

# Redefining Men

## *Alternative Masculinities in a Twelve-Step Program*

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*This article argues that Codependents Anonymous—a group often criticized for overlooking gender politics—can encourage an awareness of hegemonic masculinity among men. The psychospiritual codependency discourse requires that people examine their lives for sources of dysfunction and make changes where possible. Drawing on data from ethnographic research and interviews, this article reveals that men can come to attribute dysfunction to stereotypical male behavior. Traditional masculinity has failed to provide the men in this research with its customary privileges, including successful marriages and intimate relationships. The experience of failure left them with no typical male resources on which to draw. This lack of resources, consequently, made change possible. Illustrative cases follow several men through the transition from hegemonic masculinity to egalitarian personhood.*

*Key words:* codependency, hegemonic masculinity, traditional masculinity, stereotypes, transitions

When Tom's wife sought support in meetings of Codependents Anonymous (CoDA), he felt optimistic. Like many men—and many women, as well—Tom considered his wife responsible for making the changes that would smooth out their troubled marriage (see Hare-Mustin 1983; Cancian 1987). He had what he now calls a “typical male way” of dealing with his troubled marriage. “I thought there really *was* no problem,” he said, “because she'd come around to my way of seeing things eventually.” She brought home some of the group's literature. Tom read it, and his first thoughts were positive. He recalls reading the twelve steps, being especially struck by the part about making amends, and thinking, “Wow! This is great! She'll realize the error of her ways.” He assumed that she would admit that he had been right all along and their troubles would end. However, he assumed wrong. His wife did not come around to his way of seeing things. Instead, she filed for divorce. She had Tom removed from the house through court order. Another

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man moved in. Tom continued to pay the mortgage and support three children with whom he had only weekend visitation rights.

Tom recalls feeling the anger, hurt, betrayal, and other feelings that go along with uncoupling. In other words, he recalls the strong, potentially violent emotions that this culture permits men to feel (see Johnson 1997; Pogrebin 1983; Stearns 1994; Stearns and Stearns 1986). More important, he recalls feeling something that he had never felt before: he felt helpless and he felt like a failure. For the first time in his life, Tom faced something that he could neither change nor fix. He had long been a self-described "Mr. Fixit," in the broadest sense. He was the Brannon Masculinity Scale in the flesh, a "big wheel," "no sissy stuff," "give 'em hell," "sturdy oak" kind of guy (Brannon 1985). He recalled being "a guy who'd never ask for directions, who'd only read the manual as a last resort." If all else failed, he would "plug the hole or get a bigger hammer." If someone offered another solution or worried about making matters worse, Tom persisted. This had worked for as long as he could remember—until recently. Suddenly, the legal language of divorce was particularly telling in the way it justifies dissolved marriages on grounds that they are "irretrievably broken." This time, Tom had no hammer big enough and no way to slant the situation his way. Tom remembered the literature his wife had brought home and went to CoDA, thinking it might be a place "where you could admit that you messed up and that now you've got nothing."

Tom had originally thought that CoDA would be a place where his wife would be transformed; now, finding himself there, he was transformed instead. The group drew on a body of popular psychospiritual advice literature that depicted dominant social institutions as entirely, albeit ambiguously, dysfunctional (see, e.g., Beattie 1987, 1989, 1990; Schaef 1986). Families of origin came under particular attack (see Beattie 1987, 1989, 1990; CoDA 1995; Wegscheider-Cruse and Cruse 1990). Because Tom and most of the men in CoDA come from the baby boom, their families were historically characterized by traditional gender roles. Since the codependency discourse maintains that many of the patterns learned in the family transmit dysfunction, it labels traditional gender roles as dysfunctional as well. Consequently, Tom and other men discarded many aspects of stereotypical masculinity while working on recovery from codependency. To be sure, the men encountered in this research did not depict their transformations in the vocabulary of academic feminism. They used the psychospiritual discourse of codependency, not politics, to resist repeating oppressive arrangements of the past.

This article illustrates how Tom and others became "different kinds of men," to use Tom's words, through participation in CoDA. It extends and refines the literature on transformations in masculinity from versions of what Connell (1986) referred to as "hegemonic" to what Kimmel (1996) called "democratic manhood" (see Connell 1993; Cornish 1999; Kimmel and

Mosmiller 1992; Schacht and Ewing 1998; Wild 1999). Much of the men's studies literature focuses either on making men aware of the need for structural change or on stories of how individual men have become more aware of sexism. This article examines how that individual awareness can be brought to bear on micropractices within relationships. Because CoDA is not a single-sex group and creates an environment where men must take women on equal terms, it offers communal validation for ending sexist behavior. Both women and men are there to be introspective of their emotional lives and remake the self.<sup>1</sup> This vulnerability minimizes the contest of manhood and encourages men to recognize their use of power and control.

Most of the research on CoDA and its discourse has either focused exclusively on women or castigated the alleged neglect of gender politics (see Kaminer 1990, 1991; Babcock and McKay 1995; Mitchell-Norberg, Warren, and Zale 1995; Rapping 1996). Consequently, it has ignored and trivialized the experiences of the men who also identify with the phenomenon of codependency. In contrast, this research shows how CoDA offers men a safe space in which to consider alternatives to hegemonic masculinity. Indeed, the evidence offered here suggests that the men who are drawn to CoDA must consider alternatives since they have failed important tests of traditional manhood. The failure opens them to the possibility of change. In what follows, Tom and other men serve as illustrative cases of the sort of transformation that can take place. First, however, we offer some background on CoDA and codependency.

CoDA (1988) describes itself as "a fellowship of men and women whose common problem is an inability to maintain functional relationships." What this translates into, in terms of members, is a remarkably high proportion of people who have been through divorce. Although CoDA is not explicitly a program for divorcees, most of those in attendance are divorced. CoDA is a twelve-step program based on the principles and practices of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). Although CoDA shares AA's basic tenets, alcoholism or substance abuse need not factor into the range of problems addressed by this particular generation of twelve-step groups.<sup>2</sup> During the 1980s, an increasing number of behaviors acquired the label of *addiction*, and the word simultaneously acquired an elasticity that stretched it beyond physiological dependence. Since twelve-step programs have long been an effective means of treating addictions, new groups sprang up to offer support for behaviors now labeled as such, including compulsive gambling, eating, and engaging in unhealthy relationships, otherwise known as codependency. It is not so much an addiction, in the classic sense, as it is a psychospiritual state or condition. As Rice (1996) put it, codependency "is not something that one 'has,' but, rather, something one believes" (p. 10). According to the discourse, the condition results from living in a society that keeps people at a distance from their true selves or inner children. This alienation from the self and its purported needs is not only a cause of codependency but also one of its

symptoms. Allegedly, codependent relationships not only arise from a lack of self-awareness; they also worsen it. Within the discourse, failed relationships are attributed to an inability to understand and meet the needs of the lost self.

When followed wholeheartedly, the twelve steps can produce a dramatic personal transformation. However, the steps are not just guidelines for behavioral modification, and a commitment to a twelve-step program involves more than going to weekly meetings. "Working a program," as it is called in the groups, entails adopting a particular discourse and its perspective on human behavior. For example, working a program in CoDA involves embracing a discourse that portrays dominant social institutions as "dysfunctional" (see, e.g., Schaefer 1986) and attributes the troubles of adulthood to growing up in families that are microcosms of that dysfunction.<sup>3</sup>

## METHOD

The men who were part of this research do not constitute a representative sample of CoDA members or of men. It is as impossible to define a universe of self-identified codependents as it is to find the typical American man. The men who appear here do so as examples of the social process of transformation within a particular group. They appear not because they are unique but because, within the group, they are so typical. Their accounts crystallize the experience of the men in this study. To be sure, the kind of change they underwent occurs in contexts other than CoDA. Moreover, the men may well have changed even without the group; there is no way to know.

Data for this article come from a larger study that examined codependency as a cultural phenomenon (Irvine 1999; see also Irvine 1997, 1995, 2000). The research involved two methods: participant-observation in CoDA groups and intensive interviews with members. The participant-observation took place in more than 200 CoDA meetings open to the public in New York City and on Long Island, amounting to more than 400 hours of fieldwork. (CoDA has closed meetings for gay men and lesbians and for concentrated study of the twelve steps in sequence. None of these were included in this research.)<sup>4</sup>

The larger study draws on interviews with CoDA members, both male and female. For this article, only the male interviewees were selected out of the sample. The interviews were crucial for two reasons. First, they contributed depth and detail beyond that available through observation, given the limited time that each person speaks at a meeting. Second, the interviews minimized the effect of a kind of bias that is unavoidable in groups such as CoDA, in which the criteria for membership are highly subjective and rules of anonymity prevail. Specifically, an observer cannot know whether he or she is surrounded by committed members or newcomers. CoDA's (1988) preamble, read at every meeting, explains that the "only requirement for membership is a desire for healthy and fulfilling relationships with others and ourselves."

Thus, one may consider oneself a member after attending a single meeting. Inevitably, then, some of those observed in the research were visitors or infrequent attendees. The interviews attempted to compensate for this by including men with varying degrees of commitment to the group. Using “theoretical sampling” guidelines (Glaser 1978; Glaser and Strauss 1967), the first interviews were done with men who had attended CoDA for several years.<sup>5</sup> They were approached with the possibility of an interview after the interviewers had established sufficient rapport through participant-observation in a given group. Next, newer members, as well as men who had raised topics that suggested new avenues of questioning, were interviewed. Several men were reinterviewed a year after the first interview. Each man received a copy of his transcribed interview. The transcript not only served as a check on accuracy and the removal of identifying references but was also a means of thanking the men for their time. For most of them, it represented a version of the autobiography they had been trying to create in the group.

The interviews and data analysis followed the respected analytic techniques available in the grounded theory methods (see Glaser and Strauss 1967; Glaser 1978; Charmaz 1983; Strauss and Corbin 1997). The grounded theory method “stresses discovery and theory development rather than logical deductive reasoning which relies on prior theoretical frameworks” (Charmaz 1983, 110). It prompts researchers to ask, “What is going on here?” and “What do these people seem to be doing?” When answers suggest themselves, they generate new questions, which require new data. Analysis and data collection proceed simultaneously, and the researcher must develop a sensitivity for when to stop.

All of the interviewees were white, as were most of those observed in this research.<sup>6</sup> All of them came from the baby boom generation; again, this also describes the sample observed. All claimed to be heterosexual. They came largely from the ambiguous category of the middle class. Occupations included massage therapist, building contractor, and computer salesman. One man was on unemployment and one on disability.

Since the study that is the basis for this article examined several dimensions of codependency and recovery as lived experience, the interviews probed broadly into life history. The transcripts were analyzed using several aspects of grounded theory, especially constant comparative analysis, theoretical sampling, theoretical coding and memoing, and the development of theoretical concepts. The analysis for this article involved iterative coding for issues of masculinity. The transcripts were first given simple codes, such as “mentions gender” or “manhood,” then more refined codes, such as “problematizes traditional masculinity” or “adopts egalitarian attitude.” For example, in the first round of coding, a passage in which a man attributed his behavior to being male received a code of “mentions gender.” On further reviewing the transcript, it appeared that he was describing that male behavior as the cause of his relationship trouble. The passage was thus recoded as

“problematizes traditional masculinity.” The coding continued until coverage of topics reached saturation or until the same themes appeared repeatedly and nothing new was revealed. What emerged from the analysis were narratives of transformation from traditional or hegemonic versions of masculinity (not surprising, given the men’s demographics) to alternatives that are more egalitarian. A narrative “describes what happened, defines outcomes, or presents the stages of a social process. . . . [Narratives] usually relate events or describe processes step by step. First this happened, then that happened” (Rubin and Rubin 1995, 24).<sup>7</sup> Nine of the ten men described, systematically, how their lives had changed because their ideas about traditional masculinity had changed with time in the group. The one who still clung to traditional masculinity was the newest participant. Perhaps his behavior has since changed as well, but we have no way to know. One long-time member said that everyone who goes to the meetings is bound to change; it is only a matter of time. “If you stick around long enough,” he said, “the program will get to you one way or another.”

### MAKING MEN VISIBLE

The claim that CoDA has something to offer men is significant because in most scholarly and journalistic treatments of the group, men have been invisible. Just as Tom gave his wife responsibility for smoothing out the difficulties in their marriage, the research on CoDA tends to spotlight women. The assumption that participation in CoDA is a women’s phenomenon is seriously misguided. To be sure, research suggests that women are more likely than men to seek help for problems in romantic relationships (see Hare-Mustin 1983). Nevertheless, this does not imply that men do not seek help at all or that when they do, they are incapable of change.

In the case of CoDA, the invisibility of men originates in two methodological errors. The first of these amounts to a cautionary tale about selective observation. Using loose versions of content analysis, a number of critics allege that codependency, as a “condition,” is obviously targeted at women.<sup>8</sup> Characteristics such as being “overinvolved” in relationships, “depending upon others for approval,” “having poor boundaries,” and being “too willing to assume blame” could only describe women, claimed one feminist critic (Walters 1995, 184). Another wrote that the symptoms of codependency—“the lack of self-esteem and self-identity, the people-pleasing behavior, and the problems with control and dependency”—are conspicuously “female issues” (Martin 1988, 391). Yet, a less selective review of the same lists of symptoms would have to include characteristics such as control, workaholicism, anger, and shutting off feelings—traits conventionally considered male, not female. These, however, are not discussed when the agenda is to vilify the codependency discourse for labeling women’s traits as defective.

Codependency is then said to take its place in a long history of pathologizing women's situation under patriarchy.

A second reason for the invisibility of men sounds a warning about the use of secondary data. One often reads that women constitute 85 percent of CoDA's 60,000 members (see Mitchell-Norberg, Warren, and Zale 1995).<sup>9</sup> There is, however, no way of determining how many people—male or female—claim to be CoDA members. CoDA's national service office would be the most reliable source of these data, and it has not and will not survey its membership. Presumably, then, the figure of 60,000 is an estimate—probably a reasonable one—based on 3,000 CoDA groups' having 20 members each. The 85 percent is a stock statistic that first appeared in a *New York Times Book Review* essay written by Wendy Kaminer (1990), a version of which appears in her book, *I'm Dysfunctional, You're Dysfunctional* (1991). Kaminer made her observations at a conference on codependency, but there is a problem with her data. The conference was intended for people in the helping professions—therapists and specialists in addiction treatment. The 85 percent represents the proportion of female conference attendees, but the helping professions are highly feminized.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps this 85 percent also happens to identify personally with codependency, but the figure does not represent a proportion of self-identified codependents or CoDA members. In this particular instance, occupation explains away the relationship between gender and codependency. Nevertheless, once the statistic appeared in print, it took on a life of its own. For example, Babcock (1995) used it to document the claim that the membership of codependency self-help groups is predominantly female. The figure was extrapolated to readers of codependency books, as well, since the sponsors of the codependency conference are also the leading publishers in the recovery niche. Walters (1995) wrote that “publishers report that 85 percent of the readership of codependent materials are women” (p. 184).

At the time of this writing, there were only two studies of CoDA that avoided selective observation (see Irvine 1999; Rice 1996). Both studies found that women were slightly more likely to attend CoDA, but only slightly. For example, in the participant-observation phase of this research, which sampled meetings on all days and at all times, 58 percent of those attending were women. This approaches the 61 percent observed by Rice (1996), who studied groups in other parts of the country. The figures should not raise any eyebrows, however, since women constitute a slightly greater proportion of the membership of small support groups of all kinds than do men, making codependency's appeal to women something less than exceptional (see Wuthnow 1994, 47). Through gender socialization, women are better prepared to do the kind of personal disclosure that CoDA requires. Indeed, given the deeply confessional qualities of the group, it is striking that so many men attend. Ample research documents that masculine socialization discourages men from engaging in private talk for fear of exposing

vulnerabilities and thereby threatening their positions of power and privilege (see, e.g., Sattel 1976; Rubin 1983; Tannen 1990).

In sum, socialization predisposes men to avoid a group like CoDA, but they nevertheless do attend—and in impressive numbers. Because of presuppositions that codependency is a women's issue, men who identify with the phenomenon have gone unnoticed. The question that must be asked then is, What is the appeal of the discourse, and the group, for men?<sup>11</sup>

### **OMNIPOTENT MASCULINITY AND THE LONELINESS OF FAILURE**

It would have been convenient for this research if the men in CoDA had been obviously different from other men in some way from the start. Then we could attribute the change they underwent to exceptional circumstances of some sort. For example, if all the men in CoDA had recently begun dating feminist women (or, for that matter, had been dumped by them), then we could say that the change was in their best interest. However, this was not the case. They were such average guys. Moreover, the breakups that led them to CoDA could just as easily have steered them toward defensive hypermasculinity. In interviews, however, the men in CoDA claimed they were different from most others. They had failed. To them, this made them different. As we will shortly explain in more detail, when men fail, they fail alone. They feel excluded from the category of men. This feeling of exclusion is analytically important because while the men in CoDA felt different from other men because they had failed, it was their failure that made it possible for them to become truly different. As bell hooks (1998) wrote, "The pain men experience can serve as a catalyst calling attention to the need for change" (p. 581).

The men in CoDA arrived after failing in at least two ways. First, by failing to maintain a relationship, they had failed "a major test of adulthood"—and this is true for women as well as men (Vaughan 1986, 160). This may seem implausible in times when divorce and separation have become commonplace. Yet, even today, "relationships are almost universally viewed in success/failure terms . . . [and] any party to a terminated or even a spoiled relationship is tarred by failure" (McCall 1982, 219). Even if one does not take one's own divorce as a sign of failure, others often see it in that light.<sup>12</sup> Research suggests that while divorce itself has become more accepted, divorced people have not (Gerstel 1987). The process is still widely considered indicative of some personal flaw. For example, socializing with couples becomes difficult after uncoupling, not only because of the inevitable "splitting of friends" (Gerstel 1987; Spanier and Thompson 1983; Weiss 1975). Divorced people report feeling that married friends exclude them from social

interaction because they find them threatening in some way (Gerstel 1987). Married couples fear that the experience will be contagious or that a now-single friend will move in on one's partner.

Everyone in CoDA comes to the group facing (or anticipating) the stigma of uncoupling, whether from divorce or another type of breakup. The men interviewed for this research claimed to appreciate the company of people who know that situation well. Although it initially seemed counterintuitive to find men who subscribe to stereotypical masculinity drawn to such a group, it makes sense given the “‘expressive’ hardships” (Knupfer, Clark, and Room 1966) that men face in uncoupling. Research suggests that married men tend to rely on their wives for emotional support and rely on the marriage for supportive social networks while women typically maintain close social ties outside the marriage (Gerstel, Riessman, and Rosenfield 1985). When a marriage ends, a man often loses his sole confidant (Sheehy 1998). The men in CoDA find comfort in being around others who feel like friends at a time when friends may become scarce. As forty-two-year-old Alex put it, “I like the affiliation, just the social affiliation with people my age [who have] been divorced or are having midlife crises or something, and I can associate with that.” Paul, also in his forties, said, “The thing that really showed me that things could change for me was just sitting in meetings—just listening at first—and thinking, ‘Wow. I really have nothing to hide from these people. They’ve seen it all already.’ ”

Even given the level of acceptance within the group, the men still had reasons to feel different. In addition to the failure of uncoupling, they had failed in a second way: they had been unable to fix things. A man's inability to fix anything he comes across, even a relationship, suggests incompetent masculinity. Manhood, as an accomplishment, depends largely on skill and control, so the failure of a relationship implies flawed manhood as well. The failure may occur indirectly, through not having the kind of wife or girlfriend who will make the necessary changes, but it occurs nonetheless. For the men in CoDA, their failed relationships implied that they, too, were broken. Tom put it succinctly: “I was ‘Mr. Fix-it.’ I would always have a solution ready. Once I realized I couldn't fix my own marriage, I felt like a failure.” Another man, forty-year-old Eric, described the frustration of being unable to fix things:

I wish I could have a relationship with my wife, but I can't because she doesn't want the relationship. And I was sitting there saying, “Why can't I have this relationship with my wife?” It was a constant, constant thing. Those are the feelings that keep you down. They knock you out of the box, no matter what you're doing. You can get up and go to work every day, but you're not going to be successful because you're living with something that can't be fixed and, in the back of your mind, you can fix it. In my case, I'd have this insight that, “OK. It can't be fixed,” and I'd go and make a cup of coffee, and I'd sit down and

think about how I can fix it. And it's just terrible. It's a real hard circle. That's how I can relate to the people at CoDA.

### THE ENDURING POWER OF THE SELF-MADE MAN

Understanding why the fear of failure weighs so heavily on men requires understanding that masculinity is an accomplishment tied to passing a series of elusive tests. Over the course of American history, masculinity has taken many forms. Race, class, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, sexual preference, education, and geography all generate differences among men (see Kaufman 1994). Yet, despite considerable variety there is, as Kimmel (1996) pointed out, "a singular vision of masculinity, a particular definition that is held up as the model against which [men] all measure [them]selves" (p. 5). This "singular vision" is the self-made man. It is a standard that "carries with it the constant burdens of proof" (Kimmel 1996, x). The history of manhood in America, Kimmel writes, is one of relentless tests. The tests are doubly complicated because success is never obvious. As Brooks (1995) put it, "The traditional concept of manhood is an elusive state to achieve" (p. 5). Men must prove—mostly to other men—that they are contenders, whether in feats of physical or sexual prowess or economic superiority. They must, therefore, have the self-control to condition themselves for a variety of imminent tests. Moreover, the so-called self-made man is supposed to be native-born and white, and there are numerous ways—subtle and otherwise—to exclude those who are not from the home playing field. Erving Goffman's (1963) words of more than thirty years ago still ring true today:

In an important sense, there is only one complete unblushing male in America: a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual, Protestant, father, of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight, and height, and a recent record in sports. . . . *Any male who fails to qualify in any one of these ways is likely to view himself—during moments at least—as unworthy, incomplete, and inferior* [emphasis added]. (P. 128)

When failure or weakness looms, escape is always an option. Faced with inferiority, men have often run away. They have gone to sea, to the frontier, or to the men's club to avoid old challenges and seek new ones with better odds. For men, failure carries the threat of exclusion from the status of male. As a result, men often hide their failures, leaving others with no models of how to fail and still maintain one's manhood and self-respect. Tom summed this up well: "The average guy won't even ask for directions," he said; "how's he going to admit that he might have blown his relationship?"

Because admitting to failure is so rare and so perilous, the men in CoDA felt that it made them different. Moreover, they felt different even in the

company of others who had failed at least as badly. To be sure, they found comfort in realizing that there was little they could say that would surprise anyone at the meetings. Nevertheless, the pressures to succeed weighed so heavily that failure still came as a shock. For example, when Paul described the “jolt” of uncoupling, he clearly attributed it to the systematic loss of his roles as a man.

There’s a lot of loss I experienced in my life. A family—after being together for eighteen years—and an eighteen-year marriage, it broke up, you know . . . and not being with my kids all the time, and just not playing that role that I was shown growing up as what the father’s supposed to be—he’s supposed to take care of everybody—and to let go of that and be in a separate household from that was a big jolt to my system.

As difficult as it is to endure, a jolt can rock a man out of traditional ways of thinking and behaving. CoDA was built to encourage just this sort of change. It has borrowed strategies from AA that aimed to help the alcoholic become sober. Twelve-step culture even has a name for the jolt—“hitting bottom”—and a strategy for dealing with it, which is to take “one day at a time.” This is no doubt appealing to men, who otherwise have few skills for dealing with failure. Tom explained how this helped him keep things in perspective.

Most guys, you know, they work on a project, and it might be over their heads, really, but they insist that they can do it. Anything. Plumbing. Electrical. Automotive. We can do it. When we screw up, we can fix it. If we can’t, we get mad. That’s the way most of us look at relationships. But when your marriage falls apart, you can’t stay mad forever. In the middle of the night, you know you’re at fault for at least 50 percent of the problem. You realize that nothing’s going to change unless you do. My salvation was what I call the “humility angle” in CoDA, where you really do hit bottom and you say, “Look, I’m happy for the air that I’m breathing,” and you start from there and everything else is a plus.

## **HITTING BOTTOM AND COMING UP CHANGED**

### *How CoDA Challenges Hegemonic Masculinity*

Hitting bottom forces a man to consider what he may have done to put himself there. Taking one day at a time helps him reflect without becoming overwhelmed. If a man begins working a program with any seriousness, the self-assessment the task requires will force him to consider what he can change. For example, after a short time in the group, Tom made the “searching and fearless moral inventory” of step 4. He reflected on a lifetime of doing things the “typical male way.” His time in the Navy, the defense industry, and

sales had given male ways plenty of reinforcement. While working the program, he became critical of where the typical male approach had led him. For example, he began to see how his rush to find solutions had meant that he seldom fully understood the problems. At the same time, the norms for interaction within CoDA forced him to behave differently. For example, CoDA has a norm of acceptance, articulated in the view that a "higher power" places people "right where they need to be." Although Tom struggles with the concept of a higher power, having to accept others has meant a drastic change. "I have learned to respect others right where they are. I may not like where they are, but I have to respect it. I can't change it."

Other norms that challenge traditional masculinity have to do with procedures at meetings. For example, no one can control others in CoDA; the group has safeguards in place to prevent anyone from taking charge. There are no professional leaders. Anyone who wants to start a group can do so by contacting CoDA's national service office and finding a church or community center willing to rent a room. The person who establishes a group does not lead it in any way. The groups operate democratically and support themselves through member contributions.<sup>13</sup> The meetings are run by volunteers who read from a text provided by CoDA, which allows anyone to conduct the proceedings. Moreover, members abide by the twelve-step tradition of anonymity. This means not only introducing themselves solely by first names but also omitting references to what one does outside the group. In short, CoDA is a place where, to paraphrase the twelfth tradition, principles must come before personalities. This was something new for Tom and the other men, who were accustomed to taking every opportunity to promote themselves and, if possible, take over. Research suggests that imposing control and thereby exercising social power is an important component of traditional masculinity (see Kaufman 1994; Pease 1997).

CoDA also challenges traditional masculinity through the norms against voicing disagreement or opinion. Participants cannot offer advice or criticism to others. They must simply allow others to "share," to use the twelve-step term. At each meeting, the leader reminds those present to speak only about themselves, to limit their sharing to five minutes, and to avoid "cross talk," meaning comments explicitly or implicitly directed at what another has said. This is distinctly at odds with the characteristic ways in which men are socialized to communicate. A good deal of research on gender differences in conversation emphasizes that men talk more, interrupt more, and control topics more often than women (Aries 1987; Crawford 1995; Tannen 1990, 1994). The men were struck by how much having to listen without voicing their opinions changed them. Most notably, it transformed them from "lecturers" to "listeners" (Tannen 1990). Tom described how he plans to apply the behavior he learned in the group to other contexts:

I know now that I never let my wife finish what she was saying. I was answering the question before she even asked it. Now that I know that I have that tendency, I can change it. I have changed it. I don't feel threatened now if I'm not in charge of the conversation. I intend to listen better next time around.

Like Tom, other men claimed to have become less fearful of what listening might do to their status. "In CoDA," one said, "I basically realized that having a solution ready was all about making myself feel superior to somebody else" CoDA has made him more interested in learning from others than in impressing them. "Now," he said, "I listen to other people share about their lives, and I think to myself, 'Maybe they know something I don't. Let's pay attention here.' " This is unmistakably the voice of transition. "I was that then," Tom is saying, "I am this now."<sup>14</sup>

The group's norms against cross talk also encourage men to consider their emotions. For example, when a man feels the urge to offer an opinion, he has to realize that it can go no further; it simply remains an urge. He is left with a feeling—something most men make little room for in their lives. Tom, for example, admitted that he had always had difficulty expressing certain emotions—anger was an exception—but considered this a mark of manhood (see Brod 1987). When he could not lecture others in CoDA, his alternative was to leave the group or to ask himself why he felt it was so important to do so. He chose the latter. Through this sort of reflection, Tom realized that much of his behavior, such as jumping to solutions, was "all about making [him]self feel good." His own description reiterates claims made about the intricate connections among suppressed emotions, control, fear, and male power (see Kaufman 1994):

I never really talked about how I felt. In CoDA, I realized that life's not a competition. I don't have to prove that I'm better than anybody else. It made me feel ashamed for not giving my wife the respect she deserved. Then, I realized I probably didn't give anybody the respect they deserved.

Although Tom has not started "spilling his guts to everyone," thinking about the emotional basis for his behavior has "opened up a whole new dimension" for him. He no longer believes that "it's my way or the highway." Now, he asks himself, "Where am I coming from, emotionally, in this? Is this about trying to make myself feel good?"

### **TAKING WOMEN SERIOUSLY**

Another major area of change had to do with how the men viewed relationships and women. Since intimate relationships are such an important part of adult life, and since the men in CoDA had uncoupled at least once, it made

sense to ask in the interviews what they would do differently next time around. Paul, who was engaged at the time, had given this some thought. He laughed and said, "Oh, man! I hope I do a lot different!" When pressed for examples, he pondered for a moment then explained how he would take the next woman in his life more seriously because of what he had learned in CoDA.

In his first marriage, Paul had followed the breadwinner ideal that has been an important component of masculinity at least since the term was first used in the early nineteenth century (Kimmel 1996). The example that Paul learned from his father included coming home from work and being waited on hand and foot. Although Paul valued his home life, the hours that really counted were at work, and work revolved around men. "I never had any women friends," he recalls.

I married the first girl that paid attention to me. . . . I went through school with all guys in my class. And the job I went to was all male oriented—it's all guys. I never had that intimacy with a female, or a friendship.

In other words, he did not think of his wife as a friend. Rather, his rush to marry the first women who paid attention to him suggests that she had been a way for him to save his manhood. She was a trophy that showed other men that he had made the grade. Because he thought of his wife as his possession, and not his equal, he seldom considered her views. He seldom considered the views of any women, for that matter, since they existed, very traditionally, in a realm apart from the one populated by men.

This version of the separate spheres was recalled by many of the men in this study. Typically, it had at least two consequences. First, it justified male control over the marriage. For example, since Paul was the man and he lived in a world in which men were bosses, it made sense to him, at the time, that he would be the boss at home, too. He was also paying for things, which justified his calling the tune. Since working a CoDA program, this has changed. Paul is aware now, he says, of how his history puts him at risk for becoming "a patriarch," in his own words. For him, this evokes images of the childhood he now considers dysfunctional and, in particular, how his father treated his mother as someone who was "less than." In a sense, he is attempting, as Peter Berger (1963) so aptly put it, "to correct fortune by remaking history" (p. 61). "Now that I'm getting in touch with myself, I see that," he explained.<sup>15</sup> "I'm really glad to become aware of that stuff because I know it's the way out." His next marriage will be more of a partnership, he says. His need to run the whole show is a thing of the past.

Similar histories were voiced by other men as well. Eric said, "I used to think that relationships were like businesses. Somebody had to have the bottom line, and that had to be the man." Like Paul, he had unwittingly followed

his father's example, which included believing that the "man is the boss." "I was brought up by a father who thinks he's in control," he said, "and I thought I was, too." He continues:

Everything revolved around my father at home. My father was the strong arm, the strong hand. Everything revolved around him. I learned that. It's very, very hard living in that role. You have no other outlets. You're the strong guy.

Eric now considers this perspective "totally sick, totally dysfunctional." In answer to the question of how he will do things next time around, he emphasized the careful listening he learned in the group. He also hoped his next relationship would be a "halfway relationship." As he put it, "I want to be a friend and to be able to go halfway in everything."

A second consequence of the separate spheres that CoDA addresses concerns the status of women, in general. Like Paul, many of the men had considered women trophies. Having a woman on his arm provides a man with "conditional self-worth" (Schafer 1975; see also Pleck 1981a, 1981b; Brooks 1995; Kimmel 1996). All of the men talked of how having to listen to women as equals in the group had diminished their trophy perspective. Moreover, as Paul discussed, a different attitude toward women had also changed his emotional life. For example, thinking of his wife as his possession had made him extremely jealous and angry, which he now recalls as agonizing. "I'd see [her] looking at a guy, and I was like freaking nuts," he recalled. In CoDA, he learned—like Tom—to consider what his feelings mean. He realized that jealousy came from thinking of life as a competition, which he does less and less often these days. He is much more likely to think of women as equals "along the same journey of life," as he put it, than as trophies.

## CONCLUSION

Patient listening, tolerance, and emotional awareness are admirable qualities, but not ones readily associated with stereotypical male behavior. By providing an atmosphere of acceptance—even acceptance of failure—CoDA encourages men to do things differently, and its norms shape their new behavior. This research found men who took a step away from sexism by accepting the responsibility for having learned "the typical male" patterns of behavior (see hooks 1998). It also found men who were displeased that self-made manhood limits the range of emotions they may feel and express. In short, it found men who enjoyed white male privilege but had begun to recognize how men as well as women suffer because of social and economic inequality between the sexes. "Men are not exploited or oppressed by sexism," wrote bell hooks (1998), "but there are ways in which they suffer as a result of it" (p. 581).

Moreover, white male privilege failed the men in this research in that it failed to provide an advantage in all spheres—including married life.

Going to CoDA is not tantamount to escape. The men in this research did not run away to repair their ability to prove their manhood again. Instead, they began to engage in “quiet daily struggles . . . to free themselves from the burden of proof” (Kimmel 1996, 334). This is not to say that every man in CoDA walks in a typical male and walks out profeminist. Rather, it is to point out that in the group, the discourse encourages some men to consider what being a man means to them and reject much of their traditional behavior in favor of more egalitarian options. To be sure, the path of any particular man depends on his resources and circumstances. CoDA does not impose a standard of masculinity on its members; its popularity and endurance require accommodating a range of variation. Nevertheless, the group does have norms, and new behavior learned in the group is often carried into other contexts.<sup>16</sup>

One could argue that while this alternative masculinity offers an improvement over traditional behavior, it does nothing to change inequality. It does not diminish the pressing economic reasons that cause women to invest themselves in relationships with men. Decades of research conclude that the majority of women depend on the incomes of male partners because their earning power alone does not provide an adequate standard of living, especially when children enter the picture (Cherlin 1992; Duncan and Hoffman 1985; Weitzman 1985). Moreover, twelve-step masculinity does not challenge the reality that because of economic inequality, women have developed emotional skills that they trade for economic support from men. As Hochschild (1983) explained, “Women make a resource out of feeling and offer it to men in return for the more material resources they lack” (p. 163). In many ways, men have an interest in maintaining the status quo. Klocke (1998) wrote that “men still benefit from patriarchy (social system of sexism) whether or not they choose to fight sexism (attempt to be anti-sexist)” (p. 2). This constitutes something more complex than the personal troubles of codependency.

Nevertheless, it is a mistake to condemn CoDA for not initiating political change. CoDA is equipping people not to buck the system but to ride out the system’s bucking. Those who are drawn to the group confront uncoupling, single parenthood, reconstituted families, serial monogamy, and a host of other forms of disruption and complication. CoDA does not try to stem this tide; it helps people adapt to it. Indeed, it may even encourage disruption by making it easier for people to dissolve relationships and lead more flexible lives. In this way, CoDA is responding to a social need not by serving as a corrective to what is allegedly wrong but by equipping people to live with what exists. This does not mean that the group does its members a disservice by not being a political movement. To expect this is to expect more than CoDA can do. It can fix broken men, but it cannot fix the system.

Still, the men in CoDA recognize the social side of the problems they face. They recognize the intractability of institutionalized sexism. At the same time, however, they want satisfying relationships, marriages, and families. They face the dilemma that a woman in CoDA summed up as “Not in my lifetime!” “If things have to be just right in the world before I can have a relationship,” she said, “I might as well forget it.” While debates over the personal versus the political continue, millions of people go about the business of trying to have satisfying relationships. CoDA offers a strategy for both men and women to work out potentially egalitarian arrangements—in the present. For people who want to build equitable relationships in their lifetimes, CoDA offers a practical means of doing so. If, along the way, it also offers a way for men to “unlearn sexism” (hooks 1998), then so much the better.

## NOTES

1. Connell (1993) pointed out that “the challenge to hegemonic masculinity . . . takes the form of an attempt to re-make the self.”

2. For analyses of the evolution of addiction treatment discourse and the development of new groups that reproduce it, see Irvine (1999) and Rice (1996).

3. The family systems perspective is prevalent in contemporary popular psychotherapeutic discourse. It is a structural-functional theory, and feminist scholars have traced its origins to R. F. Bales and T. Parsons (1951). The Palo Alto Group of theorists has been especially influential on the course of addiction rhetoric. For a list of works, see Rice (1996, 70, fn 28).

4. For full discussions of the ethics of research in Co-Dependents Anonymous (CoDA), see Irvine (1998, 1999, appendix).

5. Initial efforts to recruit participants revealed the contradictions between accepted research procedures and the realities of studying anonymous groups. The plan was to place a small ad in local “pennysavers” and to distribute flyers and make announcements at meetings. However, the tradition of anonymity meant that the ad was fruitless; people who belong to an anonymous group would not come forward and identify themselves. Furthermore, CoDA does not promote any outside causes, so flyers and announcements were out of the question. The only workable strategy was to approach people one on one after establishing familiarity in the group.

6. Census data were used in an effort to locate meeting sites with greater demographic heterogeneity. However, even groups that met in neighborhoods with relatively high percentages of Asians, blacks, and Hispanics in residence drew only a small proportion of minorities. For example, at one Manhattan meeting site that had relatively high proportions of blacks and Hispanics in the surrounding neighborhood (about 20 percent), minorities composed only about 15 percent of those attending the meeting. No one appeared to be Asian, although Asians composed nearly 12 percent of the local population. Moreover, no Asians attended meetings at any of the CoDA sites visited.

According to census data, no groups met in areas having median household incomes below \$25,000 a year. Most meetings took place in areas with incomes between \$45,000 and \$55,000 a year. The one exception to this was on Manhattan’s upper east side, where the median household income exceeds \$100,000. Even there, however, the composition of the membership was consistent with that of other meeting sites.

7. The human sciences have recently enjoyed a burgeoning of studies that take narrative seriously, as a topic and a method. Examples include Bruner (1987, 1994), Chase (1995, 1996), Frank (1995), Irvine (1999, 2000), Karp (1996), Kleinman (1988), MacIntyre (1984), Maines (1993), McAdams (1985, 1993), Mitchell (1981), Neisser and Fivush (1994), Plummer (1983,

1995), Riessman (1990), Polkinghorne (1988, 1991), Rosenwald and Ochberg (1992), Sarbin (1986), Schafer (1981, 1992), Slavney and McHugh (1984), Somers (1994), Taylor (1989), and *The Narrative Study of Lives* series (Josselson and Lieblich 1993, 1995; Lieblich and Josselson 1994; Josselson 1996).

8. For a sample of critiques that make this argument, see Babcock and McKay (1995).

9. Mitchell-Norberg, Warren, and Zale (1995) cite Secunda's (1990) article in *New Woman* magazine as the source of this figure. Secunda herself cites no source for it.

10. See Philipson (1993) for a thorough study of the feminization of psychotherapy.

11. A male reader of this article joked that the men go to CoDA to meet women. No doubt some do go looking for dates—but surely women do this as well. Within twelve-step culture, this is known as “thirteenth stepping,” and it is discouraged. Long-time members claim that some does take place, although not a lot. The consensus is that when one is serious about working a program, one should not begin a new relationship during the first year of recovery. At no time should anyone date a person from the same group. Of the thirty-six people interviewed for the original research, only two claimed to have dated other members (and they happened to have dated each other).

12. Gerstel (1987) found that stigmatization depends on the specific conditions of the divorce and on gender. Among men, those who had affairs while married and continued them during separation reported experiencing the greatest disapproval from others. Among women, highest reports of disapproval came from those with young children.

13. Contributions are usually no more than \$1 per person per meeting. Should anyone aspire to greater generosity, the twelve traditions prohibit large donations as well as outside support.

14. Thanks to Patrick Krueger for this insight.

15. Those wondering what “getting in touch with myself” means for these groups are encouraged to read Irvine (1999).

16. These are enforced through informal social control. CoDA has no formal means of ensuring that participants observe the group's norms, but informal sanctions are strong. For a discussion of what happens when norms are violated, see Irvine (1999), especially chapter 8.

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