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Public Attitudes to Marital Problems

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Few of us need to be reminded that we live in an era in which divorce is a commonplace phenomenon, affecting something like one marriage in three. Popularly, it is supposed that the sheer extent of divorce has resulted in changed public attitudes, both to the separated and divorced themselves and to the more general conditions which lead to marital breakdown — expectations of marriage, the changing meaning of marriage, and so on. As our knowledge of the marital relationship improves, we begin to see more clearly the relationship between public norms about marriage and the family and the private, personal experiences of individuals. In this paper we want to look at the *public* dimension of this relationship through an exploration of attitudes to marital problems. Our findings are drawn from a recent attitude survey¹ and enable us to throw some light on the complex problem of help seeking in marriage.

The Family Beliefs Survey

Our survey of family beliefs was conducted during the summer of 1981 in the cities of Sheffield and Aberdeen² and explored public attitudes on a wide range of topics relating to marriage and the family. From samples of 484 in each place we achieved 363 adult interviews in Sheffield and 353 in Aberdeen, giving response rates of 75% and 73% respectively. Given the contrasting socio-economic characteristics of the locations it was reasonable to expect some differences in beliefs about the family. Aberdeen is a port where fishing and papermaking have been the predominant industries and Sheffield is a heavy industrial town; their recent economic experiences have also varied — buoyancy in Aberdeen based on North Sea oil in contrast to high levels of unemployment in Sheffield.

With the exception of a slight over-representation of women in the Aberdeen sample,³ the survey provides us with the views of a representative cross-section of the adult populations of the two cities. It would be unwise however to extrapolate beyond this — the survey is in no sense a proxy for Britain as a whole. In table 1 we can see the composition of the two samples by the sex and marital status of our respondents.⁴

Beliefs about marriage and divorce are not easily explored in the attitude survey format. One way in which we tried to overcome some of the more obvious drawbacks of the survey was in constructing brief stories, or 'vignettes',

Table 1

Respondents in the Sheffield-Aberdeen Family Beliefs Survey,
by sex and marital status

	Sheffield n = 363		Aberdeen n = 353	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Single	42	29	36	43
Married	104	118	87	134
Widowed	9	35	5	32
Divorced	10	10	5	6
Separated	2	4	2	3

describing the marriages of a number of imaginary couples. In designing these vignettes our aim was to present a series of case studies depicting situations known to end in marital separation and divorce. In this we relied not so much upon the well-known matrimonial causes, but upon the various accounts of the divorced and separated which appear in the research and counselling literature. The three problems which we explored, therefore, were infidelity, violence, and a generalised feeling of disillusionment and dissatisfaction, which we refer to as *ennui*.

Our first task was to examine the degree of seriousness with which respondents regarded the problems we described. In each case we asked whether the situation should a) be sorted out by the couple themselves, whether b) they should seek outside help or c) they should seriously consider splitting up. Secondly, we were interested in the possible mediating effects of children: how might the presence or absence of children influence public opinions about what the couple should do? In looking here at these two related dimensions, we shall examine responses principally in terms of the sex, age and marital status of our respondents, looking also for variations between locations.

Infidelity

The first group of vignettes looked at public perceptions of infidelity. Each of the stories was read out to the respondent.

Andrew and Margaret have been married about nine years. They have no children.

Margaret is very upset because she recently discovered that Andrew is having an affair with someone he met at work. What should they do?

Of course, we were concerned that respondents might sense a double standard of sexual morality in this vignette, and we therefore added a rider to the question:

Suppose it was Margaret who was having the affair?

We found that in both locations and irrespective of which spouse was being unfaithful, responses were remarkably consistent. For respondents in both Sheffield and Aberdeen, infidelity appears as something which a couple should 'sort out themselves'. This view was taken by over 60% of those interviewed. Just under one third to a quarter believed that the couple should seek outside help, with ten per cent or less suggesting that they should seriously consider splitting

Table 2

	Infidelity			
	Andrew and Margaret (no children)		Aberdeen	
	Sheffield		Aberdeen	
	Andrew	Margaret	Andrew	Margaret
Sort it themselves	64	65	61	62
Seek outside help	30	28	31	28
Split-up	6	7	8	10
(T)	100%	100%	100%	100%
	Bob and Lorraine (children)			
	Sheffield		Aberdeen	
	Bob	Lorraine	Bob	Lorraine
Sort it out themselves	68	69	67	69
Seek outside help	26	26	27	26
Split-up	6	5	6	6
(T)	100%	100%	100%	100%

up (table 2). The evidence here therefore suggests that infidelity is *not* regarded as something which should inevitably and inexorably lead to separation and divorce, but is rather an essentially private matter which the couple should sort out together. This view tends to be shared by men and women of all ages in both locations, though the under thirties in Sheffield showed that they would be slightly more likely to seek outside help. It is modified slightly by marital status however. Whilst the numbers are small and should therefore be treated with caution, they do show that the divorced were less likely than any other marital status group to suggest that the couple sort out the problem themselves and the most likely to suggest *outside help*.

Perhaps surprisingly, the second vignette on infidelity, which included the presence of children and in which we again added the rider changing the unfaithful partner, produced very little alteration in patterns of response. The second vignette read:

Bob and Lorraine have been married for about ten years. They have two children aged eight and six. Lorraine is having an affair with someone she met at evening classes and Bob has found out about it. What should they do?

Suppose it was Bob who was having the affair?

As Table 2 shows, the presence of children makes no substantial alteration, producing only a minor increase, more noticeable in Aberdeen than Sheffield, among those who suggest the couple sort it out themselves, with a small *drop* in the numbers suggesting outside help.

Violence

In the next vignette we looked at the question of marital violence.

Mike and Joyce have been married for about three years and have no children. Joyce is increasingly frightened of Mike's violent temper and wonders whether she can go on putting up with his sudden outbursts which frequently end in physical violence. What should they do?

For this example, in stark contrast to that on infidelity, we found that violence in a marriage is clearly *not* regarded as something which a couple should attempt to deal with alone; only eight per cent in Sheffield and seven per cent in Aberdeen recommended this option. Instead, opinion was fairly evenly divided between the options of outside help and splitting up?; 50% in Sheffield and 47% in Aberdeen thought the couple should seek some form of help with 42% and 46%

Table 3

	Violence			
	Mike and Joyce		Aberdeen	
	Sheffield		Aberdeen	
	No children	Children	No children	Children
Sort it out themselves	8	13	7	8
Seek outside help	50	60	47	58
Split-up	42	27	46	34
(T)	100%	100%	100%	100%

respectively suggesting separation (table 3). In Sheffield the women were slightly more likely than the men to suggest outside help and the men slightly more likely than the women to suggest splitting up. Once again, there were no marked age differences in the responses. Marital status did produce some variations however — suggesting the influence of personal experience upon responses. In Sheffield, the divorced run against the general trend in opting for the suggestion of splitting up, whereas the widowed in both cities had the lowest proportions suggesting this option and the highest for outside help.

When we introduced children into the vignette and asked our respondents what the couple should do, there were some appreciable changes in replies. We found that the advice to separate fell by 15% in Sheffield and 12% in Aberdeen, with respective increases in outside help of ten per cent and 11%.

Ennui

The final vignette took the theme of a generalised dissatisfaction with marriage, labelled *ennui*.

Philip and Angela have no children. They have been married for about six years but they both feel they have grown apart. They have few interests in common and both feel bored and dissatisfied with their relationship. What should they do?

We found that this problem was believed to be a powerful reason for splitting up, where no children are involved. In Sheffield 51% of respondents took the view that the couple should seriously consider separation, with 48% of Aberdonians sharing the same opinion. Outside help was the preferred option of 23% in Sheffield and 22% in Aberdeen, with 26% and 30% respectively, suggesting that the couple should sort out their own difficulties (table 4).

In looking at these answers by the sex of the respondent, we found that in both cities men were slightly more likely than women to suggest that the couple split up (54% against 47% in Sheffield and 50% against 45% in Aberdeen). Women however were more prepared than men to suggest that the couple sort out their own difficulties or seek outside help.

Table 4

	Ennui			
	Philip and Angela Sheffield		Aberdeen	
	No children	Children	No children	Children
Sort it out themselves	26	38	30	34
Seek outside help	23	47	22	47
Split-up	51	15	48	19
(T)	100%	100%	100%	100%

Again, there were virtually no age differences, though in Aberdeen responses tended to polarise with increasing age — older respondents proposing separation or a private solution to the problem, rather than outside help.

In Sheffield the single and divorced opted for separation more than the married and widowed, who showed stronger preferences for the couple sorting out their own difficulties. Preferences for outside help were not altered by marital status. In Aberdeen by contrast, the widowed showed stronger preferences than the rest for splitting up and were least in favour of outside help — the divorced being most in favour of this latter option.

We then added a rider to the vignette:

Suppose they have young children: what should they do?

We now found (table 4) a dramatic alteration in responses. The view that the couple should seriously consider splitting up seemed, with the inclusion of children, to evaporate — reduced by 36% in Sheffield and 29% in Aberdeen — thus becoming the least, rather than the most, preferred option of the three. By contrast, advice to seek outside help *increased* by 24% in Sheffield and 25% in Aberdeen, and therefore became the most, rather than the least, preferred choice. The belief that the couple should sort out their own difficulties remained constant in both locations with or without children.

Conclusions

In trying to make sense of these findings it is important, first of all, to recognise the different responses produced by each vignette. Most striking are the contrasts between different types of problem, along with the powerful mediating effects which the presence of children produce in certain cases. Taken overall, there is no doubt that in the two locations we studied the most powerful reason for ending a marriage, providing there are no children, is the boredom and mutual dissatisfaction of the partners. Where children are involved however *ennui* is over-ridingly a problem for outside intervention. But with or without children, *violence* is seen as the marital problem most amenable to outside help. *Infidelity*, on the other hand, whether or not there are children, is something for the couple to sort out themselves.

These simple findings tell us quite a lot about public attitudes to marital relationships. The first, concerning the questions of boredom, dissatisfaction, *ennui* and lack of fulfilment within marriage reflects the highly privatised nature of the contemporary marital relationship. That so many of our respondents believed the couple in the vignette should seriously consider splitting up,

underlies the belief that a sense of personal fulfilment for each of the partners is now almost a *sine qua non* of successful marriage. There is more strength here to the argument that high divorce rates are a product of taking marriage *more* rather than *less* seriously. It is also interesting to note that when we included children in our vignette of the bored couple, attitudes shifted away from splitting up and pointed much more to the need for outside help. This is presumably the 'for the sake of the children' factor asserting itself — but also it reveals a certain propensity (47% of respondents in each town) to accept some sort of intervention, childless unhappy couples on the other hand appear either not to require outside help or are believed not to be amenable to it.

In the case of the violent marriage, we see an even greater readiness to suggest outside intervention — especially where children are involved. Attitudes were once again remarkably consistent between locations — this was not something the couple could sort out themselves or with the help of friends or relatives. Neither was it quite such a powerful reason as boredom for splitting up — even where no children were involved. Of the three problems examined this was certainly regarded as the most 'treatable', though we did see the divorced group in Sheffield, for example, suggesting much more strongly than the rest that the couple should split up.

Our findings on attitudes to infidelity should be treated with extreme caution. They suggest that infidelity is regarded overwhelmingly as something which the couple should sort out together, rather than seek outside help or split up. Impressive though these responses are, it would be unwise to suggest that they imply any public condonation of extra-marital sexual relationships; with hindsight, we should have (for each of the vignettes) allowed our respondents the option; 'this is a normal part of marriage and should not be regarded as a "problem".' In the belief however that each of the three situations would be regarded as a problem, we did not include this option. On the other hand, it is unfortunate that we are not able to say something more definite about attitudes to infidelity.

It should be emphasised that while we have been exploring public attitudes within two geographically separate locations, most attitudes appear remarkably similar in both. Our findings tell us what men and women in Sheffield and Aberdeen think about certain kinds of marital problems. Whilst they imply a considerable readiness to accept the intervention of outside agencies in unhappy marriages, they are of course telling us about our respondents' view of what 'other people' should do and not what respondents would themselves do in the same circumstances. There is plenty of evidence to suggest however that the management of marital problems is heavily scripted by prevailing social attitudes and norms. The description of public attitudes found here may therefore help us better to understand the men and women who face problems relating to infidelity, violence or *ennui* within their own marriages and their varying propensities to seek some form of help-giving intervention.

Notes and references

1. The survey was conducted by Social and Community Planning Research, with

- special assistance from Gill Courtenay. Jackie Burgoyne collaborated on the design and pilot stages.
2. The locations were chosen in relation to earlier studies of divorce and remarriage, see for example, Burgoyne, J and Clark, D: 'Starting again...' *Marriage Guidance*, vol 19, no 7.
 3. Women make up 62% of those interviewed in Aberdeen, but only 55% of the population of the city.
 4. Hereafter, all tables showing responses are based on gross percentages and *exclude*, because of small numbers, those who are separated.

Stephanie Gaunt

Reasons for Resignation

The author has been an MG counsellor since 1978, and is currently working as a full-time counsellor with an alcoholics rehabilitation project in Birmingham. Here, she summarises the main findings of a research project carried out in association with the NMGC, forming part of a masters degree in applied psychology undertaken in 1982.

Introduction

It has been estimated that, on average, nearly one third of each year's intake of new counsellors will resign from MG before the completion of their basic training period.

Clearly, from the organisation's point of view, this situation is far from satisfactory. Costs of training are increased, and the perennial shortage of manpower puts local marriage guidance councils under constant pressure to recruit more counsellors. Service to the client will inevitably suffer if a high proportion of counsellors are in training, and therefore inexperienced; and finally, for the individual counsellor, the decision to withdraw from counselling may be extremely distressing.

In order to look at this problem it was decided to concentrate on the following two questions:

- a whether there are any factors which differentiate counsellors who leave from those who stay, and, if any of these factors occur in a sufficiently high degree, whether they could be predicted during the selection process.
- b the reasons underlying an individual's decision to drop out of training, and whether the organisation could identify these reasons and act on them at an earlier stage.

Methodology

In order to answer these questions, a two-tier approach was adopted. Firstly, the comparison of data on selected personal history variables for two groups of counsellors, one consisting of counsellors who had stayed in training, and one