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Prologue

The nature of marriage

Marriage in Britain today is a fascinating but bewildering subject. This is partly because so much of a marriage relationship takes place in private, because its character varies from couple to couple, because it is extremely complex, and because it has been subjected to a great deal of change in recent years. These four themes require some expansion.

Whether or not a marriage is a legally constituted one, there is usually public recognition of its existence: the couple's relatives, friends and acquaintances know that they are married or living together. But beyond this fact it is probable that most people will know little about the relationship between the two people involved, for example what they talk about when they are together, even whether they talk at all, what their sexual relationship is like, what if anything they disagree about and how violently, how if at all they share tasks around the house and in the care of children, who takes what sort of decisions, who gives in to whom, and what interests if any they share. Their habits will usually only explode into public view when something abnormal occurs (such as severe marital discord) and outsiders gain information about them through the couple's need to talk or to seek advice or help. Of course some marriages are less private than others, but it is generally true in our society that most of the interaction between a wife and hus-band is carried on in their own home and away from the public gaze, and that they will not usually discuss with other people most of the intimate details of their lives together. If one wants to understand other people's marriages, all one usually has to go on is a vast array of tiny clues, but with most of the major pieces missing. It may therefore be hard to reach an answer to the question of what marriage is like, for one will know little about any marriages except those of which one is either a close observer or a participant.

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Marriage is also bewildering because, even though it may be hard to obtain detailed information about any one marriage, it is clear that there are many different styles or ways of being married. Even without the categories identified by researchers (see chapter 2) everyone has heard of marriages in which the husband dominates, or of those dominated by the wife, of the couple who are always rowing but appear quite content, of those who seem constantly on the verge of splitting up, of those who appear to spend most of their time together to the exclusion of other people, of those who seem to lead quite separate lives, of relationships which never seem to change as against those apparently in constant flux; and so on and so on. Explanations of why marriages have the character they do are therefore also complex and varied; there are cultural, structural, psychological, even physiological explanations. No individual marriage can be explained by any single factor, and therefore no one can easily predict the form a marriage will take.

The difficulty of understanding marriage is of course compounded by its complexity and by the way in which it pervades the lives of the married: marriage is not just one aspect of their lives, but hundreds. It is usually the building up and maintenance of a home, and all the goods that go with it and in it (garden, furniture, car, pets, television); it is (usually) the bearing and rearing of children; a sexual relationship; being company for each other, and giving and receiving comfort, advice, criticism, anecdotes, useful information; looking after each other when sick; joining in hobbies, pastimes or games together; helping to provide each other's daily comforts and requirements (for example, providing clean clothes, growing vegetables, fetching or cooking food); helping to look after or entertain each other's friends and relations; and perhaps assisting with each other's occupation. Although there is considerable variation it is probably true to say that, outside working hours, most of the time of most married people is spent doing or thinking about the things involved in being married. An enterprise of so many facets seems a difficult thing to fulfil well: after all not everyone can be good at, or enjoy, all aspects; and it seems likely that, unless they are rigidly compartmentalised, difficulties in one area may well affect other areas. It makes one wonder how such a large-scale enterprise can be built on the back of such a seemingly small and fragile thing as a relationship between two people.

Finally, of course, marriage behaviour is changing. What makes this bewildering is the difficulty of predicting what will happen in the future. The three main directions of marital change are towards more

cohabitation, more symmetry between the roles of husband and wife, and more divorce. The latter change is the most evident: over the last twenty years there has been a 400% increase in the divorce rate, and it is estimated that about one in four of the couples marrying today will end that marriage in divorce (Rimmer 1981); if present trends continue, of course, the proportion will become even higher. There are no single factors that distinguish those who divorce from those who do not, so it is hard to predict future trends. Another consideration is the effect upon young people's own marriage behaviour of their parents' divorce and of subsequent periods in a household with a single parent or a stepparent; data from the U.S.A. show a weak association, but we do not yet know whether the same will be true for Britain (Thornes and Collard 1979). Cohabitation is also on the increase. It has been estimated that 'of all marriages taking place between 1977 and 1979 nearly a third were pre-ceded by cohabitation compared with only one in twenty of all marriages that took place between 1961 and 1970' (Office of Popu-lation Censuses and Surveys 1981). The proportion of couples living together before first marriages was 20% by the end of the 1970s, and for second marriages it was as high as 60%. If these trends continue, obviously a period of cohabitation before marriage will eventually become the norm (though the proportion for whom cohabitation is an alternative to marriage still appears to be small). As far as the relationship between the partners within marriage is concerned, there have undoubtedly been considerable changes outside marriage in the post-war period which have in turn led to changing attitudes towards marital roles. Factors such as the growing acceptability of, and demand for, equality of opportunity and treatment of all sections of the popu-lation; the development of the women's movement, producing greater public awareness of the position of women, and its efforts to alter attitudes towards women; the expanded labour market compared with the pre-war period, which has improved the economic position par-ticularly of married women; these have all contributed to bring about an alteration in role distribution within marriage. Thus it is now more likely that a wife will contribute to earning the household income, and that a husband will help with or even share the household tasks or childcare (see chapter 2). Complete symmetry, however, is still far away, except among a minority of couples (Mansfield 1982), and again one cannot know whether the present trend will continue and, if so, how rapidly further change will occur.

The continued existence of the more traditional forms of behaviour

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alongside the newer means that a far greater degree of choice is available to couples today: the choice of whether or when to have a legal marriage ceremony, whether to stay married for ever or not, and whether to organise marital roles symmetrically or not. Having the opportunity to make choices may be preferable to having no choice, but it does in some ways make life more difficult than mere adherence to universally accepted standards.

These four characteristics of marriage (its private, varying, complex and changing nature) all make it a fascinating subject for research, but they also make it a difficult subject. In particular, its private nature means that a marriage relationship may not be easy for an outside investigator to study. There is for this reason relatively little research on the topic (see chapter 2). However, the nature of marriage today makes it more than ever an interesting subject for research, the questions frequently asked being, first, what is it that makes marriage difficult nowadays (and thus helps to explain the rising divorce rate), and second, if it is difficult, why do people still want to marry, either for a first or even for a second time.

Few people would disagree that marriage is difficult. The kind of phrases people use when one interviews them about their marriages are, for example, 'it's a struggle', 'you've got to stick it out', 'you've got to learn to adjust', 'you can't do just what you want', 'you've got to learn to take responsibility', 'all couples have their disagreements'. Yet even though it may be difficult, people still get married. They must therefore hope that it will bring important gains. What they are trying to achieve is thus an interesting and important question. The main aim of this book is to examine two possible answers. They were suggested partly by a previous answer proposed in a well-known article by the American sociologists Berger and Kellner (1964). Before discussing new answers one should therefore look briefly at theirs.

'Marriage and the Construction of Reality'

Berger and Kellner make the important point that, in order to give us the certainty that the world and our own identity within it really are as we ourselves see them, we need the knowledge that other people see them in the same way. It is thus through interaction with other people that what they call the 'validation' of the social world is carried out. They go on to say that some validations are more significant than others

(namely, the validation of one's own personal identity and place in the world) and that these can only be carried out through interaction with truly significant others (that is, those with whom we have an important or close relationship) in a continuing conversation. Having said this they then assume that marriage, being the relationship with a truly significant other *par excellence*, is an identity-building relationship. This then is the essence of the answer provided by Berger and Kellner to the question posed above about what people may be trying to achieve within marriage. However, the way in which they continue their analysis of marriage shows that it presents features which are likely to act against, or conflict with, the creation of identity. A confusing picture is thus presented, probably resulting from the fact that the authors fail to analyse the conditions necessary for identity creation and neglect an examination of the other kinds of activity carried out in intimate relationships (for another critical review see Morgan 1981).

Thus, they say that it is in the private sphere (i.e. within marriage) that the individual may obtain 'power'. This is a world in which 'he is *somebody* – perhaps even, within its charmed circle, a lord and master'. It is a world of 'individual choice' and 'autonomy'. However, if one partner in a marriage has power and is 'the master', then presumably the other undergoes a diminution of his choice and autonomy, and thus perhaps also a loss of identity. (He need not, of course, necessarily feel a sense of identity constraint: the identity of 'servant' may be fully congruent with his own sense of self.)

In assuming that marriage is an identity-creating relationship Berger and Kellner also overemphasise the autonomy which partners to a marriage have. An identity-creating relationship needs autonomy, 'its own controls', etc. But marriage is not necessarily able to function in this fashion. There are numerous rules with widespread public acceptance of how 'wives' and 'husbands' should behave. These rules may well impose an identity on individuals which is not congruent with their previous or potential sense of identity. Berger and Kellner do admit that the wider society provides the pair with 'certain standard instructions as to how they should go about this task' (i.e. creating a marriage), but they also say that beyond these instructions it is up to the pair to construct the world in which they live. However, is it not likely that in many cases these 'instructions' may inhibit the couple's task of the creation of their *own* world?

Again, Berger and Kellner convincingly state that reality and identity

creation are continuing processes in which both persons play an active part. It is 'a continual and endless conversation'. But how many marriages conform to such a pattern? Marriage is – as Berger and Kellner admit – a precarious relationship, and it may well be that whole areas of conversation have to be avoided in order that it may continue to exist.

The authors also convincingly state that it is likely that within marriage reality becomes more definite and more *stable* and that there is a narrowing of the future projections of each partner – 'both world and self thus take on a firmer, more reliable character for both parties'. But does this not involve a narrowing or constraining of the sense of identity? It would seem likely that as reality becomes firmer and narrower the sense of *stability* would be increased; however, one's sense of *self* may become less real, as also may one's sense of the other's identity. For if, as Berger and Kellner admit, the conversation about outsiders is one-sided ('the husband typically talks with his wife about his friend, but not with his friend about his wife') then one's sense of the other's identity comes to depend solely on the conversation one has with the partner, and is not enriched by conversation about one's partner with outsiders. In other words, two people rely largely on what they tell each other about their identity. Outside marriage it is more usual for us to make up our minds about the identity of another person from conversation with several others, from which we are able to piece together several dimensions of his identity. If this conversation is denied (as it typically appears to be within marriage), then the partner may come to be perceived as having a 'two-dimensional' identity. If this happens, one's own identity is threatened, for our partner will perceive us as having a two-dimensional identity. Thus this is how we will come to perceive ourselves, if it is true that it is partly from others' views of us that we see our own identity.

It seemed that, without fully realising it, Berger and Kellner were discussing two different and conflicting activities carried out within marriage: not only the creation of a sense of identity but also that of a sense of stability. The theme of stability creation is a strong one throughout the article: for example, when they say that people do not apprehend the process of reality construction which occurs within marriage, but merely think they have discovered something that was always there. This feeling, as Berger and Kellner say, enhances the stability of the world, and reduces the anxiety which accompanies the feeling that reality is sustained only by oneself.

The narrowing and solidifying of reality, the autonomy which one partner may have, the instructions the pair receive about how to go about the task of creating a marriage, all these seem likely to enhance a sense of stability. But each of them, as described above, also seems likely frequently to inhibit the creation of an individual's sense of identity, which may require more fluidity and freedom of choice so that the 'continual and endless conversation' can be carried on.

The concepts of identity and stability, and the conflict between them

A reading of Berger and Kellner encouraged two tentative answers to the question of what people may be trying to achieve within marriage; but some closer examination of the concepts seemed necessary before one could consider exploring them through empirical research (see Askham 1976 for an earlier version of the following section).

To return to the concept of identity: individuals within our society perceive themselves and others to have a wide variety of identities. These may be divided broadly, as Zicklin (1969) suggests, into three categories: macro-identities, which are revealed on cursory inspection and may involve 'sex, colour, occupation if a uniform is worn, and physical appearance'; micro-identities, which are only revealed to the other after a certain degree of acquaintance and which may involve 'name, family relationship, marital status, friendship ties, occupational role, socio-economic position, religious affiliation' etc.; and character attributes, which necessitate an even greater degree of acquaintance by the other and which involve 'personality and character traits, moods, habits, values, interests, attitudes and tastes'. Similarly, identities can be perceived as ranging from the most general types of classification which the individual shares with thousands of others (such as 'woman', 'white person', 'adolescent'), through those which are more and more restricted (such as 'unmarried mother', 'retired policeman', 'collector of butterflies'), to that in which the individual perceives himself to be unique (the 'I-myself' who is different from all other human beings).

For whatever reason, individuals in our society tend to want to develop and maintain a sense of this unique, personal identity. First, it is perhaps partly because doing so enables them to give form and direction to various types of social behaviour. For example, one may envisage the concept of personal identity as assisting the individual to make sense of the multitude of more specific identities which he performs. Thus he has a conception of how to behave for each of the roles

he performs; yet these roles could frequently contradict one another or be incapable of being performed simultaneously. A sense of personal identity will aid him in his decision as to which role should be given priority in which situation, and will also help him to modify his behaviour so that two or more roles become less contradictory. For example, instead of saying to herself that a woman is someone who does X, while a schoolteacher is someone who does Y, the individual may say: 'I am the kind of person who does Y even though I am a woman.' (Of course this is not the only strategy individuals can use to resolve role conflict; for example, there may be an acceptable way of ordering roles so that the individual knows which one should be given priority without having to refer to his self-conception.)

Second, in cases in which the individual has a choice of action, a sense of self may aid him in deciding between a variety of different goals or motives for action. In other words, as Turner (1968) states, it may 'supply a stable and workable direction to action by providing a criterion for selective attention to the social consequences and reflections of ego's behaviour'.

Third, and similarly, a sense of personal identity may give meaning to one's past and guide one's future behaviour. This is stated in Zicklin's article in which he says that the sense of identity is the individual's experience in trying to do two things: 'to make meaning out of past events in which the individual has participated', in other words, to seek behavioural consistency; and 'to delineate a certain character for himself which will guide his behaviour in future interaction'.

Assuming that people do want a sense of personal identity, the next question is how it is developed and maintained. First, of course, it can only be created if the individual interacts with others. Without this he is not a human being at all. As Mead (1934) states:

The individual experiences himself as such, not directly, but only indirectly, from the particular standpoints of other individual members of the same social group or from the generalised standpoint of the social group as a whole to which he belongs. For he enters his own experience as a self or individual, not directly or immediately, not by becoming a subject to himself, but only insofar as he first becomes an object to himself just as other individuals are objects to him or are in his experience; and he becomes an object to himself only by taking the attitudes of other individuals toward himself within a social environment or context of experience and behaviour in which both he and they are involved.

We learn through interaction, therefore, that we are man or woman, coal-miner or sociologist, stamp collector or poet, and how to act within these identities. However, as we switch from more generalised to more specific or unique identities we need a special type of 'other' with whom to interact – or rather a special kind of interaction – in order to create such identities. Because we are formulating the more intimate self we need a more intimate relationship, and another to whom we can reveal, and who will aid us in creating, the complexities of our unique self. For, as Turner says, unless they take place within an intimate relationship, 'interpretations at other than face-value, and especially at the diagnostic level, are regarded as invasions of personal privacy and attacks on personal dignity'. On the other hand, he goes on to say, 'Relationships of intimacy . . . carry with them not only license but obligation for a limited amount of mutual empathic interpretation.'

However, along with this intimate relationship, we also need – in order to create and maintain a sense of identity – certain periods of privacy. However intimate the relationship 'my' behaviour is always modified by 'yours' and by my expectations of you, and to this extent I cannot be 'myself'. I need my privacy in order to reflect upon past interaction and behaviour and upon potential future behaviour, and to produce order out of what may be conflicting identities. It is a necessary part of a mutual process of identity creation for two people – the coming together to create each other, the withdrawing in order to reflect on what may be a turbulent, disturbing or problematic period of inter-action, and then a further period of interaction to continue working on the identity creation, using the reflections one has had in private. As Zicklin states:

> Alone, we may engage in speculation and reflection upon all sorts of identities of which we have felt ourselves possessed. Once engaged in face-to-face interaction a certain focussing of attention and awareness takes place, and we fashion ourselves into a certain kind of person, again depending on with whom we are interacting.

The development of a sense of identity then seems to be an evolving process in which the individual is aided by his intimate others but from whom he also periodically withdraws.

The concept of stability is very different. It can be likened to that of the home as described by Schutz (1971) who suggests that individuals tend to seek a home environment which will provide them with 'an

unquestionable way of life, a shelter and a protection'; he goes on to define the home in the following way:

> Life at home follows an organised pattern of routine: it has its well-determined goals and well-proved means to bring them about, consisting of a set of traditions, habits, institutions, timetables for activities of all kinds, etc. Most of the problems of daily life can be mastered by following this pattern. There is no need to define or redefine situations which have occurred so many times or to look for new solutions . . . We not only may forecast what will happen tomorrow, but we also have a fair chance to plan correctly the more distant future. Things will in substance continue to be what they have been so far.

The intimate relationship in our society is the crucial element of the home. Children grow up within the home environment of their intimate relationship with one or more adults. The majority of adults go on to seek another home in a relationship with another adult (although of course not *all* homes involve other adults, nor necessarily adults having an intimate relationship).

The importance for the individual of the stability implied in the notion of 'the home' is often taken for granted in sociological studies. The reason for its existence is touched on by Berger and Luckmann (1966) when they say that the 'home world' of childhood 'is so constituted as to instil in the individual a nomic structure in which he may have confidence that "everything is all right" '. Another element of stability is 'habitualisation', and the need for this is again discussed by Berger and Luckmann. They state:

> Habitualisation carries with it the important psychological gain that choices are narrowed . . . And by providing a stable background in which human activity may proceed with a minimum of decision-making most of the time, it frees energy for such decisions as may be necessary on certain occasions. In other words, the background of habitualised activity opens up a foreground of deliberation and innovation.

If the notion of home is most frequently embodied in the intimate other, and if 'home' implies stability, changelessness or habitualisation, then this intimate other must be seen to possess certain qualities. Those that appear most necessary are a strong and permanent commitment to one's partner; in other words he or she must show the qualities of acceptance, changelessness and permanence which are implied in the concept of 'home'. 'Changelessness' does not mean complete absence