

The Centerfold Syndrome

Feminists have long complained about the effects of skin magazines on women, but what about their effect on men? In this selection excerpted from The Centerfold Syndrome (1995), Gary R. Brooks (b. 1946) argues that pinup photography — and, more generally, the objectification of women — is as damaging to men as it is to women, because it can cause men to have unreal expectations about their sexual relationships, as well as self-doubts and an inability to achieve genuine emotional intimacy with a woman. Assistant Chief of Psychological Services at Olin Teague Veterans' Center in Tempe, Texas, Brooks is a teacher and practitioner in both individual and family therapy. His many publications have most recently focused on male gender roles.

I'm a relatively normal and emotionally stable guy who grew up believing that looking at and desiring physically attractive women was both pleasurable and inevitable. Now I'm not so sure.

During the past several years, as I have studied the lives and conflicts of men, I have begun to question the value of much of what I had previously accepted. I once assumed, as many men do, that success at work and in a career was the greatest measure of a man, that physical toughness and heroic acts were pathways to proving manhood, that men had to keep the upper hand with women, that only "queers" loved other men, and that emotional sensitivity and vulnerability were signs of weakness. Of all these assumptions, however, none has been more deeply ingrained than the belief that physically attractive women's bodies are the most magnificent spectacles in nature, and that men are destined to fervently desire them, to compete for them, to sacrifice emotional and physical well-being for them, but rarely to enjoy them except from afar. Men and women have accepted this bizarre state of affairs, strangely enough, as both unavoidable and relatively harmless. Neither is true. In fact, in studying this situation I have come to the conclusion that this male pattern of relating to women's bodies, which I am calling the Centerfold Syndrome, represents one of the most malignant forces in contemporary relationships between men and women.

The centerfold has been one of the dominant cultural icons of the past half-century. As interpreted by *Playboy* magazine's founder Hugh Hefner and *Penthouse* magazine's publisher Bob Guccione, today's centerfold is a racier, slicker, and glossier fantasy woman, even more perfect and idealized than the pinup girl of the 1930s and 1940s. Her airbrushed

perfection permeates our visual environment and our consciousness, creating unreal fantasies and expectations, imposing profound distortions on how men relate with women and to women's bodies, and, in turn, how women relate to their physical selves and with men.

Elements of the Centerfold Syndrome

The five principal elements of the Centerfold Syndrome are (a) voyeurism, (b) objectification, (c) the need for validation, (d) trophyism, and (e) the fear of true intimacy.

VOYEURISM

Nothing heightens the emotional intensity of a sexual encounter as much as looking directly into the eyes of one's partner. Similarly, the unique features of a female partner's physical appearance — the way her breasts swell in a dress, the outline of her torso through gossamer fabric — can become a powerful sexual stimulus for a man. Certainly, the visual sense always has and probably always will play a major role in men's sexual responsiveness. In the latter half of this century, however, this component of men's sexuality has been so exploited, distorted, and outrageously exaggerated that the emotional and sexual health of most contemporary men has been seriously compromised.

Throughout our culture, in movies, on television, in magazines, and in public meeting places, men are continually assailed with images of naked and semi-naked women. Not only are the glossy soft-core porno magazines more plentiful than ever, but even the covers of many "women's" magazines feature the same type of comely, buxom models who are also pictured on hot rod magazines, tabloid newspapers, and, once a year, mainstream sports magazines. Advertising billboards promote "men's clubs" that are "topless" or "bottomless" or that feature models in lingerie. A popular restaurant celebrates women's "hooters" more than it celebrates its food. Beer companies seem to be competing to see which can cram the most bikini-clad women into a thirty-second commercial. Superhero comics are liberally sprinkled with images of breathtaking superwomen in skintight bodysuits. The creative inspiration for one entire television series is the adventures of scantily clad lifeguards. Increasingly, women are encouraged to wear bathing suits and exercise outfits that cover their derrières with little more than a thin fabric strip.

Only religious fundamentalists and radical feminists appear to be alarmed about this wave of female body glorification. The culture at large seems to be generally indifferent to this trend, seeing it as harmless titillation, pretty much a natural product of men's biological makeup. I

strongly disagree with this position. It is my contention that this mania, this explosion in glorification and objectification of women's bodies, promotes unreal images of women, distorts physical reality, creates an obsession with visual stimulation, and trivializes all other natural features of a healthy psychosexual relationship.

OBJECTIFICATION

Voyeurism and objectification are closely related. Just as the Centerfold Syndrome calls for men to become *observers*, it also calls for women to become the *observed*. Women become objects as men become objectifiers. As the culture has granted men the right and privilege of looking at women, women have been expected to accept the role of stimulators of men's visual interest, with their bodies becoming objects that can be lined up, compared, and rated. The process is distinctly one-way, with women's bodies highlighted and male observers remaining in the shadows or anonymous in a crowd. Objective physical aspects are critical: size, shape, and harmony of body parts are more important than a woman's human qualities. The women objectified by the media remain relatively anonymous, often without names, except for pseudonyms such as Miss May, Miss Nevada, or Miss Rotary Camshaf. Despite the occasional pretense of connection through shallow interviews or background sketches, centerfold women are left devoid of real personalities, portrayed as superficial cartoon characters. Men talk of their attraction to women in dehumanizing terms based on the body part of their obsession — "I'm a leg man," or "I'm an ass man."

What's more, one fantasy woman is never enough, since images that initially can be enormously novel and exciting can quickly lose their zip. Objectifying observers soon find one naked woman boring and routine, and look for new and different images to provoke their fascination — "variety is the spice of life." At times, the confirmed objectifier becomes so attached to the thrill of the new and different visual experience, he resorts to the kinky and the offbeat, becoming preoccupied with visual fetishes. Bizarre magazines featuring only "Big-Breasted Mamas," "Black Beauties," "Oriental Cuties," or "Biker Babes" are in part a pathetic effort to override the boredom inherent in such superficial sexuality.

Since centerfold fantasy women are presented only to stimulate and to invite admiration of their perfection, they are unlike real women, who not only have physical flaws but also expect things from relationships and can be interpersonally threatening. When centerfold women are available to men as visually perfect and emotionally distant sexual fantasy objects, real women become more complicated and less appealing. In fact, when men become fixated on narrow and idealized images of female beauty — youthful bodies with uplifted breasts and full but firm bottoms — their real partners, by comparison, may come to be seen as not only less

appealing but even ugly. Stretch marks, varicose veins, sagging breasts, and cellulite-marked legs, common phenomena for real female bodies, may be viewed as repugnant by men who see women as objects.

Furthermore, when a man in a relationship is continually distracted by a fantasy life dominated by visual images of idealized bodies of strangers, that man will frequently be emotionally absent from his partner; he will be unable to have intense, here-and-now experiences with her. Tragically, if he spends most of his emotional energy on sexual fantasies about inaccessible people, he frequently will not be available for even the most intimate emotional and sexual moments with the most important person in his life.

THE NEED FOR VALIDATION

The traditional concept of manhood is an elusive state to achieve. Most men have only a vague sense of their masculinity and, therefore, continually worry about whether they measure up, and they are quick to become alarmed at the first sign of failure, weakness, or vulnerability. They are programmed to crave validation of their masculinity, and they frequently view women's bodies as a medium for that validation. This need for validation disempowers them and creates an odd yet vitally important inversion of the traditional power relationship between women and men. Despite the fact that they generally have had considerable advantages over women in physical strength and economic and political opportunities, men have frequently felt one-down about sexuality. Although there are multiple ways that women could conceivably validate a man's masculinity, the avenue critical to most men is the sexual one. When women are envisioned as sexual objects and made the centerpiece of men's visual world, they become imbued with enormous psychosocial power. They are seen as having invaluable manhood tokens that they may, or may not, choose to dispense. The more physically attractive a woman is, the more validating power she is seen to have.

What have made matters worse are the long-standing gender differences in socialization about sexual activity. Young men have been encouraged to be promiscuous — that is, to seek sexual activity with scant consideration of relationship needs, intimacy, or emotional compatibility. At the same time, young women have been encouraged to attract men's attention, yet to withhold and serve as the gatekeepers of sexual activity.

Even when participating in sex, men are not free from the need for validation. In recent years, thanks to abundant technical advice from sex manuals and implicit assumptions that men's "performances" are the critical determinants of sexual fulfillment, many contemporary men have become obsessed with producing physical evidence of women's sexual pleasure. A dramatic response from a woman's body — erect nipples,

gyrating hips, a shuddering orgasm — can be interpreted by a man as unambiguous evidence of his manliness. Conversely, a cold, listless, or indifferent response from a woman's body often leaves a man feeling ineffectual, inadequate, or resentful. Rarely can a woman find the right words to reassure a man of his worth when he has decided that her body is underappreciative of his manly attentions. To many men, the state of a woman's body may come to be viewed as a masculinity barometer, with its natural fluctuations mistaken as irrefutable evidence of either a man's sexual competence or his shameful inadequacy.

The power imparted by women's sexual leverage, when viewed in light of women's relative powerlessness in other spheres, sets the stage for considerable misunderstanding between women and men. Women, of course, are keenly aware of men's economic and political leverage, but are frequently unaware of the degree to which men feel powerless in terms of sexuality. Men, aware of their insecurities about sexuality, are deeply fearful of women gaining power in areas once thought to be the basis of men's security and worth.

At this critical juncture in the history of gender relations, the Centerfold Syndrome is made infinitely worse by a culture that plays to men's fears and heightens men's feelings of sexual disempowerment. As I have already discussed, artificially enhanced images of exquisitely desirable women are everywhere, but these women are remote and unattainable. They are on screens or glossy pages, but physically unavailable. They parade across well-lit and well-guarded stages, before masses of sexually aroused men who hoot but don't touch and are ultimately left unfulfilled, frustrated, and demoralized.

All men and all women are diminished by this noxious situation. The very few women who meet centerfold standards only retain their power as long as they maintain perfect bodies and the leverage of mystery and unavailability. All other women suffer from pressures to live up to the outrageous centerfold standard and from the disappointment of partners when they fail. The very few men who form sexual relationships with centerfolds are often left disappointed, fearful of loss, or envious of those who tryst with even more desirable centerfolds. The great majority of men who never come close to sex with their dream woman are left feeling cheated or unmanly.

TROPHYISM

Men also experience their masculinity in relation to other men. That is, they ask themselves, How do I stack up against the other guys? Men compete in this way because they believe that the tokens of masculinity are in short supply, with the most valuable prizes obtained by only the worthiest men. Women's bodies become part of this scenario as they are

objectified and treated as potential trophies — living testaments to a man's prowess as a financial success, skillful sexual performer, or fearless warrior.

This male competition for access to women's bodies begins in adolescence when boys compete to be the first to "score," to achieve the most sexual conquests, to "make it" with the sexiest teenage girl. The women's-bodies-as-trophies mentality, damaging enough in adolescence, becomes even more destructive in adulthood, when the "trophy hunts" of adolescence clash with men's developmental need to "settle down" and select a long-term companion. While collecting new and different sexual trophies may be celebrated among male adolescents, it is a sign of emotional immaturity in the world of most adults. Furthermore, while actual trophies retain their basic physical characteristics, human trophies do not. Women's bodies age, losing their trophy-like characteristics, especially in comparison to newer varieties. Hence, the trophy-hunting man, initially satisfied with his trophy-wife, must eventually face the maddening reality that his prize will eventually lose her lustre, while other potential prizes will emit near-irresistible allure.

Another aspect of this trophyism mentality makes it especially dangerous. Trophies, once they are won, are supposed to become the property of the winner, a permanent physical symbol of accomplishment and worthiness. This cannot be so with women's bodies. Women, of course, no longer want to be passive objects, and they have a growing say in whom they spend their lives with. From the perspective of the trophy hunter, this is a horrifying trend, as he can never be assured that his trophy will remain his. At any time, she may choose to sit on the shelf of another man. This is a devastating occurrence for a trophy-hunting man, one that commonly provokes him to desperate and destructive reactions.

THE FEAR OF TRUE INTIMACY

Men are created within women's bodies and their first experiences of love and security come from intimate physical contact with their mothers' soft and welcoming bodies. Fathers' bodies could provide similar sensual pleasures, but they traditionally have been unavailable to young boys, or when available, have been stiff and threatening.

Though young boys treasure the opportunity to be physically close, both for sensual pleasures and for reassurance in times of vulnerability, they soon encounter social pressures to distance themselves from their mothers' bodies and establish a place alongside the bodies of men. This early developmental injunction, endemic to traditional parenting of boys, causes them to have lifelong conflict with women's bodies, a conflict that is the essence of this fifth and most complex aspect of the Centerfold Syndrome.

Young boys are conditioned to feel shame over feelings of weakness and vulnerability, encouraged to suppress their needs for sensual physical

* contact, and expected to develop male body armor with hard muscles and an emotionally stoic exterior. While they try to emulate heroes that are brave, intrepid, fearless, physically aggressive, and emotionally tough, boys cannot ignore that they are still insecure and crave physical comforting. At especially vulnerable times, they may allow nurturers to give some measure of soothing and comforting, but fears of humiliation quickly surface. Frequently, boys discover that some touch and physical closeness are possible through acceptable "boy" activities like sports and horseplay, but they remain continually aware that these sensual pleasures must not be acknowledged.

In short, boys learn to associate women's bodies with softness, intimacy, and sensuality, the very qualities they have been taught to reject. Despite their common exteriors of manic activity and rough play, boys often crave physical closeness and sensuality, but have no way to ask for it and few avenues by which to experience it.

In adolescence, young men find themselves besieged by two powerful yet contradictory forces — waves of sexual urgency and the extreme prohibitions against emotional intimacy. The sudden appearance of the hormonal pressures of sexuality catches young men unprepared; the fear of intimacy leaves them confused and conflicted. Help is rarely available. Usually there is some token guidance in the form of caution about the need to be sexually controlled, but boys recognize these admonitions to be contradicted by their bodies, their peers, their role models, and their culture, in which the dominant message is that sex is great and a man should acquire as much of it as possible.

Sadly, young men, who have had minimal preparation for the multiple complexities of sexuality, have also been encouraged to be physically tough and insensitive to emotional issues. Emphasis has been placed on aggressive and competitive skills, with very little emphasis on interpersonal skills of communication, empathy, and nurturing. Young men badly want sexual intimacy, but have learned to fear and suppress their needs for emotional intimacy and sensuality. They learn that the safest form of sex is the "slam bam thank you ma'am" variety.

It is conceivable that under optimal circumstances sexual activity might help boys to rediscover these long-suppressed parts of themselves and might help them unlearn their fears of these "feminine" qualities. The opposite typically occurs, however, as young men experience their brushes with sensuality and emotional intimacy as confusing and threatening to their hard-won masculine independence and desire for "sexual freedom." Most young men therefore give primacy to their sexual needs, while continuing to suppress their needs for sensuality.

As young men learn to wall themselves off from too much emotional intimacy in sex — to develop nonrelational sexuality — they are also taught to sexualize all feelings of emotional and physical closeness. As a result, they become unable to experience nonsexual intimacy. Because

their closest approximations of emotional intimacy and most intense exposure to sensual pleasure occur almost exclusively in the context of rapid-orgasm sexual activity, male adolescents learn to closely associate sex and intimacy. Further, they are poorly tutored in distinguishing the two, because they have been raised in a culture that generally gives minute attention to men's sensuality and intimacy needs while exalting their sexual needs. Because of this confusion, it should not be surprising that a man who wants to replace his feelings of emotional distance and alienation with ones of closeness and connection misinterprets the feelings as sexual ones and assumes that he is just "horny." Consequently, men may seek sex when they really want emotional intimacy, sensual pleasure, or physical comforting. Moreover, they frequently may engage in sex when they have no interest whatever in emotional intimacy.

Sometimes the distinction between the desire for sex and the desire for intimacy is irrelevant. In some cases, a sexual relationship may help a man discover his sensuality and intimacy needs, and he may develop a deeply fulfilling relationship with his partner. More often than not, however, this blurring of sexual needs and intimacy needs will create significant relationship constraints. When young men do not learn to distinguish the two sets of needs, they will be highly restricted in their capacity to develop and maintain relationships. For example, intimacy with male peers will incite homophobic panic, and intimate friendships with girls will be contaminated by compulsive sexual overtures. Limited in their pursuit of true intimacy, young men may be prone to overdependence upon a sexual partner; or to defend against excessive intimacy, they may seek promiscuous sexual activity, rather than risk getting too close to a partner. Even when remaining monogamous, young men may be prone to seek distance through fantasy and emotional withdrawal.

Ultimately, this fifth aspect of the Centerfold Syndrome is about how men are taught to suppress their needs for intimacy and sensuality, and come to invest too much emotional and psychological power in some women's bodies. Fearing their potential overdependence on women, men develop a preoccupation with sexuality, which powerfully handicaps their capacity for emotionally intimate relationships with men and for nonsexual relationships with women.

Why Aren't There More Complaints?

Although the tenets of this syndrome are indoctrinated into children at an early age, some of the teaching has been so subtle that the more covert implications are missed. Commonly, the Centerfold Syndrome is accepted as a relatively natural outgrowth of innate, gender-based biological differences. Furthermore, the social and psychological tension produced by the syndrome has often been presented as culturally beneficial — the basic lifeblood

and energizing force of our society. The significant problems related to the syndrome have been dismissed or dismissed.

Consequently, only some women have protested as yet that the Centerfold Syndrome objectifies them, depersonalizes them, reduces them to body parts, perpetuates anatomical lies, and idealizes unreal fantasies about women's bodies and sexuality. Sadly, many more women accept some of the fraudulent premises of the Centerfold Syndrome and take on the hopeless task of meeting its standards, rarely satisfied with their successes, and ultimately blaming themselves for the inevitable failures.

Yet, although damage to women as the result of the Centerfold Syndrome is gradually becoming clear, there is virtually no awareness that it also harms men. This isn't surprising, since very few men seem dissatisfied with their sexual socialization. Most seem happy to embrace the Centerfold Syndrome, though some will admit disappointment that they have not been able to capture a true centerfold. Nevertheless, it's my contention that the Centerfold Syndrome is deeply harmful to women *and* men. It produces major asynchronicity between men and women and is a crucial component in the "battle of the sexes." Since it prevents real intimacy, mature discourse, and honest interpersonal connection, it creates barriers to understanding and becomes a significant obstacle to healthy relationships.

The Centerfold Syndrome is pervasive, but it is not inevitable. It is neither an unavoidable outgrowth of biological forces nor the product of moral weakness resulting from Adam succumbing to Eve's temptation with the forbidden fruit. Rather, it is a social construction, and like all socially constructed realities, it can be deconstructed.

Reading the Text

1. Summarize in your own words what Brooks means by the Centerfold Syndrome, being sure to explain each of the five elements that he outlines.
2. Why does Brooks claim that the Centerfold Syndrome is "deeply harmful to women *and* men"?
3. How do modern mass media perpetuate the Centerfold Syndrome, in Brooks's view?
4. How, according to Brooks, has the Centerfold Syndrome led many American men to feel sexually disempowered?
5. What is the difference between sensual intimacy and sexual intimacy, according to Brooks?

Reading the Signs

1. In your journal, discuss what you consider to be the ideal woman. Compare entries in class and list on the board the responses by gender. To

what extent has the Centerfold Syndrome affected the responses of male and female students?

2. Select a men's magazine such as *Details* and study the ways in which male and female models interact in the magazine's advertising. Use your findings to support, refute, or modify Brooks's contention that the Centerfold Syndrome is perpetuated in modern media.
3. While some counterparts to *Playboy* exist for female readers, they have not had the same commercial success. Using Brooks's argument about gender roles as your starting point, write an essay in which you explain why such magazines have failed to achieve as large a market share as men's "girlie" magazines.
4. Brooks concludes his essay by asserting that "like all socially constructed realities, [the Centerfold Syndrome] can be deconstructed." In class, discuss how such a repudiation of the Centerfold Syndrome might be achieved.
5. Write an essay in which you apply Brooks's notion of the Centerfold Syndrome to the social rituals described in Peter Lyman's "The Fraternal Bond as a Joking Relationship" (p. 471). To what extent do you believe that the young men whom Lyman discusses are influenced by the Centerfold Syndrome?
6. To what extent do sports condition young men to suppress their desire for physical closeness with other human beings? To develop your ideas, consult, in addition to Brooks's essay, Michael A. Messner's "Power at Play" (p. 458).

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Women's Language

Do the men in your class tend to dominate during class discussion? Do the women tend to contribute by asking questions? According to Robin Tolmach Lakoff's (b. 1942) linguistic analysis of women's speech patterns, such tendencies may be expected in an environment where the prevailing gender codes compel men to be aggressive and women to be conciliatory. In all cultures, Tolmach argues, women's speech patterns reflect the gender codes of their society, and that wherever one looks, women's speech is defined as "illogical" in comparison with the "logical" norms of male speech. The very form of our speech is political, Lakoff argues in this excerpt from Talking Power: The Politics of Language in Our Lives (1990), and reflects the politics of gender in society. Robin Tolmach Lakoff is professor of linguistics at the University of California,