

# FAMILY CONSTELLATIONS OF THE PARTNERS IN DIVORCED AND MARRIED COUPLES

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The general hypothesis has been advanced and tested previously by the writer that later extra-familial relationships have a better chance of happiness and lasting success, the more closely they duplicate the partners' early intra-familial relationships (1-5). Factors of the early relationship with which we have been concerned are birth-order rank, sex distribution of the siblings, and decimation of the family through loss.

The present study continues this research by comparing marriages that end in divorce with those that last and are therefore assumed to be the happier. Three specific hypotheses are examined: In divorced couples, (a) older siblings are married more frequently to older siblings and younger siblings to younger siblings; (b) a larger number of partners come from like-sexed sibling configurations; (c) early loss of family members is more prevalent.

The underlying assumptions for these hypotheses are, other things being equal: (a) The optimal situation is one in which partners are unlikely to get into conflict over their seniority rights, etc. (b) Individuals having opposite-sex siblings are used to the other sex, and have less difficulty accepting the woman or man who is their marriage partner. (c) The death of a parent or sibling makes an individual slightly more ready to discontinue relationships of his own accord, or to choose, in the first place, those that would not last.

## METHOD

The subjects were 16 divorced couples and 16 couples who had been married for 10 years or more and had two or more children. All *S*s were taken from the author's acquaintances and their acquaintances. They were interviewed briefly to secure their family constellations, and information on early losses, i.e., of a parent or a sibling, up through late childhood. (When one spouse could give all needed information for both spouses, the other was not always interviewed.) The 16 divorced couples were all whom the author could contact for interviews between spring 1960 and winter 1960-61. The 16 couples of lasting marriages were the first to become available for the interviews required.

From the information obtained, for each *S* the following, previously suggested measures (1, 2, 4, 5) were derived.:

*Rank disposition* according to Formula 1, where  $n_{jun}$  stands for the number of siblings junior to *S*,  $n_{sen}$  for the number of siblings senior, and  $n$  for the number

of children in  $S$ 's family. The value of  $d_r$  expresses the rank disposition that  $S$  brings to a new relationship. It lies between 1 and 0, and may be positive or negative, indicating "seniority" or "juniority," respectively. Thus 0 designates middle rank, +1 being the oldest, -1 being the youngest.

$$d_r = \frac{n_{jun} - n_{sen}}{n - 1} \quad (1) \quad d_s = \frac{n_s}{n - 1} \quad (2) \quad d_t = \frac{|d_{r_m}| + d_{s_m}}{2} \quad (3)$$

*Sex disposition* according to Formula 2, where  $n_s$  stands for the number of siblings of the same sex as the  $S$ , and  $n$  stands again for the total number of children in  $S$ 's family. For  $d_s$  also, the range is from 1 to 0, 1 meaning that all of  $S$ 's siblings were of the same sex as he, and 0 meaning that they all were of the opposite sex.

*Rank conflict disposition* among partners is expressed by  $d_{r_m} = d_r$  husband +  $d_r$  wife. This may vary between +2 and -2. Ideal rank complementarity is expressed by 0. When two eldest siblings marry, their  $d_{r_m}$  is +2, when two youngest marry, their's is -2.

*Sex conflict disposition* among partners is expressed by  $d_{s_m} = d_s$  husband +  $d_s$  wife. This may vary from 2, where both spouses had only siblings of the same sex, to 0, where both spouses had only siblings of the opposite sex.

Since it is assumed that complementarity of rank between marriage partners is a more favorable situation, and that the presence of opposite-sex siblings in the family is a better preparation for marriage, the higher numerical values of  $d_{r_m}$  and  $d_{s_m}$  imply the greater disposition to conflict in the marriage relationship.

*Total conflict disposition* in a marriage is expressed in Formula 3, where the above two values are added, disregarding the sign of the first, and divided by 2.

Although the above formulas do not capture all aspects of sibling configuration (such as age gaps between siblings which may lead to the formation of sub-groups), they have been found fair approximations and useful for comparisons of groups. It should be noted also, that for purposes of computation, only children (who do not have a sibling configuration of their own, one might say) have been given the sibling configuration of their same-sexed parent with whom, we assume, they strongly identify.

## RESULTS

The results are presented in Table 1 and support our three hypotheses. Divorced couples (*a*) show more rank similarity, (*b*) have more siblings of the same sex, and (*c*) have suffered more early losses of family members, than married couples. These differences are statistically significant.

More specifically, among the 16 married couples, 12 duplicated in their marriages at least one of their sibling relationships for one another; they had a sibling of the opposite sex who also duplicated the spouse's sibling rank. Of the remaining 4 marriages, in 3 the husbands and in 1 the wife came from like-sexed sibling constellations. Their partners, however, had had siblings of the opposite sex. Only in the case of one couple was there rank as well as sex-conflict disposition between the spouses.



those of married couples, i.e., in those cases where these measures were obtained. Due to the small number of *S*'s these trends are not statistically significant.

#### SUMMARY

Sixteen couples, married for 10 years or more, and parents of two or more children, were compared with 16 divorced couples for their family constellations. The divorced couples showed significantly less sibling-rank complementarity in their marriages, fewer opposite-sex siblings in their family constellations, and a greater number of early losses of family members than did the "happily" married couples. This had been predicted.

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