

# The Triad Model for Counseling Couples in Groups

*Merle M. Ohlsen*

Counseling couples in groups is a relatively recent development. Papanek (1971) believes that Mittelman (1944) was the first to propose treating husband and wife together. Today, authorities endorse counseling couples in groups (Gurman & Rice, 1975; Olson, 1976).

Most who present themselves for marriage counseling want closeness, but also fear it (Papanek, 1971). Today there is growing support for counseling couples in groups, marriage enrichment groups, family counseling, and parent education groups. There is also support for using the triad model described here for group counseling with parts of families (e.g. father-son, mother-son, sister-brother, etc.) as well as for couples who are faced with conflict.

## **The Triad**

Most counselors, and even laymen, know the problems of a group of three. Even a child learns quickly to use a triad to his own advantage—pairing up first with one parent (or friend), then the other, and playing them off against each other.

In the intake interview the counselor helps each spouse learn to talk openly about what really worries and upsets her/him and to be a special helper while her/his spouse is functioning as a client (Ohlsen, 1979). When, for example, the wife speaks first, the counselor needs to: listen to her very carefully, try to detect and reflect precisely how she feels, facilitate her discussion of what really worries and upsets her about her own feelings and behaviors, help her decide precisely how she would like to change her own behavior, encourage her to practice new behaviors, and help her to solicit reinforcements of desired new behaviors from significant others (friends, relatives and co-workers, but especially her husband). Instead of criticizing her husband and complaining about his faults, as spouses usually do in marriage counseling, she is encouraged to discuss her own guilt, failures, shortcomings,

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and feelings of inadequacy, to decide what new behaviors that she would like to learn, and to implement her own desired new behaviors.

In particular, the counselor teaches her husband *to listen empathically, to detect* how she feels and *to reflect* these feelings in order to facilitate open discussion of her problems (and to check out how she feels rather than to act on his assumptions about how he thinks she feels), and *to provide encouragement and quality support* while she struggles to implement desired new behaviors. As a partner listens and tries to help his spouse, he experiences increasing empathy and compassion for her, learns to improve communication by checking out her hunches concerning how she thinks he feels, and becomes more motivated to help her learn the desired new behaviors. In other words, clients can be taught within this treatment model to pair up to help the third member of triad (wife, husband, and counselor) rather than to hurt him.

### **Counseling Content**

Thus, married couples discuss their mistaken goals concerning marriage and family and request assistance in learning to be intimate, to cope with sexual inadequacy, to share home management problems, and to share successes and failures (and learn from them). They also learn to make requests of one's mate, learn to recognize the early symptoms of conflict, to deal with it openly (rather than to ignore it or deny it) and resolve it, and make crucial partnership decisions cooperatively. In addition to the above, older couples might seek assistance in coping with aging parents, in freeing themselves from parenting responsibilities of their grown children, and in planning for retirement.

Couples with children discuss child rearing problems and may be referred for family counseling. Sometimes an extra treatment hour is scheduled just prior to the regular marriage counseling session for a family counseling session to help the entire family explore what their primary problems are, to help them decide cooperatively what each can do to help resolve their family's problems, and, if they do not already have one, to help them introduce the family council. For these family sessions the writer follows the Adlerian family counseling model (Dreikurs, 1972a & Christensen, 1979). During the family counseling session the other three or four couples in the marriage counseling group observe. Following the family counseling session, the other couples provide feedback to the members of the family and encourage them to implement specific new behaviors.

### **Introducing Counseling**

Most prospective clients are introduced to the idea of marriage counseling in a presentation which is made at a church, mental health center, or some

other community agency such as an Adlerian Family Education Center. The counselor attempts to convey precisely what will be expected of them as clients and as helpers, including how the triad works, and how they can expect to be helped before they are asked to decide whether or not they want to participate in marriage counseling.

The counselor begins by helping the couple discuss briefly what their problems are and whose cooperation is required to solve them. Early in this first group session, the counselor helps each discuss what really worries and upsets him/her and what new behaviors s/he wishes to learn. Each discovers *that s/he can and must accept responsibility* for getting ready for counseling, for openly discussing problems, for defining desired new behaviors, for learning to trust fellow clients and the counselor, and for convincing him/herself, as well as his/her spouse and the counselor, that s/he is ready for counseling (Ohlsen, 1979). When a prospective client cannot make such a commitment, s/he is helped to explore why s/he cannot do this, and what are the natural consequences of such a decision. For instance, the client may not feel that s/he has had sufficient opportunity to get even with his/her mate. Reflecting back to him/her, his/her need for more revenge tends to be somewhat shocking, but productive. Another client may be fearful of change or fearful that his/her expressed willingness to change will call forth demands for even more changes. The latter is minimized when he observes his/her spouse discussing her/his own problems, and defining desired new behaviors for her/himself rather than asking him/her to change to meet her/his expectations.

The counselor initially meets the couple together, then he meets them briefly separately to solicit their private reactions to counseling and to help each assess his/her commitment to change. Finally, he meets them together to share reactions, to review their individual goals, and to review their couple's goals.

After each has defined personal goals, the counselor returns again to their goals as a couple: What problems must they solve first? What changes would they like to occur to enrich their life together? Some who have difficulty defining their couple goals and deciding whether they are committed to a successful marriage learn to do these with the help of the other couples. Rarely are those who cannot or will not define precise behavioral goals helped by this type of marriage counseling. Sometimes such clients also interfere with other clients' growth.

### **Selecting Clients**

Selecting good prospects for a marriage counseling group is more difficult than selecting clients for other counseling groups. Seldom are both partners equally committed to counseling. When one partner cannot accept the need for counseling, or accepts it reluctantly, additional intake interviews may be required to help the reluctant partner examine the consequences of

refusing assistance with his/her marriage problems, to practice discussing what worries and upsets him/her, to define goals and criteria for evaluating self growth, and to evaluate his/her commitment in order to profit from counseling (Ohlsen, 1979). Following such conferences some reluctant partners agree to try a few group counseling sessions and are admitted to a marriage counseling group on a probationary basis. When this is done the reluctant partner should be expected to discuss his/her problems openly at the beginning of the first session, to explain why s/he was admitted on probation, and to solicit from the group criteria which they will use to decide whether s/he be allowed to continue in the group.

Following the completion of the intake interviews, the counselor must consider this basic question when selecting couples: Who needs whom for what? Usually the best selection of couples is achieved when a counselor selects clients for a group with the help of a colleague. Together they review the needs and problems of each couple and decide with whom each can best be helped.

### **Facilitating the Process**

The crucial facilitating elements for the process are a competent counselor, a therapeutic combination of clients, and a safe setting in which growth is encouraged. A competent counselor must be able to develop a therapeutic relationship with clients; to select clients who can accept responsibility for getting themselves ready for counseling; to help prospective clients to appraise the worth of treatment for themselves; to help those who elect to participate to define precise, behavioral goals, and criteria which they can use to assess their own growth; to help clients make the necessary commitment to grow; to help clients accept responsibility for establishing and maintaining therapeutic norms; and to teach clients to be good helpers as well as good clients and to reinforce them for doing so. An effective counselor also must be able to recognize and to cope with resistance and countertransference and be committed to continuing personal as well as a professional growth.

Changes in the social fabric contribute to marriage and family problems: frequent moves, pressures from changing life styles, fewer church and family ties, and less opportunities to establish an effective support system (and not just a rescue service). Consequently, some couples require specific instruction in cooperative decision making, conflict management, and techniques for developing a support system.

Dreikurs' (1972b) rationale for his conflict management model also makes a good case for this approach to marriage counseling. His four crucial points in that rationale are: (1) "Change yourself (and thereby others.) (2) Stop thinking what the other should do; the only one we can change is our-

selves. (3) . . . that we begin to see what we are doing and could do differently . . . and (4) . . . (leadership) brings people together to listen to each other, to realize the reality of their common problem, and to share responsibility.” (pp. 204-206).

Thus, clients discover that they have learned their behaviors and that they can learn to replace their self-defeating behaviors with productive, satisfying ones—that they no longer have to look upon themselves as victims—that they can increasingly learn to cope effectively with the problems which they meet and to become closer to their wished for selves.

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*There is destiny that makes us brothers;  
None goes his way alone;  
All that we send into the lives of others  
Comes back into our own.*

—Edwin Markham

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