

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.

About this Report

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.

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