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**MARRIAGE AND
MARITAL PROBLEMS**



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Marriage and Marital Problems

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Marriage and Marital Problems

Introduction

Whatever its origins in various civilizations throughout recorded history, and whatever the joys and anguishes it may bring, the fact that in our society marriage is the goal, both striven for and achieved, of the overwhelming majority of people insures it a high place in the hierarchy of “normal” maturational goals. At the beginning it should be made clear that this chapter intends to deal with marriage at this current time in history, and more specifically with middle-class American marriages. This narrowing of focus is being undertaken because this type of marriage is the one about which most clinical psychiatric experience has been accumulated and, indeed, is the one about which over 90 percent of the psychiatric literature is written. This is not to say that marriages in other classes of our society, among minority groups of various racial and ethnic backgrounds are not relevant and important. It is to say, however, that knowledge about them comes from a sociological and anthropological base, that even this knowledge is only gradually being developed with any completeness as survey and statistical studies improve, and that these marriages are by and large not the ones that have found referrals to psychiatrists.

Just as types of marriage other than the middle-class variety exist in our

society, different types of marriage exist in other cultures and societies, not only now, but also back through history. Again no major focus will be placed on these other varieties, except to underline the point that the institution of marriage is by no means universal in its characteristics, but differs from class to class, in different societies, and at different periods of history in the same societies.

The organization of institutions in a society can be explained on the basis of providing for the needs of that society and its people, and these needs can be described as biological and social. For example, needs for food, shelter, and sexual experience and needs for security, companionship, and child nurture may be seen as expressions of pure biological necessities, or pure social necessities, or in some instances a combination of both. The institution of marriage, depending on the details of its organization in any particular instance, can be seen as meeting necessities such as child care, companionship and security, and sexual fulfillment. One theory explains the differentiation of the primal horde on the basis of sexual jealousy, which resulted in the males claiming the right to their own females. Will Durant suggests another theory when he writes, "Some powerful economic motives must have favored the evolution of marriage. In all probability (for again we must remind ourselves how little we really know of origins) these motives were connected with the rising institutions of property. Individual marriage came through the desire of the male to have cheap slaves, and to avoid

bequeathing his property to other men's children.”

This theme finds an echo in the demands of today's women liberationists who call for equality and freedom from the enslavement of marriages in which women are treated as property. Leaving aside for the time a discussion of the merits of this argument, it would seem true that marriage, especially as it becomes a legal contract, has great influence in the way in which power and wealth can be accumulated and then passed in a very discriminatory fashion from one generation to the next. Powerful families arrange marriages with other powerful families, and a king in one realm marries a princess from another. Monogamous marriage, with its nuclear organization, preserves and stabilizes the social organization and also provides for a continuity through one generation and on into the next. Thus, not only is power and property preserved, but also religious beliefs and social position, which, in turn, tend to preserve the economic and political structure of the society.

With this introduction let us turn to an examination of marriage as it exists in middle-class America today.

The Marriage System

Marriage—The Majority Choice

Nearly all of us grew up in a family, in a nuclear family if you will. And although our experiences may have varied greatly, those many of us who experienced pain in that growing up, and who saw the frequent despair and anguish of our parents, nevertheless join with the large majority of our fellows and, despite any earlier protestations to the contrary, get married. But the tendency to marry is even more impressive than that. Over the past 40 years the divorce rate in this country, and not alone in this country, has risen markedly.^[1] In the past decade the rate has shown another increase. Yet most of those who have divorced remarry, and, indeed, contrary to earlier hypotheses, the majority of those in second marriages claim that they have found greater satisfaction and happiness than in their first.^[2] Thus, since 1940 for every unit of increase in the proportion of the population divorced, there have been five units of increase in the proportion married (p. v).

Therefore, the almost inevitable route for an individual in our society is to become married, or to put it another way, to join a marriage system. Becoming a member of a marriage system is no small undertaking, for while it can be entered into fairly readily, the implications are enormous “from that moment on.” These implications involve not only the relationship between the two partners but also possibly myriad responsibilities to the larger

society and to associate members of the marriage system, such as children, the couples' own parents, other relatives and assorted in-laws, and occasional friends. Furthermore, these responsibilities, at times cause for joy, at other times merely liabilities, may begin in random and erratic ways from the moment of the wedding vow and continue until the system closes with death or makes a transition into the system of divorce.

Society has always made entering the marriage system easier than leaving it. This commitment by the two partners holds both the promise of satisfaction in a close relationship with another human being through a continuity of mutual experience and the possibility of entrapment and disillusioned agony through a process of mutual erosion. We want to examine and understand this institution of marriage as we also look at the problems that arise in relationship to it, and while we then consider what therapies and remedies are, or may become, available to ease the suffering.

Why the Choice Is Made

Among other things marriage has been labeled an "institution," but I have chosen to talk of it as a "system" because I want to imply the features of change and dynamism, of interrelationships within the marriage and between the marriage system and other systems in the society. In addition, I wish to include the concept of the system existing and changing in time as other

systems in the world also alter in time and relationship. When marriage is considered under this concept of flux, the impossibility of defining “marriage” becomes instantly apparent. Let us pursue the idea of the “marriage system” a little further, then. In this system two main partners voluntarily enter a relationship that actually is licensed, or certified, by the authority of society and that thereby becomes, whatever else it may be, a legal contractual agreement. The contract makes a demand, rare even in ordinary promises, much less legal vows, that each partner shall promise to love the other as long as both shall live. The impossibility of anyone’s having sufficient control over feelings to make this promise realistically has, of course, been commonly recognized; and although for centuries hapless couples remained miserably together, the easing brought about by recent divorce legislation now removes the eternity from the promise and opens the option of certain release from such impossibly burdensome emotional obligation. However, rarely at the moment of making the vows do the parties to the contract consider the future shadow it may cast. Rather, they are more often eager and desirous of publicly declaring their affection and love for one another, and they look forward to the happiness that can come from the growing together of two people who care for each other, who share much with each other, and who long to share more. They anticipate the unique human fulfillment that can come from the intimacy of a physical and spiritual continuity of closeness between a man and a woman. In such hopes are found one of the basic forces

that make marriage so appealing. Loneliness is an unhappy feeling, and although in one sense we must all exist alone, in another sense we all seek companionship. We developed our very humanness in this sharing of experience with others, with our own parents and those who reared and cared for us as infants and children. As we live we seek the constant renewal of that humanity in this sharing. For those who grew up deprived of this kind of human contact and love, relationships with others may be anticipated with anxiety and defensiveness. Still others may have grown up with such self-mistrust and low self-esteem that they continue to seek a chronically infantile dependency on others. More will be said later of the problems these and other developmental deprivations and distorting experiences can create in the marriage system. For the moment, however, let us emphasize again the compelling attractiveness of this anticipated future of love growing in a dyadic closeness.

In addition to this appeal, the marriage system also offers the couple the sanction of having their own children and moving from the role of children themselves to that of mother and father. Indeed, in these days when young people so often easily live together with no formal marriage vows, it is the wish to have children legitimated in society's eyes that leads many of them, if not to the altar, then to the desk of the county clerk. From another perspective the desire to legitimate the child premaritally conceived is the most telling motive in many teen-age marriages that are statistically most

likely to end in early divorce.^[3]

If the desire for children motivates the origin of many marriage systems, then the presence of the children binds the marriage more tenaciously than any other factor. Children conceived in love so often become the main reason for continuing the marriage when the love is gone. Although love for the children may often be a telling factor in one parent's decision not to leave, it is also true that the children can serve as a convenient rationalization for those who fear to move on in their lives. Some partners have become so dependent on the marriage for realistic or emotional reasons that they dare not attempt to make a life apart from their current marriage, feeling that such an effort would be doomed to failure.

A third reason for marriage has a less lofty tone, but nevertheless resounds with practicality. If suburbia has little to offer for single people, the rural climes have less, and urbanity notwithstanding, the big city can be a very lonely place as well. In other words, the larger society is compatible with the marriage system, and one might even surmise that the two were made for each other. It seems evident that coupled living is favored by all kinds of other systems in the society, from the income tax to the double occupancy. Two may not be able to live as cheaply as one, but in our society the establishment of a marriage system with two major partners is encouraged on every hand.^[4]

A fourth reason for marriage has been deliberately left to last, not because it plays no part, but because it plays a diminishing role in the deliberation preceding marriage. It is the factor of sexual fulfillment. With the widespread availability of reliable and easy methods of oral contraception, and with all the other changed conditions that permit young people an easy and early intimate association, sexual experience before marriage has become more and more the usual course, and marriage is more rarely hurried along on the wings of intense but frustrated lust. One might think that with increasingly liberal sexual attitudes and expanding sexual freedom the importance of romantic love as a central force in mate choice and marriage would diminish. But romantic love is actually not that closely associated with sex itself; rather, it grew from the eleventh- and twelfth-century courtly games of idealizing the "loved" one beyond all reality, and in the haze of daydreaming ecstasy imagining a life of superb joy lived in idyllic wonderment and delight in a never ending transcendence of rapture. The myth of this impossibility spilled from the chambers of the court, beyond the aristocracy, and today the romanticism floods our lives, given special propulsion by the power of multimedia advertising. The promise of perpetual youthful glow, of poised and promising breast, of never fading allure sweeps through the airwaves and drowns us in a commercial gush. But still the seductive promise of a life of everlasting love, of the one and only, falsely leads the multitude to anticipate the continual glow of warmth and closeness.

Alas, the romanticism has a short half-life, and the hopes of one who has depended on the idealized romanticized image of his beloved are soon shattered by the day-to-day realities with which the marriage system has to engage.

Who Is Chosen

From considering why people choose to enter a marriage system, let us continue our exploration by looking at the partners people actually choose. In cultures where families arrange marriages the considerations are clear. Economic and social advantages play a large part, and if love grows between the marriage partners, all well and good. Of course, in our own society many marriages are still arranged, although the details of the arranging are often kept obscure. Nevertheless, marriage within the same class not only is common but is given much support, especially in the upper class, and when this tradition is broken, wills are frequently changed and the details of trust funds altered so that the passage of wealth and power can be controlled and channeled. It is true that in this country considerable marriage across vertical class lines take place, and certainly the trend to upward mobility favors this kind of intermarriage. In spite of this, however, and in spite of the apparently democratic idea of the freedom to marry the person one loves, the great majority of marriages occur between partners who share common cultural, ethnic, racial, and educational backgrounds.^[5] For example 99.8 percent of

white spouses are married to white spouses, and 99 percent of black spouses are married to black spouses. The least crossing of class occurs in the upper and politically powerful classes where the largest stakes in terms of money and power are in jeopardy. Royalty and the upper classes have always been keenly aware of the importance of marriage in maneuvers of political power, and although they have always had more sexual liberty and freedom of relationships than the rest of the population, they have been scrupulously careful in the way marriage contracts have stipulated the ownership and inheritance of property. Undoubtedly much of the age-old concern for women's chaste behavior has grown from men's fears that their worldly gains would be inherited by another man's children. This consideration, of course, has relevance to the status of women, to the esteem in which women are or are not held as persons; it will be explored further in the section dealing with the nature of the relationship between the partners in the marriage system and with the burgeoning women's liberation movement.

Reference was made to marriage across vertical class lines, but horizontal mobility is also an important factor in our current culture that affects not only the mate choice but also the quality of married and family life that develops. Large proportions of our population move every year, often to new areas thousands of miles away from the old home. With this constant shifting, kinship systems have greater difficulty maintaining any meaningful relationships, and the new marriage system, when it is established, must

begin to function often with very little outside support from the families of either partner. Although many attributes of such newly formed couples may lie within narrow and similar boundaries, such as educational level, race, and religion, many other features may be quite unfamiliar, having to do, for example, with local customs, verbal and nonverbal communication patterns, and even general life outlook.

Mate choice may also be influenced by personal manipulative factors, such as marrying the boss's daughter or marrying a doctor or lawyer. And only the diehard romanticists would say that such marriages could not succeed. Although that sought after quality of close intimacy may be lacking, unions based on these self-serving yet solid motivations may endure and fulfill the lives of those so united in many ways. Other reasons for mate choice may fall into an increasingly neurotic category and be related more to the personal distortions and inadequacies of one or both of the partners than to cultural or other forces in the general social system. An immature person, for example, may seek a new family haven in a marriage at the point where other demands that may be experienced as terrifying are presented. Rather than go to work or continue in college, a young person may see marriage as a way to avoid the anxiety these other routes may evoke. If a boy or girl is insecure and frightened of social venturing, the offer of a sinecure may be overwhelmingly attractive. In a society where a woman's value as a marriage partner is distortedly based on her physical appearance and her sexual coefficient, many

young women still caught in the trap of such a dehumanizing attitude may actually decide to accept a marriage proposal “now when there is a chance” rather than wait, because to most waiting may mean waiting forever, and to many in our culture this seems like a fate worse than married death.

The basis of neurotic attraction may be even more closely tied to the intimate interactions between the two people involved. Many very comfortable arrangements work out between people who have vividly disparate characteristics. By no means is the attraction of opposites to be construed as neurotic in itself. Rather, the delight and stimulation, the excitement and adventure, the peace and comfort that can come from such intermingling of differences make for more richness in life’s experiences. However, cases where the differences fulfill neurotic patterns—although they may create temporarily stable arrangements that allow greater freedom for both partners in the marriage system—may also result in vulnerable linkages that will be least able to withstand stresses of living. Then the individuals involved may not be able to adapt by themselves to a new life in which more independence is required.

Functioning in the Marriage System

All factors notwithstanding, the marriage system is entered into. Those who have the temerity to give advice may say that it should not be undertaken too young, and yet not too late, that marriage is best undertaken between those of different natures, and yet between those of the same background. Statistics show some convincing data on the marriages that have some better chance of surviving,^[6] but other critics might question whether survival of a marriage is any valid criterion of its worthwhileness. It would seem that when it comes to a specific case the task of advising a couple whether to marry is most difficult. What makes the prognosis even more uncertain is the very fact that marriage is a system and will evolve in relationship to all the other world and life forces; thus, the mass of factors affecting the prediction lie mostly in the future and beyond the grasp of the most skilled analysts or readers of fortunes.

Once the system is established it has a most complex evolution, indeed. The course will be different depending on how old the partners are; what is their economic underpinning; whether it is a first, second, or third marriage; whether there are auxiliary members of the system at the start, such as children from earlier marriages or relatives who will be living in the same household. Obviously I cannot undertake consideration here of every possible combination of circumstances. To begin with, then, let us consider some of the

challenges and situations that must be met by a newly formed marriage system in a somewhat uncomplicated setting with no auxiliary members of the system as yet.

The Newly Formed System

Earlier mention was made of the existential truth that in one sense each of us is alone in this life. And yet in another sense we are never alone, and our way of life can never be understood except in a social context, in relationship to others. In each system of which we are a member, we have a usual role or series of roles, and our social beings are defined by this multiplicity of roles. Our individuality, therefore, expresses itself in the number and complexity of roles we have in different contexts or systems. A sense of self, or person, runs through all the roles, but the role self is no less real because the behavior changes from role to role. The idea that in marriage “two become one” has a romantic beauty, but a practical pitfall. The individual who grew from a child in a family was part of that family system. But as he grew he joined other systems at school, in social groups, and at work. As he developed he usually organized less and less of his life in conjunction with the family system, and, indeed, he often had formed a separate existence in several ways by the time he was ready to enter marriage. The marriage system as a rule requires a more stringent “togetherness” than any other system, even the primary family. From being an individual involved in many systems, one suddenly

merges in the identity of a “couple,” and it is in the constricting implications of this coupling that the narrowness of many marriages begins to pinch. Of course, the renowned honeymoon period may so counter the disadvantages in the coupling system that weeks or months (or occasionally years) may pass with the spouses so involved in the pleasure of their relationship together, and with the possibilities of growth contained within it, that the limitations are not experienced as such. The newly formed system has much pleasure and challenge to offer. Since close living will be one of the hallmarks, there is a continuing communication on a verbal and nonverbal level, both in awareness and beyond awareness, during which basic rules of living are established. The intricacy is such that rules must evolve about who makes rules, and in this way hierarchies are established in different areas. Such achievements are necessary for an orderly existence that is not always brewing anxiety in its confusion. Perhaps no area is more important for the establishment of a tolerable and workable marriage system than this one of communication. Greene has noted in his categorization of problems most often brought to the counselor that problems in communication now rank first.

In the early period of the marriage, in addition to establishing modes and rules of communication, the couple also may be enjoying an opportunity for experience together, with just the two of them, that may be very sweet and quite rare in their previous experience. It is true that the trend now,

especially in cities, is for joint living before marriage; as a result this kind of close personal living experience, together with working out some of the practical problems of living, occurs before the formality of marriage vows. An advantage of these informal arrangements is that one person may live with several different partners; thereby he learns that the experience can be very different with different people, and yet that some of the living situations that develop have to do specifically with the necessities deriving from the situation itself, and not from the particular people in it.

In the early stages of the marriage there are also many new and exciting tasks that can best be accomplished by the two working together, and from this kind of joint effort a good deal of satisfaction is inevitable. Usually a new living quarter is needed, which must be furnished.^[7] Beyond this all the chores and everyday jobs must be accomplished, and with the development of the communication patterns, agreements and contracts are developed for handling these things. In the economic area agreements must also be made, either openly or covertly, about the patterns of earning, buying, and saving that will develop in the particular marriage system. Two people from similar backgrounds and having similar outlook will have less difficulty reaching agreement on such practical issues. Agreement, of course, also depends on the creation of adequate communication, and factors other than background determine this, varying from personal communication style, to personal prejudice, to neurotic or double-binding communication experience in the

past.

The “Couple” Identity

Although the honeymoon period can be happy, productive, and very important in laying the basis for important patterns to be followed as the marriage continues, there still is the potential for much trouble deriving from the consideration of the individuals in the system as a “couple.” The veneer of enchantment in being known as “that nice couple” can wear very thin. It may be true that entering a marriage system does not necessarily mean closing down other possibilities for personal growth, and, indeed, the thesis that marriage *need* not mean this will be pursued later in the chapter; but the experience of a multitude of married persons has been that entering the marriage system has meant embarking on a voyage down an increasingly constricted tunnel, chained by love and obligation that eventually erode to hate and resentful duty. The reasons for the erosion may actually relate less to the closeness than to the isolation that is so often associated with it. And the reasons for the isolation vary in each marriage system, yet may stem from personal characteristics, from the nature of the marriage system itself, or from the context of the larger society.

Reference has already been made to our highly mobile population; this mobility not only breaks up kinship systems but also disrupts friendship

systems, so that no longer do groups of people easily maintain friendships over many years. When a family is going to live for a few years at most in one community, and then be relocated on the other side of the country for the next few years, the tendency to develop a self-sufficiency as a closed system is encouraged. In high-rise apartments families are often engulfed and overwhelmed by sheer closeness and numbers, and in the midst of the crowd become more isolated rather than less. Paradoxically as space is squeezed, and community areas for recreation and even local shopping where friends can meet are eliminated, families are increasingly isolated in their living arrangements. This is true as well in the suburbs where neighbors may live next to one another for years and yet never meet or even speak for more than a superficial exchange. Again the isolation is the key, with the resulting turning in. A further factor is work for members of the family. Places of employment may be far from the place where one lives. If both husband and wife work they may travel in different directions. This could lead to an independence that one would think might counter the effects of the too great closeness. But if both must return to be together after work, the advantages of the separateness cannot be exploited, and the strings of the marriage "bag" may be drawn more closely and tightly.

Each couple's marriage system is only one in a virtual sea of such relationships. The pressure, therefore, is to stay within each narrow system, not only because of factors in that particular marriage, but also because if one

partner would like to move out more freely, he or she may find no welcoming for this, since the multitude of others are sequestered in their own togetherness. Social events tend to be organized for singles or for couples. Both partners in a marriage system are usually invited out for dinner, to a party, or to the theater. If independent activities are included, they most often are organized along sexually segregated lines, such as women's card groups or men's bowling clubs. If sexually mixed activities are sanctioned they most often are related to some specific task, such as educational classes, parent-teachers associations, political clubs, and the like. From these examples one can see that opportunities for one individual to develop himself or herself in a separate direction are to some degree available in spite of social pressures favoring couple togetherness.

The greater pressure, however, may come from within the structure of the marriage system itself, for in such a closed system expectations are set up that work against individual spontaneity and that tend to regulate the lives of the people in the system. Since so much of life is approached from the need to work in the system mutually, compromises are made and each partner tends to gear his life more and more in relationship to the other. Thus, if the wife is working during the day and taking classes for a degree some evenings, expectations will be set for the times she should be through and ready to spend time with her husband. Since he may have arranged his time to meet her after class, her option of making arrangements with someone later is

limited. To expand this example, the pressure of expectation and accountability that can develop is enormous. In addition to the social and system aspects of the closeness, personal characteristics must also be considered. One of the most insidiously destructive forces in a marriage system is the neurotic dependency that develops and, indeed, is fostered by the very way in which the system now operates. To be cherished, loved, and cared for by another person is truly a wonderful experience. To be able to turn to another person for help and to find them dependable in their concern for you is also a most gratifying human experience. But to define, especially unconsciously, your own value in terms of the way another human being behaves in relation to you is to be not only personally underdeveloped in self-esteem and maturity but also tremendously vulnerable to hurt. The corollary is that this neurotic dependency on another for one's own sense of self leads to excessive demands on the other person that disregard the other's own individuality and personal integrity and attempt to control the other person. The aftermath of such relating is a deluge of resentment, frustration, constriction, and possibly depression or rage.

In brief, then, a marriage in which the partners are free to grow as individuals and to relate themselves to other systems in a full and human way is not much encouraged by the nature of our society, is handicapped by the ubiquitous marriage system as it now exists, and is virtually impossible in any marriage system where either partner is personally so insecure that he

operates in a neurotically dependent way, opposing the growth and expansion of his spouse as well as the development of himself.

Women in the System

The particular place of women in our society must be considered here, because it plays such a crucial part in the marriage systems that are developed, and also because it is being challenged anew with a vigor that already has shown results. That women have been discriminated against as a group seems beyond dispute. Documentation of the extent of the discrimination is easily found, and only relatively recently have women even begun to have equal rights under the law in civic matters as basic as the right to vote. But the effects of the discrimination are so widespread and so universal that the lives of women in our society are adversely affected either directly or indirectly every day in every place where women are to be found—the home, the school, work, the arts. In spite of revolutionary efforts on the part of women's rights advocates, there is a remarkable persistence of the conviction that a woman's place is in the home, that a girl should be raised primarily to be a good wife and mother, and that, indeed, if this does not continue the very institution of the home and family will be undermined and the future of the country itself placed in jeopardy. Raising a girl to believe that her basic goal is to become capable of attracting a man who will then marry her may make it almost impossible for her to achieve her full potential as an

individual person in her own right. When such tremendous emphasis is placed on physical attributes, as is done in our culture, effectively forcing the woman into an image of a plasticized sex object, the damage to dignity and personality is likely to be extensive. A further crushing bind is placed on the girl when the idea is insinuated that to the extent she develops herself as a person and shows herself to be intelligent and capable she will be running the danger of engendering competitive and hostile feelings from threatened men, who will then relegate her to the role of a “castrating woman” and thereby diminish her chances of finding relationships with interesting men and eventually forming a marriage relationship. The poignancy of this problem can be no better illustrated than to note the incredible fact that in a test involving the completion of a story about a student who placed first in a medical school graduating class, the women being tested, more often than not, saw this honor as a disadvantage when the first place student was a woman; in contrast, when the top student was a man, the distinction only heralded a future of continuing benefits.

Not only does the denigration of women as people have stifling effects on the growth of a maturing girl, but also the deleterious effects continue throughout the marriage and eventually lead to intense resentments and possibly tragedies. The superior attitude of men fosters an atmosphere of competition and lack of equality that breeds chronic domestic warfare and alienation. In the later stages of marriage the woman is often more hopelessly

trapped in an intolerable life because she lacks the grounding that could enable her to develop her own individuality and find a new and independent, if not separate, existence for herself. If the attitudes discussed encourage a battle of the sexes, small wonder that it is over sex that many of the battles are fought. Again it must be noted that many in the younger generation today have moved a long distance from the attitudes described. With the acceptance of equality between men and women has come the recognition of women's right to enjoy their own sexuality with the same freedom traditionally accorded to men, both married and single. Modern contraception has provided much more freedom for women, and liberalized abortion laws, such as the one passed in 1971 in New York, has added further social sanction to the new sexual and personal independence of women. As women truly are given more equality, their degraded position as sexual objects loses relevance, and sexuality between men and women will also express their mutual humanity, and not be "the" prize either taken, or withheld, or proffered.

Early Phases of the System

In our review of the marriage system we have considered the newly married and some aspects of the way in which the partners develop rules of cooperative behavior and communication systems, as well as some of the tasks and goals related to this phase of their lives. Often both may work while one or both continue in school, and a period of adaptation ensues. Divorce is

frequent at this early stage, especially in those who marry young. Probably the young have not each developed sufficiently as individual persons to allow a contract that has much likelihood of endurance. Before long, the growth in both partners may be such that disparities develop that can never be bridged. This, together with the adventuresomeness and energy of youth and the more liberal attitudes to divorce already present in our society, makes it more understandable why the rate of divorce among the very young is so high.

For those who enter the marriage system and do not soon leave it for divorce, the next important phase may be that of childbearing and childrearing.^[8] Although more mothers continue to work after the birth of a child, and although day-care centers are being established at an increasing rate, a large majority of mothers stay home during the years when the children are young. The advent of children makes a drastic change in the system, for while a marriage system remains, a family system is now established; and even though the marriage system can end by death or divorce, the family system does not, and the members of that system (mother, father, and siblings, plus all the extended family members) continue in their family relationships as long as they live. Children, let it be said again, profoundly affect the marriage system. If the system was locked in before, the ties that bind are now vastly multiplied. Responsibility for the children tie the parents to each other as well as to the children, and the love and affection for the children create some of the strongest bonds and devotion known. Not

only do children raise the cohesion coefficient, but also they alter the intimacy factor in the marriage system. Earlier we mentioned that the close intimacy in the marriage often resulted in an isolation and alienation of the partners from other relationships. With children added to the system not only is the former isolation from others still present, but now the closeness between the husband and wife is encroached upon. Intimate times are difficult logistically, and when they are finally arranged the husband and wife (now also father and mother) may have little energy and incentive left. Such are the joys of parenthood.

The mother more often than not bears the brunt of the added work and strain at home, while the father increasingly becomes aware of his new financial responsibilities. The importance of maintaining and even increasing his income binds him further not only into his family situation but also into his work situation. Such phases in development are often referred to euphemistically as "learning the realities of life." The fact that marriage systems are organized as separate units contributes to the strain because sharing the tasks is difficult, and the continual yet often trivial chores are not relieved, even by the relatives, the aunts, grandmothers, and sisters who used to be available when the family was a larger conglomeration of generations. Wives often grow depressed, and withdraw from relationships with their husbands. The sexual relationship may be adversely affected, especially if it is experienced as a duty and an exploitation. During this period men are more

likely to seek relationships with other women as relief from the tedium at home with its incessant demands and frequent sexual rebuff.

Stresses on the System

As we continue to examine the flow of the dynamics in the marriage system, we can see how the relationship between the man and woman fluctuates in response to a multiplicity of factors both in their own personal growth and in the marital situation, which, in turn, is affected by forces in the larger society as well as by the addition of children. When stress threatens to disrupt the system, adaptational changes are necessary, or the dysfunction engendered will be manifested in unusual behavior or symptoms in one or more members of the system, or in some unusual function of the entire system. Gross disruption of the system would include one member leaving the system entirely, or the collapse of one member, such as hospitalization, or violence among the members. Stress may be applied by forces outside the marriage system itself. For example, the husband may lose his job, not as a result of personal incompetence, but rather as a result of overall economic recession in the society. Or severe illness may strike a child or the mother and require a mobilization of all other family members, with a reallocation of priorities and a major shifting of emphasis in everyone's lives. The children's development brings a series of crisis points, and these can be moments when the adaptational capacity of the family may be sorely tested. On the other

hand, at such moments of stress the family has the greatest challenge and opportunity for growth, and each member of the family system may have a new occasion to redefine goals and relationships, so that not only may the family continue as a more integrated and successfully functioning system, but also each individual might have an enlarged personal capacity.

The problems that children bring in infancy and early childhood are often the source of much tension because the parents are aware of the literal helplessness of the youngsters, and therefore feel especially keenly the responsibility that falls on them as adults. In later childhood school and peer problems are often the focus of family stress. Then as adolescence approaches and the children increasingly move in their own directions and challenge the authorities at home and at school, a whole new series of tensions must be met that take on a more social aspect and that break into the insularity of the family. Here again a paradox is seen, because in our society family life has been constricted as many of the functions formerly undertaken in the family, such as education and recreation, are more and more being performed by other systems in the society. Education in schools now includes sex and family life, while the education brought into the homes through television completely overwhelms the attempts in many families to create some special and unique direction for that particular family. The tensions that began as children neared adolescence burst into clear-cut warfare among teenagers and parents in many families, and the alliances and blame thrown back and

forth may stir a turbulence that rocks the foundations of the family and the marriage. At those critical points—infancy and early childhood, preadolescence, and the teenage years—the stresses in the family may become so severe that counseling or psychiatric help is sought. When family therapy is sought the issue most often resolves back to the marriage system, and the family adaptation is strengthened when the marital partners can redefine their goals and relationship and then cooperate in managing ways to meet the demands and responsibilities of the growing family, while at the same time not being engulfed to the extent that no life as individuals, or as man and woman, is available.

As a family grows the economic burden usually increases as well, and if college education is included in the children's future the economic strain and the sacrifice demanded may be quite severe. But assuming that a family manages to hold together through these stages, a new and most critical point in the marriage system is in the offing. At the time when the children have reached the point where they are more and more responsible for themselves, and certainly by the time some or all of the children are either in college or are working for themselves, the focus inevitably begins to turn again to the marriage relationship and to the fate of each of the two individuals in that relationship.

Middle Phases of the System

For the woman in many families, moments of personal decision may have been experienced when it was planned to begin a family, when the youngest child entered school, leaving more of the day free for other activities, when children reached their teens and were able to provide more care for themselves, and then when most of the children were old enough to leave home. At such moments of decision, many women resume earlier employment; some mothers may go back to teaching when their own children are in school, and others may reenter jobs in business. Other women, who had always wanted to further their education, begin to take courses, perhaps on a part-time basis, and a large number of women in their late twenties and early thirties become very aware that unless they begin to make progress in their own development they may not have the opportunity later, for it will be too late.

For these reasons, among others, many women reach a point of crucial decision in their thirties, when they review the lives they are living, and consider whether any changes may be possible. At this point women may feel that if they are ever going to make a change in their marital situation they would best do it now, for their youthfulness is still reflected in their appearance and their energy, and the possibility of establishing a new marriage is still a realistic one. In addition, many women now feel that an unmarried life provides greater possibilities of satisfaction than a married one, and so the fear of this different life style is not nearly as intimidating as it

once was, nor is the social stigma of divorce and a single life nearly so powerful, or likely to be incurred.

At this time the husband may feel more pressure to increase his income, and many men may take on an extra job, or work overtime, or undertake further education in the evening. In addition, owing to the competitive business atmosphere, many men until the age of forty are engaged in an intensive struggle to reach a position of some strength and stability, because after forty further significant advancement will be unlikely, and the pattern for the future of the employment career will be fairly well settled. On this somewhat different timetable, men may experience their time of crisis between forty and forty-five, when they realize that this is their last chance for a major change in life style. At this point many men form new relationships with younger women and experience a resurgence of youthful feeling, with the desire to live through many of the fantasies that they may have suppressed in their adolescence. In a sense a second adolescence may emerge, with the feeling that if the home, in this case the home of the secondary family, is not left at this time, the future will be closed, and the old life will continue until true death brings an end. At this time many men also make rather radical changes in career, or at the least make a major shift within the same field, possibly involving a geographical move as well.

In some instances a third possibility is chosen, when both husband and

wife are able to change together and evolve a very new kind of life for themselves. When this does not occur, and when the resolution does not result in a continuation of the old life pattern, divorce ensues, and friends may wonder at the dissolution of an apparently successful marriage of over twenty years' duration. However, the real surprise may be that the divorced individuals often are infused with a new excitement, and that both may go on to experience happier and more fulfilled lives. The course of the marriage, it would seem apparent, has to do not only with the external realities of children and finances but also with the intrinsic strengths of the marriage partners as independent individuals. This theme, then, keeps repeating itself; namely, that a crucial factor in determining the course of a marriage, as well as determining what happens after divorce, is the degree of personal individuation and personal security and development of each partner.

Later Phases in the System

When the marriage system continues after the critical period of middle age, new goals emerge. The possibility of more leisure time together may bring new enjoyment into the lives of the couple. The loss of friends becomes more common, and the facts of aging and death are increasingly evident. Illness may have been experienced before, but now the certainty is that illness and decline will be more and more an inevitable part of the agenda. Often families established by children may be a large source of interest and delight,

but again the tendency for the breakup of the closer kinship systems in modern America affects the intensity of such relationships, so many older people may have to adjust themselves to distance and infrequent visiting. Although more affluent older people may be able to establish retirement ways of life, large numbers of the population are left increasingly to their own resources, which usually are meager; with their failing health and the inadequacy of publicly supported programs, many are doomed to an increasingly isolated and frighteningly lonely existence. The dependence of the married couple upon each other becomes more crucial and necessary than ever. It can be the source of tremendous resentment, as well as of severe anxiety, for roles of who will be dependent on whom may suddenly, after a lifetime, forcibly be reversed. Goldfarb has noted that the crux of most marital problems in older people is their handling of dependency relationships.

Changing the System

Intrinsic Factors

In the discussion so far, we have explored some of the features of the marriage system. We have considered reasons why people may join the system, factors influential in the choice of a partner, problems in establishing a workable system, and an overall view of the goals and difficulties present at different stages in the evolution of life as the marriage system attempts to provide a workable arrangement for its members within the intertwining matrix of all the other systems in the society. At this point let us examine more closely certain intrinsic factors in the traditional system that reflect both its strengths and its shortcomings, and particularly let us examine the relationship of the individual in the marriage to the system itself, to himself, and to the larger world.

Monogamous marriage contains within it a dilemma, because the flourishing of love, which is one of its top priority goals, is discouraged by all the features that coerce and demand allegiance and affection. Compulsion breeds rebellion and resentment; duty and obligation discourage spontaneity and delight. Love cannot be forced by legal decree and formal contract, any more than it is engendered by blame or guilt. Thus, all the arrangements, formal and informal, that insure the binding of the marriage and that are justified by the necessity of protecting property rights, and the social good of

preserving stable family situations for the nurturing and rearing of children, serve at the same time to entrap the partners in the marriage and provide a soil hostile to the development of mutual affection and love. The commitment sanctified in the promise to forsake all others becomes instead a captivity, and the added irony is that the spouse who promised to love now hosts a growing resentment, and at the same time through his own vow has cut himself off from the love of those he has forsaken. Nor in this system of values is much thought given to the pain of those who are forsaken.

The problem facing the individual partner in the marriage system is to establish a *modus vivendi* permitting his own and his partner's individual growth without jeopardizing the possibilities for an intimate relationship together; at the same time he must assure a cooperative and mutually respectful endeavor to meet all the housekeeping and other maintenance necessities, and fulfill, in addition, the requirements and obligations to children and members of the community at large. This task is almost too much to expect from any individual, particularly in a system that puts so many barriers in the way.

Cuber and Harroff undertook an in-depth interview survey of 211 middle-class married people, and from the detailed reports concluded that there were five main marriage arrangements. The classification was based on the interview material of people whose marriages had lasted ten years or

more and who said that they had never seriously considered divorce or separation. The first type is the “conflict-habituated.” In this relationship there is considerable tension, although it is usually controlled. “There is private acknowledgment by both husband and wife as a rule that incompatibility is pervasive, that conflict is ever potential, and that an atmosphere of tension permeates the togetherness.” The authors note that some psychiatrists have speculated that the deep need to do psychological battle with one another constitutes the cohesive factor insuring the continuity of the marriage.

The second type of relationship is described as “devitalized.” The authors write, “These people usually characterize themselves as having been ‘deeply in love’ during the early years, as having spent a great deal of time together, having enjoyed sex, and most importantly of all, having had a close identification with one another. The present picture ... is in clear contrast—little time is spent together, sexual relationships are far less satisfying ... and interests and activities are not shared.” Further comment is made that this type of “duty” relationship in marriage is very common, and that those in it often judge that “marriage is like this—except for a few oddballs or pretenders who claim otherwise.”

The third described type is the “passive-congenial,” which is much like the devitalized, except that the passivity pervading the association has been

there from the start, giving the devitalized at least a more exciting set of memories. The authors speculate, “The passive-congenial life style fits societal needs quite well also, and this is an important consideration. The man of practical affairs, in business, government service, or the professions, quite obviously needs ‘to have things peaceful at home’ and to have a minimum of distractions as he pursues his important work. He may feel both love and gratitude toward the wife who fits this mode.”

The fourth category is in extreme contrast to the first three and is called the “vital” relationship. The essence of it is that the mates are intensely bound together psychologically in important life matters. As one of the interviewed subjects said, “The things we do together aren’t fun intrinsically—the ecstasy comes from being *together in the doing*.” The authors elaborate, “They find their central satisfaction in the life they live with and through each other—all else is subordinate and secondary.”

The final type outlined is the “total” relationship, which is described as like the vital with “the important addition that it is multifaceted ... in some cases all the important life foci are vitally shared.” Both these last two types are described as rare, both in marriage and out.

From the description of these five main types, it can be seen that factors other than the individual personality characteristics of the partners played an

important part in the style of marriage arrangement. Relationships outside the marriage, whether these included sexual involvement or not, play a significant part in the lives of many people. The restriction of freedom of relationship can be the single most eroding factor in the marriage system. By having the freedom to develop other relationships, and to engage in activities with other people, a marriage partner can pursue his or her own development in a way that is not possible if most activities are restricted to those engaged in with one's marriage partner. Possibly one of the most destructive demands in the covert marriage contract is that which encourages the belief that one person can supply another person's needs in every area. A man or woman in this framework is expected to be a companion, a friend, an intellectual equal, a lover, a helper, a parent, a sharer in interests in sports, and on and on and on. No one person can meet the needs of another in all these ways, and, indeed, no one may be able to satisfy another fully in any one of these areas.

If the marriage system were not threatened by the inclusion of other people, it seems possible that much enrichment would then be made available for each of the partners. In turn, as each flourished with the addition of this new stimulation, he or she would return to the marriage relationship renewed and with more to offer the partner. In this light the idea grows that loving one person increases ones' capacity to love others, and that love is not diminished by the inclusion of others. In practice, however, the inclusion of

other relationships frequently does threaten the marital relationship, and probably for this reason so many of these outside relationships are carried on clandestinely. This, in turn, poses a dilemma for many, who feel uncomfortable with this double role and who therefore suffer guilt and anxiety. As a result they either have periodic unsatisfying “flings,” or live with a burdened feeling of uneasiness, or eventually break the doubleness by breaking the marriage, or by giving up the double life and settling for a more drab and unsatisfying continuity in their marriage.

Therapeutic Approaches

In a discussion of marital therapy, the first focus should be on the problems. In the chapter so far, problems in living of almost every sort have been discussed. Within the definition of the marriage system, it is evident that any problem that affects any individual in the system, or in the expanded family system, or any situation that influences the effective functioning of the marriage system can be considered a problem related to the marriage. In a sense, though, this means that almost every human problem can be seen as a problem related to marriage and the family. Indeed, there is much to commend this point of view. With the development of general systems theory and theories of communication, the idea that any human behavior can be understood outside the context of its occurrence has lost ground. The increasing expansion of family theory and family therapy is a clear-cut

application of these newer theories to actual clinical problems. More and more frequently, when an individual, be he a child, or the adult in a marriage or in a larger family system, is found exhibiting behavior that could be labeled “symptomatic,” or in behaving in a disruptive manner, that particular “identified patient” is understood by clinicians as a member of a system, and his behavior is understood in the light of the behavior of those around him, and in the particular context of his living. So it is, more specifically, that when one member of a marital partnership has behavioral or symptomatic disturbances, the context of the marriage itself is now frequently included in the therapeutic effort. Some clinicians have defined family therapy, of which marriage therapy is a variety, as a method for treating the family, as opposed to treating the individual. However, Haley, a pioneer in the field of family therapy, has noted that the concept of family therapy is inclusive and operates even when a single member of a family system is treated by a therapist. He makes the point that no one participant in a system can be influenced in his behavior without that influence having an effect on all other parts of the system. Briefly, then, he holds that family therapy is all that *has* ever been practiced, although often the practitioners were themselves unaware that this was the case.

Before continuing with any further discussion of therapy, let us return for the moment to a further appraisal of the problems. Leaving aside those behaviors that appear in individuals, such as depressions, acute psychotic

episodes, anxiety states, alcoholism, and various behavior disorders, let us consider the complaints that overtly can be related to the marriage system and in fact are presented as such. Greene has provided a recent listing of the major reasons couples give when they appeal for professional help with their marriages. Based on the responses of 750 couples, the survey shows that the most frequent complaint now is lack of communication. The next eleven specific marital complaints, in order of frequency, are constant arguments, unfulfilled emotional needs, sexual dissatisfaction, financial disagreements, in-law trouble, infidelity, conflicts about children, domineering spouse, suspicious spouse, alcoholism, and, finally, physical attack.

These, then, are the leading reasons why partners in marriage seek counsel and therapy. Since we have tried to look at marriage as a system, it would be consistent to consider the marriage therapist as a consultant to that system. This is possibly a different way to consider the role of the psychiatrist, but it has some advantages. For one, the therapist is not placed in the position of having to be a saving influence. Rather, the initiative is clearly left with the partners, who come to an expert for appraisal and consultation, who may be able to gain some further understanding of the reasons for the dysfunction of their system, and who may also take suggestions and advice from the consultant and in an experimental mode try out various new possibilities. In light of the previous discussion on the factors affecting the system at various moments in its evolution, one can see that the

consultant would attempt to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the particular system, in terms of its members and of the supporting systems interacting with it, and he would further attempt to understand the nature of the stresses being applied in both general and specific ways. With this kind of background information he might then suggest various ways in which new operations in the system could be implemented, or in which certain tasks formerly attempted by the system might be given less important priority or abandoned altogether. For example, perhaps grandmother need only be visited once a year, or possibly one partner might cut down on committee activities in a local political club. Again, the consultant might suggest that problems in the way the two partners were communicating might be contributing to massive misunderstandings; by helping with the analysis and correction of such problems, the consultant may contribute to a new level of cooperation and satisfaction. In another problem area the consultant may provide direct help with sexual difficulties, utilizing approaches formulated by Masters and Johnson—if not directly himself, then through referral to therapists trained in such methods.

Without further specific examples, it can be seen how the marriage therapist can act as consultant to the marriage system; and by considering the multitude of factors present in the system, and by utilizing his own special training and skills, he can engage the partners in their own therapeutic endeavor.

There is still a difference in approach among those who will see only the couple, those who will see only one of the partners, those who will see both partners, but only in separate sessions, and those who will vary their approach and see at times one, at others times both, and at other times each in separate sessions. Perhaps some of the confusion can be resolved by realizing that different systems are involved. Each individual is in essence a system in himself, but never *only* a system in himself. The individual always relates to other people, and he relates to people in many different systems, such as his marriage system, his friendship systems, his work system, his community system, and so on. The dilemma for the therapist develops if he must choose between the individuality of the single patient or the continuity of functioning of one of the systems of which the patient is a participant member. This pivotal choice becomes the therapist's moment of truth, for it is at this juncture that he reveals himself as one who believes in the freedom of the individual to choose his own destiny, or as one who believes that the needs and merits of the particular system override those of any particular member, and thereby allies himself as therapist-facilitator to the continuation of the existing system.

Other Directions

In their struggle for growth people move in many different directions, make many false starts and return to start over again, and often never are

able to achieve the growth they would like. A couple may seek marriage therapy, but find as they explore the possibilities that one or both do not want to continue either the therapy or the marriage. The variations are many. One or both may then enter therapy by themselves, to continue in the marriage or to break it. They may begin individual therapy and then combine again for marriage therapy. It is also important to realize that people in a marriage system have many other possibilities than therapy. Some, of course, stay stifled in a continuing unhappy and unproductive system. Some seek divorce. Only some seek therapy, which, as has been noted, may eventuate in several possible outcomes. More recently others have been seeking new styles of life that attempt to make over the old marriage system entirely. Some have moved toward communal living. Others have experimented with group marriage. Others have tried to break some of the constrictions in regular marriage by becoming “swingers,” combining affairs and other relationships in an open contract with mutual participation.

The divorce rate, and the amount of unfulfillment and unhappiness in marriages that continue, together with the increasing attempts by so many of our younger generation to find new possibilities for relationship, leads to the conclusion that at this time in history the traditional marriage system is having great problems in effectively fulfilling many of its stated functions. Nevertheless, the system does not seem about to disappear; it is so intimately related to the basic structure of other systems in the total society that nothing

short of a complete social revolution would lead to its early disappearance and replacement. Therefore, the continuing need for marriage therapists, or consultants, is apparent. Possibly the traditional system can continue to evolve. Perhaps the most promising hope lies in the direction of more openness in the system, of greater freedom for the individuals in the system to develop independently, while yet retaining the core cooperative relationship of intimacy and continuity. In the fostering of this evolution, it is hoped that the consultant-therapist can make a significant and helpful contribution.

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Notes

[1] Rates of final divorce decrees granted under civil law per 1,000 population: United States, 1932, 1.3; 1945, 3-5; 1960, 2.2; 1965, 2.5; France, 1932, 0.5; 1945, 0.6; 1950, 0.9; 1960, 0.7; Sweden, 1932, 0.4; 1945, 1.0; 1955, 1.2; 1960, 0.9; 1965, 1.2. Divorce rate per 1,000 married couples: United States, 1935, 7.8; 1964, 10.7; France, 1935, 2.3; 1963, 2.9; Sweden, 1934, 2.3; 1962, 5.0 (pp. 29, 31)

[2] A very large proportion of the marriages that are dissolved within less than 20 years are followed by remarriages. For example, in 1960 over four-fifths of the white men who had first married some 18 years previously and had been divorced had remarried. The remarriage rate of nonwhite men was nearly as high; the corresponding rate for white women was seven-tenths, and that for nonwhite women was about five-eighths (p. 400).

[3] The divorce rates per 1,000 married persons, from four selected states having rates available, 1960-61: the total divorce rate for men under twenty was 24.8, and for women 29.0 (p. 57).

[4] A great deal more is known about the divorced population than the separated ... at the time of the 1960 census, over 2 million were separated and over 3 million were divorced. (p. 222).

About 2.7 million men in 1967 were bachelors (statistically 35 years old or over who have never married), and 2.8 million women were spinsters (statistically 30 years old and over who have never married). (p. 298).

[5] Among couples who married during the 1950's and were still in their first marriages in 1960, the median educational attainment was 12.3 years for both husbands and wives.

About three-fourths of the married couples in the United States in 1960 comprised a husband and wife of the same national origin. English-speaking and German persons of foreign stock had high rates of outmarriage to persons of other origins including native Americans, whereas those of Polish, Russian, and Italian foreign stock—with a higher proportion of first-generation Americans—had lower rates of outmarriage. Persons of Russian foreign stock very rarely married persons of Irish or Italian foreign stock.

A cross section of married Protestants and Roman Catholic adults in the United States have a similar moderate amount of intermarriage; married Jewish adults have relatively little religious intermarriage by comparison with the levels for the other two groups.

The 1960 census showed that only 0.4 percent of United States married couples had a different race reported for husband or wife (pp. 391-394).

[6] In 1960 rates of dissolution were highest for those who married in their teens and lowest for those who married in their twenties. Persons with marriages “not intact” included the separated as well as the divorced and the widowed; among these persons the proportion of nonwhites was about twice as high as that for whites. The percentage of adults who were divorced was smaller among the foreign born than among the second generation.

The Northeast had by far the lowest percentage divorced. The West had uniformly the highest percentage divorced. The rural areas generally had the lowest percentage divorced and separated, and the large cities had the highest.

Well-educated white men had a much lower percentage of divorces than the less educated. The relationship was more complex for non white men; the percentage divorced rose irregularly as education increased to the level of entrance into college and then fell as education increased further. Likewise among women, rising education up through the early college years was associated with a rising divorce rate; although the percentage of divorces was lower for college graduates, it reached its highest level for women with graduate school training.

Occupations in which especially small proportions of divorced men were found in 1960 included accountants, college professors, draftsmen, physicians, and high school teachers. Corresponding occupations for women included librarians, music teachers, and elementary and high school teachers (pp. 400-403).

[7] During the first year of marriage one in every ten couples lives with relatives, according to data for 1960. For nonwhite couples the rate was more than twice that high.

Homeowners were twice as numerous as renters in 1960. Even among young couples married less than five years, every third couple had already started to pay for a home of their own (pp. 394-395)

[\[8\]](#) More women now than a generation ago are sharing in the process of bearing and rearing children. Now only about a tenth bear no children, as compared with a fourth of the older generation. A part of this change resulted from a drop from about one-twelfth to one-twenty-fifth in the proportion who remained single through the childbearing period. At the same time the average number of children has declined from about four to two and one-half (p. 394)