

Part II:

Why Marriage is Challenging: Some Targets for Couple Therapy

Art & Sheila 2/14/81



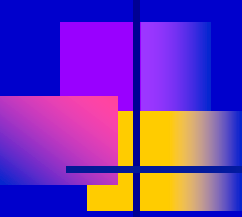
Not obvious to me!
Not obvious to my students!
Not obvious to my clients!



Why is Marriage Challenging?

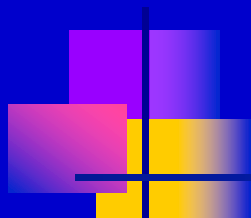
- What do you think? [Write down.]
- What has made relationships hard for you?
- What has made them hard for your clients?
- My compilation
 - Overlapping categories
 - Based on experience and research literature.
- Aerial view; some obvious; all fundamental

Categories

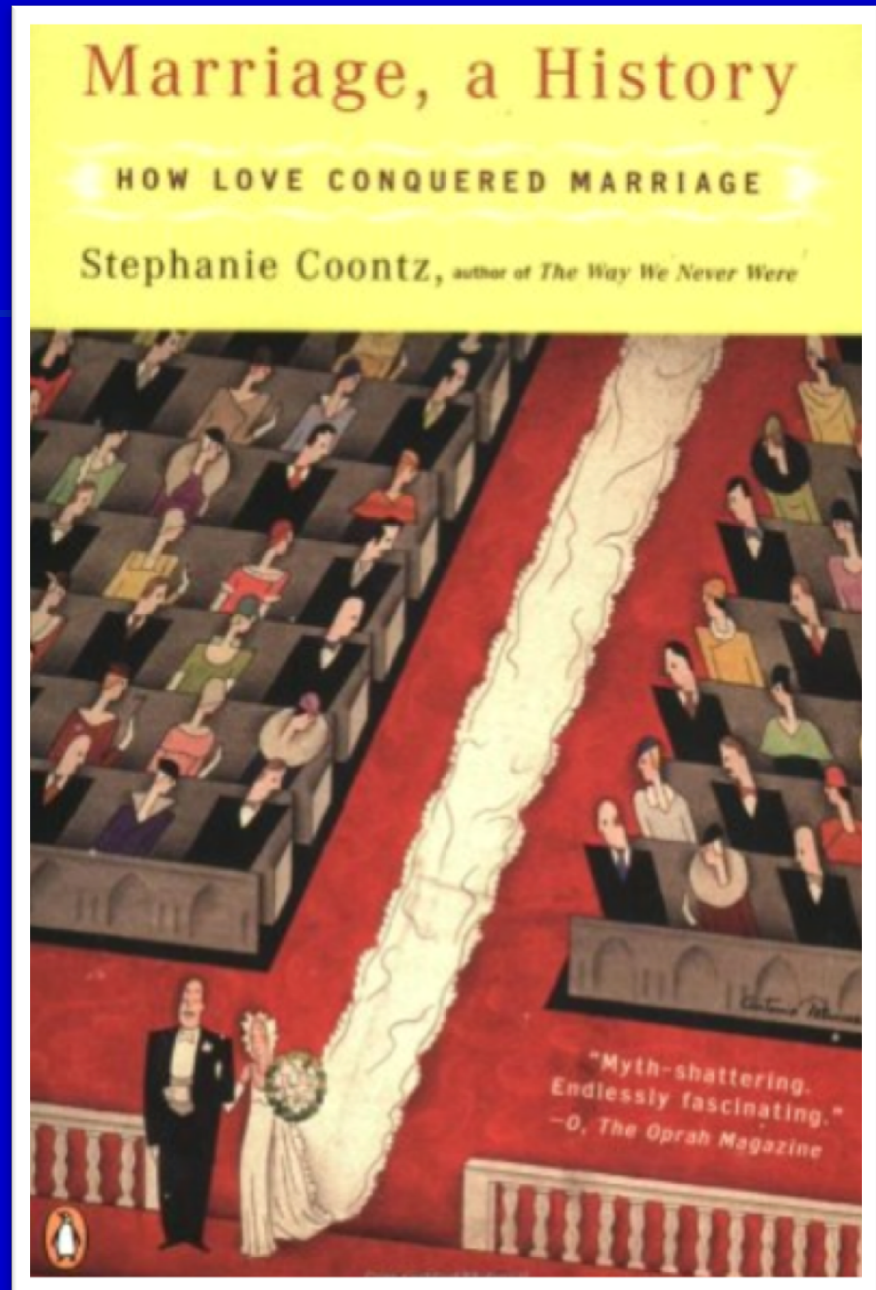
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- Personal challenges
 - Problematic expectations
 - “Human nature”
 - Maturity/immaturity
 - Interpersonal challenges
 - Managing Differences
 - Managing Conflict
 - External challenges
 - Social demands, stress, traumatic events
 - Maintaining positive tone/identity



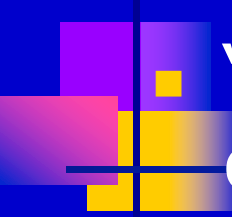
Personal Challenges



Problematic Expectations: “The Love Match”



“Love match” as partial answer



“As soon as the idea that love should be the central reason for marriage, and companionship its basic goal, was first raised, observers of the day warned that the same values that increased people’s satisfaction with marriage as a relationship had an inherent tendency to undermine the stability of marriage as an institution. . . .If people were encouraged to expect marriage to be the best and happiest experience of their lives, what would hold a marriage together if things went ‘for worse,’ rather than ‘for better’?” --S. Coontz



Problematic Expectations: “Romantic Wishes”



Unrealistic expectations: Romantic, prior to marriage

- Courtship and “happily ever after”
- Roller coaster or The African Queen
 - Arranged marriages
- The marriage plot: romance fiction—most popular genre, \$1.358 billion, 13.4% of U.S. market in 2010
- “Love sickness” pair bonding
- “Love is blind”

Katy & Eric

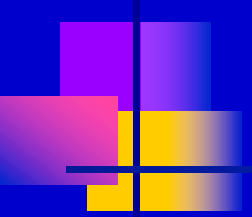
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Unrealistic expectations: At Home

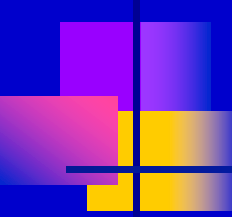
- Identical: “Why can’t a woman be ...”
- Home as castle/refuge
- Unrestrained
- Asking/planning spoils things
- Deidealization of the other AND the self



Problematic Expectations: Seeking a Cure

- Mastery and the repetition compulsion
- Healing defects/deficits

T. Real, *New Rules for Marriage*, 2007



“Perhaps you married your mate to steady you, or to be successful for you, or to give you value, abundance, culture, standing, or friends, or to stop you from drinking or start you having fun, or simply to give you the gift of not draining you dry. And all these things are wonderful; they’re great—as gifts. But they’re poison as obligations. We must stop oppressing others with ‘the mad agenda’ that they heal us.”

Personal Challenges: Human Nature

External cause focus

- “Look out for that lion”
 - Chemical reagent metaphor
 - “Circular causation” not wired in
- Too much on human motivation vs. context
 - “Fundamental attribution error”
 - “Actor/observer bias” (cutting ourselves slack)
- “Bad stronger than the good”
 - Hole rather than the donut!
- Defensive re self-esteem & moral goodness



Human Nature continued

- “Negative sentiment over-ride”
- Revenge, grudge-holding feels good
- Sex and monogamy/infidelity
- Excessive guilt and feeling undeserving



Personal Challenges: Maturity

- “Marriage license” is a joke
- Unlike driver’s license
- Unlike license to practice therapy
- But what would YOU include?

Maturity

- 
- Self-awareness
 - Relativism/subjectivity
 - Responsibility
 - Self-esteem & resilience
 - Assertiveness and mature dependence
 - Compromise and imperfection
 - Comfort with sexuality
 - Comfort with self-exposure
 - Freedom from gender stereotypes
 - Empathy



Maturity continued

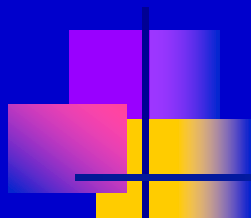
“To recognize that the object of our feelings, needs, actions, and thoughts is actually another subject, an equivalent center of being, is the real difficulty.”

--Jessica Benjamin, 2004



Maturity continued

- Other dimensions
 - Secure attachment, differentiation, agreeableness, reality acceptance
 - Teamwork
 - Love
- “Waking from the spell of childhood”
- Not immutable, but targets for therapy



Interpersonal Challenges



Interpersonal Challenges: Managing Differences

- Olson & Olson: 79% opined, “Our differences never seem to get resolved.”
- Spectrum from trivial to substantial
- Mars/Venus but also everyone (twins)
- Explains import of subjective understanding, managing conflict, & acceptance



Interpersonal Challenges: Managing Conflict



Conflict continued

- Gottman et al: Best predictor of success
- All previous categories make this harder
- People are bad at this!
 - No models, even if parents were good
 - Not taught, unlike other chancy activities
 - Good news: Can be improved (suggestions in book)

Conflict continued

Co-captains problem

- Conflict avoided
 - Icebergs hit
 - Estrangement
- Maladaptive vs. adaptive solutions
 - Power imbalance
 - Accepting influence
 - Attunement
 - Trust and happiness



External Challenges

External Challenges:

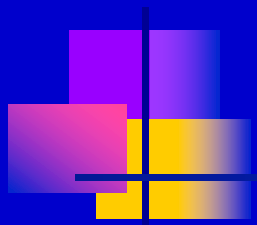
Life challenges/social pressures

- Predictable and life course
 - Q. for Zorba, "Have you ever been married?"
 - "The full catastrophe!"
- Social structure/support/expectations
- Time famine
- Creating roles on the fly
- Unexpected serious problems



External challenges: Secondary maladaptive outcomes

- Polarizations/impasses
- Equity & division of labor conflicts
- Spouse fails to “have one’s back”
- “Fight group” (fighting as defense)
- Flight to “solutions” that create problems
- Exhaustion, anxiety, depression, burnout in one or both




External Challenges: Maintaining Positive Experiences & Positive Couple Identity

Positive experiences & positive couple identity

- External stressors decrease both
 - 82% wished partners “had more time and energy for recreation with me.”
 - Marital conflict of any kind decreases
 - “Death by 1000 cuts”
 - “Chinese water torture”
 - “Couple identity” and “flourishing”
 - Sacrifice and commitment
 - “For richer, for poorer”
 - Proactive vs. attention only to the “bad”²⁹

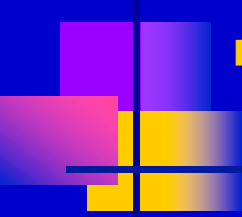
What people want? Selfobject functions



“The concept of selfobject experience, as originally proposed by Kohut and revised and extended by others, captures much of what people are generally looking for in couples' relationships: experiences that help them consolidate and maintain a positive, cohesive sense of self. More simply, people want a partner who makes them feel better, not worse. This generally means someone understanding, positive, and affirming; someone they can look up to, admire, and lean on in times of stress, who helps with the experience, modulation and integration of affect; and someone with whom they feel a sense of essential likeness and belonging—in other words, someone who functions as a reliable source of selfobject experience.”

--Carla Leone, 2008

Summary

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- Whirlwind tour of major reasons relationships are challenging:
 - Personal challenges due to problematic expectations, human nature, and need for maturity.
 - Interpersonal challenges due to the need to manage differences and conflict.
 - External challenges due to social pressure, unforeseen events and need to maintain positivity
 - All can be therapeutic targets