

A Step Toward Successful Marriage¹

DANICA DEUTSCH, *New York*

TYPE OF CLIENTS

Marital counseling has always been an essential part of the work at the Alfred Adler Consultation Center. This is the case not only when people come specifically with marital problems but also where the complaints center around the behavior or adjustment difficulties of a child or children. More often than not it becomes apparent after a short time that the difficulties with the children reflect the parental discord in the upbringing of the children, and on a deeper level, the discord in their marital relationship. Mostly it takes some time and effort to convince such parents that if their marriage were straightened out, their parental problems would clear up too. Quite often, however, we find them ready to accept our suggestions because they themselves have felt this need for a long time, without knowing where to turn.

Some couples have accumulated so much circumstantial evidence against each other that they approach the counselor literally with briefcases full of it. They must be reminded that we are not lawyers and that, to quote Adler, "It is not a question of whether one or the other is right or wrong but whether they want peace." Therefore it is very helpful for the counseling process to ascertain whether the partners basically want to maintain their marriage.

PROCEDURE

Though in many cases the clients expect to carry their fight into the counseling situation and therefore ask to be seen together, this has proven to be unwise in the beginning. Only after the clients have gained some insight into their individual problems can one occasionally meet with both together. These sessions then prove to be very revealing as to how far the intrapersonal insight can be applied to their interpersonal relationship. Here the question also arises whether it is advisable that the same counselor deal with both partners. In contrast

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to the prejudice of other schools of thought, we feel that it is a short cut, except where suspicion is the basic problem (paranoid trends).

REASONS FOR DISCONTENT

In our experience, practically anything can become a bone of contention in the intimacy of living together in marriage. In analyzing the underlying dynamics we find that the disturbance need not express itself in the sexual area, though we are inclined to think this likely. We hear quite often, "Sex is the only thing that's good in our marriage." There are other areas which seem just as conducive to the creation of resentment and discord.

QUESTIONNAIRE

In examining these areas, a specific questionnaire² was compiled. For every experienced Adlerian it is a matter of course to be geared toward the detection of the client's pattern of life. It goes without saying that if a client comes burdened with complaints he will be encouraged to express on his own what seems to him to be the reason for his difficulties. By listening carefully and analyzing these complaints, we can detect the connections between the "symptom" and the "goal" of the individual. The questionnaire is meant as a *guide* to this end in counseling, especially for teaching and training purposes. It will be used differently in marital or premarital counseling. Some of the points listed may seem trivial. Experience has proved their validity, however, as later illustrations will show.

PREMARITAL COUNSELING

Premarital counseling developed at our Center as a logical expansion of counseling with young adults. But there were also more and more referrals for this sole purpose from other sources.

In premarital counseling the setting is supposed to be an informal interview, first with each partner individually, and then with both parties together. In order to put clients at ease, the questions lead

² This questionnaire is based on one originally proposed by Alfred Adler, as an appendix to his book *Social Interest: A Challenge to Mankind* (London, Farrar & Faber), and on that by Rudolf Dreikurs, M.D., included in his article "The Psychological Interview in Medicine" (*The American Journal of Individual Psychology*, Vol. X, Nos. 3 and 4, 1952-53).

from the casual to the more important, starting with formal data, such as age, etc. (They can be asked in any sequence preferred.) The questions as to "educational background," "current and common interests and pleasures," are meant to shed light on possible ensuing feelings of inferiority and intellectual rivalry.

Illustration A³

A woman cried bitterly for more than one session because she "could not take any longer her husband's money-mindedness, after fifteen years of marital struggle." She had an academic background and felt very superior because of it, emphasizing her high standards for the education of their three children. She looked down on her husband who was a self-made businessman but who lacked academic education. Therefore, according to her, he did not have the same set of values as she for a mode of living. Both used their children as a battleground in their fight for prestige. She wanted to give them a good education. He wanted to secure their future financially. Therefore he had to save money. She had to fight for every dollar and felt very frustrated, comparing her home and her clothing to that of their friends. Crying, she said: "He bribes me with love whenever I need a new dress, complimenting me on my looks in the old dresses!"

In the process of counseling both became aware that she had used her "educational background" as a means of power over her husband, provoking inferiority feelings in him for which he compensated by keeping her in financial dependence.

HABITS

Leisure time pursuits and hobbies reflect the individual's tendencies toward extroversion or introversion and show where compromises may be the only solution.

Still greater adjustments seem imperative in areas which are generally overlooked when people are "in love" but may become grievances later on in marriage, giving ample proof of a "tendentious apperception."

Illustration B

A young woman complained after four years of marriage that husband's habits in daily life "got on her nerves," especially his way of eating (sipping his soup). In discussing the background, it turned out that the young couple had known each other since the age of fifteen

³ The examples cited merely illustrate certain trends; they are not case histories.

(her husband was one year her senior). They separated when nineteen for the purpose of gaining new experiences, but joined again after one year and decided to get married since they had not found anybody else they liked better. The counselor's question was, "What were his eating habits at that time?" The answer: "I didn't notice anything!"

The symptom reported served obviously to cover up deeper problems, in this case sexual ones. What this young woman really objected to were her husband's "bedside manners." He was only interested in the sex act, while she—like most women—needed an erotic atmosphere. So she rejected him and the vicious cycle started.

Each partner had been an only child and was used to getting what he wanted on easy terms. A compromise could be made after they realized that by not caring for each other's needs they deprived themselves of much more.

Some habits may be virtuous in themselves, as for instance, being punctual, neat, economical, not drinking, not smoking, but we know only too well that these very habits may become symptoms of righteousness and self-indulgence and may turn into weapons for domination. "We can lie with truth" (Adler).

SETS OF VALUES

The discussion of the sets of values which have been important in each individual's life, as for instance the meaning of tradition, responsibility toward others, according to the cultural background, etc., gives a clue to one's conformity or rebellious attitude toward the past and the degree of social interest.

The rationale for these attitudes is revealed by analyzing the family background and will also permit insight into the acceptance or rejection of one's role as man or woman in the cultural sphere as well as in sexual relationships.

A story was told in New York that highlights the difference of perception and evaluation of the same facts:

Illustration C

Two newcomers met after not having seen each other for two years. Mrs. A to Mrs. B: "I heard your daughter has married. How is she?" Mrs. B: "Just wonderful! She married an American boy and he is so considerate. When he comes home from work he helps her set the table, he takes the baby out on Sunday so that she can rest longer, she couldn't be taken care of better. But, Mrs. A, didn't your son get married too? How is he?" "Oh, don't ask me, Mrs. B," said Mrs. A. "He married an American girl and she asks of him that after work he

should help around the house, with the dishes, take the baby out and so on! The poor boy! I feel so sorry for him. He is not as lucky as your daughter.”

FAMILY CONSTELLATION

The positions of the mother and of the father in the family, their marital relationship and the role of the siblings serve as the basis for one's self-evaluation and personal ambitions, attitude toward work and one's own sexual role. If the individual has the feeling of acceptance in his family, he is capable of accepting himself with assets and liabilities. (He will set his life goals at a reachable height.) This will help also to develop understanding and tolerance toward his marriage partner.

Illustration D

A couple came for premarital counseling. Both worked, and everything else seemed to fall in line; their education, their cultural background, their interests, and their sets of values. There was only one element that invited questioning. When he took the floor—which happened quite often—she listened admiringly. Was this a genuine attitude or premarital enchantment? He was asked, “Who was the dominating spirit in your family?” “My mother,” he said. “And how was your father?” “Lenient and giving in.” “Do you take after your father?” “Certainly not,” was the reply.

In her family, the father dominated, the mother “giving in, but getting what she wanted in a feminine way.” She had chosen her mother's role.

For the time being harmony seemed warranted. However, the possibility of danger in this area was brought to their attention.

The last illustration will seem to make me an *advocatus diaboli*, disproving my own statements.

Illustration E

It is the story of the happiest couple I ever met.

They have been married for over thirty years. They have gone through depression and hardships but still long for each other when separated. They are both community minded, but she more than he, and their cultural interests, hobbies, and leisure time pursuits are as different as they can be. She loves classical music, books, can recite poems and tell enchanting stories to her grandchildren. He is a businessman and his outside interests are golf, fishing, horse races, and card games. When he goes fishing, she comes along with her radio and her knitting. When he goes to the races, she goes to plays. And when he has his card games, she has her “musicals.” Their special gift is their

love and respect for each other and a good sense of humor. They don't resent their differences and therefore enjoy their common interests, their home and their children. They are individually independent, mutually interdependent.

In keeping with the Adlerian principles real incompatibility between marital partners is rare if detected in time and counterbalanced by the effort of mutual understanding and acceptance of one's own and the partner's needs for self-expression. (Except in cases of deep-seated neuroses or psychoses.)

In premarital situations the danger signals can be brought into due awareness by counseling. In the still benevolent atmosphere of "great expectations" interpretations fall on fertile ground and may serve as prophylactic measures against disappointment and suffering.

Sometimes we are confronted with the question: "Do you think that we should give up the plan of getting married because we are so different from each other?" Our answer has been that these interviews do not have the purpose of severing ties, but, on the contrary, of strengthening them.

Just as premarital physical examinations have been helpful for reasons of physical hygiene, and regular physical check-ups have been established as a routine, premarital and marital counseling planned as an institution may serve as a means toward mental hygiene of the future family.

SUMMARY

The purpose of the marriage counseling service, and consequently of this paper, is to demonstrate that apparently irreconcilable differences are symptoms of personality disorders in one or both partners, and can be overcome by an indeterministic approach. We do not want to give the impression that this approach is superficial or easy to apply. It needs a great deal of experience, sensitivity, and a good sense of humor. It is our task to de-dramatize situations and thus help a client to bring more objectivity towards the role he is playing in this "human comedy." Alleviating thus his guilt feelings, we can activate positive attitudes and courage for shared responsibility. Although this type of counseling has a definite therapeutic effect, it may often serve only to detect underlying causes and to prepare for further psychotherapy, especially in cases where the disturbance stems from a deep-seated neurosis or psychosis.