

Conduct Manuals

Throughout history, conduct manuals have been a way to educate readers on the social norms of a particular time. They came about during the mid to late Middle Ages and were used primarily to define moral standards for people based on classical ideals of appropriateness (Thakur & Simpson). Their primary function at the time was to emphasize the importance of acting in a spiritual and pure way in order to honor religion and faith (Knox). Conduct manuals were meant to dictate certain scripts to a particular audience based on cultural attitudes and customs. In the 17th century, there was a significant shift in conduct manuals in that they became directed specifically at girls and women, telling them how to act, think, and feel in a socially acceptable manner that would be seen as appealing to men (Thakur & Simpson). Many would argue that this trend has remained intact even into the 21st century, as society has continued to impose “norms” and specific scripts onto young girls in order to influence their development in a way that society sees fit.

Conduct manuals fall under the genre of advice literature (Sheridan Harvey). They strive to depict what is considered to be proper behavior from a woman. Centuries ago, these books focused on subjects regarding how a woman should properly maintain her home, make her husband happy, and take care of her children (Sheridan Harvey). By constructing these strict guidelines of how a woman could and could not act, the writers of conduct manuals were inhibiting women from realizing their full potential. Women could not imagine emerging from their designated duties because the literature in their lives did not even present it as a possibility. Conduct manuals caused women and girls to fear rejection and isolation if they dared stray from the cultural norms that were dictated to them.

In the grand scheme of things, conduct manuals and the advice they provided constructed the general view of feminism (Harris). Straying from its guidance traditionally meant that a woman was abandoning her femininity. Conduct manuals focused heavily on what a woman should *appear* to be, rather than what she actually *was* (Murphy). A classic example of an 18th century conduct book is *Sermon to Young Girls*, by Dr. James Fordyce. Fordyce focuses on instructing women how to behave in order to entice a man. For example, he instructs women to be submissive and dutiful (Fordyce). The message is that women should be quiet and never get in the way of a man; her purpose should be to make sure her man is happy no matter what. He also emphasizes the importance of sensitivity. Fordyce explains, “better kind of woman' will melt into tears at the sight or hearing of distress” (p. 12), meaning that acting helpless and ignorant will ensure positive attention from a man.

Fordyce’s conduct manual encapsulates the idea that everything a woman does is based on male reception. The idea that women were seen merely as objects of pleasure to men is perfectly captured in a quote by Xavier graduate students saying, “It is also interesting that most conduct books were written by men, which leads one to believe that the authors were simply describing the average man’s ideal woman, not taking into account that all women are different from one another.” By creating a fixed set of guidelines, conduct books essentially aimed to make all women identical to each other. The scripts do not leave any room for individuality or creativity, so girls were forced to grow up and live their lives being told that they were meant to be just like everyone else, or else they would never find a suitable husband.

For young girls during this time, conduct manuals explicitly laid out their futures and positions in society. The guidelines for women were so rigid, that girls never had the opportunity to truly understand what it meant to express themselves. Just by being born female, conduct

manuals told 18th century girls that they were to grow up to become mothers who would quietly care for the children, the men, and the home.

In the 19th century, when novel writing appeared, it seemed as though social norms were being challenged, and that women might have a chance at securing a place outside of the home; however, the men who wrote conduct manuals continued to do everything they could to discourage novel reading and prevent women from realizing there could be more to their lives. One manual even states that women should “avoid novel reading, for it gives women a false view of life and leads girls and women to live in an unhealthy, dreamy state of erotic fantasy,” (Thakur & Simpson). Men emphatically tried to discourage reading and education by proclaiming that it went against what a man would find attractive in a woman.

As the years went by, the only form of writing that women conducted was through letters and thank you notes. Mary August Jordan, author of the conduct manual, *Correct Writing and Speaking*, declared that letter-writing was a way for women to practice their etiquette (Donawerth). In *The Art of Thank You*, by Connie Leas, women are instructed to follow the steps laid out and the tips provided for constructing the perfect thank you note for every situation, in order to avoid a “social faux pas” (Leas 22). By consulting etiquette experts in creating this conduct manual, Leas further emphasizes the fact that women must act in very specific ways in order to be seen as socially acceptable.

Despite the fact that thank you notes were a form of conduct manuals that reinforced gender roles and were a way to highlight the ideal domestic woman, they were also revolutionary for women’s education. At the time when education was dominated by males, women were warned against gaining too much education, because it would make them seem undesirable. Because of this, thank you notes were the primary way for women to communicate and attempt

to “adapt academic materials from a mainly masculine tradition to women’s use” (Donawerth). Since the form of writing thank you notes was so detailed and reserved for women only, women were given the opportunity to form their own sphere of rhetoric (Donawerth). With the help of thank you notes as their main source of communication and education, women were able to meet together and begin to discuss their intellectual positions in society. Although women did not directly defy the policies set by men regarding women and education until the 1850s, thank you notes were a way for women to start the conversation amongst themselves. The women’s sphere of rhetoric enabled women to gradually realize that the messages of conduct manuals could in fact be challenged (Donawerth).

Since the 18th and 19th centuries, women have come a very long way. It is no longer seen as undesirable for women to receive an education or work outside of the home. Women’s rights movements broke through a great deal of the restraints placed on women through conduct manuals. Although women have made great strides throughout the past several decades, conduct manuals do still exist today. Writings such as self-help and how-to books directed at women have the same rigid structure that conduct manuals did in the 18th and 19th centuries. Current conduct manuals can largely be separated into two groups: those that teach women how to enter and be successful in a masculine world (Harris), and those that tell young girls and women how they should act in “typical” girlhood scenarios.

In today’s society, it is common for women to be portrayed as desperately wanting to find a man. Women in the media can be portrayed as frivolous and silly when it comes to associating with men. Going with this theme, many conduct manuals focus on teaching women and girls how to succeed in relationships by thinking like a man. The message that thinking like a man

will ensure success further convinces young girls that they must somehow alter themselves and their natural, feminine brains in order to be accepted in the masculine world today.

An example of a conduct manual that instructs women to think like a man in order to achieve successful relationships is a book written by TV host Steve Harvey, *Act Like a Lady, Think Like a Man*. In his book, Steve Harvey focuses on instructing women how to act around men and how to treat them in order to ensure a successful relationship, since, in his own words, “It’s a man’s world” (Steve Harvey). While the book could be interpreted as a helpful, comical way for women to have an uncensored look into the mind of a man, in reality it is clearly a conduct manual setting guidelines within which women are expected to act. The book also assumes a woman needs help and specific instructions when it comes to finding a man because she is incapable of doing so on her own.

A troubling aspect about this particular conduct manual is that Steve Harvey is constructing rules for women to follow that directly restate traditional gender roles of the 18th and 19th centuries (Lang). He even goes so far as to describe how women should act like helpless little girls so that men will be attracted to them and have the opportunity to feel like the hero. He preaches that women are not allowed to do manual labor around the house, like mowing the lawn, but instead they should be “making a meal or two” (Steve Harvey). Suggestions such as this are insulting to the progress women have made over the years. Steve Harvey is using his conduct manual to encourage women to forget their current place in society, and revert back to the confinements of their homes as it was centuries ago.

Huffington Post blogger Nico Lang perfectly encapsulates the problem with Steve Harvey’s message to women by saying, “Rather than valuing the ways in which modern women are subverting traditional gender dynamics in ways that are making dating more equitable, Steve

Harvey instructs women that the way to get what you want is to ‘put your finger in your mouth and act like you haven’t got a clue what to do or the strength to do it’ (Harvey)” (Lang). Lang is supporting the claim that Steve Harvey’s work is a step backwards when it comes to gender equality. Even more detrimental is the fact that young, impressionable girls could read Harvey’s words, and internalize the message that being themselves is not enough to find a man. They are being encouraged to act within a specific set of rules, therefore discouraging individuality, and encouraging conformity, which is essentially the underlying aim of all conduct manuals.

In addition to Steve Harvey’s instructions for girls and women to think like men, there are other types of conduct manuals that tell girls what to do and how to act in certain girlhood situations. For example, in her book *The Bad Girl’s Guide to Getting What You Want*, Cameron Tuttle explains how girls need to act in order to be seen as “bad,” or independent. Tuttle’s title alone implies that the only way for a young girl to get what she wants in this world is to be bad and aggressive, which is a specific script in itself as it encourages girls to act the same way. This modern-day conduct manual is particularly dangerous because it encourages girls to conform to the “bad girl” script provided. Tuttle depicts many important milestones in a girl’s life, but some specific examples of life events she focuses on are dating and finding a job.

In offering dating advice, Tuttle explains how a girl can “increase your market value” so that a boy will “be wanting you all night long,” (Tuttle 87). She expands in detail how girls should act in order to attract men, therefore enhancing the idea that conduct manuals are meant to train girls to become the image of “idealized femininity” (Harris) in the eyes of men. She also gives specific instructions on how a girl should act, and more importantly dress, in a job interview. Girls are to wear more makeup than normal, wear solid colors, and keep their legs crossed at all times in order to appear qualified for any given position (Tuttle 103). By offering

this advice, Tuttle not only enables conduct manuals to live on in the 21st century, but she also effectively generalizes young females as an entire group. Her book assumes that all young girls experience the same difficulties and situations, and her solution is to provide them a step-by-step script to follow when dealing with these situations, further discouraging the importance of individuality.

While modern conduct manuals like Steve Harvey's and Tuttle's might seem entertaining and innocent, they are actually very dangerous and could have horrible consequences on young girls today. Since these books send the message that girls are incapable of maintaining relationships or getting decent jobs in the professional world by their own accord, their self-esteem and sense of individuality could be utterly devastated. If society constantly tells girls to act a certain way in order to alter themselves to what society thinks they should be, they could feel lost and inadequate in a world that is constantly telling them that they are not enough.

The presence of conduct manuals in the 21st century is a pressing issue that desperately lacks the attention it deserves. Society as a whole needs to reform the way women are portrayed in order to protect young girls. By portraying women as objects of desire in the media, girls cannot help but receive the messages around them that they are supposed to look and act like the ideal woman, even if that mean abandoning the qualities that make them unique. Girls are exposed to societal scripts of what a woman should be through online quizzes determining what celebrities they are most like, models in magazines, and other online spaces that constantly remind them that they need to improve themselves and change who they are in order to be what society tells them is the ideal woman.

The conduct manuals of the 21st century are just as detrimental as those of the 18th century, if not more. Older conduct manuals dealt with primarily how a woman should act,

whereas now there is additional emphasis on the element pertaining to how a woman's body should look. This physical element makes societal scripts all the more dangerous because there is the potential that girls will develop unhealthy habits and eating disorders in order to force themselves to fit into the norms laid out in today's conduct manuals.

Woman have come so far since the 18th and 19th centuries. It is most common for woman to be college-educated and found working professional jobs. Today's version of conduct manuals are essentially dragging women back into the 18th century, revealing a sad statement of our society's inability to appreciate the tremendous strides women have made throughout the years.

It is essential that young girls today are taught that conduct manuals are unimportant and should be ignored. Girls should look to celebrities like Adele, Amy Schumer, and to strong leaders like Hillary Clinton in order to see how important individuality and diversity among women really are. By encouraging girls to understand that diversity and uniqueness are valued qualities, there is potential to end conduct manuals forever, and girls will allowed to write their own manuals for themselves and their personalities as they see fit without any outside influence.

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