate solidarity.15

Thus I set out initially not to elevate gender as the core analytical frame. I choose instead to make my starting point the thesis that contemporary intimate culture, in its promise of achieving through relationships simultaneous self-development and deep connection with another, creates the possibility for complicated narratives of individualism and solidarity. While I fully expect heterosexual relationship practices and beliefs to be narrated in a gendered fashion, I do not take gender inequality as the primary conceptual tool for interpreting any such differences. A contemporary culture of intimacy gestures to a number of ideals, not simply gender egalitarianism.

This study also confronts what has been a middle class-bound tendency in much intimacy research and theory. One cannot overstate the degree to which the features of our supposed individualized intimacy - and especially its therapeutic ideals of self-development - have been presumed by theorists as near-universal cultural forces. While some intimacy theorists make disclaimers about differences across class backgrounds, these few remain vague as to what these differences might be or mean (e.g., Giddens, 1996).

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15 Even in the few empirical studies (e.g., Holmes, 2004) to engage issues of individuation vs. solidarity in a manner similar to what I have suggested, this work still tends to locate gender as its key analytic concept. Sharon Hays’s (1996) and Mary Blair-Loy’s (2001) works stand to some extent as exceptions to the rule. In focusing on the contradictory gendered ideologies of work life and family life, these researchers are attentive to the tension surrounding individuation and obligation in relationships. In the last instance, however, they cast these tensions as a work/family matter; they have little to say about macro-level cultural narratives of individualism.
Moreover, empirical researchers have trained their studies of contemporary intimate dynamics almost exclusively on middle class, professional women and men (e.g., Blair-Loy, 2001; Hays, 1996; Holmes, 2004; Lewis, 2001; Orrange, 2003; Risman and Johnson-Sumerford, 1998; Swidler, 2001). In some instances researchers acknowledge the limits of this focus, and reference the (white) middle class as a crosscutting social group whose tendencies shed light on broader cultural patterns. At other times, researchers simply adopt and continue in unquestioning fashion the middle class focus contained in previous work, theoretical or other.

Yet there is good reason to find out whether class differences matter to discussions about a new intimacy (Jamieson, 1998). Ideals of egalitarianism and personal growth may hardly be universal. At a very basic level, therapeutic self-development may be a luxury rather than an innate desire; it is not unreasonable to think that therapy itself is more a middle-class than working-class pursuit. And to the extent that relationship egalitarianism may be more of an intellectual orientation than it is practice, such abstract ideals might tend to circulate in specific educational classes. Finally, the communicative traits necessary to sustain in relationships dense narratives of intimate ideals may not be found to be universal. Overall, I aim to broaden theoretical and empirical accounts by including a varied class portrait of intimate solidarity’s lived reality.

It would be inaccurate, of course, to assert that this study adopts a wholly original course. As in any piece of research, my work draws on the conceptual and methodological approaches employed in previous empirical studies of intimacy.
Especially important in this regard is Jane Lewis’s (2001) study of individualism and marriage\textsuperscript{16}. In *The End of Marriage? Individualism and Intimate Relations*, Lewis used both interview methods, and a textual analysis of British marriage and family law, in order to trace out the increase throughout the 1900’s of individualized intimate relations. While the textual analysis is not of immediate concern here, Lewis’s interview method is quite relevant. Focusing on the differences between cohabiting and married relationships, Lewis interviews women and men in an attempt to “…explore the nature of ‘commitment’ (to the other and to the relationship) and the extent to which there has been a growth in the pursuit of individualism…” (123). Lewis’s insistence on the importance of meaning in romantic relationships is well-taken; her interest in the meanings of individualism and commitment make her work a uniquely good frame of reference for my own research. Interestingly, she laments the nearly complete lack of research in the UK focused on the meanings of romantic relationships. I argue that a similar dearth of meaning-based research exists in the U.S. as well, at least as regards exploring the place of individualism and solidarity in romantic relationships.

\textsuperscript{16} Swidler’s (2001) work is also a significant conceptual and methodological influence, though her data was collected over 25 years ago.
CHAPTER FOUR: Research methodology

Whether theorists have expressed optimism about a culture of intimacy or are more skeptical, they seem to agree that for most individuals, weaving together self-development and solidarity in relationships is a complicated matter. Partners’ pursuits of individuation may run up against each other; in these instances, how is space allowed to a cohabiter or spouse? If navigating intimate solidarity in relationships requires room for one person’s self-development, to the potential detriment of the other’s, what does obligation and solidarity itself mean to individuals? To empirically answer these questions requires knowledge of the everyday ‘relationship worlds’ people inhabit. As such, the present study includes interview research with adults involved in heterosexual married and cohabiting relationships. By focusing on heterosexual relationships I account for the gendered features of intimate solidarity. Exploring class dimensions also works to improve upon past intimacy research. The specifics of the project are outlined in this chapter.

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This project sought answers to three main research questions:

**RQ 1:** *How do women and men in heterosexual relationships make sense of (articulate) their day-to-day management of intimate individuation and solidarity?*

Seemingly contradictory impulses toward individuation and connection were at the heart of this project. This first research question seeks a description of the meanings of individualism and solidarity in lived relationships. In order to concretize the data
collection effort, I will probe the meanings of key concepts in defined “relationship spaces” - e.g., money management, sex, friendships.

**RQ 2:** How do social class, gender and other identities shape individuals’ management of the pushes and pulls of intimate individuation and solidarity?

Though divided in their interpretations of contemporary intimacy, researchers are at least in agreement that recent developments are linked to shifts in the gendered features of heterosexual relationships. My own project is concerned with pursuing this question of gender. Feminist sociologists have done much to emphasize the still-gendered quality of supposedly-changed heterosexual relationships, and I fully expected to see individualized intimacy negotiated according to gendered contexts.

Researchers have been less explicit about the role of social class in today’s culture of intimacy. This does not mean, though, that class-based assumptions are absent in their work. Theorists of intimacy seem to have in mind ‘the (white) middle-class couple’. What empirical research exists exploring the features of individualized intimacy is no less class-bound in its analyses; the professional, highly educated samples frequently included in much of this work exhibit a narrowness of scope. As Jamieson (1999) and others have argued, efforts to trace certain changes in intimacy tend to imagine new intimate ideals as universal, yet the absorption of certain aspects (e.g., the role of therapeutic discourse and communicative ideals) of this new intimacy may require specific types of ‘cultural capital’. Thus expose a class-dimension shaping individuals’ efforts at intimate individuation and solidarity.
RQ 3: *Does the management of individuation and connection in heterosexual relationships have any implications for the ways sociologists conceptualize solidarity and individualism more broadly?*

For sociologists involved in debates over the fate of families and marriage, the discussion too often has hinged on simplified conceptual frameworks: notions of a corrosive, self-centered individualism on the one hand, and almost teleological optimism about the new culture of individual creativity on the other. The former group of scholars sees a relationship culture of ‘till death do us part’ corrupted by an ethos of ‘what’s in it for me’; the latter sees the crumbling of coercive traditions and a chance for progress and liberation.

In exploring this final research question, I acknowledge the shortcomings of casting intimacy and intimate solidarity as either a crisis or celebration of individualism. As such, I strive to learn about, and craft qualified concepts of individualism and obligation from the individuals who daily traverse the terrain of intimate solidarity. The implications for generalized understandings of solidarity and individualism that follow from this study will only begin to be detected at the project’s conclusion, and not in full scope until much later.

**Method**

At its core, this dissertation is concerned with *accounts* of intimate solidarity. It explores how individuals understand their pursuit of individuation from and connection to a partner. In this project, individuals’ *practices and behaviors* command the researcher’s interest; everyday practices are probed primarily as ‘artifacts’ out of and
around which individuals articulate accounts of navigating intimate solidarity. In light of these research goals in-depth interviewing is the most sensible methodological tool.

The case for in-depth, qualitative interview methods has been made by a number of theorists and researchers engaged in methodological debates (e.g., Mishler, 1981; Lofland and Lofland, 1995; Weiss, 1994). The argument for conducting qualitative interview research is typically set against the rationale for what would be its most reasonable alternative: survey-based interview methods. Weiss (1994:3) highlights the most general advantages associated with adopting qualitative rather than survey-based interviewing, noting the “coherence, depth and density” of response the qualitative interviewer may achieve in her work. Whereas survey-based (quantitative) interviews standardize the research instrument in the service of statistical generalization and measurement reliability, qualitative interviewing trades such uniformity for more nuanced descriptions of social life and, often, the goal of exposing social meanings. Qualitative interviewing may conjure up the image of social analysis as “art” (Rapley, 2001) while survey-based research is associated with newsworthy, ’scientific’ studies of opinions, attitudes and beliefs. Despite differences in approach, however, both sociological methods are intended to account systematically for the same basic social phenomena: individuals’ relationships to society.

There is rich history of qualitative empirical research on the relationship between egalitarianism and gender in intimate relationships (e.g., Blair-Loy, 2001; Hays, 1996; Hochschild, 1989), and on the cultural ‘languages’ of love (e.g., Swidler, 2001). Scholars have generated nuanced, textured analyses through the use of qualitative interview-based

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17 Semi-structured (qualitative) interviews are codified as a useful, viable methodological tool in influential instructional sociology textbooks, evidencing ‘institutional recognition’ of the method within sociology.
methods. As has been demonstrated in earlier chapters, the place of individualism in the ‘new intimacy’ has received less attention from interview-based researchers (but see Lewis, 2001; and Orrange, 2003). Overall, there appears to be an established basis for and tradition of employing interview research in exploring intimacy, especially among cultural sociologists.

I adopted qualitative interviewing for its general advantages, but also for more specific reasons. My primary interest revolves around individuals’ accounts of relationships rather than being concerned with measuring the frequency of certain acts performed in romantic relationships. My assumption is that the conflicted character of intimate solidarity generates contradictory and ‘messy’ understandings of relationships on the part of individuals. To explore individuals’ efforts at navigating and ‘making sense’ of intimate solidarity requires a flexible method of inquiry. Dryden (1999) emphasized the special applicability of open-ended interviews in her work on egalitarian pursuits and ‘doing’ gender in marriage. In her work, qualitative interviews allowed for suppressed or unrealized contradictions in romantic relationships - between beliefs and practice, preference and actuality - to be actively wrestled with. In my research as well, it is only reasonable to expect that accounts of intimate solidarity will be incomplete; the open-ended character of qualitative interview allows for the fleshing out of any contradictions. It also works to expose individuals’ active processes of ‘meaning-making’ in intimacy. In this project, preliminary understandings of individualism, solidarity, self-development and other concepts are sketched out prima facie and inform the interview guide, but they are allowed through qualitative interviewing to develop in unfixed directions.
**Sampling design**

The sample parameters used in this study were determined according to the logic of purposive (or theoretical) non-random sampling. Qualitative interview-based research frequently makes use of non-random sampling, as its aim is often to expose the beliefs or attitudes of a rather focused or narrow social group. This rationale, though, does not seem entirely adequate to explain the use of such sampling in my proposed work. After all, women and men involved in heterosexual relationships, however I select for age, class, or other factors, do not constitute a difficult-to-reach or especially unique population. In the case of my own research, the sample is drawn ‘purposively’ in the sense that it targets certain class features of a population of partnered women and men; it is ‘theoretical’ in that I specify this targeted sample based on the conceptual framings of past intimacy theory and perceived gaps existing research. That my sample is non-random owes more to the fact that statistical generalizability is not a goal, than it does to the difficulty of locating my target population.

Social class is one of the principle comparison categories in the sample. In the preceding chapter I argued for the need for class comparisons in intimacy research; middle class, professional women and men (cohabiting or married) have received the lion’s share of attention in both intimacy theory and research. Thus the case for class-sensitivity in intimacy research is relatively clear. Class categorization of a sample can be a more or less complicated endeavor. The basis on which a researcher locates members of a sample as belonging to one or another class is hardly fixed. Quantitative

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18 Of course, sensitivity to class or gender is not merely a sampling issue. Heeding Cuadraz and Uttal’s (1999) appeal for qualitative interview strategies uniquely attuned to identity matters, my method seeks to keep class at the fore. This approach is described below in a section detailing the survey questionnaire and interview guide.
research (and much qualitative research) tends to define class as a matter of acquired formal education and, type of employment and, when obtainable, level of income. Class in these instances is understood as (a) economic capacity and (b) cultural attributes for which amounts of formal education are a proxy. In this study class groupings are marked off by several factors, including education, income, occupation leisure tastes, political engagement. To be sure, there was overlap and asymmetry among several of these categories.

My sample includes heterosexuals involved in romantic relationships. I sought a roughly even split in the sample between women and men, with gender category established through respondents’ self identification. By restricting the sample to heterosexual (and not same-sex) relationships I no doubt miss some of the complexity of contemporary intimacy and intimate solidarity. Carrington (1999) and Roseneil and Budgeon (2004) – in empirical and theoretical work, respectively – demonstrate what is lacking in scholarly approaches that consider post-1960’s changes in intimacy to be a ‘hetero-specific’ phenomenon. And yet I confine my research to heterosexuals for two reasons. As I have argued, the concept of intimate solidarity I wish to explore has received at best indirect attention. It may be that the meanings of individualism and solidarity in heterosexual relationships have been no more examined than they have in same-sex bonds. Additionally, I contend that relationships between women and men are key sites for the enacting of intimacy’s new ideals, inasmuch as the latter are informed by changes in traditional gender relations. This position acknowledges the role of gender in organizing same-sex relationships, but locates heterosexual bonds as those which stand to be upended most by the presumably new culture of intimacy.
This sample of 45 heterosexual women and men includes individuals involved for at least six months in a cohabiting or married relationship. As sociology remains unresolved about many of the meaningful differences between marriage and cohabitation, and given that I do not articulate or review many other positions on the matter, I had little justification for focusing exclusively on either form of relationship. I did select for relationships of at least six months in duration in order to focus on romantic bonds which exhibit some degree of sustained connection, and to allow for cohabiters to be included in the sample. I included one partner from a relationship, not both, so that there was ‘freedom of response’ for the interviewee. There is no chance of any party checking up in the moment on what another has divulged. Also, a sample of individuals promised to yield a greater diversity of narratives than would interviews with couples. Finally, this approach limited the chance of the interview dynamic resembling a form of ‘couples’ therapy’ in which the researcher may be positioned (unintentionally) as a fixer of relationships.

Finally, participants were all between 25-45 years of age. This age range is useful in that it latches onto a demographic group rather fully immersed in the contemporary culture of intimacy. Born at the earliest in the mid-1960’s these respondents have come of age not in the contested cauldron of late-20th century social shifts, but instead in a period when the culture of such shifts has, to some extent, become settled.

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19 Family sociology has demonstrated clearly that the vast majority of cohabiting relationships tend to dissolve (entirely or into marriage) after about 3 years duration.
20 Other general constraints associated with qualitative interview methods are addressed below in a section covering data collection.
21 While certain feminist methodological approaches are supportive of such a dynamic, other feminist positions are not. In-depth interviewing 'as therapy' is generally inconsistent with sociological research philosophies.
Recruitment of Participants

The most challenging element of sample recruitment was the effort to include a variety of class characteristics, and men in general. Of course, once having agreed to participate, it would have been troublesome and inappropriate to reject a potential respondent because there already had been amassed, for example, enough blue-collar interviewees or too many regular New York Times readers. Thus the recruiting advertisement and more specifically its placement in public settings were important factors in attracting an initial audience with some class diversity.

Through a targeted selection of recruitment sites was able to reach a diversity of individuals – women and men with different employment (white-collar, blue collar, professional) and hobbies/leisure pursuits (e.g., including reading, outdoors activity, TV consumption). To select in advance for different types of participants I included a diversity of recruitment sites: coffee houses, pubs, varied workplaces, libraries, shopping sites, online ads, to name the most common.

This strategy for achieving class diversity had limitations. For one, it adopts a rather shorthand conceptualization of class-cultural membership. But targeting actual social spaces for their class milieu appears to be the best option available for a study including a small sample size but which seeks diversity.

Data Collection: strategy and tools

As stated, participant recruitment will took place entirely through public advertisements at local businesses, community gathering places and, if possible, places of employment. Locales were chosen based primarily on their likelihood of yielding a
class-diverse sample. An IRB-approved recruitment sheet was posted at various locations, requesting the participation of coupled women and men between the ages of 25 and 45. A modest ($20) monetary compensation was advertised. This amount was enough to raise interest, but presumed not so much as to unduly coerce participation. Of course, my contact information and institutional affiliation were included on the advertisement.

The setting of the interviews was determined through telephone conversations with prospective participants. In almost every case I accommodated individual preferences for interview locations: homes, places of employment, eateries or wherever else interviewees suggested. All interviews were audio-recorded with respondent permission. The interviewees were made aware of all of their guaranteed “human subjects” rights and given the ability to obtain the transcripts of their interviews if they choose.

The qualitative interview guide, included in full in the Appendix, served as a map with which to navigate myself and the interviewee through our conversation. Characteristically, the qualitative interview guide included not just a formalized list of questions but also a set of general prompts to lead myself and the participant through several topics and themes of interest to the researcher. I divided the guide into four general themes: the respondent’s sense of self; the respondent’s general orientation to relationships; how the respondent understands the terms of their present relationship; the reconciliation of self and solidarity in the present relationship. To be sure, I covered similar ground in more than one phase of the interview. Such overlap was a welcome feature of the interviews.
At various points during the interviews I obtained basic demographic information (e.g., ethnicity, marital status, number of children), and, more importantly, information that establishes a ‘class-cultural portrait’ of the respondent. The class-cultural portrait was obtained through questions about lifestyle, hobbies, employment industry, and travel. Typical questions explored the kinds/amounts of reading one does (Advice columns? Newspapers?), type of media consumption (e.g., types of TV programming, interest in radio and TV talk shows), kinds of hobbies, and other class-cultural related subject matter. And of course, attention will be paid throughout to whether these activities are done alone or with a partner, and to individuals’ accounts of such arrangements.

Developing the interview instrument involved some degree of conceptualization and operationalization. Although these are not commonly used terms in qualitative or cultural sociological research, it is useful to briefly outline the extent to which these processes went on in my work. A culture of intimacy, even if conditioned by structural matters, still must be primarily a *culture*. It is a constellation of meaningful ideals (regarding individual rights, obligation, self-development and other matters) that inform orientations to romantic relationships. For interview purposes I defined these concepts in only the most preliminary fashion. I did operate from certain preconceptions, based on previous research, of the ‘relationship spaces’ (e.g., money management and time use) in which individualism and solidarity are negotiated. The interviews were steered in the direction of these matters. I also made decisions about which kinds of more abstract/ideal matters (e.g., commitment and personal growth) arising in relationships might shed light on meanings of individualism and solidarity. In other words, I did not come to the study with a completely open sense of what is to be observed. I used theory
and research to hone in on central themes in romantic relationships relating to intimate solidarity and individuation.

**Data Analysis**

The data analysis was carried out with the aid of NVIVO qualitative software and took place in several stages. The earliest analyses, performed on the first five interviews, were used to refine the interview guide and isolate the more productive conversational topics and strategies. This first stage was a ‘loose’ analytical process comprised largely of noting dead ends and provocative junctures in the interviews. I found ongoing reflection on the interview method, as well as numerous conversations with advisors, to be effective tools in refining the guide during the early going.

A more thorough, substantive data analysis began two-thirds of the way through the data collection, and continued well after the end of the interviews. After transcribing all the interviews, I first undertook ‘open coding,’ assigning conceptual and descriptive (e.g., class-, gender- and age-related) labels to the text of the conversations. As is typical in the stage of open coding, this process produced a large number of conceptual categories which would eventually be condensed. I also created a set of codes for verbatim responses to specific interview questions. These were codes that called my attention to particularly important interview questions that almost all respondents were asked, as opposed to signaling abstract concepts that emerged from responses. Responses to some of these ‘special’ interview questions (e.g., What would make you exit the relationship? Has the relationship ever meant leaving anything behind?) were featured
heavily in Chapters Five and Seven. This ‘preset’ coding was also helpful when needing to refer to important interview questions asked of nearly all respondents.

The data analysis also included the composition of interview memos. These memos took the form of written reflections on each interview as a whole, and included comments on the respondents’ demeanor and perceived truthfulness, as well as my sense of how the respondent’s narrative fit into a broader social context (e.g., its resonance with popular culture, its consistency with clichés). A more free-form type of analysis, the memos were a useful counterpart to the more structured and formal coding.

By far the largest analytical task took place toward the end of data collection and beyond. It involved condensing and economizing the initial multitude of conceptual codes while retaining the distinctiveness of different patterns which had emerged. This stage of coding, aided heavily by computer manipulation of the data, produced the main analytical groupings that were presented in the findings chapters of this dissertation. The NVIVO software was especially useful in teasing out and tracking connections between conceptual themes (e.g., pragmatic and emotional self-disclosure) and contextual and descriptive factors (e.g., educational levels and number of previous relationships). In other words, the software enabled me to efficiently produce ‘cross-tabulations’ of themes matched with different sample characteristics, and to see where the outliers (mismatches) were.

**Conclusion**

Through qualitative interviews and targeted survey research, this project explored the meanings of individualism and solidarity which circulate in heterosexual
relationships. I submit that class and gender should be kept close in mind in efforts to understand a culture of intimacy; this research is structured accordingly. The principal strengths of this dissertation derive from a meaning-centered, class-conscious approach lacking in previous intimacy research, and from a close connection to theory. The effort to meaningfully incorporate a concept of class into research on a culture of intimacy - however debatable the class categorization may be - promises to be an improvement on previous middle class-bound work.
CHAPTER FIVE:
Locating the language of individualized intimacy:
Sex, money and gender

The organization of the findings

This chapter and the two chapters that follow present the analysis of 45 one-on-one interviews collected over an eight month period. Complete details on how the qualitative data analysis was carried out were included in the preceding chapter. Before entering into the presentation of my findings I provide a brief overview of how the analytical chapters are organized, as well as an explanation of why I chose this style of organization. I address the analytical chapters in the order they appear in the dissertation.

This initial analytical chapter begins with some general methodological observations, and moves on to present data on the everyday relationship spaces, or terrains, around which languages of individuation and solidarity were crafted by respondents. The chapter reestablishes the problematic of managing self and other in intimacy by treating two specific relationship spaces - sex and money - that emerged as rich reservoirs for narratives of individuation in relationships. Although sex and money were not the only parts of intimate life that contain individualized and solidaristic dimensions (for example, friends and career were sometimes mentioned as areas of relationship life that had implications for managing self and other), they were the most frequently occurring relationship topics that were linked meaningfully to questions of individualized intimacy.\(^{22}\) Although I had high hopes for topics like friendship maintenance being fertile ground for discussions of individuation - in fact I spent much

\(^{22}\) As is discussed below, sex and money came up in varied ways during the interviews - sometimes as a result of my urging, sometimes raised by the sample without provocation.
time pre-data collection crafting interview questions on the subject - the women and men I met simply did not latch onto that topic as a compelling part of intimate individuation.

This first analytical chapter also takes identity, mainly gender, as an analytical category through which the respondents’ narratives can be further scrutinized. I discuss this decision in greater detail below.

The second analytical chapter shifts focus from the more concrete world of relationship behaviors and practices to the more abstract notion of self-development. Self-development has been a principal concern of intimacy theorists, with most of the attention given to self-development’s implications for thinking about obligations toward self and other in relationships. I first use the data to draw a conceptual distinction between personal space and self-development. I then go on to describe how, depending largely upon class background, respondents saw self-development as helped or hindered by, or one and the same as, membership in the relationship. In addition to detailing how men and women of different class backgrounds defined self-development, I also describe their preferences for how personal self-development should relate to the intimate union.

Finally, I include a chapter centered on the character and sources of solidarity in a supposedly individualized intimate setting. Whereas the chapters that precede it make individuation the centerpiece of the analysis, the final analytical chapter examines the other side of the coin, probing how solidarity is maintained in relationships. After acknowledging that a range of intimate dynamics may contribute to or diminish intimate togetherness, I move to highlight communication in its various forms as core feature of intimate solidarity. The chapter shows how two particular types of relationship
communication - emotional and pragmatic disclosure - are linked to intimate solidarity, and how gender and relationship experience, among other factors, shaped these stories.

Why communication as the focus of my solidarity analysis? I offer three reasons. First, similar to the justification offered above for using sex and money as settings for examining individuation, I would point out that communication was almost universally heralded by the sample when they were asked what keeps a relationship together, what keeps partners close to one another. Second, and also along the lines begun in the first analytical chapter, communication presented itself as a topic that could illuminate not just solidarity, but in addition the boundaries between individuation and togetherness. Last, and perhaps most important, communication (or self-disclosure) is a staple item in theorists’ depictions of individualized intimacy and their comments on the ‘new’ intimate solidarity. Thus this particular manifestation of intimate togetherness is very relevant to the theoretical dialogues I wish to comment on.

There are two other matters that should be addressed before presenting the data. First, I wish to stress the fact that, although this was an interview study that collected respondent’s accounts of their lives, respondents’ narratives were not the product of merely abstract questions. The accounts reference the day-to-day facts of individual lives - going to bars, paying bills, having conversations - as often as they delve into more abstract beliefs and ideas about relationships. My goal was to give fair attention to both types of data.

Also, I should speak to an organizational matter, namely tendency throughout the three analytical chapters to bracket gender and social class from one another. I do not do this in all cases, but in enough that it requires some explanation.
The central issue here is my decision to perform a somewhat ‘non-intersectional’ analysis. As I argued in earlier chapters, part of my aim in this project was to highlight the roles of gender and social class in conditioning individualized intimacy. My claim has been that neither of these concepts has been addressed adequately in previous research; social class has hardly been a focus at all. It is my position that when embarking on a research path that is not well-worn, it may be a cleaner strategy to deal in any one chapter or section of the analysis with as few conceptual linkages as possible. Not only does this make the analysis neater, it also allows for deeper readings of each individual concept at hand. If, alternatively, I were consistently looking for and raising the class/gender or gender/class intersections in the data, I would inevitably obscure, or at least fail to penetrate far enough into, some unique features of each concept “on its own”.

I realize that a pro-intersectional argument would respond that these concepts are never “on their own”. That may be true, but my position is that unless we presume intersectional analysis the best tool for examining the lives of women and men of different classes, races, etc., then we must admit that there are some circumstances in which other, non-intersectional analyses are preferable. It must also be noted that there are other intersections (e.g., age and class, relationship experience and gender) that are taken up in these chapters. Though not what is typically meant by intersectionality, these were nonetheless identities (or conditions) that collided in interesting ways.
Pushing past the common sense of individualized intimacy (a note on the interview method)

Before beginning my data collection, I struggled over how I would acquaint my eventual interviewees with the general topics to be covered. As in all interview efforts, there were concerns about the appropriateness of leading interviewees toward predetermined themes, and about confusing them. I decided to advise participants early in our interviews that our conversation would revolve around something called individualism. In particular, I explained to the early interviewees, I was interested in “how someone manages their own life while sharing that life with someone else,” and whether “it is important to be ‘an individual’ while also being a relationship partner or spouse.” Unfortunately, my early efforts at introducing these topics led to pat, shallow responses. Consider the following responses, culled from the earliest interviews, to a question about what are the biggest differences between being in a relationship and being single:

- You can’t do just what you want to do now (in a relationship), you have to run things by the other person.
- When you’re single, you go where you want to go, eat what you want to eat. Now (in a relationship), it’s about compromise.
- In a relationship you lose freedom that you had when you were single…Freedom to do what you prefer, regardless of what anyone thinks.

These initial, boilerplate responses about individualism and relationships served as a methodological reminder - of the importance of probing cliché. To be sure, pressing for depth and contemplation is the task of every qualitative researcher, and it would be wrongheaded to imagine that nuanced responses would be proffered without coaxing. Nonetheless I wondered whether I had run into a particularly strong current of popular cliché, given that so many men and women (especially among the early participants) used
strikingly similar terms to define the main difference between singlehood and relationship life. Early on in this first handful of interviews, there was nearly uniform agreement about the importance of making room for independence and autonomy in intimacy. This struck me as a reasonable, but hardly surprising finding.

It was the in the fifth interview, with Lester, a ten-year cohabiter, that I began to see that my respondents possessed sharper and more sophisticated views on relationships and individualism than I was allowing them to express. Lester illustrated for me that the expression of plain, common sense understandings of individualism in relationships does not preclude someone also having more subtle interpretations. As seen in this excerpt, Lester at first glance sounded no different - in terms of his boilerplate response - from the respondents quoted above. Initially, Lester described the defining features of relationships and single life no differently than did other early interviewees: single life is about ‘you,’ and relationships are about ‘two.’ But Lester would soon deepen his account of his relationship with girlfriend Bonnie in a way that proved very helpful going forward in future interviews:

I: What I’m trying to find out, Lester, is how people in relationships, whether it’s marriage or not, think about their own lives as individuals and their life together with that other person.

L: Well, right off the bat, it’s not so much an individual life, anymore.

I: It’s not?

L: No, because you’re always with somebody! (laughing)

I: I see. And what difference do you think that makes?

L: There’s some stuff that you just can’t do anymore when you’re not single. I can’t run out and pick up a girl (laughing). I can’t play my music at 80 decibels, if she doesn’t like it. It’s like that saying: I’m can swing my fist all I want, as long as I’m alone and no one’s near me. But if someone’s around, and I hit somebody with that fist of mine, well, you can’t do that. A relationship is the same thing.

I: So it’s about freedom, or a lack of freedom?
L: Yeah, but you don’t just give up on it (freedom) because you’re married or whatever. Again, like the example: if I can’t swing my fist because you’re next to me, maybe you shouldn’t be next to me, catch my drift (laughing)? Who told you to stand there? If Bonnie gets in the way of me doing my thing, it’s not just, ‘Oh, well, there goes that’…No, it’s, ‘Hey, why not, what does it have to do with you, you know, I mean, how does it even affect you?’ You gotta work that stuff out.

And so, in the fifth of what would become a collection of 45 interviews, Lester had captured the goal of this project, had distilled it better than I myself had done so to that point. Lester zeroed in on what I found so slippery about the topics of interest, about how to elicit complex stories about those topics. Today most men and women would agree (and clearly they did in this project) that a relationship carries with it a diminishment of autonomy, just as does any collaboration. But, to paraphrase Lester’s rhetorical questions, when, in which instances, and to what extent, this diminishment?

And, if individualism exists in obligated relationships, how does it relate to togetherness? Lester knew very well that two heads may complicate or constrain what one head has in mind. “Everyone knows that,” he reminded me. But, as he seemed to suggest in the excerpt above and as he would later explain at length, it is the limits, lived terms and variability of relationship individualism that demand investigation. Lester showed me that what is interesting about the question of individualism in relationships is where it crops up and where it doesn’t, when self or relationship is endorsed or curbed, and why - these ideas shaped the remainder of my data collection efforts.

The terrain of intimate individualism: sex and money

I’m lucky: in most of my relationships, the one now included, we have both tended to be fairly independent people. My wife, Monique, is not a needy person, and neither was Jan, my ex-wife. By not being needy, I mean they were self-regulated, and organized enough to be able to handle things without me. I mean, there's people you see, they've got the same matching bike helmets and they have the same hiking shoes and it's like, I don't think they're ever separated from each other. Can’t even tell them apart! Now that’s just smothering. Don’t get me wrong, we really appreciate the time we have together; we care so much about each other, and we know we're going to be there for
each other. So it's okay to be apart and be our own people, as long as we’re there for one another, too. It’s a balance.

_Paul, 39, remarried_

What (individuals in relationships) hope to (learn)...is how to square the circle: how to force relationship to empower without disempowering, enable without disabling, fulfilling without burdening.

_Zygmunt Bauman (2003)_

The theses of individualized intimacy put forth by theorists label ‘personalization’ - a rising concern about self and personal interests - as one of if not _the_ central cultural development shaping contemporary relationships. But the nature of this supposed personalization and move toward self-interest has not been explored in concrete terms. Does it regard individual careers; sexual independence; leisure; concern over well-being? Is the cultural force of individualized intimacy the same for women and men, for the middle-classes and working-classes? This chapter, along with the chapter that follows, sketches the ‘lived territory’ of individualized ideals expressed by respondents. The two chapters highlight the languages employed to describe intimate ideals and the dimensions of interviewees’ lives in which themes of individualism seemed to be most implicated. The goal is to describe where in relationships individualized ideals ‘live’, how they are articulated, and what are there limits.

Two territories of individualist ideals are discussed in this chapter: sexual independence and money management. It is worthwhile to state briefly how these themes emerged in the interviews. The first concept, sexual independence, developed mainly out of responses to questions about how being in a relationship is different from being single. Once nudged past their initial responses (typically, for instance: “When you’re single, you can do whatever you want”), I found that many interviewees framed the differences
between singlehood and relationship life largely in terms of sexual activity. In particular, women and men had much to say about the role played by sex and sexual life in defining one’s individuality, and the implications of that individuality being limited. This was interesting ground to cover, as it shed light not only on how sex can be understood as an instance of intimate individualism, but also on the ways that individuals manage, and often relinquish, a potentially threatening form of individuation.

The other terrain discussed in this chapter, money management, was built in advance into the interview guide, and thus was not as spontaneously linked to individualism as were respondents’ discussions of sexual behavior. Nevertheless, existing research on the topic of money management in relationships suggests it is a reasonable means for exploring the meanings of individualized ideals. As I describe below, once we penetrated past some of the more boilerplate comments on money management, interviewees had much to say about the negotiation of self and other in relation to the couple’s financial life.

Each of these two themes presented gendered, and in some cases, class-based features. The gendering of sexual independence centered on the degree to which a respondent’s definition of personal autonomy was linked to sexuality, and especially to the importance of freedom to explore sexual interactions23 outside the relationship. In short, women viewed sex and sexuality as a core feature of self that stretched from youth, through singlehood and into coupled life, and was to be protected. Men tended to exclude sex from self-definition, in life before and after entering into a relationship. Interestingly, men sometimes employed the abandonment of sexual autonomy as part of a

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23 The phrase ‘sexual interaction’ is used to encompass a wide range of more and less ‘serious’ sexual behaviors and thoughts.
‘solidarity narrative,’ explaining how such abandonment was part and parcel of bonding with a partner. Gender also shaped beliefs about joint and independent money management, though in a more modest fashion. Thus there are two fields of comparison that run throughout the chapter: concrete territories of individualism, and social identity (gender)\textsuperscript{24}. I first address sex, individualism and gender.

**Women, men, and the meanings of self and sexual freedom**

You asked me what I miss out on these days, now that I’m married. That’s simple: different women. It used to be as much (sex) as I could get, from as many women as possible. Now – well, let’s just say that’s over with, now. But, hey, that stuff isn’t me anymore, anyway.

*Jay, 38, married*

I think that so many people, they get married too early and find themselves feeling stifled. I mean, Paul and I have talked about this and we both worry about that. And I’ve told him sometimes I feel guilty because, when we were living apart but still dating, I did have these other short sexual relationships and he really didn’t. I’ve told him that he can now, but he hasn’t yet. Maybe someday he’ll feel that he wants to have that different experience and that’s fine. A person needs to have those experiences if they feel it.

*Janice, 27, cohabiter*

The question was posed to all the women and men interviewed, “Has this relationship ever meant leaving behind something important to you?” In response a surprising proportion of respondents - 28 of 45 - referenced a loss of sexual opportunities. In general, women and men alike acknowledged as a matter-of-fact that expectations of monogamy limit (or eliminate) freedom to pursue other sexual activities. In a way, this fact represents a truth about *solidarity* in relationships: the women and men shared a basic understanding that relationship binds its members sexually and as a result seriously

\textsuperscript{24} It is the case that gendered themes were more prominent in accounts of sexual independence. Nonetheless, there were some provocative explicit and implicit allusions to gender ideology in respondents accounts of money management. It is fair to say that gender impacted each topic in important ways.
limits the exercise of sexual freedom. If one of the questions to be answered in the dissertation revolved around the sources of intimate solidarity today, monogamous sexual obligations are probably as good an initial answer as any.

This is not to say, though, that monogamy and sexual autonomy were simple subjects for my respondents. There were striking differences in how men and women viewed the loss of sexual freedom in relationships. These differences revolved mainly around the implications for *self-definition* associated with fettered or unfettered sexual activity, and thus were viewed as windows on individualism, and to a lesser extent solidarity, in intimacy.

The women who mentioned sexual activity as a realm of lost freedom in relationships, tended to view such ‘missed opportunities’ in terms of self-definition and self-revelation. That is, when women talked about the loss of sexual freedoms in marriage or cohabiting relationships, they emphasized lost chances to express, or increase knowledge about, themselves. In some cases, the perceived loss is compelling enough that they seek to reclaim sexual autonomy on a limited scale.

My interview with Janice, the cohabiter quoted above, was the more memorable example of a ‘strong view’ on sex and autonomy in relationships. Janice, 27, has lived with her boyfriend for three years and presumes that the couple will marry. Though she expressed during our conversation every intention of making her relationship permanent, she believes that either partner should be able to pursue sexual activities outside the relationship:

J: It’s not that I think you should be sleeping with everyone under the sun. It’s just that, I think, sometimes people need a release for themselves. They need to explore that part of

25 ‘Sexual activity’, and at times ‘sexual interaction,’ refer to the many ways women and men talked about flirting, being with, touching, or otherwise sexually engaging with individuals outside their relationship.
them, with someone else. Then a person can go back to their marriage or whatever, with more understanding of what is missing, of what they need as a person.

I: Doesn’t that - isn’t it possible that that will raise problems? Jealousies?

J: Yeah, if it isn’t done the right way. And, if you’re not being clear that the, umm, the sex or whatever, is not just about pleasuring yourself, it’s about getting in touch with yourself.

In fact, Janice earlier in her relationship acted on this ideal, by maintaining a temporary physical relationship with another man. In spite of surface appearances, what is interesting is that Janice’s argument for sexual individualism also has its solidaristic implications. She presented the ideal of sexual exploration outside the relationship as a means to securing one’s relationship in the long run. This is not - at least it is not merely - a self-indulgent perspective on sexual activity. Janice believes that by learning about and satisfying one’s personal needs through extra-relationship sexual activity, a person can return to the relationship more knowledgeable about themselves in a better position to be fulfilled in the long run. The distinction between sexual freedom as a source of pleasure vs. self-knowledge, for Janice, is a distinction between sexual independence for its own sake vs. for the sake of the relationship.

It is true that Janice’s explicit endorsement of sexual activity outside the relationship was more muted among most women (and men) in the sample. Indeed, few respondents were comfortable with the notion of any “serious” extra-relationship sexual activity. And yet, Janice touches on something that was common in women’s talk of sexual freedom and relationship life. To the extent that the women interviewed talked about monogamy and lost sexual opportunities, they expressed concern over limits on “who they were” as individuals. Sexual freedom - freedom to flirt with, or be emotionally or physically close to other men - was for women a core part of personal freedom.
When I spoke with another woman, Patsy, I was able to see a more elaborate exposition of what sexual individuation can mean for women, and how it fits into a broader social and personal context. 32 years old, Patsy married husband Gavin two years ago. She and Gavin had lived together for four years before their marriage. Patsy is an accomplished natural scientist who earned her Ph.D. in chemistry just before her wedding. She told me that career accomplishments have always been important to her, as has the principle of “standing on (her) own two feet”. This hasn’t always been easy to accomplish with Gavin, who according to Patsy has an “old-fashioned” streak. Although he is often emotionally supportive of Patsy, Gavin worries about and tries to impose limits on some behaviors of Patsy’s that he finds threatening. Patsy explained that sexual freedoms come into play here, but before addressing that particular topic, some background is useful.

Patsy’s lifelong desire to stand on her own feet is the product of a family dynamic that, according to her, taught her the perils of dependence in relationships. Patsy’s mother, Jerri, has been involved in what Patsy describes as an “unfair marriage” for some time. According to her, Jerri has tolerated a husband who demands near-total “obedience” and has strongly discouraged any type of self-improvement that may have granted Jerri more autonomy in the relationship:

P: When it comes to my own relationships, I had to go on is like, my own parents – who are actually, severely dysfunctional. My mom ingrained this in my head when I was growing up, and it was: ‘don’t ever compromise yourself too much in the beginning, make sure that when you first get with your husband that you are who you are and that you stand up for what you believe in – even if you do wind up compromising, make sure its clear who you are. Don’t just go be a part of him’.

I: And this was your mom’s advice-?

P: Yeah, because that’s what she did – she agreed not to work, and stay at home all the time, while he did what he wanted. Now she resents him and they have all these issues. And the funny thing is, umm, back when I first started dating a long-term boyfriend, she’s like, ‘are you sure you like doing that? You never liked doing that before, did you?’
I: So she was checking up?

P: Yup. And I would explain that it’s OK, I do like doing this or whatever it was.

I: And did you take her advice into relationships with you?

P: I did, yeah. I never ever want to go through what they’re going through every single day of their lives.

And indeed, Patsy has lived by her mother’s admonitions, even now that she has settled into her marriage to Gavin. There have been several topics she and Gavin have had to hash out - e.g., Patsy’s desire to ride motorcycles and Gavin’s associated fears – relating to questions of individuation and its fallout. In many of these cases, their negotiations have come down to the matter of personal safety: an activity that jeopardizes personal safety is understood to be off limits, even if that constrains individualism. There is another matter, though, that has not been so easily resolved in their marriage.

By far the most complicated element of Patsy and Gavin’s marriage relates to how Patsy manages her own interest in sexual freedom. It seemed that it was this part of their relationship that most calls upon Patsy to enact her mother’s advice about not compromising oneself. Whereas other ‘individualist issues’ that have sprung up for Patsy and Gavin - seeing friends, having alone time – have been resolved quite simply, her sexual freedom, she told me, has been a real sticking point. Initially Patsy couched her missing sexual interaction with other men in terms of vanity, but later in terms of self-liberation and self-definition. In the end, it seems that sexual autonomy is what she misses most about single life, not merely for the positive attention it garners, but for its potential for self-revelation. Here, in response to a question about single life and marriage, Patsy thinks through the topic of sexual autonomy:

I: You’ve said you're a relationship person. But is there anything you miss about being single?
P: I used to date a lot. But I don’t know that I really miss much about that, because, well— you’re going to think I’m vain...

I: Why is that?

P: Well, I think the only thing I ever enjoyed about being on my own was knowing that I was still attractive, and still able to connect with men sexually. What I really like is being able to go out and do things and, umm, being able to go up and talk to a guy. Lots of different guys, to be honest. I like to talk to guys. It’s a big part of who I am. I’ve just always have been that type of person, I don’t know why. So, as long as Gavin doesn’t keep me from that, we’re OK. That part of me has to come out.

I: Is it ever hard for Gavin to allow you to express that ‘part of yourself’, as you put it?

P: At the beginning (of the relationship) I think it was, but I think he knows now. He knows—that’s just me, Patsy. She's just going to go talk to guys; she’s sexual, she’s friendly, and she's not ugly (laughing). I would never abuse it, but I wouldn’t let go of it either. And he understands.

I: You’d never abuse what, exactly?

P: I’d never abuse my right to talk to guys or flirt, to express myself like that.

And later:

P: You know, we’re sitting here now, and I’ve had two text messages from him (Gavin) already, and it’s cuz’ he knows me.

I: He knows you— does that mean he has to worry? Because earlier you said something along the lines of, ‘I wouldn’t take advantage” of his, his trust.

P: (laughing) It’s both I guess. He knows I feel strong about that side of me, and he knows my mom’s influence. But its absolutely—he definitely can trust me. I can do this, I can meet with you, I can flirt at the bar, and that, those, doesn’t mean I don’t love him.

There are several interesting points to take away from Patsy’s case, each of which serves to frame the other women’s cases presented in this section. For one, there is her initial association, and subsequent disassociation, of vanity and sexual interactions. It is not entirely clear whether she moved away from her initial characterization out of social desirability or because she genuinely sees it as something different, something involving a more developed philosophy of individuation. Certainly her frequent references to her mother’s influence suggest that she has thought a good deal about matters of individuation and autonomy. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to ask whether Patsy and
other women like her in the sample lean toward sexual freedom for stereotypically
gendered reasons. I discuss these multiple interpretations in greater detail toward the end
of this section.

Patsy’s discussion of her ‘sexual self’ also calls to mind a different theme, called
first to my attention by the interviewee Lester, quoted earlier. Lester was talking about
the general task of managing personal freedom in relationships, and likened this scenario
to the dilemma of balancing individual and social freedoms *writ large*. Patsy’s case is a
splendid example of this dilemma. To begin, she constructs flirting and sexual
interaction as expressive of something core about herself, as an important enough part of
her that Gavin must not “keep her” from it. Lester would commiserate about how having
a partner necessarily implies that certain personal thoughts and actions will be called into
question or subject to constraint. Patsy too is aware of this condition as it regards sexual
expression. Second, Patsy feels that her freedom in this regard - her freedom to express
herself sexually - must not be exercised in a ‘high-handed’ fashion. Patsy seems to
believe, as Lester does, that along with any personal freedom in relationships come
demands for responsibility and discretion. Patsy makes clear that she would not
relinquish her personal right to sexual expression, but also that she would “never abuse”
it. Here we have a rather close representation of what theorists like Giddens (1992) have
conceived of as the appearance of certain rationalized principles in the intimate sphere.
When Giddens writes of elemental democratic notions (e.g., “no rights without
obligations”) being incorporated into the arrangement of personal lives, it is just Patsy’s
and Lester’s sorts of judicious deliberations that he envisions.
While it is true that, for women like Janice and Patsy, the suspension of sexual activities was linked to individualism through notions of self-expression, this was not the only way women framed that connection. That is, sexual freedom and personal individuality were not always linked through a concept of self-definition. For other women committing sexually in a monogamous relationship was thought to constrain individuality, not by denying core parts of oneself, but by limiting personal choice. The exercise of sexual freedom was, in other words, more a matter of freedom of choice in one’s intimate life and less about self-revelation. Consider Joan, 34, who has been living with her boyfriend Tommy for five years.

J: You know that saying about the grass being greener? I guess the thing I miss the most these days - my favorite thing about my past - was the possibility of finding someone new and interesting and fun. Like, when you first meet someone, there’s that excitement there, the attraction and the flirting, but also the chance that you’re getting into something that is really good. I mean, I was never really one to enjoy hooking up with a bunch of guys, or that kind of thing. I don’t even mind being tied down to one person, in the sexual aspect. But dating and hooking up with someone who seemed promising was always exciting for me.

I: It was the promise of something new?

J: Yeah, and that’s gone now. I am very happy with Tommy, but even if I wasn’t completely sold on him, there’s no way (anymore) to find out what’s out there, so I have less choice. Before this relationship, I was able to explore what was out there.

I: And now you can’t do that?

J: Of course not! Well, I mean there are things I still do, like when it’s just the girls, it’s fun to talk to a guy and to think about what it would be like. But, c’mon, I can’t be doing that when Tommy is there, and we’re together most of the time.

For Joan, the relationship’s closing off of flirtation and other sexual interactions wasn’t so much a matter of self-repression (as was the case for Janice and Patsy) but a reminder of diminished options. In fact, though Joan talks of missing out on sexual attractions and “hooking up,” she doesn’t seem to see these as goals in themselves. Rather, they represent lost opportunities for newer and better relationships, the “greener grass” to which she alludes. There are fleeting moments - at work, at parties - when Joan is still
able for a short time to explore these avenues with men. She seems to acknowledge them as superficial, but they do serve an individuating purpose.

Joan’s story is especially interesting - as we will see in greater detail in the next chapter - given what she views as the unique assets she brings to the ‘romantic market’. As a Ph.D. holding, professionally employed woman, Joan feels that she is in prime position to explore other romantic possibilities, but “knows” that such an outlook is “selfish”. It seems that she has struck a bargain - if only in her own mind - about how to retain some of the hopeful feelings of new encounters while not crossing any lines of obligation toward Tommy. Her case also highlights the gendered character of sexuality and individualism in intimacy, as it was expressed by the respondents. Here is a highly educated, economically successful woman whose main concerns about personal autonomy seemed to boil down to a question of romantic endeavors: whether or not she still had the chance to pursue a better, more exciting or fulfilling relationship. What she professes to miss most about single life is the promise of new beginnings of a romantic sort - no mention is made of career pursuits or other forms of self-development.

Caitlin’s Case: The threats of sexual independence

Another woman, Caitlin, 32, is worth a more sustained examination. Caitlin has been married to husband John for eight years. Similarly to Joan, she from time to time allows herself to flirt with other men, not so much as an expression of self, but to briefly test the waters of what life might be like in a different relationship. In other respects, though, the two women are quite different. Caitlin earned her High School equivalency degree at the age of 20, immediately thereafter entering into a series of waitress jobs.
Caitlin sees herself as someone who has overcome several obstacles to put herself on the “right track,” including the premature death of her parents. While she seems pleased to have found in John a “real soulmate,” she, like Joan, finds appeal in sexual freedom as a means to personal choice:

C: There’s no way I would give up what John and I have now - at least, not to be single. I don’t want to be single again. But say I go out to a bar this weekend and see a really cute guy – sure, I’ll go over and talk to him. But I’m not looking for a ‘booty call’. If I flirt, it’s not like I’m doing something (sexual) on the sly. Let me be honest, it’s not always perfect with John, like with anybody, so I guess maybe sometimes I’m, like, keeping my options open?

I: But how are you keeping them open? One night is just one night, right?

C: I guess by talking to that guy at the bar, getting into that ‘singles’ type scene. It’s not like I’m (having sex with) anybody! But I am trying to keep an eye on the action out there.

Tellingly, Caitlin’s interest in keeping “an eye on the action” stems not merely from her own personality and personal history, but also from the dynamics of her marriage to John. John, a bus driver, is on the road most of the day, and as a result can be difficult to communicate with. What is more, he has a habit of “disappearing” with friends, according to Caitlin – she worries specifically about women he might be spending time with:

C: Every so often he does his own things. He goes out, he goes to bars, and he disappears.

I: How often does he disappear?

C: Umm, he's done it to me 6 times total, where he hasn’t come home till the next day at like 3 o’clock in the afternoon. The last time was recently. He's a very big personality, so if he goes to the bar and there's these certain women there, he will, umm, proceed to spend an awful lot of time and money there, and get very sneaky.

I: And how do you react to this? It seems like it would be hard to swallow…

C: I let him do his thing. Like, I look at it like this: this guy works 80 hours a week – overtime. You know, he's up at 5 in the morning; he comes home at 5 at night, so he's working 12 hours shifts. If he has to go out, blow a bunch of money to get something off his chest, then that’s what you got to do. I’m not going to fight you. But the thing that gets me is the women that are there, a bunch of skanks. I trust him, but not them.
In spite of her professions, it is not entirely clear that Caitlin trusts John, and part of her ‘insurance policy,’ it seems, is the keeping open of romantic options. This seems to be an influence on her behavior around other men. Caitlin reserves the right to consider other sexual and romantic possibilities, not so much as a right to self-expression, but as a more practical exercise in self-preservation: she can’t be sure that John’s behavior is always appropriate or that it will always be so, thus she keeps her options open.

One must also consider that not all of Caitlin’s reactions to John’s behavior are best described as individualized. She also retains a more traditionally gendered and even solidaristic disposition toward John’s behaviors around other women, which wind up muting her own sense of sexual independence:

I: So is this something - I would assume that this (his behavior) is something that's caused some heated arguments?

C: A little bit, but I’m also about cleaning it up. I let him have it for a while, but I know ragging on him is only going to make things worse. I’ll wind up saying, 'are you hungry?’ You know, like, my chore is to please him, so that’s how I make it – I give my love back to him. It’s like, OK, I’m not going to hug you right now or kiss you, but I’ll make you eggs (laughing). Go sleep, sleep for the next 12 hours, do what you’ve got to do. Wake up; you’ll be a better person. But don’t leave me hanging. Usually the last thing I say to him before he goes out - please don’t forget to come home.

I: And do you ever take it out on him when you’re out having your own night out?

C: Definitely sometimes – I’ll stay out late and ‘forget to call’ him, you know what I mean. But I know I can’t do anything with a guy.

I: You mean, to get back at him?

C: Right, that I can’t do. (Long pause) I’m not gonna be one of those trashy women at bars he’s at. That’s not me.

In making a sort of moral judgment about her own sexual behavior vis a vis other women, Caitlin is showing the limits of her sense of sexual individuation: although she harbors a

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26 Incidentally, this type of ‘hedging’ is revisited as a concept in the next section devoted to individuation and money management in relationships.
belief in keeping her sexual options open, and although John’s behavior often is
undeserving of loyalty, Caitlin draws a line before acting on any sexual interests outside
the relationship.

Each of these four women highlighted in this section is talking about sex,
monogamy and personal freedom. And each sees the interplay among these concepts in a
distinct way. The earlier statements, from Janice and Patsy, represent a pattern of
thought that emphasizes the power of sexual freedoms to reveal something about one’s
self; this freedom, exercised judiciously, is important enough to be defended, even if it
makes a partner uneasy. The latter statements, from Joan and Caitlin, associate sexual
freedom with personal choice, in particular the chance to evaluate other intimate avenues
and new relationships. In both cases, sexual freedoms have implications for self and
individuality, although the latter examples have a less serious, more playful bent to them.
And yet, even when women talked about extra-relationship sexual behaviors merely as
something “fun,” or as a diversion, the fun was to be had in expressing something about,
or opening up life options for, oneself. As Pamela (39, married for ten years) put it:

P: If I flirt, yeah, some of it is because it’s just exciting to do. But it’s also just in me.
You know how a zebra can’t change its stripes? Well I can’t change this, and I wouldn’t
want to.

Gender is at play here as well, though not always in a stereotypical fashion.
Pamela’s comments in particular are reminiscent of some of the popular adages we
usually hear about men’s sexual behavior and identity – about sexual assertiveness being
‘in their blood,’ being natural, etc. Not only do these women’s narratives contradict
some of those gendered expectations, but one gets the feeling that Pamela and the others
quoted above do not even recognize gender as something that supplies or limits interests
in sexual freedom. Rather they allude to personal motivations buried deep within
themselves as explanations for their behaviors and feelings. As we see in the next section, men tell a somewhat different, less personal and more solidaristic, story of sex and individuality in relationships.

But before moving on, it must be acknowledged that these and other women’s talk of the personally emancipating effects of sexual independence may not be wholly liberated or self-assured narratives. That is, there is reason to question whether their advocacy of and interest in extra-relationship flirtation or other sexual activity flows from an independent sense of self-empowerment, or rather from less ‘positive’ sources.

For instance, rather than view the women’s interest in sexual independence as a sign of de-gendered, individualist beliefs, isn’t it fair to suggest that these views are vestiges of gender inequalities? The social realities of gender mean that women are more likely than men to cling to sexual validation as a form of self validation. In the excerpt from my interview with Patsy, she herself indicates as much when she initially deprecates her association of sexual attention and self-expression; she worries about being viewed as “vain,” and seemed to feel in general that her feelings were dubious. And so, isn’t it reasonable to see these narratives as right in line with (and not contrary to) gendered scripts?

I would argue that while no doubt some of this view holds water, it does not adequately explain all of the sentiments expressed by women about sexual independence. For instance, in Patsy’s case, when she discusses her interest in sexual autonomy in terms of “rights” not to be “abused,” her conceptual language seems at a level of sophistication not to be entirely explained away by social desirability or a false consciousness about ‘sexual emancipation’. There is more going on here.
Moreover, there are analytical difficulties associated with divining the ‘real meaning’ or ‘real sources’ of these women’s accounts. It is a tricky task to argue for which set of cultural strictures most heavily informs a respondent’s narrative. Is it more plausible that, since women are viewed sexually by society and have been denied other outlets for self-development, they find sex a ready avenue for self-expression? Or, reasoning from a similar foundation to different conclusions, is it more accurate to observe that, since sexual assertiveness in women is limited and circumscribed in broader society, the women I interviewed are providing accounts which actually cut against the grain of gender cues? The answer is probably that each interpretation is applicable in different circumstances.

And so women’s emphasis on sex as a part of self does not mean that their views clearly contradicted or overturned stereotypical gender expectations. Indeed, the very language of sex that the women used - talk of flirting, hinting, teasing - was more passive than that of their male counterparts, who were more explicit in discussing sexual activities. So too was there a clear attempt by women to emphasize their sexual faithfulness, even when advocating for some measure of sexual freedom in relationships; men were less likely to defend their sexual loyalties.

**Men, sex and self**

Jay’s quote (p. 10) reads like the sort of stereotypical sound bite that one might use as an example in an undergraduate class. Before marriage, Jay seems to say, there is the chance for various sexual experiences, but, after marriage, that chance is no more. Popular culture tells us that men are more likely to be aware of this ‘trade-off,’ or that
they feel more constrained by it than do women. But in fact most women and men in this sample acknowledged with some mild regret that a relationship must necessarily close off such experiences. Women and men were relatively evenly split as to the number in either group who regretted or were indifferent about this reality. And yet, there was something fundamentally different about the way men and women talked about sexual freedom and relationships; this was reflected in what each group believed was at stake personally when it comes to sex and self.

The women quoted above shared in identifying ‘the self’ as sexuality’s *dramatis personae*. Time and again these and other women interviewed described extra-relationship sexual desires as an exercise in self-expression or exploration. Sexual freedom was concomitant with general notions of personal freedom. This was not the case for men. Though many men talked readily and at length about the loss of sexual freedoms accompanying involvement in a marriage or cohabiting relationship, they tended to separate sexual proclivities from the core of an individual.

We see in this brief section that men did not as a rule understand sexual activities as an arena for expression of self, and so did not link sexual freedom to personal freedom. Rather, sexual freedoms were understood by men as having more to do with stages of life and social roles than with an inner personal core; *moreover, any loss of sexual freedom was likely to be associated positively with an augmented intimate solidarity*. Overall the following stories illustrate a ‘de-personalized’ notion of sexual activity relative to women’s accounts. Although what follows is a small cross-section of examples, they serve to reflect a general pattern in many men’s accounts.
I interviewed Steven, 29, a few months before his wedding date. He and his fiancée Karen are both veterinarians in the same practice, so they spend more time together than do most couples. They began dating midway through college, ten years ago, and have not separated since. As was the case in interviews with men and women who had been in their current relationship for most of their adult lives, I asked Steven what he thought about having been involved with only one person during a life-period when multiple romantic interests are commonplace. He chuckled knowingly before I even finished my question. “You sound like my brother,” he told me.

Overall I was struck by Steven’s self-assuredness. As someone whose parents had a “cold” relationship, Steven has always prized warmth and familiarity as relationship goals. And he knows - that is, he assumes - that as a man he is unique in that regard. Steven knows full well what “most guys” might say, and what his friends have in fact said, about the large proportion of time he spends with Karen. In particular he has received his fair share of teasing about what he’s been “missing out on” as a result of his long relationship with Karen, namely sexual freedom. But the story Steven told me suggests that he sees sex and sexual freedom as something that, though enjoyable, are not what “makes him tick”:

S: Sure, I’ve thought about all that. And I’ve heard about it, too. The way I look at it is this: Neither of us (neither he nor Karen) were ever really made for, I don’t know, the college scene - I like going to a bar as much as the next person, but I never wanted to go out, get drunk and make out with three people and stumble into class hung-over the next day. I cared about school, I had scholarships to keep up, so I was sort of growing up almost a little before my time, I feel like.

I: What did ‘growing up’ have to do with sex or hooking-up?

S: I don’t know…I know some guys would say, ‘Well, geez, you know, they started dating at 20, and now he’s 29, getting married, and that, that window is closing…Oh my God, no more sex and hooking up! (laughing)’ But when you grow up you start to see things for what they are. I mean, I dated a lot of girls in high school and in the beginning of college, and I had had, umm, I think four sexual partners before I met Karen. I mean, it sounds awful, but I really didn’t like these other girls. If I could have chosen to spend
time with either the girl I was dating in high school, whoever she might have been at the
time, or my friends, I would have picked my friends, hands down, any day of the week.

I: I don’t want to harp on this, but what does getting older have to do with how you see
the lack of sexual options once you’re in a relationship?

S: Let me see. It’s like, over the years, friends have said, ’You’ve been with Karen the
whole time, what are you doing?’ Especially my male friends. They would say, ’Come
on. Have you cheated on her, are you going to cheat on her - don’t you want to go to a
party where there is going to be a bunch of girls there?’ And, ’Where’s the old Steve?’ I
heard that shit so many times. What they don’t get, though, is that that was never me.
OK, maybe a little bit when I was younger, but you change your philosophy a bit. I just
sort of feel like, when you’re young you date people, you sleep with people you don’t
really care about, you have fun. But when you grow up you get with somebody you care
about. What’s important now is that person (Karen) - not just having sex.

It was difficult at first to ascertain why Steven was making a connection between
age, or maturity, and his views on sexual freedom. Throughout the interview Steven
positioned himself as unique among other men when it came to sexual activity. Whereas
most men are consumed with sexual energies, Steven estimated, he thinks of himself as
someone whose life is not defined by those interests. Having attended what he describes
as a progressive liberal arts college, it is tempting to attribute Steven’s outlook to a
certain type of gender ideology; no doubt some of that interpretation would be true. But
it would be incomplete to explain Steven’s outlook on sex simply as being less influenced
by stereotyped gender roles. For, as we will see, central elements of Steven’s account of
sexual freedom and relationships were in line with stories told by other, far more ‘gender
typical’ men.

If it is not a conscious gender ideology shaping his somewhat ‘personally
detached’ outlook on sex and autonomy, what is it? The following excerpt reveals a
crucial part of Steven’s views of sex, relationships and self:

S: If I was single today - if I broke-up with Karen - I’m sure I would have tons of
meaningless, empty sex. I would do that because it would be fun, but deep down I would
not be happy. When you’re 18, sex is something to be enjoyed because there wasn’t
anything better to do at the time. I never considered that a girl could be my best friend,
and I never considered all the other things that I want to do with myself. Sex is fun, and
hooking up is fun, but I’m a grown-up now, and when you’re a grown-up, you focus on different stuff.

When Steven refers to the notion of sex (with other women) as “fun,” he is making a distinction between what is of real importance to him and what is trivial; more important to this analysis, he is also articulating what is relevant to a person’s core and what is peripheral or transient. For Steven, as for other men interviewed, there was no debate that freedom to have sex with multiple partners was a ‘loss’ associated with involvement in a relationship. But time and again these men diminished the ‘self-importance’ of such freedom, instead highlighting the meaningfulness for self-definition of other parts of one’s life. To be sure, this finding is in keeping with the idea that social forces allow men a more diverse model of individuation than they do women.

Interestingly, whether these men had a more or less egalitarian set of beliefs relating to gender, their understandings of sex and self were quite similar. My interview with another man, Phil, is a case in point. Phil’s background could hardly be more different from Steven’s. As opposed to Steven’s self-described privileged, “WASP” background, Phil grew up in a perennially financially strapped household, dropped out of high school, and, as an adult, has moved from one unstable job to the next. Phil is now employed part time as a municipal construction worker. On matters of social interest, he is by his own description rather conservative. He does not think much of the notion of gender equality, and in general expressed a more conservative worldview than did Steven.

Now 36, Phil has spent the past 12 years in a series of cohabiting relationships, marrying his wife Candace five years ago. Though Phil and Steven come from very different backgrounds, they share some similar perspectives on sex and self in
relationships: namely, the separation of sexual freedom from self-definition, and the sense that a dynamic sexual life is the stuff of another, earlier life stage:

P: Between my teens and my late twenties I spent a lot of time, you know, drinking a lot, chasing women, and going to hell with myself. I had these odd jobs, not much responsibility, so, you know, you smoke pot, you may do some acid here and there. I had a ‘74 Barracuda, my hair was down to here, the leather, the whole bit – remember, this was the ’80s (laughing). And that was my thing - leather jacket, the boots, the Levi's, and fucking anything that moved. You know, they were just flings, a way to pass time…

I: And do you miss any of that? The way you talk about it, it sounds like you had a good time…

P: I reminisce once in a while. But I can’t do that no more. My body's older. It’s not who I am anymore. Like I said, I was passing time back then, so the drugs, the women - I was always figuring that I would be moving on to something else. Do I miss the different women? Sure. But that’s a young man’s game.

For Phil and Steven, the sexual activities that characterized life outside of monogamous relationships, though enjoyable for what they were, were not closely bound to notions of self and individuality. In describing sexual expression as a way to “pass time” that is no longer a part of “who I am,” Steven and Phil and many other men I spoke with denied the salience of sexual expression as means of self-definition. As another respondent, Gary, put it,

G: In every relationship, you have to have your own identity. You have to know who you are.

I: Why is that so necessary?

G: Well, look at me. When I broke up with my previous girlfriend, I didn’t know who I was. So what do I do? I went and did all those stupid things, slept with all those women, because I was seeking an identity – ‘Who was I?’ Sex didn’t do that for me, it didn’t figure that out for me. You can’t find yourself through drugs or booze, and you can’t do it that way (through sex) either.

These accounts suggest that men viewed sexual freedom as relatively unrelated to their sense of self, even during periods when sex was a larger part of their life. Sex occupied their thoughts and actions more when they were younger and single, but even then it was rarely thought of as central to their sense of individuality. This is in contrast
to the women noted above, who described strong connections between sexual activity and self-expression.

At bottom, women told a story of individualism in relationships that placed sex near the center of self-understanding, whereas men saw sexual freedom as the province of a different stage of one’s life. Men were more likely to cite the strictures of family membership and age when talking about sexual life in relationships. Conversely, whether for purposes of self-expression, or to explore romantic options outside of relationships, women did not as often mention these factors as disqualifying them from some (usually limited) sort of sexual life outside the context of their relationship. Often they saw the potential loss - loss of a part of “who they are” - as too great to relinquish their right to some sexual autonomy. Men, though at times more openly wistful about past sexual encounters, did not give the impression that that particular part of their past had implications for ‘who they were’. Moreover, they often saw a more narrowed sexual life as generating solidarity in the relationship. As the respondent Steven put it, he and his fiancée have been freed to enjoy a deeper sense of togetherness now that concerns about sexual explorations are past them.

Managing money and self in relationships

Given the proportion of dual-career couples in my sample (38 of the 45 individuals interviewed were involved in dual-career relationships), and the precedent in existing families research linking money matters and the question of independence, I made money management a core of my interview guide. After roughly a dozen interviews, though, I saw that my questions about money management - about the
circumstances under which financial resources are kept separate or held jointly, and why - turned up short, uninterested responses. The newly individuals quoted below indicate the lack of interest that met my early attempts to broach the subject of money and financial management:

I let her handle the financial stuff, writing the checks for bills and that sort of thing. We’ll let each other know, you know, ‘I spent money on such and such today.’ But the money thing is not a big deal to me or to her.

Bill (32), married

Well, with the mortgage, I’m paying for half and he’s paying for half. Sometimes I’ll pay for the groceries and, you know, he’ll pick up more of the utilities, and we’re fine with that.

I: And how did you kind of settle on that method of dividing up finances?

Umm, no reason in particular. It’s just how we always did it.

Molly (28), cohabiting

Money’s nothing we worry about. For us, we keep most of our money separate, but if that bothered us down the road, OK, then we get a joint account. I mean, it doesn’t bother me or her either way. That kind of thing (whether they keep finances together or separate), what difference does it make?

Ben (27), married

By no means were Bill, Molly and Ben the only ones to provide clipped responses to my inquiries about money management. In fact, many interviewees sought to ‘shut down’ any discussion about their finances. One explanation for this trend is that the interview was billed as a study of relationships, and money seemed not to the point. Or perhaps the topic was too personal. But respondents were never confused by the segue to questions about finances; neither did they seem put-off by a sensitive topic. It is certainly a good thing that I maintained by line of inquiry, though, since in many cases, upon further probing, money management was found to be an important source of individualized or solidaristic sentiments.
The place of “I” in “Team”

I believe there are two points to take away from the flippant responses to questions about money management. For one, similar to the methodological issues raised at the beginning of this chapter, it is important for the researcher to consider thoroughly the reasons for seemingly fruitless avenues of inquiry. As it turns out, most respondents eventually had a great deal to say about money management and the balancing of self and other in relationships, even when initial comments suggested otherwise.

The second matter of interest relates to the fact that, in most cases, I met success talking with these respondents about money, relationship and individualism, only when these topics were approached indirectly. On this point, it appears that the interviews benefited by taking a cue from ‘real life’. That is, it is usually inadvisable in social settings to approach the topic of money, especially with relative strangers, from head on. I cannot recall a single interview in which a respondent was hesitant about disclosing their income; that information was not guarded in the least. But when it came to the management of money - how it is allocated, discussed and monitored within the relationship - women and men were far less forthcoming. In the end the problem was solved by accessing the concept of money management indirectly, through talk about the relationship in general as an exercise in teamwork.

Thus ‘teamwork’ provided an angle into talking about money, individualism and, to a lesser extent, solidarity. When the women and men in the sample talked about their relationships in terms of teams and teamwork, they invariably broached the topic of money management.27 In the two sub-sections that follow I first sketch the general

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27 Perhaps because the sample was comprised of relatively young couples, childcare and other housework were not the main ways that respondents concretized the notion of team - even though these areas come fast
concept of financial teamwork as it was related to me by respondents. I describe its relation to independence and dependence in relationships. It is shown that money matters were a platform for enacting individualized or solidaristic behaviors, with most respondents preferring the former.

Second, I use several interview cases to detail a uniquely gendered facet of money management in relationships. By focusing on women and men who adopt an independent, ‘protectionist’ stance regarding money management, I am able to highlight stereotypical but also some less predictable gendered patterns in individualized money management. Here the emphasis is on individuals who actively reject the pooling of economic resources, and how their rationales carried gendered connotations.

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The relationship is supposed to like a team, right? One washes dishes, one dries, one does this, the other does that. But in (my relationship) we run into trouble being a team when it comes to spending. We keep our money separate, but we still have trouble. Something that I am coming around to and that Kristen, I think, agrees with, is that even though we keep the money separate, if she's perpetually overdrawn and losing track of the (bank) balances, that creates tension that then bleeds over into the relationship. And there’s other ramifications - like if I know that she has gone to my mother for money, that really upsets me. I kind of feel like, heaven forbid I need my mom’s money, I don’t want her bleeding it dry. I’m more careful with money, so some may say, ‘Let the guy take care of the money,’ but we both are against traditional roles and rules in the relationship…I’m trying to look out for both of us, but me too.

David, 31, cohabiter

“There’s no ‘I’ in ‘Team’,” as the saying goes. Perhaps contrary to what many theorists of individualized intimacy would expect, the women and men I spoke with were fond of referring to their marriages and relationships as “teams”. And even when respondents’ relationships actually failed to measure up to their established standards for good teamwork, the team-ideal remained in place. As a researcher interested in the

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to mind. As nearly half of the sample did not have children, childrearing as an arena for relationship teamwork would have made for a small number of cases. By contrast, money management is a ‘relationship universal’.
boundaries of self and other in relationships, the team metaphor struck a chord; teams expect their players or members to submit to a greater cause, to exhibit a degree of selflessness. But they may also contain unique - good or bad - individual performances. Teams allow some space for recognizing and fostering individual achievement. Does ‘relationship as team’ possess corresponding features? What are the interrelations among money management, the place of the individual and teamwork? These were some of my questions.

The following exchange with Paul, 29, who is engaged to his girlfriend Darla, captures how spending and accounting for money within the relationship was articulated as a main part of ‘being a team’:

I: You said earlier that Darla has made you look at your life a little differently…

P: Yeah, I’m not just living for myself anymore, I’m part of a team now. I can’t live selfishly anymore, it can’t be all about myself. You know, just making enough money to pay my rent and buy the things I want to buy, and spending how I want to spend.

I: And how do you and Darla handle money? You say you’re a ‘team’ – so do you guys pool everything together or do you keep separate accounts?

P: Yeah, well, it’s separate accounts, but we split all the bills. It’s not penny for penny exact, not tit-for tat, we just make sure that each of is putting in what we’re able to. If I have to run and spend 40 dollars at the store, it’s not like I’m expecting 20 back from her. We each have our own money to do our own stuff with, as long as it doesn’t interfere with what has to be taken care of for the both of us.

When Paul refers to spending in such a way that he and Darla can take care of what matters to the both of them (e.g., rent, a shared vacation, new furnishings), he taps into the teamwork theme that emerged in many accounts. Though he and Darla choose to keep separate accounts, they view their finances as an exercise in teamwork.

Likewise, another interviewee, Vicki, describes her and husband Jim’s view of money management in terms of teamwork. But note that this is a gendered sort of team mentality:
I: Do you talk much with Jim about spending?

V: I try to bite my tongue. I try. I mean, in the end, pretty much anything he decides to buy, he can pay for. He’s not going to make us go broke. He’s the breadwinner and I’m the bill payer, you know? He makes the money, the money goes into his account every other week. I transfer it to my checking account and pay the bills...That’s one of my responsibilities for being home. It’s my part of the team, to manage the finances. And I do the grocery shopping, I fill the car with gas. I pay all the insurance. Honestly, it’s the only way to make sure everything is paid on time. If anybody calls my house and says the car payment is late, Jim will tell them, ‘My wife handles it. I don’t know anything about it. Talk to her.’

A self-described “happy homemaker,” Vicki appeared quite content with the couple’s division of financial labor, and with her contribution to their team. Indeed, Vicki derived a sense of personal accomplishment from her handling of the finances. She described how these financial responsibilities remind her of her days of office work before her children were born.

Other women and men’s stories of financial teamwork were more complicated. The two extended cases that follow detail the sometimes conflicted views of individuation, solidarity and money faced by a married man, Malcolm, and a cohabiter named Molly. My conversations with Malcolm and Molly provide insight into how teamwork, money management, and individuation should be understood as gendered relationship concepts.

Malcolm’s case: finances, gendered expectations, and isolation

As a segue to the next section on ‘protectionist’ money management and gender, it is useful to spend some space on a case that introduces into our discussion the blending of independence, dependence and gender concepts. Among respondents who decided to pool together their finances, it was generally agreed that spending habits and attention to financial management are ways that a partner proves devotion ‘to the team’ and exhibits
either selfless or selfish behavior. But this does not mean that money management always goes according to plan.

Malcolm, 39, has been married for twelve years and has three children. A police officer who works construction when he is off-duty, he routinely puts in 75 hours weekly at his two jobs. As someone who grew up with a father usually out of the home on business, Malcolm has some conflicted feelings about his economic role in the family. He certainly identifies with and seems to enjoy a provider role - “Work is what I do best,” he told me. He also takes seriously his (necessarily limited) role as a dad, and feels bad about the struggle to carve out recreational time with his kids. “We need the money, and that means they (the kids) suffer…They don’t see much as much.” The burdens of childcare, then, fall on the shoulders of Malcolm’s wife, Wendy, who has been employed intermittently over last decade as a part-time lunchroom monitor, but has remained out of the paid workforce for six years.

The story Malcolm tells of financial management and marriage is a study in the complex language of teamwork and individualism in relationships, and how gender ideologies shape this discourse. Like other respondents, Malcolm’s views on relationships have been shaped by experiences with his own family. Overall, he showed himself during our conversation to be a person of conviction; if asked, Malcolm makes quite clear where he stands on an issue, and sometimes does so without provocation. He stated early on in our interview, and frequently thereafter, that to the extent that finances are only one partner’s responsibility, it is a recipe for failed teamwork and probably a failed relationship. Surprisingly though, given his convictions, this is just the situation - a dangerous one, in Malcolm’s view - in which he and Wendy find themselves:
M: I can feel that it’s taking a toll on us. On me. It’s a lot to carry - knowing that you’re the only one who really knows the money situation, what to factor in and what to save. And I’ve tried to involve her. She said she’s interested, but then when it comes down to do it, and I say, ‘Hey, why don’t you come in here for a minute right now and we’ll talk about some of the bills and stuff’…No dice.

I: And that bothers you?

M: I get a little annoyed every once in a while because I think that if she had a better picture, I think she would control her spending a little better.

I: But you don’t insist? On getting more help from her?

M: I have never put my foot down in that house. Ever. I will brood, I will argue my butt off sometimes but I will never – I mentioned (earlier in the interview) how my father didn’t respect my mother, always telling her, 'Now, this is the way its going to be’…

I: You're worried about it being like that?

M: Yeah. I don’t want Wendy to get the idea that I don’t respect her or her opinion. Like, her opinion is different from mine, but I would be the final say. I’ve always said from day one that she's my equal, she’s my partner - she is not inferior to me.

In fact, they are not quite equal team members according to Malcolm, not on the matter of money management.

Malcom’s case presents a dilemma: the desire to obtain assistance while not appearing to be a “dictator,” as he put it. Far from enjoying their autonomous roles with regard to financial management (historically very little discussion about money has taken place between them), Malcolm feels overwhelmed and not part of a real team. In response, he has adopted a truly reflective perspective to make sense of this dilemma. By drawing on his father’s overbearing stance toward his own mother, Malcolm is crafting his understanding of personal responsibilities, obligations and gender. But ultimately his views contain contradictory gender cues. Throughout our entire interview there was a tension between, on one hand, his seeming acceptance of being the sole earner and a limitless, independent financial provider, and on the other his longing for more teamwork and a shared shouldering of financial burdens. Gender plays a crucial role in shaping
these contradictory imperatives (individual stoicism vs. a team sharing its collective burdens):

I: So if you insist on her being there to help do the bills and go over finances - to you that would be too close to ordering her around?

M: Yes. As much as I would love to do it sometimes, I can’t. Sometimes I say to myself, ‘Hey, we’re supposed to be a team here, you know?’ We’re married and in this together, but she ain’t helping out. The way that I have said it several times is, ‘Honey, I can’t physically work anymore hours than I do now. Congratulations - you now spend money faster than I can make it. What do you want me to do? I cannot make money as fast as you can spend it.’ I just had a meeting with a financial planner. And that’s somebody who is hopefully going to take our chaotic lives and make it make sense. Well, what I found out is that it doesn’t matter whether I’m making $50,000 a year or $500,000 a year - I’m still friggin broke, because we live outside of our means…I know she feels bad about it, and I’m sure there are better ways that I can get her to help out, but women are an emotional animal. And here’s the other thing: If I find out that my wife wants something, I don’t say no. I don’t say no to my wife.

I: That’s a tough situation. You're not going to turn her down when it comes to spending, even when you know full well the difficult situation you're in, financially?

M: If my wife says that she wants a new car, I will find a way to go buy her a new car. I'll wear the same pair of shoes until my feet go through them, you know? I’ll wear the same jeans until they have so many holes in them and it’s indecent for me to go out in public.

I: And do you feel OK about that arrangement?

M: I don’t know. I don’t know. My dad did a good job of making a martyr out of himself so that may have something to do with it. I don’t know. It’s what men do, what husbands do.

There are at least two other provocative themes to be drawn from Malcom’s case. For one, the couple’s lack of financial teamwork ends up providing a justification for Malcom’s fast-paced work schedule; because he and Wendy do not manage their financial life together, Malcom must manage it himself - mostly by working and earning at every opportunity. This is not a total loss for Malcom, in spite of it taking him away from his children, because what Malcom likes best about his work-life is the autonomy that his job grants. He expressed a real appreciation for his independence at work as a police officer - the place, he said, where he “can actually fix things” and feels at home.

In his true home life, however, it is teamwork that he desires, especially regarding
financial management. Malcolm’s taste for personal efficacy at work stands in contrast to his want for help at home.

His account also exhibits tensions between traditional and detraditionalized gendered scripts. Malcolm summarizes his wife’s inability to pitch in on managing finances, and his own failure to successfully communicate the need for help, as products of women’s and men’s different emotional make-ups. Malcolm routinely finds it difficult to say no to Wendy regarding her spending. He purchases goods and services for her, when he “knows better”. Why does he do this? Malcolm’s explanation speaks to both traditional and, interestingly, more egalitarian gendered motives. He is wary of repeating the patriarchal tendencies of his own father, and so feels it untenable to demand more help with the task of financial management. He cannot tell Wendy “how it’s going to be.” Malcolm is also cautious not to tightly ‘hold the purse-strings,’ again so as not to open himself to accusations of patriarchal control. Thus his tale of money management indicates a dilemma of egalitarianism and gender: a man open in his desire for assistance and teamwork from his romantic partner, but feeling it fall on deaf ears. Malcolm’s desire for help, in itself, suggests a man ready to admit the limits and dangers of autonomy, even as he feels the burden of being a ‘male provider’.

A final interesting point lay in Malcolm’s story, one which some would view as apropos of our late modern culture of relationships. After years of lacking teamwork, Malcolm and Wendy have finally decided to “get on the same page” regarding their finances. They will seek their salvation in the expertise of a financial advisor. The advisor will fill in as one of the few sources with a seemingly legitimate claim to ‘make sense out of’ that which befuddles Malcolm and Wendy.
Molly’s Case: Boundary maintenance in the quest for financial teamwork

In the previous segment, I considered the case of Malcolm, whose desires for financial teamwork are complicated by gendered phenomena. Now we turn to another case in which gender is implicated in a couple’s negotiation of individuation and teamwork. Whereas Malcolm feels ineffective in erecting a teamwork model of financial management, Molly succeeds to an extent, but not without harboring some reservations about the effects on her boyfriend Ron’s sense of individuation and autonomy.

“I never saw Ron have any problem with having joint accounts. Of course, he can still take his money and do whatever he wants with it, but, well, he has to ask me first. He has to check with me, but if he wants to go buy something that’s not a big deal.” Thus did Molly begin, in a somewhat contradictory fashion, her response to my question about how she and Ron handle money. Molly, 28, met Ron in high school. They attended the same college, and are about to buy their first house. Marriage is in the cards, perhaps in a couple of years, Molly told me.

If there were a man or woman in the sample for whom teamwork was a uniquely important concept, it was certainly Molly. She described herself as someone who “does not do good on her own,” preferring to involve Ron on most activities and decision making. Molly also openly admitted that she “was not a person who needs friends,” and would prefer to spend free time with Ron rather than with anyone else. When she was in college she would frequently defer time with friends so that she could see more of Ron, and now that they are moving toward marriage, Molly naturally sees their lives as becoming even more entwined: “In college you run around, but it’s time for us to settle down together.”
Regarding money management, Molly has definite preferences for the team model I have been describing. This is due in part to personal tastes (perhaps *gendered* tastes, as Molly mentioned several times her enjoyment of supporting “her man”), but also to some special circumstances surrounding money management in their relationship:

M: The money thing can be tricky because, umm, he used to gamble a lot in college. So that was a problem with us too, with the money situation. If he started doing that (gambling) again, that probably would be a big problem for me.

I: How come?

M: I want to get a house soon, and he might lose money gambling. I have to know how he’s handling his money, since there have been times when he doesn’t handle it too good.

I: So does that mean you guys check in with one another about, like, how you’re spending money?

M: Oh yeah. Even of I didn’t say anything about money, we can see it on our account statement, you know. So that’s how we check in back and forth. It’s not like I want to spy on him. It’s just because I handle the checking account, mostly I write out all the checks. I know if a dime is taken out. I’m not checking *him*, I’m just checking our account.

I: So if you see, say, $20 dollars is taken out…

M: Then I might be a little nosy and say, ‘what was that for?’ And uh, he, you know, he coughs up a reason pretty quick. He always tells the truth. He always tells the truth. Like, ‘Oh, that was for the lottery’ or something stupid.

Molly sees the situation quite plainly: Ron’s past risk-taking with money means that his spending needs to be monitored. Note, though, that Molly is careful in how she characterizes this situation. A professed believer in teamwork, she is not bashful about endorsing the principle of each partner helping the other stay on course to meet their financial goals. And yet, similar to Malcolm’s case, Molly seems to feel that her ‘supervisory’ role must be presented just so. When Molly sought to assure me that she is monitoring the money in their relationship - and not the person (Ron) - she was ‘dancing the dance’ of individuation and togetherness in intimacy. The dilemma for Molly lies in how to pursue relationship goals (e.g, their future house purchase) without encroaching...
Hedging bets: the role of gender in money management and self-protection

I’ll tell him how much I have in my bank account but he’ll kind of fudge a little bit - hedge around the issue quite a bit. Sometimes I’ll ask him, ‘Well, how much money do you have saved?’ ‘Enough,’ he says. But the thing is, whatever we’re spending, or he’s spending, we keep our finances separate, so it doesn’t really matter to me.

Kelly (34), cohabiter

The difficulties encountered by Malcolm and Molly - worries about a partner’s overspending, feelings of lacking teamwork, fears of financial insolvency - are hardly unique in relationships. Indeed, they are commonplace enough that, as research shows, an increasing proportion of cohabiting and married couples see separate finances as a simpler, safer arrangement. This fact is not lost on intimacy scholars. Much has been made in recent accounts of individualized intimacy of the notion of ‘hedging’. Generally speaking, cohabitation, distance relationships, high divorce rates, delayed childbirth - these and other developments have been interpreted, often with normative assessments, as protections against relationship commitment, as safety measures that allow couples to ‘hedge’ their relationship ‘bets’. More specifically, couples’ management of finances may also be seen in this light. In fact, many families researchers have examined the demographic patterns and cultural outlooks that inform independent and joint money

28 What is difficult to tell from our conversation, but is a quite interesting question, is whether it is more important to individuals that they actually not tread on a partner’s individuality or that they merely not give the appearance of doing so.
management in relationships, and their implications for thinking about relationship commitment (Elizabeth, 2001; Kenney, 2006; Treas, 1993; Vogler and Pahl, 1994).

In talking with the women and men in my own sample, the decision to keep finances separate or together did at times relate to hesitancy about the continuation of a relationship, but also to more abstract notions of autonomy and personal freedom – at times these notions carried clear gender implications.

Kelly, the cohabiter quoted above, feels good reason to hedge when it comes to keeping her finances separate from those of her boyfriend, Ray. At the beginning of our interview, Kelly described what she sees as the central tension in her seven years living with Ray, a point of contention seemingly drawn straight from gendered popular culture mythology: “Ray is commitment-phobic”. Essentially what Kelly means is that Ray has been quite reluctant to agree to marriage. To understand how their disagreement over commitment relates to the topic of money management and gender, it’s useful first to provide some context.

It has been for several years an open argument between Kelly and Ray over when and whether the two will marry. Kelly has tried to navigate what she sees as a tricky path, asserting her interest in marriage while not applying too much pressure to Ray. Clearly there are stereotypical gendered themes at play here. Kelly described Ray pointedly as a “typical guy,” who would be dragged kicking and screaming into marriage, if ever that day comes:

I: Has there been any talk of marriage over the years?

K: Yes, if talk can involve just one person. It’s very one-sided. I mean, we don’t really fight much about it, but it’s kind of aggravating to me. I mean, I want to be married. I want to have kids. But I’m not holding my breath on him. And I don’t want to have kids without being married.

I: Why not?
K: I feel like if he can’t commit to me, why would I want to have kids with him? It’s funny, he was the one in the very beginning, he was all excited about getting married once we got into a steady relationship. But then he kind of backed off. He regressed. I think maybe, in the beginning, it was too early in the relationship to be able to consider marriage a real possibility, so he didn’t mind promising it. Now it’s come to the point where, you know, we could seriously get married now he says, 'Whoa, this is a possibility, it’s real – but I’m not sure I’m ready to grow up yet'…

Besides the question of marriage, Kelly cited several other reasons to doubt Ray’s commitment, including the large amounts of time he spends out of the house with friends, his lack of interest in having children, and his general reluctance to “let her into” his personal life. Her concerns came to a head recently after an incident in which Ray’s loyalty was found to be especially lacking:

K: It’s gotten to the point where – I mean, how much longer am I going to have to wait for a commitment and to, you know, feel secure in the relationship? And it’s not only a (marriage) proposal that would do it, but something, anything that would make me feel more secure. Here is a good example: This is not about marriage, but it’s about his commitment to me. During Rosh Hashanah we initially had plans to spend the evening with my family, but his mom died last year, so he said, 'I really think we should spend the holiday with my dad because he's going to be home alone'. So we canceled the plans with my family. And then he ended up going out with his friends the day we were supposed to see his dad. He didn’t come home until 8 in the evening and I was like, 'What's going on?' He said, 'Well, I’m just going to go over and hang out with my dad,’ and I’m like, 'Want me to come?’ and he says no, he’s just going to run over himself. And, to top it off, he ended up going out and stopped at a friend’s house instead - he didn’t see his dad at all! He came home at like 4 in the morning, after I had canceled plans with my family - to spend the holiday home alone. It was the worst of his commitment issues (coming out).

Overall, it was a picture of uncertainty in the relationship that Kelly painted, especially regarding Ray’s long term commitment to her. And it does not help, according to Kelly, that Ray’s behavior conforms to a depiction of men who are reluctant to “settle down”. She views his behavior through the prism of a thousand clichés about men’s desires to avoid domesticity. My question was whether Kelly is guarded as a result of her assessment of Ray. But, whereas Ray’s hedging was on clear display in Kelly’s account, it was not apparent throughout our conversation that she herself engaged in any such hedging - though any such behavior would seem reasonable. Kelly reported only rarely if
ever considering leaving the relationship, or forming bonds with other men, even after feeling very hurt and even shamed by Ray’s lack of loyalty.

The single time that hedging, or self-protection, did emerge in our interview took place at the very end when, after an inquiry about the couples’ total household income, our discussion turned to more general issues of money management. I had asked Kelly to estimate what the household earns annually:

K: Actually I’m not sure what he makes, because there’s no joint accounts or anything like that, and we split all the bills 50/50. Back at the beginning (of the relationship) he said, up-front, that even if we were married, he doesn’t want to have to account to anyone about what he spends his money on. And now, the way things have gone, I can understand. I don’t see that that (sharing finances) is necessary in a committed relationship, or for marriage, anyway.

I: Do either of you want to keep money separate because, ‘Well, you never know what might happen with us,’ or that kind of thing?"

K: Oh very much so. Like, we bought a washer and dryer together and I actually said, ‘why don’t you buy the washer, and I’ll buy the dryer so, you know, just in case.’ I know, it makes no sense – I’ll have dirty, dry clothes and he’ll have clean, wet ones (laughing). But, seriously, the way things have been with us, it’s more secure for me to have my money separate. My mom and friends have said that to be for years: make sure you’re careful with your money, because you don’t know what’s gonna happen with him.

Kelly’s comments are consistent with the findings of previous research and with the sample as a whole; cohabiters were more likely than married interviewees to endorse independent money management as a hedge against future uncertainty. For Kelly, it is Ray’s (perceived) gendered aversion to “commitment” that drives her decision to protect herself through maintaining separate finances.

There were also several married interviewees who adopted protectionist view of financial management. For instance, Devon, 29, newly married to Rosemary, expressed reluctance about merging finances now that the pair is married:

I: Since now you’re married and both working, do you keep money together or separate?

D: We each have our own accounts, but we might start a joint one with the money that we got from the wedding. But honestly, in my opinion, it's working the way it's working.
I think we would rather have most of it separate, and then have another account for joint money, maybe for savings, when we have a house later on.

I: Why do think that you prefer to have most money in personal accounts?

D: Well I just think it would be easier.

I: What's easier about it?

D: I'd just rather have my own (laughing). In case anything was to happen down the road, it’s easier to split things up. I mean, look, we have our own accounts, and they were separated from the beginning of our relationship, and they were separated through the whole relationship, and there’s been no argument. This way it wouldn’t be a rough situation if we ever did decide to go our separate ways or whatever. That would be a rough decision, of course. Splitting up is messy enough – why get all the money involved too, you know?

Another respondent, Justine, 33, who two years ago married her longtime boyfriend Pete, was even clearer in her desire to use independent finances as a shield against potential future troubles:

I: You said that if it’s his (Pete’s) money and he wanted to get an expensive luxury car, he should go ahead?

J: Go ahead – But I'm not paying for it! Cuz I didn’t want it. That’s on him. He makes more than I do, so I gotta look out for mine.

I: So you don’t try to influence the other person about how they use their money?

J: I guess there have been times I tried to talk him into things, but I try to stay away (for the most part). And - it’s hard to be honest about this, but I did try one time to talk him into co-signing a car loan for me. And the first thing that came up out of his mouth was, ‘No!’ He said, ‘Why don’t you sell your own car and get yourself the new car on your own?’ We laugh sometimes about that one.

I: But were there any hard feelings about that? About his refusing to help you get the car?

J: No way. Two days later, I thanked him. Why get myself deeper into debt? I would have said no to him, too (in the reverse situation). I’m not gonna go on the hook for someone else’s debt. I’ll worry about me, and he can worry about himself. So I can’t get mad at him for doing what I would do.

In Justine’s case, the protectionist rhetoric is given a gendered inflection, albeit small, in her reference to the income difference between her and Pete. Her concerns about taking on a partner’s debt are heightened by the fact that, as is the case is most couples, she makes less than her male partner.
The effect of gender on protectionist tendencies was given its clearest representation in the interview with David, excerpted above. As one of several men who espoused egalitarian gender ideologies, and similar especially to Malcolm, David was explicit in his desire to avoid gender-typical rationales for behavior in his relationship with Kristen. And yet throughout our discussion of money management, David fashioned a logic of protectionist tendencies that relies upon stereotypical gender beliefs:

D: …I’m more careful with money, so some may say, ‘Let the guy take care of the money,’ but we both are against traditional roles and rules in the relationship…I’m trying to look out for both of us, but me too.

I: Why don’t you both work together to save money, or be careful, or whatever?

D: Kristen can’t really – she’s very book-smart, but when it comes to common sense, she lacks a little bit and she isn’t on top of her game. She’s a woman, you know? We’re equal – she could handle the money if she wanted to - but she still likes to shop, and she's been writing checks, she's been shopping here and there and not telling me.

David would go further, explaining that Kristen’s avoidance of responsibility in the realm of money stems from a protective father who would not allow her to experience failure. Whatever the accuracy of David’s psychoanalysis, his gendered reading of Kristen is clear. One is reminded upon reflecting on his comments, of a dialogue in the film The Godfather, in which the title character advises his maturing son, “Women and children can be careless. But not men.” David said he wants to live with Kristen on terms of equality, but he just does not think her up to the task; as a result he advocates for separate finances. In so doing he is, in his words, looking out for the couple, but also for himself.

Conclusions

Theories of individualized intimacy present a menagerie of allusions, analogies and conceptual language; the data presented in this chapter and the next two serve to ground the sometimes amorphous content of these theories. The findings are the product
of a research strategy addressed to the strengths of both theoretical and empirical treatments of individualized intimacy. In short, I aimed to remain faithful to the multiple conceptualizations of individualized intimacy offered by theorists, but do so with the precision modeled by relevant empirical studies of married and cohabiting relationships. Therefore I present in this chapter not the only places where individualized intimacy ‘lives’ in the respondents’ relationships, but are areas that provoked deep responses. The language of individualism in both sexual and financial relationship matters bore distinct gender patterning, and so it is sensible to use these topics together as a means to discuss the gendered dimensions of individualized intimacy.

Perhaps because it is among the most clearly defined arenas of relationship devotion, sexual freedom was mentioned frequently in respondents’ discussions of individualism. While nearly every respondent acknowledged the limits that relationship places on sexual activity, women and men interpreted this ‘fact’ in rather different ways. The difference pivoted on women and men’s tendencies to view sex as constituent of a core self – that is, the tendency to see sexual activities outside of the relationship (and their abandonment once in a relationship) as tied to one’s understanding of ‘who they are’.

Looked at one way, it cut against common gender expectations for the men to express little concern over the loss of sexual independence that attends being in a monogamous relationship. Indeed, very few men interviewed expressed feeling unfortunately constrained by monogamy. This seems attributable to their tendency to view sexuality detachedly, as a matter simply of one’s behaviors: one’s relative promiscuity is not much different than whether they tend to eat this food or that.
Moreover, the “settling down” associated with monogamous relationships, to most men, was seen as just a part of growing up. Women, on the other hand, were more likely to view sexual freedom as a matter of expressing a central feature of self, and thus voiced more concern over the limits imposed by monogamy. In accordance with gendered scripts, these women were usually quick to disavow a sincere interest in “cheating,” but nonetheless tended to express concern over losing the ability to function in the world as an independent sexual being – whether through flirting, talking with men, or maintaining friendships that exist on the boundary between platonic and amorous. For women, such actions were viewed as a way to retain or carve out a sense of self, but as mentioned earlier, there is reason to question how much this tendency is inscribed with traditionally gendered meanings.

Couples’ money management also had implications for thinking about relationship individualism. Consistent with previous findings, married women and men were more likely to pool money than were cohabiters, even when part of a dual earning couple. In cases when married or cohabiting respondents reported keeping separate finances, the overwhelming majority of either group explained their arrangements in terms of “hedging”. Keeping money separate would “make things easier” if the couple were to split up. It is less clear the extent to which this sentiment reflects an individualist bent; most respondents in this category described their reasons as being merely practical. Moreover, looking at the data from a different angle, respondents in couples who decide to pool together their monies rarely described such arrangements as driven by any conscious tendency toward commitment or togetherness. Rather, like their “separate
money” counterparts, they interpreted the scenario more often than not as “just the way it worked out”.

More revealing were our discussions of how couples viewed the negotiation of financial management more generally – how they viewed the task of planning a financial future for the pair rather than for themselves as individuals. The concept of “teamwork” was employed by many respondents in order to capture the couple’s effort to balance individual desires against the unit’s financial needs. Even in cases in which respondents described only one partner responsible for handling the paying of bills or depositing checks, there were appeals made to a principle of teamwork. Often this came in the form of a felt need to sacrifice personal spending for the good of the couple, to leave behind the days of more “selfish” financial behavior.

Like respondents’ discussions of sex and self, these narratives of financial teamwork (whether the team principle was successfully implemented or not) and individualism bore their own gendered marks. Several men, especially those who “hedge” their financial bets, doubted the financial prowess of their partners, even as they longed for more teamwork. While these men’s stereotyping of women’s abilities is in line with traditionally gendered scripts, their openness about needing help with financial affairs and longing to not “stand alone” cuts against the grain. Women for their part tended more often than men to express concern over their partner’s spending habits, and to assume supervisory duties. This too was couched in terms of teamwork, with one partner (usually the woman) strategizing while the other helped to carry out the plan. Whether there can be true teamwork when one half of the relationship takes nearly full ownership over the planning of financial strategies is questionable. For instance, many
women and some men felt that any need to police a partner’s spending behavior not only jeopardized a real sense of teamwork, but also impinged upon the partner’s autonomy – a doubly dissatisfactory situation.

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What exactly is the character of the individualism thought to have altered contemporary intimacy? The narratives collected in this chapter represent whittling of that giant question into a manageable form. The men and women in this sample spoke ‘languages of intimacy’ that were, on the surface, consistent with many of the themes described by intimacy theorists and indeed with the popular adages of the day. Statements that “independence is important,” or that one must be able to “be yourself” in a relationship, abounded. But when pressed to talk about independence and autonomy in the context of actual relationship scenarios, respondents’ accounts offered much more subtlety than is contained in any such aphorism.

In moving from matters of money and sex to the more abstract notion of self-development, the next chapter addresses another dimension of individualism, this time with a focus on differences of social class. In so doing I try to account for overlooked class implications in theorists’ descriptions of individualized intimacy.
CHAPTER SIX: The particularities of social class in intimacy

Workingmen intellectually reject the idea that endless opportunity exists for the competent. And yet, the institutions of class force them to apply the idea to themselves: if I don’t escape being part of the woodwork, it’s because I didn’t develop my powers enough...

...(The concept of) education covers, at the most abstract level, the development of capacities within a human being...(To the people we interviewed...) the middle-class has more of a chance than the working-class to escape from becoming creatures of circumstance, more chance to develop the defenses, the tools of personal, rational control that “education” gives.

Richard Sennett (1993)

I've made a lot of bad decisions, you know, and I don’t see myself as an intelligent man. I make some poor decisions. I mean, put it this way – one of my real accomplishments in life was meeting my girlfriend and making it work. I’m proud of that.

Walter, cohabiter, 38

Class, self-development and intimate life

When Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb (1992) embarked on a study of working-class families in 1970s Boston, their goal was to understand the contradictions of living a life of manual labor at the dawn of the information age. They were interested in how respect and worth were understood by manual laborers living through a period when the acquisition of these social rewards became linked, in Sennett and Cobb’s view, not to what people produce through their work but what people are capable of. This was a dawning American era in which the promise of one’s inner-development and capabilities began to trump more tangible productivity as a means to social dignity. As the first quote above suggests, Sennett and Cobb’s study laid heavy emphasis on workers’ nagging feelings of inadequacy, which often were felt even when the men had achieved material success in their occupations. This persistent unease, the authors claimed, is partly attributable to the working class’s sense that it is the more abstract tools of self-
development and self-mastery that are necessary for commanding “real respect” in “today’s world” and that these resources are outside of their grasp.

This class-centered perspective on self-development makes Sennett and Cobb’s work relevant to any discussion of contemporary, individualized intimacy. It is true that these researchers were neither the first nor the only scholars to note the importance of self-development in post-WWII America. As I described in Chapter One, theorists have long made self-development a part of their analysis of contemporary culture, especially intimate culture. Nevertheless Sennett and Cobb’s explicit focus on class and self-development, and the findings they unearthed pushed me to consider: If in fact self-development is understood as a core part of intimate culture today, should not it be examined with social class in mind?

I am not the first to argue for the importance of social class to studies of individualized intimacy, but the camp is not a large one. In earlier chapters I pointed out that Jamieson (1998) is one of the few voices to make a strong case for correcting the middle-upper-class bent of recent intimacy perspectives. Her position is crafted largely against what she sees as a narrow class-vision in Giddens’s perspectives on intimacy. I agree generally with Jamieson’s claims, but my focus in this chapter is somewhat different. Whereas Jamieson latches onto (and disrupts) Giddens’s assumption that a middle-class ideal of mutual self-disclosure is the lynchpin of new intimacy, my own attention to class issues in intimacy centers on the concept of self-development that has been at the center of so many theories of individualized intimacy.

Thus this chapter explores self-development and its place in intimacy, through the prism of social class. My first task was to settle on just what the concept of self-

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29 In fact, I return to the concept of self-disclosure in the next chapter.
development might mean, both to individuals in relationships and to the theorists who have spent so much space discussing it. At the outset of data collection I wanted to be sure to leave space in the interview guide for men and women to generate their own interpretations. Because intimacy theorists have tended to label so many features of relationships today as pertaining to self-development, I sought to be careful about using the term as a catch-all. I set out to define self-development very generally for the purpose of drafting interview questions: self-development as the project of cultivating one’s personal interests and abilities. Self-development so defined may take place in the context of career or leisure, may refer to emotional or physical cultivation, and, importantly, may be limited or facilitated by a number of factors. The generality of this working definition meant that allusions to self-development would emerge in various sections of my interviews, and not only in response to more targeted ‘self-development questions’.

For instance, in the following excerpt, Jeffrey, 27, responds to a question about whether he and his wife Paula had planned to have children - they now have a son - and in the process takes us unexpectedly into the realm of self-development:

I: Would you say that you were someone who knew that they wanted to have kids?

J: I wanted a kid, but I would rather have - she's (Paula is) younger than I am, she’s 23. And we've been together since she was 18. And I feel bad because she didn’t get to do everything that she wanted to do. I mean, she hasn’t graduated college yet, she didn’t get to travel, or be alone, go somewhere with your friends – whatever. And we've talked, I'd rather her, like, if she wants to, go back to school at nights. And I would stay home with the baby. I don’t want to feel like she's – that we're stopping her from doing what she wants to do, or her dreams or her aspirations or whatever.

The example illustrates a trend that ran throughout the interviews, in which allusions to self-development themes - in this case, notions of personal experience and experimentation - were better unearthed through indirect questioning. In general I sought
during the interviews to probe whatever paths seemed to lead to ideas about self-development as I had defined it, leaving until later the task of grouping or categorizing these discussions.

Ultimately I focused most closely on (1) the conceptual distinction between personal space and self-development, and on (2) class-based differences in views of self-development as personal cultivation or social advancement. This chapter proceeds first with a section that attempts to distinguish intimate self-development as something that goes beyond simply securing ‘alone time’ for oneself. The cliché of ‘me-time’ is a popular one, but I had in mind a richer sort of concept. After establishing self-development as a unique conceptual domain, I go on in the remainder of the chapter to use Cancian’s (1987) interdependent, independent and dependent blueprints of intimacy and self-development in order to analyze the effects of class on respondents’ narratives. I conclude by restating the importance of class considerations in the analysis of intimate individuation, in light of the presented data.

**Distinguishing self-development and personal space in relationships: three cases**

It is by now cliché to desire or affirm the importance of personal space for oneself. Things or people being “in our space”; our “needing space”; requests for others to “get out of (our) space - however glib these aphorisms sound, they are in the lexicon of personal relationships today. Not surprisingly they were spoken frequently, in one form or another, by the men and women I interviewed. But, I wondered, to what extent and in what ways do these sentiments and sayings about “space” in relationships relate to ideals of self-development as I had defined the term? My sense early on in the interviews was
that professed needs for personal space, and impulses toward self-development in relationships, were not one and the same.

The move to distinguish conceptually between ‘space’ and ‘self-development’ dawned on me after early interviews with three married men. The first was with Blake, 36. Blake married his wife, Brenda, four years ago. He had previously been married for three years during his early 20s. It was a relationship that ended badly, his first marriage, with several legal battles fought by the time the divorce was finalized. If there was a respondent who may have fallen into the category of ‘self-selection’, it was likely Blake. He was very forthcoming about his present and past marriage, and seemed to genuinely enjoy talking about these topics.

Blake and I began talking in earnest about self and other in relationships as a result of a discussion about the various lines of work he’s been involved in. Previously a bouncer for a night club, a sound technician for rock bands - jobs he described as “very social” - Blake is now employed as a delivery driver. The biggest difference between his current and past jobs, he said, is that now he spends much of his work day alone. This prompted me to ask whether he minds spending all that time by himself, especially after working such different sorts of jobs. Quite the contrary, he told me. In fact, Blake went as far as to connect the time he spends alone at work to what he sees as a more general principle in relationships: the importance of carving out independent time for oneself. His time “on the road” serves this purpose, if only partially - Blake relishes it even as he draws some criticism from his wife:

B: I tell you, I like that extra half-hour in the morning. It’s important enough that I don’t eat when I get up right away; I like to leave early for work, acclimate myself to the job. I'll sit there, I'll eat in the break room - not a pretty place - just to get a moment to myself, clear my head, grab my bearings, get straight, fly right, so to speak. And she’ll bust on
me later, telling me, 'I know it doesn’t take you an hour and a half to get to work!' But that's my alone time, and I don’t know what I would do without it.

I: Is that – the time to yourself – something that you didn’t have before? Before you took this job?

B: Yeah, that’s right. And she wishes probably that I didn’t have it now (laughing). But the more I’ve been involved in relationships, the more I know that everyone needs time to themselves. I just have a scenario where it’s built into the job. I tell her that: I gotta be on the road, what can I do?

It should be noted that Brenda’s ire about her husband’s extra time spent alone at work is likely driven by the fact that responsibility for child care - they have four children - falls disproportionately on her shoulders. This means that Blake’s time out of the house is difficult to manage for Brenda, and that her housework directly allows for his personal space. As we will see below, these facts are not lost on Blake; indeed, he eventually communicated that personal space must come second to family obligations. But his emphasis on personal space is clear,

In addition to highlighting the gendered inequality that supports Blake’s pursuit of “personal time,” it is instructive in a different sense to consider that Blake’s interest in personal space seemed to involve something other than the enrichment of one’s personal abilities - that is, something other than my own provisional conceptualization of self-development. Instead of an interest in personal enrichment, Blake explained that what he really longs for, and what his ideal of personal space truly involves, is something rather common - a respite from the fray of family life:

B: I don’t need much, you know? If I can get time to take a breath during the day, working or whatever, that’s what I’m talking about. I’m not looking to travel the world (laughing)... There’s a bunch of kids in this (house), and sometimes you just have to catch that breath.

To be sure, Blake seemed less aware, or at least voiced less concern over, the “breaths” that his wife Brenda might need, but he did relate that he is generally wary of the effect of personal space on “family time”. He felt that personal space, though enjoyable and
necessary to blow off steam, should be consumed in moderation when one is a member of a family:

I: You like personal space - what about time to see friends or do hobbies or that sort of thing?

B: We (Blake and his friends) used to take motorcycle rides all weekend long when I was younger, before I got married to my first wife even. But it's just, when you have big families you don't have that time, really, to go out and do what you want to do. What am I going to do, let my wife do all the work all the time?

I: And how do you feel about that?

B: Well, you miss your buddies, but they're single, that's the life they chose, you know? That's not the life I chose. I wanted a family, I want a wife, I want to be happy. If I did what they did, my kids would be shot. My friends may have all the bells and whistles, but my buddies are terribly lonely. Being able to do your own thing ain't worth that. The kind of time (to myself) I need - it doesn't mean I can't do what I need to do at home.

In other words, Blake seems to say, personal space in relationships does not necessarily have implications for deep self-development. And perhaps it cannot have those implications, he might add, unless one is prepared to let one's partner pick up all the slack when it comes to family work. Self-development, he intimates, might not be something that someone with a family has time for. Of course, supporting a family of six almost entirely on a delivery driver's pay means that there is little time or resources to support any leisure pursuits, self-development related or not.

Another interview, with Calvin (37), struck upon similar personal space themes. Calvin, whose wife years ago sustained an injury requiring nearly constant medical attention, takes on most of the couple’s child-related duties, from supervising homework to picking up from school. In addition to carrying out these tasks, he also is very involved in his aging parents’ lives; they own a sizeable piece of land that requires regular maintenance, and Calvin performs or arranges the handling of many of these tasks. The overall costs associated with this life, according to Calvin, involve a decreased ability to secure time to himself. He is not entirely satisfied with the chances
for personal space, and he reflected on a past when he could spend his time mostly as he pleased:

I: How does it strike you, balancing attending to your wife and time you spend on your own?

C: It sucks (laughing). You don’t switch easy from living the life that I had, racing horses, gambling, going to casinos. You get to a point where you say, ‘what I wouldn’t give to go back to doing what I used to do,’ and you try to look for those tunnels…Is there a way to get back there…

I: What kind of ‘tunnels’ do you mean?

C: Well, like, I’m avid into working out. But I’m working overtime because we were short on finances. So, what I do is - my child's daycare is right next to the gym in the mall - on days that I don't have to work overtime, I go to the gym before I picked up the child. It was my relaxation, my de-stress time, it was my time. You just find ways to get back to that me-time.

In the end, though, Calvin deemphasizes personal activities in the face of relationship and family obligations. One appreciates his candor, as he describes his perspective in honest, if somewhat grudging language:

C: My wife will say to me, 'let’s go for a bike ride,’ and what do we do? We'll go for the bike ride. My wife says, 'let’s go research this,’ and we do that. I come home from work and my parents call, and they need some help at the barn. ‘Sure mom, let me see what I can do.’ …Whatever it takes to help people - to help my family. I do it, you know, and do I find time for myself? Well, eventually the day comes where the load lightens up and I take time to be by myself…You’re better off if you have satisfaction in helping others and not yourself. Otherwise you go crazy wishing you could do something else.

What these two men, Calvin and Blake, share is an understanding of personal time and personal space as more or less providing a break from the routine of relationship and family life. It is what I would call a ‘stripped down’ concept of personal space. Compare their views with the view of Alexander, 40, who has been married to wife Gwen for twelve years.

Alexander struck me as the sample’s most assertive advocate for the importance of personal space. When I met Alexander at an area park, he seemed genuinely relieved to be where he was. The founder and chief executive of a baby food manufacturing
company, he has a truly busy work life. He travels at least twice a month and is loath to take time off from work. Alexander has been the family’s sole earner for the past 10 years and sees himself as primarily an ‘economic being’; he likes money, to earn it and spend it. And yet Alexander also has a side that enjoys the more ethereal things about life. In spite of his arduous career aspirations - many of which he has fulfilled - he described himself frankly as someone who has since his youth prized his leisure time, and especially time to himself. This is a fact he initially explained simply as a gendered phenomenon: “Men like to be alone,” he told me. Accomplishing this ‘alone time’ was easier when he was younger, he said, but even in the present day, after twelve years of marriage, two children and a demanding professional career, private time is just as if not more important to him:

I: You just mentioned that there are tradeoffs in marriage. What couldn’t you give up on for the sake of your wife - something you’d have to insist on?

A: My space. And it took her awhile to realize that, and she does now. She doesn’t like it, though. I’m into private computer games and the internet, and she worries that I’m going to run away with someone. Even if she worries, though, that’s my space, and it’s very valuable, very valuable - valuable for anyone in a long relationship.

And later:

A: I don’t believe in constant closeness - I’m not the 100% people-person that Gwen is. If I have my choice, I don’t want to necessarily see or go out with anybody. And I’m sorry to say, sometimes that means her, too. I want to have my beer, lie with my boxers on the couch and watch a game - and that’s it. But Gwen will jump at the opportunity, if somebody calls and asks her to go out and do something she feels she has to do it and can’t say no…I need space for my own personal reflection. And you know, I notice it in my kids too, they’ll go in their room and she doesn’t understand why they choose to spend time alone. Now, if they (the kids) need that kind of space, don’t you think a grown person does?

These statements made by Alexander near the beginning of our interview, piqued my curiosity about what exactly Alexander had in mind when it comes to ‘personal space’. On the face of it, his understanding of personal space did not seem much different from that of Blake and Calvin; Alexander seemed to emphasize a desire to have
the freedom to eat what he likes, watch TV programs of his choosing and otherwise relax in the way he sees fit. Ideals of conscious project of self-development were not apparent. But I later found that there was more to Alexander’s account of personal space.

When he spoke about a need for “personal reflection” or “a chance to breathe,” I sensed that Alexander was trying to articulate something more subtle than I initially credited. It is interesting to note, for instance, that Alexander’s desire for personal space did not revolve around “time with the guys.” Indeed, Alexander much prefers time to himself over time with friends. Neither was his preference for autonomy a thinly veiled longing for past days of reveling - a tendency so often associated with ‘domesticated masculinity’. Instead, as I found out later in the interview, his ideal of personal space and its importance referred toward a set of interests and capacities within himself that could not be accommodated solely in the context of the relationship. In one sense, these feelings are similar to the sexual self-concerns expressed by the women discussed in the previous chapter. But the focus of Alexander’s self-concern was not a sexual form of individualism. The following passage, in which Alexander describes his volunteer work as a masseur, reveals his views on inner capacities and relationship constraints:

A: I don’t do it for the money - I did it for the money when I was in college. I do it now because it’s a diversion, it’s different, it’s relaxing for me and it allows me to be myself. I find it creative, it’s purely intrinsic.

I: What do you mean, intrinsic?

A: It’s a part of me, the massage is, a part of me that’s, like, way down in there, and that I can only (access) in that way. My wife, she doesn’t like it. She doesn’t approve of it, but I’m very open and very liberal. We have to make room for that part of me.

It Alexander’s mention of the “intrinsic” value of his hobby that led me to think about the distinctions among preferences for autonomy in relationships: namely, the difference between personal space sought as a temporary break from the everyday trials
of relationship and family, and a more sustained project of inner-development. It is the latter concept that focused on most during the interviews, and that I analyze in the remainder of this chapter, with special attention given to social class and some gendered considerations. The self-development concept that I flesh out is a product both of my data and more abstract theoretical perspectives. I attempt wherever possible to clarify whether it is respondents themselves or me crafting an interpretation of self-development. I begin by outlining how theory played a role in my analysis of respondent’s accounts of self-development.

Making something of oneself via relationship or in spite of it: interdependent and individualized self-development

Cancian’s influential 1980s research on self-development in intimacy posed two likely possibilities for the future of relationships. On one hand was the more preferable - in Cancian’s view - “interdependent” model of self-development, in which one’s personal development was reinforced by and in tandem with the couple’s bond. The value of one’s personal development is understood here as roughly equal to that of the relationship30. Conversely, Cancian argued, there exists another potential self-development path in intimacy, marked by the pursuit of autonomous personal interests more or less regardless of the relationship’s ‘gravitational pull’. She called this second scenario the “independent” blueprint for intimacy. The label was not meant to communicate the positives that one might associate with a concept of independence, but

30 Giddens (1992) would soon after articulate a very similar notion, in his concept of the “pure relationship,” but Cancian’s work came first and must surely have had an influence on Giddens’s thinking.
instead the kinds of negative connotations described earlier by Robert Bellah and Christopher Lasch.

Cancian’s sketch is, to an extent, useful for mapping the patterns found in my data. By and large, the women and men I interviewed - regardless of background or age – voiced idealistic support for the interdependent type of self-development in relationships. Personal pursuits were good, they said, as long as they did not threaten the “unit”. Indeed, this was a fairly boilerplate sentiment. Also revealing were the ways respondents’ judged the likelihood of achieving an interdependent type of self-development in their own relationship. These differences frequently were bound up with the issues of social class and, to a lesser extent, gender. While Cancian spent much time considering the gendered aspects of new orientations toward intimacy, she was noticeably silent about any class-based influences.

Such influences were crucially important in this study. The most consistent correlation between social class and models of self-development described by respondents was this: the lower the amount of class capital in a given relationship, the less likely it was that the relationship actually embodied an interdependent form of self-development. In other words, the interdependent model of self-development was more commonly found in middle-class relationships, which had greater levels of education and professional employment; working-class relationships were more likely to exhibit independent or, as I describe below, dependent forms of self-development. What is more (what Cancian fails to forecast, but which Sennett and Cobb discuss at length), self-development in intimacy attempted or failed, alone or in tandem, carried different basic meanings for working-class and middle-class respondents. The former group equated
development with socioeconomic advancement, while the latter class, having already achieved success on that front, constructed personal enhancement as a more subtle and explicitly psychic pursuit.

**Working-class narratives of self-development**

**Stacey’s case**

When Stacey, 27, arrived for our interview she struck a defensive pose almost immediately. Initially I attributed Stacey’s defensiveness to our interview setting. The interview took place in my office and had a somewhat formal feel to it - perhaps especially so to Stacey, who by her own account is unaccustomed to offices. In hindsight, though, I realize that Stacey was put off less by the setting than by what she interpreted as a too-pointed question early in the interview about how she and her boyfriend Jeff got together. I (perhaps clumsily) asked her what she liked about Jeff, and Stacey treated it more as a challenge than as a routine inquiry:

I: What do you think - what got you connected with Jeff in the first place?

S: I mean, he’s not…It’s not like he’s a bad catch, you know? He's actually a very, very intelligent person and I love that. I mean, he maybe puts on a front for other people, acting dumb, but he's very smart. He's very intelligent. Anything he puts his mind to he can accomplish, so, it’s like that.

Stacey explained that Jeff, when among some of his friends, feels the need to act out a tough, masculine role. This role includes participating in some behaviors - fights, drinking - that do not come across well. She said that Jeff, who is one year younger than Stacey and works part time as a carpenter, does not always strike others as “a great guy”. Jeff’s failure to live up to what potential Stacey and others see in him makes for a frequent point of contention in the couple’s life:
I: Are there goals that the two of you have in mind? Buying a house, having kids, or anything like that?

S: I think, umm, mainly just school for me. I want to probably get my bachelor’s in the next few years. And after that I definitely want to have a good job. No more cutting hair. And he (Jeff) wants to start his own business. But he is in and out of work, and he wants to quit smoking weed.

I: And is that something you want also, or-

S: Oh my god, yes. I've been telling him to for so long. I mean, I used to smoke when I was a kid - I'm not a kid anymore.

I: So do you guys butt heads about that?

S: All the time. All the time. I catch him all the time, and I always get this stupid smile from him. I try to explain to him that he’s better than this, that he’s got potential, and it will work for two days, and then he will go back to the same shit. I mean, I don’t know what would make him quit. I can’t get him to quit, his parole officer can’t get him to quit - what can you do? It’s why I don’t have a lot of hope for things turning around for us. We set goals for ourselves, and try and change things that we don’t like in our lives, I mean, we really do. I work part-time and I am a student. We have a lot of bills. We accumulated a lot of debt. There are times when I don’t know that I’ll make my goals work out (if I’m working at them) alone.

And later:

I: You said that you worry about whether you and Jeff will “turn things around”? What do you mean by that?

S: Well, if I had a nickel for every time my parents brought up Jeff getting into trouble, I mean - (pause). You gotta understand that I’m like ‘daddy’s girl,’ and I’m trying to live up to what they want.

I: And part of that is finding, uh, finding a good boyfriend?

S: Oh, yeah! And Jeff knows what they think (of him), so I’m like a buttress between them.

In addition to raising class issues, the references to being a “daddy’s girl” and acting as a buffer between her boyfriend and her parents’ desires add a gendered dimension to Stacey’s account. Stacey went on to explain that her parents tend to see her quest to find a “good man” as one of - if not the - most important parts of her life. And so there is a multifaceted dilemma for Stacey: she has personal goals as well as a set of relationship goals imposed by her family, but each set of objectives is threatened, directly or indirectly, by the class positioning of her partner.
Stacey’s account was important in shaping the direction of my class analysis. Her doubtfulness about whether her relationship will foster self-development and the realization of her goals, along with her frequent references to money troubles, educational concerns, and Jeff’s legal trouble, stoked my already strong interest in the correspondence between social class and self-development. Self-development took on a decidedly economic and status-oriented meaning for Stacey. I wanted to know whether this conceptualization of self-development would hold for other working-class respondents, and whether different classes could be ‘mapped’ to independent or interdependent models of self-development in relationships. Ultimately I found that respondents involved in relationships characterized by lessened “class capital” had a more difficult time enacting the interdependent model of self-development in intimacy, even as they strongly extolled its benefits in abstract terms. This is not entirely surprising, perhaps, given that self-development is likely a sort of privilege, one that corresponds with the possession of material and cultural resources: money, education, leisure and exposure to different lifestyles.

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A lot of people around here aren’t where I’m at – they do what they want to do and not what they need to do. It’s one of the reasons I want to move from here. I’m on track to save money and move, but he likes where we’re at. He’s comfortable. I’m somewhat comfortable, but I just want a little more. And it’s not here.

*Katherine, 36, married*

There are times that he just breaks me down...I remember trying to land a better job, before the kids got here. And he said, when I would go on interviews, he said, 'Listen, now, don’t act like a snob.' 'Now don’t come across as a snob in your interview.' It gets to the point where you’re not sure why he’s so defensive about stuff.

*Madeleine, 35, married*
Katherine and Madeline, the women quoted above, were two of the more revealing examples of working-class\textsuperscript{31} self-development in relationships, but were by no means the only cases. I return to them shortly. But to give first a more general account of the working-class patterns that emerged in the interviews, let us consider some excerpts from other conversations with working-class respondents who spoke about their efforts to develop themselves while in their relationship.

The following statements come from Paula, 34, a cohabiter and an overall interesting case. The child of immigrants from Italy, Paula grew up in a blue collar family - her father an electrician and her mother a “typical housewife”. She worked to put herself through college in her late 20s, and now works as a real estate assistant. Paula is proud of her higher education experience, but described suffering from low self-esteem and feeling as if co-workers sometimes take advantage of her.

Paula has had a tricky time managing self-development and her own personal accomplishments, in her relationship with boyfriend Rick. She told me that Rick works as a plumber and, like many of his “rough around the edges” co-workers and friends, holds both gendered and class-based views that shape his attitudes toward Paula’s personal development and toward the relationship in general:

\begin{quote}
P: Personally, I don’t feel like I lord anything over him, but I feel like he does get resentful of the fact that, you know, that I have had things handed to me a little bit easier in life. But I don’t think he gets it. OK, so I’ve had things handed to me. But that means that it’s that much harder for me to feel like I’m accomplishing things, because I’m still learning how to go out and fend for myself in certain areas.

I: Why doesn’t he see that, in your opinion?

P: You know, it’s like I’m on a different intellectual playing field sometimes. Rick is pretty cut and dry and simple and sort of to the point, and I’m more like an analyzer and a
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{31} I classify working- and middle-class status according to several criteria, including educational attainment, income, and occupation. I categorized respondents with reference to objective thresholds as well as with reference one another (relatively). The class conceptualization is justified and explained in full in Chapter 3.
thinker. I'll ponder things and, you know, come out with these philosophical reasons for things. And, honestly, I say to him: 'I don't think I'm any better than you at all.' And actually I think that. To me it doesn't matter that I've had the higher education experience, and he hasn't. But he likes to needle me about what I can't do. It makes him feel better about his own life, maybe?

Part of what makes Paula’s account memorable is that she draws a clear class distinction between herself and Rick in spite of relatively few actual differences existing in their personal histories. Educational differences aside (Rick attended one year of college whereas Paula has a four-year degree), both grew up in working class families, have working class friends, and work in jobs barely beyond the entry level. Nonetheless, Paula sees Rick’s pointed and perhaps bitter statements about her being coddled, and her own “intellectual” abilities, as class-based barriers between them that limit her own personal advancement or at least destine it to be a lonely pursuit.

Another interviewee, Beverly, 29, who married husband Brian five years ago, after the birth of their second child, also told of disconnection between her partner’s class capital and her own personal ambitions. What is particularly interesting about Beverly’s case is that she and her husband come from nearly identical class backgrounds, growing up one block from one another. She and Brian began dating when Beverly was still in high school, causing her parents some heartache because Brian is seven years older than her. But Beverly did not see the importance of the age difference, and continued the relationship. As it happened, age differences were not nearly the obstacle in the relationship that social class and aspirations turned out to be.

Although, as Beverly put it, “no one really goes to college” in her and Brian’s hometown, she was convinced from an early age that she wanted to attend schooling beyond high school. Though it would make her different from many friends and family members, it was important to Beverly. She recalled her decision ten years ago to go
away to college and the difficulties between her and her future husband that followed - troubles that had a fair amount to do with class capital:

B: It was Labor Day weekend, freshman year. So he comes up (from their hometown) to my dorm. I was pissed. I had just seen him the weekend before, so I’m like, ‘what are you doing?’ He just wanted to visit for the weekend. And I said, ‘No - you can’t stay here. My roommate would not approve.’ And he says - get this! - he says, ‘No, don’t worry, I have my own apartment’ So he went and rented a place 3 blocks from campus!

I: And were you upset?

B: To tell the truth I was, at first, but it was also very nice because I was so homesick. And he’d already found a job, so I was like, ‘ok, cool’. The biggest problem was during my sophomore year when I decided I wanted to explore the world. He was really upset because I told him I was going to go to England for a year. He was so upset. He didn’t go to the airport - he didn’t talk to me for, like, the whole month before it. He was so upset that I was leaving.

I: Why? Because he would miss you?

B: Yeah, of course. But more than that too, I guess. I mean, he grew up in the same place he was born, never went to college, barely got out of high school. How’s he supposed to get that I’m flying halfway around the world. He thought it was like me doing the (unthinkable). I don’t blame him, though.

Here Beverly comes across as quite aware of the class limitations of her own background, and thus of her husband’s own limitations. She understood the costs (e.g., homesickness, generating difference between herself and old friends) and self-development benefits of her decision to leave for college and move away from Brian; she was both touched but also somewhat put off by his following her. What is more, she understood the class-based reasons that he would be worried by her decisions. It was possible that she would meet newer and “more interesting” people, or find herself on a career track that diverged from Brian’s.

For both Paula and Beverly, as for many of the respondents with working-class backgrounds or partners from such backgrounds, self-development was viewed as a worthwhile goal but not usually a tandem interest or project within the relationship. Sometimes this pattern was attributed simply to the fact that a partner was too busy or too
taxed by work or family obligations to be an active aid in another’s self-development. After all, for families with fewer resources and busy schedules, joint efforts at development can be challenging. But the difficulties in enacting an interdependent self-development described by respondents included more than references to diminished material resources. Respondents also articulated a ‘social-psychological’ vision of social class and self-development, one that pivoted on the sense of one’s own, or a partner’s, class-cultural capital. In particular, working-class interviewees seemed to feel that, among other factors, lack of education and generally limited visions of improving oneself were the main impediments to an interdependent sort of self-development in their relationships. It is noteworthy that women were more likely to perceive shortcomings in their male partners’ visions of self-development than men were in women, perhaps due to lingering expectations of men’s role as independent social actors. Meanwhile, working class men often identified the relationship and family themselves as personal achievements. This was especially so for men who had particularly difficult pasts. The following cases serve to illuminate these various trends.

*Katherine, Madeline, Walter and Victor: Independent and dependent self-development in working class couples*

Four individuals, Katherine, Madeline, Walter and Victor, stand out as examples of the economic and status-based character of self-development in working-class relationships. They represent, to use Cancian’s language, the independent and dependent pathways toward self-development that Cancian disdained and thought to be diminishing in middle-class intimacy. In Katherine’s, Madeline’s and Walter’s interviews especially,
the respondents expressed unhappiness regarding self-development, not in relation to a partner’s over-attachment (e.g., in relation to “being monitored” and thus kept from pursuing self-development) but due to what amounted in sociological terms to deficient human capital – their own or a partner’s.

Katherine, first quoted above, was a case that embodied a strong independent orientation toward self-development in relationships. Having moved frequently in recent years, in search of affordable housing, Katherine now works the graveyard shift as a telephone operator, while her husband, Craig, picks up odd jobs as a handyman. Money is very tight for the couple, and that topic has led to a number of stresses and strains in the marriage. For periods of time, Katherine’s children from a previous marriage have lived with relatives to lighten the couple’s economic load. In spite of the tough times, Katherine frequently alluded during our interview to having “plans” for her life that she was serious about seeing through: a better job, going back to school, moving away from troubled neighborhoods. She was eager, though, to explain the difficulties she sees in achieving her goals – a good many of which obstacles have to do with Craig. For instance, when I asked her about how the couple spends their leisure hours, Katherine quickly moved to contrast her personal life goals against those (or the lack thereof) of her spouse:

I: How do you and your husband like to spend time when you’re not at work?

K: Well, he just wants to drive around, usually with people up to no good. A lot of people around here (in the city where they live) aren’t where I’m at – they do what they want to do and not what they need to do. It’s one of the reasons I want to move from here. I’m on track to save money and move, but he likes where we’re at. He’s comfortable. I’m somewhat comfortable, but I just want a little more. And it ain’t here.

Katherine used references to “good people” and people who were “no good” in order to distinguish among preferable paths for her own life. She seemed to form her own self-
understanding in relation to what she sees in the friends and neighbors who surround her and Craig. 38 years old, Katherine has lived her whole life in urban areas where work was hard to find and keep hold of. As a result, Katherine communicated a keen sense of the toil it takes to “live right” in these settings.

Interestingly, all of these circumstances bear directly on her marriage to Craig and her quest for self-development. In part this is because Katherine is not sure whether Craig has what it takes to live right, especially in tough times; as a result she doubts that her husband can contribute - emotionally or financially - to her betterment “as a person”:

K: My whole life I’ve been trying to do the right thing, when nobody else was doing that. I got a daughter (from a previous relationship) and she’s doing great, and I wanna show her that mom can do that too. I’ve got plans to grow myself, as a person.

I: And does Craig know that you have these plans that you want to try and see through? Have you ever told him?

K: Yeah, and he says, ‘wait till the time comes.’ It’s just frustrating. And you wanna know why he’s so comfortable, honestly? A lack of education, and umm, not exploring other avenues. Like when we were going to Disney World - it was the first time he’d traveled outside of New York State! I travel every year, so having been other places, I know I don’t want to be here forever. But what am I gonna do – I’m with him, and I can’t change those things about him. I can’t make him see what I see for myself. So I am stuck.

Ultimately, though, Katherine may not feel quite as “stuck” as she intimated. What she sees as Craig’s limited potential for self-development makes her seriously consider separating from him and striking out on her own. This is not a possibility she takes lightly, but her fears about remaining ‘stagnant’ as a person are compelling. She even discussed her thoughts about moving to a city where she would have more occupational and networking resources. As for her marriage, it is not clear that Craig would be enough reason to pass on a promising life opportunity.

K: I wouldn’t be here if not for Craig. I’d be in Washington, DC. I just can’t leave here right now, or leave Craig. It’s hard to move alone, and he's not just going to let it go like that; there will be issues about property that you have to fight. I’m not ready to deal with that at this time, so I’m just waiting for the right time. I need to get some money in order, make sure everything would be in order before I moved
I: But also, would it be hard to leave, at least a little hard to leave Craig, even if you had the means to do it?

K: Yeah, it would.

It is tempting but inaccurate to read Katherine’s disposition as simply callous or selfish. But hers was not the account of a hollow social climber, if in fact such individuals exist. Rather, Katherine’s worries about self-development and her lack of faith in Craig’s ability to foster the same are artifacts of working-class - in this case, working-poor - life. Thoughts of ending the relationship are in the same self-preservation vain as are those of partners fleeing abuse. This is not to say that each scenario is equally serious - only that the reality of limited options is similar in each instance.

Whereas Katherine seemed settled that her path to self-development was obstructed by her husband’s diminished class capital, it was not always the case that independent models of self-development were articulated so starkly. For instance, when I spoke with Madeline (35) about her marriage to Bill, a building contractor, similar social class themes emerged as did in Katherine’s interview. Madeline’s views on self-development, though they conformed in many ways to the independent blueprint so strongly embodied in Katherine’s account, were much less firmly fixed and more ‘forgiving’. Perhaps because she interpreted her own background as “more middle-class,” Madeline was not frustrated by whatever class-based shortcomings Bill may have, so much as she was curious about their effects on his own and her self-development. Madeline’s more privileged position (in class terms) may provide her a more self-secure view on her husband. And yet, as we will see, she sees Bill still as posing some risks and hurdles to her self-development.
It helps to provide some relationship history for Bill and Madeline. In talking about how she and Bill first met some 20 years ago, Madeline told me that class differences played a role in their relationship right from the start:

M: They say that opposites attract, and that was the case. He was at a public school and I was at a private. He was from the city, I’m from the suburbs. I really paid him, like, no mind at the beginning, because of that. He was always with that city, that inner-city crowd. And he kinda called me the snob from the suburbs.

I: Even though your two towns weren’t far away?

M: Yeah, I know. But he tells me now: ‘I’ve always had a thing for you. I always thought that you were a nice girl, living the nice life out there.’ Honestly, if you ask me if I remember him, I really don’t! I know that sounds bad. It’s the ‘different side of the tracks’ scene.

Class would persist as a theme in their relationship. Madeline explained that the couple’s differences in educational and financial background are still raised frequently by Bill, not without a fair amount of insecurity on his part. She offered some insight into the origins of these issues, stating that the difficulties they experience over their different backgrounds actually carry over from one of Bill’s previous relationships. In fact, Madeline believes that this previous relationship explains a lot about the nagging concerns over class and self-development that emerge in their marriage:

I: Were either of you in a long-term relationship before you met?

M: Oh, yeah. There was his ex-girlfriend, she was somebody that he dated just before we met (as adults). Why he was with her, I have no idea. And he doesn’t know either. She was like a complete intellectual - she was like a professor of philosophy or English. So you had the construction guy and the professor (laughing). And she was at this level, this intellectual level where she's so intelligent she can’t talk at a normal level - what in the hell would (he) do with her – you’re (Bill is) a carpenter!

I: Is that how he saw it as well?

M: Yeah, he did. He told me that they would go to the opera in New York City and they would go up to her parents’ summer house. And they’d have these conversations about, umm, I don’t know, ‘Should states have the right to override the constitution?’ My God the way she would explain things! When we started dating he says, 'I had trouble talking to her because she was always, like, at this level.'

I: And how long was he with her?
M: A little over a year – so there must have been something he liked about her. Even now, sometimes, I get the feeling he wished things worked out better there.

Eventually Madeline connected these sorts of class issues to their own relationship, and ultimately to how she sees her own self-development (career aspirations in this case) compromised by what amounts to class tensions:

M: The fact is, we’ve had our share of bickering over my background and his. In the beginning, when we first started dating – like I said before, I was from a nice area, and he was from the city. I felt like he was all about the inner-city thing. His father was a cop, you know. And my parents were just more middle class and, you know, I always addressed his parents as 'Mr. and Mrs.', and he was like, 'no, just call my mom Pam. Just call my dad Vic.' I’m like, 'I cant – I wasn’t raised to do that.' He actually broke me of that. He would tell me, 'you are so snobby, you need to like get down to earth.' Sometimes I’m on the phone with a coworker and he says that I make these faces, and the way I talked – he called it very ‘valley girl’ and ‘upper crusty’. ‘You just have to be real about stuff and not be so uptight.’ That’s what he says

I: Do you find yourself agreeing with him, or do you see it differently?

M: Well, I see it as a problem he has with people who are snobby, or like, well educated. And it comes out with me too. I don’t know if I agree (with Bill), but it’s tough sometimes. I remember trying to land a better job, before the kids got here. And he said, when I would go on interviews, he said, 'Listen, now, don’t act like a snob.' ‘Now don’t come across as a snob in your interview.’ It gets to the point where you’re not sure why he’s so defensive about stuff. It goes back to the woman he was with, because she was real smart. He wants me to talk like a regular person, not like a philosophy professor or whatever. But what happens is, I don’t feel like telling him about my ideas for a new job or stuff like that, because he’s gonna shoot it down.

I: And that makes you less likely to go try for that – the job or whatever it may be?

M: It’s a confidence thing. He makes me worry about seeming like a snob, and then I just, I don’t know, I just lose interest.

One of the more distressing elements of Madeline’s story is that her own capabilities are being wither understated or outright stunted by Bill’s comments. It is evident in the above passages that Madeline herself senses Bill’s resentments, but does not quite know how to handle them in a way that preserves her own pursuits. Ironically, her skills and abilities are the very attributes Bill uses to stem Madeline’s self-development: she is told she is “too smart,” “too snobby,” or some other class ‘code word’.

When it comes to relationships, self-development and social class, the two interviewees Katherine and Madeline exist at two points on the same ‘independence
continuum’. They both articulate an independent view on self-development in their relationships: each woman feels that the exploration of her own potential is better undertaken on her own. Their sentiments, by no means identical, share in identifying class phenomena as driving the (perceived or actual) tensions over self-development in the relationship. Katherine appears more hardened in her assessment of her husband’s class capital, while Madeline offered a more empathetic account. In both cases the women lacked faith that their partner had a vested interest in their development, and so adopt an independent disposition.

In addition to this pattern of independent self-development, a type of dependence also emerged as a model for some working-class respondents. Interestingly, it was men who typically followed this pattern. In the next accounts, self-development, far from being a pursuit detached (necessarily or otherwise) from one’s partner, was in fact described as synonymous with the relationship. Membership itself in the relationship was viewed as type of self-development.

Walter is a cohabiter of nine years who I interviewed near the end of my data collection. He is an exemplar of the dependent pattern that had emerged among some working class men who preceded him. Walter, who possesses a High School equivalency degree, works as a superintendent for an office building. He has spent a brief time incarcerated, and since then has had relatively few chances for economic advancement.

Throughout much of our conversation Walter displayed an awareness of peoples’ “place in the world,” whether talking about friends, family members, co-workers or other people he has encountered. He good-naturedly described even his girlfriend Jessica as being “out of (his) class,” smarter and more worldly. Acting as something of an amateur
sociologist, it is safe to say that Walter is someone who notices class differences in general and within his own relationship.

As the following exchange demonstrates, Walter’s sense of his capabilities, which has been shaped by past and present circumstances having to do with his family of origin and personal conditions, gives him a unique view on self-development. Unlike the independent pattern typified by Madeline and Katherine, Walter’s case is not one of perceived self-reliance when it comes to self-development. That is, he does not view self-development as something he must undertake alone. Quite the contrary: Walter described himself as uninterested in, in fact incapable of, a project of self-development that exists outside of his relationship with Jessica:

I: Would you say that being in a relationship puts any limits on you, on what you do with yourself?

W: I’d be miserable alone, I know that. I wouldn’t get much done.

I: Why? (Long pause) What wouldn’t you get done alone that you do get done now, in a relationship?

W: (sighing) Umm, I don’t go out too much, like I said….I’ve made a lot of bad decisions, you know, and I don’t see myself as a - as an intelligent man. I make some poor decisions…You’ve got to give me a minute here because I don’t know how to answer this one. I mean, put it this way – one of my real accomplishments was meeting Jessica and making it work. I’m proud of that.

I: The relationship is important to you then…

W: It is. She is. Even some of my old family says so. I did alright here (in establishing a relationship with Jessica) and they (Walter’s family) can see I’m on the right track in my life. Moreso than before.

Unlike the previous narratives, which featured individuals with defined but as yet unfulfilled and unassisted plans for self-development and improvement, Walter’s account does not suggest an uncooperative or unable partner. Indeed, in this excerpt and in other portions of our interview Walter rarely mentioned career, leisure or other areas of his life in which he sought personal augmenting, regardless of whether support would be
provided by Jessica. Instead it is *the relationship itself* that, to Walter, marks his self-development. This became more evident as we talked further about how he assesses his own personal efficacy in life:

I: You mentioned bad decisions that you’ve made. What do your bad decisions have to do with being on your own or in a relationship?

W: Oh, please! Without her, I would blow my money at the track, you know, I'm that poor about money management. I would spend a lot of time alone. (As it is) now I’m at home during the day, watching TV, going on the computer, eating. I don’t – I don’t do a whole lot. You know, I had a rough childhood. Umm, my mother, she dies of a drug overdose. My step-father was an alcoholic and he died. My father - my real father - was an alcoholic. So I was by myself, and I didn’t really know what to do with myself. But this relationship, it makes me a lot happier, and I’m glad I did it.

I: So this was one of your good decisions, then?

W: Yeah. It’s like, quit while you’re ahead, you know? I made a good move here (by getting into this relationship) with Jessica, better than anything else I’ve done.

Initially I glossed over portions of Walter’s narrative that would ultimately prove to be important pieces of data. In hindsight I see that I moved too quickly to read parts of Walter’s story as a modern relationship cliché: “You’re the best decision I’ve ever made,” he seems to say. At first gloss Walter’s account smacked of pop-culture ‘echoing’. And no doubt some of these cultural narratives are to be found in Walter’s account. But there is a greater analytical payoff by paying more serious attention to the class dimensions of his self-deprecating view of self-development. Walter’s perspective is that of someone who has made a better life, has obtained an improved sense of well-being, *by virtue of* his relationship. Even if Walter were to augment his economic standing, it seems that his sense of personal accomplishment would remain tied closely to the fact of his relationship with Jessica. Although it may appear that his case falls into Cancian’s interdependent category of relationship self-development - given his valorization of his bond with Jessica - this interpretation is not satisfactory. Walter’s
self-development is not so much *fostered by* his relationship with Jessica than it is synonymous with it.

This dependent model of self-development, defined by the act fact of entering a “good relationship,” demands attention. For though it was voiced by respondents of all class backgrounds that self-development can (and should) flow from union with a partner, typically it was working-class respondents, and especially men, who saw ‘relationship’ as the primary and sometimes sole medium of self-development. Thus there is a need to distinguish analytically between relationship as a part of one’s self-development, and relationship as seemingly the only available pathway to self-development.

In talking with another man, Victor, 34, the notion of a relationship being the *route* to self-development was put forth still more clearly. Victor, when not looking for work as a glazier (a glass worker), finds himself immersed in his relatively new relationship with Heather. They began living together one year before our interview. Currently unemployed, Victor has assumed responsibility for nearly all household duties, including looking after Heather’s three children from a previous relationship, while she is at work.

The fact that Victor lost his job not long before our interview made me inclined to tread lightly around the topic. I soon found out that this was unnecessary. Far from feeling down about his struggle to find paid work, Victor is bolstered by his family role and especially by his close, emotional relationship with Heather. He said that he thrives in his new family role, in large part because it represents such a positive break from certain social class pitfalls in his past:

I: So you and the younger kids are in the house almost all the time now?
V: Yeah, and it’s work. I mean, it’s a full-time job

I: And do you mind having that role? Keeping an eye on them?

V: Not at all. Like I said, it’s something new for me, but I like it. I like to cook, so I cook the dinners and stuff, clean up. The only thing I don’t like is that Heather’s not there with me and the kids. I don’t even care that I’m not working. I see my life now, with them, as a step in the right direction for myself. When I moved in with Heather, I basically gave up all my old friends because they were all going wrong: drugs, partying, having a good time all the time. With her (Heather), I have a real life.

I: And was that hard letting go of any of that stuff?

V: Not at all. You think, ‘ball and chain,’ and all that, but it’s exactly what I was looking for. I don’t even have friends now, but that’s OK by me. You know what I grew up doing, what I grew up around? Drinking too young, partying too much, growing up too fast. What was that gonna do for me? But now I got people to live for, people to live my life for. My mother - I talked to my mother and she tells me that my old people have been calling looking for me at home, and she tells me, ‘So-and-so called. They want to know if they can have a number for you.’ But I’m finally living a good life, with Heather. So when my mom asks, I tell her, ‘No mom, I am good. Get their number and maybe I’ll call them.’

Like several other of the working-class men I interviewed, Walter and Victor struggled to articulate personal ambitions that were separate from the relationship or family life. There are good sociological reasons to explain these accounts. Many of these cases involved men who had not graduated from high school and have had trouble finding steady employment; Walter and Victor in particular have seen friends and family members fall victim to a range of social pitfalls. As a result, their sense of self and peace of mind come largely from their current relationships, which are viewed as true ‘life improvements’. Content with the feeling of self-fulfillment they derive from their relationships, each man had little to say about individual pursuits outside that context.

Whereas this pattern of ‘relationship-defined selves’ has often been attributed to gendered dynamics - e.g., the idea of women consumed by family and relationships, as men turn their eyes to ‘bigger things’ outside the relationship - here some of the largest differences in ideals of self-development were instead related to class.
The resilient self: middle class narratives of self-development

The most basic class difference exhibited by the sample overall was that middle-class respondents were more likely than their working-class counterparts to describe their relationships as actually fostering an interdependent form of self-development. Middle-class respondents had relationships that approximated the mutually supportive self-development ideal. This finding is somewhat predictable and in line with the arguments put forth by Jamieson and, before her, Sennett and Cobb. In general the resources enjoyed by the middle-class enable and even introduce the very possibility of self-development. Respondents with greater education and employment in professional careers were more outspoken about personal goals outside the context of their relationship. This finding is attributable to a variety of social factors, from years of schooling to economic resources to status, and one can speculate as to which social forces most drive class differences in envisioning self-development. On a micro-level, in this study, the ease with which middle-upper-class respondents talked about independent pursuits seemed to stem from strong senses of personal skills and uniqueness. The more personally accomplished in life a respondent felt themselves to be, the more concern they expressed about sacrificing self-development to relationship obligations. Of the 20 interviewees who possessed Bachelor’s or postgraduate degrees, 16 alluded to clearly defined personal ambitions that required balancing with relationship priorities - a far larger proportion than was evident among those with less education.

Ironically, although the interdependent model of self-development thrived in these middle-class relationships, the respondents often longed for personal pursuits of a more independent sort. It seems that either class grouping in the sample lived out a model of
self-development that the other longed for. In spite of their taste for independent pursuits, these middle-class respondents were likely to describe an interdependent type of self-development in their relationships; they frequently cited a partner’s active facilitating of their own self-development. For these women and men a husband or girlfriend’s respect for ‘rights’ to self-development meant that they had in their partner a personal advocate rather than an obstacle.

Nowhere was this clearer than in my interview with Roberta (38, married for 14 years). Roberta married husband Jeff in her mid-twenties, and was clear with him from the beginning that she had personal plans that would not be laid aside. She told me that she had been raised in a “progressive” family that fostered ideals of achievement. Now working part time as a tax lawyer, Roberta believes in self-development in relationships, adding the idea of developing not only herself but also the relationship:

I: You said that you make a real effort to talk with Jeff about things other than the kids. Why?

R: I think it’s really important that you have more dimensions to your relationship. We talk about art and music and politics and world events, and I just think that it’s really important ‘cuz you can get bogged down talking about your kids. Especially after the sort of stuff I used to talk about at work. You know, one of the really great things for us was that we decided that we weren’t going to have kids for at least 5 years after we got married. I was pretty young, 24, when we got married, and I really wanted to do the career thing and wanted to know that I could work at the highest level. And he never tried to take that away from me. I know there would be resentment if I didn’t have the chance to pursue that; as bad as it sounds, I needed something for myself, to push for, other than a husband and kids.

It is likely that Roberta’s feeling of guilt about “needing something for herself” has something to do with gendered expectations about selflessness. In particular, she wanted to make clear that self-development could not entirely replace a marriage and family. Although some middle-class men voiced this sort of disclaimer, it was for more common among women. Nevertheless Roberta indicated throughout our conversation a deep
respect for personal development, and an expectation that both partners in a relationship would work to realize that ideal.

Roberta’s account provides support for the argument that social class directly impacts the enacting of an interdependent model of self-development. In fact, Roberta attributes Jeff’s ready assistance to his own professional career as a college professor. Jeff “gets it” because he himself is an accomplished person who knows the value of fostering self-development.

R: He did well and achieved as a professor, so he knows, I should say he knew, what I felt. It was a lot of training and schooling and money spent. I didn’t want that to go for nothing.

The fact that Jeff could “understand” her desires, as Roberta put it, was a real boon when it came to pursuing her career interests.

In the view of many middle-class respondents, personal pursuits and capabilities elicited tolerance and support from their partners; often, as in Roberta’s case, this was attributed to the partner having ‘been in the same boat’ vis a vis their own personal development. This pattern is confirmed indirectly in the account given in the previous section by Katherine, the married telephone operator. Katherine viewed her husband as unable to contribute to her self-development precisely because he has little sense of personal efficacy, and limited class capital. He cannot be an equal partner in that way.

Both working-class and middle-class respondents shared a presumption of the benefits of an interdependent model; unlike in Katherine’s case, middle-class respondents were likely to be involved with partners who ‘bring more to the table’ in terms of self-development potential.

I refer to presumed benefits because it was not universally the case that respondents whose relationships embodied interdependent self-development saw this as a
good thing. Interdependent self-development was not without its disadvantages, according to these more highly educated, professional respondents. It was surprising at first to hear that such a positively termed concept lamented. What troubled some of these men and women was the perceived tendency for interdependent forms of self-development to limit or encroach upon independent self-development.

Denise, 27, was a newly married interviewee. From the outset of our interview she projected a self-conscious ideal of independence in her relationship, forged out of childhood experiences and her medical training and recent military service. Denise described her husband Frederick, himself a pediatrician, as unfailingly supportive of nearly all of Denise’s personal endeavors. But this support is not always entirely welcome:

D: I love Frederick. Whatever I’ve accomplished is because of him, in part. He was half the effort when I was in medic training and when I went overseas. But – I know you’re not supposed to say, ‘I love you but’ – but sometimes I feel like he doesn’t give enough latitude for me to do things for myself. Anything I want to do has to be a together thing – maybe not every time but a lot - you know what I mean?

I: Yeah, but what are the kinds of things you’re talking about?

D: Well…I’ve always played sports and athletics – it’s important to me. But it’s hard for me to do those things – he wants to get involved too, to support me in them. Like even if I’m going for a run.

I: You’d prefer he wasn’t so-

D: I don’t need him to be a part of everything I do or take up. If I have hobbies or things that are part of me, he doesn’t necessarily have to be a part of that. I must sound like a bitch (laughing). But I’ve been doing these things for a long time now…

I: So sometimes you don’t need the support?

D: Right! Exactly.

For Denise, there are a number of personal activities that are “close to her heart,” as she put it. And while Frederick’s interest in contributing to these endeavors might appear
from the outside to be quite helpful and positive - there are some working-class respondents who would have welcomed it! - Denise does not always see it so.

Why does Denies feel this way? To be sure, some of Denise’s aversion to Frederick’s involvement is nothing more than a routine desire for some privacy in one’s life. But Denise dug deeper, drawing connections between a history of individual accomplishment and self-assurance, and a cultivated preference for less interdependence in her pursuit of self-development:

I: Why is it so important to go running or play sports by yourself, without Frederick?

D: First, it’s nothing about Fred per se. It would be anyone. I just see myself, always have seen myself, as a naturally kind of aloof person. Ever since I was in high school I would go to movies by myself, I’d go to school and keep a distance from everyone, just go for bike rides by myself. When I was older, I would get in my car on a whip (sic) and drive to New York City and back.

I: And yet you’re somebody who has been in a relationship with your husband since you were a teenager, over ten years. How does that work for you – having Fred as a presence, supportive or otherwise?

D: How it works is you pick your battles and you pick what you really want to do on your own. Like, I’ll want to hang out with my friend, Jessica, just the two of us. And he’ll (Frederick will) feel a little left out, I think. But he has to remember – and I try to tell him this – that when you have spent as much time as I have alone over there (abroad in the military), you start to really appreciate the separate parts of your life. I learned a lot about myself then. And it’s not so easy to go back to being – to having things done for you or with you.

It should be noted that this hesitance about interdependent models of self-development was more common among younger middle-class respondents than among those older. Younger respondents seemed to see more limitations associated with interdependence, regardless of a partner’s good intentions. An example is found in the following is an exchange with Claudia, whose relationship with boyfriend Barry, a continuing undergraduate, has meant adjusting her own graduate school plans. Claudia, only 27, is already quite aware of the personal sacrifices she’s made for her relationship with Barry, and of what, as she puts it, “might have been”:
I: Has your relationship with Barry ever meant leaving anything behind?

C: Well, sure, it’s meant having to change some plans, especially in terms of where I went to Law School. I’m here now in Evansville instead of being at other schools that I wanted to be at, that were more competitive. Or even in better geographic locations, where there were more cultural activities that I enjoy. Those things are important to me, but we decided to be together instead of making it a long distance relationship. I’ve also given up friendships, you know, which has been a bit tough. I’ve always been a person who values their friends.

I: So you could be in a better school, in a region that offers more of your type of activities, and perhaps with more friends - how do you feel about that?

C: Umm...I...you know, I guess you make the most of what you have, and you...you see the positive of what you are, of where you are. My family is here, and Evansville is very close to Canada and other cultural centers, so I can still spread my wings, so to speak. Losing things that are important to you, losing parts of yourself, it’s not easy. You make compromises.

Another younger respondent, Peter, 28, was a special sort of case. Peter was probably the interview case that raised self-selection concerns more than any other, as he seemed to have thought through issues of individualism in intimacy well before I met him. Describing himself as “different from most people” in relationships, Peter expressed a desire not merely for independent self-development, but also for ‘personalization’ even in the context of partnered relationship activities.

Throughout our interview Peter made it clear that he sees himself as patron of cultural activities, including theater and musical productions. A medical doctor, he mentioned his extensive education several times. There are some cultural activities that he and Myra enjoy together, including musical performances. Here, Peter describes his and girlfriend Myra’s tastes for similar music. Note his interest in the couple deriving separate pleasures from the same activity:

P: Typically I like to encourage separate hobbies or things, but occasionally there’s a concert or an event we will go and do together. You know, a lecture on this or that. That’s works well for me as long as we're interested in different sides of the same coin. Or, say we get a CD that we both really like. Sometimes she’ll like the songs I don’t, and I like the songs she doesn’t, you know? Take Miles Davis - I like the more eccentric stuff, she likes the more standard stuff. We both love him, but for completely different, you know, areas.
But Peter does not see in his and Myra’s tastes ‘difference plain and simple’. He has a
definite preference for the couple deriving different feelings from shared activities; this
preference is bound up with beliefs about what such differences illuminate about each
person’s experiences and knowledge or, put more generally, their cultural capital:

I: What makes you like the fact that you and Myra see “different sides of the same coin”?

P: Umm, I have, well…Here’s a ‘for example.’ I’ve considered myself kind of a
pseudo-Buddhist for say, over a decade. She is into more, umm, New Age type stuff, so
there's this overlap in a sense. We both have read certain books, but I’m more into the
more serious practice, and she's more interested in more, you know, umm - It’s hard for
me not to be condescending about it, to be honest with you. But, I think she practices
bullshit stuff, umm, it’s that simple.

It was at this point that Peter made a rather individualized cognitive ‘move,’ drawing a
distinction between his and Myra’s participation in this particular (spiritual) activity that
was based on quite external grounds – based on what he views as the integrity of the
practice and which of them adheres most closely to it:

I: Is that a good thing or a bad thing to you, that you share this interest but do it in
different ways?

P: It’s just that I hate to see certain things corrupted, you know - I hate to see these
millennia-old traditions corrupted by, you know, bad CD's and incense, you know, the
Border's version. You're not going to discover enlightenment at Border's, I’m sorry. You
know? This is why I say that we get different messages out of the teachings. Anyway,
that’s my take on it. I’m not in a place to judge, but it doesn’t stop me (laughing).

Admittedly, Peter’s reasoning here was uncommon among the respondents.
Nonetheless it bears noting. It calls to mind - playing against - Bellah’s description of
relationships today as insular pairings whose standards are internally generated. In this
case, Peter distances himself from Myra’s self-development actions on the grounds that
they do not match his understanding of what is demanded by a given spiritual practice; in
this sense at least, the external world trumps any unconditional acceptance presumed in
relationships today.
The common thread running through all these responses from respondents with greater class capital is twofold. On one hand, self-development was typically something in which one’s partner takes an active interest. This is in contrast to the many working-class respondents who expressed a lack of relationship interdependence in pursuing self-development. Second, although the interdependent model was at the fingertips of these middle-class women and men, it was only with ambivalence that they embraced a partner’s active support of their own self-development. While assistance on errands, housework and other ‘mundane’ activities was welcomed by most of these respondents, this class grouping did not always appreciate a partner’s intrusion into the realm of personal development. I refer to this phenomenon as the presence of a ‘resilient self’ in relationships: an understanding of oneself as worthy and capable of private development, even as an able and willing partner stands by ready to assist.

Conclusion

I have argued that there is good reason to consider the class dimensions of individualized intimacy and how they relate to self-development within relationships. The data presented in this chapter support the idea that an intimate culture oriented around self-development exhibits definite class-bound distinctions (Jamieson, 1999). Indeed, some of the most revealing differences in intimate ideals uncovered in this study centered on class differences. Education, career, and cultural backgrounds translated, for many respondents, into quite different meanings and patterns of individualism in relationships, both in thought and in practice. This leads us back to Holmes’ (2004)
question: *An individualization of intimacy for whom?* Findings indicate that the question is not just one of gender but also of social class.

To summarize, the sample exhibited marked differences in how self-development ideals were envisioned and enacted; these different orientations can be mapped with some success to Cancian’s independent, dependent and interdependent models of self-development in relationships, and yet there is still more to be said about the class-based patterns than what Cancian offers. The models varied according to how individuals from different class backgrounds: (a) envisioned themselves as possessing a set of unique traits or skills to use in the world, (b) viewed their romantic partner as a capable or welcome facilitator of self-development, and (c) possessed a clear ‘life agenda’ independent of relationship life. Put simply, the trappings of class shaped what individuals felt they could, or wanted to pursue as individuals and partners in a relationship. Working-class respondents were more likely to emphasize socioeconomic dimensions of (and limitations on) self-development, while middle-class respondents found self-development to be synonymous with inner, psychic cultivation. Perhaps this is one more incarnation of the tendency for those whose material needs are satisfied to turn their attention to more abstract matters.

But isn’t there reason to question the relevance of these class differences to an examination of contemporary intimate culture? It is hardly a revelation, after all, that educational, career and other life opportunities are distributed unequally in society, and that such inequalities generate variation in self-understanding and personal horizons. That this fact happens to impact individuals in relationships would appear merely circumstantial. Might not two *single* people of different class statuses also exhibit
tendencies toward self-development that followed the patterns shown above? What special reason is there to home in on these facts in an analysis of relationships?

I stress again that the unique importance of class to this analysis resides in the weight given by scholars to the supposedly new self-development aspects of intimacy. Regardless of their normative positions, theorists all see in contemporary relationship culture a forceful ideal of self-cultivation and self-fulfillment. And yet the chance of self-development, the very notion of its viability, is not evenly distributed in society; neither is its meaning universal. Nearly forty years ago Sennett and Cobb showed that the working classes struggle to narrate their lives as unique or as producing ‘special’ output. This kind of inequality - the unequal degree to which individuals can consider their lives fully developed, or worth developing - demands of scholars interested in the self-development dimensions of intimacy a class-conscious analysis. It was found in this study that notions of self-development and its actual achievement meant very different things to women and men of different class-cultural backgrounds. In the concluding chapter of this dissertation, I return to this point to discuss further implications of considering class more seriously in studies of contemporary intimate culture.
CHAPTER SEVEN: Communication and solidarity in individualized intimacy

In the political sphere democracy involves the creation of a constitution and, normally, a forum for public debate...What are the equivalent mechanisms in the context of the pure relationship?...All relationships which approximate to the pure form maintain an implicit 'rolling contract' to which appeal may be made by either partner when situations arise felt to be unfair or oppressive. The rolling contract...underlies, but is also open to negotiation through, open discussion by partners about the nature of the relationship.

(Giddens, 1992)

Whence togetherness? The question of solidarity in intimacy

Beginning most famously with Durkheim, social and cultural theorists have identified the fate of solidarity amidst progressing individualism as a central social dilemma. Today, a century after Durkheim’s work, the relationship between individualism and solidarity is a canonized sociological puzzle. Putnam’s Bowling Alone (2000) and Riesman’s The Lonely Crowd (1950) and, more recently, Bellah et. al’s Habits of the Heart (1985) and Wuthnow’s Acts of Compassion (1991), all pose classic sociological questions about our contemporary world: What happens to communal ties as individualism in its many forms progresses? Does society become increasingly fragmented and self-interested, or retain some common cohesiveness? How so?

As this dissertation has argued, current scholarly debates about individualized intimacy ask just the same sort of questions, which generally boil down this way: To the extent that individualism is popularly accepted and expected in contemporary intimacy, what are the bases and chances of solidarity - togetherness - in relationships? Inquiry along these lines is as broad as it is incendiary; the fate of solidarity and selflessness in intimacy is probably the topic that has provoked from scholars their most normative and heartfelt statements.
Speculation about the chances of solidarity in individualized intimacy depends in part on how solidarity itself is conceptualized. Is willingness to remain in a relationship the proper definition of togetherness/solidarity? If so, then divorce rates are a useful empirical indicator, and do help answer our questions. Or perhaps solidarity is marked by the willingness to put another before oneself. That understanding is more difficult to capture through measurable indicators, although survey research has tried to do so (e.g., through items addressed to the lengths one will go in order to sustain a relationship, even at cost to oneself). Finally, might solidarity be less about remaining coupled in the strict sense, and more about an emotional sort of closeness - the thorough ‘partnership’ that has come to define, for some, the meaning of relationships today? While I attempted to touch on all of these conceptions of intimate solidarity, it is the case that emotional closeness - of various sorts - presented itself as the most compelling sort of solidarity discussed by respondents.

This chapter presents an analysis that narrows from general types of intimate togetherness to one particular manifestation of solidarity - intimate communication - that was of interest to my respondents and that resonates with my own conceptual interests. The section that follows begins with an analysis of the “basics” of intimate solidarity - the sorts of essential things that bind partners together, according to my respondents - before moving on to a more focused treatment of communication, or self-disclosure, as a means to intimate solidarity. As was the case with material in previous chapters, the role of communication in relationships is discussed here as a multiple concept, one that varied according to several social dimensions in the sample, including gender and age lines. By distinguishing between two sorts of solidifying communication (pragmatic and
emotional), I am able to trace the narration of two different conceptions of togetherness-through-dialogue. I show that communication and its articulation emerges alongside the narration of gender and ‘relationship experience’. That is, the perceived appropriateness, usefulness and skill-set associated with either type of communication was defined through the respondents active process of thinking through gender ideologies and the role of experience in one’s life. A similar process was to a lesser extent at play regarding social class and constructions of communicative solidarity. The basics of communicative solidarity and the more subtle interconnections are treated in the following sections.

**Different conceptions of solidarity**

The most direct approach employed to access respondents’ characterizations of intimate solidarity was adapted from survey studies of relationship commitment. In these studies (discussed at length in Chapter 2) intimate solidarity is often conceptualized as a willingness to remain coupled, and operationalized through scaled items measuring responses to various ‘separation scenarios’ - e.g., Which of the following would likely lead you to leave your partner or divorce: Abuse? Infidelity? Sexual frequency? Terminal Illness? These survey questions are designed to access the types and extents of scenarios that would generate a disposition toward exiting a relationship; the underlying assumption is that remaining in a relationship defines solidarity, if only partly.

I share the opinion that a concept of intimate solidarity must have something to do with remaining coupled, and so I posed to all respondents the following question: What would have to happen in your current relationship for you to “call it quits”? Collected here are some sample responses:
I’d have to leave if she was with someone else, if she had an affair. I mean, ten years is a long time to just pack up your bag and go, but I think that would be it. I would leave immediately and just kinda, maybe try and talk it out. But I doubt it (would work out).

_Walter_

I think maybe unfaithfulness would do it, maybe, umm, violence toward the kids - severe violence to the kids, violence to me. You know, I grew up in a violent family, and had violent relationships before, and I don’t want that now. I was put in a position before where I had to defend myself from my ex-wife and I ended up doing county time for that.

_Jim_

It would have to do with having kids. And I’ve said to him, umm, in my opinion, he needs to figure out what he wants to do, and if he doesn’t, then I might have to leave. I don’t want that to happen, but at the same time, I do need to take care of this for myself. I want to have a child very very badly - it’s not out of any sense that this is what women do, it’s because I want a child.

_Janice_

It’s a good question: what would make me call it quits? I don’t think you know that until you’re in it. His cheating would do it. Also, complete disregard, disrespect and ignoring me, that would make me up and leave. Like, you know, not being connected and being pushed aside or something like that. That would do it, that would definitely do it. That would probably even do it more so than an infidelity. I think it comes down to this: If I felt like I wasn’t being loved and understood by the other person, then it’s not worth me investing myself into that relationship.

_Denise_

These responses come from two married and cohabiting women and two married and cohabiting men; they are a good starting point for a discussion of the general trends in the data relating to intimate solidarity. For one, it is interesting to note that, as suggested by the tone of the above sample of excerpts, nearly all respondents in the sample mentioned infidelity as potential or certain grounds for splitting up. This is unsurprising in light of survey research that notes a diminished but still strong stigma associated with infidelity.

Less common, though suggested by the above quotations, were respondents’ references to possible separation driven by matters relating to having children, or violence and fighting. The former topic was skewed by gender, with women more often than men claiming that entrenched differences over the timing of having children or whether to have them at all would lead to a breakup or divorce. The latter references to
conflict in relationships were distinct for their class-based differences. Working class respondents, especially those with substance abuse histories, were faster to mention arguing and physical aggression as reasons for potentially splitting up.

One other trend, embodied best in the last quote from Denise, was particularly rich and serves as a launching pad for the remainder of this chapter. Denise was first quoted in the previous chapter (on self-development), as an example of a middle-upper class respondent who did not necessarily need or desire her partner to be involved in many of her personal hobbies and pursuits. In the quote above, however, she strikes a somewhat different tone regarding the topic of intimate togetherness. Here Denise mentions a particular type of solidarity that should - must - exist in her marriage. She cites the relevance of emotional closeness in any decision about the couple remaining together. In particular, she says that “not being pushed aside” and “being understood” are central to her desire to remain in the relationship; failing these conditions, Denise would be dubious about continuing the relationship.

Emotional closeness and mutual understanding may seem obvious sources of togetherness, and yet they were not expressed by all respondents who spoke about intimate solidarity. For instance, a handful of respondents prioritized a concept of loyalty over personal understanding as a reason to remain together through hard times. In these cases, emotional bonding was seen more as a characteristic of other personal relationships, for instance with friends or relatives. Moreover, even when the concept of mutual understanding did figure into respondents’ accounts, it was rarely conceived in precisely the same way. For some, mutual understanding was about a partner knowing
about them ‘deep inside’; for others, understanding was more about knowing what the
other person likes and dislikes – e.g., how a partner likes their eggs.

The best way to summarize the study’s findings on communication and solidarity
is this: almost all respondents cited communication as the key to lasting togetherness; but
the interviewees had differing explanations for how communication produces solidarity in
relationships, and under what circumstances it does so. In contrast to the more easily
interpreted issues mentioned earlier - e.g., abuse and infidelity - ‘emotional bonds’ and
‘mutual understanding’ were more difficult to pin down. What was clear, though, was
that these phrases emerged frequently in interviews, often linked to notions of solidarity.

There were two questions I sought to answer regarding ‘communicative
solidarity’: What did these concepts mean to different individuals, and, given that they
were valued by so many respondents, what is perceived as fostering or detracting from
them in a relationship?

**Intimate solidarity and two types of communicative ideals**

The ‘importance of communication’ in relationships of all kinds is by now a well-
worn adage. The members of my sample proved no less influenced by the cultural ideal
of communication than one might expect. The researcher’s task was, as it had been at
other points in this study, one of pushing past common sense – in this case the received
wisdom of communication’s importance in relationships. My goal was to understand
exactly how open dialogue between partners was thought to generate solidarity. It was
not until I pressed women and men about the benefits and limits of communication that I
began to see its connection with solidarity and, importantly, its implications for thinking
about individualism in relationships as well.

Nearly the entire sample cited “open communication” early on when asked,
“What do you find makes a relationship work out well?” The following are three typical
responses to a request that interviewees talk about what kinds of things keep a couple
together “in the long run”:

Honest, open communication. I want open, honest communication. That's it. For a
relationship to work, you have got to have that. Even if you are lying sometimes, or if
you get caught in a lie, you have to be able to talk about it and sit down and accept it and
accept responsibility for what you have done... You can always work through something,
as long as you can be honest and open and talk about it.

Working together, learning to accomplish the same things, openness and communication
– that makes the difference between a bad relationship and a good relationship. And of
course love, you know, that's pretty important, but openness and communication... to me
that's a big, big factor. It keeps you together.

The best relationship would definitely be, spending a lot of time together and, you know,
having good communication. Communication is definitely a part of it, in my eyes.
Being able to just talk about anything, you know? And it was definitely missing in my
last relationship, and from what I’ve heard it was missing in her last relationship, too.
Her old boyfriend couldn’t open up, he couldn’t tell her nothing...To me, it would be a
miserable thing, not being able to communicate in a relationship, a horror story, you
know? You’d keep wondering, ‘why is she mad at me? She looks upset, but what’s going
on in her head? Is it me? Did I do something wrong? Or is it that she just had a bad day at
work?’ I can’t take not knowing.

These sentiments, offered respectively by a newlywed woman, and remarried and
cohabiting men, typified the sample’s general opinion that “open, honest communication”
was the lynchpin of successful intimate relationships. Indeed, several respondents
mentioned feeling pressure to engage in relationship communication even when they
themselves were not sure of its merits - solidaristic or otherwise. For instance Roseanne
(31, married for 2 years), in talking about what commitment and togetherness means in a
relationship, found herself drawn to talk about communication even though that topic
seemed to dawn on her from somewhere external to her own personal beliefs:

I: What would you say it means to be in a close relationship?
R: Well, first off, you have to be faithful, that’s my own feeling. And I know a lot of people say communication is important but I don’t know how I feel about that - a lot of people don’t know how to communicate with each other. Sometimes a person might say one thing, but the other person doesn’t comprehend it the right way. So when it comes to communication, I know they say it’s important, but it’s (also) tricky. That’s been my experience.

I: So, do you try to communicate often with (husband) Carl?

R: I don’t know that I do. I guess that makes me a bad wife, huh (laughing)? And here I thought I needed to make dinners and that would be (enough).

Roseanne’s last, wry statements are revealing. The sheer quantity of references collected from the sample suggests a conventional wisdom that communication makes relationships work, that it holds partners together. But how? Roseanne is not sure exactly, and so might not always follow through in practice on that received wisdom. Nevertheless she feels the weight of the injunction toward communication.

**Pragmatic disclosure and emotional disclosure: the role of experience and gender**

To be more specific, interviewees tended to see communication as serving two types of binding functions in relationships: 1) as a practical means of keeping a partner apprized of day-to-day activities, and 2) as an instrument of mutual self-revelation, by which partners learn about the each other’s past and present. The first type of communication, as described by the respondents, fosters intimate togetherness through the joint management of everyday life; it is the pragmatic, or instrumental, communication between members of a team. The latter type of disclosure - what I call emotional disclosure - binds partners through ‘knowing the other’. Communication in this sense provides a window on who a person ‘is,’ in turn allowing the romantic partners to be drawn closer together.

To be sure, there is overlap in these concepts. For instance, one may learn about a partner’s essential personality by observing, and communicating about, mundane details
of life. The interviewees, though, often drew distinctions between the two notions. For the remainder of the chapter I offer a look at how these conceptualizations of open communication were thought to generate relationship solidarity, and how narratives of gender and relationship experience, and to a lesser extent social class, were bound up with these accounts.

Brent’s case

“I’m gone all day, you know, sometimes into the night. I want to be filled in: on her classes, what went on that day, what's going on with the kids. She has to fill me in on all that stuff so I don’t miss out on anything.” These are the words of Brent, 36, father to three children, a cab driver who has been married eight years. Like many other respondents, Brent cited the importance of communication in keeping him and his wife Abby, “on the same page.” One of the most comfortable interviewees I encountered, Brent gave the overall impression of being something of a ‘relationship veteran.’ Having been involved in several long-term relationships prior to his marriage, and currently in the process of raising three children, Brent (and some others like him in the sample) was a contrast to newlyweds and new cohabiters. Like other respondents who had been in numerous relationships or who had spent more years with their current partner, Brent carried a sense that he and wife Abby had been through the preliminary features of relationships. He related his views on communication to notions of solidarity.

For instance, when asked what he and Abby like to talk about given the importance he said they place on communication, Brent was quick to point out that their communication was not typically about abstract relationship issues, or “feelings.”
Rather, Brent stated that he and his wife felt closest, and that he personally felt most comfortable, when they were discussing what he called “the particulars” of their day:

B: To tell the truth, I feel connected to Abby and the kids (by) having those conversations: what to have for dinner, housework, chores, what do you want to do for fun, you know…

I: You’re connected by being involved in talking about ‘who’s doing what’?

B: Yeah, exactly. Money is another topic of conversation…and the kids are huge. I feel like 85% of the stuff we’re talking about is just nuts and bolts (related to) the kids. ‘I’m going to get this one, you’re getting that one.’ ‘You’re going to take so and so here or there.’ It sounds boring as hell, I know, but for me it’s (these conversations are) my lifeline to her and to the family.

I: And what about conversations about the relationship itself, or about your, like, thoughts or views on life?

B: Well, umm, there’s less of that I guess. I mean, we have our problems from time to time, and we fight. But we’re not big on long talks, or long walks on the beach holding hands (laughing).

Given the full breadth of our conversation, there are several reasons one might suggest for Brent and Abby’s behaviors around communication. In structural terms, Brent’s daily life as a cab driver means working odd hours and a schedule usually opposite to Abby’s. The couple’s time together is necessarily limited and in fact numbers fewer hours than even many respondents in dual career couples reported. As a result, Brent and Abby’s “logistical” conversations are often the only, or at least the most readily available type of communication between them.

Viewed another way, perhaps there is a gendered interpretation to be offered for Brent’s account - especially in light of his last, somewhat sarcastic sentence about ‘sentimental’ relationship scenarios. As I explain later in the chapter, women and men sometimes held stereotypical views of the opposite sex’s orientations toward “talking things out”; women constructed men as deficient in the skills of deep conversation, while men often saw their lives as separate enough from women’s lives that talk was not feasible. Although Brent does not fall into this latter pattern, it is possible that he retains
a stereotypical view of emotional outpourings. At any rate, the main point is that clearly Brent derives a real feeling of togetherness - a relationship “lifeline” - from these 

pragmatic dialogues.

Another good example of the relationship experience/pragmatic communication trend was Liza, who has been married for 18 years to her old high school boyfriend, Ben. Liza described herself as a person who values honesty, who believes that, in order for a couple to be on good terms, each partner must know where the other stands on various issues, and that open communication is important in that regard. She has a particular understanding of what useful communication should look like, and it seems that it is one that has changed over the years; indeed, it has changed even in her present marriage.

Liza recalled a time in the past when her conversations with Ben were more passionate and penetrating but also more turbulent, even divisive. Today she sees the benefits (solidary and otherwise) of a more pragmatic type of communication:

I: Would you prefer more of those past conversations you had with Ben about the state of your marriage, or about those ‘passionate’ topics?

L: No, because I think we’re kind of ‘status quo’ right now. I think if something came up that needed to be addressed in-depth then we would do that. But right now things are kind of stable. Earlier on we had times where we were more involved in talking about things, how we felt, who we wanted to be, and so forth. We actually had a time, early on, I think it was when we had my first child - I was very unhappy and I just wasn’t liking what he (Ben) was doing for me. I needed change. So we started talking about what he was to me, and what was I to him. It was very tough. Different story today. Now we talk more about something funny that happened at the store, or who’s getting the milk. Less interesting, I guess, but more peaceful. I don’t know. I feel closer to him now than I did back then, when we talked about that other stuff.

I: Why do you think that is?

L: You know, I don’t know. Getting older, maybe, and the kids. When you’re young, you feel like you have to be so connected to that person. Now, we talk about the boring stuff, I guess you’d call it, but we’re better in the long run.

It was difficult to pin down precise reasons that women and men involved in longer relationships (relationships more than five years duration), and especially those
who had children, were more likely to talk about pragmatic - as opposed to emotional - communication as a means to intimate solidarity, but the pattern was not arguable. Of the 17 respondents involved in relationships of at least five years, 15 expressed that pragmatic communication was a central means to achieving feelings of solidarity with a partner. Both structural matters (e.g., the presence of children, busier lifestyles) as well as the increased familiarity that attends many years in a relationship are possible explanations for this pattern.

There were, however, some exceptions to the rule worth noting, in the form of a handful of younger respondents who also cited pragmatic communication as a pathway toward togetherness. Valerie, 26, lives with her boyfriend of three years, Steven. I met Valerie at what she described as a “transition point” in their relationship. She and Steven attended the same college several years earlier and knew one another as friends during that time. After graduation, and a series of short-term relationships for each of them, Steven and Valerie reacquainted romantically. In the early going, they struggled to find a common ground when it came to obligations toward one another. In particular, they each had a set of close friends, to whom each felt attached and who often came between the couple. Valerie explained these difficulties in terms of “maturity” and communication:

V: The biggest thing between us then was that Steven had this group of friends - and so did I - and we didn’t wanna give that up. And it hurts us, as a relationship.

I: How did you resolve that problem? Or, did you resolve it?

V: We were younger then, and getting a little bit more, you know, mature, was a difference. Back then we would just yell at one another about it. But then eventually we’d get to, like, a point where we would explain how we really felt. It would take a long time, and we’d be crying and stuff. Eventually, like I said, we would know more about why the other person was mad.

To be clear, Valerie is no unabashed supporter of communication in relationships. Indeed, although their relationship is still relatively new, Valerie is pleased that she and
Steven have moved into a newer, more stable, and less frequent form of communication. And she sees this shift as contributing to different sort of solidarity in the relationship. The key has been a move toward more mundane communication as a means of bringing the pair closer together and defusing or replacing formerly charged communication patterns:

I: Do you still talk about the relationship itself? About things that pertain more to the two of you, or to how you’re doing together?

V: If we were away from each other, then we would. For example, a few years ago when we tried to do things long distance, there would be lots of, I don’t know, more personal discussions. Like last February I was working and he was in Mexico for two months, and I was bundled up and aggravated that I wasn’t with him, and men in general don’t talk about their feelings (laughing), so we had to have some deep talking then. But now we have more talk about what we're doing this weekend, and that sort thing. Things have calmed down, and now we just talk about the everyday stuff, but it’s good to have that kind of communication too, you know.

I: What if Steven went away on business again?

V: Do you mean what would happen to what we talk about? Maybe we would go back to the old ways. But I’m not sure about that. I’m hoping it’s out of our system, to be honest. I hope we’re past that.

I: Because it started fights?

V: Sort of. And because now I feel closer to him, without all the drama. We’re just, umm, doing our thing.

To the extent that respondents associated pragmatic communication with togetherness, it was a relationship solidarity derived from the functional features of life that they described. In other words, these couples’ spirit of togetherness and teamwork was grounded first in the workings of everyday life - shared errands, chores, childcare, bills and other daily matters which in turn provided fodder for a pragmatic form of communication. These women and men acknowledged the possibility of becoming distant from a partner as a result of not being “kept in the loop” on such matters. Note that pragmatic communication’s basis in the everyday details of relationship life did not mean it was any less meaningfully bound up with solidarity. Darren, 28, put this point in
perhaps the clearest language of all the respondents. With a wife who works nights as a telephone operator, Darren makes sure to stay up late and await her arrival home so that he can hear about her day, “because she needs that…she needs to come home and unload her day. But I need it too, ‘cuz (otherwise) we start to drift when we don’t know what’s what with each other.”

Pragmatic communicative ideals underline the materiality of people’s lives and relationships; they recognize that the quotidian in relationship life is essential to the experience of intimate solidarity. In order for two active individuals to forge a life together and remain close, the above respondents and their like seemed to say, each person must know what the other is doing. There are instrumental reasons for this, of course - e.g., a missed payment by one damages credit for both. But more often respondents reasoned from a more abstract position: a life is defined in part by what one does, and so to truly know and feel connected to a partner requires learning about those daily activities.

This sort of communication, as Jamieson has argued and as some studies demonstrate empirically, is a major feature of individuals’ relationship narratives. It is shown here to be constitutive of intimate solidarity. It is not, however, the image that intimacy theorists tend to have in mind when they talk of self-disclosure in relationships. Instead, theorists tend to describe an ideal of self-disclosure in relationships that involves a ‘pouring out of the self’: emotional rather than practical self-revelation. As we will see in the next section, this ideal too lived in lives of my respondents.

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If you feel something, let me know how you feel. Thinking it’s wrong to feel the way you're feeling - that's detrimental to you as a human being. That's your soul, man, that's your inner voice talking to you, and it has more than every right to (be expressed)
through your mouth. That's the only way you can get it out. I mean, by keeping that in - bottling that in, you're bottling in who your core value is, who you really are, and I have to know all about that from the other person. Who would wanna be with somebody who's a fake, quiet person, who can deal with everything alone and (is) imperviable (sic)? ‘I’m superwoman, I can’t feel anything.’ Raw emotion is the best part of who somebody really is, you know what I mean?

Charlie, 26, married

It is a fundamental truth of humanity that individuals are not merely collections of instinctive behaviors. We think and feel, about the world and ourselves. This fact bears directly on the concept of emotional disclosure that emerged from many interviews, which I address in this section. Some of the men and women I interviewed lauded communication in relationships for its ability to keep them abreast not simply of what their partner does, but also who their partners are, what they think and feel. The quote above, from a 26 year-old married man named Charlie, was among the more forceful statements in support of what I call the ideal of ‘emotional disclosure’: relationship communication oriented around revealing the self, with the explicit goal or unintended outcome of augmenting intimate solidarity. This ideal conceives of open communication as a window deep into the person with whom one shares a life. It is not entirely distinct from the pragmatic ideal described above; like its practical counterpart, emotional disclosure was certainly thought to include, in part, reflections on the particulars of one’s daily life. It differs, though, in its additional goal of penetrating into the core of the individual, into some emotional center that defines ‘who we are.’

Alexis is 41 years old, remarried to Kevin, 57. I note their ages, for Alexis made reference several times to the gap between the two. Although the age gap concerned her at the outset of their five-year relationship, Alexis said, her worries faded upon “getting to know” Kevin. Alexis told me frankly that she felt somewhat detached from Kevin early on in their relationship. She said that it would have been impossible to feel
comfortable with Kevin, someone who had lived a full life before they met, without obtaining a ‘personal history’ of sorts. This she accomplished through ongoing communication with Kevin. Alexis described emotional self-disclosure as a means to learning how a partner’s past shapes who he is in the present:

A: In a relationship you've got to meld together, you've got to know each other, inside and out. You have to live with him, but even more than that you have to see if you can live with one another. Everybody comes from different backgrounds these days; my husband comes from a different background, but I do too, you know. And Kevin’s a bit older – like I told you before, that worried me. The way to fix all of it is to get everything out in the open. I remember talking to him about his first marriage, his health (conditions), all this stuff about him that made me feel so comfortable with who he was. I don’t think he had that before.

Alexis’ allusions to different backgrounds would certainly please theorists who focus on the new diversity in relationships today - e.g., reversed gender roles, delayed marriage, interracial couples - and the challenges it raises. And the emphasis on emotional revelation is clear. In this case the age difference in the relationship makes self-disclosure even more important to Alexis. She uses communication as a way to piece together the story of Kevin’s life prior to their meeting. Absent this sort of dialogue, she would not feel close enough to Kevin, or know enough about him, for a real sense of intimate solidarity to exist.

Praise for the solidarity-producing effects of emotional disclosure sometimes sprang from less-than-likely sources. Consider Marshall, a remarried father of three working as a retail supervisor. Unlike Alexis, who had recently taken several college psychology classes, Marshall is a less obvious proponent of open communication. Having worked his entire adult life in male-dominated blue collar jobs, and the child of “emotionally distant” parents, Marshall said that he surprises even himself in his comfort with open interpersonal dialogue. Such communication is important enough to him that he has committed to improving his skills in that arena, even seeking therapy toward that...
end. During the interview Marshall was inclined to note the pitfalls awaiting couples who do not engage in emotional disclosure:

M: I know guys at work, I hear how they talk about their wives - they don’t keep their wives in the loop, they don’t talk about their jobs with them, or their troubles or their past. And I call them ‘puppies,’ that's what I call them. They haven’t gotten over the hump of their relationship yet, and it’s so obvious.

I: What's this ‘hump,’ you’re talking about?

M: The hump is honesty, openness, communication. It's so important. If you want to have a successful relationship it's got to be communication. Even when it's bad communication, at least it's communication. You know, you'll hear these other guys complaining about their life and how no one understands them, and you can just tell that they don’t talk to their wives the way they probably should, you know? You can tell. They're (partners in other couples are) all in their own different worlds. They gotta be the tough guy, keeping their mouth shut. They talk to their boys, though. See, I learned how much being open can help, from my first marriage - she wouldn’t have cared what I had to say about anything.

The exchange with Marshall is revealing for its forceful advocacy of emotional disclosure, but also for the light it sheds on two other things, namely relationship experience and gender. When Marshall chastises his male co-workers for playing a “tough guy” role, or labels them “puppies,” he is linking their lack of emotional disclosure to levels of ‘relationship maturity’ and to the constraints of gender roles. In the second half of this chapter I explore in greater detail each of these topics and their relation to communicative ideals.

A closer look at relationship experience, gender and the circumscription of communicative ideals

It has been shown that, in keeping with conventional cultural wisdom, almost all (39 out of a total 45) respondents cited the salience of open communication in fostering solidarity in relationships. The type of communication envisioned was not static, but its overall perceived importance was more or less universal in the sample.
In some cases, though, and even in several instances where a respondent’s belief in pragmatic or emotional disclosure was truly heartfelt, these ideals were shaped by their intersection with one of two factors: relationship experience and gender. It is important to discuss in more detail how communicative ideals were sometimes articulated alongside narratives of gender and relationship experience. I deal first with the latter.

**How experience in relationships shaped views on communication and solidarity**

As the interviews wore on, it became clear that there was variation in the force and depth with which men and women elaborated their relationships beliefs. Some beliefs were strongly held and argued while others were less firmly presented. Nowhere was this difference clearer than in regard to beliefs in self-disclosure and open communication. Some respondents provided various examples of how communication led directly, in their view, to more togetherness and closeness in their relationships, or, conversely, how “bad communication” drove a wedge between partners. Clearly the men and women in this category had thought a lot about why communication would be central in binding individuals to one another. For others, however, the stated importance of open communication sounded more like cliché than thoroughgoing commitment to an ideal. This second contingent of respondents seemed to think that it was ‘correct’ to praise open communication, but upon being questioned further did not have deep reasons for their position.

Interestingly, the varying depth of articulated ideals seemed not to be a function of underlying contrary feelings that belied the stated importance of such ideals. In other words, it did not seem that social desirability was the main cause for a respondent saying
one thing about communication but seeming another. Rather, differences were related to
the *degree of consideration* given to how and why self-disclosure is useful in
relationships. Although it would be reasonable to assume that class differences drove this
variation, this is not supported by the data. Whether respondents had more working-class
or middle-class backgrounds, had more or less education, showed little effect on the
depth of articulation of communicative ideals.

Instead it was relationship experience - understood as length of time in a single
relationship or as experience over the years in multiple relationships - that ranked as the
main influence on deeper or shallower ideals of self-disclosure. Relationship experience
appeared to provide a larger frame of reference for, and more time for consideration of,
one’s relationship views. Indeed, even some younger respondents who had been in a
relationship of five years or more were more likely than their older but greener (in terms
of relationship experience) counterparts to express a developed account of the importance
of self-disclosure.

It was Marshall’s account, excerpted above, that first suggested this line of
thought on relationship experience. Marshall had his own conceptual vocabulary when it
came to relationship experience, describing his co-workers who struggle to feel close to
their partners, as “puppies.” Their fledgling relationship status means to Marshall that
they have not yet learned the benefits of self-disclosure.

This would not be the only example of notions of “learning” and “experience”
factoring into respondents’ narratives of self-disclosure and solidarity. This was
especially true of accounts of *emotional* disclosure, and how one must learn the ‘useful
limits’ of communication. For example, David, 40 years-old and remarried for two years,
described making concerted efforts to “learn from” his first marriage to Deborah - especially about the benefits of using communication to seek assistance and be less self-reliant in relationships:

D: My ex-wife was very proactive at getting advice from a third party - not trying to solve things internally. I tried to pick that up from her, but ended up taking it too far. Sometimes I would come home, when I was not getting along with my boss, and I would dump what was happening at work on her. I would just start dumping it. I know (now) that she would have been more appreciative if I would at least say, ‘Deborah, I’d like to talk with you about some things that have occurred. Would it be okay - can you tell me a good time either tonight or in the next week that would be good?’ I didn't know how to respect her own needs like that, at that time.

Like other experienced interviewees who focused on self-disclosure in relationships, David outlined how, over time, her was able to gauge how communication could counterbalance overly-individualized behavior and generate a greater sense of intimate togetherness. It was a subtle argument David was making. He noted that communication, whether pragmatic or emotional, would not be truly successful - would not be truly solidifying - unless partners avoided “dumping” onto each other. A married woman, Beverly, who has been with her husband for 12 years, also pointed out that confessing everything that comes into one’s mind is not the “right way” to go about sharing with one’s self with a partner:

B: If you push too far, then the frustration starts. No one wants to have someone bore them to death. On some level (when you do that) you’re not even really talking anymore. You’re just using the other person to let stuff out. My husband can go 3 hours. After that much time, I don’t feel an emotional connection to the person I’m talking to. It’s not the right way to do it.

Importantly, when asked how she came to realize these feelings, Beverly cited the role of previous relationships:

B: I don’t know why I feel that way. I guess it’s gotta do with being someone who used to do it myself (laughing). You see enough boyfriends and even friends glaze over while you’re dumping all your stuff on them, umm, you know, it sinks in (laughing).
Likewise, when another woman Faith, who has been married for 11 years, talked about the limits that should be placed on self-disclosure in order to preserve individuation, there was the sense that her position on the matter has been honed through the past trials of relationship life:

I: Do you think there are any situations where it’s OK to keep things to yourself, to not share things with your husband?

F: I think I thought that more in the past, yeah. But not so much anymore. I mean, I’m pretty straight with him, now. I guess it really depends. It depends on how you view what you’re withholding from the other person. I’ve learned the hard way that if you are withholding something because you’re afraid of the consequence of telling them, that’s usually a sign that it’s not very good, and you feel crummy about it. But if you’re withholding something because it’s a piece of you that you want to keep private, or because friends or confidants have trusted you, that’s OK. It’s probably even a good thing.

I: What’s a good thing, exactly?

F: Keeping that stuff to yourself, you know, not spilling everything. Then you can have some personal life.

I: And what do you mean when you say you learned this the hard way?

F: Well, I’ve seen both sides in relationships. You know, I had boyfriends who picked at everything, and then I’ve hidden things from them so they wouldn’t get mad. Over the years you find some, I dunno, some middle area I guess.

 Faith has learned not only about the limits of communicative solidarity, but of togetherness in general, through her relationship experience. She constructs herself as an active learner who succeeds (or fails) in relationships based largely on acquired knowledge and skills.

All the above examples come from respondents in second marriages or relationships longer than 7 years. Interestingly, among younger and less experienced respondents, the solidifying role of communication was no less likely to come up in the interviews but was articulated in vaguer terms. It seemed that these latter respondents felt they ‘should’ say something about communication in relationships, but were unsure of a deeper position on the topic. Consider Alice, 26, a cohabiter of 2 years:
A: Listening and communicating are the basics. Just ask Oprah (laughing)! You have to keep tabs on one another. I think a good relationship is one that is really built on trust and people feeling comfortable, without unspoken tensions. People need to understand and compromise and listen and be patient and put someone else’s needs ahead of their own sometimes.

I: What do listening and communicating have to do with putting someone else’s needs first?

A: Well…(long pause) I’m not sure, really. I mean, it makes sense, right? That communication is important? It’s how you let the other person know where you’re at.

Or the following exchange with Elaine, 25, who pronounced at the beginning and conclusion of the interview that communication is the key ingredient to a close relationship. The excerpt, occurring in the middle portion of the interview, suggests a thinness to Elaine’s understanding of communicative ideals:

I: You’ve mentioned several times that you think communication is important - do you ever talk with your boyfriend about the state your relationship?

E: No, not really. Just the typical, ‘I love you,’ every now and then, you know, now and then during the night, but that's about it. We pretty much talk about our families, what they are up to, and what we plan to do for next weekend or something.

I: You never try to take an assessment of how your relationship is going, or anything like that?

E: Not lately I haven’t - I’m pretty sure where it is and where it’s going…Umm, there really is no question. I'm not asking myself and nether is he – at least I don’t think he's asking himself.

It should not be inferred that Alice or Elaine (the latter moved in with her boyfriend just one year before our interview) is being insincere in her praise of open communication. The truth is that each woman seemed to accept wholly the principle that communication brings couples closer together. Nonetheless, I wish to draw attention to the thinner resonance of their ideals relative to the deeper, more deliberated rationales for communication offered by David, Beverly, Marshall and Faith. The latter group provided more carefully considered accounts of the importance of self-disclosure, its limitations, and how it binds partners to one another. Whether these differences are attributable to age or time spent in relationships or both, it is clear that the pattern existed
over the course of many interviews. In concluding this chapter I address the broader implications of this trend.

*The gendered features of emotional and pragmatic disclosure*

In addition to relationship experience, gender also informed respondents’ communicative ideals, and how men and women saw the relationship between communication and solidarity. The impact of gender was mediated largely through (often stereotypical) narratives about men and women’s relationship ‘capabilities’ – ideologies about what each sex is able to comprehend about oneself and others, and in turn feel comfortable talking about. In keeping with the theme of experience and ‘acquired skills,’ the interviewees assessed themselves and their partners in terms of gendered communicative abilities – sometimes stereotypical, but other times innovative and contrary to gendered tropes.

When I spoke with Renee - a cohabiter who, like several other interviewees, mentioned that her undergraduate background is in psychology - her faith in the beneficial effects of open communication was on full display. In fact, she said that she had agreed to participate in the interview with hopes that she might learn more about how to improve dialogue with Seth, her boyfriend. Renee’s education has instilled a belief in the positive role of sharing internal feelings. But this ideal has not meant that accomplishing such communication in the relationship is an easy task. Seth lacks, in her view, the requisite skills for beneficial self-disclosure:

R: I know how important dialogue is, and I think of myself as a helper for Seth when it comes to communication. I can nudge him in ways that other people won’t or can’t. And believe me, as a man, he needs the nudging!
I: Nudging to do what, exactly?

R: He doesn’t have extraordinary abilities - he doesn’t have confidants. He doesn’t have guy friends, or even female friends that he would go to to share something, and so it’s just him and I. He does have some friends, he just doesn’t utilize them, or even me, in that way. And he doesn’t necessarily make a huge amount of effort to think about what’s in his head and then let me in on it. And this is something, you know, in angry moments, that I’ve said, ‘You’re lazy about doing this communication work.’ But what guys aren’t?

Note that Renee shifted between two explanations for Seth’s inability to communicate. She initially mentions lacking communicative “abilities,” but also went on to cite a lack of “confidants” with whom Seth might hone communication skills. It is possible that Renee accurately perceives Seth’s conformance to a pattern that afflicts many American men, namely a reported lack of friends relative to women. In the last instance, though, Renee seemed most comfortable and most genuine in attributing Seth’s diminished communicative abilities to his gender (“What guys aren’t this way,” she asks.). To Renee, there is a gendered obstacle to their intimate solidarity:

I: Is it ever frustrating that Seth does not open up to you?

R: It sure is! Especially when, you know, I want to share important things with him, or I want him to do (the same). There’s like a wall there, and I can’t get over and he won’t go over.

Some of the men’s constructions of women also contained stereotypical gender stories. Alexander, the married business executive discussed in the previous chapter, whose career requires frequent trips out of town, expressed a different gender-based reading of what couples can and should share with one another. Alexander related that he shares little with his wife besides daily logistical information. Like Renee, he explains this lack of communication via stereotypically gendered beliefs, mostly citing limitations on his wife’s part. Here, though, the limitations are not those of communicative abilities but of ‘common knowledge’:

A: We don’t talk much in detail about it (his work) because she could care less about career, mine or hers. She works a little, but like a lot of (women), her family is her
primary job and preference. For me, my family is just one faction of my life. If it’s not house stuff, she ain’t talking to me.

And later, regarding the negotiation of finances:

A: I pay all the bills, I manage all the expenses, I do all the insurances, and she spends.

I: And is there a joint discussion about what will be spent and how it will be spent?

A: No. There is no budget for her. She buys whatever she pleases, and I have nothing to say about it. And she can’t understand the work that brings in that money! She’s used to a 9-5 world where you go in and come home, no problem. Her father was blue collar guy and that’s what he did. I’m a different scenario when you get to this (employment) level. But I don’t need her to understand. I don’t expect her to, anyway.

Alexander’s perspective is shaped not by beliefs about differential communicative abilities but about the knowledge necessary to discuss topics that matter to him; the issue is the content of disclosure, not its form or execution. Alexander does not see much reward in sharing with his wife - whose grasp of his world, the working world, he assumes is limited to what she gleaned as a child from her father’s career - the demands of his work life. He does not believe a woman - or, at least, this woman - will understand. Rigid gender ideologies clearly underpin his assumptions. The dilemma as it regards intimate solidarity is that some of the very things Alexander cares most about (e.g., his career) are viewed as off limits for sharing with his wife. This likely represents a real weakening of togetherness for the couple. This notion is confirmed by the fact that Alexander prefers time to himself when not at work, rather than time with family.

It was two cohabiting interviewees, Max and Nadine, who provided the most vivid statements on gender, communication and togetherness. Their cases serve as concentrated examples of the currents running through many other interviews. I will address Max’s case first.

A self-described “introvert” with a “succinct” communicative style, but also someone who professed strong egalitarian gender inclinations, Max drew my attention
immediately. Max grew up with his mother Ann, a single-parent for much of his life. Max told me that he learned about independence and individual responsibility from his mother’s example. He was forthright about this individualist spirit having made its way into many areas of his life, including his relationships. Among other topics, we talked at length about the ways his individualism shapes his relationship; Max’s views on communication with girlfriend Helen were particularly interesting. In all of these discussions Max’s gender ideology played a salient role:

M: I spent a lot of time watching men dominate women in my family. I knew I would try to be different.

I: And since you and (girlfriend) Helen tend to look at your relationship in this kind of ‘gender conscious way,’ are there areas of you life where you’re especially careful when it comes to, umm, not being patriarchal or not reinforcing typical gender stuff? Any trouble spots?

M: One thing, actually, that’s hard, is that I tend to be very blunt. Very curt, very succinct. I don’t require knowing what you think about my opinions - I’m very sure of myself and Helen is very – how do I put this? – very sensitive. It’s something we’ve really had to resolve as far as communication goes, because at times I come across as the blunt, forceful male, where in reality it’s just my personality, regardless of whom I’m talking with. So it could look like I’m the forceful male hurting her because I’m, you know, over-driven, but really I think it’s more of a personality clash. So if someone is coming from the outside (and) looks in, it could look bad, and then I will doubt myself: ‘Was I being, you know, umm, overly patriarchal or was I just being myself?’

I: And is that the only way that your worry about gender stuff when it comes to communication?

M: Well, the other thing is - and I get the impression that it might be different for other people when it comes to this - I don’t care if she has any interest in what I do. She really likes to share herself with me. She likes to share her feelings, her thoughts. She wants, in the morning, she wants to tell you what her dreams were, you know. She has this need to be validated by someone else, to be praised and things of that nature. Not me. I don’t know how much of this is tied to my being very introverted, and her very extroverted, or is it about men and women? Who’s to say?

In these passages, and in the interview overall, Max struggled to reconcile a stated preference for gender egalitarianism with stereotypical assumptions about women that he has adopted over time. Throughout our conversation he stressed the roles played by ‘personality’ and gender - concepts he sees as distinct - in determining his and Helen’s
expressions of self through communication. On one level, Max was merely applying familiar stereotypes about men’s assertiveness and women’s sensitivity as a way to distinguish communicative styles: men are gruff while women sensitive in conversation. Ultimately, though, he is unsure whether to explain their tendencies in terms of gender or more idiosyncratic “personality differences”.

Even more revealing were Max’s comments on his and Helen’s needs for self-validation and how these needs impact decisions to share oneself. Max said he sees in Helen a “need to be validated by someone else,” a need he claims that he does not feel, or at least not as strongly as Helen does. Indeed, Max expressed time and again his comfort as a solitary figure, neither needing himself to share personal feelings, nor inclined to give audience to the disclosures of his partner. Whether or not Max considers the implications for solidarity of his dispositions is unclear, but the overall theme - male communicative reticence and female outpouring - is not new.

If Max was representative of what a good portion of men (and more than a few women) believed about gendered expectations and communication in relationships, Nadine, 33, spoke for many women in the sample who felt that men fail in the first place to achieve necessary self-understanding - men do not “understand themselves” enough to participate in self-disclosure. In this regard, Nadine echoes some of the sentiments voiced by Renee, above, who doubted her partner’s communicative skill-set. But Nadine went further in her characterization, distinguishing between the types of relationship communication for which her boyfriend Nick, and men in general, are suited or unsuited:

I: What are the common topics of conversation for you and Nick? What are the things you usually talk about?
N: We don’t have a lot of; you know, deep, meaningful discussion, that’s for sure. I mean, sometimes we’ll talk about current events, maybe the election. But we’re basically down to talking about what we did that day, what our friends are up to.

I: Do you ever talk about the relationship?

N: Yeah. If I initiate it, and then he will end the conversation as soon as possible.

D: What kinds of things do you bring up that he would stamp out?

N: Umm, the things like, you know, ‘Why not spend more time with me, share more of what’s in that head of yours with me, or, why don’t we ever go out and do things?’...And the marriage thing, too (Nadine has pressed Nick about marriage for several years). I kind of sound kind of nagging right now, and I should really know better, because those types of things are just not what guys are good at.

I: What things?

N: Talking about romantic things, telling me about his thoughts...He will never bring anything up. In fact, when I’ll bring things up, things on my mind, we’ll talk about it and then he’ll say, ‘Why are you just attacking me? What about the things that you do wrong?’ And I’m like, ‘OK, go ahead!’ you know, ‘Tell me what you want me to do differently.’ But then it’s, ‘never mind’. The only thing he shares with me is that he wants me to clean more. It’s never about feelings with him - he’s not one to really talk about feelings much. To be honest, it’s a bit alienating.

Now, it’s evident in this excerpt that Nadine is shifting between the topic of general communication in relationships and the more specific issue of arguing with one’s partner, which is one particular form of communication. Still, what comes through here, and did so especially at other points during the interview, is a conception of men’s inability to share much about themselves. For Nadine, as for other women who expressed similar feelings, there is in intimacy an alienating effect of men’s perceived inability to participate in mutual self-disclosure. A wall goes up between the two selves in the relationship; this is compounded in Nadine’s case by the fact that what communication Nick does engage in revolves mainly around telling her what household chores she could or should be doing. As a result, Nadine related in other segments of the interview, she views friends and family as better outlets for self-disclosure.

Before leaving this section on gender differences, it is worthwhile to reference one more example of how communication between women and men in relationships is
complicated by gendered scripts. Building on Nadine’s story of ‘communication as criticism,’ my interview with another woman, a married mother of two, sheds additional light on how communication in relationships may be dampened by gendered effects.

Claire, 36, recalled an argument with her husband about a “just-the-guys trip” he planned, a trip whose planning came at a time when the hectic pace of daily life was presenting some real challenges for the couple. Our conversation revealed Claire’s awareness of gendered expectations surrounding individualism and personal space, and how those expectations are entrenched in such a way that stunts open communication:

C: Jay had wanted to go on this weekend trip, and had brought it up when we were hanging with a couple of friends. The trip meant flying out to Arizona and I thought to myself, ‘Are you kidding me?’ It was the first time I was ever like, ‘no!’ I mean, you have to understand that we don’t ask each other for permission, you know - we respect each other, we respect the relationship. But this just reached a breaking point. I had already said, ‘I need more help, I need more help’ – with the kid, the finances, the errands, everything. And then this came up. I was pissed that that I had to step over his boundaries and pull him back.

I: Step over his boundaries?

C: Yeah. Normally, we don’t ask permission. We give each other the space to do what we want. But this time I just couldn’t cope – not when I gotta do all this stuff at home. So, I was pissed that he made me - I don’t know if ‘made me’ is the right term – made me come at him like that. What was worse was that he should have told me about this some other time. Then we could have really talked it over. But no, it comes up in front of them, and I’m on the spot – I can’t be the controlling female.

In this case communication, individualism and gender are woven into the fabric of Claire and Jay’s disagreement. The couple has adopted a certain individualist disposition in their relationship - evidenced by the fact that they “don’t ask permission” - that requires leaving space for the other’s activities. Claire, it seems, feels special pressure to conform in this manner, owing in part to stereotypes about “controlling” women. As a result she cannot speak freely in front of others. What is more, although Claire claims that Jay’s trip might have been fruitfully discussed had it been brought up just between the two of
them, there is reason to question whether the burden of gender would allow her to discuss
the subject ‘freely’ even in private circumstances

**Conclusion**

In the two preceding chapters I sought to answer questions about the status of
individualism in contemporary heterosexual relationships. This chapter took up the other
side of the coin, so to speak: an examination of one particular source of intimate
*solidarity*, relationship communication. Without doubt intimate solidarity is a
multifaceted concept, and so the way it is presented here is only one among many
interpretations.

As I stated in the introduction to this chapter, I focused on the solidaristic
implications of relationship communication - as opposed, for instance, to the solidarity
generated by having children, or religious membership, or other sources - for several
reasons. For one, it emerged as the most frequently stated route to togetherness in
relationships. When my questioning turned to the things that keep a couple close to one
another, communication was a very popular topic. Secondly, there were analytical
grounds for my choice. Respondents’ discussions of what I call pragmatic and emotional
disclosure allowed for an examination of how intimate solidarity might exist alongside,
and even require, respect for individualism in relationships. Thus it was an especially
useful topic given the interests of this dissertation - namely, exploring the limits, or
boundaries, of self and other in relationships. Finally, self-disclosure has occupied such a
central place in theories of individualized intimacy that it merits careful attention.
The main difference between pragmatic and emotional disclosure, the two general types of relationship communication addressed in his chapter, centered on the concept of ‘self’ implied by each type. Pragmatic disclosure deemphasizes a unique self as the object of relationship communication, instead favoring the daily lives - the errands, conversations, work and other activities - of partners as the basis of communicative togetherness. Respondents who prized pragmatic communication found that solidarity lay in keeping abreast of another active person, not necessarily in delving into someone’s emotional core.

This is contrasted with the emotional form of disclosure, in which ‘self’ is presumed to be ‘in us somewhere’ and accessible mainly, or only, through thorough dialogue. Note: it is not that the advocate of emotional communication is entirely disinterested in the everyday details of a partner’s active life. Rather, she assumes that there is a core inside us that is separate from behavior. This part of the individual can only be revealed to an intimate partner through probing personal conversation.

This is not an obvious distinction I draw between the two types of communication. They represent substantially different understandings of self and solidarity. If, for example, we imagine the familiarity gained about oneself by friends, as opposed to that obtained by one’s psychotherapist - the former learning about the person through mundane, routine interaction, the latter through a more laden, conscious effort - we go some of the way toward grasping the distinction between the two categories of communication treated in this chapter.

Thus the findings on communication and solidarity are particularly relevant to theories of intimacy. The pervasiveness in the sample of the general ideal of
communication was consistent with theorists’ view that valorization of self-disclosure in intimacy is paramount. The nearly universal reference to communication’s importance suggests that such beliefs are widely diffused relationship knowledge. However, I had reason to probe individuals’ true internalization of such ideals, given the varying ‘depths of expression’ of such values. For some respondents their communicative ideals were well-considered commitments; for others the beliefs bore less developed rationales.

The relative depth of intimate ideals was explained, in part, by respondents’ relationship experience. Specifically, I observed that individuals who offered developed explanations of their ideals had spent more time in their current or previous relationships. Future researchers should distinguish among intimate ideals adopted or learned at different points in individuals’ lives. In addition, to the extent that intimate ideals - regarding communication or other topics - are more fully developed only after spending time in relationships, why is this so? For instance, might we expect that young uncoupled women and men, individuals who in some cases will exhibit very low levels of relationship experience, accordingly possess crudely developed intimate ideals? These are interesting avenues for further research.

Finally, there is the matter of gender. The epigraph for this chapter references Anthony Giddens’s concept of the ‘pure relationship,’ a model of intimacy in which romantic pairings are populated by democratic members; each party respecting and balancing their own interests alongside a partner’s. Giddens’s view is relevant here mostly for the way it envisions communication as the means by which intimate partners’ interests are voiced and eventually addressed in relationships. For Giddens, deliberative communication stands in as the rationalized glue that holds together fair-minded
relationships. The findings presented in the latter half of this chapter suggest that
gendered expectations and narratives continue to problematize Giddens’s ideal type.
Many women and men in the sample understood their own and their partner’s abilities to
communicate in relationships as being delimited by gendered factors. Stereotyped
accounts of men as closed-off, women as emotionally gushing, colored accounts of
communication. Not only do these narratives weaken the notion that communication
necessarily leads to increased intimate solidarity, they also support precisely some of the
challenges to Giddens’s vision of an ‘intimacy of equals’. The gendered patterns
encountered in this sample mean that democratic dialogue in relationships is hardly a
given, even in middle-class relationships.
CHAPTER EIGHT: A cultural sociology of contemporary intimacy

The dissertation, from conceptualization to execution

Origins of the project

This dissertation connects the sociology of families to a range of cultural and social theories of individualism that have emerged over the past 40 years. This task was accomplished through a study of intimate culture and romantic relationships, social arenas in which individualist ideals and practices are thought to play an increasingly central role. Until now, scholarship on individualism, intimacy and families has been characterized by a certain ‘cherry-picking’ quality, as theorists rather unsystematically select empirical evidence in support of their frameworks, and empirical researchers borrow incompletely from the reservoir of (sometimes imprecisely crafted) theory. There is room for improvement in the state of theoretical and empirical research on individualism in contemporary family life.

In this concluding chapter I argue that the study’s accomplishments, such as they are, lend themselves to (1) improving the incorporation of social/cultural theories into empirical research on intimacy and family life, and (2) clarifying the perspectives that theorists have offered on the topic of individualized intimacy and the general subject of contemporary individualism.

Before detailing precisely how my findings advance these goals, I offer some general reflections on the project. It should be stated clearly that this project grew out of the theoretical literature on contemporary individualism and personal relationships. As the ordering of chapters one and two suggests, I engaged in a ‘two-stage’ literature
review which informed my data collection. Having first extensively reviewed the theoretical traditions presented in Chapter One, I used the conceptual vocabularies - the theoretical languages of self-development, self-disclosure and obligation - embodied in those perspectives to guide my review of empirical research on heterosexual relationships. My approach clearly privileged theory; the theoretical statements dictated how I reviewed the empirical record. To be sure, there are weaknesses to this strategy (they are detailed below in a dedicated section) and certain difficulties, most notably the challenge of locating in the empirical record what were sometimes vaguely articulated theoretical concepts. As an example, to pick on Giddens’s theoretical work, it was not entirely clear what kinds of empirical studies best speak to Giddens’s notions of the “pure relationship” or “democratized intimacy”. Each of these concepts alludes to intimate equality, but the volume of empirical research on equality and fairness in relationships would fill several large rooms. My point is that the abstract character of intimacy theory made the process of winnowing the empirical record a difficult one.

My approach was first to assess the extent to which current empirical research on intimate relationships clearly incorporated the theories of individualism that were of interest to me. There were relatively few studies that explicitly confronted the perspectives I was interested in, but there were several strands of research on intimate relationships that served my purposes indirectly. Several common conceptual threads running through the theoretical treatments of individualized intimacy could also be found in the empirical sociology of families literatures. These themes included time-use, money management, relationship commitment, and gender and self-development. I recognize that each of these topics has a rich enough scholarly tradition so as to stand
alone as the topic of a dissertation. My goal, however, was to remain as faithful as possible to the diversity of recent intimacy theories. As such, I sacrificed depth for breadth in my review of the empirical record.

I saw three principal shortcomings in the empirical research on individualized intimacy, which sought to improve upon in my own work. The most basic failing was the disconnection between the (largely cultural) theories of individualized intimacy which have emerged over the past 40 years, and empirical families research. Second, where individualism had in fact been incorporated into studies of marriage and cohabitation, this occurred in a rather narrow fashion, with a given study typically addressing only one perspective or normative position on individualized intimacy; often this problem was compounded by the study itself tending toward a normative stance. Finally, the empirical literature favored heavily quantitative operationalizations of individualism in intimacy.

Notes on the method

Given these facts, I adopted a qualitative approach that would allow me to dig into the multiple meanings that individuals attach to individualism in intimacy. I hoped that my respondents would craft narratives that shed light on the themes that theorists had spent so much space articulating - perhaps confirming what had been postulated about intimacy, perhaps contradicting or refining it. My interest was not in measuring or quantifying this or that conceptualization of intimate individualism, but rather in accessing the active construction of individualism and solidarity in relationships, exploring where the concepts live, what they mean, and why. The interview guide was
designed to lead respondents through the personalized and solidaristic implications of a range of ‘relationship situations’: money, leisure, sex, self-development, etc.

Rather than repeat here the justification for all my sampling criteria - it is detailed in full in Chapter Four - I will offer some reflections on the sampling method in hindsight. Looking back, the most surprising feature of the sampling process was the difficulty I encountered recruiting participants. What I perceived as a non-demanding set of criteria (respondents needed to be heterosexual, married or cohabiting, and between the ages of 25 and 45) in fact resulted in an arduous task securing the target number of interviewees. It required more than six months and a variety of recruitment tools (e.g., newspaper ads, online ads, bulletins placed at more than 50 physical locations, snowball techniques) to secure 45 respondents, which was five less than my original target of 50. Two possible reasons for the difficulty come fast to mind. For one, in order to battle problems of a skewed sample, I avoided over-sampling from the online pool of recruits. It is true that the online advertisements would have allowed me to reach my target number far more quickly than did the other methods, but it would also have resulted in a class- and age-skewed sample. Another possible problem was the amount of financial compensation offered for participation. Twenty dollars may have been too low to compel many people to sit for a 90 minute interview.

What was found: the meanings of self and other in relationships

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32 It must be said, though, that the compensation was a clear factor in influencing many of the working-class members of my sample. I can think of only one occasion on which it was clear that the compensation supplied more than an appropriate motivation for participating in the interview, and in that case the data was excluded from the analysis.
I embarked on this research with it in mind that it would be successful if its findings provided an answer to the question: What exactly do people think about, and how do people enact, individualism and solidarity in relationships? Put another way, what is the lived reality of individualized intimacy? My goal was not to judge the amount of individualism or solidarity in relationships, nor to say whether there is more or less of either quality than there once was. Rather, my goal was a richly descriptive effort – to map the empirical social world of relationships to abstract social theories.

To review, I found that the valorization of communication, self-knowledge and individuality was a consistent theme throughout the interviews. I found that these concepts were described, enacted and delimited within actual relationships in a variety of ways. To select just one example, the perceived limits on individuation brought on by losses of sexual freedom were very important to some respondents while for others sexual individuation was next to meaningless in the first place. What is more, the sheer volume of conceptual distinctions related to individualism - for instance, individualism understood as self-development, and more particularly distinguished as something that may occur in spite of, because of or beside one’s relationship - reveals a good deal of the dissertation’s ‘punchline’: an argument for a more supple, focused conceptual language of individualized intimacy, and an empirical research agenda that follows suit.

Besides the conceptual distinctions among different forms of individualism and solidarity drawn from the respondents’ accounts, there are also the factors underlying such varied narratives. Here we are able to see a real weakness in previous perspectives on individualized intimacy. Theorists sketch contemporary relationship culture in vivid terms but tend to assume that it is driven by universal forces (e.g., late capitalism,
‘changes in values’) experienced by individuals in a relatively undifferentiated fashion. If theorists have been slow to recognize the fine distinctions in how individualism and solidarity are lived out in relationships today, it is likely because they have glossed over or homogenized the social conditions of the women and men whose ideas and behaviors they seek to define and judge.

In this study, as I have stressed in each of the last three chapters, men and women’s accounts could not have been understood properly without reference to gender, class, age and other personal and social circumstances. Whether communication was thought to enhance solidarity, or not; whether communication was described as an emotional or pragmatic tool; whether self-development was perceived as a team project or an individual effort; whether a relationship behavior was viewed as having implications for personal freedom or as mere afterthought: social identity played a pivotal role in shaping these distinctions.

Some categories of analysis, for instance gender and class, were expected at the outset of the project to bear heavily on respondents’ accounts. Others, such as age and relationship experience, were more of a surprise. At any rate these conditions shaped the respondents accounts; they are a testament to the importance of using basic descriptive categories to clarify our theoretical statements.

A concretized view of individualized intimacy

The first analytical contribution of the dissertation consists in my use of the data to whittle down the universe of ‘relationship spaces’ in which intimate individuation and solidarity may take place. The initial analysis chapters highlight two specific terrains of
relationship life (sex and money management) and one conceptual domain (self-development). Rather than read any and all relationship phenomena as a potential indicator of individuation (or togetherness), I gave attention to the strongest indicators, and those that have been most clearly articulated in theoretical accounts.

Sex and money were the most frequently raised issues when it came to talk of intimate individuation; each topic bore the effects of both gender and social class. Women described sexual expression outside of the relationship as a central means of achieving individuation while remaining part of a couple. This sort of expression was rarely understood as actual “cheating,” but nonetheless involved sexual interaction with other men. Conversely, men were much less likely to see sexual freedom as a means to meaningful individuation, though they did reference a modest loss of autonomy associated with monogamy. The men in the sample were more likely to view sexual exploration as the province of an earlier period in one’s life, and at any rate did not count it as a contributor to “true” autonomy. As was argued in Chapter 5, these findings can be interpreted as either traditionally or non-traditionally gendered patterns. On one hand, women maybe more inclined to identify with sexual individuality as a result of their sexualization in broader society. Conversely, the women in the sample may be contradicting a traditional gender script, in their preference for sexual autonomy and lamentations of the constraints of monogamy. Anyway the findings on sex provide a concretization of intimate individualism that has been lacking.

So too did the findings on money management provide a more careful accounting of individualism in intimacy. Of course, there is an ample body of empirical research on this score to which the study’s findings contribute. Independent and joint money
management have been explored primarily through 1) studies that ascertain what types of couples (e.g., married or cohabiting) engage in either independent and joint financial management, or 2) that map individual characteristics (e.g., income levels, preferences for egalitarianism) and financial arrangements in couples. Here, my focus was on the connection between conceptions of individualism and couples’ money management – how women and men did or did not view money management as a potential field of intimate individuation.

Money management turned out to have both solidaristic and individualist implications for respondents. To the extent that financial cooperation was viewed as an exercise in intimate “teamwork,” money management represented a chance to demonstrate allegiance to the other person in a couple. By forging and adhering to joint financial plans, some couples enacted an ideal of partnership and intimate togetherness; they deliberated about financial goals and pursued them as a couple. Other respondents, however, reported taking financial management in a more individualized direction, many of which I included in the concept of “hedging”. Reminiscent of Bauman’s vision of contemporary relationships that “keep doors open at all times,” a sizeable number of respondents - those married and cohabiting, women and men - viewed money management as a practice best kept separate, not so much to preserve a sense of autonomy and freedom, but to ease any potential relationship split.

Many researchers view the greater likelihood that cohabiting relationships will endorse independent money management as evidence of a commitment deficit. And yet my own findings suggest that married individuals were just as capable as their cohabiting counterparts of citing independent money management as a hedge against future
relationship uncertainty. Indeed, it was *class condition*, not marital status, that seemed to be the key factor informing decisions about independent money management, with those respondents most financially vulnerable being more likely to endorse a hedging strategy. This provides one more piece of evidence in favor of efforts to weigh social class more heavily in explorations of individualized intimacy.

**Narrating self and other: self-development and solidarity in intimacy**

Chapters 6 and 7 dealt with what, taken at face value, are contradictory imperatives in intimacy: self-development and solidarity. Building on Cancian’s (1987) models of independent, interdependent and dependent self-development in intimacy, in Chapter 6 I categorized narratives of self-development in intimacy according to these three conceptual distinctions. I also demonstrated how social class shaped the accounts provided by these men and women.

Perhaps because self-development - a concept central to debates about contemporary intimacy - implies cultivating personal skills and personal ‘capital,’ I found that working-class respondents were much less likely to be content with how their relationship fostered self-development. They were likely to adopt an independent disposition toward self-development, largely due to what they saw as class-based limitations in their partners. Moreover, a subsection of these working-class respondents, and especially men, viewed self-development as *consonant with the relationship itself*—that is, they viewed membership in the relationship as an example, often a prime example, of their own self-development. This was more than a sense of self-sacrifice for
one’s relationship as a means to self-worth, but rather a belief in the relationship itself as a personal accomplishment.

By contrast, many middle-class respondents enjoyed relationships that conformed to the interdependent model of self-development; these women and men tended to find in their partners capable and supportive aids in self-development. Often they described their partners as actively participating in hobbies and pursuits that they found enriching. But this did not mean the respondents were entirely content. The interdependent model of self-development was found by a sizeable number of these respondents to be a constraint on individualism. As helpful as one’s partner may be when it comes to fostering self-development, many middle-class women and men expressed a preference for greater autonomy, perhaps because they felt a greater sense of personal efficacy and wanted to exercise that facility. This pattern represents a partial confirmation of notions that the middle-class possesses a particularly keen interest in self-development, and interest that must be balanced in subtle ways once involved in a relationship. Again, social class becomes a crucial analytical category, one that has been missing in much research on individualized intimacy.

Chapter 7 took up the question of solidarity, the “other side of the coin” of individualized intimacy. Previous research on solidarity in intimacy is dominated by direct and indirect, often quantitative measures of commitment: divorce rates, and scaled “willingness to separate” variables are typical operationalizations of commitment and, by extension, solidarity. Gender and marital status (married, cohabiting, single) are some of the key independent variables examined in this body of work.
My own approach sought to distinguish among different meanings of intimate togetherness, rather than calculate its greater or lesser amount in relationships. Ultimately my focus rested on mutual understanding as one common interpretation of solidarity expressed by respondents. It was by no means the only sort of solidarity that individuals envisioned in intimacy, but it was, for many reasons which have already been described, a rich and useful conceptualization of intimate solidarity to explore.

By ‘mutual understanding’ I meant to capture what respondents saw as a chief pathway to intimate togetherness: shared knowledge of one’s own and a partner’s life. Thus communication, in what I term its pragmatic and emotional forms, was described by the sample as an important tool for achieving intimate solidarity. The conceptual distinction between pragmatic and emotional communication is especially useful as it relates to competing theories of individualized intimacy, the differing visions of what is most unique about relationships today and what contributes to or weakens solidarity.

My findings suggest that Jamieson (1998; 1999), for instance, is probably correct to question the position of primacy given by some theorists to self-disclosure in contemporary relationships. Individualized intimacy, or solidaristic intimacy for that matter, is not all about “pouring out” one’s self. And yet intimate solidarity as understood by most of my respondents absolutely required knowledge - whether mundane or transcendent - of the other; this knowledge was thought to be gleaned through communication. This held true for women and men alike, although each sex had different ideas about the types of communication for which the opposite partner was suited.

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In sum, the findings suggest that the many facets of romantic relationships examined in this dissertation (communication, money management, etc.) each are bound up with the problematic of individualized intimacy. And while they have been the subjects of an extensive body of empirical studies, they take on original importance when the conceptual lens is shifted to today’s unique culture of individuation and togetherness. For example, the data here shows that individuals are aware of the *de facto* importance of communication in relationships; we know from a host of other studies, both quantitative and qualitative how much couples communicate, and what they discuss. But what does their prioritization of communication tell us about the new ethos of individualism thought to permeate our lives today? What are the mechanics by which individuation and solidarity of different sorts are maintained or threatened by communication? These are the questions this dissertation sought to answer, that future studies may probe further.

Above all the study tells us this: the anxieties of contemporary culture are also the anxieties of relationships and family life. Seemingly mandatory dual careers for couples, working-class men’s declining economic position, swelling pools of “unmarriageable” men, the cultural wisdom of self-reliance in the face of divorce, layoffs or moves across the country; in short, the fodder that induces a raft of editorials, self-help publications and collective anxiety – all this is being negotiated by women and men in relationships who every day appear more aware of these conditions. And so a sense of contradiction permeates the data. The individuals I interviewed grapple with the vicissitudes of contemporary life knowing their relationships can either be ports in the storm or, conversely, liabilities. Which vision depended upon a variety of factors. For many working class respondents, the relationship itself was a foothold amidst personal
economic instability. For the middle classes and working classes alike, even intimate *solidarity* was an exercise in self-revelation: whether due to odd work hours or a keen sense of self, togetherness was accomplished through divulging about one’s life. Women lamented losses of sexual individuation while both sexes told of financial hedging strategies, since one never knows what the future holds. In sum, whatever individualized culture that exists today does indeed weave into intimate bonds, but hardly in a uniform way.

**The study’s limitations**

There are several limitations of the study, which I will discuss in what I consider to be their order of importance. I move from the most worrisome elements of the project to those concerns which I view as more minor.

*Theory and empiricism*

A concern has been raised a number of times throughout this project, by more than one audience, that the entire research effort privileges theory at the expense of empirical clarity. The potential weaknesses associated with this strategy can be categorized in two ways. First, there is the straightforward possibility of diminishing the importance of existing empirical approaches to studying intimacy and its individualized dimensions. This diminishment may have affected the project’s data collection stage, as well as its very conceptualization. Second, my emphasis on theoretical perspectives in framing the project creates certain ‘observational problems’ when it comes to data analysis. The task of observing and interpreting connections between broad cultural
forces as articulated by elite social/cultural theorists and the empirical facts of everyday life as articulated by a sample of individuals is a difficult one.

Regarding my secondary reliance on empirical research in crafting the project, this issue most clearly at play is my having allowed theoretical perspectives to shape my research questions far more than the empirical record. The main reason for my decision was that theorists’ treatments of individualism and intimacy were conceptually richer than the existing body of empirical research on relationships. And yet by privileging theory in this way, my review of the empirical literature, and thus the implications I would glean from it, were subordinate to and dependent upon the ideas offered by the theorists. I crafted the project first from what had been said by theorists about individualized intimacy, only afterward consulting the empirical record, and at that in a way dictated by theory. Thus the features of relationships that I judged to be most pertinent to my study of individualism and solidarity (e.g., commitment, self-development, communication) came almost entirely from the theoretical work.

The second problem, the difficulty of uncovering actual evidence of the broad and sometimes fanciful depictions of intimate life offered by theorists, impacts the validity of the findings. With what degree of certainty can I claim that a given interview or set of interviews embodies the theorists’ models? In this regard consider just one example, Bauman’s notion that individuals today prefer the traits of “top-pocket relationships” - relationships that demand our presence only when desired we desire. Bauman’s concept is at best unclearly defined, making it difficult to know when you’ve found evidence of it. My project was confronted routinely with this sort of dilemma, trying to find in individuals’ everyday lives what were fairly ephemeral notions: ambivalence, self-
valorization, selflessness and the rest. Of course, it is never simple to ‘test’ theories
whose conceptual vocabularies are complex. But my task was made difficult by the fact
that the theorists who have weighed in on individualized intimacy do not lend themselves
to deductive research; there are few easily derived hypotheses or correlations that follow
from their arguments. And so the empirical results turned up by my research were
destined to be in somewhat ‘allusive’ relationship to the theoretical work, perhaps
weakening their external validity, or causing me to overreach in my interpretations.

*Sampling and other methodological issues*

Besides the above conceptual concerns, there are also methodological limitations
to the study. As was stated earlier, the difficulty of reaching my target sample size may
be something of a red flag. In particular the problem of self-selection rears its head. To
the extent that individuals were reluctant to participate - in spite of a variety of
advertising strategies - there are questions raised about those who *did* in fact participate.
Were they inappropriately motivated to participate\(^{33}\)? If so, this might be a problem of
excessive financial compensation. Another concern is that those who agreed to the
interview were more disposed than the average person to talking about themselves and
personal issues.

There was little indication that members of my sample were overly eager to
participate, or had an ‘agenda’ to advance through participation. I saw no evidence that
this was a sample uniquely moved by an interest in sharing themselves. Moreover, the

\(^{33}\) It is arguable that the dangers associated with self-selection are negligible in certain qualitative studies.
Whereas in quantitative research there is an understandable avoidance of statistically generalized findings
drawn from non-random, or self-selected, samples, this concern bears less on a qualitative project not
gearred toward such generalizations. If the goal of this interview project was to obtain rich accounts of the
topics at hand, then a motivated and honest participant would seem a good one. Accuracy would seem to
trump motivation or intensity as a methodological concern.
advertisements of the project indicated little more, in terms of substantive information, than a researcher seeking people’s views on relationships. The study was not pitched as an incendiary, or potentially incendiary, exploration. Indeed, most respondents characterized their current relationships as satisfying overall. And yet there is something to be said for the fact that men were far more difficult to obtain as participants, and that those men who did participate were likely to be older than the female respondents. It is possible that men’s interest in discussing intimacy and family life is one that emerges more strongly over time.

A more pressing concern associated with the sample is its age limitation. In attempting to reach a cohort who had ‘come of age’ fully immersed in today’s culture of so-called individualized intimacy, I limited myself to accounts from men and women in relatively young relationships, whether married or cohabiting. (The median respondent age was 32.) This meant that I was collecting data from some individuals who have not had much relationship experience out of which ideologies might form or concrete examples of behavior can be cited. An older sample would have a wider frame of reference. This notion is borne out by the fact that older respondents in the sample who were in second marriages were often the most engaging interviews.

Finally there were problems with the ‘grounding’ of respondents’ narratives. I at times experienced challenges - not all of which were overcome - when it came to guiding abstract views on intimacy back to concrete ground. Respondents were sometimes reluctant to discuss preferences, dislikes and beliefs in relation to actual relationship practices, or struggled to do so. Although I was able in many cases to force respondents to concretize their expressed ideals, in some cases men and women seemed at a loss or
even put off when asked to connect their views to actual relationship practice. At times, my request for a concrete example of a given sentiment may have appeared too professorial or testing. Or, more simply, respondents may think more often about their views and less about actual practices. Whatever the reason, the inclination for respondents to remain in the realm of abstraction merits attention in future research.

**Toward new studies of individualized intimacy and social life**

In light of the limitations cited above and the substantive findings presented, there are several improvements that may be made to future studies of individualized intimacy. I will address specific research avenues according to the limitations noted in the preceding section.

Regarding my emphasis on theory, one possibility is that future researchers interested in contemporary intimacy will use the empirical record to qualify or even exclude certain theorists’ perspectives before data collection. For instance, researchers may begin by employing well-established distinctions found in the *empirical* record - perhaps those drawn between cohabiting and married relationships - as a way to press the theoretical perspectives into more specific statements. By proceeding first from theory, I operated according to theorists’ rather undifferentiated portrait of relationships. The empirical record offers a far more careful and detailed accounting of intimacy and its forms, and should me taken into account by future students of individualism, solidarity and intimacy.

In addition to elevating the empirical record as a guide for future projects, more precise conceptualizations and operationalizations are needed in future studies. My own
findings on emotional and pragmatic styles of disclosure, and the ways that these themes were shaped by gendered narratives and relationship experience, serve as a starting point for more focused, perhaps quantitative, research on the broad correlations among particular styles of communication, notions of self, and demographic characteristics. That is, what has been expressed in clumsy theoretical terms – e.g., the tyranny of communication in relationships - must be refined before it can guide discrete projects that explore better defined concepts, in greater detail. In particular it will be interesting to see whether large scale surveys like the GSS and NSFH can be incorporated into targeted research on concepts like pragmatic communication and economic self-development, and their correlation with other behavioral and preferential intimacy measures.

The characteristics of my sample also suggest directions for future work. Perhaps most glaringly, the relative youth of my sample and the importance played by relationship experience in respondents’ accounts of communication and other themes, seem to indicate that older samples - perhaps including individuals in second and third marriages - are a worthwhile group to emphasize in new studies. Moreover, this was a study of patterns of individuation in heterosexual intimacy. To the extent that same-sex couples enjoy less connection to mainstream institutions - marriage, legal status, certain religious institutions - there is special reason to explore the “detradiotionalized” and individualized character of same-sex intimacy.

The dissertation urges a rethinking too of how theorists and social commentators talk about the general individualization of societies. If one of the central findings of this study is that both individualism and solidarity escape full understanding through the use of sweeping theoretical frames, it is likely that the same truth applies to more abstract
theoretical debates about individualized society. The question that must be considered is this: To what extent and in what manner can we describe the U.S. and other Western cultures as societies of individualism? The sociological problematic of Western individualism has been taken for granted for nearly 60 years, if not since Durkheim; a body of research has evolved pitting ‘stock and trade’ case examples of more or less individualized societies: the U.S., UK and Canada on one side, Japan, China, Northern Europe on the other.

Is there not, however, a need for more careful, attuned theories of contemporary individualized societies? The gradations and variations of individualism shown in the present study must provoke questions about associated trends in society at large. It is hardly accurate anymore to assert an individualized Western monolith or ‘civilization’. Popular discourse and debate, whatever their shortcomings, seem to grasp this point - for instance, differentiating ‘socialist’ Canada and Western Europe against individual freedom-relishing America – in relation to health care, the welfare state and other matters. It is of course indisputable that “American individualism” remains a very powerful cultural narrative. But it may be time to reassess its terrain systematically. Scholars might begin by distinguishing between individualist cultures in differentiated social spheres, comparing the logic of individualism (or solidarity) in a range of social institutions. Just as multiple arenas of individual autonomy were found in this study to exist in the realm of intimacy, so too will cultures of individualism as expressed in political discourse, work and economy, education, and other spheres exhibit shades of gray.

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34 I have advanced this argument in other work (Santore, 2008).
To conclude, the dissertation suggests a broadening of the field of intimacy studies; it encourages the incorporation of emerging cultural theories of modernity and late modernity into micro-sociological studies of family life. It serves the most basic purpose of introducing individualism and solidarity as autonomous, ‘strong cultural’ categories of analysis in families and marriage research. In the voluminous body of empirical research on family topics like communication, gender inequality, housework, emotions, and money management - and especially in U.S. scholarship - cultural questions of individualism and solidarity have been clumsily posed or ignored entirely. The cultural sociological approach represented here has been absent in much orthodox families scholarship.

And yet I have remained faithful to well-established topical concerns in the sociology of families, even as I undertook a fundamentally different approach. Many of the substantive arenas (intimate communication, leisure, money management) addressed in this dissertation do in fact have rich research histories, but have been circumscribed by a limited set of concerns: gender differences and inequalities, income inequalities, the differences between marriage and cohabitation, to name a few. While these certainly are necessary scholarly pursuits, they have tended to dominate the body of scholarship. This study blended traditional topics in the sociology of family with a novel theoretical frame. This is an important point given how often theory, and especially cultural theory, may seem detached from the more traditional concerns of American empirical sociology.

My plan to ‘follow theory’ wherever it may lead demanded that I explore multiple spheres within relationships, even if it meant providing only a snapshot of each. The fact is that my theoretical guides were too sweeping (and vague) to inspire a more tightly
focused study of individualized intimacy. It seems that future efforts to clarify the scope of individualism and solidarity in intimacy will benefit from homing in on perhaps just one or two spheres of relationship life, so as to analyze in more depth the various patterns discussed in this dissertation.

The questions answered here, and those that I hope will be probed in future research, concern the precise character of the individualism that has supposedly altered contemporary intimacy. On the surface, my data and others’ indicate that the conditions of individualized intimacy described by theorists do in fact live in the minds and actions of individuals. The popularity of several ideals expressed by the sample (e.g., about needing space in relationships, about the importance of communication) offers support to the characterizations offered by Cancian, Giddens, Lasch, Bellah, and others who describe a contemporary intimate culture that has been profoundly shaped by ‘personalized values’. Thus there is good reason to believe that such beliefs are widely diffused and common relationship knowledge. But, as the findings show, the respondents’ narratives were riddled with distinctions and caveats. The data did not indicate an inevitable march of intimate individualism; neither did it suggest a triumph of some new and enhanced intimate solidarity. Some of the theorists’ narrower claims were supported (e.g., Jamieson’s vision of a gendered and middle-class-bound emphasis on intimate self-disclosure), whereas some larger arguments (e.g., the idea that relationships today, on balance, prioritize the individual as much as or more than the intimate union) remained unclear.35

35 In truth this latter argument was not the focus of this project, and the data collected here cannot speak to it. I doubt that a single empirical effort could do so adequately.
Overall the data presented here stand as a call for more careful theoretical statements on intimacy and individualism, and certainly for more hesitancy about announcing individualism as a boon or bane development in contemporary relationships. Until researchers place finer points on theorists’ conceptions of individualism and togetherness in relationships, it is likely that we will be left operating in something of a normative mode. But before individualized intimacy can be *judged* it must be *detailed* in careful empirical terms: How does it exist, and for whom? The narratives collected here represent a starting point to that end. My hope is that, as in all good theory-building research, this study generates multiple yet focused pathways of further exploration, and that it presses theories of individualized intimacy into more precise conceptualizing work.
References


Appendix

The interview guide

Intro

PhD candidate, performing my dissertation research. This is an interview project, eventually with 50 individuals. Basically, what I am interested in, and what the interview focuses on, are the details of how people in romantic relationships live as individuals, while at the same time as “partners”. I’m trying to find out about how people talk about their “individual lives” and “relationship lives”.

If at any time I am being unclear, please let me know...

Warmup Questions –
these will be on the brief side...

Do you live with your boyfriend/girlfriend/spouse (name)?

Do you have any children either together or from other relationships?
   Does anyone else (friends or family) live with you?

Are you currently employed?
   How long have you been employed at this job?
   Could you tell me about what you do there?

And _____, does s/he work or go to school?

OK, let me ask you some general questions about your marriage/relationship...

How long have you been a couple?

How long living together?

How did you and ______ meet?
   Can you tell me about that?

(Optional) Do you think you’ll end up getting married?
   Why, or why not?
   And how does your partner feel about this?
Questions about everyday relationship practices

I want to get started by getting a sense of the everyday life of your marriage/relationship....

TALK
When you and your partner talk with one another, what are some common topics of conversation?
   Probe: Practical items; talk about work, friends; about the relationship…

TIME (GENERAL)
And if you think of a typical week in your life, how would you characterize the amount of time you and ______ spend with one another?
   Are you satisfied with the amount? Or with what you spend your time doing?
   Do you ever have discussions about how much time you spend with one another, or the way that you spend it?

Do you enjoy time to yourself? When? Why?

Do you have any spaces in your home that are “private spaces”? – for just one of you?
   How did that come about?

KIDS
(If they have kids)
Who takes care of child-related tasks?
   Like getting them to school?
   Getting them to playdates?
   Playing with them?
   How do these decisions get worked out? What does a typical conversation look like?
   Do you prefer to take care of these things on your own?

(If they do not have kids)
Do you have plans for children? Did you ever?
   Was there agreement about that?

MONEY
Do you and your partner keep money separate or pooled together?
   Is any money kept separate?
   Why do you tend to keep money separate/together?

   Which kinds of purchases would involve a joint discussion?
   Do you spend money on anything you don't have to “account for”?
   What do you like best and least about the way you and your partner handle
finances/money?

Let’s talk about your leisure time, to the extent you have some!

When you’re not at work, what do you spend time doing? (Take me through a typical evening after work, or a typical weekend)
   In the evenings? On the weekends?

(For all of these, find out whether the partner joins in)
   In which activities do they join in or not?
   Why or why don’t they join you?
   And how do you feel about your partner being there or not?
   What would happen if you or your partner wanted to participate in these activities on their own? (Give them examples!)

And what about friendships…Do you tend to have friends in common, or friends that are just yours?
   Do you or _____ ever see friends alone?
   To do what kinds of activities?
   How is that arranged?

Would you be OK with _______ seeing friends apart from you?
   How frequently? Say, once/week? More?
      What if it meant going away to see friends?

And how about in the reverse, is ________ OK with you seeing friends?
   Does it matter whether the friends are of the opposite sex?

Say a co-worker or friend gets in touch with you and asks you to get-together…
   Do you make a decision on your own, or not
      Why? In which cases? What does it depend on?

How often do you and your partner see other family members?
   How do you decide on when to see them?
   Do you have an interest in seeing your partner’s family?

Reconciling Individual and Relationship

Let’s shift gears a little bit, away from the everyday stuff…

Would you say that being in a relationship suits you? Why?
   If they say they are a “relationship person,” probe what exactly that means
   What about when you were single – did that suit you? Would it now?
All relationships have certain stress points and problems… Would you say you have any that turn up in your own relationship?
   What about for your partner, if you would imagine her/his opinion?
   Do you have a sense of why these obstacles turn up?

Can you imagine anything that would make you think seriously about ending the relationship?
   Probe – would it be physical, emotional, financial?

Let me ask you about some of your opinions and beliefs that relate to the topic of romantic relationships…

Generally speaking, what do you think it means to be in a “committed relationship”?
   Is it physical? Emotional?
   Would you describe your own relationship as a “committed” one?
   Is there any way in which your relationship is not completely committed?

What is owed to the other person in a relationship?
   Probe: For example, financial obligations? Emotional? Physical?

   Do you and _______ have different kinds of obligations, or do you owe each other the same things?

Are there limits to what people are owed in relationships?
   (Give the Skydiving example)

   Is there such a thing as “too far”?
   How can you tell when sacrifice ‘goes too far’?

Has your relationship ever meant leaving anything behind?
   Why did this occur?
   How did you/do you feel about this?
   Were there any discussions about it?

What about for your partner?
   Have there been times when s/he left behind anything that s/he would have otherwise pursued?

Some people would say that there’s a difference between the person they are in their relationship and the person they are outside of it?

Would you say that that’s true for you, in any way?
   Probe: For example, the way you are with friends or co-workers.
   What makes things different?
   Do you mind that there’s a difference?
Wrapping up and general statements

Just to revisit an earlier question...

How do you think you do as a person in a marriage/relationship?

What’s the difference(s) between being someone in a relationship and being single?

And what goes into making a “good relationship”?

Before I forget, can I get your age,
   Estimate of personal and household income
   And the last year of schooling you completed?

Finally, do you have any questions about the study for me?

FOR RESEARCHER’S REFERENCE ONLY:

General ideas to be explored:

How does individualism exist in the context of romantic relationships?

What does personal fulfillment mean to respondents? How interested are they in a “project” of personal development?

How does personal fulfillment conflict with commitment to the relationship, and how do people make sense of this conflict?

Is separate space important in the relationship? Why?

What guides people, pushes people toward personal projects and/or intimate relationships? How do people negotiate/balance/understand their dual interests?

How are women and men similar/different in their understanding of personal development and connection in relationships?

How does gender structure respondents’ narratives of balancing relationship commitment and personal projects?

When do respondents consider their partner’s pursuit of personal projects as threatening or “too individualized?”

Finally, how does class (and especially ‘cultural class capital’) bleed through in the interviews, or shape individuals’ responses and rationalizations?