

THE PSYCHIATRIC ASPECTS OF MARITAL STABILITY INTRODUCTORY FORMULATION OF THE PROBLEM

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Like other words that have been applied to the marital relation the term stability, is not very suitable. "Adjustment", "happiness", and "success", all of which have been used in the past to denote some sort of optimum quality in the relation, are no better. None of these designations tell us what we need to know or even what to look for. By "stability" do we mean that the marital partners maintain their union through grim determination, through custom, or because they love each other as intensely as they thought they did during their engagement? "Happiness" and "success" are equally difficult to define. The trouble is that they are residual categories, derived from their opposites. An "unstable", "unhappy", or "unsuccessful" marriage has the aura of greater definiteness. We think we know what these words describe. So we turn them around, hoping to find the desirable in the reverse direction. The same difficulties apply to the concept of mental health. Everyone talks about it, but no one knows what it is. It is assumed that there must be some such state, since it is the opposite of mental illness. Therefore we search for it, not bothering to ask whether it exists, or whether it is a useful concept.

The method of inquiry based on residual categories is not very useful. A method of treatment, whether legal or psychiatric, directed at a residual category offers little hope of benefit. The aims of such a treatment have to be imported from some other system of knowledge — from religion, philosophy, legal tradition, custom,

or, if scientific, from the psychology of the individual. The aims can't be *specific*, for the marital relation until it is treated in its own right—as a phenomenon which needs to be explored and studied because we know so little about it. We first need to understand the variations in structure and function of the marriage relation so that we can distinguish healthy from pathological forms of the relation. We need to develop descriptive terms designating the appropriate structural units of the marriage relation. We need to investigate the function of these variable structures in variable contexts. A marital structure which functions very well in a hierarchical society, may function poorly in an egalitarian one. Without specificity of units, we are hopelessly at sea.

The problem of units and of structure in the marital relation has been handled in psychiatric theory predominantly through the concept of the personality structure of the marital partners. Another concept, currently in vogue, is that of the motivational structure, conscious and unconscious, of the husband and wife. The underlying assumptions are derived principally from psychoanalytic theory, somewhat seasoned, in the United States at any rate, by practical insights gleaned from the Child Guidance and Mental Hygiene movement. These concepts have been useful, but their limitations outweigh their advantages, and they have given rise, in the United States, to some unfortunate "criteria" for marital success. It is said that the marital partners should be free of "anxiety", "insecurity", and "overdependence." Neither should they be too "independent". At the same time, they should be "mature", "non-defensive", and capable of "identifying" with each other's needs and feelings. Their overt relations with each other should not be dominated by attempts to ward off fixed unconscious conflicts. They should not be "over-protective", "over-rejecting", nor "over-permissive." If the trait-list were to be extended in this direction, it would turn out that they should not even be alive. On the basis of such unrealistic criteria, every marriage is doomed to failure from the outset, and some psychiatrists have written as if they believed this to be true.

On the functional side of this list of "good" and "bad"

personality traits psychiatry considers the conscious and unconscious motivations behind the choice of a marital partner. An unstable marriage is considered to be due to an irrational or "neurotic" choice. If the choice was a bad one, the partnership tends to be maintained through the operation of similar factors. On the concrete level, the range of such irrational motives, is extensive. The neurotic choice can be due to an unconscious defense against such irrational motives, is extensive. The neurotic choice can be due to an unconscious desire for emotional gratification, or it can be based on an unconscious defense against such a desire. An example of the first category is a marriage partner selected because of a desire for revenge on one or both parents. The daughter of proud, wealthy, upper-class parents — who have paid little attention to her during childhood — marries a penniless, irresponsible artist, the son of foreign-born, working-class parents, in order to defy and annoy her family. An example of the second category is a marriage partner selected because of unconscious guilt arising from an unconscious desire for revenge. The daughter of proud, wealthy, upper-class parents — who have paid little attention to her during childhood — would unconsciously like to hurt her parents through her marriage because of the degree of neglect she has experienced in childhood. But, because her father has occasionally shown her some affection, she feels too guilty and remorseful at the idea of actually hurting them in an open way. Accordingly, she chooses a husband of an eminently satisfactory social background, a responsible and kind man, whom she does not love or care for in the least. She becomes a listless, masochistically suffering, chronically sick wife, taking an "indirect" revenge on her parents by making no effort to conceal her unhappiness.

In contrast to the units of personality structure and motives, considered by psychiatry, legal systems employ an entirely different set of structural concepts. Here the units are held to be "acts" to which are attached a variable quantum of "guilt." Such "acts" are said to be "committed." Literally, this description would merely indicate that the activity was performed jointly, but in the legal sense the word denotes wrong-doing, blame, or guilt. Thus in legal systems the measure of marital instability is the amount of wrong-

doing which can be proved to have taken place. Since what is held to be wrong-doing varies greatly over time and place, such units are not reliable indicators of the actual character of the marital relation. However, they have an advantage over the psychiatric descriptive terms in that they make explicit the socio-cultural norms governing standards of conduct in marriage. On the other hand, the degree of variability and outright conflict of such norms represented by contradictory or inconsistent legal codes is based on inexplicit and conflicting cultural value orientations which legal systems make no direct attempt to define.

A more stable system of structural units is offered by the concept of social role. This concept is ideally adapted to the description of the marital relation because it refers simultaneously to the inter-relationship of the marital pair, treated as a unit, and to the motivation and behavior of the partners, treated as individuals. A social role is defined as a goal-directed sequence of behavior patterned in accordance with cultural value orientations for the position a person holds in a social group or situation. These are "natural" units in the sense that every society has developed a vocabulary of names for its most important roles, and a set of "expectations", however ill-defined, for the behavior to be exhibited by the person in his role. Thus the marital partners have several interrelated and interlocking roles to maintain vis-a-vis each other. They are involved in a husband-wife relation, which, in the middle-class American nuclear family, is the pivot of the family system. They may very well be still involved in a child-parent role system with their own and parents-in-law. They are involved in occupational and recreational role systems which put them into relation with others outside the home but which involve the network of family relations. Each one of these role structures have system properties. This is to say that they can't be maintained without the coordinated, reciprocally attuned, complementary behavior of the role partner. In this sense all behavior is "committed" behavior — that is, socially orchestrated and composed of interwoven, neatly enmeshed, separate sequence of acts. Looked at this way, the maintenance of "stability" within the marital structure depends upon the maintenance of "complementarity" in the various role

structures. Thus the pertinent questions to ask regarding marital stability are (1) "what contributes to the disintegration of role complementarity?" and (2) "what processes restore complementarity once it has been broken down?"

The two most prominent sources of discrepancy productive of breakdown in role structures are (1) variations in cultural value orientations on the basis of which the marital partners pattern their roles, and (2) conflicts in motivation within the individual marital partner which determine his choice both of the role and of the role partner.

In the body of my presentation I will elaborate on these two sources of breakdown of the marital relation and will then outline the various steps which can be taken to restore equilibrium in the relationship once it has begun to fail.
