

should be: for the sake of adolescents, and of their immaturity, do not allow them to step and attain a false maturity by handing over responsibility that is not yet theirs, even though they may fight for it.

Organizing as the task of adolescence

In this chapter, we have seen processes of organizing taking place as the adolescent finds a place in the adult working world and finds a partner. The significance of these processes is underlined by the fact that we have reached into the political debates of the economic world and sexual politics. The fact that these issues create such potential for strong feeling and will, no doubt, continue to do so, suggests that these issues can create conflict and turmoil for most as they negotiate their way out of adolescent dependency on their parents and into the adult world. It is hard to remain in a state of adult dispassionate detachment when buffeted by young people. To hope for any understanding, a tolerance of these disturbances must, it seems, be accepted. For, as Winnicott suggests, each individual creates his own system – whether he or we like it or not – and we seek to usurp this process at our peril. The best we representatives of the adult world can do is to examine our own relationship to our own authority because ultimately the developing adolescent will be asking us, in his idiosyncratic way, how we did it and go on doing it.

Further reading

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Chapter 11

Partnership and marriage

Christopher Clulow

It might seem rather odd to include a chapter on marriage in a book on human development, even when the title is prefaced by the less formal term 'partnership'. After all, the social institution of marriage has been criticized for impeding the development of women. It has been charged with obstructing social change by representing values and practices that belong to another age. Most tellingly, it can seem to have questionable relevance when people are increasingly choosing not to marry, and to divorce when they do marry. It's as if we echo Mae West's sentiment that marriage might be a great institution for other people (and those who do marry tend to celebrate in style by spending a fortune on weddings), but we ourselves are not yet ready for an institution and may never be.

So does the term 'partnership' fit the bill better? Certainly it reflects the prevalent view that the nature of the 'glue' holding couples together is of a less formal and more private nature than traditional marriage. And it captures how people are currently living their lives. More than three in five women who do choose to marry for the first time are already living with their husband to be. Two thirds of their weddings will be civil rather than religious events, a quarter of which will take place in 'approved premises' other than registry offices (hotels, stately homes, and so on). Around half of all conceptions take place outside marriage and in excess of one in three births are to unmarried women, although, tellingly, nearly two-thirds of these are registered by both parents living at the same address (The Stationery Office, 2003). Yet, ironically, as the deregulation of marriage becomes more marked there is a counterbalancing movement to regulate cohabiting partnerships, and that goes for opposite as well as same sex partners.

Some of this is for good, old-fashioned economic reasons (to ensure justice with regard to children, property and pensions once the relationship ends). But there will usually also be a wish to symbolize within the partnership, and for others outside it, the nature of the commitment that is being entered into or consolidated. That commitment will have important emotional and psychological dimensions, as well as the evident legal, social, and economic ones.

It is here that the concerns of this chapter link with those of preceding chapters. When committing ourselves to our partners, to whom are we really making a commitment? To the community to which we belong, which depends on couples to provide an environment in which individuals can contribute to society by raising children, producing goods and services and caring for dependent relatives? To our partners as the people they actually are, rather than the ones we would like them to be? Or to ourselves? This last possibility frames a vital question for the psychology of partnerships: when we fall in love and choose the person we want to be with, are we choosing an actual other person or a reflection of ourselves? Are we seeking an internal object of our own in our choice of partner – the quest of Narcissus searching for the elusive Echo that turns out to be no more than a reflection of himself. Or are we committing ourselves to forging a real relationship, the condition that Nora describes at the end of Ibsen's classic play *The doll's house* in response to her husband, Torveld's, pleading to be something more to her than a stranger: 'You and I would have to change so much . . . that life between us two could become a marriage.' This is the commitment to development, for every partnership is a journey from narcissistic object relating to 'marriage'. No wonder partnerships are capable of evoking intense ambivalence, an ambivalence that can resonate at public and private levels.

The tension between the personal aspirations of people in their love relations and the social buttressing of an institution in which the public has a vested interest is nothing new, nor are the strategies they deploy to manage the dilemmas associated with making a commitment. Samuel Johnson diagnosed the ineptitude of people as the root cause of marital unhappiness and prescribed arrangement as the solution:

I believe marriages would in general be as happy, and often more so, if they were all made by the lord chancellor, upon due

consideration of characters and circumstances, without the parties having any choice in the matter. (Boswell, 1791/1990)

Just over 60 years later John Stuart Mill, who wanted to live with Harriet Taylor but realized it would be socially impossible outside marriage, saw the institution as the problem and wrote the following disclaimer:

. . . the whole character of the marriage relation as constituted by law [is] such as both she and I conscientiously disapprove, for this amongst other reasons, that it confers upon one of the parties to the contract, legal power and control over the person, property and freedom of action of the other party, independent of her own wishes and will. (Mill, 1873/1989)

Such tension is the stuff of some of our greatest literature and drama, in which the struggles of individuals torn between the dictates of their hearts and the constraints of social obligation are tracked in the minutest of detail, both of them interacting in complex ways to shape the outcome. Take, for example, Elizabeth's struggle to recognize her feelings about Darcy in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Marriage was not simply the consequence of love, nor were the impediments to it just of an external nature. On the contrary, love and marriage followed from a change in consciousness:

Had I been in love I could not have been more wretchedly blind. But vanity, not love has been my folly . . . I have courted prepossession and ignorance and driven reason away . . . Till this moment I never knew myself. (Austen, 1813/1985, pp. 236–237)

Or again, Noel Coward's heroine in *Brief Encounter* is caught in the bitter-sweet conundrum of love and loss. Laura and Alec long for an ideal, unordinary love. But the power of the film lies not in the consummation of the ideal but in its renunciation. True, the conventions of the time would have judged their affair harshly, but Laura's renunciation was based not on fear of censure but on her own self-respect. She did not succumb to the pressures of others but arrived at her own position.

Development arises from struggling with the competing commitments of partnership: the partners to themselves as individuals, to each other as a couple, to the families they create as a result of their union and to the wider communities of which they are a part. It also arises from the capacity of adult partnerships to engage individuals at an unconscious level, reactivating conflicts associated with past love relationships and their legacies of separation, loss and trauma. It is here that the potential for development lies. But how do we make the right choice of partner. And is there such a thing as a 'right' choice?

Choice of partner

Making a 'good match' is what everyone wants in choosing a life partner. The criteria for such a match have social, economic, religious and psychological dimensions. Different cultures, periods of history and individual preferences determine the relative emphasis accorded to these dimensions, and much turns on perceptions of what marriage and partnership is for.

From a societal perspective, traditional marriage is primarily a social contract which has been (and perhaps in some quarters continues to be) relied upon to provide institutionalized answers to key questions that every community and their elected representatives must answer: Who will provide economically, and who will care for dependents? As befits a patriarchal society the answers to these questions have been very gender-specific over the past three centuries, perhaps best summarized by the late-Victorian poet Alfred Lord Tennyson in the lines: 'man for the field, woman for the hearth . . . all else confusion.' Men dominated the public domain of political and economic activities; women dominated the private domain of domesticity and home life (the titular 'head of the family' role reserved for men was some compensation for their often having little place at home apart from siring children and paying the bills). The law defined the relationship between men and women in marriage in terms of ownership: the woman was the man's property; her children were his heirs; sexual infidelity constituted theft by another man; her identity was defined by that of her husband.

So, the contract was primarily between provider and homemaker. Evaluation of what made for a 'good' marriage – even as late as the mid-twentieth century – was primarily in terms of these

roles and how well they were performed. Wars and pestilence might temporarily disturb the established order – and result in a rate of re-marriage as high as ours today – but the established order was conceived, in some sense, as being 'natural' if not pre-ordained.

The picture is no longer the same. Changes in education, contraception, economic structures, employment opportunities, welfare entitlements, transport, public attitudes and a myriad of other factors have freed women of many aspects of their dependence on men. Culturally there is a wish to replace the old patriarchy with an egalitarian order that is inclusive, non-discriminatory and sexually emancipated. Attitude surveys over the past 40 years confirm this change of values, although changes in behaviour have proved harder to achieve. Nevertheless, the social position afforded by marriage, valuing men as providers and women as homemakers, has given ground to an emphasis on companionate qualities – mutual respect, friendship, tolerance, sexual compatibility, fidelity and so on, and there is a broad measure of support for this to be provided outside marriage. So the freedom and range of partner choice has grown immeasurably in the past 40 years. Commitments have become looser, more personally defined and less certain.

The sociologist Anthony Giddens (1992) writes about the emergence of the 'pure relationship', entered into for its own sake rather than any associated benefits, and continued for only so long as it continues to deliver enough satisfaction for the parties concerned. No longer are obligations to family and kin simply based on blood ties; they are increasingly negotiated as the essence of family life is defined in terms of social and psychological factors. A new set of opportunities and constraints surround us in pursuing Freud's twin life purposes of loving and working – *lieben und arbeiten* – managing the home/work balance in attending to our personal and collective needs for care and productivity. And there is less anxiety about the instinctual drives that led Freud to postulate in *Civilization and its discontents* that monogamy was part of a social contract to contain sexual love and transform it into a wider platonic love that could bind larger social units together. Sexual activity outside marriage is no longer surrounded by guilt as it once was, except when one or both partners are already in a committed relationship.

It has been proposed that underlying the traditional structuring of gender roles in marriage is an even more deep-seated, but concealed, emotional contract concerned with the dynamics of

dependency. The unconscious agreement here is that women will protect men from an awareness of their dependency needs by being the dependent partner. Reciprocally, men will protect women from the discomfort associated with competitive assertiveness by being the independent partner (Orbach, 1993). The origins of the pain associated with this unconscious contract are said to be located in child-rearing patterns that perpetuate traditional gender role differences. What psychologists have described as the 'male wound' (Hudson and Jacob, 1991) is seen as resulting from a socially enforced separation of boys from their mothers to make an identification with the man's world as represented by father, and it is said to act as a spur for men to protect themselves against the possibility of future hurt. No such journey has to be made by girls, who must differentiate and separate themselves from their mothers without the psycho-socio-cultural imperatives to which boys are subject. Indeed, the unconscious message from mothers to daughters may be that to be cared for you must care for others – a message of merger rather than differentiation. The unconscious gender agreement can be seen as underpinning an established social order and protecting against an unconscious anxiety that to change the relations between men and women will have catastrophic psychological as well as social consequences. As the social order changes so must the psychological contract (or perhaps the process works more powerfully in reverse?). So whereas the last century started with a campaign for educational literacy for women, it ended with one for emotional literacy for men.

The stage is now set for internal qualities rather than external structures to be the defining features of the good marriage. Or, rather, the boundary of the external world that is deemed relevant to the quality of a relationship extends only to one's partner, with children and work assuming prominence at different stages of the partnership. In these circumstances, relationship parameters become the focus of marital research, resulting in claims that factors like facial expression, states of physiological arousal and the emotional accessibility of partners to each other in high-conflict situations are the key predictors of divorce, or that a key factor determining the impact of divorce on children is the capacity of parents to manage conflict appropriately. No longer are we just looking at socio-economic disadvantage to predict the likely outcome of marriage (although the statistical correlation is well-established). The focus of attention is on the couple, and the individuals who make up the

couple, rather than on the environment in which they live out their lives together. Most couples concur with this shift, believing that marriages break down because of matters like conflict, infidelity, betrayal, isolation, emptiness, violence and the loss of a sense of self, or of sharing something in common – personal explanations rather than public causes.

In these circumstances the function of partnership is increasingly considered in affective terms. Partners expect emotional support from each other, and expect their partnerships to be robust enough to withstand the expression of feelings generated by circumstances internal and external to their relationship. The expectation of partnership is for social and emotional stimulus, a still point in a turbulent world and a platform from which to create a meaningful existence. In attachment terms, adult partnerships are expected to provide both a haven to which to retreat and a secure base from which to explore – oneself, one's partner and the wider world. The balance that is struck between protection and development will vary between couples and within the life course of the partnership.

A 'good match' must therefore encompass something more than coming out of the same social drawer, or being drawn together by similar interests. There needs to be some psychological resonance between the partners which, despite its often unrecognized nature, has the capacity to spur partners on in terms of their own development. When partnerships founder and help is sought, therapists need to understand something about the unconscious choices that have been made by the partners, and the unconscious contract that binds them together. For in making a commitment to another person we are also making a commitment to ourselves, and there is no greater spur to personal development than having to tangle with uncomfortable issues within a relationship that is vital to our sense of felt security. So, to get the most out of partnerships in developmental terms we need, in some respects, to 'marry our problem'.

Another way of saying this is that, in our choice of love relationships, we are deeply influenced by the assumptions about ourselves in relation to others that we all unconsciously make on the basis of what we have experienced in growing up. As we have seen in earlier chapters, we live out in current relationships aspects of what we believe we have experienced in former relationships, and nowhere is this more likely to be true than in relation to the people who matter most to us. Intimate adult partnerships are

transference relationships par excellence. They recapture the bodily pleasures, rapturous gaze and passions of infancy in ways that cut through personal cautions and social convention. Like the fairy tales of old, the passions of the mind are capable of transforming frogs into princes and angels into devils. And always there is the quest to be made whole, to put right something that has gone wrong, to be reunited with something that we feel might have been lost to us, or to find someone who awaits us if only we can find the magic key. In all of this there is an underlying question of whether we are living in the realms of fantasy or reality, whether we are passively 'in love' with an experience or actively 'loving' another person as she or he actually is.

A renowned American couple therapist, Milton Erickson, interviewed about what made for a good marriage talked about there being four states of love (Haley, 1985). The first he described as infantile love: 'I love me'. Then came the state of loving 'me in you' – loving someone because they are 'my' brother, sister, parent, dog and so forth. Adolescent love was depicted as loving another for what they do for you – basking in the glow of their attractiveness, talents and other kinds of reflected glory. Finally there was mature love: cherishing someone out of concern for them, and finding enjoyment in the other person's enjoyment. Usually, this is a reciprocal process. While Erickson's language implies a linear developmental process of growing up, it might be more accurate to depict the capacity to love in different ways as different states of mind, all of which may be found in the same person at different times. For example, the idealization that accompanies young love is unlikely to persist for long (although there are moments when this can return). Perhaps this is just as well, because the experience of being 'in love', while heady for the recipient, can also be accompanied by a sense of fragility: 'Will he or she continue to love me when they know what I'm really like?' Again, partners and parents, who are usually compassionate and considerate, may behave in self-absorbed and demanding ways when going through stressful periods in their lives. This is, perhaps, most evident during separation and divorce. The capacity for mature love is partly a consequence of what has been internalized from earlier love relationships and partly a product of current circumstances. Either way, the power of relationships to influence relationships is unquestionable: there can be no more transformative experience than to be known and loved for whom one is.

Intimacy and isolation

Every love relationship has a developmental and defensive potential. Partnerships are based on a mixture of identification and difference, and people vary in the balance they find most comfortable at different stages in their partnership. The early stages of a relationship will often be characterized by an exclusive sense of identification between the partners, where similarities will be highlighted over differences as they establish in their own eyes, and in those of others, a sense of 'us' as a couple. But if the sense of 'us' is fixed over time it will inhibit the acceptance and discovery of differences between the partners. The 'you and me against the world' mentality locates everything potentially threatening outside the relationship, and the voyage of partnership becomes a Hansel and Gretel-type excursion into the dark woods where endless threats to survival weld the partners together. It is then as if the partnership must be preserved at all costs, and sometimes the cost is the inhibition of development.

Equally, the discovery of differences in a relationship can be challenging, interesting and open new pathways. But sometimes differences are clung to as a protection against fears that intimacy – developing a sense of 'us' in the relationship – will threaten to obliterate separateness and override any distinctive sense of there being a 'me'. Some couples fight tooth and nail to ward off the belief that intimacy will expose their soft underbelly and render them fatally vulnerable. Edward Albee's portrait of George and Martha's marriage in *Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is a vivid depiction of the different psychological games that can be played to protect partners against the fear of intimacy, and of the unconscious recruitment process that goes on to perpetuate past patterns of relating that extends beyond the couple to those who come within their orbit (Clulow, 2001). In these circumstances the closest the partners can come to creativity is in the world of fantasy, and then enormous effort must be expended on preserving the fantasy from the harsh glare of reality that constantly threatens to expose it for what it is. Difference must be preserved at all costs, and sometimes the cost is isolation.

Most relationships contain a degree of complementarity, enjoying both the otherness of the other and a sense of identification with what she or he can represent of and for oneself. The definition of the optimist as a person with a depressed friend captures

something of the unconscious agreement that can hold partners together in ways that complement each other. It also suggests the power of relationships to evoke experiences in others that don't necessarily belong to them. Everyone knows how depressing it can be to be in the company of an eternal optimist except, perhaps, those for whom there is some unconscious satisfaction and sense of 'fit' in having their part in the relationship clearly delineated in these terms. Unconscious agreements for managing anxiety through projective identification can take almost any form. Role differences may be in terms of going out and staying in, or caring for and being cared for, or feeling passionately and thinking reasonably. Providing there is a fit between the partners that sustains the unconscious agreement to manage differences in a complementary way all may go well. It is when these patterns become rigid and inflexible, or when they are tested by events (for example, when the carer is him- or herself in need of care) that the system becomes destabilized and challenged to adapt. This can often be the point at which couples ask for help, because what is happening to them feels insurmountable as it is outside their conscious awareness. Conscious awareness is focused on being uncomfortably exposed to a problem, and the problem is usually located in the partner.

It will be becoming apparent that implicit in this view of partnership are certain assumptions that cast light on why couples are so different, and why they behave in the ways they do. One is that marriages and partnerships can be construed as psychological as well as social institutions. There is a kind of membrane surrounding the couple that sustains an unconscious contract between them about how they will manage shared conflicts surrounding the vicissitudes of intimacy, isolation, and autonomy. This is sometimes referred to as a shared defensive system, a system constructed to manage shared unconscious fantasies about the implications of becoming intimately involved with another human being. It is as if partners recognize their own and each other's ways of managing pain, feelings and anxiety, and implicitly sign up to an agreement to join forces in finding a comfortable balance that sustains them as a couple and as individuals. From this perspective, one partner's experience cannot be thought about in isolation from their other half. When things go wrong it is not sufficient to treat the depression, anger, or withdrawal of one partner without taking account of what this might mean for the other and the relationship between

them. As couple therapists are prone to ask: 'Whose anger is it anyway?' The couple is a system, albeit one that reflects the internal worlds of each partner and the external worlds in which they live out their lives together. The key assumption is that these worlds are shared between the partners in a fundamental way that relates to their security as individuals as well as to that of their partnership.

Another assumption is the significance of boundaries as the site where developmental work goes on in adult partnerships. This is implicit in the earlier assumption that couples are surrounded by a psychic 'skin'; that partnerships are psychological entities. However, within each entity there are boundary matters affecting the space between the partners and the process of regulating distance in their relationship, so that neither feels too 'hot' (emotionally close) nor too 'cold' (emotionally distant) for comfort. The dilemma that Schopenhauer posed for his company of porcupines facing freezing conditions captures a task facing every couple. If they huddle too closely together for warmth the experience may be uncomfortably prickly. If they withdraw too far from each other they may freeze to death. Here we are back to the ambivalence about commitment with which this chapter opened, and the task facing couples of finding a balance between being together and being apart that is sufficiently flexible to respond to the changing needs and demands they face. In negotiating this balance, ambivalent feelings may be separated out between the partners, so that one pushes for togetherness while the other maintains a degree of separateness. This pursuer-pursued dynamic can fuel many conflicts, and often masks fears that the partners share about fusion and isolation associated with intimacy.

Anxiety about psychological space may be reflected in the organization of physical space. Britton, a psychoanalyst practising in London, has described the architectural solution of the French sixteenth century essayist, Montaigne, to protecting and defining mental space in his marriage. Montaigne built himself a separate tower adjoining the chateau he shared with his wife, at the top of which was his study, there being a narrow exposed parapet connecting this with his wife's bedroom. In contrast, Edward Hopper, the American painter of more recent times, shared an open plan studio with his wife. But in order to stay together they eventually resorted to painting a line across the studio floor which neither was permitted to cross. Britton writes:

If we choose to live with someone in an intimate relationship, whether they are of the opposite or the same sex, whether they are legal spouses or not, we are confronted with the problems of sharing space; physical and mental. In these days of informal sexual arrangements, some, prompted by a claustrophobia of marital space, imagine they can avoid the spousal living room by inhabiting, indefinitely, the ante-room. However, they are already operating in just the same way that they would on the other side of that threshold. (Britton, 2000)

Drawing an analogy with psychoanalysis, he goes on to say:

They are like those who continue well into middle age to imagine that they are living on the threshold of life. In analysis they regard what is taking place as the dress rehearsal and not the performance, not realizing that this is their own particular way of having an analysis. Similarly, it is their own particular way of being married. (Britton, 2000, p. 12)

Boundaries also operate to define roles and relationships linked with temporal as well as spatial anxieties. The prospect of physical and emotional proximity to the object of one's heart's desire can stir longing and terror in equal measure when an emotional equivalence is drawn between what's happening now and what has happened in the past (as it always is). Families evoke the familiar, so when we set out to start a new family the process is always accompanied by echoes of the families we have known most intimately – the families we have grown up in. It is here that we learn most of what we know and believe about family life, an education that is all the more powerful for having operated at a subliminal level. It is absorbed knowledge, acquired through lived experience and therefore highly resistant to disconfirmation. Whether we replicate or repudiate what we believe to have been our experience, these beliefs powerfully mould our patterns of relating in later life.

Mother-son and father-daughter partnerships are part of our common folk-awareness. But it is not only the child's relationship with one or other parent that moulds the relationship template for later life. Other family members also exert an influence. So it is that the eldest child in one family and the youngest child in another

may choose each other and play out a rivalry for affection and attention that characterized life in their respective family homes. Or they may agree that one will be the parent to the other and either affirm each other in their care-giving and care-receiving roles, or vie with each other to be looked after and to do the looking after. Sometimes these unconscious sibling connections may raise incestuous anxieties that are played out in the couple's sexual relationship, making it difficult for them to be passionately involved with each other.

The legacy of the past for the couple's sexual relationship is most often thought about from a psychoanalytic perspective in connection with Oedipal anxieties and traumatic abuse. The former refers to difficulties relinquishing parental love objects and the persisting aspiration to be first in the affections of the opposite sex parent, which can leave little room for a real lover in later life or may result in replaying the family drama by casting the lover in the role of parental love object to be won at any expense from potential rivals. The latter refers to the wound inflicted when childhood vulnerability has been exploited, leaving a residue for the survivor in later life that may associate all sexual encounters with the experience of being intruded upon, or of being violated.

Less traumatically, reworkings of the Oedipal myth can be especially helpful in illuminating the processes involved in developing boundaries in the course of ordinary human development. Contemporary thinking about the Oedipal situation highlights the potential significance of the parental couple for healthy child development. Put very briefly, psychoanalytic theory asserts that the process of individuation begins with an infant's recognition of self in the responses of his or her mother, a phase that is increasingly accompanied by the dawning and uncomfortable recognition that she exists as other than an extension of the infant's self. Tolerating the loss of the illusion of having sole and permanent rights over mother is the result of an emotionally painful process and represents a substantial psychological achievement. So the first stage of developing a capacity for self-reflection comes through the infant imagining him- or herself being observed by mother. Taking a third person into account, like father, changes this constellation. Occupying a position outside the primary pair of mother and infant, fathers create the conditions for a second stage in the development of a reflective self (and I am using the words 'mother' and 'father' here as social roles capable of being filled by either

gender). The child now has an experience of there being a couple from which she or he is excluded.

Children, then, occupy a third position, on the outside of the parental couple, and if things go well they will not be filled up with anxiety about being excluded. They will then be free both to observe and absorb the workings of the parental couple, and they can imagine themselves being the object of observation. As observers they learn how partnerships operate, how intimacy is handled and how differences are managed without being central to the drama (even though they might try and join in); they can enjoy the liveliness of the partnership without feeling diminished, threatened, excluded or impelled to intrude. As the ones observed, they develop a capacity for self-observation, for entertaining another point of view, and for independent thought and activity. The Oedipal situation then becomes the crucible in which the capacity to be both alone and intimately involved with others – a central ingredient of successful partnerships – is developed.

Structures, events, meanings, and processes

Secure partnerships, then, are those in which partners have a capacity to be alone and involved, as well as an ability to move between these positions. Behind the diversity of conditions and circumstances that shape the nature of individual partnerships are common themes and dilemmas. There is the push for change and the pull of security, the longing for intimacy and the fear of being engulfed, the wish to be the same as others and the drive to be different. It is as if couples are engaged in a kind of dance, ensuring, in the poetic words of Kahlil Gibran, that there are 'spaces in [their] togetherness . . . even as the strings of a lute are alone though they quiver with the same music' and that they 'stand together, yet not too near together: for the pillars of the temple stand apart, and the oak tree and the cypress grow not in each other's shadow' (Gibran, 1926).

The nature of their 'dance' is not just of their choosing, but will be affected by events that occur outside the partnership. Predictable changes (for example, setting up home, starting a family, children leaving home, ailing parents) and unexpected events (such as illness, infidelity, redundancy) can constitute a shock to the system, destabilizing an established balance and requiring work to

recover equilibrium. While it is unwise to lay claim to there being a natural rhythm in the life course of partnerships, since the points of divergence and diversity are many, there are discernible ebbs and flows in the tide of a couple's life together, which can form a pattern. There is the process of two individuals coming together to create something new, often personified by children. In order for this to happen, other relationships and pastimes must end and be let go of. As time passes, these new creations may be superseded, requiring a re-ordering of the partners' relationship to each other and their wider family and social group.

Change, however welcome, is usually associated with a degree of stress. Leaving home, becoming an 'item', going on holiday, promotion at work, starting a family, all require certain familiar routines and rhythms to be given up to make the most of the new situation. As relationships change, those in them are perceived differently and related to differently. In consequence, they begin to view themselves differently and become, in some respects, different people. Every transition involves a mourning process, however pleasurable the change might be considered to be. Although mourning might seem an extreme word to use to describe the process of adapting to new circumstances, it is appropriate to apply it to the many minor deaths that occur in the lifetime of a couple's relationship. As well as celebrating the new, partners must be able to let go of those parts of their past selves and lives that have become redundant.

It used to be thought that the degree of stress associated with change stemmed directly from the size and number of changes that people faced at any one time in their lives. It was as if a totting-up system could be applied to predict the likelihood of going down with a stress-related illness. But then it became apparent that events impacted on individuals in different ways. Some seemed able to survive major catastrophes relatively unscathed, while others were sunk by the proverbial storm in a teacup. In examining why this should be it was evident that social supports of different kinds make a difference, as does the degree of forewarning people have of what is involved in changes they are facing. But perhaps most importantly, it is clear that events interact with personal meanings in ways that affect how exposed and protected individuals are to destructive aspects of change. Couple relationships have been shown to be very significant buffers against stress when they work well. But they also may not be allowed to offer this protection

when events are interpreted in the light of paranoid assumptions. For example, if an offer of help made to a new mother is read by her as an attempt to take her baby away, or as a coded criticism of her ability as a mother, a potentially important lifeline may no longer be available to her. And if the new father who made the offer is feeling excluded by the baby, his partner's response may compound the feeling that he has been rejected and betrayed. Every couple therapist knows how difficult the concept of reality is, when the subjective realities of each partner move apart from each other. As the late Anthony Powell (1972) said, 'it's not what happens to people that is significant, it's what they think happens to them'. And people often need to talk about their experience before they know what they think is happening to them.

In the same way that individual partnerships change over time, responding to different needs and circumstances, so too do public institutions. Marriage is not the destination for couples that it used to be. It is no longer needed to legitimize sex, or to provide a route into the world of adulthood or to confer social status. If it is embarked on at all, it is as a point of departure, and one that may come within an already existing history of commitment between the partners. Partnerships are not tableaux depicting a static condition, but dynamic institution-cum-relationships that occupy a space between internal and external realities. At a public level, the institution of marriage bridges the couple and their rapidly changing socioeconomic, legislative, cultural, and religious environment. At a private level, it bridges his inner world and hers, and represents their jointly constructed reality as a couple. Partnerships are open systems, susceptible to and mediating between different levels of reality in public and private domains. They operate in the space between these domains; small wonder, then, that they are constantly repositioning and redefining themselves during the lifetime of a couple and the history of a community.

So does a chapter on partnership and marriage fit within a book on human development, as we queried at the beginning of this chapter? It is clear that some dimensions of marriage are no longer relevant to our concerns, but that others remain vital. Because humans are social beings there is, throughout life, a need to be connected with others at an emotional level, to be known by them and to know them. From an evolutionary perspective our survival might depend on it. Partnerships provide a basis for our individual life projects because they offer opportunities for us to know

ourselves, and to be known and accepted for whom we really are, without having to assume the mantles that go with many other social roles and relationships. They also provide a spur for change. In that sense they have a developmental 'people-making' role, offering opportunities for emotional and social development.

This 'people-making' function extends to the next generation when couples produce children. The quality of the parental relationship has been shown to be very important for healthy child development, in the same way that it has been linked with the health and well-being of the adults. This is not to say that two parents are always necessary to ensure the best chances for the next generation. In psychological terms, one parent may be able to embody enough of an 'internal couple' to provide children with the experience that allows them to develop a balanced sense of themselves in relation to others, just as two parents who operate in fused or separate ways may deny children the opportunity to develop in this way. What is important is the quality of relationships as distinct from the form they take. Partnerships can enhance the capacity of adults to act as parents *and* they can diminish those capacities. They can check the impulses of children to 'divide and rule' in their dealings with others *and* they can encourage patterns of relating that are deceptive, manipulative, and exploitative. They can provide an environment within which children and partners are free to test themselves and develop new strengths, *and* they can confirm the worst that people fear about themselves, so inhibiting further exploration. The subtle interplay between form and process allows no absolute judgement about the relative merits of two-parent families, but serves to emphasize the relevance of what goes on in relationships to shaping the social ecology of the next generation.

Further reading

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