
WOMEN IN MARITAL CONFLICT

A Casework Study

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PREFACE

The study upon which *Women in Marital Conflict* is based was originally a dissertation completed as a requirement for the degree of doctor of philosophy conferred by Bryn Mawr College in the spring of 1947. In the revision of the manuscript for publication, substantial changes in content and detail were made, although the findings remain essentially the same. Much of the detailed tabulation of data in the case histories has been eliminated but is available in the original document, which has been microfilmed.

Additional theoretical material not explicitly a part of the doctoral study has been developed at some length in the present volume to help the student place the findings in the framework of the psychological assumptions upon which most modern casework rests. Chapters XI and XIII have been developed somewhat further than in the 1947 version because of progress in the field along the lines of these chapters, which has modified or further clarified the writer's views. One chapter has been omitted as unimportant, several have been streamlined, and in general the manuscript has been simplified and made more readable. Responsibility for the content of the final publication rests solely with the writer.

The author is indebted to many people and a number of organizations for assistance in making this study and preparing the manuscript. The case material was made available by eleven member agencies of the Family Service Association of America:

Family Service Society of Fulton and DeKalb Counties, Atlanta, Ga.
Family Society of Greater Boston, Boston, Mass.
Jewish Family Welfare Society, Brooklyn, N. Y.
United Charities of Chicago, Chicago, Ill.
Family Service Association, Cleveland, Ohio
Family Service Association, Indianapolis, Ind.
Family Service of Milwaukee, Milwaukee, Wis.
Community Service Society, New York, N. Y.
Family and Children's Service, Pittsburgh, Pa.
Family Service of St. Paul, St. Paul, Minn.
Family Service Association, Washington, D. C.

The assistance of these family agencies is very much appreciated. They not only permitted study of their records but were also generous in answering many questions that arose in the course of the study. Much is owed also to the twenty-two caseworkers who carried on treatment in these families but who must, in the interest of their clients, remain anonymous. While these workers, and

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their agencies, have not been asked to endorse the findings of the study, my thinking naturally has been strongly influenced by their views and it is hoped that on the whole they will find my interpretations in harmony with their own.

The Family Service Association of America also assisted in this study by granting several months' time and secretarial service when I was a member of the Association staff. The late Linton B. Swift, then director of the Association, gave much encouragement to the development of the project.

I also wish to acknowledge with gratitude the assistance of the American Association of University Women under whose auspices this study was begun with the award of the Gamma Phi Beta Lindsey Barbee Fellowship.

Faculty members of the Bryn Mawr College gave generous and valuable assistance in preparing for this study, planning it, and bringing it to final completion. I am especially grateful to Dr. Mildred Fairchild and Dr. Hertha Kraus, of the Carola Woerishoffer Department of Social Economy, and to Dr. Donald W. MacKinnon for their contributions to my thinking and the development of the project. Dr. LeRoy M. A. Maeder acted as special psychiatric consultant for the study for the doctoral committee and to him special thanks are due.

Many of my colleagues have read the study and contributed valuable ideas and most helpful criticism. These include Sidney J. Berkowitz, Florence R. Day, Annette Garrett, Gordon Hamilton, Cora Kasius, Betsey Libbey, Rosemary Reynolds, Dr. Sophia M. Robison, and Elsie Martens Waelder. To Miss Reynolds I am especially grateful for assistance in organizing the material, in formulating ideas, and for many suggestions on form and content.

I am indebted, too, to Shirley Moore Martin, who has contributed patient and skilful editorial assistance. For struggling with the never-ending corrections and insertions, my former secretary, Veronica G. Matthes, also has my sincere appreciation.

It does take a lot of us to make a book!

New York, N. Y.
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FLORENCE HOLLIS

I. Approach to the Problem

MARRIAGE CONFLICT is causing increasing concern among students of social trends. Conviction is spreading that broken and unhappy homes breed warped personalities—successive links in a long chain of individual discontent and misery. Unhappy parents provide unhappy homes; children grow up in these unhappy homes; in later life they provide unhappy homes for other children. Studies indicate that individuals who have been brought up in unhappy homes are those who have the least chance themselves of achieving lasting and satisfying marriage unions.

What can be done? How can the chain be broken? The question baffles all who have seriously studied the problem. This much we know: there is no panacea; approaches must be made simultaneously along many lines; only study of causes, study of treatment methods, and study of results will finally bring us answers.

Disharmony in marriage has been approached from many points of view. Psychologists, sociologists, clergymen, physicians, psychiatrists, educators, lawyers, and social workers—all have examined aspects of the problem. Marriage counseling has been carried on by interested individuals in all these professional groups. During the past two decades most of these groups, sometimes separately and

sometimes jointly, have sponsored projects in which clinical treatment is undertaken.¹

The Place of the Family Service Agency

In the field of social work the greatest concentration of work on marriage problems has been in family service agencies.² Contrary to popular opinion, interest in such work in family service agencies is not a recent development. Indeed, at the inception of the charity organization society movement, such societies were distinguished from other relief-giving agencies of the day by their recognition that economic breakdown is often the result of destructive factors both within the family and in the social structure, which must be dealt with if the family is to become self-supporting again and future economic collapse prevented. Among these factors domestic difficulty and family breakdown were early recognized and efforts were made to alleviate them.

To be sure, the methods used in 1890 were based on the knowledge of 1890, when moral suasion by means of personal influence was the accepted form of treatment, and causation was seen in "intemperance," "shiftlessness," "poverty," "immorality," and other factors now thought of as symptoms rather than causes. In the early 1900's interest turned to social reform, and American family

¹ A number of books give information about this development outside the field of social work. For further information, including lists of such facilities, see:

Ray E. Baber, *Marriage and the Family*, McGraw-Hill Book Co., New York, 1939, Chap. 18.

Julien E. Benjamin, "Family Consultation Service as a Function of a Family Agency," *Family Life and National Recovery*, Family Welfare Association of America, New York, 1935.

Ralph P. Bridgman, "Guidance for Marriage and Family Life," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, March, 1932, pp. 144-164.

Marie Carden, *The Organization of Family Consultation Centers*, an unpublished master's thesis, Boston University, Boston, 1941.

Evelyn Millis Duvall and Reuben Hill, *When You Marry*, D. C. Heath & Co., Boston, 1945, Appendix.

Family Consultation and Family Case Work, A Report of the Family Consultation Committee of the Cleveland Associated Charities, Family Welfare Association of America, New York, 1935.

Robert G. Foster, "Servicing the Family through Counseling Agencies," *American Sociological Review*, October, 1937, pp. 764-770.

Sidney E. Goldstein, *Marriage and Family Counseling*, McGraw-Hill Book Co., New York, 1945.

² Also known as "family welfare agencies" and earlier known as "charity organization societies."

caseworkers, along with others, began their long sponsorship of constructive legislation dealing with marriage—licensing, age and health requirements for marriage, improved divorce laws, support provisions, domestic relations courts. Family breakdown also began to be seen in terms of social conditions—poor housing, poor working conditions, unemployment, inadequate health care, lack of educational opportunities. In the 1920's, as the findings of psychoanalysis and of the various Freudian derivatives began to be known to the casework field, emphasis shifted to psychological factors. This would probably have led to deeper study of marriage problems more rapidly than it did had it not been for the depression of the 1930's. The impact of widespread unemployment was felt in family agencies long before the existence of a depression was officially recognized. Case loads were climbing in 1928 and from then until 1933 the major effort of many private agencies was absorbed in administering financial assistance.³ Nevertheless, during this period interest in psychological aspects of maladjustment grew rapidly and there was much experimentation, although in comparatively few cases, in the application of psychoanalytic theories of behavior and modifications of analytic techniques to casework. With the development of a more nearly adequate public assistance program in 1933, the family service agencies were freed to pursue more vigorously their long-standing interest in the causes and treatment of social maladjustment, including marital conflict. Such names as Family Consultation Bureau and Institute of Family Service began to appear among the well over two hundred member agencies of the Family Service Association of America.⁴

Increasingly in recent years couples have come to family service agencies because of marital unhappiness. Frequently, though not always, discontent and open quarreling had already existed for years, and often it had reached such a point that separation was being seriously considered or had actually taken place. We soon discovered that on the whole these were complicated problems and that in many instances treatment skills were insufficient for effective help. Improvement sometimes occurred as a result of few or many

³ It is this period that has led many writers who are not thoroughly familiar with the history of casework to assume that family agencies were purely relief-giving institutions prior to 1933.

⁴ Then known as the Family Welfare Association of America.

interviews but all too often it was followed later by a renewal of the conflict. Because of its many different services, the family agency was in a particularly good position to observe this relapse. Parent-child difficulties, health breakdown, financial need, and other matters often brought these same families again to our offices, thus giving us an opportunity to see the further development of the conflict and gain a realistic sense of the complexity of marriage adjustment and of the gap between present knowledge and that required for effective work.

This naturally led us to ask: How often are these situations really untreatable and how often are they an indication of limited casework skill? No doubt some clients were hopelessly and contentedly immature and some were satisfying deep-seated neurotic needs through prolonging marital conflict so that neither separation nor a lessening of conflict could be achieved through the sort of treatment casework could offer. But there were many others, it seemed, where the situation did not appear hopelessly beyond mending. With such questions in mind, individual agencies began to institute staff study of marriage conflict; a national committee was appointed to explore this area and make recommendations for ways of improving the effectiveness of casework with couples seeking assistance with this problem.⁵

Plan of the Present Study

It is out of this background that the present study emerges. The writer believed—and this was substantiated by the study—that careful examination of a sample of family agency treatment records would throw light on the dynamics of marital disharmony and its treatment which might be of value both to caseworkers and to other students working in the field of marriage relations. The fact that the modern family agency has as its clientele a group of people cutting across all levels of society except the most wealthy provides an opportunity to study marriage conflict and its treatment in a sampling of the population unusually representative of the average American family.

The study is necessarily a preliminary one rather than exhaustive and definitive. As already acknowledged, the subject is both a

⁵ *Report of F. W. A. A. Committee on Marriage Counseling*, Family Welfare Association of America, New York, September, 1943.

broad and a profound one that must be approached from many sides. Research in all the fields dealing with it is in a very early stage. One segment is uncovered here, another fragment comes to light there. Often these isolated pieces fit together surprisingly well. This study is offered, then, as one piece to this fundamentally important puzzle. It is intended for use not only by caseworkers but by others in the field of marriage counseling and marriage study.

In brief, this is a study of 100 families, selected, according to a random pattern, from eleven large family service agencies after the completion of the treatment period surveyed. The general pattern was for each of ten agencies to contribute for study five cases from each of two competent workers of their own selection. These cases were the first five cases showing conflict in marriage assigned to these workers after a given common date.

The study was based primarily on whatever treatment occurred during the following year. (The record of any earlier contact with the same family was used as supplementary material.) The study was begun after this treatment was completed and was dependent upon records written during its course. In other words it is a study made entirely after the work was completed and recorded, and with no knowledge on the part of either workers or agencies, while the treatment was actually underway, that such a study would be made. A few cases selected in the same way from an eleventh agency were used because of gaps in the material supplied by one or two of the original agencies.

The cases were examined from the point of view of both the personalities of the individuals involved and the "external pressures" to which they were exposed.⁶ The over-all impression left by the findings is that personality factors lay at the root of the marriage conflict in these families. An effort was made to identify, insofar as was possible from the material, those personality factors particularly hazardous to a comfortable marriage adjustment. Not infrequently other factors such as interfering relatives, certain cultural differences, and economic pressures contributed causally to the maladjustment and sometimes they played a major role, but more often they were either symptomatic of the personality factors or subordinate to them. Because of the nature of the case studies

⁶ See p. 222 for Schedule Used in Analysis of Individual Cases.

and time limitations, exploration of the psychological factors was limited to the women involved and emphasis throughout was on their part in the difficulty.

The psychological factor that emerged most clearly was emotional dependence. This is closely related, of course, to the question of parental ties, which were also studied. Other personality factors that were examined in detail were the "need to suffer" and "rejection of femininity." Treatment methods were described, classified, and criticized. The complete study is not being presented here but rather material selected from the original work which demonstrates some of the principal findings and seems to offer new insights of practical value to workers in the field of marriage counseling.

General Characteristics of the Couples Studied

In many ways these families represent a fairly good cross section of the married, urban population of this country. The group studied included 87 Caucasian and 18 Negro families. The fact that, with the exception of one Jewish family service agency, the work was done in non-sectarian agencies and that no agencies serving predominantly Roman Catholics were included affects the religious distribution of the families. The group is for the most part Protestant, with nine Jewish families, seven Roman Catholic families, and fifteen couples of mixed faiths. The average size of family was 4.09, somewhat above the average of 3.57 for unbroken families in the United States. Ages of the couples ranged from 17 to 61, the majority falling between 23 and 38 with fairly even distribution between these years. The average age was 34.5 for the husbands and 31.5 for the wives. All but fifteen of the couples were within the first fifteen years of their marriage, with fairly even distribution within these fifteen years except for a slight peak at the six- to eight-year level. Income ranged from \$78 to \$464 a month with an average wage of \$206. This is slightly above the most comparable average that could be found for wage earners in the United States: \$196.27, in this pre-inflation period.⁷ Occupations of the husbands ranged from professional to unskilled workers

⁷ Based on a weekly wage of \$45.29, reported the "average earnings of wage earners in manufacturing" for January, 1944. *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, Bureau of the Census, Washington, D. C., 1946, p. 213.

with approximately 40 per cent in skilled clerical work, skilled trades, or retail business, 17 per cent in semi-skilled, minor clerical, or minor business jobs, 16 per cent in slightly skilled occupations, 16 per cent in unskilled work, and 10 per cent in professional, semi-professional, and managerial positions.

From the point of view of the student of marriage problems, this group of families should be particularly interesting because the families seen are probably closer to representing the "average American family" than those observed in other studies, which for the most part have been heavily weighted by college populations and others relatively high on the educational scale. While we do not have specific information about education, the occupations would suggest that at most not more than one-half the group are high school graduates and an exceedingly small number college graduates.

While financial assistance was sometimes given to these families, for most of them (78 per cent) this was not involved. The number of interviews ranged from one to over forty; in 73 per cent the number was 10 or under, in 27 per cent, 11 or more. The average length of the record was 17.5 typed pages.

Some Theoretical Assumptions

Before presenting the case material itself it will be well to clarify for the reader the theoretical frame of reference to which the writer was oriented. In the brief space that can appropriately be reserved for this purpose this must be a highly schematic presentation, rather than a detailed exposition for the reader not already familiar with the subject matter. It is designed simply to orient the reader to the main outlines of theory basic to the study.

In casework the individual is always seen in his relation to the environment to which he is attempting to adapt himself and from which he is hoping to satisfy his fundamental needs. This environment may either encourage or become a hindrance to the achievement of his physical and emotional aims. It consists both of material things and of other people who, like himself, are striving to gratify their wants. His ability to find contentment depends partly on his good fortune in finding a benign environment, partly

on the skill he develops in mastering the physical world, and partly on the growth of his ability to love others and draw the love of others to himself.

Many people come to the caseworker for help primarily because their environment is askew. Much of the caseworker's skill lies in his knowledge of how to bring the resources of the community to bear on the client's situation and alleviate the pressures and inner insecurities. For others the environment *per se* is not unusually harsh and pressing except as it becomes so in response to the maladroitness of the individual. Where the problem lies to a considerable degree within the person seeking help, the caseworker must consider whether the client can be assisted in making a better internal adjustment. The second part of the caseworker's skill lies in his ability to forward this adaptive process.

For guidance in promoting this adaptation, caseworkers in recent years have culled from the body of knowledge and theory developed by Freud and his followers those principles particularly useful to them in understanding and helping the people turning to them for assistance with difficulties in their social adjustment. As will be explained in more detail in a later chapter, this does not mean that caseworkers are attempting to carry on psychoanalysis or to deal directly with deeply unconscious factors. There are clear distinctions between psychoanalysis and psychosocial treatment carried on by a caseworker. However, the principles of personality development and the dynamics of personality functioning which have been developed by psychoanalysis provide the framework upon which rests most modern casework treatment of psychological problems.

According to this theory,⁸ the adult personality consists structurally of three sets of forces—id, superego, and ego. The id is the sum total of the instinctual love and aggressive drives of the personality. The superego, known as conscience, of which the ego ideal is a part, represents the rules of life and ideals transmitted to the individual from his family and group culture. The ego is the name for that composite of qualities through which the indi-

⁸ The following material is based on understanding gained primarily from seminars with a number of psychoanalysts and from published material. The reader will find items in the bibliography under the following names particularly useful for further study: Alexander, Deutsch, English and Pearson, Fenichel, A. Freud, S. Freud, Hendricks, and Isaacs.

vidual adapts himself to the outside world, securing from it the opportunity to express his fundamental drives and to meet his major needs. These qualities include the ability to perceive external realities and internal feelings, the ability to find ways of meeting internal needs through the environment in a fashion that will not only be satisfying but will bring the minimum of discomfort to others or to himself, the ability to foresee the outcome of various courses of action, to learn from experience, to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of his behavior, to suppress and repress desires that cannot be safely expressed, in general to control, direct, and harmonize his activities.

It is through the ego that we become aware of feelings of pleasure, anger, fear, anxiety, and guilt. We feel pleasure when needs are gratified, anger when they are thwarted, fear when we are threatened by a known external danger, anxiety when we are threatened by subjective dangers from the forces within our own personalities, or more general, less defined dangers from without, and guilt when we have violated, or contemplate violating, the tenets of our own superego. It is the task of the ego, then, to find as much pleasure as possible, to avoid the creation of anger by frustration whenever possible, to protect us from both outer and inner danger in order to avoid the development of fear and anxiety, and to do all this in a manner that will not arouse feelings of guilt.

The complexities of this simple sounding formula of course are unlimited. In the course of growth from babyhood to maturity the ego must not only grow in its own strength, accuracy of perception and reason, and balance of judgment, but must also transmute the primitive instinctual urges of the id into the immensely varied pattern of adult strivings and longings which can be met by adult sexual love and companionship, by the myriad shades of friendship, by work, by creative expression, play, and other sublimations, and by those relatively controlled and socialized modes of expression of aggression permitted by the culture in which the individual lives. In attempting to handle drives that cannot be expressed directly, the ego makes use of a number of "mechanisms of defense," largely unconscious, of which repression is the most frequent. Where the superego pattern transmitted by the parents is not well adapted to the situation in which the individual finds himself, the ego must bring about modification of this too, through constant