Open Marriage: A Synergic Model

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Open marriage as presented in this paper should be considered both as a concept and a process. Conceptually it attempts to provide options for marital partners in a complex society which values individual self-fulfillment and provides multitudinous opportunities for individuals to develop identities and find warm and intimate relationships with many other persons. Open marriage attempts to build on the past difficulties of traditional marriage and provides guidelines through an open systems model for development of intimate marital relationships which provides the growth of the marital partners in the context of a one-to-one relationship.

In the wake of increasing dissatisfaction with the prevailing pattern of traditional monogamous marriage, a number of alternative marriage styles have begun to emerge. These experimentations vary from those involving more than three persons in the basic pattern and include group marriage, communal life styles, and polygamous patterns (more often triadic, and more often polygynous rather than polyandrous) to modifications in the basic one-to-one monogamous configuration. This last group may be divided into those which are nonmarriage relationships (still monogamous but extra-legal) and those which represent innovations, changes, deletions, and additions to the standard expectations for those legally married. These modifications may include such various items as separate domiciles, extramarital sexual relations in group or partner-exchange contexts, or reversal of traditional role patterns; i.e., woman provides, man housekeeps. None of these patterns are particularly new in transcultural contexts since all have occurred elsewhere in other societies at one time or another. However, their proliferation and the motives which have impelled men and women in our society to increasingly seek innovations in our marriage style deserve closer scrutiny.

It is not enough to say that society is pluralistic and that these alternate patterns for marriage have appeared in response to the changes in our society and the development of different life styles. Even though one can foresee a future in which there is a range of marriage patterns to choose from, the questions still remain: Why have so many experimental forms appeared? And more important, what are the personal motivations for seeking these innovative styles? Compendiums of sociological explanations seemed somehow to pass over the personal dimensions involved. Yet these questions are exceedingly important for the future especially since that future will affect our styles of child-rearing and thus the perpetuation of those values we deem most humanistic and worthy of saving. Even excluding experimental family forms, Sussman (1971) has pointed out that even today some children may live in numerous variant forms of the traditional nuclear family during their formative stages. Under these conditions some changes in our value system are to be expected. The questions are which values and how many?

With the above questions in mind we began to explore contemporary marriage in 1967.¹ The authors’ interviews began first

¹In developing the concept of open marriage, the authors interviewed approximately 400 persons from 1967 to 1971. Informant-respondents were
with those who were involved in experimental structures and in the greatest variations from the norm in traditional marriage. It was felt that these innovators would have greater insight because they had already opted for change, and that they would perhaps be more articulate and perceptive about why they had chosen change. The interviewers then moved on to the divorced, the nonmarrieds, the singles, the young, and to those who were either disillusioned or contented with traditional monogamous marriage. As research was carried out in a primarily middle class setting, Cuber and Harroff's (1965) delineations of types of marriage relationships (i.e., conflict-habituated, devitalized, passive-congenial, the vital, and the total) gained increasing validity. During the research in the anthropological

17 to 75 years of age, urban and suburban middle class in orientation and occupation, and approximately 75 percent were married or had been married. Thirty interviews, both formal and informal, with professional therapists and marriage counselors supplemented this data. The interviews included individual and couple in-depth sessions (frequently tape recorded), discussion in group settings, and short mini-interviews in a variety of social settings. While some topical and background questions were used (i.e., age, occupation, marital status, etc.: "What do you think the ingredients of a good marriage are?"), the interviews were primarily open-ended and exploratory in nature, focusing on eliciting information through face to face encounter, about values, feelings and attitudes toward marriage and changes they perceived as necessary for improvement.

The term nonmarrieds applies to those relationships in which there is some commitment but which are not legalized. They can range in time from a few months to a life time. Premarital is an accurate term for only a portion of these relationships since some never intend to marry the nonmarriage partner, or the relationship is frequently considered only a temporary plateau before each has the sustaining personal resources to move on to another level, or another person. Formerly marrieds would probably comprise a separate category. The word cohabitation is also misleading as a coverall term for these relationships. Since cohabitation implies both a shared domicile and sex without legal marriage, it did not apply to some relationships encountered, e.g., a couple who did not share a domicile but did form a cohesive unit insofar as they shared all their spare time, vacations, and sex, and presented themselves as a couple in social situations. Therefore, the term nonmarriage relationship is suggested.

literature it was found that little attention had been given to the interpersonal dimension of marriage or to the interrelation of the intrapsychic and ideological aspects of marriage. However, it was felt that the anthropological perspective gave a holistic approach to the problems of contemporary marriage that was considered valuable. While cultural ideologies and prescriptions for marriage behavior persisted, value orientation and actual behavior were changing, thus creating confusion for many.

The Problem

As exploratory insights to the problems evolved, the authors became increasingly convinced that the central problem in contemporary marriage was relationship. The attempt to solve the problem by moving into group and communal situations did not seem to mitigate the problems we discovered in interpersonal relationships. With the breakdown of many external supports for traditional marriage, the pressures on the interpersonal husband-and-wife relationship became intensified. There was a need for that relationship to provide more fulfillment and benefits both on a personal and interpersonal level. Problems in marriage were manifested by the inability of the majority of individuals to find in the marital relationship both intimacy and opportunity for developing their personal potential. Understanding of the problem concluded in addition that:

1) Marital partners and those contemplating marriage expressed a need for intimacy and growth in a relationship where they could actualize their individual potential without destroying the relationship.

2) Most people did not have the skills in relating and in communication which would allow for growth in a noncritical atmosphere. The typical dyadic marital role relationships had already been precut for them. They were locked into a negative involuted feedback system. This was their perception of their situation as well, although not with the same terminology.

3) Many of the innovations and experimental forms, although not all of them or all of the people involved in them, were a
reflection and indication of this lack of skills in interpersonal relations.

4) Other important impediments to growth were the unrealistic expectations and myths stemming from the traditional marriage format of the past, in particular, overriding emotional dependencies, and possessive jealousy.

This left us as the observers and researchers with the options of reporting the alternate styles with their attendant disillusionments and problems, or of choosing another path in utilizing the research. While one can catalogue all the sociological and technological forces that are contributing factors to the breakdown of marriage and the family, it offers little in the way of ameliorating the problems each individual faces when he comes to grips on an interpersonal basis with the old mores and patterns of institutions that have not changed, while his needs and the external socio-cultural conditions affecting his behavior have changed. Therefore, the authors chose to present a model for personal change and value reorientation that individuals could utilize on an interpersonal basis within their own marital situation.

The Action Model

The concept of open marriage, which is outlined elsewhere in detail (O'Neill & O'Neill, 1972), is primarily based on the expression of desires for change and the perceived routes to change drawn from the interviews conducted over a period of four years and upon the actual changes already made in many relationships that were observed. The research conducted was utilized to create a model for change. In so doing the authors have stepped beyond the role of objective researcher reporting the data and findings into the realm of what can be termed action anthropology: that is, delineating a model for change by placing the problem areas in their cultural context. An attempt has been made to present the traditional marital configuration in its societal setting and to delineate the cultural imperatives and values implicit in these imperatives for examination by those involved in marriage relationships. The purpose, then, is to make it possible for individuals to become aware of the idealized precepts of the institution of marriage and the forces influencing their attitude toward, and their behavior in, marriage. Without an awareness of the present conditions, they cannot perceive the pathways to change. It is to be fully understood that some will choose to remain within traditional marriage where the perimeters and dimensions are defined for them by the norms. But for those who feel a need for change, awareness and insight are a necessary first step to determining or discovering what pathways are available.

Action anthropology is a variation on the theme of action research. In the past, action research (Festinger, 1953; Sellitz, 1963) has been associated with institutional or organizational change directed toward finding solutions to organizational or social problems. The flow has been from the institutional level down to the individual in effecting change. More recently it has been recognized that individuals can initiate measures for change and reverse the flow to effect change on the institutional level. Weinberg (1965) has noted that this is a problem-solving, action-oriented society, and continues:

On this action level, society and the person are both symbolic systems with varying capacities for solving problems. Both society and the person can respond to problems in terms of their knowledge and their capacity for decision making and executive knowledge. Both can communicate, plan, and implement programs to solve problems. . . . The individual deliberates about alternatives before selecting a problem-solving response. (4)

Today, the orientation toward methods of change must begin with the individual. The need for a measure of self-determination is paramount. Yet the individual is frequently overlooked as a primary force for change, the assumption being that his behavior is shaped by impinging social forces in the environment and that he has neither sufficient knowledge and perspective to perceive these forces, nor is adequately equipped to institute directive and self-motivated change. This attitude underestimates the individual. The sample encompassed a broad range of middle class informant-respondents. The majority expressed a desire for some feeling of self-determination and autonomy in their lives and marriage behavior. Many had already instituted it. Furthermore, most had

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a knowledge of what the problem areas were in marriage.

One quote is offered from an interview with a 23-year-old single woman, who was at that time in a nonmarriage relationship with a young man and seriously contemplating marriage:

I don't want to say yes, yes we are going to be in love forever. It's like saying, yes, yes you know the ocean—and the next wave is going to look like this one, but I can say it is worth the risk if I feel I can do something about it. I want to be understanding, and start out with the attitude of, well it ain't going to be bliss but if I do my homework I stand a very good chance, and knowing what the chances are and stepping into it with your eyes open, you got a chance of making your marriage work . . . and there is a lot more homework to do today because people have to make decisions they never had to make before in marriage, but those marriages will be better for it . . . it's not I'm doing this because I've got to do it, it's doing this because I chose to do it, and that's what it is, man is a thinking animal, therefore I am. Once you get down to this kind of foundation and you can build, you know, 'well begun is half done.'

The Open Marriage Model

Open marriage is presented as a model with a two-fold purpose:

1) To provide insights for individuals concerning the past patterns of traditional marriage, which has been termed closed marriage. Based on closed systems model, traditional marriage was perceived as presenting few options for choice or change.

2) To provide guidelines, through an open systems model, for developing an intimate marital relationship that would provide for growth for both partners in the context of a one-to-one relationship. This does imply some degree of mutuality. It does not imply that growth will always be bilateral, but rather that there will be supportive assistance and tolerance during unilateral growth. Shostrom and Kavanaugh (1971) have delineated the rhythmic relationship which best exemplifies this pattern. These guidelines have been designed in answer to the needs expressed by the majority of our informant-respondents for a relationship which could offer them more dimensions for growth together than either could attain singly. The principle through which this mutually augmenting growth occurs is synergy. Many couples found that this synergistic self-actualizing mode of relating became possible only through the revision and deletion of some of the expectations of closed marriage.

Open marriage can then be defined as a relationship in which the partners are committed to their own and to each other's growth. Supportive caring and increasing security in individual identities makes possible the sharing of self-growth with a meaningful other who encourages and anticipates his own and his mate's growth. It is a relationship which is flexible enough to allow for change, which is constantly being renegotiated in the light of changing needs, consensus in decision making, in tolerance of individual growth, and in openness to new possibilities for growth. Obviously, following this model often involves a departure, sometimes radical, from rigid conformity to the established husband-wife roles and is not easy to effect.

In brief, the guidelines are: living for now, realistic expectations, privacy, role flexibility, open and honest communication, open companionship, equality, identity, and trust. The first step is for partners to reassess the marriage relationship they are in, or anticipate, in order to reevaluate expectations for themselves and for their partner. Couples in today's society are not educated for marriage or the requisites of a good human relationship, nor are they aware of the psychological and myriad other commitments that the typical marriage contract implies. The expectations of closed marriage—the major one being that the partner will be able to fulfill all of the other's needs (emotional, social, sexual, economic, intellectual, and otherwise)—present obstacles to growth and attitudes that foster conflict between partners. Awareness of these expectations and a realignment more in accord with a realistic appraisal of their capabilities are fundamental to instituting change and to solving their problems in relationship.

Living for now involves relating in the present rather than in terms of the past or in terms of the future goals which are frequently materialistic and concrete rather than emotional and intellectual in nature. The granting of time off, or privacy, can be used for examination of the self and for
psychic regeneration. A way out of what many marital partners conceive as the role-bind involves working toward a greater role flexibility both in terms of switching roles temporarily or on a part-time basis, and as a therapeutic device for understanding the self and the position of the other partner. Open and honest communication is perhaps the most important element in an open relationship. The lack of communication skills creates a formidable barrier between husband and wife, yet these skills are the most important in sustaining a vital relationship, promoting understanding, and in increasing knowledge of self. Open companionship involves relating to others, including the opposite sex, outside the primary unit of husband and wife, as an auxiliary avenue for growth. Equality involves relating to the mate as a peer in terms of ways to achieve stature rather than through the status attached to husband and wife roles. Identity involves the development of the individual through interaction with mate and others and through actualizing his own potentials. Trust, growing through the utilization of these other guidelines and based on mutuality and respect, creates a climate for growth. Liking, respect, sexual intimacy, and love grow through the exercise of these elements.

Each progressive guideline becomes increasingly abstract. The system can be seen as an expanding spiral of evolving steps in complexity and depth in the marital relationship. The system organizes through the principle of synergy, a concept drawn from medicine and chemistry, first utilized by Benedict (Maslow and Honigmann, 1970) in cultural, and later by Maslow (1965, 1968) in interpersonal contexts. In open marriage, the concept of synergic build-up is defined as a mutually augmenting growth system. Synergy means that two partners in marriage can accomplish more personal and interpersonal growth together than they could separately without the loss of their individual identities. Synergic build-up defines the positive augmenting feedback that can enhance mutual growth.

While only a limited few may be able to utilize all these guidelines in their totality and simultaneously, open marriage would best be considered a resource mosaic from which couples can draw according to their needs and their readiness for change in any one area.

The majority of the sample had already explored the possibilities for change in some of the areas covered by the guidelines. Many of these reflected only a change in attitude, while behavioral changes were acknowledged as difficult. The two areas of greatest difficulty were the conflicts arising from changing man-woman and husband-wife roles and the problems encountered in self-development.

The question of marital and extramarital sexual behavior, while ever-present, did not seem to be the central problem with which they were coping. While marital sex sometimes presented problems, many felt that the emphasis on sexual adjustment, in terms of manuals and the media, was exaggerated. Although many felt that they could not cope with sexual jealousy in terms of extramarital sex, they were on the verge of deciding that sex per se was not their central problem in the marriage. Numerous couples had already effected some degree of sexual latitude in their own relationships. Some had done so with tacit knowledge but without verbalized agreement. Others had done so in various types of consensual arrangements, including group sex and partner exchange. While some benefits were noted, it was observed that by and large these experiences did not occur in a context where the marital partners were developing their primary marriage relationship sufficiently for this activity to count as a growth experience. Frequently it obscured relationship problems, became an avenue of escape, and intensified conflicts. For some, however, it did become a means of revealing other problem areas in the marriage.

Underlying the marital couple's explorations into any area of nonconformity, whether it was extramarital sex or the equally important area of changes in typical role behavior (i.e., male-female, man-woman, husband-wife), was the central problem of relationship. That is, how could the marital partners relate in terms of their

Concerning these two areas of change, the authors are least optimistic about the movement
changing needs and those of society in a mutually beneficial fashion? Open marriage presents some of the elements in interpersonal relationships that would allow for change, for increasing responsibility for the self and for others, and for increased understanding between husband and wife.

The open marriage model offers insights and learning guides for developing more intimate and understanding marital relationships. An open relationship in marriage, as well as in any interpersonal matrix, involves becoming a more open person. Since the open-minded personality is one which can perceive options and alternatives and make decisions about the paths to change (Rokeach, 1960), efforts to help the marital couple in perception and skills should increase their ability to solve many problems in marriage. However, it will not be easy for most couples. Emotional maturity, and the development of responsibility and confident identity cannot emerge overnight. But standing still, or merely exploring experimental structural forms without attention to the interpersonal factors only seems to be increasing the number of problems in marriage and decreasing the benefits to be gained from it. Open marriage is not intended to solve marital problems, but by using the open marriage model, the couple will at least be substituting problems which promote growth and learning for problems which are currently insoluble.

Implications

It is in the arena of interpersonal relations that marriage and the family will have to find new meaning and gain greater strength, no matter what the structural framework may be. Children cannot be taught the value of supportive love and caring, responsibility, problem-solving, or decision-making skills unless the parents have first developed these qualities in their own relationship. The inadequacy of organized institutions to instill these values and skills is only too apparent. Therefore, intimate, long-term relationships such as those of marriage and the family must provide them, and in order to do this they must be more rewarding and fulfilling for their members and there must be feedback and caring for each other's welfare.

Focusing on the methods for achieving a rewarding one-to-one relationship provides something that individuals can deal with and work with on a self-determining level. By encouraging personal responsibility, self-growth and bonding through the synergic relationship, the basic unit of husband and wife should become more rewarding and offer more avenues for fulfillment.

Building from within strengthens the individual, the couple, and then the family unit, and thus the entire social structure, since the fundamental unit of society is the family. Whatever form the family unit may be, its strength will still depend upon the rewards gained from interpersonal relationships. It is in this sense that the individual, and the married couple, can become not only a fulcrum for change but also a key factor leading to the strengthening of the social structure. Thus both family and society can be better equipped to cope with accelerating technological and cultural change. Hopefully, open families can evolve to an open society and eventually to an open world.

REFERENCES:
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