

CONFIGURATION OF COUPLE RELATIONSHIPS AND MARITAL CONFLICT

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Abstract: *One of the most well-known marital typologies in the study of lasting marriages was developed by John Cuber and Peggy Harroff (1965), which is used as the main theoretical framework in the present analysis. I collected data using the technique of the individual, semi-structured, face-to-face interview and participatory, uncontrolled, hidden observation. This paper highlights some specific features of marital conflicts in different types of marital relationships. I also underline that marital partners, to a different extent, focus either on the pragmatic or the emotional benefits of marriage and this priority influences their behaviours during their conflictual situations.*

Key words: *types of marriage, marital relationships, marital conflict.*

1. Introduction

In post-traditional societies, individuals start to make their own decisions about lifestyle and personal relations, without being led by traditions or institutionally-sanctioned or religious rules (Giddens, 1990). Marriage has changed and continues to change, and so do the ways of investigating family life.

Western societies are now characterized as individualistic, and individualism is positively associated with valuing romantic love (Dion and Dion, 1990). Individualism emerged as a way to think about ourselves. A successful marriage came to be measured by how well the union met its members' emotional needs.

The current state of marriage was summarized by Cherlin (2004, p. 858) in these terms: "At present, marriage is no longer as dominant as it once was, but it remains important on a symbolic level. It has been transformed from a familial and community institution to an individualized, choice based achievement. It is a marker of prestige and is still somewhat useful in creating enforceable trust".

2. Theoretical Framework

The two transitions in the meaning of marriage can be used as a basis for outlining a classification of family types. Ernest Burgess famously labelled the first one as a

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transition "from an institution to a companionship" (Burgess & Locke, 1945). The second great change in the meaning of marriage occurred when the companionate marriage lost ground and it was gradually overtaken by different forms of marriage (and nonmarital families), particularly marriages in which both the husband and the wife worked outside the home, and their focus is on self-development, flexible and negotiable roles, openness in confronting problem (Cherlin, 2004).

This classification includes three kinds of marriage: institutional, companionate and individualized marriage.

1. *Institutional marriage*: marriage is seen as a social institution based on dutiful adherence to the time-honoured marriage premise, particularly the norm of permanence (Cherlin, 2004). Institutional marriage generally offers practical and economic security, along with the rewards that we often associate with custom and tradition.

2. By *companionate marriage*, Ernest Burgess and Harvey Locke (1945) were referring to the single-earner, breadwinner-homemaker marriage that flourished in the 1950s. In the companionate marriage, couples are bound together by companionship, coupled with a gendered division of labour, pride in performing spousal and parenting roles, and hopes for "the American dream"—a home of their own and a comfortable domestic life together (Lamanna, Riedmann and Stewart, 2017). During this first transition in meaning, marriage remained the only socially acceptable way to have a sexual relationship and to raise children.

3. *Individualized marriage* is distinguished by four interrelated characteristics: it is optional; spouses' roles are flexible (negotiable and renegotiable); its expected rewards involve love, communication, and emotional intimacy; it exists in conjunction with a vast diversity of family forms (Lamanna, Riedmann and Stewart, 2017). More than in companionate marriages, partners now expect love and emotional intimacy, open communication, role flexibility, gender equality, and personal growth (Cherlin, 2004). Individuals aim for personal growth and deeper intimacy through more open communication and mutually shared disclosures about feelings with their partners.

In other words, marriage has undergone a process of deinstitutionalization - a weakening of the social norms that define partners' behaviour (Cherlin, 2004). This deinstitutionalization of marriage was seen as a loss for society, a "decline", on the one hand (Blankenhorn et al. 2015), or as an inevitable historical change, on the other hand, (Coontz, 2015).

An approach often found in the contemporary analysis of the family and marriage is the one made from the position of the paradigm of costs and benefits. This cost-benefit analysis implies weighing the current and anticipated costs of being in a marital relation against the anticipated benefits. This analysis is based on the idea that people are guided, in most of their actions, by the principle of obtaining the greatest possible benefits with the least possible costs (Iluţ, 2005). Appearing in the economic field, the notions of benefit/cost have broadened their semantic sphere, referring, at present, to psychological, informational, social, emotional aspects, in addition to the material, financial ones. Applying the paradigm of rational behaviour from micro-economics to human behaviour in general and to family behaviour in particular, Garry Becker (1993)

claims that aspects related to the family can be explained in terms of capital, costs, benefits, rational strategies. Enriched in this way, the new words can also be found at the level of analysis of married life, especially when we try possible answers to questions like: "Why do we choose a certain partner and not another?", "What are the reasons why people still get married?", "Why do we stay in a couple relationship over time?"

Depending on individual preferences and the socio-economic background in which they have developed, the partners in a couple choose to focus either on the practical or the emotional benefits of marriage. Based on this criterion, Mary Ann Lamanna and Agnes Riedmann (1991) describe two major types of marriage: the utilitarian (the more pragmatic marriage) and the intrinsic (the emotional dimension being more important).

Utilitarian marriage represents a union started or maintained, in particular, based on pragmatic motivations (Lamanna and Riedmann, 1991), such as: social approval, children, comfort or even material luxury, financial security, career advancement, housekeeping, a political favor, a good car, a great house, and so on. Marriages entered for practical reasons are more common throughout history and throughout the world. These partners do not focus on intimacy. In utilitarian marriages, there may be numerous ties to one another (children, property, and status), that is why they tend to be more stable than intrinsic ones. Although studies show that there are certain social categories predisposed to this type of marriage - for example, divorced women with children to support (White, 1979) - it can still be found in all social classes.

The main features of *intrinsic marriage* consist of "the intensity of feelings about each other and the centrality of the spouse's welfare in each mate's scale of values" (Cuber and Harroff, 1965, p. 144). The partners are together because they share common values, they enjoy being together, and they love and value one another. These partners have looked for someone they were drawn to and with whom they felt a close and intense relationship. They find the couple relationship personally rewarding. Intrinsic marriages are a relatively recent phenomenon arising out of the 20th century focus on romantic love as a basis for marriage and increased independence of partners. Intrinsic marriages have little conflict and tension. In an intrinsic marriage, if the love or passion cools down, there may be nothing else to keep the partners together.

In real life, very few connections are either purely utilitarian or purely intrinsic. These two types represent, rather, the opposite poles of a continuum. Real marriages are thus placed on different positions of this imaginary line, combining to varying degrees the elements of pragmatism with those of emotional sharing. Between the two extremes, one can identify an almost unlimited variety of types of marital relationships. Therefore, John F. Cuber and Peggy B. Harroff (1965), studying enduring marriages, developed one of the best-known marital typologies. They proposed three institutional (conflict habituated, devitalized, and passive-congenial) and two companionate (vital and total) types of marriage. Following their research, based on interviewing couples, marital relationships were classified as follows:

- Conflict-habituated marital relationship;
- Devitalized marital relationship;
- Passive- congenial marital relationship;
- Vital marital relationship;

- Total marital relationship.

These types of marital relationships do not constitute degrees of happiness of the partners, but, rather, reflect different ways of adapting to life as a couple and at the same time various conceptions of marriage. In other words, couples experiencing these types of relationships may or may not declare themselves satisfied with them. What seems bizarre to us and we wonder why they are still together, may represent for the respective partners a relationship that offers them the fulfilment of their personal needs.

3. Methodology

The present study is part of a wider qualitative, explanatory-descriptive research, which aimed to identify the spouses' ways of relating to conflict situations.

In order to collect in-depth information, I chose the interview method, because it facilitates direct and interactive access to human subjectivity, to the inner universe of those studied. The technique used was that of the individual, semi-structured, face-to-face interview. I also used the method of participatory, uncontrolled, hidden observation, both during the interviews and in other quotidian interaction contexts. The data collected in this way was synthesized by observation notes.

I selected the convenience sampling technique, including different participants from a socio-demographic point of view. Qualitative research requires a bond of trust and openness that is established between the interviewer and the interviewee. The topic of problems in the couple, of marital conflicts, is a sensitive one that is not discussed with anyone. I consider that these deep, intimate aspects of the relationship or memories, mostly negative, would hardly be revealed to an outside, unknown researcher. Therefore, I interviewed well-known people with a high willingness to self-disclose. The sample of the present qualitative research is composed of 19 married people, 7 men and 12 women, 16 subjects from Braşov County and 3 from other counties, 16 from the urban environment and 3 from the rural environment, with elementary education 2, secondary education 8 and higher education 9, aged between 18 and 70 years.

The interviews were conducted with respect to research ethics, the participating subjects were informed about the research objectives and they were assured that the data obtained was confidential, that the materials collected from them would carry a code.

The data were audio recorded and then transcribed into texts and analysed using the classic coding procedure - with "pencil and paper" and the data analysis software NVivo 11.

After collecting the first data, I started the process of data analysis in order to interpret them. I used the case-oriented analysis strategy described by Huberman and Miles (1998): I coded the materials and developed, for each topic in turn, a unique analytical model, frames which I then compared each with each other, resulting in a characteristic pattern according to all the analysed cases. The strategy for working with the texts was to code the material with the aim of making categories and developing theories, found in Flick (1998).

In the first phase, I used to the global analysis, which gave me a general perspective on the analysed material; I made an inventory of the themes identified in the material. I used this type of analysis in order to familiarize myself with the text, to have information about what themes exist in each interview and where in the texts they can be found. As I read the text, I wrote down key words, I structured larger passages by marking central concepts or sentences.

The coding of the textual material was carried out through the three procedures of theoretical coding, described by Strauss and Corbin (1990): open coding, axial coding and selective coding.

4. Findings

Following the analysis of the data obtained from the interviews and the observation notes, I identified a series of categories and subcategories related to attitudes towards marital conflict.

In the next paragraphs, I will synthesize the features of each type of marriage from Cuber and Harroff's (1965) classification, and I will present the specificity of the categories and subcategories related to marital conflict discovered in the coding process.

1. The couple characterized by a **relationship in which conflict is a habit** systematically experiences considerable tension and many unresolved conflicts (Cuber and Harroff, 1965). Currently, husband and wife argue, nag each other and refer to unpleasant moments from the past. As a rule, both admit that they are incompatible, but the atmosphere of tension seems normal to them.

In this type of couple relationship, marital conflict is predominantly found in the form of tension and crisis. Tension implies a constant negative change in attitude, sometimes accompanied by the emergence of fixed opinions. Each new conflict situation confirms and aggravates this negative reporting, mutual perceptions are altered, and the relationship becomes a source of stress and worry. The crisis represents the most intense and obvious form of manifestation of the conflict. The behaviour goes out of rational control, verbal abuse (swearing, vulgar adjectives, raised tone, yelling and shouting), silence treatment, psychological abuse ("*you're stupid, what if you came from the city [...]*" "*you're lazy, you don't want to do anything!*"), or even physical violence (pushed, slapped) being recorded.

Marital conflict is perceived and defined as a fight, competition:

"The conflict ... arguing ... I think it means that both fight back, neither gives up and the other listens or receives". (Female, 29 years old, postgraduate studies, urban)

"...it's an either you or I situation..." (Male, 38 years old, higher education, urban)

"...a state of war..." (Male, 39, higher education, urban)

Those who participate involuntarily, as external observers, in such situations consider these marital conflicts (in which persons with a conflict-habituated marital relationship are involved) to be embarrassing situations. Talking about the arguments of others in the public space, one of the interviewed subjects defines them as: "*...circus scene...*", "*To me, they seem like very embarrassing moments*". (Male, 38 years old, higher education, urban).

This kind of relationship differs from those in which conflicts are generated by concrete, specific problems, because here the subject of the disagreement is not very important, and the partners, in general, do not resolve or even expect to resolve their disagreements.

Among the effects produced by marital conflict from this type of couple relationship (especially in the case of the contemptuous or aggressive behaviour of the couple partner) is the feeling of self-disregard experienced by the victim of aggression:

"I was crying...I was crying and I thought I was a fool...it was as if the same movie was playing in my head: you are a fool, you don't know how to do anything...don't worry, you're in vain, and you're in school for nothing". (Woman, 40 years old, high school, urban)

The person who is constantly verbally abused may also develop feelings of self-blame (*"I don't know how to explain it to you... I felt guilty for saying it was my stain"*), helplessness (*"I couldn't handle it"*) and may face other new forms of abuse, for example economic one (*"don't leave me a penny, maybe I needed something, I don't know..."*).

One of the participants explains her husband's occasionally aggressive behaviour as an effect of the social learning process from the partner's family of origin:

"...I don't think he has a bad soul as he inherited the model from his family. It's like an inheritance, you know? He was coming that way, what he saw, he did". (Woman, 40 years old, high school, urban).

It is not mandatory that these relationships end in a divorce. Some psychiatrists have advanced the idea that, for certain individuals, this type of marriage satisfies the need for conflict (in Lamanna and Riedmann, 1991). On these coordinates, marital relationships in which conflict is a habit can be considered intrinsic relationships, because they satisfy the emotional needs of the partners. However, they cannot be considered intimate because they are not based on mutual acceptance, concern for the other's well-being and support, or honest self-disclosure.

2. The partners involved in a **devitalized marital relationship**, in general, are those who have been married for several years and for whom, with the passage of time, the relationship has lost its initial energy, intimacy and meaning (Lamanna and Riedmann, 1991). At first in love, they recall many pleasant moments spent together, a rewarding sexual relationship and an intense emotional closeness. Their current situation is starkly contrasting: they spend little time together, little sexual activity, and no longer share many interests with each other. Most of the time together is that of "duty", when they play, plan or carry out activities with their children or when they have to attend social events. This relationship was at first an intrinsic one, but over time, it became a utilitarian one.

Most often they experience situational conflict. This type of conflict occurs when at least one partner wants to change a specific situation in the couple's life and consists of concrete requests (Strong, DeVault, & Sayad, 1998). Among these concrete requests for behavioural change, the following can be exemplified: to share domestic tasks equitably, to have equal responsibilities regarding the care and education of children and so on.

The participants involved in the devitalized marital relationship predominantly define the conflict as being represented by heated discussions, arguments, disagreements,

different opinions:

"...more heated discussions, she wants something, I want something else, and discussions, conflicts, arguments arise". (Male, 26 years old, higher education, urban)

"Two people arguing is a conflict". (Male, 39 years old, vocational school, urban)

"Different opinions on a certain topic". (Male, 39 years old, higher education, urban)

"...small arguments or disagreements over an idea or a decision". (Woman, 35 years old, higher education, urban)

The main reasons for conflict, mentioned by the respondents, are minor aspects related to daily life:

"...we argue over minor things, never over serious things...childish reasons". (Male, 34 years old, post-secondary school, urban)

"From nonsense... so nothing serious... I want to go to one store first, he wants to go to another or why I bought cucumbers instead of tomatoes..." (Woman, 35, higher education, urban)

This type of marital relationship is extremely common in real life. Differences can be observed in the reactions of those who live it, in the way they relate to this reality. Thus, some accept it, considering that they have "matured", that they have passed into another natural stage of life as a couple, others are full of bitterness and resentment, and others are ambivalent.

However, this lack of emotions does not necessarily threaten the stability of the marriage. Many people believe that the devitalized style is appropriate for partners who have been married for many years. This couple frequently compares their relationship with others who are going through the same situation, concluding that it is something normal.

3. In the case of the **passive-congenial marriage**, as in the previous one, the partners emphasize aspects other than emotional closeness. These aspects can be different from one social class to another, and can be mentioned: civic and professional responsibilities, the importance of property, children, reputation, economic security, the benefits of exchanging domestic "services", hopes for their own children, and so on.

Unlike the devitalized marriage, partners in a passive-congenial relationship never expect their bond to be characterized by emotional intensity, instead, they value their decision to marry (Cuber and Harroff, 1965).

In this type of marital relationship, conflict is rarely encountered, but this does not mean that there are no unspoken frustrations. One of the participants considered that frustrations and arguments are mainly generated by the lack of information to the partner, by the lack of communication:

"Not consulting your partner. I say it starts from there. Communication. The fact that you don't talk to your partner". (Woman, 37 years old, elementary education, rural)

These partners focus on matters like *"who said first and what"* or *"I won't forget the moment when you..."*.

Cramer (2002), following the observations made, identified four types of potential situations that can prevent marital partners from building a harmonious relationship: constant avoidance of conflict; adopting inadequate problem-solving behaviour; the use of unsubstantiated observations to prolong the period in which the conflict should be resolved and the difficult expression of emotions.

On this basis, Cramer (2002) concludes that the biggest problems that destroy marital harmony can be associated with negative behaviour during conflicts and take the forms mentioned previously. In other words, these partners predominantly show the strategy of constantly avoiding conflicts, which prevents them from having a relationship that continues to develop intimacy.

And, since it is not a very intimate relationship, these unions satisfy, first of all, the needs of the partners to be in someone's company.

This type of relationship is less prone to divorce than those in which the partners have unrealistic expectations regarding emotional intensity. However, it can end when the couple finds that their marriage can no longer meet their new pragmatic needs (such as material support or professional advancement), or when one of them finds that they want more intimacy or accidentally falls in love with someone else.

4. The **relationship full of vitality** is a type of intrinsic marriage, in which being together and having common interests are important aspects, intensely valued (Lamanna and Riedmann, 1991). This does not mean that the partners thus united lose their own identity or that they do not face conflicting situations in their married life.

The autonomous individual is able to treat the other as such and to recognize that the development of their separate potentialities does not represent a threat to the relationship, but, on the contrary, a possible factor of evolution. The idea of autonomy involves the person's capacity to be self-reflective and self-determined, to judge, choose, decide and act, but also respect for the capacity of the other party in the relationship.

Thus, intimacy in a couple relationship requires achieving a balance between personal autonomy, on the one hand, and trust, openness, vulnerability, on the other. Intimacy is, above all, a problem of emotional communication with oneself and with the partner, in conditions of interpersonal equality.

The conflict is also present in these relationships, but it is, rather, focused on specific issues. Partners in a high-energy relationship try to quickly resolve their differences so that they can renew their relationship, which means so much to both of them.

Among the reasons mentioned by the respondents can be mentioned:

- Different views on raising, caring for and educating children:

"We usually argue because of ... different views on raising children" (Female, 45, high school, urban)

"Maybe we used to fight over money. That there wasn't enough money or something like that, but for other reasons not". (Woman, 45 years old, high school, urban)

- Different visions related to future plans:

"...we argued before because I want us to start building a house and he keeps telling me that we don't have money, and we really don't have money, but we can take a loan from the bank... so because of the money..." (Woman, 40 years old, high school, urban)

- (not) fulfilling some domestic tasks:

"We generally don't argue. Maybe related to the small tasks that everyone has to perform in the family and that sometimes we didn't manage to solve in time". (Male, 37 years old, higher education, urban)

Usually, partners full of vitality consider their sexual relationship as important and

generative of pleasure. Instead of seeing it as a ritual to be practiced submissively, sexuality is an aspect that colours their whole life.

The lasting marriages full of vitality are rarely encountered in everyday life. Those who have such a connection often say that their lifestyle is neither experienced nor understood by those around them.

Janice Driver și John Gottman (2004) analysed the role of enthusiasm and the ability to be funny in everyday life, especially with applicability in conflict situations (use of humour and affection during marital conflict). They found that the ability to use positive affect such as humour or affection during marital confrontations is critical in predicting the future "health" of the relationship.

5. But even rarer are the examples of **total marriage**, which are also intrinsic. Total marital relationships are similar to energetic ones, but they are multifaceted. In some cases all the important points of life are shared with vitality by the two partners.

Thus, spouses involved in a total relationship may have common interests in professional life (similar occupations, same employer or similar projects, such as writing a book, making a film or running a family business), friends, activities leisure, and domestic life. They organize their lives in such a way that it can be just the two of them for long periods of time.

Marital conflict in this type of couple relationship tends to appear, rather, in the form of misunderstandings. This type of interpersonal conflict consists of dysfunctions at the level of message transmission-reception. Being unclearly formulated, the message is erroneously decoded by the receiver.

The intimate relationship is characterized by: self-development as the main priority, the development of the relationship over time, the desire to be satisfied in the long term, respect for the freedom of the other to choose, balanced distribution of power and reciprocity in the relationship, compromise, negotiation or leadership by rotation, sharing feelings, desires combined with expressing appreciation towards the partner, openness, appropriate trust, resulting from knowing the essential features of the partner, mutual respect for individuality, relationship that addresses all aspects of reality, relationship in constant change, responsibility of both partners in maintaining of the relationship, loving detachment, healthy concern for the good and development of the other without "suffocating" him or her, the sexual relationship evolving from affection and friendship, solving problems together and a cycle of comfort and contentment (Giddens, 1992, pp. 93–94).

Both the vitality-filled and the total relationships are emotionally intense, but the latter is much more comprehensive, while the energetic one also has spheres in which the partners carry out certain activities individually.

Marital conflict in total marriage is considered to be

- a natural aspect of life

"...probably part of our situation as humans, of our life as humans on Earth". (Male, 39 years old, higher education, urban)

- a learning situation

"Conflicts are actually ok, they are good, they can help us, we can learn from them". (Male, 38 years old, higher education, urban)

Happy couples tend to act in a positive way to resolve conflicts (such as behavioural change, offering reasonable alternatives, and so on), while unhappy couples use more negative strategies in dealing with conflicts. The partners in this type of marital relationship are tolerant and open in relation to the different opinions of the partner, their conflicts rather are taking the form of a civilized disagreement:

“we just express our point of view calmly and take things as they are” (Female, 35, higher education, urban)

These respondents detail the constructive consequences of marital conflicts, both on the individual and on their relationship as a couple:

- Conflicts bring a substantial contribution to the process of self-knowledge:

“I am learning to know myself, this is my main resource in this world of conflicts [...] I am trying to learn from my stupidity”. (Male, 39 years old, higher education, urban)

- Marital conflicts carried out in a civilized way have an important role in the process of development and evolution of the marital relationship:

“They have a meaning, they detonate the relationship, give it another boost. [...] After a tension comes a closeness and physicality, a lull follows; as after a storm at sea, the sun follows, the waves are calm, the ship receives wind from the stern, and the direction is restored. [...] If we refuse dialogue, things escalate and explode anyway”. (Male, 39 years old, higher education, urban);

“At first they were useful to us, in the sense that it was only after a few arguments that we started to ask ourselves certain questions like: what did he really mean by that? What expectations do I/she have?... And I think they helped us. We got closer, we were willing to learn from them. Yes, I think they are indispensable at some point. At least for us they were. Now we don't need to fight anymore, we know each other quite well”. (Male, 34 years old, post-secondary school, urban).

- Constructive marital conflict leads to the development of trust in the other and in the ability of both to overcome the obstacles that arise, as well as shaping an optimistic attitude regarding the future of the marital relationship:

“What makes me happy is the way we resolve conflicts, I think that's a great thing in a relationship... The way we resolve conflicts gives me courage and hope for the future, because I know, I see that our intentions are to understand and be good to each other, and when you see that your partner, in fact, has no intention of catching you, attacking you, when you realize that, in fact, your relationship in this respect is very loose, your partner is not against you, he doesn't want to change you, he doesn't want to turn you into another person, he just wants to understand you, then it's very good.” (Male, 39 years old, higher education, urban).

Although they are rare, total marital relationships still exist and can last. The downside of this type of union is that they are vulnerable to rapid disintegration if the quality of the marriage changes. Also, the partners develop a mutual dependence, which greatly complicates the situation of the individual who has to adapt if the death of the other occurs or in case of divorce. On the positive side, this exemplifies high level satisfaction within the couple as a whole.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Typologies, used in all fields of science, are artificial categories developed to demonstrate the similarities that exist within a group and highlight the differences between groups. Typologies enable marriage scholars to develop a shared language and are useful in describing the similarities and differences between marriages. In this paper, I have described the differences between the types of marriages in terms of the causes of marital conflicts and strategies for dealing with conflict situations.

The results presented confirm the fact that conflict situations in the couple have either a dysfunctional or constructive role. What shapes the differences in the type of consequences produced by marital conflict is how we behave in such situations. And the style of reporting conflict episodes is learned throughout our socialization process and through direct interactional experience. Thus, dysfunctional behavioural patterns can be replaced by constructive strategies for dealing with interpersonal and marital conflicts, in particular.

Cherlin (2004, p. 858) has sketched three alternatives for the likely future of marriage: "The first, a return to a more dominant, institutionalized form of marriage, seems unlikely. In the second, the current situation continues; marriage remains important, but not as dominant, and retains its high symbolic status. In the third, marriage fades into just one of many kinds of interpersonal romantic relationships".

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