The Work of Seduction: Intimacy and Subjectivity in the London 'Seduction Community'

Rachel O'Neill

Abstract

This paper explores negotiations of intimate and sexual subjectivity among men involved in the London 'seduction community', a central locus within what is more properly regarded as a transnational community-industry. Herein, heterosexual men undertake various forms of skills training and personal development in order to gain greater choice and control in their relationships with women. As an entry point to this discussion I consider the international media event that enveloped American 'pickup artist' Julien Blanc in November 2014. Shifting focus away from the cultural figure of the 'pickup artist' and onto socially located men, I attempt to complicate a dominant narrative that characterises men who participate in this community-industry as pathetic, pathological or perverse. This analysis makes use of extensive ethnographic research undertaken within the London seduction community between 2012-2013, and examines how men who participate in this setting engage a mode of intimate and sexual subjectivity ordered by themes of management and enterprise. Ultimately I argue that the central logics of the seduction community are not dissonant from but are in fact consistent with broader reconfigurations of intimacy, sex and capital taking place in the contemporary UK context.

Keywords: seduction, mediated intimacy, masculinity, neoliberalism

Introduction

The 'seduction community' has been an object of media curiosity in and beyond the UK for almost a decade, with men who participate in this community-industry routinely positioned as pathetic, pathological or perverse in their attempts to meet and 'seduce' women. This cultural narrative recently played out in spectacular manner when, in November 2014, a series of campaigns were launched to ban a 'pickup artist' named Julien Blanc from countries including Brazil, Canada, Germany, Japan and Singapore, where he was scheduled to teach seduction seminars with the American company *Real Social Dynamics*. In the UK, an online petition calling on Home Secretary Theresa May to deny a visa to Blanc quickly attracted widespread public support and extraordinary levels of media attention, with a series of articles and opinion pieces appearing in *The Daily Mail, The Telegraph, The Guardian* and *New Statesman*. Both the online petition and associated media

coverage framed Blanc as an aberrant individual whose teachings about how to 'pick up' women are an affront to 'British values'. On 19 November it was announced that Blanc had been denied entry to the UK by the Home Office through recourse to special immigration measures typically reserved for political and religious extremists. As multiple news outlets reported at the time, it was the first recorded instance of a person being denied entry to the UK on the grounds of sexism. Within a matter of weeks, Blanc had become a figure of international opprobrium, encapsulated in the TIME headline: 'Is this the most hated man in the world?' (Gibson 2014).

The media event (Fiske 1996) surrounding Blanc adhered to a familiar narrative in which the deviance of the 'pickup artist' was affirmed and reified. In doing so, this cultural figure[1] - temporarily embodied by Blanc - became knowable as an individuated 'problem' that could be safely contained through recourse to state intervention. This paper attempts to complicate this narrative, drawing on extensive ethnographic fieldwork undertaken within the London seduction community. My intent is to provide a more nuanced perspective of this community-industry and its operations in contemporary Britain - not to exculpate it from criticism but to demonstrate that what it represents is, in fact, less a *deviation* or *departure* from current social conventions surrounding sex and relationships than an *extension* and *acceleration* of existing cultural norms. That is to say, the underpinning logics of the seduction community are *consistent with* broader reconfigurations of intimacy and subjectivity taking place within late capitalism. While calling into question the framework of understanding that has informed the campaign against Blanc, as well as related media representations of 'pickup artists' and 'PUAs', I should make clear that my intention here is not to undermine feminist critiques of the teachings and practices advanced by men such as Blanc. Indeed, I share many of the concerns raised by campaigners as well as those raised by feminist scholars elsewhere (Denes 2011). Rather, my argument is guided by the feminist ethnographic principle that in order to successfully challenge gendered economies of power, it is necessary to know as much as possible about the foundations on which they are built (Ezzell 2013).

The paper proceeds in three parts. In the first section, I present a series of extracts from my fieldwork diary, the intention of which is to provide some sense of the discourses that animate the lived spaces of the London seduction community. To contextualise these extracts, I provide some further details about the operations of this community-industry in London and discuss the research I have undertaken in this context. In the second section I advance an understanding of the seduction community as a site of mediated intimacy that must be understood in terms of the broader cultural rationalities fostered by neoliberal capitalism. The third and main section elaborates this argument more fully by examining how logics of enterprise and management structure the intimate and sexual subjectivities of men who participate in this sphere. I explore the ways in which 'pickup' or 'game' - here defined as a set of techniques and knowledge-practices for the governance of self and

intimate relations - draws on more widely available cultural logics to promote a marketised and consumerist orientation to sexual relationships among heterosexual men. I further consider how the commercial structure of the London seduction community figures intimate life as a site of commercial endeavour, such that the ability to gain sexual access to women's bodies functions not only as a marker of status among men but acquires material exchange value. In conclusion, I offer some comments as to how feminist activism and scholarship might think differently about this and related concerns regarding contemporary permutations of gender, intimacy and (in)equality.

Researching the London seduction community

It's 12pm on Saturday afternoon. In the windowless conference room of a hotel in central London I sit amongst a group of about fifteen men – mostly in their twenties and thirties, though one or two look older – waiting for the session to start. Striding from the back of the room where he has been speaking with the other trainers, Aaron calls for our attention. Introducing himself, Aaron recounts how he and the other trainers all started out on the same programme: 'We've been where you are now. We've sat where you're sitting. We've looked up with our note pad and pens, wondering, "Are we going to get good at this? Are we going to get results?" So we know what it's like'. After going through the structure of the course, Aaron asks each student to explain why they are attending this training programme and what it is they want to achieve. In turns, men introduce themselves; some index the number of women they've dated or slept with in the past, others detail their current skill level and talk about their 'sticking points'. All profess a desire for greater choice and control in their relationships with women. As he's introducing himself, a student named Anwar explains that he thinks of himself as a 'decent guy', when Aaron interrupts him: 'The problem is, you're not the guy that's going to take them home and bend them over. We need to get you to be that guy'.

…

On Wednesday evening I arrive late to the university seminar room where the 'in-field' seminar is being held. Through the glass panel in the door I can see that the session has already begun; the lights are off and the room is packed. Hurriedly, I open the door and squeeze into the chair that has been produced for me. At the front of the room is Charlie, whose filmic double appears on screen via the overhead projector. In the video, taken with a hidden camera in central London, Charlie is talking to a woman on the street. In the seminar room, he stands to one side of the screen, narrating each aspect of the interaction and drawing attention to various aspects of his body language and conversational repertoire. Occasionally, he pauses the video to explain specific concepts and theories, referring as he does so to

prepared notes. As he sets up the next video, Charlie fast-forwards to the end of the interaction. Finding the point in the video he wants, he tells his audience: 'This was the second approach of the day, I was like "I want to get more out of this", like "Wrap it up"'. Pressing play, Charlie appears on screen standing face to face with a woman outside a London Underground station. As he leans in and kisses her on screen, in the seminar room he tells his audience: 'Just push it super hard, get the make out and walk away - always leave her wanting more'. Apparently satisfied that he now has his audience's full attention, Charlie rewinds to the beginning of the interaction. As the video shows him approaching the same woman, this time in another part of London, he reiterates a key principle: 'Part of the mentality of being a guy is doing the choosing - you do the choosing, not her'. On screen, Charlie raises his hands to stop the woman as she walks down the street. As she comes to a halt in front of him in the video, in the seminar room he gestures emphatically and exclaims: 'Easy, so easy!' After they stand talking for a few minutes, Charlie asks the woman to join him for coffee. As the pair begin to walk down the street together - the hidden camera following close behind - Charlie goes over the importance of planning the 'logistics' of an interaction: 'You have to know where you're going to go, where you're going to lead her - because ultimately you want to lead her to the bedroom'. Elaborating on this point, Charlie explains: 'The key to all this, the key to everything, is to meet girls and for them to trust you'. Later, when the lights go on, I hear a man say: 'What's a woman doing here?'

...

In one of the final sessions on the second day of the weekend training programme, Keith takes to the top of the room to tell students about the week-long residential course the company offers in addition to the bootcamp programme. 'What is the residential? It's seven days living with us. You live with us in central London. We were in the flat last night and there were about ten girls there - that's just your average night in the residential apartment. What does the course involve? It is a lot of fun, you do get a lot of results, but it is a lot of work as well. If you're not willing to work, you shouldn't apply, because it's a 24/7 programme. For seven days you're going to be fully immersed in the world of pickup. Your results will rocket - not from day five, from day one. From day one you'll be working hard, and getting results from day one'. A number of students are leaning forward in their chairs and making notes as Keith goes through the details of the course: the application programme, the questionnaire used to determine training needs, the course cost and finance plan. Keith promises that anyone who takes the course is guaranteed to 'walk out of there the finished article'. As though to prove his point, he invites Jake, the current residential client, to come to the front of the room and tell the bootcamp students about his experience. After first shaking hands with Keith, Jake turns to address the bootcamp cohort. 'Where do I start?', he says, 'I mean, it was amazing'. Detailing the numerous sexual encounters he has had over the past week, Jake

explains that while he saw improvements in his game after taking the bootcamp course, the residential course has fundamentally changed him. Impressing how valuable the experience has been, he enjoins those attending the bootcamp course to find a way to pay for the residential programme, no matter what their financial situation. Concluding his talk, he smiles widely and says: 'I was destroying girls. They were just melting in my hands. It was fantastic'.

(Field notes, various commercial events, London 2012-2013)

These notes recount scenes from within the London seduction community, a central locus within the transnational community-industry variously referred to as the 'pickup community' or 'PUA industry' and the express purpose of which is to enable heterosexual men to achieve greater choice and control in their relationships with women through various forms of skills training and personal development. An import from the United States, the seduction community has had a presence in London for at least ten years, with the first UK-based seduction training company established in 2007. Today a panoply of private companies as well as freelance trainers offer fee-based seduction training services which include one-to-one coaching, weekend courses and live-in residential programmes, while free and ostensibly non-commercial events regularly take place in the city. Online forums provide spaces for men involved in this community-industry to document their activities, discuss concepts and techniques, seek advice and offer feedback to one another. Those with established profiles as trainers within the London industry host channels on social media sites such as YouTube, where the instructional videos they produce routinely receive tens or even hundreds of thousands of views.

While spatially and temporally discontinuous, the activities of the London seduction community are concentrated in London's West End, with commercial trainers meeting clients, running seminars and hosting promotional events in and around Oxford Street, Leicester Square, Covent Garden, Piccadilly Circus and Soho. Upmarket areas of London such as Kensington and Chelsea as well as newly fashionable areas such as Shoreditch are also popular sites for trainers to work and socialise. Although those involved in the London seduction community are often referred to and refer to themselves as 'pickup artists' or 'PUAs', there is a good deal of ambivalence around these terms, such that it has become common for those who have made careers in this industry to at least nominally distance themselves from such labels. As the preceding notes clearly indicate, the term 'community' is also something of a misnomer and rather conveniently promotes a sense of authentic collectively while concealing the machinations of what is in fact a lucrative industry. Nevertheless, because it remains the most common appellation used to describe this socio-cultural formation I use it here alongside and in conjunction with the hybridised term 'community-industry'.

I conducted ethnographic research within the London seduction community between 2012 and 2013. During this time I attended training and promotional events, observed private coaching sessions, and also attended free community events and social occasions. As I have discussed elsewhere (author 2014), negotiating these spaces as a woman presented particular challenges but also allowed for the development of important conceptual insights. In the course of my fieldwork I conducted interviews with 32 participants representing a broad cross-section of those involved in the London community. These included freelance trainers as well as those employed by established companies, event managers and business directors, students at commercial events and community organisers. Interviews were semi-structured and averaged two hours in duration, with the longest of these lasting four and a half hours. At their own request, a number of participants were interviewed on a second occasion, while others kept in touch via email, periodically sending updates about their activities as well as links to content they felt was relevant to the research. The demographics of participants in this study reflect the general composition of the London seduction community more broadly, which is largely made up of middle class men in their twenties and thirties of various racial and ethnic identities.[2] As part of the research I also examined a range of media associated with this community-industry, including books, blogs, forums and promotional materials.

Seduction as mediated intimacy

In this paper I advance an understanding of the seduction community as site of mediated intimacy, arguing that the orientating logics and underpinning premises of this community-industry are in many ways consonant with broader reconfigurations of intimacy and sexuality taking place in and beyond the contemporary British context. In doing so, this paper represents a contribution to an emergent body of literature concerned to examine the *mediation* of intimacy. This thematic, Imogen Tyler and Rosalind Gill (Tyler and Gill 2013) note, was identified by sociologist Ken Plummer in his work on sexual stories almost twenty years ago but has received little attention to date, especially as compared to sociological debates over the 'transformation of intimacy' (Giddens 1992; Jamieson 1999). For Tyler and Gill, a number of shifts in the social and cultural landscape mean that the need to attend to this thematic is even more acute now than it was then. In the first instance, representations of intimate relations proliferate across the mass media, 'from stories about politicians' affairs, celebrity pregnancies and experiences of heartbreak, to reality shows preoccupied with "making over" intimate life' (Tyler and Gill 2013: 80). Second, a new kind of 'intimate gaze', closely related to the personalising tendencies of contemporary media, 'has come to constitute a kind of grammar of mediation, such that all mediated life becomes refracted through a lens of intimacy, in a way that is distinct from earlier moments' (Tyler and Gill 2013: 80). Finally, new media

technologies have become increasingly central to the ways in which intimate relationships are established and maintained in affluent societies of the global north, such that intimate relationships in these contexts are increasingly lived out in relation to and through relations with media technologies. On this basis, Tyler and Gill contend: 'the need to develop an understanding of mediated intimacy has never seemed more urgent' (Tyler and Gill 2013: 80).

Of central concern for scholars interested in the mediation of contemporary intimate life are the ways in which intimate and sexual subjectivities are configured through broader social and cultural rationalities, most especially those of postfeminism and neoliberalism. In her work on women's magazines, Gill examines how sexual subjectivity and intimate relations are increasingly represented as sites of labour and investment. Focusing specifically on the forms of sex and relationship advice administered by women's magazines, Gill identifies a series of representational patterns or discursive repertoires: 'intimate entrepreneurship', whereby sex and relationships are to be meticulously planned for, organised and managed; 'men-ology', where women are given instruction in how to appeal to and please men; and 'transforming the self', which calls on women to remodel how they think and feel about their bodies and desires, the kinds of sexual practices they engage, and the intimate relationships they have with men. Gill argues that these kinds of repertoires exemplify the operation of neoliberal rationalities within the domain of intimate life, as women are repeatedly exhorted to *work on* their sexual selves and *invest in* an intimate skill set. Particularly notable here is the psychological work women are expected to perform: 'women are enjoined to self-monitor and monitor others, to work on and transform the intimate self, to regulate every aspect of their conduct, and to present every action – however constrained or normatively demanded – as the outcome of individual choice and a deliberative personal biography' (Gill 2009b: 366). These discourse are, in addition, distinctly postfeminist insofar as they emphasise women's choice and empowerment while nevertheless directing women to please and appease men. As Gill describes: 'activities which might, in a different moment, be understood precisely as enacted to 'please your man' must be re-apprehended in postfeminist terms, as something you are doing 'for yourself'' (Gill 2009b: 363). Taken together, these discourses 'offer a distinctively postfeminist articulation of intimate relationships which helps to sustain unequal gender relations and is profoundly connected to neoliberalism' (Gill 2009b: 362).

Similar discursive patterns - whereby intimate and sexual subjectivity are represented in terms of enterprise and management - have been identified across a broad range of media, including self-help texts, makeover television and lifestyle magazines (Farvid and Braun 2013a; Farvid and Braun 2013b; Harvey and Gill 2011; Potts 1998; Tyler 2004). While both men and women are enjoined to become enterprising sexual subjects, these discourses are deeply gendered, with masculine repertoires frequently organised around themes of scientific rationality and

efficiency (Harvey and Gill 2011) as well as planning and strategy (Farvid and Braun 2013b). These discourses are also highly contradictory, as gendered performances are 'presented simultaneously as moments of freedom, choice, empowerment and pleasure, yet also as hard work that is normatively demanded and essential to the success of heterosexual relationships' (Harvey and Gill 2011: 488). Surveying this cultural landscape, Melissa Tyler argues that 'through the incorporation of managerial imperatives, discourses and techniques into those cultural resources that in part guide us through everyday life, sexuality has also become yet another aspect of the lifeworld in which the work ethic seemingly reigns supreme' (Tyler 2004: 100). Tyler's research, which encompasses not only textual analysis but also interviews, suggests that the exhortation to manage intimate and sexual relationships inculcates a performance imperative that has the potential to fundamentally change the character of intimate experiences and sexual relations. She contends: 'with this incitement to sexual and managerial discourse, has come a corresponding performance imperative that does not simply repress sex, but suppresses (or rather arrests) the inter-subjectivity of eroticism' (Tyler 2004: 101).

My argument in this paper is that the emergence of the seduction community as a contemporary socio-cultural formation must be understood in relation to these developments. In doing so, I should highlight first that the London seduction community is a highly porous entity that lacks fixed boundaries. As such, knowledge-practices germane to this context frequently manifest elsewhere. Enabling this is the common practice whereby established figures from within the London pickup industry rebrand themselves as 'dating coaches' or 'lifestyle experts' when contributing sex and relationship advice to mainstream magazine titles such as *Cosmopolitan, FHM* and *Men's Health,* as well as online sites such as *AskMen*. Over the past few years many of the most successful pickup training companies in London have been moving towards a more marketable model of 'self-development' and 'lifestyle management', offering advice on subjects that have long been the purview of men's lifestyle magazines, such as fashion, health and fitness, personal finances, entrepreneurship and travel. Indeed, the American company *Real Social Dynamics* - widely regarded as an industry leader - has been at the forefront of this marketing shift. The seduction urtext *The Game* (Strauss 2005) is recognised as one of the best-selling and most widely read pieces of sex advice literature ever produced, its sales far exceeding even the most popular texts currently directed at women (Farvid and Braun 2013b). Thus my framing of the London seduction community as a site of mediated intimacy is based in part on a recognition of the continuities between this and more conventional forms of sex and relationship advice media.

However, in approaching the seduction community in this way I also want to argue for a conception of mediated intimacy which goes beyond a concern with textual representations to address questions of how mediated intimacies are *lived* and *experienced*. While analyses of media representations have much to tell us about ideal constructions of intimate and sexual relations, it is crucial for feminist scholars

to further consider how these constructions are negotiated. This is particularly important in the case of the seduction community, because while feminist scholars have directed critical attention to the textual productions of this community-industry (Denes 2011; Farvid and Braun 2013b), less has been done to examine how men engage with the knowledge-practices these texts elaborate or indeed those elaborated in the seduction seminars and training events which regularly take place in cities from London to Berlin, New York to Tel Aviv, Sydney to Montreal, Stockholm to Mumbai. In arguing for a conception of the seduction community as a site of mediated intimacy, I also want to draw attention to the ways in which the cultural logics of neoliberalism and postfeminism are immanent with contemporary formations of masculinity. While scholars elsewhere have begun to take up these issues through analyses of 'lad culture' (Jackson et al. 2014; Phipps and Young 2014), there remains far too little scholarship examining how neoliberal rationalities shape men's sexual practices and how men negotiate a social and cultural context in which feminism is simultaneously 'taken into account' and 'undone' (McRobbie 2009).

The work of seduction

I. Cultivating a sexual work ethic

For many men, the knowledge-practices elaborated in the London seduction community - commonly referred to as 'pickup' or' game' - are appealing precisely because they recast 'success with women' as a matter of labour and investment. In this way, heterosexual men are enjoined to cultivate a 'sexual work ethic' (Rogers 2005) and engage a model a 'self as enterprise' (McNay 2009). Adam, a trainer in his thirties who has worked in the industry for a number of years, explained: 'I think what game does, it kind of gives power back to those who are not the biggest, strongest, most athletic. It's a set of skills that can actually be learned, by different people. Which kind of makes it quite accessible to all'. Through the language of meritocracy - the contention that these skills are 'accessible to all' - pickup or game promises that any man can achieve greater choice and control over their intimate and sexual lives. Evincing a similar logic, a financial consultant in his mid-twenties named Moe explained: 'If you think "Yeah, well, sometimes I get lucky and sometimes I don't", you just stand there and wait and hope somebody will fall in your lap, or anything. But in pickup you.. you take action, you do something'. There is, however, a kind of compulsion attendant on this promise, as the opportunity pickup provides men to exercise greater choice and control in their intimate lives is weighted by an imperative for men to take responsibility. Trainers I interviewed frequently impressed this point and complained about students who fail to take responsibility for themselves. One recounted:

> We had one student the other day who expected everything to be done for him. And I was just thinking.. how can you expect someone to become good with women.. for you? You know, where does it get done for you? [...] Nowhere does it say that you get to do.. that this is effortless. This is an intense, seven day, twelve hours a day course. We can't do it for you.

This view was also commonly held among students - or at least among those who had attained a certain level of competency in pickup. To this end, Moe complained about some of the other students on a course we had both recently attended, saying: 'I understand you're there to get help, but you have a responsibility to take action as well [...] The instructor can lead you, but they can't take you all the way. You have to push that little extra as well'. By recourse to neoliberal vocabularies which exhort men to 'take responsibility' and 'take action', the teachings and practices of the London seduction community borrow from and redeploy the 'meritocratic feeling' that structures neoliberalism in the UK context (Littler 2013), framing 'success' with women as a matter of individual 'graft' and a capacity for 'hard work'.

Inevitably, some proportion of men who seek out seduction training materials or otherwise become involved in the London seduction community do not achieve anything like the kind of choice and control promised by seduction training companies. Indeed, many of the men I spoke to admitted that investment in pickup training and materials had not significantly improved their relationships with women, yet consistently framed this as their own personal failing. Indeed, this was the case even when their engagement with pickup had resolutely negative implications for their relationships with women. Exemplifying this, a business professional in his late thirties named Anwar described losing a much-valued relationship after undertaking pickup training:

> She just said I'd changed and ahm and she said that she didn't know me anymore. And I think the fact that I- I mean, I have really deep feelings on this, in the sense that, I mean, she was the reason I took the course, because I wanted her. She was the only thing I really cared about.

When I asked Anwar how this made him feel about pickup, he related:

> I'm mad and angry. But not at pickup, I'm angry at me. Because it's my fault [...] I mean, it's not game's fault, okay? [...] It's not game's fault, it's my fault. If I'd done.. because I.. as I said, it's a bit like you give me a set of tools and [...] if I didn't know how to use those tools properly, I'm going to make a mistake. And, so it's not game's fault, it's my fault for not having the skills and using them properly. And, so, ahm.. I'm not.. ahm.. I'm not bitter, for game. I'm.. it's my fault.

Unable or unwilling to criticise the efficacy of the knowledge-practices elaborated within the London seduction community, Anwar blames himself for being unable to master the 'tools' pickup provides. In doing so, he accedes to the prevailing culture

mandate wherein the 'neoliberal subject is required to bear full responsibility for their life biography' (Gill 2008a: 436). Anwar's attachment to pickup is perhaps best understood a form of cruel optimism, which Lauren Berlant defines as a relation in which 'something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing' such that 'the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially {Berlant, 2011 #2396, p.1}. Having undertaken a pickup training course with the sole intention of using the skills he would learn there to secure a relationship with this particular woman, Anwar's engagement with the knowledge-practices of this community-industry quickly brought the relationship to an end. As he himself stated: 'It's because of PUA she's gone'. However, by locating blame on *himself* Anwar is able to sustain the fantasy that pickup will, eventually and with sufficient effort on his part, enable him to realise the kinds of sexual and intimate relationships he desires.

In an interesting inversion of the logic whereby pickup transforms sex and relationships into a form of work, many of the men I interviewed described engagement with pickup materials and training as having been of professional benefit to them. Indeed this was one of the most frequently recurring narratives across all interviews, seemingly irrespective of the kind of employment participants held. For example, when I asked Ravi, a researcher in his thirties, whether or not he had seen any changes in himself since becoming involved in the London seduction community, he responded:

> In my professional life I have drastically and visibly seen the difference. Because now I'm more confident presenting something in front of an audience - before I was not. I can talk more confidently, more decisively, with my manager, with my boss. Before I was not like that. So these are some of the visible changes I got. I explicitly owe it to game, this side of things.

Noting that his response neglected to mention anything about how pickup training had impacted his relationships with women, I asked Ravi if he had experienced any changes in his intimate and sexual relations. He explained: 'The other side, the other side I have still to work on many things. But I'm seeing the results, so I know if I put more hard work into it, if I'm more determined, then down the line I'll definitely get results on the sexual part, the actual pickup part of it'. Impressing that what is required is 'more hard work', here Ravi demonstrates how, by reimagining 'success with women' along entrepreneurial and meritocratic lines, seduction training companies gainfully exploit the neoliberal fantasy that 'anything can be achieved if the correct disposition has been adopted' (Gilroy 2013: 26).

Unlike Ravi, a recent university graduate I interviewed named Derek felt that his relationships with women had changed dramatically since he had become involved in the London seduction community and undertaken a succession of training courses. However, like Ravi and many other men I spoke to, Derek also felt that pickup training had given him an advantage in his professional career.

Illustrating this, he described how his social skills - which he accredited to pickup training - had enabled him to compete successfully against candidates with more prestigious educational qualifications when interviewing for a high-profile job: 'And all of these other people's backgrounds were Oxford and Cambridge [...] You know, and I'm just like "I've got nothing on these guys". But I do. I've got everything on them. Because they may be very smart, but can they string a few words together? Not really.' When he later mentioned that it was a woman who conducted the interview, the relational dynamics that underpinned his success more clearly came into focus: 'I was in that interview, with a woman, and I'm thinking to myself, you know what, like, you're nothing on- you're nothing on the shit I've been through this week. You're literally nothing. You know, I've had people getting - I've had hardcore situations. What could possibly, what could possibly be more intense than that?'

Like other kinds of immaterial labourers for whom 'the distinction between life and work, and work and leisure, has collapsed' (Maddison 2013: 107), those who work in the London seduction industry - particularly those who are well-known and have established profiles - often have little separation between their public and private lives. It is here that the pursuit of pleasure is most clearly seen to 'replicate and facilitate work patterns' (Maddison 2013: 107), as trainers' intimate and sexual lives literally become their work. When I asked Danny, a trainer in his late twenties, what it takes to work in the industry he explained:

> I think every- every coach and trainer, they're only good if they've actually gone out and have been successful themselves. And by success I definitively mean getting out and getting laid. Not gone out and had dates. A good trainer needs to have gone out, dated and have gotten laid [...] I genuinely wouldn't take any trainer seriously unless he's, I don't know.. had sex with.. I don't know.. forty or fifty women. And it's not just the numbers, it's also about the quality. So they would have needed to- he would have needed have slept with quality women also. So not just unattractive women and low self esteem women. Then I could say he might be qualified as a trainer.

Where, in other homosocial contexts, 'success' with women frequently functions as a kind of currency and marker of status among men (Flood 2008; Pascoe 2007; Ringrose et al. 2013), within the London seduction community being 'good with women' acquires material exchange value. The process by which trainers prove themselves in this industry - by attaining sexual access to women's bodies - plainly exemplifies 'the general commodification of sex which is one of the most striking characteristics of neoliberal culture today' (Gilbert 2013: 13).

But for trainers in the London seduction community, intimate life is not only governed by commodity logics but commodified for market exchange. In order to build their brand, trainers commodify their intimate lives by producing a whole range of 'reality media' (Tyler and Gill 2013). Seemingly private moments are recorded or written about, shared online or published in books. Many trainers write diary-style blogs in which they provide detailed accounts of their sexual encounters

with women, explaining precisely their techniques and providing guidance to other men. Some additionally film these encounters, which they then screen at live training events or post online via social media or pay-to-view online training programmes, where they are consumed by 'entrepreneurial voyeurs' (Maddison 2013). In producing these videos trainers subject themselves to the regimes of surveillance and monitoring commonly seen in reality television. The crucial difference, however, is that these videos are actually real rather than scripted 'reality', and typically filmed without women's knowledge or consent. In this way, women are not only objectified but made into *object lessons*. The practice of producing and sharing in-field footage - whether freely or for financial gain - is virtually innocuous within the London seduction community. Explaining why he himself films and publicly posts videos of himself interacting with women in the street, on dates and in private settings, one participant stated simply: 'I wanted to give an honest insight into pickup. Some guys might be sceptical. And, I think, some guys will always be sceptical. So I wanted to demonstrate that this is a skill just like anything else. If you put the time into it, you're going to reap the rewards from it'. The lack of regard shown for the women who are unknowingly made to appear in these videos both reflects and reproduces the violability which commonly structures women's representation in the media, and further demonstrates that in the contemporary cultural conjuncture 'sexuality has increasingly becomes autonomized, an independent field of action containing its own rules and moral values' (Illouz 2014: 17).

II. Consuming sex

In talking about how and why they became involved in the London seduction community, men I interviewed frequently made reference to the kinds of intimate and sexual relationships they wanted to have. While trainers frequently impressed that many of their students are seeking committed relationships - likely out of a perceived need to contravene negative perceptions about the seduction community - for most of the men I spoke to learning how to more skilfully negotiate casual sexual encounters was their immediate priority. Discussing his decision to undertake a weekend training programme - at a cost of several hundred pounds - a banker in his mid-twenties named Doug said simply: 'I just wanted more casual sex'. At the same time, most participants also assumed that they would eventually become involved in some kind of committed relationship. In some cases, this was not so much because they wanted to be in a committed relationship *per se* but rather that there was a point at which seeking casual sexual encounters would become untenable, as exemplified by trainer Mark's rhetorical supposition: 'Because what are you going to when you're forty, or even when you're fifty? Still walk around Trafalgar Square opening sets?' In this regard, most of the men I interviewed ascribed to a kind of 'two-phase' masculinity (Eck 2014), where men's pursuit of casual sexual encounters

is supposed to (and *supposed* to) eventually give way to monogamous relationships as a signal of heterosexual maturity (see also Farvid & Braun, 2013a; Terry and Braun 2009).

In keeping with the exigencies of the male sex drive discourse (Hollway 1984), the desirability of casual sex for men was very often assumed to be self-evident and as such did not require further explanation. Doug, for example, did not immediately elaborate why he 'just wanted' more casual sex. Yet when I asked him and other participants to detail more precisely what it was that appealed to them about casual sexual encounters, their explanations were notably lacking in any explicit sense of carnality or embodied desire. Indeed, the rationales they put forth more often betrayed a highly rationalised form of eroticism (Hawkes 1996) consistent with the neoliberal construction of self as enterprise (McNay 2009). As Doug went on to elucidate:

> It seemed like the investment would be worth it. You know, I spend time in the gym and I was trying to figure out, what's the pay put from that? I buy nice clothes, what's the pay out from that? What's the expected payout from this? Almost certainly higher than either of those two.

Here Doug contends that pickup training is likely to offer him a better 'pay out' or return on his investment than other practices geared towards casual sex, namely fashion and body work. In doing so, he reproduces a commonly-held understanding of sex as a commodity controlled by women and which men seek to gain access to through various forms of labour and investment (Mooney-Somers and Ussher 2010; Seal and Ehrhardt 2003). Crucially, however, this investment is directed inwards, as men who undertake pickup training seek to acquire a skill set which will enable them to have greater choice and control in their relationships with women. As Doug further detailed, part of his motivation for taking the course was that: 'I would want to know that if I wanted to have casual sex, I could walk into a bar and it wouldn't be a problem for me'. Doug's investment in pickup training then is a means to realise a certain sexual 'lifestyle' in which casual sex is pursued and engaged primarily as a recreational activity (Hawkes 1996). In this sense, seduction training is yet another form of 'serial recreational sexuality organized under the aegis of the market' (Illouz 2014: 41).

For many participants, the point at which they envision themselves becoming involved in a committed relationship was in some way related to or dependent on the kinds of casual sexual encounters they wanted to have. Moe explained: 'Of course I want to have great experiences with girls, and eventually, someday, I will get married as well. But ah yeah.. I- I've promised myself that I won't get into a relationship, a serious one, until I feel that I've arrived at a level that where- where I am very pleased with'. While relating a desire for 'great experiences', Moe here fixates on reaching a certain 'level'. He went on to explain that attaining a certain degree of proficiency in pickup was also important for securing his future relationship: 'I don't

want to meet my dream girl and then make her disappointed, or lose her to some cooler guy'. Evincing a similar logic, a trainer in his thirties named Rahul claimed: 'You've got to work on yourself and your life, get it to a competent level, then go out and meet women. Especially if you're going to go for really hot ones, you're going to compete with their boyfriends or you're going to compete with other guys that are going to go after them'. In an intensely competitive romantic field (Illouz 2013) in which the 'entrepreneur of himself has only competitors' (Donzelot 2008: 129-130, cited in McNay 2009: 58), pickup is perceived as a means for some men to gain an advantage over others. Indeed, this was a common sentiment among the men I interviewed. Describing how he felt after completing a pickup training course, university student Antonio explained: 'Like, just from this bootcamp I feel like.. I've gone from disadvantaged to totally advantaged'.

Notably, the advantage pickup is held to offer men pertains not only to their relationships with other men - here cast as competitors in the sexual marketplace - but also their future relationships with women. Derek, for example, described:

> I need to go out there, and do a lot of stuff, before I can commit to anybody. Because I want her to know that I chose her out of thousands, you know. I want her to know that, actually, there was something about her. She wasn't the first thing that I ever got my hands on, you know. She wasn't the first person I ever was with, that I thought "Wow", you know. I want her to know, definitely, that I had options. I could have had anybody. But I chose her.

For Derek, doing 'a lot of stuff' is a means to gain leverage in an imagined future relationship. This same sensibility was elsewhere in evidence when trainer Danny explained the advantages of meeting women in the street or other public venues rather than through online or mobile dating applications. Describing how a brief stint of online dating left him feeling 'like such a pussy', he explained:

> When you start the girl on the street, as long as you've done it well, it creates a much better and stronger impression, and it can actually resonate for the rest of the relationship also. Because the girl knows, "Okay, this guy, he met me by approaching me, so.. he's got game". Generally girls respect you more. So it resonates for the rest of the relationship and girls are actually less likely then to take the piss by treating you badly. Because they know that you're a man with options.

For both Derek and Danny, being a 'man with options' is conceived as a means to retain an advantage in sexual and intimate relationships with women, which are inscribed by an almost adversarial dynamic. Far from the democratic bargaining and mutual exchange of the 'pure relationship' envisioned by scholars elsewhere (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Giddens 1992), here heterosexual relations are given over to a much more competitive ethos of self-interested individualism, such that every

aspect of the relationship - including how you meet - becomes a matter of tactic, strategy and ultimately power.

As already stated, participants' talk about the kinds of sexual encounters and intimate relationships they want to have was often marked by a lack of attention to or concern with the affective or embodied aspects of heterosexual experience. Instead, men tended to place emphasis on attaining a certain 'level' of sexual proficiency or amassing a certain number of sexual partners. Seduction training, moreover, enjoins men to understand intimacy not as a mutual and somewhat unpredictable dynamic, but rather as an affective relation that can be wilfully produced. Where participants did talk about the experiential dynamics of intimate and sexual relationships, this was most often as something to be looked back upon from the perspective of a distant future. Exemplifying this, Derek explained:

> I want to do a lot of things, I want to sleep with a lot of people, I want to have a lot of interactions, and stuff like that. And I don't feel like I've done enough. Maybe it's just because I'm young, you know, but I want to do that shit. Because I want to look back at this time, when I'm old, and think 'Fucking hell, you absolutely killed it!'

In a similar manner, Doug related: 'I'd like to pick up more women, I just think it would a fun thing to do. And I will regret it if I'm old and married - which I probably will be - and thinking, 'I should have chased more women when I was younger'. I don't want to look back and regret not doing that when I was in my twenties'. Both Derek and Doug express a desire for casual sexual encounters that are valuable not as experiences in and of themselves but as experiences that they can later reflect upon. The *prospective* and *anticipatory* relation these formulations express is unambiguous, as even before they have had these encounters Derek and Doug imagine themselves *looking back* on them in ways which bolster their own sense of masculinity. These narratives exemplify the operations of the 'extended present' in which 'the future is always-already within the present; measured, planned for, determined, chosen in the present' (Coleman 2010: 273). In this sense, Derek and Doug's desire for casual sex reflects a logic characteristic to capitalist labour organisation insofar as they are concerned not so much with the embodied experience or relational dynamic of these encounters as with 'the creation of potential' (Adkins 2008: 194 cited in Coleman 2010: 280). Their narratives also exemplify the imprint of a culture in which sex has become a 'consumptive rather than relational act' (Gilbert 2013).

This same logic aligns with the consumer orientation that structures the intimate practices and sexual desires of many of the men I interviewed, who frequently intimated that their past intimate and sexual partners had not been attractive or not been attractive enough. Talking about the kinds of sexual relationships he had in the past - predominantly casual encounters with women he met in bars and clubs - an engineer in his late twenties named Gavin described: 'I just went for the girls that I

thought I could get really, that was basically what my past was. I just went for what I thought I could get. So I was picking off easy targets, pretty much'. These same marketised notions of 'getting' and 'having' women (Phipps and Young 2014) also figured in some men's descriptions of the women they had previously had long-term relationships with. Talking about an ex-girlfriend whom he had dated for 'one or two years' and described as 'not very attractive', Moe stated: 'At the time I.. that was, in my mind, it was the best I could get. If I could get any at all'. Elsewhere, university student Jay described his ex-girlfriend - whom he had dated for over four years - as 'quite attractive, but not like.. my ideal'. Later he explained that this had became a problem in their relationship:

> I mean, when she woke up in the morning, without makeup it wasn't.. ah.. it wasn't.. I didn't.. I liked her better with makeup on, so. So yeah. More than.. more than other people, like you know. I think she needed a little bit of makeup on, at least. But yeah, I think that should be a problem for you, if you're gonna be ah like waking up next to.. If I'm going to be waking up next to her like everyday, that would be a problem in the long term

Against these descriptions of their past sexual partners' physical inadequacies, many participants offered detailed specifications about the physical characteristics their desired partners should embody, including age, weight, height and body type; skin, hair and eye colour; race, ethnicity and nationality. Though participants often framed their preferences as idiosyncratic, the overall *uniformity* of these descriptions was striking, as men almost invariably described a feminine ideal that closely resembles that depicted in contemporary advertising: young, slim and able-bodied, normatively white or an exoticised 'Other', and conventionally attractive (Gill 2008b; Gill 2009a). Injunctions that women be 'fit' were frequent, with many men describing preferences for women who 'work out', 'go to the gym' and 'take care of themselves physically'. The overwhelming emphasis placed on women's appearance and lack of consideration given to the affective and relational dynamics that might pertain in their future relationships gives lie to the consumer orientation which has increasingly come to structure heterosexual encounters and relationships in late capitalist contexts, where a range of social, cultural and technological developments conspire to transform the pursuit of sex and intimacy into something akin to a shopping experience (Illouz 2013). The competitive and comparative ethos which structures men's engagement in the London seduction community is also crucial here, as was demonstrated by men who spoke enviously about the kinds of women trainers date and have relationships with. Talking about a seduction trainer whose blog he follows, Ravi stated: 'The quality of women he's getting, it's really good. My target is also like that, getting the highest in high value'. The relentlessly *aspirational* quality of these narratives can be read as a symptom of the ways in which intimate and sexual relations are being remade in a culture 'enamoured with the upgrade'

(Gregg 2013: 309) and further demonstrates that 'it is often not women per se that men desire, but women's bodies' (Burkett and Hamilton 2012: 827).

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that the London seduction community is not so much a *deviation* or *departure* from current social conventions as an *extension* and *acceleration* of existing cultural norms. That is to say, the underpinning logics of this community-industry are *consonant with* broader reconfigurations of intimacy and sexual subjectivity taking place within the contemporary British context. In developing this analysis I have attempted to show how the forms of intimate and sexual subjectivity negotiated by men who participate in this community-industry - ordered by logics of enterprise and management, competition and consumerism - have resonance with broader patterns of subjectivity and sociality elaborated in neoliberal capitalism. Approaching the seduction community as a site of mediated intimacy, my argument complicates a dominant cultural narrative which figures men involved in the seduction community as pathetic, pathological or perverse - an 'army of sleazebags, saddos and weirdos' (Freeman 2014) - or as individuated 'problems' who can be safely contained through recourse to state intervention. Again, I must reiterate that my intention is not to exculpate the seduction community from criticism - far from it - but rather to nuance our understanding of this deeply problematic phenomenon.

This research adds to growing concerns about the ways in which the proliferation of neoliberal rationalities are reconfiguring intimate and sexual subjectivities and producing distinctly antisocial forms of sociability (Gilbert 2013; Gill 2009b; Maddison 2013). These concerns are further exacerbated by the recognition that the lack of mutuality fostered by neoliberal rationalities within intimate and sexual relations may well be conducive to sexual coercion and violence (Phipps and Young 2014), particularly in a context where gender equality is assumed to have been achieved and women are imbued with 'compulsory sexual agency' (Burkett and Hamilton 2012; Gill 2008b; Gill 2008a). With and alongside feminist scholars elsewhere (Barker 2013; Fahs 2011; Heckert and Cleminson 2011; Maddison 2013), I find myself asking what can be done to unsettle the entrepreneurial and consumerist modes of sexuality that are taking hold in the contemporary cultural conjuncture and instead find ways to forge more mutual and ethical forms of intimacy and sexuality. I do not presume to have the answers to these questions. Moreover, like Breanne Fahs (2011), I am sceptical of the idea that there can be any definitive 'solution' to the problems of gender inequality and sexual oppression. What I do want to impress here however is the importance of undertaking more

rigorous analysis in an attempt to 'get the story right' (Ezzell 2013). It is only too easy to dismiss the seduction community as a cultural anomaly and pathologise the men who participate in this community-industry. Examining how the seduction community as a site of mediated intimacy reflects and reproduces broader cultural rationalities is a much more difficult - and much more urgent - endeavour.

Notes

[1] My thinking about the 'pickup artist' as a cultural figure here owes much to the work of Imogen Tyler. For Tyler, the term 'figure' denotes 'the ways in which at different historical and cultural moments specific "social types" become over determined and are publicly imagined (are figured) in excessive, distorted, and caricatured ways' (Tyler, 2008: 18). She further argues that 'the emergence of these figures is always expressive of an underlying social crisis or anxiety' (Tyler, 2008: 18).

[2] Men involved in the London seduction community are largely young and middle class. The majority are in their 20s and 30s, though men older than this regularly attend commercial and non-commercial events. They are typically highly educated, having attended or currently attending university, and many have postgraduate qualifications (a full third of interview participants held postgraduate degrees). Most work in professional occupations in fields such as business, science and education. In part, the class dynamics of the seduction community can be attributed to the significant costs involved, with a weekend training course with an established company costing several hundred pounds. Non-commercial events also presume a certain financial status, as attendees must have both the time and income required to travel and socialise within central London. In terms of race and ethnicity, the London seduction community reflects the general population of London in that it is predominantly but by no means exclusively white; at events I attended, white men typically accounted for between half and three quarters of attendees. British Asian and South Asian men are somewhat overrepresented within the London pickup scene, a trend that was often commented on and discussed by men I interviewed. Despite this overrepresentation, it is notable that the most well-known and commercially successful trainers within the London seduction community are white. Set against the general population, relatively few Black men participate in the London scene, an absence which leads some men involved in this setting to conclude that Black men are 'naturally' good with women. Reflecting these general characteristics, in this study just over half of interview participants (18) identified as white British or white European, 8 described themselves as South Asian, British Asian or British Indian, 3 as East Asian, 2 as Black and 1 as Middle Eastern. All names given here have been changed, and identifying personal details have been omitted.

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