

## MARRIAGE COUNSELING AS RATIONAL PROCESS-ORIENTED PSYCHOTHERAPY

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The ideas presented in this paper derive mainly from the writer's own clinical experience and theoretical eclecticism (14). They appear to be basically compatible with Individual Psychology as developed by Alfred Adler (1) and as applied to many contemporary therapeutic problems and situations by those who follow in his tradition (2). Specific formulation of the writer's clinical point of view has been considerably influenced by professional association with Albert Ellis (with whom he is currently collaborating on a major work in rational psychotherapy). As Ellis has pointed out (4), Individual Psychology and rational psychotherapy have many points of fundamental similarity.

### MARRIAGE COUNSELING AS PSYCHOTHERAPY

Marriage counseling is more often than not conceived of as an activity different from psychotherapy and as not falling under the jurisdiction of either psychology or psychiatry (16, 22). Its major trend to date has been greatly influenced by sociologists and non-psychiatric physicians who, for the most part, represent marriage counseling as relatively superficial treatment of marital relationship problems of so-called normal persons and, hence, not calling for the knowledge or training of the psychotherapist. Stokes (20, 21), Ellis (3, 5), Laidlaw (17), and Harper (9, 10, 11, 12, 13) have been the most consistent and outspoken proponents of an opposing point of view, namely, that marriage counseling *is* psychotherapy. As the present writer has stated, the contention that marriage counseling is *not* psychotherapy

leads one to wonder if (this contention) may not be a rationalization of the psychotherapeutically untrained, for actual marriage counseling seems to be effective or ineffective to the extent that it penetrates and leads to the revision of the *personal dynamics and value systems of individual clients*. While special knowledge of marital relationships and general knowledge of related sociological phenomena appear essential, it is difficult to see how the marriage counseling process itself is basically anything other than a type of psychotherapy (9, p. 338).

Based on this clinical conviction, then, the terms "psychotherapy" and "counseling" are to be considered synonyms in this paper. If "marriage psychotherapy" did not seem too awkward, the term "counseling" would have been dispensed with.

## MAJOR PROCESSES ON WHICH THERAPY FOCUSES

Let us begin with the "process-oriented" aspect of our concept of psychotherapy as applied to patients who have marriage-focused presenting problems. English and English (6) present a variety of definitions of *process*. The basic one is that process is

a change or a changing in an object or organism in which a consistent quality or direction can be discerned. A process is always in some sense active; something is happening. It contrasts with the structure or form of organization of what changes, which structure is conceived to be relatively static despite process change.

Process-oriented marriage counseling, then, directs its attention to the quality and direction of the changing activity, the dynamic behavior, and the life styles of the individuals who make up a marriage relationship. Although the writer recognizes, of course, that individual and interactional behavior must take place within certain anatomical and social structures, he regards these structures as realistic limitations for such behavior and not the major focus of the counselor's interest and attention. Such social structures, for example, as the marriage and family institutions, government, the school, or the church, interest the process-oriented therapist in *their influence on human processes and life styles* and not as valuable objects in and of themselves. He must take these institutionalized relationships importantly into account in his psychotherapeutic work; but his therapy is centered on the *functioning persons*, not the marriage or other relationship forms in which they participate and by which they are affected.

This may seem like belaboring the obvious. But, as already indicated, it seems currently necessary to distinguish as pointedly as possible this point of view from the "relationship treatment trend" in the amorphous field of marriage counseling.

*Rationality.* The chief process toward which marriage counseling can be directed in an inner-force encouraging, block-removing, reconstructive therapeutic way is the rational process: the thinking, reality-perceiving and reality-understanding, the creative, the problem-facing and problem-handling process. Examples of how the rational process gets stalemated in man's nonrational culture, and some of the counter-socializing the present therapist undertakes in helping his patients to utilize more fully their rational abilities, will be dealt with below. Right now let us try to justify rationality's number one position.

Since love often gets top billing as a human process, especially when we are thinking about marriage, it may seem radical to state

that the problem-facing and problem-handling process is more important. As Erich Fromm (7) brings out most clearly, deep, mature, broadly humanistic, outgoing love for another cannot be achieved by the individual until he has come truly to love himself. Self-love and self-esteem, as Fromm points out, are achieved mainly through the individual's experience of productiveness. And this experience in the adult human being, the present writer contends, is largely a by-product of the growing use of his rational process: creative thinking and practical problem-solving.

This elevation of the effectively functioning human mind to a position of primacy as a process is not just whimsy on the author's part. Such unwhimsical biologists as Julian Huxley (15) and Nobel-Prize-winning H. J. Muller (18) assure us that man spearheads continuing organic evolution (so far as this planet is concerned) by his dynamic culture, his continuing ability to change and grow and learn, his questing intelligence, his flexible nonspecialization as an animal, his ability to perceive and deal rationally with reality-in-transition. Man, with his genetically unrigidified and unspecialized behavior patterns, is alone among the earthly animals prepared to make any major onward moves with the evolving universe. He will soon be capable, in fact, of leaving his particular planet and, perhaps in another decade or two, the planetary system of his particular star.

Man achieves this status as the spearhead of continuing evolution by utilizing the cerebrum-centered processes that distinguish him so dramatically from his closest earthly relatives. It is, therefore, the major satisfaction of his distinct humanness—an outstanding experience of the joyful process of self-fulfillment—whenever man regularly thinks creatively and acts upon the results of that thinking. If, with a fair degree of consistency, a particular human animal has a sense of utilization of his major cerebral processes, of facing and thinking creatively about and acting rationally toward reality, *that* person will have a sense of self-esteem, of happiness, and of self-love. Only then, as the writer sees it, is a human being a creature capable of the more distinctly human form of mature and realistic love called for in deep and abiding relationships.

*Love.* Marriage, like life, is a problem process, and ignored troubles simply grow into bigger and often unmanageable ones. Until the couple, then, just like the individual himself, is able to face and to handle with relative effectiveness the problems of married life, neither

deep and lasting happiness nor deep and lasting love will be forthcoming from that life. The love herein referred to (as distinguished from the childish sentiment glorified in the opiates of our culture) is the process whereby the emotionally mature and secure individual identifies himself with another, the love object, in a way that makes that other *almost* as dear, as cared for, as valuable, as interesting, as enjoyable as himself. It is the opinion of the writer that to try to make the loved one *more*—or even *as*—precious as oneself is unrealistic self-delusion. *Almost*, it would appear, is the correct word.

Love, like any other process, can be used to corrupt and can itself be corrupted. One way it is corrupted is as a phoney sort of canned product—the outer shell of affection, the mechanical form of love. People go through the motions. They may temporarily fool themselves as well as others, but they do not contribute to the actual process of loving until they have the self-esteem, the self-confidence, the reduction of anxiety and guilt and shame, that enable them securely to participate in spontaneous love-making with an adult of the other sex. It is as a part of the process of mature love, that the process of sex is so important for the marriage counselor to understand and to communicate to his clients.

Sexual functioning, as one means of love expression, can also be corrupted into some kind of canned product. It can be contaminated by “spiritualizing:” guilt and shame can be wrapped into some high-sounding theological package that can take all the *fun* out of the sex process and leave it a pallid, dead product. Love-making can also be “academicized.” Much of the marriage manual teaching about sex helps to make it an academic product, e.g., by focusing attention on the mechanics of the sexual act rather than on the joyful process of erotic activity.

Sex as joy-love experience is exceedingly difficult to communicate to patients, most of whom have developed prudish and pornographic attitudes. Some of the change in attitude can be achieved through direct, head-on sexual reconditioning of the couple, and some through indirectly improving the couple’s ability to communicate effectively and affectionately in nonsexual areas of marriage (11). Just as effective individual problem-facing-and-handling is the outstanding means for achieving and maintaining self-love, so effective communication (deep and meaningful transmitting of thoughts and feelings directed toward problem-solving) is the major method of achieving and maintaining marital love.

*Humor.* In addition to the creative problem-managing process and the love-sex process, we shall consider the process of humor, which functions as a catalyst for communication.

The humor referred to is the spontaneous type, not a contrived variety. Nothing is more deadly to marriage or to marriage counseling than the canned jokes or the frozen platitudinous witticisms passed off by the ha-ha-I'm-a-card spouse and the chuckle-chuckle-I'm-real-droll counselor. Process humor usually does not even sound funny when repeated because it is alertly geared to the ongoing changes of the relationship in which it occurs.

Humor can, of course, be used negatively, either as hostile attack or retreating defense, in both marriage and marriage counseling. For humor to be used as a constructive process, it must be shared by the participants in an interaction. One way for a spouse or a counselor to achieve mutually experienced humor with the marital partner or the client is for the initiator of the humor to make himself the object. This too, can be tricky, for it is important that the humor be neither out of character nor in any way self-deprecating. The joke is on me (a real part of me); I laugh spontaneously with you; but I lose no self-esteem while doing so.

The great value of humor is not only that it makes the problem-handling process in marriage and in psychotherapy more pleasurable, but, by reducing anxiety and hostility, it makes for clearer perception of problems and for greater likelihood of finding satisfactory ways of dealing with them. It also helps to open the channels for the adult type of love. Much of the writer's marriage counseling is, therefore, tempered by the anxiety-and-hostility-reducing type of positive humor. It is directed toward challenging the husband and wife, as individuals and as a couple, to become aware of themselves as potentially capable, loving, lovable, problem-perceiving, and problem-handling persons.

#### RATIONAL THERAPY FOR IRRATIONAL BEHAVIOR

Our culture not only leads us mistakenly to focus a great deal of our attention on structure, content, and products, instead of on function, direction, and process. We are also conditioned by this same culture to develop clouded perceptions and irrational conceptions of the realities with which we are faced in social living. It is toward these cultural confusions of reality that a major portion of the writer's approach is directly pointed.

*Contrast with Client-centered Therapy*

By way of introductory contrast for the rationality-directed part of this approach, it seems appropriate to look for a moment at another form of therapy which is process-oriented, namely, client-centered or nondirective therapy. According to Rogers (19), personal feelings are primary, are the fundamental core of the individual's self. Rational, process-oriented psychotherapists believe, on the other hand, that this emphasis on the emotions disregards the most important evolutionary development of the human animal: the overpowering potentialities of the ego or executive functions of his cerebrum. The writer does not contend that the healthy human animal does not have some strictly prehuman reactions, but he maintains that *many* of man's emotions are directly controlled by his thinking. If his thinking is irrational, his emotions will be disordered or, better, reality-disoriented. If his thinking is rational, his emotions will be effectively and realistically related to the demands being made on him as a functioning organism.

*Direct Handling of Irrational Beliefs*

Much of the time of a rational, process-oriented therapist, then, as distinguished from a nondirective one, will be spent, quite directly, toward helping the patient to recognize and alter the irrational patterns of thinking that are causing much of the disruption in his own emotions and, along with the irrational beliefs of his spouse, the disruption of his marital relations. The marriage counselor needs to listen to and observe both the husband and the wife (sometimes separately and sometimes together), but then he needs to formulate and communicate concrete recommendations for change. The therapist needs to make specific assignments of experiments, in thought and action, to be carried out between therapy sessions (home work). These assigned changes need to be practiced at times in the counseling situation as well. An inhibited, masochistic wife, for example, may need to play the role of being self-assertive with the acceptance and guidance of the counselor, before she is prepared to stand up to and communicate directly with her husband. The overly aggressive wife, on the other hand, may need to face the test of learning how to relate in an equalitarian way to the therapist who plays the role of the hostilely withdrawing husband, before she is able to deal adequately with her aggressive attitudes in the actual marital situation. But what these disturbed husbands and wives need most of the time, is instruction in *thinking*, and, hence, feeling and acting, rationally and realistically.

A considerable portion of the present therapist's time, then, is spent in helping patients to overcome some of their irrational, traditional, (often) downright stupid patterns of thinking about life in general and about themselves, their mates, and their marriages in particular. Every patient the writer has ever seen has had his own unique elements of irrationality; but many primitive and childish ideas are practically universal in our culture.

*Examples of Irrational Beliefs and Therapeutic Counter-Beliefs*

Illustrations will now be presented of these near-universals of irrationality which apply particularly to marriage and family situations. Following each example, the therapist offers (in greatly condensed form) the kind of counter-belief with which he attempts to recondition these people toward a greater degree of rationality. Such rational counter-propaganda (necessary to offset the propaganda of irrationality with which the patient has been conditioned and keeps reconditioning himself) is in each instance, of course, geared to the specific social situation and personality traits of the individual patient.

*Irrational belief No. 1.* It is absolutely essential for my mate to love and respect me, no matter how stupidly, boringly, or annoyingly I behave, and, if he (or she) does not, then we do not have real and true and deep and lasting love in our marriage and things are positively calamitous.

*Rational counter-belief.* It is enjoyable (but not necessary) to be loved and approved by one's mate a good portion of the time, but it becomes catastrophic *not* to be, *only* if one tells himself it is. If you avoid thinking: "Oh, dear, isn't this horrible that my mate does not currently love or approve me?" and think instead: "I wonder how I can function in this situation, so that *I* will more approve of *myself*," it is likely that, incidentally, your mate will have more love and esteem for you. But even if the spouse continues to be uncooperative in the situation, *you*, now thinking and functioning more realistically, will be happier.

*Irrational belief No. 2.* If my spouse and I loved each other truly at the time of marriage, then the love would be everlasting and our relationship positively wonderful. Conversely, if serious problems arise and persist, then we did not love each other enough, obviously, or things like this would never have happened.

*Rational counter-belief.* Love is a learned process, and, like any other form of learned reaction or interaction, it grows stronger with

reinforcing experience and weaker with inhibition or disuse. The initial degree of love is quite unrelated to the nature and intensity of problems that will arise in the marriage. Love, steadily nurtured, will help to provide a desirable setting in which to develop the skills of communication necessary to manage marital problems, but will in no way protect the couple from the problems, or serve to substitute for the skills.

*Irrational belief No. 3.* Other people, especially my spouse, do things to me emotionally. "My husband doesn't make me happy;" "my wife angers me;" "he depresses me;" "if my wife wouldn't say stupid things to my friends, then I wouldn't get upset with her."

*Rational counter-belief.* Each person makes his own emotions. When your spouse calls you some undesirable name, for example, *that* does not hurt or upset or anger you. It is your *intervening evaluation* which makes you hurt or upset or angry. You evaluate (that is, "say to yourself") something like: "Isn't this awful, dreadful, despicable, etc., that this heel of a spouse—for whom I have done countless wonderful and self-sacrificing things—has the unloving and unappreciative gall to say that to me?" And *that* is what produces the negative emotions. You can change the emotional response by changing your evaluation. You can, with persistent practice, learn to say to yourself such things as: "So what? So he thinks I am a dirty name. Does this need to ruin *my* day? Isn't this mainly *his* problem? If it is also partly something for me to concern myself about, I'll ask him to discuss his complaint in calm, non-abusive tones either now or later." Or: "He seems to feel strongly about something (identified or unidentified). I think I'll disregard his name-calling and try calmly to find out what's annoying him."

*Irrational belief No. 4.* Certain things are unquestionably catastrophic, undeniably immoral, unthinkable intolerable, and rigidly inviolable. Hence, any discussion of these matters, or consideration of alternative approaches to problems connected with them, is impossible. Only a scum and a bum would do such a thing as this. He's a scum and a bum, so I am through with him.

*Rational counter-belief.* Yes, this is the nature of moral righteousness. You have been brought up to think that certain things are absolutely right and others absolutely wrong, and so it is indeed difficult (but *not* impossible, with help) for you to learn to exercise your critical



conceptual judgment. Because you have been brought up on this childish nonsense is no reason for you to continue to believe it. Only if you *insist* on retaining these beliefs will they indefinitely remain as obstacles to your thinking, feeling, and acting realistically. This spouse of yours has done this undesirable, uncooperative, unhelpful thing (be it adultery, theft, wife-beating, child-rejecting, or whatever). It *may* be that this is so permanently characteristic of him, so symptomatic of a basic character disorder, that you will decide to separate from him. But let's make this judgment after a critical and rational inspection of the facts and after a calm and logical discussion with him.

*Irrational belief No. 5.* She hit me, so I hit her. Or: he lost his temper and called my mother an old bag, and so I felt I had a perfect right to let him know that his own sister is just a plain tramp. Or: she deliberately poured the liquor down the sink, so I took a pair of scissors and cut up all her evening gowns. I'd do it again, too, because I believe in an eye for an eye.

*Rational counter-belief.* Neurosis is essentially stupid behavior in a basically nonstupid person. When your spouse becomes neurotic, starts doing and saying stupid things, you not only aggravate *his* neurosis by reacting as you do, but you become equally, or perhaps more, stupid in *your* thoughts and feelings and actions. The only effective way out of a neurotic situation is for the respondent to be *less* neurotic—that is, *more rational*—than the initiator of the neurotic pattern. If instead of evaluating your spouse's neurotic words and actions as terrible, awful, etc., you say to yourself: "Keep your head, old friend. Be as nonstupid as possible. Find out what's eating this person rather than trying to imitate or excel his neurotic performance"—if you do this, you will be contributing to the reduction of neurosis in your marriage. At the very least, you can learn (with practice) to say: "So here he goes again. This is *his* idiotic merry-go-round; I'm not taking a ride to get the brass ring he's holding out to me."

*Irrational belief No. 6.* I don't *deserve* what is happening to me. Other people's children don't have four diseases in a row. Other people's husbands don't bet the rent money on the horses. *Why* must this happen to me? What have I done to *deserve* this?

*Rational counter-belief.* Reality at any present instant of time is inexorable. The past and the present cannot be altered. All we can

work with is a future that will become a new present. It is quite likely that, in some instances, your past actions have been contributing factors to your present difficulties. Your friends and neighbors *may* have fewer misfortunes than you, or they may simply conceal their different sorts of problems from you. They may have been wiser or simply more fortunate than you. But the only reality you can work with is your own. You only distrust yourself and reduce your ability to deal with your problems by making inaccurate comparisons with your misperceptions of other people's realities. Your situation can undoubtedly be improved; certainly your attitude toward it can be. In any event, improvement is more apt to derive from rationally conceived action than by bemoaning a mythical dispensation of injustice. Let us look at the facts to see how we can most effectively deal with them.

#### CONCLUSION

Thus goes rational process-oriented marriage counseling. Both by word and example, the therapist stresses the fundamental importance (in life in general and in marriage in particular) of the processes of problem-facing-and-handling, love, and humor. Much of the therapeutic hour is devoted to combating irrational beliefs which block the patient from thinking rationally, loving, and enjoying life. The therapist then suggests effective alternatives in thought and action for the patient to practice between therapeutic sessions.

Does such marriage counseling work? In many instances, it is quite successful because it helps each party to the marriage to function in a basically less neurotic way. In a relatively few instances, these methods fail, and the writer then turns to other procedures (14). He believes with Glad (8) that different therapeutic techniques and values work with varying success both because of differing personalities of therapists and differing personalities of patients. For this therapist, however, it is seldom necessary to reach therapeutic "east" by sailing emotional "west." It is usually possible to fly directly "east" to what the writer considers the major cause of most of his patients' difficulties: patterns of irrational thought.

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