

# MARRIAGE

— and why  
would we  
sooner talk  
of sex,  
violence  
and divorce

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Marriage and marriage breakdown are the reasons we have the much discussed Family Law Act, Family Courts and the current boom in divorces. Divorce and the legal machinery which deals with it is more easily discussed in the media than is marriage and the processes by which it breaks down. This helps people to ignore marital problems until they become so painful and difficult that divorce seems the only solution. It is easier to read and write about sex, divorce and violence than about marriage, love and emotional closeness. Unless this is changed the rate of marriage breakdown and divorce in Australia is likely to remain higher than society can afford.

Divorce is only one expression of marriage breakdown but it is the one which attracts most attention from the media. Other expressions of marriage breakdown might include desertion, separation, suicide, ill-health, alcoholism, accidents (motor, domestic and industrial) assault and child-abuse — to mention only a few. The total cost to the community of the results of all forms of marriage breakdown is considerable but it is only possible to clearly identify some of these. For this year, the salaries and administration bill for the Family Court of Australia alone will be some \$7,500,000 and the Commonwealth will also pay another \$1,250,000 towards the costs of the

Family Court of Western Australia. Other direct payments made by the Commonwealth will be some \$2,000,000 to marriage counselling organisations and \$50,000 to organisations providing preparation for marriage courses. The cost to the State Governments for child care services and to the Commonwealth for social security pensions to deserted wives adds millions of dollars to the cost of marriage breakdowns to the Australian taxpayer.

### **Costs**

In spite of these costs and in spite of expressions of public concern, there is little public discussion in Australia of marriage and the processes which lead to its breakdown. Warwick Hartin, Director of the Marriage Guidance Council of Victoria and author of *Divorce Dilemma*, commenting on this, observed that people are much more comfortable discussing sex than they are in discussing marriage.

It is this discomfort in talking or even thinking about close relationships which means that many people do not face up to difficulties as these develop in their marriage. Therefore they often do nothing about their marital problems before they start divorce proceedings.

### **Interpersonal Situations**

People in many interpersonal situations tend to deal with problems by either hoping that they will go away or by converting the problems in their own minds, to a health, legal, bureaucratic or religious one to be solved for them by someone else. Lawyers, who are often criticised for their part in the divorce process, cannot really be blamed for accepting a role which so many people assign them. In most cases, if people who are divorcing would personally face up to the issues to be resolved between them and deal with them directly, their problems would be resolved more cheaply and, in the long term, with

less disastrous emotional consequences.

Most of the chronic disputations, with which the Family Courts have to deal, are because the partners in conflict are still fighting over issues which they will not personally face and complete. Even though a marriage may be legally terminated by divorce, partners who are still in conflict are involved with each other. Thus, at the emotional level they are still married and not really divorced. In effect, conflict continues the marriage.

### **Conflict**

Another cause of continuing conflict during and after marriage is the need to blame. When things go wrong, or our expectations are not met, our sense of personal inadequacy and failure is less painful if we can find something external to ourselves to blame. Depending upon the issue, we may blame the government, the weather, the umpire, our childhood or our partner. By blaming others we are able to avoid personal responsibility for our situation. Mr Bern Boas, a Melbourne marriage counsellor, has pointed out that many marriage partners put so much of their energy into playing, what he has called, the 'Blame Game' that they have no energy left to deal constructively with their problems. By blaming, they are able to plead helplessness and avoid responsibility for themselves.

### **Divorce**

The doctrine of basing divorce on the need to prove that the other partner had committed a matrimonial offence was pernicious because it encouraged partners to play the 'Blame Game'. There is no doubt that it was in the interests of lawyers to foster this. Now by substituting 'breakdown of marriage' for the matrimonial offence as a ground for divorce, the Family Law Act discourages the playing of the 'Blame Game'. The new law is

based upon the philosophy that, as far as possible, people should be encouraged to accept personal responsibility for themselves.

It is usual to say that marriage is a long term collaborative relationship between co-operating partners, however it is conflict rather than satisfactory levels of emotional intimacy which holds many marriages together. Certain social factors, combined with certain types of childhood experiences in the family of origin, produce people who try to achieve closeness and intimacy by behaviour which is competitive and antagonistic rather than co-operative. It is not surprising that, when they take legal action, such people want their lawyers to be combative too.

In marriage and in families, many people try to satisfy their needs for closeness, tenderness and intimacy without being direct and honest with their partners about their emotional needs or about their feelings about their partner's emotional needs. Such people try to find closeness with each other by fighting and arguing. They may even have strong feelings of doubt and uncertainty if there is not some degree of conflict being expressed in their marital and family relationships.

### **Destroys**

Conflict may hold some marriages together but it destroys others. This is not because conflict itself is bad or undesirable but because people often do not know how to deal with it. It is harmful if the partners fight dirty because to them winning is more important than resolution of the conflict. Conflict is an essential part of relationships and it is harmful to deny conflict by avoiding it or by pretending it does not exist. An important difference between marriages which are fulfilling and those which breakdown is that, in the former, conflict is resolved and does not persist to be disruptive in the relationship. Couples who find that they are

caught in a repetitive pattern of conflict which they cannot resolve are usually on the escalator to divorce or separation if they do not get help from a marriage counsellor.

The long term survival of many marriages is threatened when one or both partners are afraid to experience their emotions. They block feelings from their awareness, express them indirectly or deny ownership of them by attributing them to others or by blaming others for them. One partner then becomes burdened with the responsibility for the other's feelings. Such patterns of behaviour may lead to partners

tinuous doing things for him or her. A husband may provide his wife with everything she needs but never involve her in any way in the decisions he is making. One divorcing wife explained 'It was nice of him to give me such an expensive car but I really would have preferred to talk with him'. This woman was wanting involvement in an adult relationship but she was not given adult responsibilities. The husband thought that he was protecting her from the stress of decision-making. She felt left out and treated as if she was still a little girl. A wife who kept a spotless house couldn't understand why her

ing deserted by trying to prove that they are always successful and never wrong. They feel that to make an error or fail in anything would mean withdrawal of the love and acceptance which they need. Such people often report that, in childhood they felt that nothing they ever did was good enough to please their parents. Any feeling of pride in success would be denigrated. The parents would point out that they could have done even better.

These are only some of the processes of marriage failure which may be identified in marriage counselling. In each case one, or

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remaining quite ignorant of how the other thinks or feels. I sometimes ask one marriage partner to pretend to be the other and to tell me what he or she imagines that the other is thinking or feeling. On many occasions the partner is quite unable to do this even though they have been married and lived together for many years. One or both partners lack empathy and understanding of each other. They remain strangers in a relationship in which they both depend on each other for affirmation of personal identity.

Another potentially destructive marital pattern is that in which the partners avoid emotional contact with each other and their children by doing things. Sometimes they busily do things for each other or sometimes one partner is emotionally frustrated by the other's con-

husband left her for another woman whom she regarded as a poor housekeeper. The husband says of the other woman, 'I can enjoy her company and relax with her. She treats me as a person not something less important than the furniture'. The tragedy of these processes is that the partners are trying as hard as they can to be the perfect partner to the other, they are trying to live up to some fantasy. Perhaps the saddest of these cases is the work-obsessed husband who gives his wife and family everything except an emotional contact with himself. Another is the work-obsessed wife who is trying so hard to be the perfect wife and mother that her husband and family cannot relate to her as a real human being.

Some partners defend themselves against intimacy and fantasies of be-

both the partners, block out of their awareness information about the effect of their own behaviour on others. Thus, although clearly they are alienating and estranging others they do not change their behaviour to prevent this happening.

People caught in this circular repetitive pattern of behaviour, which prevents them developing close and satisfying relations, often have a very low level of self-regard. In order to bolster their own self-esteem, each partner may denigrate the other. Such people may find it almost impossible to say anything good about themselves or about their partner. Their sense of self-worth is extraordinarily dependent upon the opinions held about them by others. They are usually unable to report any recollections of expressions of love and acceptance by

their parents when they themselves were children. This may not mean that their parents did not love or care about them but it may mean that the expression of this love and care by the parents was so depersonalised and expressed so indirectly that it was misinterpreted. These people reach adulthood and enter marriage without ever having felt loved for being who they are. They enter marriage seeking the closeness and emotional support which they have never received in childhood. They often do not have the language or the skill to communicate their own needs to their partner. They

quence of the marital problems. Improvement in communications is often a major aim of marriage counselling. Improving communication between couple partners may lead them into deciding to separate or it may lead them to see the attractions and strengths in their relationship and to the decision to work on it. Often partners get into patterns of communication in which any word from either causes the other to adopt a defensive or potentially hostile posture. They always approach each other warily like two 'High Noon' gunfighters. The partners cannot hear or understand each

Secondly, he must accept responsibility for his behaviour and for changing it and, thirdly, he must feel that the results will be worth the effort. He must also be realistic about the difficulties he will encounter in trying to change.

From the community's view we must be realistic about the time, effort, cost and helper competence which must be made available in order to help individuals improve their capacity to relate in marriage.

If the present ratio of divorces to marriages continues, we will eventually have a society in which more than 50% of marriages end in

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*warily like two*

*'High Noon' Gun Fighters*

also do not have the sensitivity to understand their partner's needs when these are communicated to them.

In many families the communications from parents to children are predominantly denigrating or critical actions or statements. These undermine the child's confidence and sense of worth. In adulthood such people may be unsure of themselves and excessively dependent upon what others do or say to them in order to feel good about themselves. Thus in marriage, they place extreme but unclear demands upon their partners.

Communication difficulties between partners is almost inevitably associated with marriage breakdown. Sometimes communication problems are a cause and sometimes they are a conse-

other. Whatever the outcome for their marriage, such couples need the help of experienced counsellors if they are to deal with these problems so that they do not continue to be disruptive in either their existing or in new relationships.

These are only some of the factors which lead to marriage breakdown but they are enough to show that the problems with which the court, the lawyer and the marriage counsellor must deal usually are long-standing and often have origins in early life. It also shows why it is difficult, if not impossible, for people to change their way of behaviour without skilled counselling. Before behaviour of the type that we are discussing can be changed, certain things must happen. Firstly, the individual must become aware of the fact that it is necessary for him to change.

divorce. In addition to divorce there are those who permanently separate and those whose marriages can only be sustained by continuous counselling and welfare support. Another group of marriages for which society pays dearly are those held together by some reciprocal patterns of pathological behaviour of the partners. This is usually disastrous to the mental and physical health of the partners and their family. Even if the dire prediction of 50% divorce is only half correct, the rate will not fall below 25%. This figure is sufficiently high for us to ask what can be done to stop marriages from failing.

Divorce is by no means the worst part of the story about marriage breakdown. Most people successfully remarry after divorce. The Commission on Human Relationships

was told that 97% of the divorced remarry. The risk of divorce for second marriages is about the same as for the first. This destroys the argument that, having found divorce easy the first time, people will quickly resort to it again. Marriage counsellors and family law practitioners both agree that there is no such thing as easy divorce. However amicably partners handle the termination of their marriage there is always pain and suffering involved for both partners.

The argument that divorce should be made more difficult to prevent people from too readily resorting to

divorce but to enhance the levels of satisfaction in marriage. The question for society is one of quality — not quantity — of marriage. It would help in achieving this if the media were less fascinated with the discussion of divorce and the legal machinery for dealing with it and more interested in discussion of marriage and the nature of satisfactory relationships. By preferring to discuss divorce rather than marriage enrichment, the media probably encourage people to think first of divorce rather than trying to deal with their problems through counselling at an earlier stage.

tranquillisers or anti-depressants.

The individual is often psychologically programmed to ignore information about the effect of his own behaviour upon others and, in Australia, he is assisted in this by the part played by many social institutions. The ease with which medical treatment by drugs rather than counselling is available is one example. Here, as with lawyers, it is easy to blame the practitioner, but it is the public which puts medical practitioners in this role. Government policies also make it easier and cheaper for a person to deal with the physical symptoms resulting from

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it discounts the importance of the quality of marriage. It is based on the idea that partners should reduce the level of satisfaction they want in their marriage in order to stay married. Rather than demanding more difficult divorce, it would be more constructive to demand more marriage counselling and better education for relationships so that people can realise the greatest possible satisfactions in marriage, rather than settle for less. By making divorce more difficult, the overall effect would be to reduce the level of marital satisfaction in the community. Countries which have laws making divorce difficult to get have low regard for the status of women. This results in worse social problems than divorce.

The problem for Australian society is not to reduce the levels of

Marriage counselling in Australia is not a popular cause, although each year more than 20,000 couples go to the organisations approved by the Attorney-General as marriage counselling organisations under the Family Law Act. Marriage counselling services do not publicise themselves very well and there is still some erroneous impression in the community that they are agencies for social conformity, self-righteously bent on keeping partners together. However, the main reason that so many people do not go for marriage counselling is a lack of willingness to accept responsibility for their own problem. It is easier to abrogate responsibility by calling the problem a legal one and delegating it to a lawyer or by calling emotional discomfort an illness and getting a doctor to prescribe

marital stress rather than to face the need for counselling. Employers will give an employee leave to have medical treatment but few will do so in order to permit one to have marriage counselling. Child and Family Guidance Centres are often faced with a child behaviour problem without being able to treat the predisposing marital problem of the parents. This helps the parents conclude that their problems are caused by the behaviour or health of their child and not by the problems in their relationship.

The practice of passing problems to an expert leads many people who do come for marriage counselling to expect that the counsellor will quickly solve their problems for them. Wanting a prescription of magical solutions, like the doctor's pills, they are not really prepared to

work on their relationship. Some diagnose their problem as specific rather than as a relationship problem. For example, one man was happy to come if the counsellor would deal with his sex problem but he said, 'I don't want marriage counselling.'

Some people come for marriage counselling as if living in some unreal or fantasy world. They are not able or willing to see the consequences of what is happening in their lives. A man, whose wife had said that she would leave him unless their married life changed, couldn't find time to come for counselling.

marriage is not difficult to understand when so many do not feel responsible for entering their marriage relationship in the first place. I asked 100 couples who were marriage counselling clients to give the reasons for marrying each other in the first place. Outside influences and circumstances apparently outside the control of the couples were given as the main reason for marrying in over 70% of these cases. They gave reasons such as social pressures and pregnancy which implied that the partners had drifted into marriage rather than through making a decision for which they were personally responsible.

problems. Now, under the Family Law Act, it also provides counsellors at the Family Court to assist people deal with their problems as they face the distress of divorce. The two services augment and complement each other for they provide counselling at two important and different stages of the breakdown process.

The amount of funding devoted to the marriage counselling done by organizations is much less than the amount invested by the government in the legal machinery which deals with divorce. However, the combination of private and public fun-

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longer mine'*

He wouldn't take time off from work for counselling and after work he was too busy coaching football. He was in danger of losing his wife, a substantial proportion of his assets and custody of his children if she went ahead with her threat. I pointed out that his behaviour in refusing to make time for counselling showed that his marriage did not seem as important to him as coaching schoolboy football. Like many others, he did not want to accept responsibility for what was happening in his life and needed the issues to be made concrete and specific to him. When they do come for counselling, people may, in effect, say to the counsellor, 'Now I have told you about it this is your problem and no longer mine'.

That people often do not feel responsible for the termination of

Before evidence of marriage breakdown becomes public through the institution of divorce proceedings or by some other means, there has usually been much private suffering by the partners. Although it is claimed that marriage and the family are the basis of our society, the same society makes it easy for people to ignore marital problems until they have reached a chronic state. This stems from attitudes and false assumptions which prevent people being realistic about their situation and thus about the help which is available.

Australians are better off than most people when it comes to getting marriage counselling. Since 1960 the Australian Government has supported and encouraged marriage counselling services to help people in the early stages of their

ding has, until the recent need for government restrictions, led to the development of a satisfactory marriage counselling service in Australia.

If we are to deal constructively with marriage breakdown then there needs to be a big change in the way we think about marriage. More value and emphasis needs to be given to marriage counselling as a community resource. More importantly, we must educate people to know when to use this resource. The problem which must be faced is similar to that of educating people about the early detection of cancer and the need for early treatment. The analogy is not over-dramatic for a person marrying today is more likely to have the marriage end in divorce than through the death of one partner by cancer.