



Young Men and Sexuality: Myths, Problems, and Needed Correctives

A Review of

Challenging Casanova: Beyond the Stereotype of the Promiscuous Young Male

by Andrew P. Smiler

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Reviewed by

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In *Challenging Casanova: Beyond the Stereotype of the Promiscuous Young Male*, Andrew Smiler offers an important book focusing on one of the most central, complex, and confounding aspects of men's lives. In times of revolutionary revisioning of traditional models of manhood, male sexuality can easily be considered the area most refractory to change and most difficult to navigate for even the (seemingly) most successful of men.

Smiler opens his book with a cataloging of sexual misconduct of many male public figures, as well as a referencing of the most popular mass media images of sexually obsessed young men. In calling attention to these events and their devastatingly negative impact on impressions that most Americans have of men and their sexuality, Smiler's work is an extension of that of many others who have called for examination and revision of male sexual scripts (Brooks, 1995; Kleinplatz, 2001; Levant, 1997; Stock, 1997; Tiefer, 1986; Zilbergeld, 1978). Ultimately, he provides his readers ("parents, teachers, and other members of society," p. 7) multiple strategies to understand, challenge, and revise some of the most harmful features of the sexual programming of boys and men.

What strikes me as surprising and somewhat perplexing is the path that Smiler takes to reach the latter part of the book, where he offers strategies for change. In this review, I will first elaborate on aspects of the book that I find problematic and suggest a perspective that I believe can be more productive. I will then turn to the many strong areas of the book in which Smiler has drawn from his scientific research, professional experience, and broad literature review to offer valuable ideas for raising young men and for future discourse on this vital area of men's lives.

The initial thrust of Smiler's thesis is that a major disservice is being perpetrated against young men by the many elements of contemporary culture that contribute to the notion that "guys are emotional clods who are incapable of connecting with their partners because, hey, they're just guys, and guys are only interested in sex" (p. 2). For Smiler, the most illustrative example of this negative image of young men is the *Casanova complex* posited by Trachtenberg (1988).

Similar to the jet-set playboy described by David and Brannon (1976) or "players," these men are compulsive lovers who promiscuously seek as many sexual partners as possible without regard for anything but their sexual conquests. As Smiler describes this image, "The Casanova Complex is a culturally based image that says guys just want promiscuous sex, not relationships, and that almost any behavior, no matter how rude, crude, risky, or destructive is OK if it'll get him laid" (p. 17).

After a trenchant analysis of popular culture's embracing of this image as the ideal model of male sexuality, Smiler articulates the many ways in which this belief system is not only harmful to young men and women, but also a stereotype that needs to be vigorously challenged. For Smiler, this challenge needs to be made not only to that model of sexuality but also to conventional beliefs about how much of a problem it actually is. Drawing from his own research and extensive federal government research, Smiler contends that there is an enormous misunderstanding of young men's sexual attitudes and behavior. He writes,

The Casanova Complex describes only a minority of men. . . . Casanova-like promiscuity drops to no more than 5 percent of the population. . . . Casanova-like promiscuity is in fact not the norm and does not reflect the way most boys or young men

At this point, one can be relieved by Smiler's findings but nevertheless somewhat confused about his mission. That is, how much effort should be expended to challenge a belief system that is rejected by 95 percent of young men? Stereotypes can certainly be harmful even when they are inaccurate reflections of actual behavior of a group because they can create tension in those persons not meeting the stereotype. But should this misperception of young men be a matter of significant concern because most men *do not* have promiscuous sexual relationships?

I believe Smiler's contentions would be far more compelling if he broadened his lens beyond young men's dating and promiscuous sexual activity. For those writers noted above, male sexuality includes far more than simply counting the numbers of desired, or actual, sexual partners (i.e., the Casanova complex). It includes the ways that boys and men think about sex, their adaptive and maladaptive sexual fantasies, their possible visual addiction to bodies (and parts of bodies), and their capacity to incorporate sensuality with sexuality in their intimate relationships.

Smiler provides the reader with a nicely articulated description of young men's sexual maturation from initial tentative physical contacts with a potential partner through eventual first intercourse experience (what he refers to as moving from first base to getting to home plate). It can be argued, however, that long before these cautious and awkward first encounters with an actual person, most young men have already had extensive sexual activity through exposure to an endless barrage of images of naked and seminaked women (or men) in magazines, on television, online, and in videogames.

It would be unreasonable to believe that in the great majority of cases this exposure is not accompanied by masturbation to these idealized and unrealistic visual images. Would it then be realistic to posit that ejaculation to visual images conditions boys to eventually become exceptionally reactive to certain types of young women (or young men) and their body parts? Doesn't it make sense to consider that this conditioning contributes to voyeuristic sexuality and objectification of women? Couldn't this pattern be problematic for young men even if they never behave as Casanovas by having promiscuous sexual encounters?

For support of this broadened perspective of problematic male sexuality, we need only to look at the enormous growth of the sex industry—for example, pornography, "gentlemen's" clubs, and escort services/prostitution. The great majority of young men encounter explicit Internet pornography during their teen years, many before the age of 14 (Sabina, Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2008). Frank (2002) noted that over the last few decades we have experienced exponential growth in "commercial sexual services" and strip clubs. Although no one knows what portion of the male population buys sexual services, estimates have varied between 16 and 80 percent (Bennetts, 2011).

It seems to me that by using the Casanova complex as the primary gauge for measuring problems with male sexuality, Smiler has allowed the reader to underestimate the problems with contemporary male sexuality. The unfortunate irony may be that by restricting his lens to promiscuous sexual behavior and underplaying a broader consideration of all possible problematic aspects of male sexuality, Smiler has undercut the many very valuable arguments that he ultimately makes for revising the dominant "scripts" for male sexual conduct.

In the later chapters of his book, Smiler skillfully describes the need to substitute faulty models of sexual expectations of young men with those that are relational, respectful, egalitarian, and more congruent with men's deepest psychological needs. Drawing upon his impressive literacy in multiple areas of popular culture, Smiler is able to cite examples from music, cinema, and television to support his analysis of the roots of dysfunctional sexual models and enrich his recommendations for developing new models.

In addition to the way that Smiler's media savvy enhances accessibility of his book, there are many other commendable strengths. In looking at causes of Casanova-like behavior, Smiler provides a comprehensible analysis of biological and evolutionary contributions but cautions against simple explanations of this complex human phenomenon. He provides a thoughtful examination of how excessive emphasis on physical body appearance has begun to pose significant psychological and physical dangers for young men.

Finally, Smiler has provided a multifaceted plan to "push back" against purveyors of destructive models of male sexuality. He has described methods to promote media literacy and initiate conversations about sexual values with young men. As a bonus, he has provided a very helpful final section offering contact information to assist those persons desiring further information or guidance in offering help in this most difficult area.

In summary, I find much to recommend in *Challenging Casanova*. I have problems with what seems to be inconsistency in

Smiler's arguments regarding the true prevalence of problems with young men's sexuality. I also find his characterization of previous work in this area as somewhat misleading regarding the potential for self-fulfilling prophecies.

Nevertheless, I am pleased that in its entirety Smiler's work calls for a close examination of the ways in which sexuality is presented to young men. This book, like many of its predecessors, can contribute to the daunting task of generating a new rubric of relational and compassionate male sexuality.

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