

Cancian, Francesca M. (1987). *Love in America: Gender and self-development*. England: Cambridge University Press.

Reviewed by

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Biographical Information

John R. Kelly is a professor in the Department of Leisure Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The relationship of leisure, work and family through the life course is the focus of his scholarship.

Is the family a repressive institution or a locus of warmth, nurture, and acceptance in a diffuse mass society? At the center of the traditional family, at least for some periods of time, is an intimate dyadic relationship, usually referred to as a marriage. In most of its forms that relationship is presumed to involve affection, commitment, and mutuality as well as legal and social forms of property holding, legal identification, and associated social functions. The most common term for that set of expectations is "love" despite the usage of the same term to refer to many kinds of more temporary acts and relationships. In a study based on both historical analysis and interviews, Professor Francesca Cancian of the University of California at Irvine examines the changing nature of love as related to marriage.

The very concepts of marriage and the family are currently under attack from a variety of perspectives. The divorce rate, rising through the decades to its present close-to-50% level, contests the elements of commitment and permanence. Many argue that the wider alternatives given women in the paid work force have simply unmasked previously hidden dissatisfactions with an inequitable institution. From a feminist perspective, marriage is the most central of those institutions perpetuating the subordination of women in a patriarchal society. Society has undergirded the power of males in marriage with laws that have legitimated authority and even the use of physical force as well as property rights. Women have been given little recourse against often arbitrary male dominance. In the family, females have learned "their place" in supporting the primary roles of males in school and church as well as in the economy. Females have learned that their central life fulfillment is to be found in nurturing the lives of others. As a consequence, as Cancian outlines, there is a long history of evidence indicating that marriage is better for males than females. Even in leisure, women are expected to direct their efforts toward planning and providing "family leisure" that is oriented toward the nurture and development of children and the restoration of the primary worker for productive engagement.

Most historical analysts now see the postwar "family boom" of the 50s as an aberration from long-term trends of increasing marital dissolution even among the middle

and upper classes, periods of adult singleness and single-parent childrearing, and the increase of women in the paid work force, especially in low-pay services. There has been an increase in relationship and residential forms other than the daddy/mommy/kiddies nuclear family. Over a decade ago, the reviewer suggested a refocus of study to relationships of intimacy that included forms and meanings other than traditional heterosexual marriage. Yet, most adults in this society marry, although the percentage is moving down toward 80% from the former peak of over 90%. Studies of values still consistently find that home and family are the most important element of life for most adults (Kelly & Kelly, 1994). For those in families, leisure and family are closely related in locale, companionship, and meaning. And, as Cancian reviews, being married remains central to life satisfaction, if somewhat more for men than women.

The Argument of Gendered Love

Cancian argues that love itself has become “feminized” in Western societies. She combines historical analysis with an anthropological/sociological approach to the division of familial roles. This familiar gendered division assigns women to the sphere of “love.” Love is identified with alleged feminine characteristics of tenderness, emotional expression, and even gentleness. Love, then, is associated with the sexual division of labor in which relationships and nurture are designated as women’s work. Men, on the other hand, are assigned to the world of work where they are expected to control emotions without being sensitive to the feelings of others in their aggressive campaign for success. Love is feminized and self-development is masculinized. Therefore, insofar as health and maturity are identified with becoming independent, autonomous, decisive, and competent, characteristics associated with masculinity are privileged.

Cancian goes on to argue that more flexible gender roles and critiques of the bias of masculine privilege are having some impact. From a leisure perspective, the Western orientation toward self-development and autonomy in contemporary leisure theory may be one more aspect of this split. Insofar as Western culture divides by gender into masculine “agency” and feminine “communion,” leisure theorizing buys into this bias by giving priority to individual agency rather than social expression and bonding.

Cancian uses a set of interviews to illustrate how this division is carried out in contemporary marriages. Even personality types and activities are gender-stereotyped. Women, as many have pointed out, do the emotional work of both marriage and the family. Men tend to believe that they are actually expressing love when they provide physical and economic support for spouse and family. “Family leisure” becomes the responsibility of the wife/mother insofar as it is oriented toward nurture and bonding. Leisure directed toward individual development including competence-building and the challenge of Csikszentmihalyi’s “flow” are a masculinized province for males and some females who have transcended the stereotypes.

Androgynous Love

Cancian proposes another alternative. It is that love becomes more “androgynous” in marriage, the family, and by extension even in leisure. She believes that conceptions

of the ideal self are becoming more androgynous by portraying the developed person as combining feminine intimacy and emotional expression with masculine independence and competence. The older restricted images of mature personhood are seen as truncating the full development of both men and women. She further argues that love and self-development are mutually reinforcing, not opposed. She would echo the revisionist understanding of marriage and other intimate relationships that proposes that love grows as those in the relationship develop most fully all facets of their human potential and that intimate relationships require space as well as communion.

At least one theoretical approach to leisure has been based on the idea that leisure is a process or dialectic that involves both the existential and the social (Kelly, 1987). Achieving a balance between the two is a lifelong project that changes as role intersections and personalities change through the life course. "California-style" elegies to leisure that is solely directed toward self-development and individual expression fail to recognize that, for the most part, we value most highly activity with those persons who are most important to us. Feminist critiques of the ideologies of family, motherhood, gender-biased love, and other socially-embedded roles fail to recognize that we are profoundly social beings. Intimacy is, ideally, not peculiarly feminine any more than a sense of able selfhood in meeting challenge is exclusively masculine.

Cancian's proposal has several implications for both leisure and the family. One is that leisure itself might be defined in a more androgynous perspective incorporating both self-development and bonding. A second is that discarding old gender stereotypes does not always require abandoning the human dimensions that are central for all genders and sexual orientations at any age or in any culture. And, third, despite its historically gendered distortions, love is still potentially a rather good thing, in leisure as well as in the variety of committed relationships.

References

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