

A Report to the Nation
Dan Cere, Principal Investigator

The Experts' Story of Courtship



Institute for American Values

In 1999, the Institute for American Values' Council on Families, comprised of 20 nationally prominent scholars and family experts, began an investigation of "Courtship in America." This report began as a working paper for that initiative and is one of a series of current and planned Institute publications on the status of courtship as it relates to marriage. Dan Cere, the principal investigator for this report, is an affiliate scholar at the Institute for American Values, the co-director of the Newman Institute at McGill University in Montreal, Canada, and a lecturer on McGill's Faculty of Education. The Institute is grateful to Maggie Gallagher and Melanie O'Hara and to Norval Glenn and the other members of the Council on Families for their scholarly and editorial contributions, and to the W.H. Brady Foundation and the Achelis Foundation for their generous financial support of this initiative. The contributions of other supporters are also greatly appreciated.

On the cover: The Dance of Life by Edvard Munch (1863-1944). Nasjonalgalleriet (National Gallery), Oslo, Norway. Photo-graph © Bridgeman Art Library, New York, NY.

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ISBN: 0-9659841-8-4

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The Experts' Story of Courtship

Introduction

You will enjoy this report for two reasons. First, it is a highly original and entertaining piece of scholarship. It shows you some of the inner workings of three important academic disciplines and summarizes a great deal of current research. It is also filled with subtle insights, and much of it is very funny, though Dan Cere's humor is so dry that you might have to pause at times to figure out whether you are reading description or satire.

This report is also an important and timely piece of scholarship. It will deepen your understanding of our society. Cere tells us how leading academics today conceptualize and research the issues of courtship and marriage, and furthermore, what these core academic propositions reveal, and obscure, about courtship and marriage specifically, and about the state of our culture generally. That's a tall order: lots of complexity, many overlapping dimensions, high stakes.

Much of the report is an argument against reductionism. Whether it is the economist telling us that the marriage "market" consists of sovereign consumers expressing their utility preferences, or the sociobiologist who sees no underlying differences between a wife and a mistress (so long as both can help the male to achieve "reproductive success"), or the close relationship theorist who sees no underlying differences between marriage and any other "close relationship," Cere is like a thirsty man in a desert talking to people who don't know what water is.

For Cere, marriage is something big, even mysterious. Courtship is important because courtship is so closely connected to marriage. But in today's prevailing academic narratives, marriage and courtship are increasingly portrayed as small, one-dimensional, and unconnected. Cere can't seem to decide whether he is more bored, angered, or amazed by this state of affairs. Mostly he seems to be amazed. You will be, too.

Most provocatively, Cere suggests that today's fashionable academic narratives, not despite, but *because of* their glaring reductionisms, end up accurately describing some important social trends. For example, viewing marriage in increasingly individualistic, what's-in-it-for-me-today terms. Or granting social acceptance to powerful men who cheat on their wives, change wives regularly, or in other ways engage in what sociobiologists call "dominant male polygyny." Today's academic models tell us little about courtship and marriage, but they tell us a great deal, perhaps more than we would care to know, about *who we are* — a society in which courtship is in disarray and marriage in many respects is being gradually reduced to just another "close relationship."

There is good news as well. There is a discernable yearning among many young people today to do better at marriage than their parents did. Among educators, counselors, scholars, policy makers, and religious and civic leaders, a grass roots marriage movement is busy being born. This report, I hope and believe, will contribute to that movement.

David Blankenhorn
President, Institute for American Values

The End of Courtship?

COURTSHIP CHARTS the pathways to marriage. Its customs and rituals aim at providing practices to help individuals negotiate the complex transition into marriage. How do people find marriage partners? What do they look for? What are the steps in the dance of courtship that lead young people from sexual attraction, to love, to lasting marriage? Courtship provides, for better or worse, the moral, emotional, and relational education for married life. Good courtship traditions should foster attitudes, values, and practices that facilitate the formation of flourishing marriages.

Until recently, courtship occupied a prominent position in the theoretical and research interests of sociologists and other social scientists. These scholars were interested in courtship because they were interested in marriage. As a key locus of both production and reproduction, marriage was understood as a social institution vital to the welfare of society — much more than simply a lifestyle choice, or a personal relationship between two isolated individuals. Understanding the pathways to marriage was seen by these scholars as an important step in understanding how society functions and how it meets certain basic needs of its members.

Today, courtship no longer occupies a vital place in American culture. The term itself seems quaint and outdated. Social historians such as Beth Bailey and Ellen Rothman have documented the erosion of courtship traditions in 20th century America.¹ Leon Kass, a member of the Institute for American Values' Council on Families, argues that the “end” of courtship is one component of the social, cultural, economic, and legal trends which have destabilized marriage in recent decades. Today, men and women can no longer turn to socially prescribed forms of conduct to help them find their way to marriage. The road to marriage is all but devoid of clear markers; as a result, it is inevitably fraught with more accidents and wrong turns. The erosion of courtship practices clearly contributes to current trends towards later, fewer, and less successful marriages.²

At the same time, as the consequences of family fragmentation become ever more apparent, there are currently signs of a renewed interest in finding ways to strengthen marriage. A large body of research shows that healthy marriages protect the health and well being of children, and that, when marriages fail, significant social costs are generated. Children whose parents fail to get or stay married are more likely to be poor, to experience health problems, to fail at school, to experience mental illness, to commit crimes and show signs of other conduct disorders, to have poorer quality relationships with both parents and peers, to engage in substance abuse and premature and promiscuous sexual behavior, and to have babies while young and unmarried. As adults, they on average receive less education and have lower status jobs and less stable family lives than do those whose parents got and stayed married, even after controlling for characteristics such as race and parents' socioeconomic status.³

To these risks must also be added the psychic and even spiritual costs of living in an environment in which the closest human ties — between husband and wife, parent and child — can no longer be taken for granted, but instead are constantly in “play.” In such an environment, marriage does not stand for security or certainty, but for risk, peril, and

the constant possibility of loss. Finally, for communities, the decline of marriage creates significant social costs, as governments struggle, often with poor results, to provide substitutes for what had previously been a two-parent family system and the private nurturing and support of children. These expenses include direct taxpayer costs such as increased expenditures on welfare, crime control, and child support collection and other court activities, as well as indirect costs such as lower productivity and diminished social and human capital.⁴

A growing appreciation for the importance of marriage is leading to numerous concrete efforts to strengthen it.⁵ As a result, even the question of courtship is beginning to reappear. In the popular realm, a number of recent books on courtship, both secular and religious, have sold successfully. For example, Ellen Fein and Sherrie Schneider's widely read and discussed 1996 book, *The Rules*, purports to teach battle-scarred women a firm, practical, no-nonsense (and morality-free) formula for finding a fabulous husband. Joshua Harris' 1997 Christian best-seller, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, urges young people to eschew recreational dating and return to older, more "scriptural," courtship practices. There are distinct signs of a yearning among many young people today for clearer and more effective pathways to marriage than the culture now provides.

The spread of marriage education, in both schools and religious communities, also suggests a renewal of interest in courtship.⁶ Florida recently passed a law requiring its high schools to teach marriage and relationship skills to all students. Along with several other states, Florida also offers reduced marriage license fees to couples who take premarital education courses. Clergy in over 100 communities in recent years have agreed to create "Community Marriage Policies" such as those championed by Marriage Savers and other groups, which require couples to participate in marriage education before clergy will consent to marry them. There have been legal reforms as well. In Louisiana and Arizona, state legislators have passed "covenant marriage" laws in which couples who opt for legally stronger marriage contracts agree to take pre-marriage education courses and to seek counseling if marriage troubles develop.⁷

These developments suggest that Leon Kass' verdict need not be final. Perhaps we in North America have already passed through the "end" of courtship and are now poised to witness its rebirth.

The End of Scholarship on Courtship?

This report seeks to contribute to the emerging marriage movement in North America by offering a critical assessment of what can be called the experts' story of courtship. Let us begin with two questions. Does current social science theory and research aid, or hinder, society's nascent but growing search for more successful courtship patterns? What findings and ideas from current family and social science scholarship might improve our understanding of the status and future of courtship?

The most obvious answers to these questions are "hinder" and "very few." As Norval Glenn, a leading family sociologist and the Research Director of the Institute's Council on Families, points out: "While research on marriage burgeoned in the 1990s, and there was a continuation of studies of 'mate selection,' surprisingly little research has attempted to

chart how couples meet, evaluate one another, and choose to marry one another under current conditions, which are substantially different from those that existed only two or three decades ago.” Within the field of sociology, Glenn reports that: “The study of courtship has become virtually moribund, except for research about the relationship between premarital cohabitation and marital success.”⁸

The few, relatively recent scholarly books on courtship have little to offer. Bernard Murstein’s 1986 summary of the research, *Paths to Marriage*, is based on older research, now quite dated, and is, according to Glenn, “seriously deficient” in research design. Rodney M. Cate and Sally A. Lloyd’s 1992 book, *Courtship*, is oriented towards uncovering the emotional pathways to intimate relationships in general, irrespective of whether or not these end in marriage. Other emerging courtship fields, such as the new studies of “courtship violence,” primarily investigate processes involving couples who may, or may not, even be considering marriage.⁹ Research into the dynamics of initiating and developing close, sexually based relationships has been a major pre-occupation in contemporary academic theory. However, this body of research seldom if ever seeks to identify and examine those attitudes and practices which lead to stable marriages.

This sagging academic interest in courtship may in part reflect broader cultural trends. According to Anthony Giddens, one of Britain’s most distinguished sociologists, popular culture is creating a new grammar of intimacy. In *The Transformation of Intimacy* (1992), and, more recently, in the prestigious Reiff Lectures, Giddens argues that we are moving from a marriage culture to a culture which celebrates “pure relationship.” A “pure relationship” is a relationship which has been stripped of any goal or end beyond the intrinsic emotional, psychological, or sexual satisfaction which the relationship brings to the individuals involved.¹⁰ Giddens points out that much of the burgeoning self-help literature on relationships reflects this trend, addressing its words of counsel, for example, to any and all sexually intimate liaisons, including heterosexual, gay, lesbian, monogamist, divorced, co-habitational, serial, triangular, and “double duo” relationships.¹¹

In this new world of pure relationships, marriage is on a morally and socially level playing field with all other long-term sexually intimate relationships, since, in this view, similar values and processes govern the initiation, maintenance, and dissolution of many diverse forms of intimacy. And since marriage itself merits no special attention, the concept of a special pathway to marriage, courtship, is typically pushed aside in favor of more generic discussions of the dynamics of initiating close relationships.

At the same time, while Glenn’s assessment of the decline of research into courtship is accurate and noteworthy, current scholarship in the areas of mate selection and close relationship initiation can provide revealing insights into the state of our society. For this reason, this report examines the courtship-related findings and theoretical perspectives of three currently dominant schools of scholarly thought and research: exchange theory, sociobiology, and close relationship theory. In turn, these bodies of thought shape three of our society’s currently prevailing intellectual narratives on courtship: the economists’ story, the sociobiologists’ story, and the close relationship theorists’ story. In significant ways, these expert stories provide us with a set of mirrors which reflect, and may also help to guide, current cultural trends.



At left:

*Eye In Eye (1894)
by Edvard Munch
(1863-1944).
Munch-museet
(Munch Museum),
Oslo, Norway.
Photograph © Erich
Lessing/Art Resource,
New York, NY.*

The Economists' Story of Courtship

THE CONTEMPORARY CULTURAL disarray over dating, courtship, and mate selection reflects deep-seated historical developments that have been the subject of scholarly discussion for a few generations. The societal transition to modernity and then to post-modernity has been accompanied by, at the very least, a diminishment of social scripting of interpersonal relationships, including sexual relationships, courtship, and marriage.

What kind of person should I marry? What kind of marriage should I have? Should I marry at all? Much more so than in the past, our society today defines these questions essentially as individual choices, and so generates no broadly accepted answers to them. The move to weaker social scripts surrounding marriage and courtship, though intensified over the last generation, is not entirely new. Over sixty years ago, Willard Waller drew attention to the modern urban shift away from the explicit standards for mate selection which had characterized more homogeneous societies: “In modern society, groups are confused, and cultural imperatives are in conflict, and therefore the nature of the bargaining process is more complex and its outlines confused.” Waller argued that “the current emphasis on marriage for love” was little more than a cloaking device to obscure cultural confusion over the absence of more explicit communal guidelines for courtship. Furthermore, Waller noted that fundamentally new types of bargains were being struck in the courtship process, “bargains which have to do with merely the conditions of association outside of marriage.”¹²

Over the course of the 20th century, dating and courtship patterns gradually drifted into a free-floating social space, devoid of any clear connection to the goal of marriage.¹³ Numerous current social trends reinforce the attractiveness of what Waller termed “outside of marriage” courtship bargains. Rising rates of premarital sexuality, cohabitation, and out-of-wedlock births since the 1960s signal a decline in the cultural and social stature of marriage as the unique repository of sexual life and procreation. Such trends continue to erode the traditional teleological connection of courtship to marriage.

Critical social theorists have attempted to trace the story of the commodification and commercialization of courtship practices in modern capitalist economies. Herbert Marcuse (*Eros and Civilization*) and Eric Fromm (*The Art of Loving*) laid out the theoretical foundations for this critique. Contemporary disciples of the Frankfurt school (such as Eva Illouz, Beth Bailey, and Ulrich Beck) have attempted to document this history.¹⁴ In a nutshell, they argue that 19th century courtship practices lay within the sphere of civil society. Churches, families, kinship groups, and cultural communities were major players in shaping the rites and practices of courtship. However, 20th century courtship increasingly moved to the beat of modern capitalism. Courtship was driven out of the home into the marketplace. Movie theaters, automobiles, restaurants, dance halls, and clubs — rather than homes, church halls, and community celebrations — became the privileged spaces for courtship. The language of the market came to dominate both popular ideologies of courtship and romance, as well as academic theories of courtship. As Beth Bailey puts it:

As it emerged in the twentieth century, courtship largely was construed and understood in models and metaphors of modern industrial capitalism. The new system of courtship privileged competition (and worried about how to control it); it valued consumption; it presented an economic model of scarcity and abundance as a guide to personal affairs.

*The rules of the market were consciously applied; the vocabulary of economic exchange defined acts of courtship.*¹⁵

EXCHANGE THEORY explicitly assumes that acts of marriage, like other acts, are primarily directed at the self, and that the self is above all a consumer of goods, relationships, and even attitudes. Even in sheerly economic venues, it is not clear that the whole of human motivation in the market can be reduced to a desire to consume. But exchange theory puts aside the passion and poetry of mate selection as mere marketing strategies, cover for the self's real purpose. "Persons marry," Gary Becker writes, "when the utility expected from the marriage exceeds the utility expected from remaining single."¹⁶ In the self-contained world of exchange theory, any desire, even the desire to love and care for another human being, must be shoved within the cramped confines of a person's "utility function."

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It was Becker and his school's special but limited achievement to apply the tools of the economist to the arena of love, and to do so, moreover, at the very moment when, according to the social historians, the commodification of courtship was largely completed. Thus, the utility of a marriage depends on the "commodities" produced by the potential partner: standards of living, quantity and quality of children, sexual gratification, social status, and others.¹⁷ The marriage market consists of three components: supply, preferences, and resources. Men and women actively looking for spouses represent the "supply." "Preferences" (demand) are the preferred characteristics which men or women, as customers, seek out in a spouse. "Resources" (supply) are the various attributes that men and women offer to exchange in order to purchase their own preferences in a spouse.¹⁸

This exchange theory of courtship, the oldest of our three expert stories, is by no means dead. The "marriage market" model, with its bland economic vocabulary (supply and demand, preferences, bargaining, exchange, and investment) continues to structure some prominent discussions of mate selection — see, for example, chapter eight of Andrew Cherlin's 1999 college textbook, *Public and Private Families* — and also continues to generate useful research into some subsets of courtship practice, such as the relationship between employment and the marriageability of men.

For those interested in marriage as a social institution, the prime advantage of this perspective is that the economists' story still conceptualizes courtship as the pathway to marriage. In addition, exchange theory provides an engaging intellectual articulation of the trend towards the commodification of marriage. In various ways in our society, the marriage vow has, in fact, been dumbed down to a mere contract intended to serve the narrow interests of the individuals investing in the relationship. Indeed, even this contractual dimension of marriage is getting weaker, as no-fault divorce laws make today's marriage agreements far flimsier and more vulnerable to shifting subjective preferences than most business contracts. Exchange theory nicely captures this cultural shift and spotlights the utilitarian motivations which increasingly guide our entrance into, and exit from, these fragile marriage "deals."

Yet by assuming (indeed requiring) that, by definition, individuals act as rational consumers, exchange theory is of limited use in understanding the social and interpersonal aspects of courtship and marriage as institutions. It fails to appreciate the irrational or unself-

conscious ideas that may move people to marriage and may keep them in it long after a “rational consumer” would have traded in her old clunky model for a jazzier new one. Many of the essential features of love as courtship — the longing for permanence, the desire to donate the self to another — must, in the economists’ story of courtship, be either submerged into contract theory or dismissed altogether as irrational. For a fuller understanding of how and why people marry, we must look elsewhere.

The Sociobiologists’ Story of Courtship

SOCIOBIOLOGY HAS BEEN one of the most prolific, powerful, and fruitful of the new theoretical perspectives on courtship, marriage, and sexuality. In the search for clearer rules and more certain scripting about the formation of sexually bonded relations, sociobiology has emerged as an attractive contender, basing its arguments on genes rather than morals. In contrast to rational choice or exchange theorists, sociobiologists search for deeply rooted evolutionary factors that govern sexual and romantic preferences in mate selection.

Sociobiology is attractive to many as a theoretical tool for investigating courtship because it revives the idea first, that human nature exists, and second, that it is gendered. Evolutionary psychology maintains that males and females have fundamentally divergent sexual psychologies. These differences are expressed in radically different strategies and counter-strategies in courtship relationships.¹⁹

Innate evolutionary factors have conditioned women to value and select men on the basis of their ability to provide nourishment, protection, security, and social status for themselves and their offspring. For these reasons, females seek “dominant males.” Accordingly, status traits such as power, money, social position, resources, office, intelligence, education, skills, and the ability to father rank high for women. Males, on the other hand, are hard-wired to seek sexual liaisons with women who give signals of reproductive viability. Accordingly, physical traits such as health, youth, and physical attractiveness rank high for men.²⁰

In this highly charged and competitive world of courtship, male and female interests are essentially incommensurable. This incommensurability yields divergent courtship strategies for men and women. Effective courtship becomes essentially the “art of seduction,” as both men and women resort to systematic deception to increase their attractiveness to members of the opposite sex. Females deceive about their age and physical attractiveness. Males dissemble about actual or potential financial resources, career prospects, and willingness to commit. Women deceive and seduce cosmetically; men deceive and seduce through ritualized displays of acquisition and provisioning skills. Women concentrate on dressing for dates; men concentrate on planning and paying for dates.²¹

Given these courtship dynamics, sociobiology predicts the emergence of a “marriage gradient” in which women “marry up” and men “marry down.” This tendency puts a “marriage squeeze” on high status women. High status males have an immense pool of potential female mates from which to choose. However, high status women seeking to “marry up” face a restricted pool of available males. The male tendency to “marry down” tends further to sideline high status females. Many contemporary feminists disparage this pattern as a patriarchal strategy aimed at female subordination. Men socially entrench the subordination

of women by marrying down and ruling over their younger and lower status women. This male strategy also reinforces the social marginalization of high-achieving women.

Sociobiologists smile at these expressions of moral outrage. From their perspective, feminists are usually high status women with careers, resources and power; however, feminists typically refuse to marry down. They are in the market for “*challenging*” men — a feminist euphemism for “dominant males.” Thus, feminist disparagements of males who “marry down” echo the age-old strategies of high status females, who typically denigrate low status female competitors while simultaneously berating high status males for daring to overlook them.²²

These courtship strategies have a profound impact on the hierarchies of human societies. Male and female mate preferences generate very different social outcomes.²³ The female traits that men value (youth, health, and attractiveness) have relatively little impact on social order, aside from the impetus that they give to the cosmetics and clothing industries. However, the male traits that women value (status, productivity, dominance, and resources) fire up the male “will to power.” Men need to make a difference in the world if they are to be noticed by women. Mary Batten argues that female mate selection strategies have played a major role in driving men to compete, to seek to out-perform, to accumulate, and to seek to monopolize power and wealth in order to be attractive to women, thereby fostering in all human societies the “social dominance orientation” of men, an orientation which generates “male dominance” in most social structures.²⁴

Especially in light of some major trends in modern societies, sociobiology seems to offer powerful intellectual resources for thinking about courtship. First, sociobiology brings a stark realism to discussions of heterosexual attraction. To some extent, it offers a rollicking comic



At left:

*Separation by
Edvard Munch
(1863-1944).
Munch-museet
(Munch Museum),
Oslo, Norway.
Photograph ©
Scala/Art Resource,
New York, NY.*

spoof on the world of romance and power. In the world of sociobiology, lovers are bustling about, stumbling through their relationships, deceiving one another, wooing and warring with one another on the basis of very different, even contradictory, scripts of love — and yet somehow, when all is said and done, these mismatched lovers land in bed together, men on top, cunningly trapped by the inexorable logic of reproductive success. Meanwhile, in the public sphere, men strain, compete, and exhaust themselves to succeed in the worlds of high finance and global politics in order to be “attractive” to the next pretty blond that happens

Sociobiology could help make the concept of polygyny appear to be a reasonable accommodation to the more problematic exigencies of dominant male psychology.

to pass by. In the words of Henry Kissinger: “Without an office, you have no power, and I love power because it attracts women.”²⁵ This is the stuff of good Shakespearean comedy.

The realism of sociobiology also offers us an intellectual version of the growing cynicism that pervades many contemporary explorations of marriage in literature, popular film, and music. According to David Buss, we must “lift our collective heads” out

of the romantic sands and recognize that sexual relationships are about power, sex, property, deceit, and control, not love, self-giving, romance, or commitment.²⁶ Sociobiology replaces the tale of cupid’s arrows and love potions with a story of another outside agent: our own impish genes, which manipulate our consciously constructed selves and mock our consciously constructed purposes, all in the name of their own blind, relentless search for survival and replication.²⁷

Second, some scholars argue that an investigation of our unadorned sexual nature can offer scientific support for monogamous heterosexual marriage.²⁸ John Townsend’s colorful exploration of evolutionary perspectives on mate selection, *What Women Want — What Men Want* (1998), ends with a homiletic flourish on the role that evolution has played in the development of monogamous marriage. However, if we follow the logic of maximum reproductive success to its end point, we seem to find the case not for monogamous marriage, but instead for male polygyny. To the extent that sociobiology suggests or implies a particular social-sexual order, dominant male polygyny, not strict monogamy, may eventually emerge as its central plank.

Townsend himself has trouble shaking loose from the inner logic of this position. “Men in position of power,” Townsend admits, “tend to practice polygyny: legitimate polygyny where it is allowed; functional polygyny where it is not.”²⁹ Townsend notes that polygyny is accepted in over 83 percent of human societies. He concedes that Western societies have firmly prohibited polygyny, but argues that many elite males are “in effect, polygynous.” Divorce and remarriage, or a series of sexual partners (one at a time), are forms of “serial polygyny.” Simultaneous sexual relationships are forms of “functional polygyny.” Townsend suggests that most high status males practice “functional polygyny.”³⁰

In the last few pages of his study, Townsend leans hard on the rudder to pull his argument back in line with his commitments to monogamous marriage and fidelity. But his efforts seem too late and too little. By this point, an aggressive and promiscuous male genie is out of the bottle. Dominant males are fully capable of attracting and sustaining relationships with a variety of women, while also making significant investments in their offspring.

Given the fact that contemporary male elites now command resources and affluence beyond the wildest dreams of their hoary male ancestors, these men should certainly be able to achieve effective polygynous parenting, especially when that practice is defined (as

sociobiology defines it) as parenting that produces the maximum number of children who themselves are capable of reproducing. The fundamental problem with illegal forms of polygyny is that social responsibility and surveillance are factored out. Islamic law has always argued that polygyny is acceptable as long as dominant males can meet the needs of their spouses and offspring for provision and attention. In other societies, such as ours, the absence of this public norm can drive male elites into the underground sexual economy, where they satisfy their promiscuous drives while largely escaping child rearing responsibilities. Legalized forms of polygyny could provide the firm social rules required to coerce dominant males to make sure that appropriate spousal and parental investments accompany their diverse sexual relationships.

The strict emphasis on monogamy in Western marriage law was forged during the Middle Ages. During this time, the church found itself locked in battle with male elites who were pressing for legalized concubinage and a relaxation of divorce laws. Since then, male elites have recovered considerable ground on divorce. Similarly, we now may be in the midst of a subtle drift back towards some form of socially acceptable concubinage for dominant males. Sociobiology could help us to facilitate this tricky transition by making the concept of polygyny appear to be a reasonable accommodation to the more problematic exigencies of dominant male psychology.

Third, sociobiology brings a crucial advantage to the current debate. It reconnects courtship with procreation, offering powerful explorations of the intrinsic connections between sexuality, heterosexual bonding, reproductive success, and investment in offspring. According to David Buss, all of the major varieties of love acts — display, intimacy, sex, protection, gift giving, and others — target reproductive success. This proposition provides a much-needed corrective to other theoretical approaches, which tend to banish completely the questions of children and child rearing from inquiries into courtship and mate selection. Contemporary exchange theory, filter theory, and interpersonal process theory all operate in a weird “child-free” zone of courtship and coupling. But sociobiology insists on factoring in procreation, children, and child rearing as pivotal issues for heterosexual bonding.

However, the strength of sociobiology is also its weakness. Sociobiology places our attention squarely on the procreative dimension, but to the exclusion of both the interpersonal and social dimensions of marriage. To a sociobiologist, your mate is not the person you marry, it is the person with whom you have children. If those children survive and reproduce, the union was successful; if not, not. Insofar as we seek to understand courtship and marriage, this latter definition is deeply revealing of sociobiology’s inherent limitations. Is it really true, as a matter of social and scientific fact, that a pregnant mistress is the functional equivalent of a wife? By whose definition of what wifely functions? In this sense, sociobiology screens out at least as much as it reveals about courting and marrying.

Moreover, consider one final point about children in the sociobiologists’ story. To the sociobiologist, sexual attraction is not dependent on any conscious awareness or social construal of the linkage between attraction and procreation. This linkage was forged in our distant evolutionary past. Once the evolutionary wiring is in place, men are instinctively attracted to young, voluptuous women, and women are instinctively attracted to dominant males. They are not attracted to physical beauty or social dominance because these traits signal reproductive potential; they are just attracted.

But what happens when these ancient drives are loosened from their moorings in reproduction? What happens when, aided by technology, we can weaken or dissolve altogether the links between sex and procreation? Sociobiologists assure us that our drives are now genetically secure, so that we can afford to dispense with any direct concern about procreation. In days of old, procreation *was* a critical fact in the slow evolution of humans toward heterosexual attraction, but that work is done, the sociobiologists tell us. The dynamics of sexual attraction can now thrive in free-standing forms. So where, in the final sociobiological analysis, do children fit in? In social terms, nowhere.

In sum, for all of its rich explanatory power regarding the interactions between uncul- tured (or natural) sexual desire, procreation, and social processes, sociobiology lacks almost completely the theoretical resources to understand marriage and courtship as social institu- tions. In the current environment, sociobiology also reinforces trends of dubious value. Its particular version of sexual realism corresponds well to contemporary cynicism about het- erosexual love and marriage. Sociobiology has only a weak interest in monogamous mar- riage, and insofar as other arrangements may meet our “evolutionary desires,” sociobiology is more than willing to consider them. There is also its barely veiled celebration of domi- nance, exploit, and raw power. Insofar as sociobiology helps us shape our standards, dom- inant males in our society should be given great latitude to make full use of their resources, especially in the realm of sexual pursuit. Sound familiar? Finally, sociobiology has a nice way of acknowledging and thanking children for their unique contribution to the evolution of our sexual drives, then politely showing them the door.

At right:

The Kiss by Edvard Munch (1863-1944). Nasjonalgalleriet (National Gallery), Oslo, Norway. Photograph © Scala/Art Resource, New York, NY.



The Close Relationship Theorists' Story of Courtship

VISITING MONTREAL'S largest bookstore, searching for books on courtship and marriage, brings one to an enormous "Self-Help" floor. On this floor, however, there is no section of books called either "Marriage" or "Family." All books on marriage, divorce, dating, courtship, seduction, friendship, and lesbian and gay relationships are now displayed under one inclusive category called "Relationships." Later, back in the confines of a university library, one gradually discovers that this retail reclassification has come on the heels of a major theoretical reclassification emanating from the academy.

One of the most prominent perspectives in contemporary courtship research is that of "close relationship" theory. In 1988, Steve Duck edited a major anthology, *Handbook of Personal Relationships*, which marked the tenth anniversary of a new discipline, "the science of close relations." Current research in the field continues at the "incredible rate" of expansion that Duck celebrated in 1988.³¹ This work has been spearheaded by a diverse group of scholars, including Duck, Robert Sternberg, Letitia Peplau, Ellen Bercheid, Harold Kelley, Catherine Surra, Clyde and Susan Hendrick, George Levinger, Susan Sprecher, Daniel Perlman, and Beverly Fehr. These scholars have formed professional associations such as *The International Society for the Study of Personal Relationships* and the *International Network on Personal Relationships*. They have also launched two journals, *The Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* (1984-) and *Personal Relationships* (1994-) as well as a number of major publication series, such as the *Sage Series on Close Relationships* and *Advances in Personal Relationships*.

The study of the dynamics of initiating and developing close, sexual based relationships has been a major preoccupation of close relationship theory. Articles and monographs cover a very wide range of courtship topics: "falling in love," romantic love, attachment patterns, love styles, interracial and interethnic dating, egalitarian daters, traditionalist daters, various aspects of physical attractiveness (body shape, health status, hair length, height), age preferences, propensity to marry, gender differences, cognitive interdependence, romantic love, jealousy, love triangles, dating infidelity, fatal attractions, content analysis of personals ads, family of origin influences, socioeconomic status, self-disclosure processes, topic avoidance, the use of deceit, non-verbal signals, partners' accounts of courtship development, voice amplitude in couple conversations, the use of humor, coping with parental criticism, coping with peer criticism, coping with menstrual cycles, coping with work load, dating violence, date rape, relationship dissolution, and romance grieving processes. This complex body of theories probing a baffling array of topics might appear to close the door to any general commentary and review. However, a number of perspectives and concerns that merit our attention do surface in this literature. Indeed, close relationship theory seems to offer a sophisticated and coherent explanation of many of our society's current mores and trends regarding courtship.

Generic Brand Relationships

Close relationship theorists argue that we need to bring a common theoretical and methodological approach to the study of all "sexually based primary relationships." They argue that, at the level of relational processes, alternative sexual lifestyles are not "qualitatively other from what is known as the benchmark conventional nuclear family." Close relationship theorists are convinced that the traditional nuclear family can no longer serve as a

meaningful paradigm and focus for scholarly research.³² They maintain that current social trends are on their side. In one of their first manifestoes, *Close Relationships* (1983), Ellen Bercheid and Letitia Peplau argue that the decline of the traditional family and the rise of “alternative relationships” make it an opportune cultural moment “for researchers to expand their focus from ‘the family’ to a more general examination of close relationships.”³³

However, most close relationship theorists argue that the reasons for a shift in paradigm are scientific, not cultural. They assert that we can learn more about marriage by recognizing that it is just one example of a much broader array of relationships — one tree of no inherently greater significance than any other in the big forest of emotional and sexual connections. According to John Scanzoni and Karen Polonko, courtship, spousal, and familial relationships can and should be “subsumed under the broader construct of close or *primary* relationships.”³⁴

The “generalizing construct” for research on adult relationships should be the construct of “primary” or “close” relationships. The main focus of close relationship research is “dyadic,” or the relationship between two people. Close relationships are characterized by “strong, frequent, and diverse interdependence that lasts over a considerable period of time.”³⁵ A relationship is more than just an “interaction” between two individuals. Robert Hinde describes a relationship as a *series* of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive interactions between two individuals that involves temporal extension into the past and future. The formation of a relationship represents the crystallization of a set of distinctive interpersonal processes: interpersonal cognition, self-disclosure, exchange, investment, commitment, and conflict.³⁶ The world of close relationships is therefore a “world of the couple.” Relevant subjects for research include: conjugal relationships, sexually based heterosexual and homosexual relationships, parent-child relationships, childhood and adult sibling relationships, friendships, and collegial relationships.

One result of redefining all relationships as inherently “dyadic” is that it becomes all but impossible to see the institutional aspects of marriage. In the taxonomy of sexually based adult relationships, the presence or absence of a legally recognized bond, such as marriage, is a secondary consideration. Marriage is merely a “de jure” category, not an actual scientific reality. In addition, the family itself largely fades away as a unit of analysis.³⁷ For close relationship theorists, the only way effectively to understand a family system is to break it down into bi-directional dyadic pairs: father-mother, mother-child, father-child, or brother-sister relationships.

Close relationship theorists argue that the family is “essentially a lay or commonsense construct,” rather than a meaningful scientific model. The terms “family” and “families” are “valid poetic and literary descriptions of folk-culture reality” that may be of value in “fostering communication among *lay persons*” about the “slippery realities” of personal relationships.³⁸ However, such “lay” constructs distort and limit scientific work on intimate adult relationships. While marital relationships might still be a useful area for study and research, close relationship theory more often suggests that “professionals” will “find it more fruitful both practically and scientifically to think and work in more general or generic terms — specifically in terms of *close* or *primary* relationships.”³⁹ All dyadic intimate relationships need to be examined from a common theoretical perspective.

And not just by scholars. In *The Sexual Bond: Rethinking Families and Close Relationships*, John Scanzoni, Karen Polonko, Jay Teachman, and Linda Thompson suggest

that legal theorists and professionals might also consider expanding their thinking about sexually bonded intimacy beyond the confines of the family to include all “close relationships.”⁴⁰ The American Law Institute recently proposed model legislation that does just that, offering most cohabiting partners with children many of the legal rights heretofore reserved for married couples.⁴¹ The Canadian Bar Association has just published a lengthy report, *Recognizing and Supporting Close Personal Relationships Between Adults*, which advocates fundamental reforms of Canadian laws in the light of the close relationship theory. It argues that the law must now focus on the “substance of relationships” rather than giving legal recognition only to certain types of “arrangements,” such as marriage. Any relationship which is marked by interdependence, mutuality, intimacy, and endurance merits legal recognition. The report contends that governments “should recognize and support” all significant adult close relationships so long as they are “neither dysfunctional nor harmful.”⁴²

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Child-Free Relationships

In addition to tossing out the married couple and the family as primary units of analysis, close relationship theorists tend to ignore the procreative dimension of sexual relationships. For example, Cate and Lloyd’s overview of courtship theories completely ignores the extensive contributions of sociobiology, with its focus on reproductive success, parental investment, and child rearing as factors in mate selection. In most cases, these issues simply do not surface in close relationship theory.⁴³

This child-free understanding of courtship shapes, and often distorts, these theorists’ view of social reality. One would assume, for example, that our society’s high rates of teen pregnancy and unwed childbearing would be relevant to the study of contemporary heterosexual courtship. Yet these major trends receive virtually no attention in close relationship theory. The telescoped concentration on the interpersonal dynamics of dyadic relationships systematically screens out any serious consideration of the procreative dimension of heterosexual coupling.

Yet children do happen, and their arrival does, therefore, present a theoretical quandary. Close relationship theorists respond to this problem primarily by drawing attention to the vexing impact of children on adult close relationships. For example, Steve Duck encourages us to put aside the traditional view of children as “bundles of joy,” and instead to understand children as “one of the greatest stressors of a relationship.” According to Duck, Clement, and Markman, the transition to parenthood is “hazardous to marriage,” since parenthood is often accompanied by a sharp decline in relationship satisfaction.⁴⁴ In a popular rendition of close relationship theory, *Partnering: A New Kind of Relationship*, Hal and Sidra Stone devote two chapters to the exploration of obstacles to good quality dyadic relationships. One chapter surveys a variety of potential threats to relationships, such as drug addiction and alcohol abuse. The other chapter focuses entirely on children. The Stones argue that children pose the major threat to “primary relationships” between adults. Primary adult relationships are “very frequently...destroyed by the presence of children.” Their discussion suggests that a critical component of effective relationship education is teaching adults to manage and control the potentially destructive impact of children on adult relationships.⁴⁵

No Fixed Script

Close relationship theorists also distance themselves from traditional sociological and psychological theories of courtship that emerged during the 1950s and 1960s. Lloyd and Cate critically examine two of these older approaches — compatibility models and stage models.⁴⁶ Compatibility models attempt to isolate factors that influence decisions to marry. Compatibility is viewed as a function of either *similarity* or *complementarity*. The *similarity* model “operates according to the lay person’s hypothesis that ‘birds of a feather flock together.’” This view argues that “homogamy” (similarity in race, religion, values, education, social status, and other factors) is critical to mate selection. Studies indicate that marital similarity factors seem to be in decline as key factors in marriage choice. On the other hand, Winch’s *complementarity* model is a “complex version of the layperson’s postulate that ‘opposites attract.’” Complementarity exists when partners have contrasting needs (for example, submissiveness versus dominance) rather than similar needs, and when these different needs also fit and gratify each other.⁴⁷

Stage models understand courtship as a developmental process. Partners proceed through a sequence of stages in which they work through various types of decision-making essential to mate selection. For example, Ira Reiss’s *Wheel Theory of Love* posits four key stages: rapport; self-revelation; mutual dependency; and intimacy need fulfillment.⁴⁸ Other stage model approaches include: Kerckhoff and Davis’ “Filter Theory,” Murstein’s “Stimulus-Value-Role Model,” and Lewis’ “Premarital Dyadic Formation Framework.” Stage models envisage courtship as a lengthy decision-making process that involves an essential set of negotiations concerning values, roles, intimacy expectations, emotive needs, dyadic

At right:

Lovers by Edvard Munch (1863-1944).
Private Collection.
Photograph ©
Bridgeman Art
Library, New York,
NY.



functioning, and rapport. While couples vary in how they “filter” through these fundamental decisions, all courtships, in this view, must work through a common set of processes or scripts in order to achieve bonding and stability.

Close relationship theorists take issue with both compatibility models and stage models. First, these approaches are criticized for their failure to attend to the diversity of “interpersonal processes” evident in courtship relationships. Lloyd and Cate argue that all of these models “assume that compatibility between partners on individual characteristics is the primary force of movement to marriage.” Mutual deliberation about these “static factors” or “individual characteristics” is perceived to be the core of courtship. While these factors may play a role in the early formation of a relationship, close relationship theory insists that “the actual interaction within relationships is of primary importance in shaping the pattern of commitment to marriage.”⁴⁹

Secondly, these models presume a common courtship pattern or “script.” Close relationship theorists reject the search for social scripting as an illegitimate attempt to impose an “outsider’s” view — a view that usually fails to assess the “insider’s” account of the courtship process. Close relationship theorists give close attention to “retrospective studies” which attempt to document the actual pathways of courtship that couples have experienced. They argue that retrospective studies “uncover” a diversity of distinct “courtship pathways.” Close scrutiny of couples’ accounts indicates that there is no “fixed script,” “set plot,” or “similar pathway” in courtship.⁵⁰

Constructing Love

For close relationship theory, there is no “set plot” for courtship because there is no teleology or common goal of close relationships. Not marriage, certainly. Not even love. For in this view, love has no objective existence. It is a construct of the individual, the shifting metric by which each of us judges whether or not a relationship is “good enough” to continue. Robert Sternberg argues that “love is a social construction” and that “there is no one particular ‘reality’ that is simultaneously experienced by all people.”⁵¹ In *The Social Construction of Love*, Anne Beall and Robert Sternberg argue that the plurality of love styles within diverse social and historical contexts testifies to the fact that love is a cultural construct. The societal construction of the thoughts, feelings, and actions associated with love occurs primarily at the macro level of culture.⁵² However, individuals are also “actively engaged” with this ongoing process of defining and re-defining the content of love.

Constructivism challenges Frank Sinatra’s “love and marriage, horse and carriage” metaphor. Love is not intrinsically connected to either marriage or procreation. Some of the most exquisite forms of romantic love, such as the courtly love tradition of the medieval era, stood outside of, and in opposition to, conjugal and familial life.⁵³ Intimate dyadic love can flourish in many free-standing forms, disconnected from marriage and children: “It all depends on time and place, as well as on the specific individuals who are making the judgment.”⁵⁴

“What is love?” thus becomes a major theoretical preoccupation of these theorists. Over the last ten years, close relationship research on dyadic love has revolved around three major approaches: John Bowlby’s “Attachment Theory,” Robert J. Sternberg’s “Triangular Theory of Love,” and John Alan Lee’s “Love Styles.”

Attachment Theory

The intellectual attraction of close relationship theorists to Bowlby's attachment theory seems odd. At first glance, Bowlby's work would appear to undermine the constructivist slant of close relationship love theory, since his attachment theory attempts to connect the origins of romantic love to primordial stages of infant psychological development.

John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth's studies of infant behavior revealed the foundational significance of the attachment relationship between an infant and his or her primary

There is no objective standpoint from which one can critically evaluate various constructs of love. The key word is "style." There are "love styles" just as there are "life styles."

adult caregiver. When an attachment figure (usually a mother) is present (proximity maintenance), the infant is happy and responsive. Typical reactions to the presence of the attachment object are smiling, fascination with his or her physical features (touching the face and hair, for example), prolonged eye contact, sharing toys, cooing, talking baby talk, clinging, and touching.⁵⁵ The child experiences the mother as a "secure base" and as a "safe haven" from which to roam and explore. There is a deep sense

of empathy and feelings of oneness. Separation is accompanied by distress, crying, and listless behavior until reunion.

In a seminal essay, Philip Shaver, Cindy Hazan and Donna Bradshaw argued that Bowlby's attachment theory can be extended to adult romantic love.⁵⁶ While it is not clear how attachment relationships are transferred from infant-mother to adult-adult, there is nevertheless a profound continuity between the characteristics of infant attachment and the characteristics of adult romantic love.⁵⁷ For romantic lovers, the presence of the beloved evokes happiness, joy, contentment, and a sense of oneness. Lovers, like babies, touch, caress, coo, talk baby talk, and engage in prolonged eye contact. Separation evokes distress, crying and confusion. Romantic love has all the innocent, intense, open, and polymorphic quality of the infant's attachment to the primary caregiver. The different attachment styles that Ainsworth discovered in children — secure, anxious/ambivalent, and avoidant — also seem to reappear in intimate adult relationships. Exploring the implications of these attachment styles for the dynamics of adult romantic love has become a major area of close relationship research.⁵⁸

This appropriation of Bowlby's attachment theory serves three important purposes for close relationship theory. First, it provides a psychological base for love and a justification for research into the dynamics of romantic attachment. By establishing romantic love as a foundational dimension of the human psyche, it drives home the primordial significance of developing an intense emotional relationship with at least one "love object" in order to secure one's happiness.

Second, used in this way, attachment theory provides a psychological base for romantic love without any overt connection to procreation. Adult attachments may meet the test of reproductive fitness insofar as the pair bonds that they foster may contribute to long-term family stability.⁵⁹ However, the romantic attachment object is first and foremost an end in itself, not some evolutionary ploy to achieve reproductive success. According to Kelley Chappell and Keith Davis, the heterosexual attachment of adult lovers, like the infant-caregiver attachment, secures a relational focus that serves and affirms primarily the needs of

the self: “both the infant and the lover have the right to expect that their partner or care-giver will meet their needs, do what is best for them, make sacrifices on their behalf, and champion their interests.”⁶⁰

Finally, while this theory establishes the foundational psychological significance of romantic love, it does not collapse romantic love into infant attachment. Attachment theorists argue that: “If anything, adult love should be more, not less, complicated than infant care-giver attachment, involving as it does a much more differentiated understanding of self, others, and both real and ideal relationships; a much longer history of relationship experiences; more mature feelings of empathy; and adult sexuality.”⁶¹ Thus, attachment theory establishes the need for adult bonding, but leaves the door open to constructivist accounts of how those attachments play out.

Triangular Theory of Love

The social construction of love is the main concern of two theories associated with the close relationship school: triangular love theory and love style theory. In most college-level marriage and family textbooks, both of these theories make regular appearances in chapters on love, dating, and mate selection.⁶²

Robert J. Sternberg’s “Triangular Theory of Love” does not attempt to define the content of love. It strives instead to isolate the components of various “constructions” of “possible types of love.”⁶³ Sternberg identifies three basic components: intimacy, passion, and commitment.

Intimacy is achieved through cognitive and emotive self-disclosure and through behavioral interdependence. Self-disclosure involves both cognitive revelation (such as sharing values, plans, hopes, and expectations) and emotive revelation (such as sharing feelings and expressing emotions). Behavioral interdependence is expressed in concrete actions, such as support, physical togetherness, sharing one’s resources, spending time together, and being there in times of need.⁶⁴ Passion is a state of intense longing for union with another, a “profound desire to be with another,” a desire “to fuse one’s spirit with that of the loved one.” Expressions of passion include sexual arousal, erotic and romantic attraction, intense preoccupation with the other, and longing for physical closeness.⁶⁵ The commitment component consists of short-term and long-term aspects: “the short-term aspect is the decision to love a certain other, the long-term aspect is the commitment to maintain that love.”⁶⁶

Mixing and matching the “levels” of these various components leads to a taxonomy of seven different kinds of love: liking, infatuated, empty, romantic, companionate, fatuous, and consummate love. Some constructions, such as infatuated love, are almost pure passion. Other constructions, such as companionate love, represent a more complex blend of intimacy and commitment. The combination of passion, intimacy and commitment produces “consummate love.”

A key value of this approach is that “love, as viewed by the triangular love theory, can be measured.” Sternberg’s “Triangular Love Scale” provides a method of measuring each of the three components of love. The results helps couples “to gain a better sense of where each partner stands” and to determine where adjustments may be necessary.⁶⁷

Love Styles

John Alan Lee's "Love Styles" offers the most thoroughly constructivistic view of love in close relationship theory. Lee states that he is documenting some of the "competing ideologies of love." Lee has culled these styles from an extensive study of Western literature and philosophy. Lee states that he is "not concerned with defining love itself" but with helping lovers distinguish between different love constructs. Lee's "constructive typology" consists of six types of love. He cautions readers that this list is far from exhaustive.⁶⁸

- *Eros* is passionate love. Erotic lovers seek intimate sexual and emotional involvement. They are affective, open, and secure in their expression of love.
- *Ludus* is flirtatious, noncommitted, and promiscuous love. Love is a game. Ludus lovers avoid commitment or self-disclosure.
- *Storge* is companionate love or friendship. It grows over time as two lives become more and more intertwined.
- *Mania* is obsessive love that is intense, explosive, jealous, and possessive. Mania is characterized by an addictive, insecure preoccupation with the partner.
- *Agape* is an altruistic and self-giving love based more on will rather than on emotion.
- *Pragma* is concerned with a sensible match that will effectively meet the social and emotional needs of each partner. It stresses joys of homogamy: similar backgrounds and shared religion, class, interests, and education.

SUSAN AND CLYDE HENDRICKS developed the "Love Attitudes Scale" to assess individuals' preferences for these different love styles.⁶⁹ Numerous studies have attempted to examine dating partner dynamics in the light of Lee's "Love Styles."⁷⁰

Lee claims that his theory offers a catalogue of possible love styles in which you can identify your preference, then match it to that of others. Note that, in Lee's theory, all close sexual relationships are, by definition, based on love. Love is what lovers do. Lovers are people who have sex together on a regular basis. The differences between lovers consist only of different "styles" of loving, "each valid according to each person's taste." The problem of love thus becomes "a matter of studying different kinds in order to choose the the love-style you prefer most. Then you can consider how your preferred love-style 'matches' with others and learn where you are most likely to find partners who are looking for this particular match."⁷¹

Is there anything of real import to say about such theories? The fundamental goal for Sternberg and Lee, as well as for most "love researchers," is to provide effective tools for measuring how people construct and conceptualize love. They also want to explore the impact that these constructions might have on dyadic relationships. As a result, this research project turns our attention away from any substantive exploration of "real love" or "true love" (the phrases themselves seem so quaint) to a consideration of "how" love is "constructed" or "represented" by diverse individuals or communities.

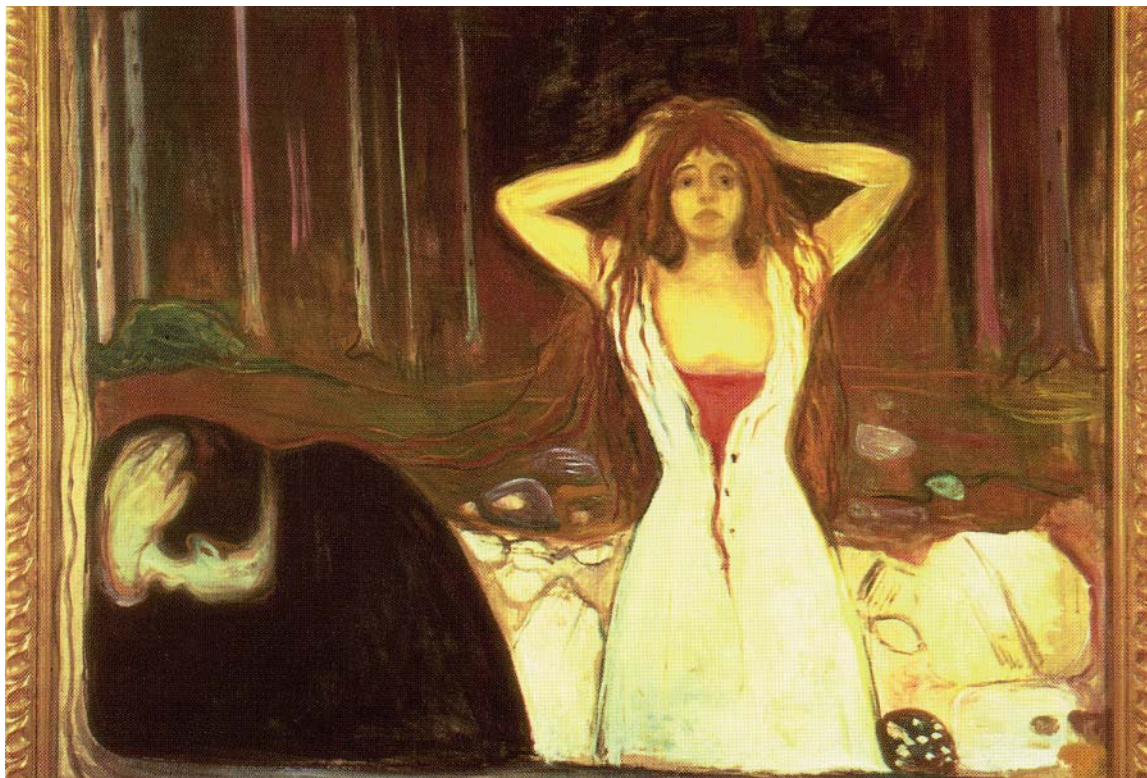
This research focus may represent an emerging cultural conclusion. "For good or ill," Kenneth Gergen writes, love is a "socially constructed" phenomenon: "in the end, there is no means of moving past the constructions to locate the real."⁷² Courtship thus becomes

the process of finding someone who will love you in the way in which you wish to be loved, and who will be satisfied with the form of love you care to offer in return. *Consent* and *satisfaction*, therefore, are the only two ways to measure not only the success of a relationship, but also the very existence of love.

In such a story of courtship, there is no objective standpoint from which one can critically evaluate various constructs of love. Lee insists on a plurality of love styles and warns that no one style can claim dominance or preeminence. The key word is “style.” There are “love styles” just as there are “life styles.” Indeed, Lee is critical of Sternberg precisely because he detects in Sternberg a “ranking” of love constructs. Even though Sternberg embraces a social constructivist approach to love, Lee senses an implied evaluative component in the use of terms such as “consummate love,” “infatuation,” or “empty love.” According to Lee, Sternberg’s “acceptance of the bias towards some kinds of relationships as more truly love than others” represents a “serious flaw” in his approach.⁷³

In this view, love styles can be constantly adjusted and changed. Because they are grounded in no external or objective standards, but instead in the subjective satisfactions of the “customers,” they are inherently temporary. One might find a particular love style (or love stiler) “dissatisfying,” so “why not change?”⁷⁴

This way of thinking profoundly relativizes both the idea and the significance of love. Indeed, *procedural* values — such as openness to ongoing negotiation, adjustment, and change — emerge in this perspective as far more important in personal relationships than any specific or objective concept of love. So Sternberg can argue that “willingness to change in response to each other” is the fundamental criterion for relationship success.⁷⁵



At left:

Ashes by Edvard Munch (1863-1944). Munch-museet (Munch Museum), Oslo, Norway. Photograph © Index/Bridgeman Art Library, New York, NY.

Satisfying the Self

What ultimately disappears in this understanding of close relationships is not just marriage, and not just children and family life. What ultimately disappears is any intrinsic concern for the well being of another person.

While close relationship theorists agree that I, as a lover, should be responsive to my beloved, the bedrock rationale for my responsiveness is to maintain a relationship that satisfies me, the lover. In this view, close relationships primarily generate worlds of meaning that enrich and enhance the self.⁷⁶ Close relationship theorists develop models that seek to chart this “self-enhancement” dimension of close relationships. Self-enhancement theory contends that intimate romantic love is “one especially satisfying, useful, and human means of expanding the self through *including each other in the self*.”⁷⁷ Loving relationships foster richer, more robust, personal identities. Elaine and Arthur Aron cite the ancient Upanisadic axiom that “all love is directed toward the Self.”⁷⁸ Even in loving, the self is still profoundly self-referential.

In this regard, consider these theorists’ concern for measuring “satisfaction” in courtship relationships. In *Courtship*, Cate and Lloyd cite relationship satisfaction as “one of the most commonly examined variables in the study of close relationships.” George Levinger, in his introduction to a recent volume, *Satisfaction in Close Relationships*, points out that there is something in contemporary culture that “virtually requires laypeople — as well as psychological experts, such as the eminent contributors to this volume — to worry about the assessing, building, eroding, and repairing of couple satisfaction”.⁷⁹ Yet there is considerable debate over the standards for measuring satisfaction.⁸⁰ Is satisfaction a matter of the partners’ subjective feelings about their relationship (how the relationship feels)? Or is it about their actual relationship behavior (how it works)?

In their essay on “Love and Satisfaction,” Susan and Clyde Hendricks distance themselves from Norval Glenn’s attempt to offer more objective criteria of relationship success. They maintain that close relationship theory is “fixed on people’s subjective, affective experiencing of their own happiness and contentment with their close relationship.”⁸¹ Larry Erbert and Steve Duck also want to shelve the concern for objective standards. They insist on the importance of “subjective evaluation by each relational partner”: “satisfaction measures are not designed as objective assessments of relational interaction, but as measures of the attitudes and feelings of the relational partners.”⁸²

At the heart of this debate is a controversy over the question of ideal or normative standards for relationships. Erbert and Duck insist on the need to develop a “dialectical theory of relationship satisfaction” which challenges and deconstructs the “ideal types” implicit in most measures of satisfaction.⁸³ They argue that such ideal types typically conceal an ideological bias that favors stability over change, reliability over uncertainty, togetherness over individuality, and agreement over conflict. These relational standards form an ideal that most couples cannot achieve; they entrench “a rigid structural prison that serves to limit the validation of other types of relationships.” Erbert and Duck maintain that this kind of approach “has effectively silenced any discussion of the idiosyncratic, novel, or highly variable dimensions of relational interaction.”⁸⁴ By focusing satisfaction measurements on subjective feelings and dispositions, these theorists effectively rule out of order any attempt to identify more objective standards.

And how, finally, are we to understand this seemingly vital “self” whom close relationships are intended to serve and before whom love itself bows and scrapes and inquires for its meaning? Ironically, as is the case of the concept of love, the concept of “self” in close relationships theory emerges as largely devoid of content. Julia Wood and Steve Duck insist that we can no longer view the “identity” of the self as “enclosed in a stable core.” Instead, “selves are recognized as contingent, forming and reforming within diverse relationships and circumstances.” The self only assumes identity “in response to others.”⁸⁵

According to Kenneth Gergen and Regina Walter, relationships are the “ontological prior.” They state that “the individual is essentially an extension of relationship.”⁸⁶ Christopher Agnew’s study of “cognitive interdependence” suggests that courtship offers an illustration of this postmodernist view. One of the defining characteristics of close romantic relationships is that each partner is intensely aware that his or her self-identity is determined by relation to another.⁸⁷ According to Francesco Alberoni, “being in love is the search for one’s own identity...a search for one’s own self, to the very bottom. This is achieved through the other person, in dialogue with her, in the encounter where each person seeks recognition in the other.”⁸⁸ The grounding of self-identity in our society was once secured by morality and religion. It has now “shrunk down to the small radius of close relationships.”⁸⁹

For Gergen, the self is essentially a “pastiche personality” which is continually constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed in diverse social contexts.⁹⁰ Since the self is constantly “fashioned” and then refashioned within processes of social interchange, the individual does not have an “autobiography” in which, for example, courtship may represent one chapter in a coherent life story. Instead, we now have “sociobiographies,” in which diverse relationships constantly help to construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct personal identity.⁹¹ For Julia Wood and Steve Duck, this “relational self” is a “teeming mass of potentialities, any of which may be realized in particular moments and none of which is invariant over time and context.”⁹²

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The Thrill of Unconsummated Courtship

In close relationship theory, romantic and courtship relationships are said to constitute the “formation stage” of sexually based relationships. This phase is marked by an emerging sense of cognitive interdependence, self-disclosure, exchange, exploration, and testing. For these theorists, courtship is *not* a process targeting a specific end, such as marriage. From this perspective, then, Andrew Cherlin’s definition of courtship as “a publicly visible process with rules and restrictions through which young men and women find a partner to marry” seems somewhat archaic.⁹³ Wood and Duck, by contrast, argue that close relationship inquiry is “less enamored of outcomes than of processes, changes, and the interesting variabilities (what modernists disparage as inconsistencies) in actors and situations.”⁹⁴

In fact, this flexible, exploratory world of courtship as romance, not courtship leading to marriage, emerges in close relationship theory as a paradigm for *all* sexually intimate relationships, including marriage. Brickman argues that there is a growing realization that “the means” towards forming a meaningful committed sexual relation “become the end.”⁹⁵

In the “formation phase” of sexual relationships, “commitment” as such is not the goal. Rather, the couple is engaged in a world of discovery involving ongoing “negotiations,” “exchanges,” “explorations, and “testings.” The authors of *The Sexual Bond: Rethinking Families and Close Relationships* argue that this process ultimately becomes the paradigm, the “ultimate goal,” for all sexual relations: “As applied to sexually based situations the partners would cultivate...not foremost a commitment to stay committed, but primarily ‘a commitment to continuing negotiation.’”⁹⁶

And so marriage lands finally in a very curious spot. Instead of courtship being defined by the goal of marriage, marriage is defined by the dynamics of courtship. Close relationship theory thus reaches a conclusion that was reached 60 years ago by cosmetics advertisers: The test of a good marriage is its capacity to maintain the “thrill of courtship.” The phrase, “You would never know that they are married,” becomes the highest possible praise for conjugal love.⁹⁷

Of course, intense courtship cannot be sustained forever. At some point, the beginning ends. However, it may be precisely the limited duration of courtship that makes this bond so fascinating to close relationship theorists. Hans Werner Berhoff points out that close relationship theory tends to focus particularly on “initiation” and “disengagement,” since these are “particularly striking phases” of intimate relationships. “Relationship maintenance,” by contrast, tends to suffer from a “deficit” in research attention.⁹⁸ Marriage is a relationship maintenance institution; it thrives on stability and homeostasis. Yet close relationship theorists are much more interested in process.⁹⁹ Erbert and Duck argue that “change represents an ongoing process in which dimensions of the ‘self’ are constructed and reconstructed...in which one ‘blends’ and ‘bleeds’ within and between the other.”¹⁰⁰ Such relationships are inherently transient:

*“No matter where they occur — in a premarital setting, or in a legal marriage, or subsequent to it, or in terms of parent-child relationships, or whatever — primary relationships must: (1) always have some sort of beginning; (2) may or may not be maintained in some fashion; (3) may or may not develop or change in other ways; but (4) eventually will end, if not by the volition of one or both partners, then surely by death.”*¹⁰¹

LIKE NEW CARS, new relationships include anxious moments of shopping around, exhilarating moments of purchase, and joyous moments of discovery. For a driver and his car, and for close relationships, the first years tend to be the best. For what lies after attraction, encounter, and romance? The dreary world of relationship maintenance. And ultimately, when the bloom is off the rose, the messy world of relationship dissolution.

Courtships are hothouses for the study of relationship dissolution. Cate and Lloyd’s study of courtship devotes much attention to theories of courtship breakdown and dissolution. Courtship dissolution is usually a function of low satisfaction levels (see above), low investment levels, and the presence of high quality alternatives.¹⁰² Investments are classified into extrinsic investments (such as shared past experiences and shared friends and property) and intrinsic investments (such as time, effort, and communication).

Imbalances in relationship investment can cause relationship deterioration. In considering dissolution, partners must assess their investments, determining what they would lose

or gain by ending the relationship. This judgment is closely related to the question of comparative alternatives. If one has attractive alternatives, in terms of potential new relationships, then the existing relationship will be less stable.¹⁰³ However, once one or both of the partners begin seriously to consider relationship termination, different “strategies” or “different pathways” emerge in the “dissolution process.”¹⁰⁴ The scripts for dissolution are as varied as the scripts for formation.

Typically, marriage and family life presuppose commitment as a self-evident ideal. Yet close relationship theorists argue that, in practice, marriages, like courtships, continue only as long as they are satisfying to the individuals involved.¹⁰⁵ Sternberg points out that “the exact nature and duration” of permanency and commitment are open to debate. Commitment usually implies a promise to “stick with someone to the end.” Increasingly, however, the “end” is redefined as “that point where the relationship is no longer working.”¹⁰⁶

In the words of Don Piraro’s satire of modern wedding vows, permanency is a firm commitment “to love and cherish each other until it’s inconvenient, or you’re tired of it, or somebody more exciting comes along, or it’s just not fun any more.” In formal terms, marriage dissolution follows the same process as courtship breakdown; however, the former process tends to be less fluid, or more bumpy, due to the higher level of “extrinsic investments” (such as past experiences, property, and children) typically connected to marriage. For this reason, courtship again seems to offer a *better* model than marriage for understanding the essential dynamics of commitment, since courtship more freely acknowledges the tentative nature of commitment itself, and more openly incorporates the possibility of dissolution into the relationship equation.



At left:

Solitude by Edvard Munch (1863-1944). Private Collection. Photograph © Bridgeman Art Library, New York, NY.

Welcome to the World of Relationships

A research model primarily aimed at understanding the internal sensations of romance is obviously ill-equipped to understand marriage or what leads to marriage. Yet times change. The new world imagined by close relationship theory — essentially a world of serial coupling — is, more and more with each passing day, the world we actually live in. Close relationship theory thus offers us a sophisticated intellectual lens through which to view — and if we wish, defend — this world.

Beth Bailey concludes her review of courtship in America by celebrating the arrival of a cultural revolution that is rapidly undermining the views of mate selection that dominated society during much of the 20th century. Bailey finds it difficult to define this revolution precisely, since, she points out, we are still working it out.¹⁰⁷ But surely its main contours have by now crystallized, and it looks very much like a cultural revolution based on close relationship theory.

Indeed, close relationship theory may constitute our society's most cogent intellectual articulation of the increasingly popular, perhaps soon dominant, ideology of interpersonal relationships. Sally Cline's book, *Couples: Scenes from the Inside*, offers an easily accessible presentation of this new ideology. Cline argues that we are in the midst of a "relationship revolution" that is de-institutionalizing personal relationships and restructuring them in terms of the "experience of intimate partnership."¹⁰⁸ We are moving from a culture of marriage to a culture of "relationships." This new world will include all intimate partnerships under one rubric and hold them accountable to a set of common values. Cline's set of values consists of her five "C's" and one "I": commitment, communication, coping, cherishing, compromise, and interdependence. Here, in user-friendly form, is the ethical core of close relationship theory.

In this new world of relationships, five main ideas stand out. First, the distinction between marriage and other intimate partnerships is all but eliminated. Marriage no longer sets a teleological goal for courtship. Courting couples are now said simply to be "in a relationship," which puts them in the same generic category as married couples, subject to the same norms and processes of relationship quality, maintenance, and dissolution.

Second, the new story tells us of basic human attachment and intimacy needs that must be satisfied. But it also insists that we privately choose the specific "love styles" with which we seek to gratify those needs. Love becomes less a noun than an adjective; love gives way to love styles.

Third, the new world is very small. It is only big enough for the "dyad," the couple. Courtship is coupling, not preparing for something bigger, such as marriage. Children are essentially screened out. Notwithstanding frequent complaints about the narrowness of the old nuclear family, the world of "close relationships" is far narrower. And because it is rigidly one-dimensional, it is also far more boring.

Fourth, the new dyadic relationships are not measured by their capacity to foster any of the traditional virtues, such as courage or self-sacrifice, but instead solely by their capacity to satisfy what the self views as the self's needs. All externally based criteria for what is needed, or for what might constitute satisfaction, are banished; all standards become radically subjective. For Barbara Ehrenreich and Deidre English, "needs have an inherent legitimacy...people are replaceable."¹⁰⁹

Finally, the openness, emotional intensity, and relative brevity of courtship are the very traits that make courtship *superior* to marriage as an expression of, and as a way of understanding, the new world of relationships. Consequently, romantic relationships replace marriage and religion as life's main arenas for the discovery of personal meaning.¹¹⁰ In this sense, Canada's intimate relationships guru, Josey Vogels, is right to suggest that, given current cultural trends, dating is on the "front lines."¹¹¹

In the end, close relationship theory reduces courtship and marriage to the loving interactions of ever-changing dyad partners. This shift may be the soft underbelly of contemporary theory and practice. For when the dust of this revolution settles, all we are left with is "relationships" — thin and shadowy vestiges of formerly powerful vocations.

What can we hold on to? Cate and Lloyd conclude their review of courtship theories by assessing and predicting some global trends. They foresee a decrease in sexual jealousy, an increase in cohabitation, greater equality between the sexes, increased pressure on quality time, and more frequent courtship experiences over the course of a lifetime, primarily due to increased relationship dissolution. Their final words express their best hopes for a future based on good-quality dyadic close relationships. In the new millennium, they assure us, the "couple" *will* survive: "We believe that the 'couple' will remain a primary unit, and that love, togetherness, quality time, good communication, and mutually satisfying sexuality will remain important themes in our culture throughout the next century."¹¹²

Despite Bailey's warnings about revolution, uncertain futures, and new-found freedoms, the road ahead seems flatter and less interesting. Don't bother to fasten your seat belts.

Close relationship theory may constitute our society's most cogent intellectual articulation of the increasingly popular, perhaps soon dominant, ideology of interpersonal relationships.

Towards a Scientific Study of Courtship

TODAY'S THREE most influential schools of thought in the academy on courtship — exchange theory, sociobiology, and close relationship theory — do provide some useful insights regarding the meaning and practice of courtship as it relates to marriage. But these insights are fragmentary and quite limited. Even taken together, these three ways of thinking about courtship and marriage obscure at least as much as they reveal. It's not so much that their answers are wrong as it is that the foundational question — what is marriage? — is never seriously asked. Each of these three perspectives begins with a radically reductionist view of marriage, thereby effectively viewing what is arguably society's most important institution in extremely narrow, one-dimensional terms.

The main strength of exchange theory is that, unlike the other two contenders, it conceptualizes courtship as the pathway to marriage. Its main weakness is that, in reducing marriage merely to the idea of individual consumers expressing preferences in a market, exchange theory factors out of its model much of what makes marriage what it is: the deep human need for lasting love, the capacity to cherish another for his or her own sake rather than by way of seeking "utilities" for oneself, and almost everything about marriage that is institutional and social rather than purely subjective and private.

The main strength of sociobiology is its recognition of the social importance of sexual embodiment and of the human drive to reproduce. Its main weakness is that, in its focus on the primacy of unencultured sexual drives, the recognition of marriage as a cultural achievement, an institution that specifically aims to enculture what otherwise would be unencultured, is all but lost. In sociobiology, whatever is or could be culturally elevated about human sexual bonding is arbitrarily lowered, or decultured. Both courtship and marriage become largely indistinguishable from mere coupling.

The main strength of close relationship theory is its exploration of the stages and the internal emotional dynamics of sexually based relationships. Its main weakness is that it radically relativizes and privatizes every possible dimension of human relationships, rejecting any criterion for relationship success other than the self's subjective assessment of the self's needs, denying any real connection between courtship and marriage, and obliterating any meaningful distinction between marriage and other sexually close relationships. This perspective not only misdescribes marriage, but also reflects a barely concealed hostility to any notion of marriage as a social institution. Which is why, for many close relationship theorists, courtship-without-marriage, or pure coupling, is actually viewed as superior to marriage as a social model for intimate sexual relationships.

At the same time, while they largely fail to help us understand courtship and marriage, these three schools of thought provide important insights into the state of modern society. Each way of thinking illuminates something important. Exchange theory illuminates our growing capacity to understand marriage in essentially utilitarian terms. This approach has great predictive power, insofar as our actual marrying behavior increasingly conforms to the expectations of the theory. Sociobiology illuminates our cultural fatigue with high or idealistic views of romance. Its emphasis on the irrational nature of sexual desire and conflict nourishes contemporary cynicism. Its harsh realism helps further to erode those moral and religious ideals which, for earlier generations, sought to elevate sexual desire into lasting marital love.

Close relationship theory illuminates our growing need to blur the distinctions between marriage and other relationships. The theoretical insights of close relationship theory ring true precisely to the extent that marriage itself is increasingly diluted and geared down to the fluidity and plasticity of just another "relationship." For example, marriage no longer regulates procreation. In Quebec, a sexual bellwether for North American culture, 55 percent of all births now take place outside of marriage. To take another example, the essential values that now guide marriage education, preparation, and counseling do not seem to be very different from Sally Cline's bundle of close relationship values. In short, the older vision of marriage as covenantal, life-long, genealogical, self-sacrificial, and child-centered is gradually being repackaged into the newer vision of the legally recognized dyadic intimate relationship. To the extent that this operation is successful, close relationship theory will resonate ever more clearly with our actual personal and social experiences.

However, these scholarly tales do not tell the whole story. While the models of courtship generated by these schools of thought illuminate certain current realities, they blind us to others. Marriage retains a central importance in our society, both practically and as an idea. An increasing number of Americans, for example, view unmarried procreation as at the very least troubling, and a significant and stable proportion of U.S. adults view sexuality

unconnected to marriage as similarly problematic. While nonmarital sex and childbearing are much more common, it is also true that about 90 percent of Americans marry, and Americans of all ages and social classes continue to list a “happy marriage” as an important personal goal. The proportion of Americans between the ages of 18 and 29 who told interviewers that a “happy marriage” is an important part of the “good life” actually increased between 1991 and 1996, from 72 percent to 86 percent.¹¹³

While there is a role for continuing academic investigations of close relationships, and of mate selection in light of exchange theory and the principles of sociobiology, family scholars as a whole would do us all a great service if they would rediscover their historic scientific curiosity about courtship as traditionally understood — that is, as the attitudes, values, social rituals, and practices leading to marriage, especially successful marriage.

Marriage is not just an inferior version of going steady, or a sexual barter, or a consumer good. Love is more than a style. Courtship is more than coupling. Illuminating these distinctions will require scientific models that begin, above all, with curiosity about what marriage is. ■

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About Edvard Munch

IN 1913, when the International Exhibit of Modern Art first introduced the U.S. public to European Post-Impressionism, Cubism, and other then-radical styles that embodied the idea of modernism in art, Edvard Munch (1863-1944) of Norway was one of the prominent artists whose work was exhibited. Munch is widely viewed as a pioneer and a gifted exemplar of the modern art movement. His main accomplishment is a style of artistic expression that is intensely subjective and psychological, focusing on the inner vision of the artist. In 1889, Munch wrote in his diary: “It’s not the chair that should be painted, but what a person has felt at the sight of it.”

Munch was born in 1863 in Loten, Norway, the son of Christian Munch, an army surgeon, and a mother, Laura Cathrine, who died when Edvard was five years old. He began painting in 1880; his paintings were first exhibited in 1883. In 1889, he moved to Paris, where he spent much of the next three years. Toulouse-Lautrec, Van Gogh, and Gauguin were important influences on Munch. From 1893 through 1908, Munch spent much of his time in Berlin. Beginning in about 1909, when he returned to Norway, his work began to achieve significant national and international popularity. Munch’s personal life was turbulent and often difficult. He died in Oslo in 1944.

Munch’s art relates to some of the themes of this report in several respects. First, the power and at times brutality of sexual attraction, especially when removed or liberated from social convention, is a major preoccupation for Munch. His paintings often combine a modernist concern for personal expressivism and sexual freedom along with a strong interest in primitivism, or what is purely natural or foundational in sexual relationships. Second, because Munch’s exploration of the male-female relationship focuses almost exclusively on the subjective world of private emotion, public norms and social institutions, such as marriage, are of little interest to him. (Munch himself had numerous close relationships with women, but never married or had children, and in 1900 wrote that he had “hated” marriage his entire life.) Many of Munch’s paintings suggest the alienation and pain that can exist in male-female sexual relationships, particularly when — at least from the perspective of this report, if not, perhaps, from Munch’s own perspective — they are severed from the cultural achievements of courtship and marriage.



At left:

Jealousy (detail) by Edvard Munch (1863-1944). Rasmus Meyer Samilinger, Bergen, Norway. Photograph © Bridgeman Art Library, New York, NY.

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THE INSTITUTE FOR AMERICAN VALUES, founded in 1987, is a private, nonpartisan organization devoted to research, publication, and public education on major issues of family well-being and civil society. The Institute's immediate mission is to examine the status and future of the family as a social institution. Its larger mission is to examine the social sources of competence, character, and citizenship in the United States. Accordingly, Institute activities are more than debates about policy. They are also conversations about culture and explorations of the American idea.

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ISBN: 0-9659841-8-4