FAMILY CONSTELLATIONS OF "NORMAL" AND "DISTURBED" MARRIAGES: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY

WALTER TOMAN AND BERNARD GRAY

Brandeis University, Waltham, Mass.

In previous studies (1 - 5) it has been suggested that an extra-familial interpersonal relationship has better chances of happiness and success, the closer it duplicates early intra-familial relationships for the partners involved. It has also been suggested that the rank disposition with which a person enters an extra-familial relationship such as a marriage can be expressed by Formula 1, where n_{jun} stands for the number of siblings junior to the person in question, n_{sen} for the number of siblings senior, and n for the number of children in that person's sibling configuration; d_r expresses the amount of one or the other kind of rank disposition that he brings to a new relationship.

$$d_r = \frac{n_{jun} - n_{sen}}{n - 1} \quad (1) \qquad d_s = \frac{n_s}{n - 1} \quad (2)$$

It has further been suggested that the sex disposition with which a person enters an extra-familial heterosexual relationship can be expressed by Formula 2, where n_s stands for the number of siblings of the same sex as the person in question, while n means the same as above. If a same-sex extra-familial relationship such as a friendship were under consideration, n_s would stand for the number of opposite-sex siblings.

The present study is concerned with a comparison of these relationships in "normal" and "disturbed" marriages. Our hypotheses were that the latter should show less rank complementarity and less other-sex disposition than the former.

METHOD

Our criterion for a disturbed versus a normal marriage was whether or not a child of that marriage had needed and received psychotherapy. We assumed that there must have been some anomaly in a marriage in order to disturb a child's milieu so as to predispose him or her for psychotherapy. Accordingly, our experimental or disturbed group consisted of parents of children and youths who frequented three child guidance centers in the Boston area, 93 couples in all. The control, or normal, group consisted of parents of college students and other married couples taken primarily from the Boston area, 309 couples in all.

The rank dispositions and sex dispositions of all 804 individuals involved were ascertained and d_r and d_s quotients for each derived.

RESULTS

Rank complementarity. Both sexes, independently in the control and experimental groups, were broken down into three categories of rank disposition (d_r): $+$ .01 to $+1$, seniority; 0, middle; $-$.01 to -1, juniority.

Chi-square tests were performed in which the obtained frequencies from the control Ss were taken as expected frequencies against which the obtained frequencies for the experimental Ss were compared. The d_r distribution of the partners was thus compared for females and males of juniority and of seniority rank disposition, four comparisons in all. Females and males of middle disposition were not compared with their control groups. The results are shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1. COMPARISON OF CONTROL AND EXPERIMENTAL SUBJECTS (SENIORITY AND JUNIORITY DISPOSED FEMALES AND MALES) REGARDING DISTRIBUTION OF RANK DISPOSITION (*dr*) OF THEIR MARRIAGE PARTNERS

Subjects' rank disposition		Partners' rank disposition distribution			Chi square
		Juniority	Middle	Seniority	
Females					
Seniority	Control	19.5	5.2	19.3	
	Experimental (N = 44)	12	2	30	11.04*
Juniority	Control	14.9	6.2	19.9	
	Experimental (N = 41)	26	4	11	13.50*
Males					
Seniority	Control	19.3	2.7	21.0	
	Experimental (N = 43)	11	1	31	9.53*
Juniority	Control	16.4	4.3	21.3	
	Experimental (N = 42)	27	5	10	12.88*

*Significant beyond the .01 level in the direction of lack of complementarity for the experimental Ss.

As is apparent, 8 females as well as 8 males were of the middle disposition which was omitted. This explains why the two chi-square sets of figures for either sex add up to 85, rather than 93. The results support our first hypothesis: The partners of the experimental Ss show significantly less rank complementarity than the partners of the control Ss.

Table 2. Comparison of Control and Experimental Subjects (Marriage Partners) Regarding Distribution of Sex Disposition (d_s)

Subjects		Sex-disposition distribution			Chi square
		Other sex	Either sex	Same sex	
Females	Control	44.6	14.0	34.4	
	Experimental (N = 93)	37	17	39	2.54*
Males	Control	36.3	17.7	39.0	
	Experimental (N = 93)	22	23	48	9.26**

*Significant beyond the .05 level toward same-sex disposition of experimental Ss.
**Significant beyond the .01 level toward same-sex disposition of experimental Ss.

Sex disposition. Both sexes, independently in the control and experimental groups, were broken down into three categories of sex disposition (d_s): 0 to .49, other-sex (more siblings of the opposite sex than of their own); .50, either-sex (equal numbers of brothers and sisters); .51 to 1, same-sex (more siblings of the same sex).

As in the case of rank complementarity, chi-square tests were performed in which the obtained frequencies from the control Ss were taken as expected frequencies against which the obtained frequencies for the experimental Ss were compared. Separate comparisons were made for females and males. The results are shown in Table 2. They tend to support the hypothesis that there is a smaller proportion of other-sex disposition among the experimental than among the control Ss.

SUMMARY

A comparison of subjects of 93 "disturbed" marriages with those of "normal" marriages regarding their childhood family constellations showed that the partners of disturbed marriages (*a*) had found less rank complementarity with each other and (*b*) were less oriented toward the other sex than the partners of normal marriages. These results confirm our initial hypotheses.

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