

Talk of Love, by Ann Swidler

reviewed by [Caroline J. Simon](#) in the [February 27, 2002](#) issue

Talk of Love: How Culture Matters. By Ann Swidler. University of Chicago Press, 289 pp., \$30.00.

During your life, have you changed your view of what love is?" "Should people make sacrifices for those they love?" "Does love require some sort of intense, ecstatic experience?" These and similar questions were asked of 88 white, middle-class Silicon Valley Californians in the early '80s. Through hundreds of hours of interviews, sociologist Ann Swidler explored how people within a relatively homogeneous group make different uses of a common cultural repertoire. In the book that grew out of those interviews, she divides her emphasis roughly equally between the themes of her title and subtitle. Swidler especially helps us to understand why people think the way they do about love. Her book can help American Christians reflect on the extent to which their views on love and human nature resemble or differ from those of American culture as a whole.

Swidler, who teaches at the University of California at Berkeley and was one of the coauthors of *Habits of the Heart*, thinks of culture as a tool kit that provides people with action strategies as they face decisions and meet life's challenges. She contrasts her view with those of other sociologists. Clifford Geertz conceives of culture as a pervasive tint that influences people in an indirect, all-encompassing way. Max Weber thinks of culture as a collection of "switchmen"--ideas that influence actions by shaping people's goals and the means they use to reach them.

Swidler concludes that Geertz, Weber and other sociologists view culture as more unitary, systematic and coherent than the results of her research suggest. Her subjects, she finds, use multiple cultural frameworks, depending on the context of their actions, and vary widely in their need for consistency among their ideas and between their ideas and their actions. Her view of culture is, at bottom, pragmatic: "It may be much less important for people to have a coherent worldview than to have enough different beliefs to adapt to most contingencies without losing the conviction that somehow the world makes sense."

If culture is a tool kit, what does it help us build? Swidler's answer is "a self." She sorts her research subjects into three basic kinds of selves. Utilitarian individualists have selves that are composed mainly of unevaluated wants. Their goal is to reach clarity about what they want. Their view of love is contractual; they seek to maximize their self-interest by forming relationships that are mutually beneficial.

Her second category, which she identifies at times with the Christian tradition, consists of people with disciplined selves. Such people see the self as a source of unruly desires that must be tamed through willpower. They view love as a commitment. Finally, attuned or therapeutic selves see the self as the seat of authentic feelings that must be explored and expressed. Therapeutic individuals view love as an arena for self-discovery and self-expression.

These three views of the self demarcate three strategies for sustaining marital bonds. Utilitarian individualists seek to stabilize their marriages through skill in negotiation. Disciplined selves seek the same goal through controlling their desires and actions. Therapeutic selves strive for deeper communication within relationships, communication that allows them continuously to adapt to one another.

Though these three types of selves underlie three differing cultures of love, Swidler points out that they have some deep commonalties. They are all rooted in a volunteerism that emphasizes freely chosen commitments as central to identity and authenticity. Swidler sees this volunteerism as arising out of a central, shared part of American culture: market economics.

Repeatedly our shared culture sends us the message that our options are open, that choice is what will define us. It makes this seem as applicable to choices like whether and whom to marry and whether to stay married as it is to what kind of toothpaste one buys.

Volunteerism, Swidler thinks, is as characteristic of the Christians whom she interviewed as of those with no religious views. Marriage Encounter, a well-known seminar designed to help Christians improve their marriages, is as volunteerist as secular utilitarian or therapeutic approaches are. "Love is a decision" is, after all, Marriage Encounter's central motto. Many of the Christians she interviewed also spoke of a "decision for Christ" and talked of God as a resource for "a kind of religiously guided work on the self."

A second common thread that connects utilitarian, disciplined and therapeutic views of love is the attempt to live out an apparent contradiction. Swidler found that people in all these categories tend to talk of love in two contrasting ways, "lurching back and forth between mythic and prosaic views of love." Mythic love is intense, all-or-nothing, unique and exclusive. Prosaic love grows slowly, is often ambivalent and confused, and emphasizes the importance of compatibility; it requires hard work, compromise and willingness to change.

Swidler maintains that these two seemingly contradictory views have joint and enduring sway over the majority of her subjects. This is possible because people employ these contrasting understandings in very different contexts. Mythic love is rooted in the structure of marriage as an institution: you either are married, or you are not; it is all or nothing. As people ask of a relationship, "Will this lead to marriage?" they naturally are led to ask, "Is this the right person for me?"

Prosaic love grows out of a very different question--not "Is this the one I should marry?" but "How can we make this marriage last?" Swidler finds that neither mythic nor prosaic love has a tight "fit" with reality, but together they describe the line of action that her interviewees are trying to sustain. That line of action involves deciding to marry and then striving to make marriages endure.

Swidler would be the first to acknowledge that her study is not based on a representative sample. She is more interested in exploring different appropriations of culture within a homogeneous group than in grounding sweeping generalizations about love or even the love culture of late-20th-century America. Some may see themselves in her conclusions. Others may see Swidler only as offering interesting insights into a particular slice of a California subculture at a particular time. In either case, becoming more self-aware of how our culture can shape us will enrich readers. Achieving some critical distance from ourselves benefits us. As Swidler observes, "The culture we fully accept does not seem like culture; it is just real life."