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Please cite this publication as follows:

Carter, J. (2016) "Age-dissimilar couples and romantic relationships: ageless love?", by Lara McKenzie. *Anthropological Forum*, 26 (2). pp. 199-201. ISSN 0066-4677.

Link to official URL (if available):

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00664677.2016.1148563>

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Age-dissimilar couples and romantic relationships: Ageless love?, by Lara McKenzie. Palgrave MacMillan Studies in Family and Intimate Life series. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2015, 209pp., references, index. ISBN: 978-1-137-44676-3 (hardback).

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This very accessible, anthropologically informed, book presents a new and interesting addition to the existing literature on relationships. As a popular media reference yet under-researched area within family studies, focusing on age-dissimilar couples offers the possibility of developing a new perspective in understanding intimate heterosexual couple relationships. Indeed, McKenzie sets out this objective from the start in explaining that the two themes of autonomy and relatedness will frame the discussion around age-dissimilar relationships, challenging previously accepted approaches to these relationships in particular, as well as the standard discussions in family studies that focus on autonomy and individualism. The unique aspect of focusing on age-dissimilar couples is that these relationships may offer an insight into certain aspects of autonomy and relatedness that may not emerge in more 'conventional' relationships: for example, when your partner choice is considered unusual, the means through which you explain and create understanding of your relationship are more exposed. McKenzie uses a variety of methods to investigate this topic, including surveys, media analysis, interviews, focus groups, although it is the latter two (and particularly the interviews) which provide the major evidence presented in the book.

McKenzie embraces the complexity that her participants offered in their accounts of their relationships, using the themes mentioned above to provide an explanation and reconciliation of these contradictions. She uses Strauss and Quinn's (1997) model of cultural 'schemas' or understandings to provide a useful, if somewhat broad, basis for conceptualising contradiction, continuity and change, and for utilising the concepts of autonomy and relatedness. These cultural concepts (or themes), while context dependent, McKenzie argues, are also constantly interacting and may even define each other; the common tendency to study autonomy in the 'West' and relatedness in non-Western contexts then, must be abandoned, not least because of the limiting consequences such research agendas produce.

McKenzie offers a refreshing stance on history and social change, making sure to include but not rely on historical shifts, and taking into account ‘historical continuities between old understandings and new ones’ (2015: 38). This continuity is a central part of the argument provided throughout the book and the conceptual chapters offer explanations for resolving the complexities and contradictions that emerge in people’s understandings of continuity and change. Central to this aim is the resolution of the two overarching contradicting themes of autonomy and relatedness; themes that McKenzie argues also emerge in the related literature (although autonomy tends to get much more attention while relatedness- and the continuities- are often ignored).

One reason why a focus on age-dissimilar relationships is important is that by studying the unfamiliar we learn about the familiar. McKenzie encapsulates this neatly when discussing the connections between the normative and the romantic (what is normative is romantic and vice versa). Normative values were elicited from participants through discussion of examples of age-dissimilar ‘romantic’ encounters in popular culture (Lester and Angela from *American Beauty* was one example). The key cultural understandings of romantic love emerging from the focus group discussions were ‘relationships are chosen’ and ‘love is equal’ (2015: 81). It is only when relationships are seen to be possessing these characteristics of ‘chosen’ and ‘equal’ that they can be deemed as potentially romantic and therefore normative or acceptable.

An interesting contradiction presented by McKenzie is that made by participants between what they do and what others do: age-dissimilar relationships are appropriate for the interviewees because of their level of maturity for example, while age-similar relationships were most appropriate for the majority of the Australian population. For McKenzie, this contradiction is characterised by two shared understandings: ‘the relationship or partner is unique’ and ‘the relationship or partner is similar to others’ (2015: 89). While making claims to individuality in their unique relationship, autonomous characteristics are called upon while interviewees simultaneously make claims to relatedness through shared experiences and understandings; thus autonomy and relatedness are once again drawn upon as key concepts. One example of how these differing concepts are reconciled is provided in chapter 4 when discussing the physical appearance of age dissimilarity; a male participant mentions that he could dye his hair to look younger, similar in age to his partner. As McKenzie points out, the act of dyeing one’s hair can be seen as exercising autonomy, for the

achievement of appearing closer in age to one's partner, which in turn affirms the norm of relatedness in appearing similar in age to a romantic partner.

Love is also dealt with in depth and a very neat discussion of the contradictions in love provided. Of particular interest was the contradiction between the normative assumption that 'love is blind' (we fall in love regardless of age, class, ethnicity, etc.) and yet, this usually only happens within these exact constraints (the majority of relationships are age- class- and ethnicity-similar). McKenzie resolves this contradiction by asserting that both ideas coexist in people's imaginations and understandings of relationships: 'limitations regarding partner selection came first, and [...] then, within a reduced pool of possible partners, a person blindly fell in love' (2015: 135). Perhaps a more problematic conflict to resolve was that between love is equal and relationships can be unequal, in fact participants were only able to partially resolve this by placing the emphasis on individual responsibility underpinned by self-determination: 'romantic problems were generally considered to be personal problems' (2015: 151). Autonomy was expressed here in either freedom from coercion or control, while relatedness was apparent in the connection made between power and gendered norms of relating: 'autonomy was exercised in relation to others' (2015: 158).

In relation to the theme of autonomy the general findings are that age today is self-determined rather than based on chronology and age-dissimilar relationships are a marker of free choice in partner selection. Yet the discussion of power highlights the problem that despite this free choice, age-dissimilar relationships can be characterised by unequal power relations. In terms of relatedness, claims made by the participants to similarity with their partner despite the age-gap reveals a desire for closeness and connection. It is the second theme that McKenzie is particularly motivated to highlight as it is often overlooked in favour of focusing on autonomy in contemporary studies of relationships. Although these themes of autonomy and relatedness are often characterised as conflicting, McKenzie demonstrates throughout the book the different and various ways in which people are able to reconcile these contradictions. The book also offers some insight into the nature of romantic love in Western societies, that it: is exclusive at any one time, can only occur between adults, consists of a strong emotional attachment, is related to caring, and creates relationships that are unique and ideal (2015: 185).

In general, this is an extremely well-researched and comprehensively theorised book that adeptly straddles anthropology, sociology and psychology. It would therefore be of interest to those interested in emotions, families or relationship studies whether coming from any of those discipline backgrounds.

References:

Strauss, C., and N. Quinn. 1997. *A cognitive theory of cultural meaning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.