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An Evaluation of
Marital and Familial Advice
In a Popular Journal

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By
John D. Davies

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July 16, 1957

INTRODUCTION

In the last few years, the popular and daily press has developed an abiding interest in a sociological problem of supreme importance to the people of this, and other countries. The problem is that of marital adjustment.

In a large measure the press has prostituted this interest past the realm of good taste. There is hardly a large daily newspaper in the country that does not run a column of advice to the "lovelorn" and advice to maritally unhappy. The quality of the general run of this advice can elicit nothing but contempt. It is predicated on the insufficient evidence of a short letter from one of the parties involved, carrying a woefully inadequate and necessarily biased account of the problem. On this the answer is based. The letters are obviously chosen for their sensational qualities and their adaptability to the glib answer of the conductor of the "service". With Dr. Crane, Lynn Hurley, and their ilk this writer is not concerned, except with the natural concern of one who sees the ignorant and unhappy victimized for profit.

On the other hand, certain members of the responsible press ~~are~~ making a sincere attempt to bring to the public a presentation of the problems of marriage in all their complexity. One of these is "The Ladies Home Journal". In a column "Making Marriage Work", Clifford R. Adams, Ph. D., a member of the Department of Psychology at Pennsylvania State university, deals with questions and case histories that have

come to his attention in the course of his work at the University. He deals with one or two broad concepts each month, presenting the problem and suggesting courses of action.

In another series, "Can This Marriage Be Saved?" under the editorship of Dorothy Cameron Disney, a carefully condensed case history is presented. The actual marriage counselor involved in the case then presents his diagnoses of the problem, the method of adjustment used, and the final results obtained. These counselors are members of the American Institute of Family Relations. The whole project is under the direction of Paul Popenoe, Sc. D., General Director of the Institute.

It is with these series in "The Ladies Home Journal" that this paper is concerned. The writer has surveyed these articles as presented in the magazine from July 1956 thru June 1957. I have attempted to classify the problems dealt with and compare their treatment with that suggested by other outstanding authorities in the field of marriage and family problems. In this way I hope to evaluate the validity of this attempt to advise and educate the public on this subject by one segment of the popular press.

CHAPTER I

Adjustment in Daily Life

In a section entitled "The Crucial First Year"⁽¹⁾, the author determines areas most likely to prove difficult for the bride in coping with the realities of marriage.

The first of these is in the area of finances. Dr. Adams' suggestion of a budget is obvious. He further holds with adherence to the plan once adopted, although it may be modified through experience or for major expenditures.

Howard F. Bigelow agrees that budgeting is the answer for family finances, but includes a pungent warning:

"There is no value in management for its own sake. The test of success in family management is not the amount of money earned or saved or spent, or the amount of work done by the members of the family, but rather the quality of living the family makes available for its members, not only this year, but every year throughout the long life of the family".⁽²⁾

The second problem is housing. The author warns that problems may arise from two major sources. The first, living with in-laws should be avoided even if the marriage must be postponed. The second is not to spend more than a fourth of one's income on housing.

Bigelow states that:

"It is usually unwise for a family to spend more than 20 or 25 per cent of its income for the rent of an unfurnished

(1) Clifford R. Adams, "Making Marriage Work", Ladies Home Journal (July 1956), Vol. LXXIII, p. 32.

(2) Morris Fishbein and Ruby Reeves, Eds., Modern Marriage and Family Living (New York, Oxford University Press, 1957), Ch. XXI, p. 308.

house. A family living in an apartment with everything furnished can expect to pay 35 or 40 per cent of its income for accommodations of similar quality."⁽³⁾

In general there is qualified agreement on this point.

The former source of trouble is basic in all marriage counseling sources. The young married people run the risk of one of the most frequent sources of marital maladjustment, as noted by George J. Mehr:

".... that seen in the life of a young man or woman who remains basically too dependent upon a mother or father. Some mothers refuse to give up their prerogatives as mothers----- continue to feel their demands upon the affection and interest of a son or daughter come first, resent the intrusion of an outsider to replace them. In turn, a son or daughter may continue to feel that primarily loyalty is to parents rather than to spouse, may remain too convinced of the wisdom and power of the parent and too dependent to discover that he or she and the spouse constitute a family apart from the parents and are in a position to determine their own way of life, with or without parental sanction."⁽⁴⁾

The third area of possible first year conflict is the wife's job. Dr. Adams suggests the wife's money be used for common goals and large expenditures such as furniture, the home, saving for a baby or aiding in the husband's education. This enables the wife to quit without painful readjustment. He also suggests the wife have help in housekeeping, either that of a maid or of the husband.

This advice is good but leaves much unanswered. What of the threat to the male ego? In a study by Mirra Komarovsky it is explained:

(3) Ibid., Ch. XXI, p. 298.

(4) Ibid., Ch. XVIII, p. 250.

"Emotional needs first of all may dictate which of the several current ideologies regarding the woman's role he will adopt, sometimes contrary to the pressures of his milieu. An insecure man may cling to the traditional masculine role. It was this kind of man who, in one study, was reported to have said: 'I'd rather turn on the gas than let my wife work.' On the other hand and under the guise of emancipated views, a weak man may seek a career woman upon whom he can lean. More complex are the motivations of the weak man who chooses a wife precisely because her strength promises a refuge but who, in his own struggles for self-respect, immediately turns against her because she is not a 'real' woman. The emotional make-up of the man operates in other ways, apart from determining the choice of ideologies."(5)

From the same source, Adams is borne out on his selective spending of the wife's salary. I quote:

"The problem of many a young working wife is how to step being one. With the birth of a child the two-income family increases its expenses at the same time that it reduces its income. When the earnings of the husband are too low for what the couple considers a minimum standard of living, the frustrations of delaying childbearing may be serious."(6)

In another section entitled "Take Time to Decide"(7), Dr. Adams takes up another phase of marital adjustment, the making of family decisions on both the small irritating problems and the large irreversible decisions. He recommends setting "family ground rules" on many of small recurring problems that arise and thus avoiding "hurried and harried" decisions. On the large problems he suggests avoidance of action under pressure. He says wait, until you have all pertinent information and until emotions are under control.

This advice is in keeping with the "democratic family" concept of our contemporary American culture and certainly

(5) Ibid., Ch. XX, p. 279.

(6) Ibid., Ch. XX, p. 280.

(7) Adams, op. cit., (October 1956), Vol. LXXIII, p. 52.

conforms to the current practice of the "family council".

James H. S. Bossard says:

"..... the modern family council may be regarded as a gathering of the family personnel to discuss, advise, deliberate, and, if possible, to agree on matters of common family interest. Its basic implications are that the family is a unified group of interacting personalities, in which each member has his rights, roles, and responsibilities."(8)

In another section "Is It Worth It?"(9), Dr. Adams approaches a problem of adjustment that can have consequences far beyond the trivial nature of individual facets of behavior. This is the question of the personal habits of one spouse irritating the other. The non-smoking husband who finds the habitual smoking of his wife repulsive, the wife or husband who takes "one too many" and flirts outrageously or talks too loudly, or the "slovenly" wife who appears at the breakfast table in hair curlers and ruffled wrapper, may all be a basis for serious maladjustment if an understanding is long delayed. Adams merely asks, "If your pet indulgence is your husband's (or wife's) pet peeve, is it worth while?"

This is a solution, but one that is not always easy to bring about. He should point out that these behavior patterns may be only symptoms of much deeper needs or frustrations. Without reaching an understanding of these hidden causes, no permanent adjustment can be made. Mohr says:

"..... In personal relationships and in understanding of inner

(8) Fishbein and Reeves, op. cit., Ch. XXXVII, p. 512.

(9) Adams, op. cit., (January 1957), Vol. LXXIV, p. 28.

motivations, desires, and strivings, objectivity and rational understanding are achieved with much greater difficulty than in other fields of human inquiry. Many people are never able to approach rational understanding of their own behavior and motivations, although maturing life experience helps in the direction of such understandings."(10)

(10) Fishbein and Reeves, op. cit., Ch. XVIII, p. 260.

CHAPTER II

Sexual Adjustment

In a section entitled "Is Sex Important to Marriage?"(1), Dr. Adams treats the subject of sexual adjustment in marriage. When he is asked this question he answers that generally a fourth of the wife's marital happiness and a third of the husband's, depend on the sexual adjustment they make. He bases satisfactory adjustment primarily on free communication of feelings between husband and wife. The discussion, of course, is to be based on sound knowledge of the sexual process.

O. Spurgeon English agrees with Adams but with a further precaution:

"..... They must feel free to talk about their sexual desires and feel free to say when and how each derives the greatest pleasure. Here is where one partner must avoid the dangerous attitude of seeming to have, from some obscure source, an innate knowledge of what is proper, aesthetic, or good."(2)

In answer to the imputation that the male is more highly sexed than the female, Robert F. Winch says:

"Since the nature of this belief tends to impute the allegedly greater sexuality of the male to original nature, and since man cannot be studied except in a social and cultural context, the belief cannot be tested. The intimate correlation between sexual behavior and cultural definitions of sexual behavior (as in the difference between the middle and lower classes) does suggest, however, that this difference might disappear in a culture which would be equally permissive for both sexes. Such a conclusion is supported, moreover, by

- (1) Clifford R. Adams, "Making Marriage Work", Ladies Home Journal (June 1957), Vol. LXXIV, p. 54.
- (2) Morris Fishbein and Ruby Reeves, Eds., Modern Marriage and Family Living (New York, Oxford university Press, 1957), Ch. XVI, p. 222.

some studies of non-Western cultures such as those reported by Margaret Mead."(3)

Under this chapter on Sexual Adjustment I would like to include Adams' views on premarital relations. In a piece with the rather "soapy" title, "Jane Has to Learn to Live With Her Past"(4), he describes the case of a young girl, 17, who has "given in" to her steady boy friend on the eve of his departure for the Army. She now has feelings of guilt, especially where her parents are concerned. Dr. Adams advises her to face forward and accept her feelings as a lesson well learned. Further, she should maintain normal communications with the boy, writing him and dating him on furlough and possibly, if he is a decent boy, genuine love will develop. He recommends that she date other men for she needs the reassurance of normal male companionship. Adams further states:

"..... She can be happy only if she lives by what she thinks is right. Making a determined resolution to do just that will help restore self-respect and strengthen her safeguards in the future."(5)

Because she centers her guilt feeling toward her family, it is obvious that Jane is the victim of the "sex is evil" theme as stated by Winch:

"..... In the first decade of life sex is evil and love is good. In the second decade sex is a 'forbidden fruit' and love is good. In the third decade sex is good within the prescribed condition of matrimony, and love is good. Thus in the third

(3) Robert F. Winch, The Modern Family (New York, Henry Holt and Company, 1952), Ch. XIII, p. 352.

(4) Adams, op. cit., (August 1956), Vol. LXXIII, p. 40.

(5) Ibid., p. 40.

decade one is expected to focalize on a single person, the spouse, both one's sensual and affectional desires, whereas in the formative and impressionable years of the first decade the affectional and sensual desires were conditioned apart, on the basis of the formula that love is good but sex is evil."(6)

It should be pointed out to her that sex is natural and in that manner assuage some of that guilt. This would be a bit spiey for consumption by the middle-class female audience of the magazine. They would be roundly shocked by the further statement of Winch on that same subject:

"..... As regards the middle class, moreover, there are evidences of some shift in attitude away from a total acceptance of the 'sex-is-evil' theme. There is impressionistic evidence, moreover, that the 'sex-is-natural' theme, a part of the 'new view' in child rearing, is being employed more and more in what is no doubt still a distinct minority of the middle class. As of this time it is too early to foretell the consequences of this shift in the socialization process. It does seem likely, however, that, with the decline in the 'sex-is-evil' attitude, the mores against premarital sex relations will lose a good deal of their force."(7)

(6) Winch, op. cit., Ch. XIII, p. 346.

(7) Ibid., p. 348.

CHAPTER III

Parental Control of Children

In an article entitled "Can You Control Your Daughter?"(1), Dr. Adams uses as the case in point an appeal from the mother of a sixteen year old girl. The young lady described is impudent, lazy, a night owl, a chimney (smoking), consort of a ne'er-do-well, liar, deceiver, unruly and rebellious. The mother pleads, "Is there any way I can bring her under control?" The author replies, "I doubt it."

Dr. Adams points out that it is difficult for parents to realize the normality of most of these behavior traits in young people of this age group. They compare their environment and behavior a generation ago with their children's today. In reality, their children are adhering to a "peer culture" as separate from the prevailing middle class culture of the parents. Her friends smoke, the ne'er-do-well is only so by their standards. The adolescent desires the privilege of making her own decisions. To thwart her brings rebellion. Adams advises the parent to recognize and try to anticipate the stage. Try then to establish a relationship of respect and mutual confidence. If she succeeds the daughter will respond to her guidance. It is too late for dictatorship.

Winch has something interesting to say on adolescent's attitude toward parents:

(1) Clifford R. Adams, "Making Marriage Work", Ladies Home Journal (December 1956), Vol. LXXIII, P. 45.

"It is at this point that children practically institutionalize their struggle for emancipation through the 'crowd' with its specialized interests, activities, language, and secrets. The nature of the gang activities and particularly the specialized slang give implicit recognition to the feeling that the parents constitute an 'out-group', almost an enemy group."(2)

He goes on to say:

"..... To the extent, therefore, that the parents try to enforce moral standards which conflict with the expectations of the adolescent peer group, they are seen by the adolescents as threatening their social acceptance."(3)

This certainly backs Adams' premise of natural behavior.

Katharine Whiteside Taylor is in agreement with Adams on the establishment of marital confidence. She states:

"..... The wise role for parents then is to accept signs of temporary rejection by adolescents as a normal, even wholesome sign of maturation and give all the leeway to independence consistent with the young person's safety and that of others. With reasonably reliable youngsters this leeway is apt to be wider than most parents tend to realize, and the only way a person's judgment can grow is through independent exercise."(4)

Winch and McGinnis indicate that this type of adolescent rebellion is a reflection of a great change in our basic social system. They say:

"If ours were a simple rural-stable society, mainly familistic, the emancipation from parental authority being gradual and marked by definite institutionalized steps, with no great postponement of marriage, sex taboo, or open competition for status, parents and youth would not be in conflict. Hence, the presence of parent-youth conflict in our civilization is one more specific manifestation of the incompatability

(2) Robert F. Winch, The Modern Family (New York, Henry Holt and Company, 1952), Ch. X, p. 278.

(3) Ibid., Ch. X, p. 278.

(4) Morris Fishbein and Ruby Reeves, Eds., Modern Marriage and Family Living (New York, Oxford university Press, 1957), Ch. XXXVI, p. 497.

between an urban-industrial-mobile social system and the familial type of reproductive institutions."⁽⁵⁾

In "Your Children's Marriage Plans Are Your Concern"⁽⁶⁾ the author gives approval to a rare instance of prospective in-law interference. He cites figures proving these marriages with parental approval on both sides prove happier. The statistics also prove the converse to be true. The reasons given by Dr. Adams are: (1) it provides a check on mate selection, (2) it implies adequate planning and preparation, (3) it assures community status, (4) it facilitates in-law adjustment, (5) it facilitates personal adjustments, and (6) it gives the couple security in time of trouble.

Oddly enough I found nothing in the sources I consulted to agree with or refute the author's concept. The only reference in this area was blunt and to the point.

"In modern American society young people have freedom to make their own selection of marriage partners. In the modern manner parents do not impose their preferences or interfere arbitrarily in their children's choice of a mate. Only when the young people are under age, as variously determined by the laws of different states, is it legally necessary for them to secure the consent of their parents to the marriage."⁽⁷⁾

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- (5) Robert F. Winch and Robert McGinnis, Marriage and the Family, (New York, Henry Holt and Company, 1954) Ch. IX, p. 264.
 - (6) Adams, op. cit., (January 1957), Vol. LXXIV, p. 28.
 - (7) Fishbein and Reeves, op. cit., Ch. VIII, p. 118.

CHAPTER IV

The Series Concerning Family Disorganization

Currently running in the "Ladies Home Journal" is the series entitled "Can This Marriage Be Saved?". These articles consist of quite detailed, though condensed, case histories of given family problems. One case is discussed each month. The wife tells her story, the husband tells his side, and then the marriage counselor relates her recommendations and the results. I have chosen the case appearing in the June 1957 issue for examination.(1)

Della's problem, from her viewpoint, could be placed briefly in two major areas. The first, an in-law problem. Her mother-in-law was the "take charge" type. She maintained her control of the couple by a constant and cleverly selected stream of gifts. There was the down payment on the home, the wall-to-wall carpeting, the children's clothes, clothes for Della (chosen deliberately to displease the recipient). All of these tendered with constant reminders to Della and her friends that Della and Riley could never get along without mother. She demanded a hand in raising the children. She got her way by deliberately goading Della into desperate outbursts of temper and prevailed in the girl's abject contriteness and shame for her behavior.

(1) Dorothy Cameron Disney, "Can This Marriage Be Saved?", Ladies Home Journal (June 1957), Vol. LXXIV, p. 88 ff.

Della's other complaint was her husband's job. He was self-employed and had become accustomed to working as much as fifteen hours a day. The nature of his work made it impossible to reach him as crisis followed crisis at home. When he came home to his frantic wife he was non-committal and cold to her problems.

Riley's side was strictly defensive. He had married Della for her good humor and independence. He knew his mother to be difficult, but he had learned to ignore her. He could not understand why Della could not handle the problem without his aid. She was in such a frantic state that the only peace he could find was in his job, thus the long hours.

The marriage counselor found Della on the verge of a complete nervous crack-up. She needed sympathy and understanding. Riley had conditioned himself, through a childhood and adolescence with a domineering mother, to close his ears to feminine problems. As soon as he understood Della's needs he cooperated in full measure.

The counselor clearly saw in the mother-in-law's possessive attitude toward the new home, the reaction to a threat to her former relationship to her son. She had always been domineering and possessive toward him, which probably grew out of her own unhappy marriage and divorce. It was suggested that Riley forbid his mother all contact with his wife for the time being.

This attitude of the mother-in-law is not uncommon and will vary in degree of compensative behavior. Harriet R. Mower says:

"Nevertheless, many parents, particularly mothers, are unadjusted, and project their conflicts and unreasonable if not irrational attachments on their children. The conduct of the parent making for conflict in response relations between husband and wife may vary all the way from the obvious but extreme cases in which a mother takes to her bed following her favorite son's marriage and remains an 'invalid', demanding sympathy and attention, to the less obvious symbolic behavior of keeping her adult son furnished with underwear. In the latter case, the mother refuses to recognize the break in response relations which marriage normally necessitates. The continuity in the intimate relationship between mother and son is preserved from infancy (symbolized by diapers) to manhood (symbolized by underwear), and is carried on into his marriage." (2)

The gifts were disposed of, the house refinanced, and all financial connections with Riley's mother were severed. This immediately had a therapeutic effect on Della.

The counselor felt a deeper problem was present in Della's case. There had been no evident reason for her inability to cope with her mother-in-law's aggressive behavior. Her pre-marital history had shown her to be independent and self-reliant. After long probing the story came out. Her father and mother were divorced. On the father's later visits to see Della he had subjected her to sadistic treatment. When she told her mother she was advised to forget it. The mother feared the loss of support payments if any conflict arose with her overbearing ex-husband. There developed subconsciously in Della a conviction that it was impossible to resist a strong, determined

(2) Howard Becker and Reuben Hill, Eds., Marriage and the Family, (Boston, D. C. Heath and Company, 1942), Ch. XVI, p. 350.

person regardless of the right or wrong of the situation. In her own subconscious she associated her mother-in-law and father as this type. When she fully comprehended this association, she changed her attitude and was able to see her mother-in-law socially again.

It is obvious that this couple needed professional advice. The deep seated conflicts involved were not apparent to the principals and probably never would be. George J. Mohr has this to say:

"A word must be said about the persistence of psychologically disturbed patterns of behavior in marriage. Deeply implanted attitudes inimical to successful adjustments in marriage disturb or disrupt many marriages in the ways described. These attitudes usually evolve during the course of development of the child toward maturity and are dependent in considerable measure upon the nature of the training and rearing. It should be emphasized, however, that all too often the nature and the very existence of these disturbing attitudes are not recognized or are explicitly denied by the victims themselves."(3)

(3) Morris Fishbein and Ruby Reeves, Modern Marriage and Family Living, (New York, Oxford university Press, 1957), Ch. XVIII, p. 280.

CONCLUSION

In this study, I have found very little among the recognized authorities on marriage that absolutely refutes the premises advanced by Dr. Adams. If he sins at all, they are those of omission.

His advice is good, but in most cases superficial. The action prescribed is often not fully explained, thus leaving the recipient confused as to motive. This I do not attribute to lack of professional stature on the author's part, but to limitations imposed upon him by his medium.

The audience of "The Ladies Home Journal" is the middle-class, middle-aged female. We exist in a rapidly changing culture. Values making their appearance in that culture are at odds with the values cherished by that audience. The author would not help his cause by clashing violently with those values. Reader resistance could only result in the discontinuance of the series and I believe that it has definite merit.

Dr. Adams does not stoop to the glib or entertaining answers to the problems presented, but maintains the serious and professional approach that the subject deserves. While he uses the language of the layman, it is necessary in communicating with his audience. And on this subject, with the competence of Dr. Adams, communication is vital.

In the Disney series we find a very different approach. It is much more professional in character and tone. It is much more detailed and stresses to a greater degree the not

so evident psychic and social conflicts that are basic in the more serious marital maladjustments.

Even though more scholarly in tone, the latter series has its place in the popular medium. It will be read for the same reason that "True Confessions" are read by a large segment of the female population. There is the vicarious thrill of surreptitiously watching and hearing the family quarrel in the house next door, with the smug satisfaction that "my" marriage is not like that. At the same time, no one could read these articles without unconsciously absorbing the knowledge that marriages can be saved through expert guidance. This fact alone makes the series valuable.

I feel that the "Ladies Home Journal" is doing a fine job in implanting the idea with the public, that sick marriages like sick bodies can be cured by those trained to the task.

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