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# The Clinical Use of Social System Theory in Marriage Counseling

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This is a paper on the applied use of social system theory in marriage counseling. Marriage counseling is a practice not earmarked by any one discipline and consequently not by any one theoretical approach. It is engaged in by psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, physicians (other than psychiatrists), lawyers, ministers, sociologists, friends, and neighbors. It has been defined by Dr. Robert Laidlaw, Chief of Psychiatry at Roosevelt Hospital, New York, and former president of the American Association of Marriage Counselors, as “a form of short-term psychotherapy dealing with interpersonal relationships in which problems relating to marriage are the central factor.”<sup>1</sup>

This definition embodies three concepts that need clarifications: 1) short-term psychotherapy; 2) problems relating to marriage; and 3) interpersonal relations.

## **Short-Term Psychotherapy**

At a recent meeting of the New England Conference of Social Workers, this was an important subject for discussion. In contrast to short-term therapy, one thinks of long-term therapy as usually associated with psychiatry, more particularly psychoanalysis. If social workers are changing from long-term therapy attitudes to short-term therapy attitudes, will they change their theoretical approach to the problem? Or will their old theoretical approaches enable them to

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Emily H. Mudd, *The Practice of Marriage Counseling*, New York: Association Press, 1951, p. 206.

handle short-term therapy? Does social system theory have a contribution to make here?

Deep therapy or long-term therapy is primarily concerned with the intra-personality system of an individual.

Short-term therapy is primarily problem oriented and can cope with many problems related to marriage. Individual short-term therapy aimed at helping a person to define his roles and to adjust to these role definitions and expectations can help an individual make satisfactory adjustments in marriage.

### **Problems Relating to Marriage**

The number of different disciplines engaged in marriage counseling is evidence of the diffuse nature of problems relating to marriage. I can only list some of the problems which have been stated by clients in my own practice. The following statements come from first interviews: Mr. and Mrs. M say they cannot communicate with each other; most everything they say to each other ends in a fight. Mrs. X suspects Mr. X has another woman. Mr. and Mrs. S are always fighting over allocation of funds; both are working; whose money should be used for what? Mr. A, an electronic engineer, feels his wife's demands that he participate in caring for the children are unrealistic; he needs his time to catch up on his professional reading, et cetera. Mr. and Mrs. H quarrel about child-care and discipline. Mrs. L, a West Indian, who has recently settled in Boston, says her husband acts like a West Indian husband instead of an American husband—what can she do?

### **Interpersonal Relationships**

An interpersonal relationship has a very complicated structure. Although many disciplines use the term and recognize the structure and function of interpersonal relationships implicitly, an explicit definition can be found in Parsons' action theory.<sup>2</sup> At its most simple level, an interpersonal relationship concerns an actor or ego and a social object or alter ego (the other half of the interpersonal relationship) engaged in a role. All meaningful behavior between individuals is carried on in terms of some system or partial social system. Roles are partial social systems. Social system and partial social systems are meaningful to ego and alter ego through the learning of role expectations in the process of socialization.<sup>3</sup> Role expectations are the patterns of expected behavior which an individual in a role assumes he has a right to expect of those individuals with

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<sup>2</sup> See Talcott Parsons, *The Social System*, Glencoe, Illinois, Free Press, 1951.

<sup>3</sup> Talcott Parsons and Robert F. Bales, *Family, Socialization and Interaction Process*, Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1955.

whom he interacts in that particular role. Specific application of this theory to husband and wife roles in marriage will follow in the case discussion.

Now that we have elaborated our definition of marriage counseling, we shall discuss a social system approach to the problems of marriage and point out some of the differences between it and an intra-personality system approach.

Marriage counseling is carried out through the medium of the interview. Interviews range on a continuum from very directive to nondirective. All interviews of this type contain a mass of data. The first question is "How does the counselor relate the client to his experiences as described by the client in the interview?" The counselor must operate either implicitly or explicitly within the framework of a system of thought with which he reflects, interprets, and clarifies data in the interview. The counselor explicitly or implicitly uses certain structural categories. We are, of course, all familiar with the concepts "id," "ego" and "super-ego." These are intra-personality concepts to which we refer when trying to systematize data about the working of the system of personality.

The structural categories which help us to systematize data about the working of social systems or partial social systems are not so well known. Social system theory has a system of descriptive structural categories which are parts of a critically worked out system. These categories allow the counselor to describe the phenomena of the interview—words, signs, symbols, dress, posture, tone of voice, pitch of voice, rate of speech, sighs, tears, et cetera, as parts of or processes within systematically conceived empirical systems.

One of the big differences between other forms of psychotherapy and marriage counseling is the method of systematizing the empirical data of the interview. Psychiatry, for example, uses intra-personality oriented categories for classification; marriage counseling uses inter-personality oriented categories.<sup>4</sup> The intra-personality type of analysis focuses attention on individuals. It singles out an individual self as a point of reference and studies the individual in his connections, interactions, et cetera, between himself and other members. For example, Mr. A, a married man, in an interview says, "I hate to do the dishes." The psychiatrist might pursue the question of hate with other questions such as "What other things do you hate?"—the reference always being the internal personality system of ego, his areas of generalized hostility. Or he might pursue the masculinity-femininity continuum in ego's personality, especially as it relates to ego's dish-washing.

The inter-personality type of analysis focuses the counselor's attention on the membership units or roles in which Mr. A participates. The counselor would

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<sup>4</sup> The difference between *intra-personality* categories and *inter-personality* categories as used here is related to Marion Levy's discussion of the difference between *relational* and *organizational* categories in his book, *The Family Revolution in Modern China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949:4-5).

pursue the statement "I hate to do the dishes" with a statement "You think it is your wife's job. What else do you think your wife's job is?" Here the counselor is only secondarily interested in the hates of the client. He is primarily interested in the role relationship between the client and his wife, especially the problem of role differentiation: Who defines the roles in this family; what are the definitions of the husband's duties, wife's duties, et cetera; do the husband and wife define their roles differently; do they disagree; how is the disagreement resolved, on a cognitive level or on an affective level? The emphasis of this approach is on getting the client to make explicit the definition of the role about which he is talking as well as his expectations of alter ego, and then to evaluate his definition and his expectations in those areas where he is having marital difficulty using normative patterns as a frame of reference.

The goal of the psychiatrist is to help get a sick patient well. The goal of the marriage counselor is to help the parties to the marriage understand the system in which they operate and to solve or adjust problems of conflict.

The necessity of distinguishing the differences between the two types of categories for the interviewing data cannot be emphasized too strongly. The type of classification that the counselor or therapist uses determines the kind of data that will be elicited during the interview. The goal of the interviewer will be reflected in the kinds of questions he asks the client. This is one reason why many case records collected in the course of an interview by a therapist who thinks in intra-personality categories are not found useful by a researcher who thinks in terms of inter-personality categories.

Now, it is possible that a particular therapist will be familiar with both systems of thought. Can such a person use both systems at the same time? Once the therapist has responded to the client on the personality or intra-personality system level, he cannot respond to the same thought at the same time on the social system or inter-personality level. This is because personality systems and social systems are only in the minds of individuals. As Parsons and Bales say, "They [personality and social systems] are differently organized about different foci of integration and have different relations to the sources of motivational energy . . . but they are made of the same stuff. . . . Neither of these system-references is the 'right' or the 'real' system of reference, both are equally real and stand on the same ontological level."<sup>5</sup> The client will respond to whatever statement the therapist makes first and the dynamic process of interview continues. Of course, the therapist who has used an intra-personality response can always try to come back later in the same interview or try in another interview to work on the social system level.

The preceding paragraph points out the necessity for the counselor to be aware of the difference between personality system interpretations and social

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<sup>5</sup> Parsons and Bales, *op. cit.*, pp. 357-358.

system interpretations. It is just as important for the client to be aware of the difference between personality system interpretations and social system interpretations so that the client can make better use of his time and the skill of the counselor. The marriage counselor must familiarize the client with the structural categories of the interview. This is primarily a process of educating the client.

The primary structural role system which the client and counselor must keep in mind during the interview is that surrounding the nuclear family—that is, the husband-wife roles, mother-father roles, and such other role relationships as the client brings up in the interview. The goal of the interview is to help the client see his or her part in the roles which are mentioned during the interview. Therefore, the questions which the counselor asks are aimed at the following:

1. To help the client see all behavior in an action frame of reference. That every time she acts in a role situation the person with whom she is interacting has a set of expectations as to how she will act and she has a set of expectations as to how that person shall react. (This I believe is the “double contingency” as used by Parsons.)
2. To help the client make explicit what her expectations were at the time that the incident took place.
3. To help the client to make explicit the interaction that took place.
4. To help the client see the conflict between expectations when they have occurred.
5. To help the client discuss alternative ways of handling the same problem if she were to meet it again.

In the initial interview, the counselor orients the client to this kind of thinking by telling her something like this: “Mrs. M, frequently in cases of marriage conflict, we find that individuals are not communicating with each other. We find ourselves in the role of husband and wife without ever really making clear to each other what we expect a husband to do regarding the family, and what we expect a wife to do. We know in a general sort of way and get along pretty well, until there is a disagreement on a small incident. Then we react by getting mad at each other. Each one feels that the other is unreasonable. You find that you have been living together and taking for granted that you understood what is expected of each other only to find that you do not agree on many things. We will discuss these areas of disagreement and see if we can make them specific instead of rather general so that we can look at them objectively. Family living is a very complicated process. We never really formally learn the job of living in a family. We bring into our new families attitudes we learned in the families in which we grew up.”

This initial orientation has a second purpose. The counselor who uses a social system approach to marriage counseling must determine whether the client

is ready to seek help on the social system level. A client who responds to such an orienting statement by saying "My trouble is I'm lonesome and depressed" and shows other evidence of wanting psychiatric help, should be referred to psychiatry. On the other hand, the client who discusses his role behavior in an intelligent, intellectual manner, should be helped by the counselor to recognize the affect and emotion involved in some of the problems which are raised during the interview. But the counselor has a duty to the client to relate these affective recognitions to his present problems. In the same way, a counselor has a duty to relate the childhood experiences which a client sees fit to talk about to the present problem which stimulated such associations. In this way, the possibility of transference will be diminished.

Now that we have defined marriage counseling and some aspects of social system theory, we will proceed to a case, for purposes of illustration.

### **The Case of Mr. and Mrs. M**

Mr. M telephoned for the appointment. Mr. and Mrs. M were seen separately. Until clients have had the opportunity to explore their role relations with their spouses in a private interview, I do not see them jointly. Conflicts in role definitions can create chaos in a joint interview and put the parties in a worse position relative to each other than they were before the joint interview. Mrs. M, after identifying herself as a Catholic, said, "My husband is a travelling salesman. This morning, I found some contraceptives in his drawer. When I showed them to him, he gave me a story about his friend. It seems his friend's wife suspects him of having relations with other women, and so he is holding the contraceptives for his friend. When I accused him of having relations with other women, he said he thought I was referring to some letters. Well, I never saw any letters. He does get a Christmas package every year from one of the buyers up in Maine that he visits. Why does she send the present to his house?" Mrs. M by this time was in tears and continued to cry. Then she continued, "I'm pregnant now with my fourth child. This morning I was desperate, but I feel a little better now." Mrs. M went on, "I don't care so much about the other women, I understand that in his business that is liable to happen, but to give me the kind of answer he gave me. Does he expect me to believe him?" In an interview of this kind the client is so full of material that the counselor has only to sit back and listen, to try and get not only the material on an empirical level, but the emotional tones.

### **An Analysis of the Case of Mr. and Mrs. M**

When Mrs. M identified herself as a Catholic she expected the counselor to classify her according to some normative marital patterns of individuals who are

Catholics. When she said her husband is a travelling salesman, she again intended to convey to me that this was a definite occupational role which had special attributes. (Much later in the interviewing we were able to discuss the role of the travelling salesman.) His answer to her when she accosted him with the fact that she had found the contraceptives was totally unsatisfactory and unexpected. On questioning, she said she really did not know what he could be expected to say at such a time, but she felt what he did say was not true, it did not make sense. She supposed he could have walked out, or refused to answer as alternative ways. She said she would have preferred this to lying.

What part of the social system was being discussed here implicitly? Mrs. M was talking about one of the "economic" aspects of the marital relation. Families, in their internal organization, like other social organizations, have a system of exchange of services. In marriage sexual relations are generally expected to be exclusive to both members of the marital relationship. It is sort of a "fair trade" deal. When Mrs. M suspected that Mr. M was having sexual relations with other women, she felt Mr. M was not carrying out his end of the sexual exchange contract and she didn't know how to react. She reacted emotionally by crying, by threatening to leave, and by becoming generally emotionally upset.

When Mrs. M suspected deviation in Mr. M, she also expected him to account to her in a manner which would satisfy her that Mr. M wanted to re-establish the equilibrium of the husband-wife role. But, from her point of view, Mr. M's answer was self-oriented instead of Mrs. M oriented. It was calculated to show that Mr. M did not deviate, that the evidence was only circumstantial. At that time, Mr. M had a need to protect himself. If he had been Mrs. M oriented, he would have given an answer which could have been reasonably accepted by Mrs. M so that she could excuse the deviation which she suspected. His denial of deviation and the story he gave was outside the acceptance circle of Mrs. M's expectations at that time.

Although Mrs. M held the normative attitude toward the exclusiveness of the husband-wife marital relations, she recognized that in certain occupational roles there was inherent in the role a temptation which if succumbed to might not be excused but understood. She went on to say that she heard stories about traveling salesmen.<sup>6</sup> She also stated that Mr. M is an attractive man and that many of the buyers to whom he sells are women. One woman who sends him a present every Christmas is a buyer.

Mrs. M stated that just talking about her marriage brought her to realize that she and Mr. M don't have too much in common anymore. (The M's have three children.) They didn't have much to say to each other. In order to get the

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<sup>6</sup> It is interesting to note here a hint of conflict in the travelling salesman-customer role and travelling salesman husband-wife role.

history on this feeling of not having too much to say to each other and to try and relate it to the "expressive" functions in the family—feelings of love and cohesion which are necessary for the family to survive as a group—I asked Mrs. M when she first noticed that she and Mr. M were not getting along and to tell this to me in terms of the incidents that occurred—what she said and what he said—so that the role interaction could be better reconstructed.

Mrs. M took the time of Mr. M's return from military service as the point at which she began to notice that their husband-wife relationships were not what they were before Mr. M went into the service. This gave us an opportunity to discuss the husband-wife role structure as it was before Mr. M went into the service. And through this historical development we tried to locate the structural categories in which the areas of strain were located. During the war, Mrs. M was head of the household. She made the decisions; she had the political authority. When Mr. M returned, the question of how much authority to relinquish had to be faced.<sup>7</sup>

Mrs. M felt that Mr. M's social behavior in company was very rude and that for that reason she did not invite guests in any more. He refused to leave the television set. She related this incident: One of the neighbors dropped in and Mr. M was watching the football game. Mrs. M asked him to come in. Mr. M turned around for a minute, said "Hello," turned back to the game, said "Take a chair for yourself," and said nothing further. Mrs. M felt this was no way to treat a guest. Guests were to be treated kindly and graciously. You get up and get a chair for a guest—you don't tell him to take a chair. This upset Mrs. M. I asked her if she later discussed this with Mr. M. Did he know what she expected him to do when a neighbor came in? This was an attempt on my part to help her make explicit her attitudes about visiting and her expectations. She answered that he ought to know himself—this was a question of manners. We discussed "manners" and the possibility that men and women see the problem of manners differently. That perhaps Mr. M did not know quite what was expected of him at that time. Did Mrs. M think the neighbor thought Mr. M had bad manners? Was it important to have the neighbors think well of Mr. M?

After investigating the areas of role differentiation—husband as a provider; she as homemaker; economic and political allocations; who makes the rules in the house (and here there was disagreement on how the children should be disciplined); and expressive patterns such as visiting, going to church, et cetera—we came back to the original problem which had brought Mrs. M in to see the counselor. It had been suggested to Mrs. M that she read *The Happy Family*

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<sup>7</sup> Dr. Eric Lindeman uses the concept of anticipatory grief reaction to explain some post-war marital problems. Many women had anticipated the possibility of losing their husbands and assumed the role attitude of "wife without a husband present." When the man returned, the social structure of the family attitudinally had no place for them.

by Levy and Munroe, especially the chapter about "The Other Woman." Mrs. M felt that she reacted not to the specific incident but to the problem of family solidarity. By going into each specific area and discussing the present pattern, the past patterns, the strains in the present patterns and their development, Mrs. M felt she was in a better position to recognize such possible areas of conflict in the future and would be more aware of them so that her system of expectations would not be too far apart from that which would be most likely to occur in the interaction between herself and her husband.

Mr. M also had several interviews with me. The same kind of orienting statement was given to Mr. M. He chose to start his interviews in a different area. His basic problem, he stated, stemmed from the religious differences between his wife and himself. Mr. M said he disliked Catholics because they were rigid. Although Mr. M was a Protestant, they were married in the Catholic Church, at the request of his wife, and he had promised that their children would be raised as Catholics. He used to go to the Catholic Church before he went into the service, but since he came back from the service he had been attending his own church. He wants to be able to take his family to church with him. He said he was willing to attend their church, but he feels they should go with him on occasion. The eldest daughter had been educated in the Catholic Church and would not go with her father. Mr. M therefore wants the other two children to go to church with him on occasion so that they can see the difference.

The counselor asked Mr. M to describe what there was specifically about Catholic people that he did not like and did he see all of those qualities in Mrs. M. Mr. M stated that he saw only some of them in Mrs. M. How did Mr. M go about discussing this problem with Mrs. M? Would Mr. M re-enact for the counselor the kind of conversation that took place. He said, with a great deal of hostility in his voice, "I would like to take the children to church with me on Sunday." I asked Mr. M to listen to himself. Did his voice in some way give a clue as to the kind of answer he was expecting? Did he get the answer he expected to get? Mr. M said he did. It was an affectively negative charged answer and his request was affectively charged also. We explored alternative ways to achieving the same goal. In order to enable Mr. M to get some perspective on his role behavior at that point, I asked him if there was any similarity between what he was seeking to accomplish in his relationship with Mrs. M concerning this church-going problem and the kind of work that he does. (From a theoretical point of view, this is an example of how a reference to role behavior in the occupational sphere, especially in the selling field where there are formal classes to make the salesman aware of his role attitudes and expectations in the salesman-buyer role, can give an individual perspective on his role behavior in another social system, his family.) Mr. M was quick to see this. He said "I'm a salesman. I am trying to sell my wife on an idea. I sound like the sales manager on a Monday morning. I would never make a sale talking like that to a customer."

What Mr. M was referring to here was the political relations in his family. The sales manager is the man in the power position who tells the salesmen what to do. Mr. M was telling Mrs. M what to do instead of seeking her cooperation in helping him to solve a problem which he felt needed her help in order to be solved. He was trying to change a decision which had been made earlier.

When Mr. M finally got around to talking about the contraceptive incident, he said he supposed it was foolish for him to have expected his wife to believe that story, although it was true. He should have expected her to blow up. His mistake was in keeping them in the open in his drawer. If he had anything to hide, he would not have kept them in his drawer where his wife could see them. He talked about the salesman's life on the road and his need to be nice to his women customers (buyers) and he expected his wife to understand that was part of the business—that the buyers expected to be dined and danced.

Mr. M said although he did promise to let the children be raised as Catholics, he really was not able to see the full meaning of his promise until he had children and the problem of church affiliation became a real one. At this point, I as a counselor discussed with Mr. M the concept of the family as a changing family and the difficulties of looking ahead and making decisions in advance. We discussed how different a family with one child is from a family with two and three children in terms of the demands that are made not only in terms of monetary cost, but in terms of allocation of time—time for one's self as against time for one's wife and children; allocation of love, affection, trust, et cetera, calling these the "economic goods"<sup>8</sup> in which a family trades; allocation of power—who makes the decisions about visiting, entertaining, and friends, as well as the rules about how much money is spent and saved and for what purposes. We also discussed the need to restate role differentiation as the children mature and are able to participate in more family functions—what they can rightfully be expected to do and not to do, and which values are to be stressed in the home—that is, music, art, television, radio, reading, et cetera.

So much for Mr. and Mrs. M. The above is only an excerpt of a case from my files. I hope it has been sufficient to demonstrate some of the clinical uses of social system theory in marriage counseling.

## Conclusion

The preceding conceptual statements, the case presentation and discussion of the case, demonstrate, I believe, the effective clinical use of social system theory for marriage counseling. By dealing in role terms, it helps many individuals to

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<sup>8</sup> This may be an unorthodox use of the term "economic good," but Parsons in a private discussion feels something is an economic good so long as the supply is limited and there are alternative modes of distribution.

adjust their marital problems in a shorter period of time and in less interviews than an intra-personality system approach to marital problems. Through the concept of role, the client can define his own problem in objective role relationship terms.

From the point of view of the marriage counselor, the social system approach gives him a detailed explicit system of related categories by which he is able to see the picture which the client is trying to convey by his verbal and non-verbal behavior in the interview.

From the point of view of research on the family, this paper points out that interview data collected by persons who are intra-personality system goal directed may be found lacking in essential information by one who asks social-system questions of such data.