



## **Intimate Citizenship, Cultural Change, and Conservative Self-Help Texts in Contemporary Mexico**

Dr. Daniel Nehring  
Middlesex University

**Abstract:** The principal focus of this article is exploratory. It provides an initial and largely unprecedented examination of therapeutic discourses of intimate life in Mexico. This respective analysis addresses two complementary questions: First, how do the texts reflect recent socio-cultural changes in Mexican society and their impact on the dynamics of couple relationships? Second, what do their narratives reveal about the constitution of large-scale cultural models of intimate relationships<sup>1</sup> in contemporary Mexico? Pursuing these questions will generate important insights into the cultural response which recent transformations of intimacy have received and the cultural models of intimate life that are emerging from these transformations.

**Keywords:** Self-help, Mexico, Intimate life

## Intimate Citizen and Cultural Change in Contemporary Mexico

During the past thirty years, sweeping social changes have profoundly transformed the Mexican gender order in both the private and public sphere. The following will provide a brief overview of these changes and the discursive struggles they have engendered in Mexican public life and politics.

Until the late 1970s, life in Mexico was shaped by hegemonic patriarchal cultural models grounded in Catholic morality and long-standing historical traditions<sup>ii</sup>. Fundamental elements of these cultural models were the exclusive legitimacy of a nuclear family model characterised by clear power differentials and divisions of labour along gendered lines (Olcott, Vaughan, Cano, 2006; Tuñón Pablós, 1987; Villafuerte García, 1998; McGinn, 1966). Within the ideological system of patriarchal family life, a set of mandatory steps leading from ritualised courtship (*noviazgo*) to lifelong marriage was central to the organisation of individuals' biographical trajectories. Consequently, affective and sexual ties between unrelated men and women in the context of religiously sanctioned marriage constituted acquired exclusive discursive legitimacy<sup>iii</sup>. Over the past thirty years, the hegemonic status of patriarchal cultural models<sup>iv</sup> in Mexico has waned, and a pluralisation of overtly socially acceptable narratives and practices of intimate life has been taking place. Economic crises and neoliberal structural reforms, a notable decline in women's fertility rates, women's massive incorporation into the labour market, feminist movements, and experiences of migration have contributed to these transformations (Chant & Craske, 2003; García & de Oliveira, 1994, 2005; Gutiérrez & Castañeda, 2002; Hirsch, 2003). Recent research has pointed to substantial local variations in the social organisation of gender relations and individuals' day-to-day management of

intimate relationships, and there is evidence of a partial trend towards companionate, love-based and egalitarian relationship forms (González-López, 2005; Hirsch, 2003; Hirsch, 2007; Hirsch & Wardlow, 2006; Gutmann, 1996).

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

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

On the whole, these recent developments can be described as a widening of the remit of intimate citizenship in Mexico. Plummer defines intimate citizenship as follows:

“Applied to intimacies, citizenship implies the rights and obligations surrounding different *intimate life styles*, the participation of different *intimate groupings* and the recognition of people's different *intimate identities*. Ideas around intimate citizenship have been increasingly placed on the political agenda. In much of the western literature on this, the great emphasis has been placed on

citizenship as the *right to choose*: to choose your partner, your sexual activities, whether you have a child or not, or what you do to your body.” (Plummer, 2005, p. 78f.)

In this sense, intimate citizenship may be understood as referring to the socio-cultural legitimacy of different cultural understandings and practices of intimate life. The recent widening of the scope of legitimate intimacies in Mexico can best be explained in terms of a contradictory pluralisation of cultural models of intimate life, in which the cultural commonalities, tensions, and contradictions between emergent logics and established patriarchal-modern, traditional, and other cultural forms are played out in different ways in a variety of localised arenas, simultaneously creating new opportunities and choices and re-asserting established constraints. Thus, while patriarchal forms of thought and action certainly have not disappeared, they do seem to have lost their hegemonic status. These developments are grounded in a cultural context that by and large corresponds to the global pattern of waning ‘grand narratives’ of intimacy described by Plummer:

“What I want to suggest here is that newly emerging intimacies reflect the slow death of any single ‘grand narrative’ of personal life. Of course, no society has ever had just one narrative about how life is to be lived [...]. Societies have always been ambiguous, variable, conflictual, changing. But societies have typically sought to provide one overarching cultural paradigm that seems to plausibly hold together the world and its history – often by means of a God or gods. [...] [P]eople seem increasingly aware that this ‘one way’ is visibly crumbling in the postmodern world. Our formerly strong conviction of unity, permanence, continuity – of one moral order under God – has started to collapse, and what we now find instead are fragmentations, pluralizations, multiplicities.” (Plummer, 2003, p.18f.)

Plummer’s concerns match those of Castells (2004). Castells argues, very broadly summarising his argument, that the patriarchal family, based on the stable authority of the male household head and

associated sexual and productive relationships, has entered a phase of crisis. This crisis involves, among other aspects, the detachment of marriage, family formation, sexual activity, reproduction and other aspects of couple relationship from each other and their autonomisation in terms of the development of particular internal logics. A prime example for this is the previously mentioned detachment of sexuality from reproduction through modern reproductive technologies, which allows individuals to attach to it different and variable meanings beyond procreation. Importantly, Plummer (2003) points out that this development of such pluralized intimacies is not a homogeneous process, but rather takes place in uneven and individually, locally and nationally varying ways.

Changes and tensions in the social organisation of gender, families, and couple relationships have been examined in a substantial number of studies (e.g. Amuchástegui & Herrera, 2001; Amuchástegui & Herrera, 2001; Carrillo, 1999; Carrillo, 2002; García & de Oliveira, 1995; García & de Oliveira, 1997; Gutmann, 2007; Cravey, 1997). However, many of these studies are characterised by socio-economic perspectives and devote little attention to the cultural dynamics of intimacies in contemporary Mexico. The relatively few studies with a cultural outlook (e.g. Gutmann, 1996; Hirsch, 2003; LeVine & Sunderland-Correa, 1993; Hirsch, 2007) in turn largely have focused on individual-level experiences of couple relationships, sexuality, and family life in particular settings.

As a result, there is hardly any in-depth research on the large-scale cultural models and public discourses in relation to which women and men in Mexico come to understand, experience, and practice their intimate lives<sup>vi</sup>. To achieve a comprehensive understanding of the socio-cultural dynamics of intimacies in

contemporary Mexico, it seems important to close this gap.

### **Mexican self-help culture**

In the following, I will introduce the empirical study on which this article is based and provide an initial overview of therapeutic culture in Mexico. This article is based on a larger multi-method study on cultural constructions of couple relationships and sexuality among young male and female middle-class professionals from Mexico City<sup>vii</sup>. It involved 43 life story interviews with university-educated men and women aged 25 to 35 working in a range of professional and academic occupations. From my respective findings, self-help texts<sup>viii</sup> emerged as a particularly salient source of inspiration for my participants' thinking about matters of intimate life.

I therefore gathered a sample of 93 self-help texts in book and magazine form, including known bestsellers, texts read by my participants, as well as similar publications. I then conducted an analysis of the texts' trajectories of production and circulation, from their authors and publishing houses to their circulation in Mexico and other areas of the world. This analysis was based on the editorial notes in the texts themselves, as well as on publicly available information, such as authors' and publishers' websites<sup>ix</sup>. My analysis of the texts' trajectories, as well as ethnographic observation I conducted in Mexico City and other urban areas suggest that self-help products are widely consumed beyond the middle classes. They are practically ubiquitous in bookshops and newspaper stands in Mexico City (and many other Mexican cities)<sup>x</sup>. Their price of often as little as twenty Pesos makes them accessible to readers with a wide range of

backgrounds, and they address a variety of concerns about the management of couple relationships, family life, and sexuality. They explicitly address a wide variety of audiences and concerns, such as housewives having to come to terms with divorce and re-marriage, single professional women, married men, or teenagers facing their first love relationship.

Data on the publication and circulation of self-help texts in Mexico are difficult to obtain. Both publishing houses and authors generally declined requests to provide respective information. Statistical data obtained through the National Chamber of the Publishing Industry in Mexico (CANIEM) in 2009 show the following pattern for the period from 2005 to 2007. These data<sup>xi</sup> indicate that a substantial and growing number of self-help texts was sold in Mexico during the documented period. While, at more than four million, the sales figures point to the significance of self-help texts in Mexican popular culture, it is also important to note that they are dwarfed by the overall number of books sold in the country in the same period.

At the present state of research, it is not possible to indicate definite reasons for this trend. As a matter of speculation, it might be assumed that it points to the localisation of the self-help phenomenon to the relatively small urban middle sectors of Mexican society. This argument would resonate with findings in other countries, which have presented self-help as a middle-class phenomenon. However, it will require substantiation through further research.

**Table 1: Publication of self-help texts in Mexico, 2005-2007**

	2005	2006	2007
Number of self-help texts sold in Mexico (titles)	4,642	5,485	3,529
Total number of books sold in Mexico (titles)	126,353	122,242	133,245
Number of self-help texts sold in Mexico (exemplars)	4,101,759	4,536,105	4,557,996
Total number of books sold in Mexico (exemplars)	157,400,809	160,603,413	147,128,541
Commercial value of self-help texts published in Mexico, in Pesos	241,019,606	311,824,402	319,399,314
Total commercial net value of books sold in Mexico	7,633,257,551	7,707,229,649	7,435,040,326

*Source: CANIEM, through personal correspondence June 2009.*

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

intimate life in Mexico. First, I found a large number of 'individualistic' texts. These texts strongly acknowledge the importance of egalitarian, negotiable gender relations and the importance of individual autonomy within couple relationships. The normative underpinnings of these texts lie in the recognition of individual autonomy and the pursuit of personal fulfilment as general principles for successful lives and happy relationships. Second, I found a version of self-help in the form of often religiously motivated patriarchal-conservative manuals of moral orientation, such as the works of Arturo Cuyas Armengol (1981) and Elizabeth Cantú de Márquez (2001). These texts are characterised by a mostly reactionary stance towards changes in gender relations in recent decades and the defence of patriarchal arrangements in couple relationships, which they describe as 'normal' and exclusively legitimate in moral terms. Third, I discovered a group of 'conventionalist' texts. Their authors acknowledge, to a certain extent, the

mentioned social changes and the importance of egalitarian arrangements in couple relationships, while at the same time tending to accord exclusive legitimacy to 'normal' heterosexual relationships in potentially lifelong marriage..

In order to focus my argument on the central concerns of this article, I selected a sub-sample of three of the patriarchal-conservative books, all written by Mexican authors within the last fifteen years. The defining feature of these texts is that they all address in great detail, and more than the other texts in my sample, contemporary changes of intimate life in Mexican society, formulate explicit value judgements regarding these changes, and derive from these judgements normative prescriptions as to the socially legitimate and personally fulfilling management of couple relationships and sexuality in everyday life. Focusing on these texts, it is my objective to bring to the fore central patterns and contradictions in conservative resistance to transformations of intimate life. An analysis of these patterns in turn allows important insights into the dynamics of contemporary cultural struggles over intimate citizenship in Mexico.

### **Representations of intimacies and social change in three conservative self-help texts**

The patriarchal-conservative texts in my sample stand in strong contrast to certain findings of research on the self-help literature in Europe and the USA. Research in these parts of the world has focused on individualising, secular self-help narratives, while largely ignoring, for instance, the sizeable market for Christian-patriarchal self-help in the USA. The analysed are concerned with a decline of 'traditional' models of couple relationships and family life in Mexico and the emergence of a variety of – often highly individualistic – forms of relationships and sexuality. They equally seek to provide

readers with techniques to diagnose respective problems in their own lives and respond to them through certain behavioural adjustments. However, whereas authors such as Hochschild (2003) describe the self-help texts they analyse as part of the mentioned trend towards individualisation and a pluralisation of relationship forms, the conservative-patriarchal texts I discovered in Mexico are explicitly opposed to such trends. They seek to provide rationales for the re-assertion of patriarchal relationship models in order to counter trends their authors portray as individually and socially harmful. These texts thus manifest cultural changes in gender relations in terms of a reactionary response to them.

The first of the analysed patriarchal-conservative books is Elizabeth Cantú de Márquez's 'The challenges for today's woman' [Los retos de la mujer de hoy]. The book, subtitled "what the Bible tells today's women" was published in its second edition, consisting of 1000 volumes according to the editorial note, in 2002 by the Mexican publisher Ediciones Las Américas. According to the book's cover, Cantú works as editorial director for Ediciones Las Américas. The publishing house, according to its internet page (<http://ela.gospelcom.net/>), is associated with Gospel Communications, a Protestant evangelical network with missionary activities in different parts of Latin America. In spite of Cantú's implication in transnational processes of religious change, her book is explicitly focused on the defence of 'traditional' forms of private life in Mexico.

The second book is 'The feminist conspiracy' [La conspiración feminista] by Lorenzo da Firenze. Published in two editions in 1997 and 2005, it won the Golden Palms award of the Mexican National Circle of Journalists [Círculo Nacional de Periodistas] in 2004 (<http://www.inventoralautentius.com/eventos.htm>). The book is meant to provide information and ways to counteract a,

according to the author, growing global influence of feminism and the threat it entails for the social situation of men. In spite of da Firenze's claims regarding the global relevance of his treatise, its circulation is limited to Mexico, and it is closely related to a locally specific anti-feminist social movement in Mexico City. This movement, the 'Male March' [La Marcha Masculina; <http://www.lamarchamasculina.com/>], has, according to its internet pages, the same goal as the book and is also managed by da Firenze.

The third book is Victor Caballero Álvarez's 'Manual for the unfaithful man: tactics and suggestions for not being discovered by your partner' [Manual del varon infiel: taticas y sugerencias para que su pareja no lo descubra], published in 2003. Caballero, according to the book's cover text, aims to "propose a set of attitudes, gestures or activities recommendable for dealing with your official partner, with the aim of maintaining successfully the double love bond in the safest way and obviously without being discovered" [my translation]. This text's cultural context of reference is equally closely localised, being written by a Mexican author for a Mexican audience.

All three texts depart in different ways from the perception of rapid social change and an at least partial re-ordering of gender relations. They evaluate these changes negatively according to different essentialist sets of values: first, in terms of the supposed loss of an established 'natural' gender order and, second, in 'The challenges for today's woman', in terms of a threat to Christian values as the exclusively legitimate base for the social ordering of gender relations.

The idea of a natural gender order corresponding to certain biological and social traits of men and women is evident, for instance, in the following excerpt from 'The feminist conspiracy':

"In the last decades of this century, women have violently criticised what they call 'machismo', without noticing that because of it and its most admired twin brother, manliness, human civilisation managed to prevail among the fury of the animals. Machismo might be labelled the dark side of manliness, but biology and psychology have already shown that the libido of human beings is an indivisible e [sic]; it cannot be compartmentalised, and there is no way to inject manliness into men and extract machismo from them. The supremacy of our species is due to this human characteristic, when there were men who fought among mastodons and brought home their prey and the fallen to the women of the village. Those women accepted the virile quality of their men, and on their part developed qualities which the latter did not have time to cultivate. Therefore, the delicacy of the woman was accepted by the man, who accepted to take care of his companion, and not the other way around." (da Firenze, 1997/2005, p.17)

Da Firenze's argument here starts from the understanding that hypermasculine behaviour, framed in terms of the dual notion of positive 'manliness' and negative 'machismo', is biologically conditioned and fulfils an important function in ensuring the survival of the human species. From this function, the patriarchal organisation of gender relations in terms of power and production divisions is naturally derived, as da Firenze tries to demonstrate in reference to a supposed prehistoric, primordial state of humanity. Da Firenze makes a strong claim to using 'scientific evidence' to back up his ideas about gender relations, but in the end his arguments only amount to the interpretation of different pieces of history in terms of a set of never fully elucidated preconceptions about the 'natural' dominance of men in society. The argumentative structure of the feminist conspiracy therefore ultimately does not differ from that of Cantú's 'Challenges for today's woman', where the social constitution of gender relations is explained in terms of a set of taken-for-granted Biblical dogmata.

While da Firenze throughout the text does make references to the particular case of gender relations in Mexico, his

arguments tend to be of a global scope, as in the preceding quotation, due to his assumption of an essential, predetermined, in the end culturally invariant configuration of male and female traits. The ‘balanced’ gender order he advocates therefore has to be rooted in the recognition of these natural differences, the importance of ‘machismo’ as central principle of social organisation, and therefore male predominance in many aspects of public life:

“ ‘We all want to be equal’ – another utopia that is unlikely at the biological and social levels. [...] If man and woman were equal [...], then they would not seek each other out nor hide from each other. They would be like two heterosexuals together [sic] – two similar poles that do not attract each other. There would not be any *market for love*.” (da Firenze, 1997/2005, 521f.)

Similar assumptions are made explicit in ‘The manual for the unfaithful man’; drawing on a socio-biological explanatory model, Caballero sees infidelity as an essential trait of gender relations rooted in the biological impulse to ensure the survival of the human species as much as in social trends, such as the massive incorporation of women into the labour market entailing greater chances for heterosexual encounters in the workplace. Based on this assumption, Caballero arrives at a negative evaluation of recent transformations of gender relations similar to that of da Firenze. Caballero equally sees certain aspects of ‘machismo’, here referred to in terms of the figure of the manly gentleman [caballero], as fulfilling basic male and female needs. He is therefore highly critical of their challenge by feminism and processes of social change, which erode patriarchal gender divisions of power, production, and emotional attachment that enable men’s presentation of self as ‘gentlemen’. In relation to this problem, he argues:

“In fact, gender equality is a reality in social and civil terms. However, in biological and affective (psychological) terms, man and woman are not

equal, in so far as she needs, as it is natural, a kind of attention and treatment, among other things, that differ from those of a man.” (Caballero Álvarez, 2003, 30)

Relying on a different, although equally essentialist, approach, Elizabeth Cantú also criticises the advent of feminism and female liberation. In her account, it is not a biologically grounded system of gender relations which is disturbed by recent social changes, but rather a ‘divine order of things’ in which relations between men and women are structured according to the exclusively legitimate commandments of the Bible. On the base of these suppositions, Cantú provides a mostly negative assessment of recent social changes, which she frames in terms of a critique of the spread of female liberation and excessive liberalism:

“After many struggles, in the last century the woman acquired the right to vote. Women’s participation is so active in politics that Tlaxcala, a conservative state of the Mexican Republic, was first to elect a woman as governor. [...] The great feminists (some of them very daring) [...] emerged during the beginning and the middle of the last century. Due to them, we were given the opportunity to learn a profession, to participate in the labour market, and to control fertility. We have reached incredible liberties unimaginable for our ancestors. Nevertheless, we have to manage them responsibly. This important movement was given the name of ‘female liberation’. Unfortunately, some confused it with licentiousness. [...] The role of the woman has changed irrevocably since the period when humanity lived in a purely agricultural society. All this puts us under a lot of pressure. There are so many voices proclaiming sometimes contradictory slogans that for the woman it is difficult to understand what is expected of her. However, the most important thing is to know what God expects of us! [...] I have news for you my friend. Nobody can free you except for God Himself. For those who believe in Jesus Christ, freedom is nothing new; since the beginnings of Christianity, the woman has been set free by Him.” (Cantú de Márquez, 2002, 14)

Cantú in this excerpt takes an ambivalent, cautious stance in the interpretation of the social changes she describes. While she acknowledges some new opportunities which have arisen for

women, the admonition to manage them “responsibly” concretely means that extemporarily valid divine commandments as to women’s position in society should not be disregarded: Society, according to Cantú, may have changed irrevocably, but the consequences of change must be made to correspond to the divine ‘order of things’ through morally responsible behaviour. This account shares with that of ‘The feminist conspiracy’ an interpretation of social change and modernisation as threats in terms of a potential alienation of society from its true fundamentals, framed by da Firenze in biological terms and by Cantú in terms of divine commandments regarding the organisation of human life.

Cantú to some extent does acknowledge the positive impact of recent social changes in Mexico in enabling women to realise their potential outside the domestic sphere in paid labour, and she also recognises a need for both husbands and wives to earn an income of their own under the problematic labour market conditions in contemporary Mexico. However, these issues for her are clearly outweighed by negative ones, i.e. specifically the obscuring of women’s ‘real’, divinely ordained role in the care for their husbands and children and the upkeep of the home. Cantú thus, to a large extent, remains very critical of many of the recent changes in Mexican society:

“God, knowing us, committed us [women] to the home due to our nature, which is more emotional [...] than that of the man. [...] However, the home is under constant threat by Satan, the adversary of our souls and the enemy of God, who promotes a licentious and sinful life, because he knows that by undermining this divine institution [of the home] he can take control of the souls of his victims. An enemy of the home is the secular world with its enchantments, its exaggerated violence, sensuality, and inversion of moral values. Other enemies are the negative mass media, pretensions and the search of wealth, the lack of time, and the tensions caused by the problems of daily life.” (Cantú de Márquez ,2002, p. 172-174)

Cantú here is strongly critical of perceived de-traditionalisation and secularisation. Underlying her essentialist, negative account of recent changes is a fundamentalist interpretation of Christianity to assess the state of gender relations in contemporary Mexico and make suggestions of their improvement. In this context, Cantú insists on the recognition of women’s clearly delimited role within the domestic sphere and the importance of the Bible as the exclusively legitimate source of instructions for managing gender relations. On the one hand, she defends Mexican patriarchal ‘traditions’ against social change and the supposed spread of excessive liberalism. However, on the other hand, her work has to be understood precisely in terms of social change and foreign cultural influence in Mexico with regard to her affiliation with a network of US evangelical missionary churches in the context of the growing importance of evangelical Protestantism and US missionary activities in Mexico. Thus, Cantú by no means simply defends established ‘traditional’ understandings and practices of gender relations. Although some affinities between historical forms of Mexican patriarchy rooted in Catholicism and patriarchal models advocated by evangelical Protestants have to be recognised, it seems more appropriate to understand her account as an at least partial re-interpretation of patriarchal arrangements based on a religious belief system which only recently has acquired importance in Mexican culture<sup>xiii</sup>.

In contrast, both ‘The feminist conspiracy’ and the ‘Manual for the unfaithful man’ draw on a combination of evidence from the biological and social sciences to make their case in favour of patriarchy. As the preceding quotes have documented, the core of da Firenze’s and Caballero’s argument is a set of assumptions about the ‘natural’ biological constitution of men and women, such as Caballero’s Darwinist claim about men’s

natural desire for reproduction to ensure the survival of the species.

An important ramification of the texts' essentialist approach to gender relations lies in their collectivist approach to agency: Cantú, da Firenze, and seemingly also Caballero presume that the 'success' of individuals' actions is determined by the extent to which they adhere to certain universally valid 'laws of life'. These laws of life demand of men and women the performance of specific functions in the context of couple relationships, and the importance of this fulfilment of collective standards often exceeds that of individual happiness. This pattern is especially evident in 'The challenges for today's woman':

"When the husband is unbearable: [...] There are as many correct husbands as there are unbearable ones. Maybe yours does not take you into account, does not show any interest in your needs, or, even worse, does not miss any opportunity for making you feel bad [and] undervalued, or he abuses you verbally or physically. This problem is more common than we imagine and even occurs in Christian homes. Abuse is a sick attempt at dominating the other. Remember: he has many rights, but not that of maltreating you [...]. When he is unjust, insulting, or constantly criticises you, maybe it is your fault. Sometimes, the man shows his ugly and harsh side due to the woman, because she does not accept and understand him or neglects her duties and does not fulfil his basic needs. We should not let our love for him die. The Book of Songs says: 'many waters cannot extinguish love, nor will the rivers drown it'. Not even a horrible husband can make us stop loving him because love is a decision we made when we married. [...] 'But', say many women, 'why does it always have to be us who sacrifice ourselves?' To that I answer: Somebody has to take the first step. If we see that our home is in decline, if we cannot talk anymore with the husband, we have to do something; we cannot remain with our arms crossed." (Cantú de Márquez, 2002, 132f.)

In Cantú's account, women's adequate performance of their role of mothers and carers within the home set out for them in the Bible and necessary for the maintaining of social order takes precedence over individual women's desires and in some cases even over their

suffering in the case of maltreatment by their husbands.

A substantial contrast thus exists between the self-help models advocated by these three authors and the European and US American texts described earlier on in terms of their understanding of self-actualisation and successful self-help. Self-actualisation according to the texts analysed by Hochschild (2003) or Giddens (1992) is achieved through the successful realisation of individual preferences and dispositions with regard to couple relationships in a cultural environment that allows multiple respective options. The models of self-actualisation analysed by these authors are strongly voluntaristic and individualistic, focusing on the pursuit of largely personal relationship preferences through autonomous individual agency, for which self-help texts seek to provide a base. Alienation in these self-help accounts stems largely from a dissonance between these individual preferences and needs and individual's personal circumstances and behavioural patterns. A good example for this model would be the self-help texts analysed by Hochschild (2003), with their emphasis on the often dissatisfying character of couple relationships and the need to develop a largely unattached, highly autonomous self focused on the satisfaction of its own needs in its own terms as a response to such alienating relationships.

In contrast, in line with this duty-based model of long-term relationships, all three analysed texts construct a binary opposition between fully legitimate long-term relationships, normally in the context of marriage, and illegitimate short-term casual relationships. This is most explicit in Caballero's description of 'official' and 'unofficial' relationships:

"You maybe have a partner (wife, bride, fiancée, or girlfriend) and possibly (for whichever motive) a lover or a woman with whom you maintain a parallel relationship. [...] Your companion is the one you officially chose. This means that she has acquired certain rights (even more so if at this point

she already has the honour of being the mother of your children). This means that, if you have not contemplated the possibility of leaving her for your lover, but rather desire to stay with her, you will have to pay attention to a series of details and be careful in certain ways in order to guarantee for her the creation and the maintenance of a state of personal satisfaction [...]. The objective is to transmit to your official companion a firm and clear message, which is perfectly illustrated by the title of one of the hits of the Latin singer and writer Luis Miguel: 'You or Nobody'." (Caballero Álvarez, 2003, 21f.)

The 'Manual for the unfaithful man' as a whole rests on the contrast between legitimate long-term marital relationships as the 'normal case' for adult men in society and casual affairs, which only remain partially legitimate in so far as they remain hidden and do not threaten the primacy of the official commitment. In this sense, there is a strong affinity between Caballero's argument and a cultural tendency in Mexico towards 'sexual silence' (Carrillo, 2002), i.e. the overt maintenance of 'normality' through the overt acquiescence to cultural expectations about sexuality while transgressive behaviour is kept hidden from public view and therefore does not require sanctions. In a similar way, Elizabeth Cantú sets up a contrast between, on the one hand, long-term marital relationships and the families built around them as centrepieces of social order and, on the other hand, casual relationships without a long-term commitment, as an indicator of social decay and individual disorientation in the context of a supposed loss of traditional values. 'The feminist conspiracy' is less explicit in this regard, but the assumption that being in a long-term relationship is the normal case among adult men and women seems to be simply taken for granted by da Firenze in much of the text's argument.

In all three accounts, the fulfilment of certain social norms regarding the need to establish a marital relationship and a family is therefore at least as important, and sometimes more important, than personal affinity, love, and the

achievement of individual happiness. The most extreme position in this regard is taken by Elizabeth Cantú, who, as already outlined above, strongly argues that women need to subordinate personal desires to the need to maintain their relationship and family even in times of severe crises. In her account, the existence of personal affinity, love, and a day-to-day relationship based on trust and good communication are important, but their absence should not entail a rupture of the relationship. While Cantú clearly does acknowledge the importance of maintaining good personal ties, it is equally obvious that she does not regard them as absolutely necessary to the persistence of a relationship. In a similar way, while acknowledging the possibility of affairs (Caballero) and divorce (da Firenze), the other two authors emphasise the need of maintaining long-term relationships regardless of personal misgivings.

## CONCLUSIONS

The three analysed texts thus present a vision of intimate citizenship which is generally contrary to the panorama of individualisation in European and US-American self-help, as portrayed by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995), Giddens (1992), and Hochschild (2003). In relation to shared assumptions about patriarchy, all three texts seem to have similar trajectories of production and circulation, being written by Mexican authors for a largely Mexican audience, in spite of Elizabeth Cantú's links to Protestant fundamentalist groups in the USA. This illustrates the authors' common point of departure in localised patriarchal ideologies historically common in Mexican society, in spite of their claims regarding the universal applicability of their arguments. In this sense, all three texts are deeply embedded in cultural struggles over intimate citizenship in contemporary Mexican society, regardless of their claims to universal relevance.

Cantú, da Firenze and, to some extent, Caballero diagnose a pattern of social change, modernisation and new tendencies in gender relations which is in some ways similar to the panorama described for Western European and North American contexts. For instance, just as Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995), the patriarchal-conservative authors highlight women's massive entry into the labour market as a central source of changes in couple relationships and family life. Indeed, the three authors are conscious of similarities between developments in Mexico and Europe and the USA, and they attribute Mexican developments in part to foreign influence. None of the three authors demonstrates an awareness of structural differences between Mexico and these other contexts with regard to changes in gender relations in recent decades. Equally, they do not demonstrate any reflexive awareness of the influence which foreign cultural products and discourses have had on their own reasoning. For example, Elizabeth Cantú's work manifests a marked contrast between her preoccupation with the preservation of allegedly eternal religious values and the relative novelty of widespread evangelical religious fundamentalism in Mexico, largely as a result of missionary activities from the USA.

Rather than just reflecting on the changes they describe – as in the case of the self-help books attuned to a new commercialised 'cold modernity' analysed by Hochschild (2003) – Cantú, da Firenze and Caballero confront them head-on. The three patriarchal-conservative authors seem to be preoccupied with preventing a supposed expansion of the scope of intimate citizenship in Mexico by providing 'traditional' forms of intimacy with firm moral moorings. These moorings – biological in da Firenze and Caballero and religious in Cantú, but 'natural' and unassailable in any case – are intended to shore up patriarchal relations among Mexican couples and to prolong the

viability of respective 'traditions' into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The work of all three authors is thus both geared towards individual self-help and the pursuit of wider political objectives. This insight is important in so far as it highlights the fact that self-help and therapy are never just about individual behavioural adjustment. Rather, whether or not their authors pursue a political agenda, the normative prescriptions made by self-help books and other therapeutic products always form part of wider discourses on intimate citizenship and the limits of acceptable forms of intimate life.

The importance of my findings is twofold: First, they point to a need to further analyse locally specific forms of self-help that contradict the narrative of individualising therapeutic culture established by research in the USA and Western Europe. Moreover, the embeddedness of locally specific conservative-patriarchal self-help discourses in wider transnational cultural networks – such as the Evangelical Protestant organisation seemingly behind the work of Elizabeth Cantú – should be subject to further study. On the whole, my argument points to a need for the systematic comparative analysis of the self-help phenomenon, both in terms of different types of therapeutic narrative and in terms of patterns of transnational circulation and consumption.

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<sup>i</sup> As a matter of narrative convention, I will use the terms ‘intimacy’, ‘intimate life’, or ‘intimate relationships’ in a narrow sense as synonyms for ‘couple relationships’.

<sup>ii</sup> This statement holds as a broad description of a long-term historical pattern. Nevertheless, it is very important to emphasise that this historical pattern does not suggest monolithic historical stability of the Mexican gender order, as certain stereotypes and long-standing misconceptions would suggest. On historical shifts in Mexican patriarchy during the first half of the 20th century, see Olcott, Vaughan, and Cano (2006). For a broader historical overview, see Tuñón (1987).

<sup>iii</sup> See, however, Carrillo (2002) for a discussion of the socio-cultural complexities underlying these overt normative standards and the dynamics of a sexual double standard enabling men to engage, within certain limits, in extramarital sexual activities.

<sup>iv</sup> I use the concept ‘cultural model’ according to its elaboration by Swidler (2001). My theoretical approach to culture and discourse has furthermore been inspired by the works of Strauss and Quinn (1997), Quinn (2005), and d’Andrade (1992).

<sup>v</sup> Also see Taracena (2002) and Kulczycki (2007). Abortion is legal in all Mexican states under strictly limited conditions, specifically rape (Human Rights Watch 2006).

<sup>vi</sup> Two noteworthy exceptions are Salles and Tuirán (1998) and Salles and Valenzuela (1998), as well as to some extent Amuchástegui (2001).

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- <sup>vii</sup> The main stage of fieldwork took place in Mexico City between September 2004 and June 2005. It was followed by several additional fieldwork trips between July 2006 and October 2008. A final phase of data collection took place in late 2009.
- <sup>viii</sup> In line with Hochschild's (2003) analysis, I understand them as texts which propose, first, a systematic self-examination of certain aspects of individuals' lives in terms of a 'didactical description' of moral and social reality established by the author and, second, in response to this self-examination, the incorporation into individual conduct of certain formal techniques or substantive modes of behaviour with the finality of achieving 'success' within particular areas of social life.
- <sup>ix</sup> Publishers and authors of the analysed self-help publications generally failed to respond to requests for information, frequently citing the confidentiality and commercial value of information about the Mexican self-help market as reasons.
- <sup>x</sup> In line with González-López (2005), I assume the historical fragmentation of the Mexican gender order into a variety of closely localised gender regimes. Two of the main respective axes of differentiation concern the divide between rural and urban gender regimes, as well as regional variations in gender relations and intimate life. Given the urban focus of my research, it is at present impossible to apply it to rural settings. My fieldwork has mainly taken place in Mexico City, but also involved a variety of fieldtrips to other parts of Mexico during the past two decades, which have provided me with a base for my description of self-help as a salient urban phenomenon.
- <sup>xi</sup> These data were provided without background information on methods of data collection, reliability of the figures provided etc. The CANIEM did not reply to further requests for information. Therefore, the information given here needs to be treated with some caution.
- <sup>xii</sup> This approach moreover corresponds to a long-standing tradition in qualitative sociological research of using the in-depth analysis of a limited number of cases to generate theoretically relevant insights into the socio-cultural dynamics of everyday life. For general methodological discussions of this issue, see, for instance, Donmoyer (2000), Gomm, Hammersley and Atkinson (2000), Lieberson (1992), Plummer (2001), and Shaw (1966).
- <sup>xiii</sup> See Bowen (1996) and Martin (2002, 1990) on global networks of Evangelical Protestantism and its spread in Latin American and Mexico.