

Family Systems in Premarital Counseling

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Rooted in Bowenian family systems theory, a format for pastoral premarital counseling is described. Examples are cited which show how couples can be helped to look at the formation of their own marital unit by studying each partner's "family of origin" system.

"But it is illusory to believe that a man and a woman are two separate people who come together to form a more perfect union. They are simply scapegoats sent out by their families to reproduce their kind."

Carl A. Whitaker¹

If this is the case, then it is not surprising that the marriage situation today is fragile. Moreover, the last two decades have watched the institution of marriage transform itself, under the impact of major legal, economic, political and social change. In many respects these changes have allowed for health and vitality, as men and women reached for equitable relationships, intimacy beyond sex, and fulfillment of individual potential. At the same time, people are leaving marriages at the rate of one divorce for every two marriages, often puzzled as to why "it didn't work out", with residual feelings of guilt and failure, yet still willing to try it again. As a result, marriage counseling, separation counseling, divorce counseling, and remarriage counseling have mushroomed in the last decade as couples wrestle with incongruities between aspirations, expectations, and disappointments in relation to their marriages.

The question is, how to reconcile what people bring to marriage with what they discover about marriage? Could premarital counseling orient itself around such possibilities of reconciliation?

Premarital counseling is practiced primarily by clergy. Although not really a popular task, it is widely believed to be an important preventative measure.

Two methods appear to be used by many clergy. One purports to be educative, using short sermonettes on varying areas of marriage, with the hope that the couple will learn, remember, and apply the accruing insights. The second method used relies on personality inventories, such as the Myers-Briggs, the idea being to alert couples ahead of time to their areas of similarity, dissimilarity and complementarity, anticipating that such knowledge will help each person deal with the other.

Any method of premarital counseling has to compete for the couple's attention in relation to certain future realities. The couple comes to a pastor, rabbi, or priest expecting to *celebrate* their relationship by marrying, not really to examine its future. Positive that their love surpasses any other, the two sit before a pastor, anticipating a wedding, but not the full reality of married life. It is usually difficult to get the two to touch this reality, as they sit, wrapped up in each other (sometimes literally), yet strangely insulated from the world around them. To entice the couple into a consideration of mundane aspects of future living when compared to their immediate aura of romantic love is not at all easy. And as Irvin Yalom points out in *Love's Executioner*²:

Therapists do not like to treat a patient who has fallen in love. Therapy and a state of love-merger are incompatible because therapeutic work requires a questioning self-awareness and an anxiety that will ultimately serve as guide to internal conflicts. The person who has fallen in love, and entered a blissful state of merger, is not self-reflective because the questioning lonely 'I' (and the attendant anxiety of isolation) dissolve into the 'WE.' Thus one sheds anxiety but loses oneself.

The method we found in teaching and working the last fifteen years with over 500 seminarians and pastors and gaining appropriate feedback, is rooted in family systems theory. We wanted to develop a premarital counseling format for clergy to use that would take seriously the couple's present romantic experience of each other and yet engage them in an examination of more extensive relationship issues present, past and future.

In our own practice of marriage and family counseling we have come to respect the fact that during a marriage's first year, a blueprint is formed for the patterns of marital relationship. This blueprint is based on each person's participation in a family system. Without really intending permanence of pattern, the couple establishes ways of dealing with each other, with in-laws, and with friends. Organization evolves in every area, whether it has to do with religion, household affairs, holiday rituals, habits of work, money, social life, and even affection and sex. This happens, in part, by design, and, in part, by default, resulting in additional patterns and behaviors by which the relationship may operate well or poorly for the entire life of the marriage.

We sought to find a format that would alert the couple to the hidden influences of family systems so that each person could participate with intentionality in forming the relationship blueprint. We also felt that such pastoral

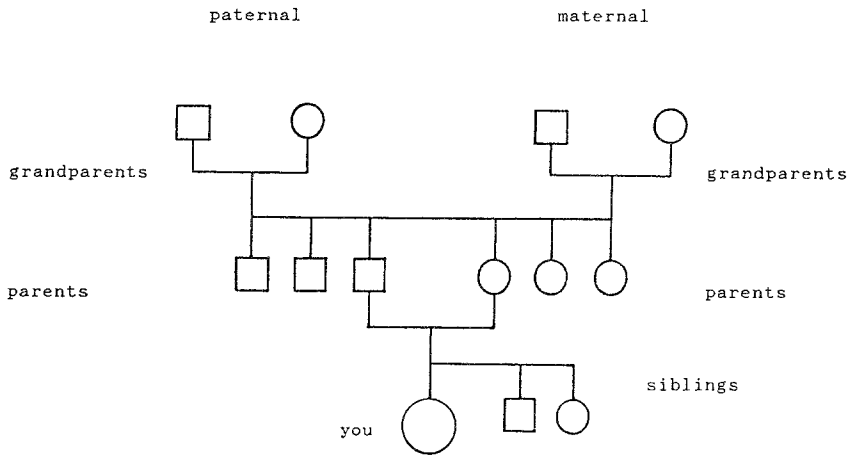


Figure 1

premarital counseling could easily provide a base for pastoral care in the years to come.

The approach we developed, then, invites the couple to examine their own relationship by studying each partner's "family of origin" system. What might seem to be a circuitous route to the couple's relationship is not really the case. Although it appears that only two persons are marrying, in reality, as Carl Whitaker says, each person's family is present in powerful and hidden ways, ready to exert its influence over values, rules, and assumptions at every opportunity. A family systems approach addresses this covert dynamism while offering what couples often find an intriguing approach to premarital counseling.

THE BASIC FORMAT

The entire format consists of four sessions. Session one sets out the agenda for the premarital counseling, and affords the opportunity to discuss the marriage rite itself. Sessions two, three and four focus on examinations of each family system and its impact on the formation of their relationship. Work begins in between sessions one and two with preparation of the genogram, by each partner, separately, and without sharing.

A genogram (Figure 1) describes all persons in the family of origin including three generations. Such facts as sibling order, birth dates, dates of

Showing Family Relationships	
Very close relationship:	= - - - - -
Distant relationship:
Conflictual relationship:	v v v v v v v v v v v v

Figure 2

deaths, separations, divorces and major illnesses are recorded according to memory.

Beginning with the grandparents on each side, the family tree is traced to the parental generation and to the person.³ Males are indicated with squares, females with circles. Dates of births and deaths are entered above each. Dates of marriages, separations, divorces are entered along the appropriate relationship lines. Family relationships are examined from the viewpoint of closeness or distance (Figure 2).⁴

Once the genogram has been prepared, premarital counseling focuses on the nuclear family system (that is, parents and siblings) of each person. Each describes his and her family culture, so to speak, responding to questions such as: What were the family values concerning money? education? work? religion? sex roles? Jotting down in note form, each describes what was communicated in the family about these, in both words and actions. In relationship to money, for example, were values held jointly by parents or were there conflicts over its use? Some families value saving over spending. Some believe in cash spending and no credit spending. Some are conservative in developing a family budget, while others oppose a budget as constraining. Did one parent handle the finances? Both?

In the area of religion, what was communicated about God, the importance of worship, the meaning of life and death? What forms of personal piety, if any, were expected or practiced? Might these become part of the expectation of one or both newly married couples? What was the meaning of church, or no affiliation? How were religious conflicts handled?

Other questions help to focus on the emotional climate of the family system: Who was close to whom? To whom were you closest? To whom did you go for comfort? How and when was affection expressed? How was anger expressed, conflict managed? Were there areas of privacy? Of sharing? How did people in the family treat illness?

Still other questions get at the lines of power and authority in the family system. How were decisions made? Who had the last word? In what areas? Who disciplined the children? How were disciplinary actions decided upon? If

you wanted permission to do something which parent did you approach first? How did you make your appeal?

Questions about personal freedoms and expressions of individuality can focus on experiences of privacy and sharing in the family. Were children treated equally in the same way or according to individual traits, interests, and ages? Did people have many individual interests? Was there a great emphasis on family activities together?

As you approach puberty and dating, what guidelines, rules or information about sexuality were imparted? By whom? A parent? A sibling? A teacher or friends? Who most influenced your picture of what it was to be a man? A woman? Did the family have firm or fluid ideas about femininity and masculinity?

As each person responds to these kinds of questions a clear picture of the family culture emerges for the person and the partner.

The next task is to consider differentiation from the family. Each person now examines his and her values as they approximate or differ from those of the family. What values, patterns, rituals, and traditions does each person think are important to maintain and what ones changed?

Julia, for example, knew that her marriage to Mark would have to be different from her parent's marriage. Having watched her mother live a life of what Julia perceived to be loneliness and powerlessness, while her father did pretty much as he pleased, Julia knew that she wanted to establish a different role as a wife. From the beginning of their relationship, she had talked with Mark about partnership and equality in the areas of financing, home maintenance, cooking, washing, and cleanup. Mark, for his part, was adamant about not replicating the fight habits of his family. He vowed that he and Julia would talk things out and negotiate. In some other areas Julia and Mark agreed with their respective family values. Both felt that education was important as an ongoing life process. Both thought work to be central to life and placed importance on finding careers that provided opportunity to use and develop talents. As Julia completed her MBA and Mark entered his second year in partnership with a small accounting firm, both felt that this growing edge of their life together would be smooth and rewarding.

Decisions and expectations such as these are typical of the intentional layouts a couple draws up. However, the way in which these plans are implemented will depend upon other operations in each person's world. These operations, also shaping the blueprint, originate in each person's *subterranean* expectations, woven so tightly into the fabric of subjectivity that they go unrecognized as *assumptions* until these hopes are challenged by some unwitting action of the partner.

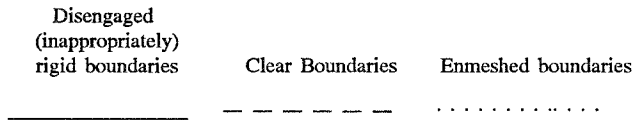
SUBTERRANEAN DYNAMICS

To picture such hidden expectations, let us imagine Julia and Mark, married now a whole week. With honeymoon trip behind them, it's back to the workaday world. On Monday evening, Julia arrives home first. She picks up the mail, carries it to the apartment and begins to open it. By the time Mark gets there, she has laid it out, neatly, sorted in piles for him. He looks at the first stack addressed to Julia and Mark Smith-Black, each envelope neatly opened, then the second stack, again neatly opened, but this time addressed just to Julia Black. When he spots the third pile addressed just to him, but yet opened by Julia, a sudden feeling of disbelief surges up. He flips out with annoyance, "You opened my mail!" Julia, thinking in her own way that she had done something thoughtful and nice in sorting the mail, is puzzled by Mark's remark. "Is there something you don't want me to see?", she says with a distinct edge in her voice. Mark, now reacting to Julia's voice and to the growing feelings of invasion and threat, says, "Just don't open my mail anymore. Some things are private." Julia follows: "People who care about each other shouldn't have secrets, especially when they are married. I share everything with you, because I love and trust you." Mark, because the conversation has long passed the point of comfort, says, "Let's just drop it. You know I don't like to argue."

Awareness of each person's family system helps to place a perspective on the mail incident. A study of Mark's family system indicates that the family placed a higher value on individuality than on family belongingness, while a study of Julia's shows the reverse. Mark, the elder of two boys, five years apart, was used to his own room, his own possessions, a lot of privacy and time alone. Julia, on the other hand, the second of five girls, was used to a lot of community property. She never had a room of her own, in fact, never spent a night alone. Sisters shared a common wardrobe. People in the family were interested and involved in one another's lives to the point that there was little privacy. So when Julia opened all the mail, she was operating out of an assumptive world based on her family's experiences. Mark protested because his assumptions about the order of things were being blatantly ignored.

Julia and Mark represent two differing patterns of family system's organization. The patterns are discernible using Salvador Minuchin's structural analysis of family functioning.

According to Minuchin, family systems are organized in a general way toward disengagement (individuality) or toward enmeshment (belongingness). At the extreme these represent poles of dysfunction, each far from the center of healthy engagement (balance of belongingness and individuality). Viewing these ideas on a continuum, as does Minuchin, it may be pictured as follows.⁵



The heavy line, characterizing the disengaged pole, represents the rigid boundaries between members of the family. In this system, individuals do not resonate to one another; that is, stresses in one do not cross over individual boundaries. A child’s hatred of school may go unrecognized until there is a call from the school. The dotted line symbolizing the enmeshed pole represents the diffuse boundaries between family members. The system has a heightened sense of belonging which often requires a yielding of individual autonomy. Stress reverberates strongly among family members. The entire family may become tremendously upset simply because a child does not want dessert one night. The center of the continuum is symbolized by a broken line, preserving both individual autonomy and a sense of responsiveness to the family.

Had Mark and Julia been aware of their respective family systems they could have interpreted each others’ behavior with an understanding that springs from and engenders intimacy. As it was, each felt a threat to intimacy without really comprehending its subterranean wellspring. Mark, coming from a family of disengagement, felt a fundamental comfort about his family’s less engaged style. To him, having a lot of privacy was “normal”, the way things should be. Likewise, Julia, part of a family that was right of center, moving along the continuum towards enmeshment, also felt that her style was “right”, and the way it ought to be. And each felt at a primitive level, that the other was “wrong”. Such is the subterranean and irrational punch of the family system, strong and resistant to change.

When Mark made the statement, “You know I don’t like to argue,” another feature of his family rose to the surface. Neither Julia nor Mark discerned the depths of meaning, even though Mark had shared with Julia that he detested his parents arguing and that he wasn’t about to repeat it. He told her about the misery that he felt as a child, listening from his bed to the late night arguments between his mother and father, both strong-willed and stubborn individuals. Every time they fought he was sure it would end in divorce. While he became used to this behavior in time, he was determined not to have such arguments in his marriage. Julia felt a great sympathy for Mark, the child, and readily agreed. That much of their expectation was mutual and clear. What Julia could not know was that when Mark said “argue” he meant *potential* arguing. *Potential* for argument was judged not on any objective criteria, but on a pure gut-level feeling of danger. In the example above, Mark felt danger as Julia took a counterposition in opening his mail. The danger increased as he felt the strength of his own feelings about privacy. When she began to ques-

tion him, that meant disagreement and within him were stirrings of irritation. That was his cue to stop talking.

In trying to "correct" his parents' "fighting" Mark did so in a reactive fashion. That is, he was still responding to anticipatory cues he experienced as the child listening to his parents. At the slightest hint of disagreement or anger in his relationship with Julia, Mark felt he must put an end to the discussion. "I don't want to talk about it. You know I don't like to argue." The first time this happens, Julia may be surprised enough or sympathetic enough to let the subject drop. But later, his pattern of interpreting disagreement as the precursor of a fight will provoke irritation and anger in Julia, as she draws on her own family experience. In her family, people said what was on their minds. In this way she and her sisters worked out who was going to do what, or wear what, or use what, and when. She can easily come to the conclusion that Mark doesn't care about her feelings, and is being selfish. He does not love her enough to stay with the issue and work it out.

If a couple can come to understand the rootage of their individual patterns of privacy and conflict, as in the example above, they need not remain in a tug of war year after year, with each person becoming intimately acquainted with the conflict instead of each other. People married for twenty-five years can still be fighting the same fights from the first year of marriage: where to spend Sundays, at his parents or hers? at his church or hers? how to manage children or money or time or leisure, often remaining ignorant of the assumptive worlds behind these tussles. They never really form their own family styles, but simply go on tugging away, hoping for a win this time to make up for the last loss.

That people bring different life experiences to marriage is no surprise. What can come as a surprise to the newly married couple is the impact of these experiences on their relationship. One young couple with whom we met for premarital counseling began to describe Sunday mornings with their individual families in amazingly different styles. The young man spoke of his growth in the church and steady attendance with his family at worship services on Sunday mornings. He said that this was not only meaningful to his spiritual development but that it also created a deep experience of intimacy with his family. It was obvious to us as he was talking that his bride-to-be became increasingly uncomfortable. When he had finished she looked at him and said,

Well, my family spent Sunday morning in quite a different way. My parents, as you know, are both busy professional people. Sunday morning was about the only time in the week when they could feel free. For as long as I can remember Sunday morning has been the occasion for a brunch around the dining room table. We all made it a point to be there, and it came to be one of the high points of our family's life. We would go to church together on major holidays, such as Christmas, but we reserved Sunday morning just for us. I hope this won't create a problem but I cherished these

times with my family and I would want nothing more than to continue this practice in my own home.

Of course, this was a problem until the underpinnings of each person were thoroughly expressed, understood and dealt with by examining new possibilities. In this case the couple came to the conclusion that worship at church together would begin the day, and Sunday "supper" could carry the family time tradition that the young woman anticipated.

CONCLUSION

Couples can be helped, then, premaritally, to explore and understand these different family life experiences as they shape assumptions and expectations that operate in the new relationship. Often before marriage, issues such as these arise and can be recognized as family systems influences. Once recognition is made, the couple can discuss alternative patterns and decide on their own style. Then they can begin the fundamental process of forming their own family. Without recognizing the disparate family styles, individuals may claim their own as normative and quickly become inflexible to the partner's experience.

Incidentally, we found this approach to premarital counseling to be an excellent introduction to the in-laws. As one young woman expressed it to us, having just returned from her fiance's family reunion, "Believe it or not, I met them, but it was as if I'd known them before I even arrived."

REFERENCE NOTES

1. Carl A. Whitaker, Alice Greenberg & Milton L. Greenberg, "Existential Marital Therapy: A Synthesis." Sholevar, G. Pirooz, Ed. *The Handbook of Marriage and Marital Therapy* (New York: SP Medical and Scientific Books, 1981), p. 182.
2. Yalom, Irvin D., *Love's Executioner and Other Tales of Psychotherapy* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1989), p. 11.
3. The genogram and family interaction patterns are based on Murray Bowen's work summarized in McGoldrick, Monica and Gerson, Randy, *Genograms in Family Assessment* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1985), pp. 4-8.
4. *ibid.*, p. 2.
5. Minuchin, Salvador, *Families and Family Therapy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1974), p. 54.