FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO MARITAL CONFLICT EVIDENCED BY
AN ANALYSIS OF THIRTY CASES OF MARRIAGE COUNSELLING

CASES REFERRED TO THE FAMILY AND CHILD SERVICE AGENCY
WINSTON-SALEM, NORTH CAROLINA, 1950 AND 1951

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE ATLANTA UNIVERSITY SCHOOL
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FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF SOCIAL WORK

BY
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Significance of the Study

Marital conflict has long been recognized as one of the foremost social problems. Interest in this problem dates back to the early Charity Organization Movement, however, marriage counselling as a specific service in social agencies has emerged primarily in the last two decades as a partial solution to the problem. In the field of social work, the greatest concentration of work with marriage problems has been in family service agencies. In the early 1920's, emphasis shifted to the psychological factors in marital discord, but developments in this area were slow until after the depression in 1933. Marriage counselling has been carried on by sociologists, psychologists, clergymen, and social workers. Increasing numbers of persons are seeking help with marital problems in family service agencies, which has led to new efforts in understanding causative aspects and treatment of the problem.¹

Prior to the emergence of marriage counselling as a specific service, case workers acquainted with families because of other problems were naturally sought out to give advice or help in marriage problems.² Now that marriage counselling has come


into its own, more scientific knowledge is needed for effective treatment in this area. The writer felt that further research was needed on the subject in order for marriage counselling to make its utmost contribution in alleviating marital conflict.

Increased scientific research based on our family and marriage counselling services would produce considerable interesting and valuable data in the area of family relationships. . . Further analysis of the techniques of the family caseworker will throw considerable light on the training and knowledge needed to undertake counselling, as well as on her treatment skills.¹

It is known that early childhood relationships in the family and other groups profoundly affect the later marriage relationship.

In looking toward the future of our relation to the marriage counselling field, we must think about measures to know of situations in the early stages while treatment can be relatively simple and before children have been greatly affected. For this to happen, we must be more specifically known as operating in the field of marriage counselling and must therefore be better prepared for this service. This involves a real interest in further research in the field.²

The present relatively high divorce, desertion, and separation rates reflect the immensity of the problem and clearly indicate the need for preventive measures. The results of marital conflict are tangible and intangible. This discord reflects itself in the later married relationships of children reared in unhappy homes, and thus the vicious cycle is perpetuated. Its toll is further shown in neuroses, alcoholism, and violence, to mention a few of the manifestations. What can

¹Anna Budd Ware, "Family Counselling Through Family Case Work," The Family, XXI, (Nov. 1940), p. 234.
²Marion Goodwin, op. cit., p. 235.
be done about this problem? The writer felt that studying the causative factors of marital conflict might yield useful information in the casework process through effecting better treatment methods.

Marriage counselling was one of the many services rendered in the Family Division of the Family and Child Service Agency, Winston-Salem, North Carolina.¹ This service was not considered as a separate category of casework in the agency, but as one of the problems that threaten the preservation of normally functioning family life. The percentage of marriage counselling cases in relation to the total caseload was not known; however, the writer felt that it has become an increasingly important service, so that a study of factors contributing to marital conflict might be helpful for future work in this area in the agency. This study was designed to describe the factors contributing to disharmony and to show their frequency in the sample. It was hoped that certain common factors and trends in causative factors would be indicated by the study.

Purpose of the Study

The main objective in undertaking this study was to ascertain factors contributing to marital conflict through an analysis of thirty cases referred to the agency in 1950 and 1951. It was hoped that this study would reveal certain common factors in indicating the frequency of causes found in the sample of cases. Thus, new factors might be ascertained or factors found

¹Hereafter referred to as the agency.
in previous studies might be further substantiated. Further study of causative aspects of marital conflict may be important in the development of more effective methods of treatment in the marriage counselling process.

The purposes are specifically outlined as follows: 1) To describe the early home life and adjustment of clients in the home situation; 2) To describe the early causative factors of marital conflict; 3) To discuss the nature and cause of conflict as seen by the clients and as seen by the worker; 4) To indicate the types of relationships which adversely affect the marriage; and 5) To determine the most frequent causes of marital discord as evidenced in the study.

Method of Procedure

The cases used in the study were obtained from listings in the "Intake Book" on requests made to the agency from 1950 and 1951. The total number of cases in the agency which involved marriage counselling was not known because the book only listed cases according to the problem presented in the initial request. Some clients might have requested another service and later received marriage counselling, and therefore not been included in the sample. The cases were listed in the intake book according to problem as marital counselling, counselling, family problem, family counselling, and other problems. It was found that forty of the cases listed under the above-mentioned problems actually were closed cases concerned with marriage counselling. The first three out of every four cases in chronological order were selected for this study.
The study was agency-centered, using secondary data from case records on uniform schedules. Reference materials from a selected bibliography on marital problems and marriage counselling were also used.

Scope and Limitations

The study was limited to thirty closed cases which were referred to the agency in 1950 and 1951. The cases represented a rather heterogeneous group of Negro and white families with various economic, religious, and cultural backgrounds. Due to the small sample studied, findings were not conclusive but can only indicate certain common factors and trends. Information on causative factors was limited to the information recorded in the case records. In many cases, some of the desired information was not given or the information was too brief to indicate any findings.

Information was not obtained as to the number of interviews for each case; however, the paucity of information for most cases indicated that few cases received intensive and lengthy counselling service.
CHAPTER II

EARLY HISTORY DATA

An analysis was made of information obtained on early history data to determine the significance of these factors as related to marital conflict. The lack of sufficient social history information in most cases limited the validity of findings. The case records were mainly concerned with the immediate problems and causes as presented by the clients and therefore very little was secured about early life experiences. From the statistical viewpoint, very few trends or relationships were shown. The data were subjective, which made it difficult to be definite about causative aspects. It is not known to what extent situational factors, such as cultural differences, interfering relatives, economic status, and other symptoms outside the personalities of individuals concerned were contributing to or responsible for the conflict. The writer felt that these situational factors were symptomatic of inner conflicts within the personalities of individuals, which stemmed from early life experiences. Underlying causes of conflict have often been disguised by minor difficulties of a surface nature.

Homelife

Parents.--From the thirty cases studied, information was secured about both marriage partners, which made a total of sixty individuals. It was felt that it would be significant to know whether the persons experiencing marital conflict were reared by natural parents, foster parents, or other relatives.
Table 1 illustrates the distribution of clients according to persons by whom reared. It was found that none of the persons studied were reared by the mother alone. Three persons were reared by other relatives. No information was given as to the person or persons who reared twenty-four individuals. A little more than half the number studied were reared by natural parents; nevertheless, the large percentage of cases in which this datum was unknown prevented the showing of a definite relationship between marital conflict and parents or parent substitutes.

**TABLE 1**

**DISTRIBUTION OF CLIENTS ACCORDING TO PERSONS BY WHOM REARED**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CLIENTS</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
<th>NATURAL PARENTS</th>
<th>OTHER RELATIVES</th>
<th>UNKNOWN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Both Parents</td>
<td>Mother Only</td>
<td>Father Only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Economic status.**—The economic status of the clients' parents was unknown for fifty persons. Parents of nine persons were in the lower economic class and parents of one person were in the middle economic class.

**Siblings.**—Table 2 illustrates the distribution of clients according to number of siblings. Five persons had no siblings, one person had two siblings, and four persons had three siblings. This information was unknown about fifty persons studied and therefore no significant facts were found in
relation to the absence or number of siblings of persons who experienced marital conflict.

TABLE 2
DISTRIBUTION OF CLIENTS ACCORDING TO NUMBER OF SIBLINGS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CLIENTS</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
<th>NONE</th>
<th>ONE</th>
<th>TWO</th>
<th>THREE</th>
<th>UNKNOWN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Early Relationships Which Seemed Related to Marital Conflict

Causative factors which seemingly emerged from early familial relationships and contributed to marital conflict were studied. The writer determined these factors from history given by clients and recorded in the case records, the worker's impression of cause, and her own diagnostic appraisal of the situations. Table 3 illustrates the distribution of early relationships as causative factors in marital conflict. These factors were classified as excessive dependency, broken homes, strong parental attachments, and parental marriage conflicts. Excessive dependency was broken down to deprivation and over-indulgence, which were considered the causes.\(^1\) Broken homes were tabulated as due to death or separation. Strong parental

\(^1\)Florence Hollis, *op. cit.*, p. 23.
attachments referred to persons who were overly close to one or both parents, to the extent that they caused difficulty in adult relationships and actually affected the marriage ties.

It was brought out that excessive dependency in early familial relationships adversely affected the marital harmony of sixteen persons of the sixty individuals studied. This dependency was caused by deprivation in parental relationships of six husbands and one wife, and by over-indulgence in parental relationships of five husbands and four wives. The following example illustrated a case of excessive dependency due to parental deprivation:

Case 1

Mr. and Mrs. T. had been married eight years and were parents of four children when Mrs. T. came to the agency for help with marital difficulties. Mrs. T. complained that her husband worked very irregularly, drank excessively, abused her physically, and boasted of affairs with other women. She was forced to assume support of the family and felt that Mr. T.'s upbringing as an only child influenced his behavior. Mr. T. described his lonely unhappy childhood to the worker. Mr. T.'s father died when he was a very young child, and his mother was a very strict and controlling person. He spent most of his childhood alone and resented having to perform household duties and being unable to have playmates. Mr. T. was excessively dependent on his mother and seemingly transferred this dependence to his wife. Having been hurt in his early relationship with his mother, Mr. T. stated that he always seemed to want to hurt the person he loved most, such as his mother and his wife. It was recognized by Mr. T. that he was striking back at things that had hurt him during his childhood.

Broken homes were related to later marital disharmony because of death of a parent for one wife and five husbands. A home broken by separation was a causative factor for one wife, which made a total of seven persons affected by this category. The case which follows illustrates the effects of a broken home
in the life experiences of Mr. M.:

Case 2

Mrs. M. came to the agency for help with her marriage problems. Mr. and Mrs. M. had been married ten years and had three children. Mr. M. had never provided adequate support and had drunk excessively throughout their married life. He had recently deserted his family for another woman and left many debts for Mrs. M. to pay. Mrs. M. was anxious to effect a reconciliation if Mr. M. could be contacted. She felt sorry for her husband because he had a difficult childhood. Mr. M.'s mother died when he was very young, which broke up their home. His oldest sister was cared for by her grandmother; two sisters were sent to the Children's Home, and he, himself, was reared by his father. Mr. M.'s father drank heavily and gave his son his first drink when he was six years old.

Strong parental attachments were related to marital difficulty in the situations of two wives and one husband, which made a total of three persons affected. It was interesting to note that this attachment involved both parents for the three persons. The case which follows highlights the effects of strong parental attachments in the situation of Mr. and Mrs. R.:

Case 3

Mr. and Mrs. R., twenty-one and twenty years old, respectively, had been married about seven months when Mrs. R. left and returned to her parents' home. Mrs. R. was undecided whether she wanted to remain separated permanently or not. It was learned that her parents had objected to the marriage and had used pressure to force her to return home with them. Mrs. R. complained that she had no privacy in her married life because they lived with her mother-in-law. Mr. R.'s mother treated him like a "baby" and upheld him in his promiscuity, late hours, and heavy drinking. It seemed that Mr. and Mrs. R. were both immature and too strongly attached to their parents to make a success of marriage.

Conflict in the marriage of their parents was a contributing cause for only one husband, and no wives. Causative factors from early familial experiences were unknown about forty-one persons, which included twenty-three wives and
eighteen husbands, or approximately two-thirds of the group. For eight persons, two wives and six husbands, two causative factors from early life experiences were listed. Therefore, eleven persons were known to have one of the causative factors included above and eight persons were known to have two causative factors. Again, the facts were inconclusive, since that information was available for only about one third of the individuals included.

The writer felt that marital conflict was largely caused by unhappy or unsatisfactory home life in childhood which resulted in later personality conflicts. This opinion was held with others in the field of family casework and closely allied professions.

Conviction is spreading that broken and unhappy homes breed warped personalities—successive links in a long chain of individual discontent and misery. Unhappy parents provide unhappy homes; children grow up in these unhappy homes; in later life they provide unhappy homes for other children. Studies indicate that individuals who have been brought up in unhappy homes are those who have the least chance themselves of achieving lasting and satisfying marriage unions.\(^1\)

"We believe that the whole question of marriage needs closer scrutiny and that divorce and separation are symptoms of personality disturbance in our social life . . . "\(^2\) Even though the writer was unable to show statistically relationships between familial relationships and later marital conflicts, these were illustrated by isolated case examples. Hollis' study,

\(^{1}\)Ibid., p. 5.

Women in Marital Conflict, examined 100 cases from the point of view of both the personalities of the individuals involved and the environmental pressures to which they were exposed. It was found that personality factors lay at the root of conflict in these families and environmental pressures were symptomatic of the personality factors or subordinate to them.\(^1\) The psychological factor that emerged most clearly was emotional dependence which was closely related to parental ties.\(^2\) The same was indicated in the present study, however it was not conclusive because of the small sample and the large unknown factor.

The desired information for this study was less detailed but somewhat similar and comparable to that shown on the schedule used in the Hollis study. It was assumed that cases of marriage counselling would of necessity have rather extensive information regarding background factors as well as the present situation, as a prerequisite to diagnosis and treatment. Many of the cases might not have been truly representative of marriage counselling, as indicated by the scarcity of pertinent data. Many of the cases seemed to have been exploratory contacts in which the marriage problem was presented. In such cases, there were insufficient contacts with the client or clients to obtain more information and for intensive counselling.

\(^1\) Florence Hollis, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 9.

\(^2\) \textit{Ibid.}, p. 10.
### TABLE 3

**DISTRIBUTION OF EARLY RELATIONSHIPS AS CAUSATIVE FACTORS IN MARITAL CONFLICT**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CAUSATIVE FACTORS*</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
<th>WIFE</th>
<th>HUSBAND</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>27</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excessive Dependency**</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deprivation</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overindulgence***</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broken Homes</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong Parental Attachments</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict in Parent's Marriage</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*This information was unknown for 23 wives and 18 husbands.

**For eight individuals, two wives and six husbands, two causative factors were tabulated. Excessive dependency was a factor in all of these cases. This was associated with strong parental attachments for two husbands and two wives, with broken homes for three husbands, and with conflict in the parental marriage for one husband.

***Four wives were overindulged by their mothers; four husbands were overindulged by their mothers; and one husband was overindulged by his sisters.
CHAPTER III

DESCRIPTION OF PRESENT SITUATION

An analysis was made of the present situation of persons who experienced marital difficulties, relative to the age of couples, previous marriages, children in the home, economic status, and religion. The general characteristics of the group studied were pertinent in that their circumstances might have been related to the marriage conflict. It was recognized that the individual's contentment in the marriage relationship was partially dependent on the gratifications gained in the environment. The crux of some marriage problems lies in the adjustment of the couple to the environment. In other cases of marital conflict, the underlying problems might emerge from inner personality conflicts. In either situation, the individual's surroundings have been known to be an inherent part of any conflicts encountered. The presentation of these facts was also intended to give a more vivid picture of the persons included in the study.

The persons who sought help with marriage problems were residents of Winston-Salem, North Carolina, an industrial urban area. Consequently, most of these people were employed in the tobacco and textile industries. The group seemed fairly representative of the "average family" in this community.

Ages of Couples

The ages of wives in the group ranged from twenty years to sixty-one years. The median age for wives was twenty-seven and
one-half years, and the largest frequency of wives was concentrated in the age group of twenty to twenty-four years. The arithmetic mean was not used due to the wide disparity in extreme values of the range. The above-mentioned figures were based on the ages of twenty-three wives, as the ages of seven wives were unknown. Ages of husbands ranged from twenty to sixty-six years. The greatest frequency of husbands was in the age group thirty to thirty-four years, and the median age was thirty years. Again, the mean age was not used because of the wide disparity in extreme values of the range. Computations were based on ages of twenty-four husbands, because the ages of six were unknown. Table 4 illustrates the distribution of ages of husbands and wives included in the study. The ages found in this group were compared with the group studied by Hollis. In the latter study, the average age was 34.5 for the husbands and 31.5 for the wives, and ages ranged from seventeen to sixty-one years.\(^1\) Therefore, the persons in both studies were relatively young, however those in the latter study were older than those in the former.

Children in the Home

The number of children in the home varied from none to seven and the average number of children per family was 3.75. Data on the number of children in the home were obtained in all cases. In Hollis' study, the average size of family was 4.09, which was above the average of 3.57 for unbroken families in the

\(^1\)Ibid.
United States. However, the latter's computations were based on the total family group and this study was only concerned with the children in the families.¹

**TABLE 4**

**DISTRIBUTION OF AGES OF COUPLES AT TIME OF APPLICATION**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AGES</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
<th>WIFE</th>
<th>HUSBAND</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-24</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-34</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-49</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50 and over</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Economic Status of Couples**

Information regarding occupations was obtained for twenty-six husbands, and fourteen men from this group were gainfully employed in unskilled labor in factories, four were in business or clerical work, seven were skilled laborers, and one was unemployed. Fifteen or one-half of the wives were unemployed

¹Ibid.
or had no occupation outside the home. Eleven women were unskilled laborers, one was a skilled laborer and three were in business or engaged in clerical work. Table 5 illustrates the distribution of kinds of occupations in which husbands and wives were engaged. Relatively speaking, the Hollis study included more professional and skilled workers and fewer unskilled laborers than this study. The majority of persons in this study were engaged in factory work, possibly due to the fact that the tobacco industry was the leading source of employment in the community. Because most persons were employed in factories, their incomes were relatively high for unskilled and skilled labor; nevertheless they were representative of a lower class group because of their standards of living.

**TABLE 5**

**DISTRIBUTION OF COUPLES ACCORDING TO TYPES OF OCCUPATION**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CLIENTS</th>
<th>TYPES OF OCCUPATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BUSINESS AND CLERICAL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The family income was learned for seventeen couples, and was unknown for thirteen couples. For the seventeen couples

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¹Ibid., p. 11.
about whom these data were secured, the average family income was approximately $193.97 monthly. Seven of the thirty couples who received marriage counselling also asked for financial help during the counselling period. The average monthly family income in the Hollis study was $206.00 monthly, which was slightly above the national pre-inflation income of $196.27 monthly.¹ Financial help was not involved in seventy-eight percent of cases in this study. Families in both studies were in similar income brackets, even though there was quite a degree of variation in kinds of occupations.

Included under requests for financial help were persons who asked for money directly, as well as those who requested services based on financial need, such as clothing, nursing care, prescribed medicine, free school lunches and books. In cases in which financial help was not requested, sometimes a financial problem existed or was pending. Most of the cases were presented to the agency when the situation became intolerable or neared a crisis. Some clients sought help when a separation seemed inevitable, which usually involved future financial difficulties. In such cases, the client often did not return to the agency because an immediate solution could not be given to the problem.

Previous Marriages

From the total group of sixty persons, only two had been married prior to the present marriage. One husband had been

¹Ibid.
married twice previously and these marriages terminated in divorce. His present wife gave the reason for his failures in previous marriages as due to interference from his mother, which she also was experiencing. One wife had been married twice previously; the first marriage ended in death of the husband, and the second was dissolved by court because this husband was found guilty of bigamy. The most significant fact seen in this analysis was that fifty-eight out of sixty persons studied were experiencing marital conflict in their first marriage.

Religion

Religion was classified as to Protestant, Catholic, none and unknown. Thirteen wives and six husbands were Protestants, information unknown for seventeen wives and nineteen husbands, and five husbands had no religion. The large number of persons about whom religious information was unknown greatly limited the findings to be deducted from this analysis. One marriage of mixed faiths was noted, in which the wife was Protestant and the husband was Catholic. In five cases, the wives were Protestant, but husbands were listed as having no religion. There was some question in the writer's thinking relative to the accuracy of listing persons as having no religion, because it was not known if the worker referred to present church affiliation or to non-existence of any religious faith. However, on the face sheets of case records, these persons were listed as having no religion. It was known that religious differences were a factor in producing marital disharmony
in one case, which was the case described above in regard to
the husband having been married twice previously. A summarized
excerpt of the case follows:

Case 4

Mr. and Mrs. J. had been married five years and had a
son, two and one-half years of age. Mrs. J. had numerous
complaints about her marriage, one of them being inter-
ference from her mother-in-law with whom they lived.
Mr. and Mrs. J. had difficulties in religious differences
as well as other aspects of their relationship. Mr. J.
professed to be of Catholic faith even though he was no
longer accepted in the church because of his divorces.
Mrs. J. was Protestant but agreed to have the child reared
in the Catholic church. She objected to her husband's
insistence that the child must become a Catholic, and
wanted this decision to depend on the child's wishes when
he becomes an adult. There was constant bickering about
religion, which was one of the factors that made their
marriage incompatible.

It was not known to what extent situational factors as
described in this chapter actually affected the marriage re-
relationship of persons concerned. The factors involved in
marital conflict were found to be complex and interwoven. A
multiplicity of causative factors were found in each case
situation.

There are marriages whose internal strength is suf-
ficient to cause them to hold together in any and all
circumstances. The effect of adverse external conditions
upon such marriages is merely to strengthen them. There
are other marriages which would not be satisfactory under
any circumstances. The middle group is the one in which
the balance of happiness or unhappiness seems most to
depend upon external conditions.¹

The group of people studied were mostly young married
couples. Their incomes were higher than the average American
income, yet they were not free of financial worries and diffi-

culties. With most couples, religious differences and problems in this area were not brought out during the counselling period. The great majority had not been married previously. The findings substantiated the writer's assumption that the group represented average American families.
CHAPTER IV

NATURE AND CAUSE OF CONFLICT

Consideration was given to the nature and cause of marital conflict as determined by the parties directly concerned, husband and wife, as well as the worker's impression of causative aspects. The validity of the worker's impression can only be based on her skills in counseling, an adequate number of interviews with both clients, and the client's readiness to accept and use casework services. However, for this study, the worker's impression was accepted without attempts to evaluate the accuracy of the diagnosis. Persons who sought help with marital problems usually blamed their spouse for the difficulties, as they were unwilling to accept the responsibility for failure in marriage. In the past, there has existed a certain stigma attached to persons who could not handle their personal problems. This stigma has gradually lessened, as more people have come to agencies for help with personal problems, such as marital conflict. For the aforementioned reasons, the conflict as presented by the client was often colored or biased, consciously or unconsciously.

As a rule, the client who seeks casework help for his marriage arrives at the agency with strong emotional defenses. Consciously or unconsciously the client recognizes marriage as the most intimate human relationship. He also believes his marriage to have been previously influenced by the actions of the two people chiefly involved--himself and his spouse. The moment the client exposes the intimate relationship to a stranger he can no longer avoid facing his conviction of a failing marriage, for which he feels himself or his partner somehow is responsible. Hence the application usually stirs up in the client intense feelings of anger, pain and guilt. Understandably, the client is also apprehensive
that the caseworker may prove rejecting, critical, or punishing, much as the spouse, or perhaps he himself has been. The client naturally and quite unconsciously attempts to defend himself from such anxiety-ridden feelings, and in the initial interview, his defense frequently takes the form of demands for immediate help. "Help" to the client means alleviating his painful marital situation largely by altering the behavior of that partner whom the client considers chiefly at fault.¹

Precipitating Cause as Seen by Wives

Twenty-eight of the thirty wives gave information relative to nature and cause of conflict, one was not interviewed, and one had no idea of the cause as her husband rather suddenly informed her that he wanted to terminate their marriage. Sixteen wives complained of inadequate support, eleven, of their husband's extra-marital affairs, thirteen, of excessive drinking by the husband, eight, of physical abuse by the husband, six, of few common interests, five, of interfering relatives, and five, of differences in the use of money. The wives usually complained of about three causes which were extremely disturbing to them. However, one particular cause was usually considered to be the main difficulty. It was significant that in several cases, inadequate support, excessive drinking, extra-marital affairs, and physical abuse from the husband were listed together as the causes of conflict. It appeared that those causes were related or that possibly one cause was responsible or contributed to the others. In some cases, the wife felt that excessive drinking caused the husband to seek

entertainment away from home which possibly brought him into contact with other women who shared his recreational tastes. With such moderate income families, excessive drinking contributed to inadequate support which possibly started arguments that ended in physical abuse while the husband was in an alcoholic state. Nevertheless, the writer felt that excessive drinking stemmed from deeper underlying causes which she did not attempt to uncover in this study. An example of a case situation in which several causes seemed to be related follows:

Case 5

Mr. and Mrs. B., twenty-two years and twenty years, respectively, had been married four years and had an infant son. Mrs. B. was very much upset when she came to the agency for help with her marriage problems. It was learned that Mr. B. never took her any place, but went out frequently with his two sisters and another woman with whom he was having an affair. Mr. B. drank excessively and seemed to enjoy himself when away from home in the company of the "other woman." Mr. B. earned a relatively small salary and spent most of it in drinking. Mrs. B. did not get adequate support and even had to discontinue buying milk for the baby. Mrs. B. nagged her husband about the support problem and he often abused her physically if this occurred when he had been drinking.

Table 6 shows the distribution of causes of conflict according to the worker, husbands, and wives. Many other causes of conflict were revealed which were not included on this table because they were too infrequent and varied. Some of the other causes given were unsatisfactory sex relations, violent temper of wife, attitude of wife toward drinking, wife too aggressive and domineering, doubted paternity of children, disapproval of wife smoking and cursing, husband attempted to make wife mentally ill, conflict over religious differences, sexual perversion of husband, possessive and jealous husband, financial
losses due to drinking by husband, dissatisfaction with living quarters, husband domineering and controlling and refusal of husband to accompany wife places.

Twenty-five wives requested help with their marital problems from the agency, which accounted for the large number of wives interviewed. Two couples requested help jointly, and in three cases help was sought by the husband. This possibly indicated that the wives had accepted casework help in the area of marriage problems more than their husbands. On the other hand, the wives had more time to contact the agency and to follow through on appointments because many were not employed outside of the home or had part-time employment. The majority of husbands were gainfully employed which made it more difficult for them to come to the agency. Therefore, it cannot be stated definitely that the wives were more accepting of casework services, because they had more available time for agency contacts than their spouses.
TABLE 6

DISTRIBUTION OF CAUSES OF CONFLICT ACCORDING TO THE WORKER, HUSBAND, AND WIFE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CAUSATIVE FACTORS*</th>
<th>WORKER</th>
<th>HUSBANDS</th>
<th>WIVES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL CAUSES</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excessive Drinking</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra-Marital Affairs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate Support</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interferring Relatives</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differences in Use of Money</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Abuse by Spouse</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immaturity</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Few Common Interests</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse Spent Most of Leisure Time Away from Home</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insecurity</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse Cruel to Children</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor Housekeeping</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussed Troubles with Outsiders</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse Needed Psychiatric Care</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse Nagged Constantly</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict in Rearing Children</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband Committed Misdemeanors</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Causative factors were not stated by worker in twelve cases, by husbands in twelve cases, and by wives in two cases.
It seemed significant that the wives as a whole did not discuss intimate problems such as their sexual adjustment, but only discussed those external factors such as the husband's excessive drinking, physical abuse, inadequate support and other symptoms. This reluctance of wives to discuss intimate matters was partially due to culturally-determined factors as well as the fact that most cases had a relatively short counselling period. Because they were having problems in their marriage, it could be assumed that they were experiencing difficulties in the more intimate relationships such as sexual adjustments. It is known that problems in marriage affect the sexual adjustment even if it has previously been a satisfactory one. Most husbands did not discuss their sex life, but this was perhaps relatively insignificant, since few were interviewed more than two or three times.

Precipitating Causes as Seen by Husbands

Of thirty husbands, twelve were not interviewed, which again pointed up the wider acceptance of marriage counselling by wives. It was found that husbands shared the blame for difficulties more than their wives. Many husbands gave their own part in the conflict as well as that of their wives. The most frequent complaint of the eighteen husbands interviewed was extra-marital affairs of the wives in five cases. Interferring relatives were involved in four cases, excessive drinking and poor housekeeping in three cases each, and cruel treatment of children and discussing
troubles with others by wives in two cases each. Some husbands blamed themselves for excessive drinking, extra-marital affairs, and other causes. In other cases, unsatisfactory behavior was related to unhappy and deprived childhoods. The complaints of husbands averaged less than two and were not as numerous in most instances as those given by their wives. The wives were often interviewed more frequently and sometimes husbands were interviewed only once. This might account for the fact that more detailed information was obtained on wives. In a few cases, the husband was interviewed several times. Most of the cases were of short duration, as several clients broke contact with the agency early in the counselling period. A case example follows, in which the husband was interviewed several times and shared the blame for the difficulties in his marriage:

Case 6

Mr. and Mrs. R. had been married six years and had three children. Mrs. R. requested help with marriage problems and stated that Mr. R. was not providing adequate support and often abused her physically. She accepted no responsibility for their difficulties. Mr. R. was interviewed and seemed interested in working out their problems. Mr. R. blamed himself for "hustling liquor" which kept him away from the home a great deal, and felt this was responsible for Mrs. R. dating other men. Mr. R. presented love letters written by his wife to other men which proved that she was involved in intimate relationships with them. Mr. R. still loved Mrs. R. in spite of her infidelity, and explained that he grew up without much love and had put his whole life and love into his marriage. He admitted that he had not provided adequately for his family but was willing to do better. The couple came in for counselling intermittently, at crisis periods, and finally stopped coming to the agency, before they had made much improvement in their situation.

Worker's Impression of Nature and Cause

In eighteen of thirty cases, the worker expressed an
opinion of the nature and cause of conflict which averaged less than two causes for each case. Immaturity was felt to be a cause in eight cases, five of which applied to husbands and three to wives. Differences over finances was involved in four cases, extra-marital affairs in four cases, in which three referred to husbands and one to a wife, and insecurity in husbands was the cause in four cases. Excessive drinking was the source of conflict for three husbands and one wife. Many other reasons were given, such as, impoverishment in love and affection, inadequacy in the husband role, domineering and controlling partner, and few common interests. The above-mentioned causes were some of the factors included on Table 6. In most instances, cause as seen by the worker was related to early life experiences. The following case illustrates the worker's impression of the cause of conflict:

Case 7

Mr. and Mrs. R., twenty-six and twenty-three years old, respectively, had been married two years and had an infant son. Mr. R. contacted the agency the first time because he feared that he would lose his wife, whom he felt was "flirting" with other men. Mr. R. returned to the agency a few months later because Mrs. R. had actually left him. Mr. R. was very much upset and felt that he could not get along without Mrs. R. whom he loved. The worker described Mr. R. as being a thin, tense, anxious young man who had a highly feminine voice and mannerisms. On the contrary, Mrs. R. was described as a rather large buxom red-head. Mr. R. had struck his wife when he saw her talking with two marines. He wanted a reconciliation and blamed himself for many things. Mr. R. regretted having allowed Mrs. R. to work. He wished that he had not forced his wife to have intercourse with him when it was always painful and nauseating to her. Mrs. R. was definite about not wanting to live with Mr. R. and said that he was not her type of man. She refused to be subjected to his jealousy and suspiciousness. The worker felt that Mr. R. was meticulous, rigid in standards, insecure, impoverished in affection, and that he felt inadequate in the husband role as he appeared to be an effeminate type of man. The
worker was impressed that Mrs. R. was immature and Mr. R. held no physical attraction for her. They had little in common and it was felt that Mr. R. wanted to win his wife's affection to prove himself a man. Mr. and Mrs. R. seemed basically unsuited for each other, according to the worker, and perhaps Mrs. R. had a deep unconscious revulsion toward her husband's femininity, rigidity, and inflexibility.

Attitudes and Plans of Clients
When Case Was Closed

Attitudes and plans of clients when case was closed were known for twenty-nine wives and eighteen husbands. Those persons whom this information was not known about were not interviewed by the worker. Thirteen wives were seemingly definite in planning to separate, eleven wives wanted to continue in their married relationship, four were planning for a reconciliation, and three were undecided. Seven husbands wanted to continue in their marriage relationships, five wanted separation, four were undecided, and two planned to work for a reconciliation. It was observed in five cases in which wives decided to separate that their husbands were not interviewed. In almost all cases of marriage counselling, at the agency, if it were agreeable with the wife, every effort was made to contact the husband. Some husbands were not willing to discuss difficulties with worker or for other reasons did not come for an interview. Such cases might be indicative of the fact that the husband was unwilling to attempt to work through the difficulties which resulted in a definite decision by the wife to separate. Table 7 illustrates the distribution of attitudes and plans by client when case was closed.
TABLE 7
DISTRIBUTION OF ATTITUDES AND PLANS OF CLIENTS
WHEN CASE WAS CLOSED

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CLIENTS</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
<th>SEPARATE</th>
<th>CONTINUE MARRIAGE</th>
<th>UNDECIDED</th>
<th>WORKING FOR RECONCILIATION</th>
<th>NOT INTERVIEWED</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The writer felt that marriage counselling was beneficial in most cases, regardless of intensity of help or plans and attitudes of clients when case was closed. The service was helpful to some clients in the therapeutic value gained in discussing problems with a relatively objective person. Many who received this service were better able to evaluate their situation and plan to either work towards improving the relationship or to dissolve it.

Many of the precipitating causes of marital conflict as seen by husbands, wives and worker were indicative of immaturity due to unresolved conflicts carried over from the early stages of psychosexual development. Symptoms such as excessive drinking, extra-marital affairs, and physical abuse by spouse were found in persons who were immature and who sought fulfillment of needs which had not been satisfied during infantile periods. Such persons were not ready to take on the adult responsibilities of marriage.
If the child is emotionally deprived or emotionally overindulged, it tends to cling too strongly to the getting and does not develop sufficient capacity for, or enjoyment of giving. It is doomed to frustration and hence to anger; emotional frustration spells unhappiness leads to anger, repressed or overt, and can become the basis for depressions and other neurotic reactions—for alcoholism, for unrest and for antisocial behavior. Children learn to control their hostilities, their sexuality, and other impulses, and to develop the orientations of maturity, largely through the incentive of being loved. If they feel unloved, they care little about controlling themselves and hence socialization and smooth emotional growth are disturbed.¹

Characteristics of maturity include independence from parental figures, relative freedom from inferiority feelings, egotism, and competitiveness, a well-developed conscience, mature sexual attitudes, a firm sense of reality, and flexibility and adaptability.²

Immaturity as seen in many of the persons studied was not always clearly related in the case material to early life experiences. However, it was known that such symptoms stemmed from various unwholesome relationships in childhood. Those persons carried their infantile behavior into marriage and consequently were faced with many problems of adjustment.

²Ibid., pp. 7-16.
CHAPTER V

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Marriage counselling as a specific service in social agencies has emerged primarily in the last two decades as a partial solution to one of the most prevalent social problems, marital conflict. It was felt that more concentration and study of the problem was needed in order for this service to improve and for treatment methods to become more effective. Marriage counselling has become an increasingly important service in the agency, so that a study of factors contributing to marital conflict might be particularly helpful for future work in this area in the agency.

The general purpose of the study was to ascertain factors contributing to marital conflict through an analysis of thirty cases referred to the agency in 1950 and 1951. The study was concerned with the early causative factors based on early life experiences of clients, the present situation of clients, and the nature and cause of conflicts as seen by the clients.

The study was limited due to the small number of cases used, and further limited because a large amount of the information desired was unknown. The unknown factor was sufficiently large to prevent the finding of conclusive evidence regarding the cases included in the study.

Specific facts found and conclusions deducted include the following:

1. Person or persons by whom reared, economic status of
parents, and number of siblings for clients were largely unknown so that no significant facts were found. Thirty-three of the sixty persons studied were reared by natural parents and this information was unknown about twenty-four persons. The economic status of parents and the number of siblings were unknown for fifty persons.

2. Excessive dependency in early familial relationships adversely affected the marital harmony of sixteen persons, which was caused by deprivation or over-indulgence in parental relationships. Early causative factors were unknown for forty-one persons or approximately two-thirds of the group.

3. The largest frequency of wives was concentrated in the age group of twenty to twenty-four years, and the median age was twenty-seven and one-half years. The greatest frequency of husbands was in the age group of thirty to thirty-four years. Therefore the group was largely made up of young married couples. The average number of children per couple was 3.75.

4. Fourteen, or almost one-half of the husbands were unskilled laborers, but incomes were relatively high due to employment in factories. One-half of the wives were not employed outside of the home, and eleven of the remaining number were unskilled laborers. Financial help was not involved in seventy-seven per cent of the cases. The group was largely representative of the lower-class by virtue of the kinds of employment and standards of living.

5. Sufficient data on religion of clients were not available and therefore no relationship was shown to marital con-
Conflict. However, of thirteen wives and eleven husbands for whom this information was known, most persons were Protestant.

6. Fifty-eight of the group were experiencing marital conflict in their first marriage, which might be due to the fact that the group consisted largely of young people.

7. The most frequent precipitating causes of conflict as seen by wives were inadequate support, excessive drinking, extra-marital affairs, and physical abuse by husbands which were frequently combined.

8. Twenty-five wives requested agency help with marriage problems, two couples requested help jointly, and three husbands requested help. Twenty-nine wives and eighteen husbands were interviewed by a worker and wives were usually interviewed more frequently than husbands. This possibly indicated that wives were more desirous of casework service in the area of marriage counselling; however, the husbands had less available time for agency contacts because they had a greater frequency of employment.

9. Most wives did not discuss intimate areas of the marriage relationship such as sexual adjustment, which was possibly due to culturally-determined taboos. Most husbands did not discuss these areas either, but this was probably because few were interviewed more than two or three times.

10. Husbands shared the responsibility of difficulties in their marriages more frequently than their wives, but did not work through difficulties by means of agency service as consistently as their wives, which might have been because they
had less available time.

11. The most frequent complaints of husbands were extra-
marital affairs of wives, and interfering relatives. Causes
given by husbands had smaller frequencies than those given by
wives, because a smaller number of husbands were interviewed.

12. In eighteen of thirty cases, the worker expressed an
opinion of cause of conflict. The most frequent causes were
immaturity, insecurity, differences in use of money, and extra-
marital affairs. In most cases, these factors were related to
early familial experiences.

13. Attitudes and plans of clients when case was closed
were known for twenty-nine wives and eighteen husbands. Eleven
wives were definite in decisions to continue their marriage and
thirteen wives were definite in planning to separate. Seven
husbands were definite in decisions to continue in marriage and
five were definite in planning to separate. A large number of
clients were helped to evaluate their situations.

14. Due to the paucity of factual information, it seemed
that many cases were possibly exploratory contacts in which a
marriage problem was presented, rather than cases of sustained
intensive marriage counselling.
APPENDIX
SCHEDULE

I. Identifying Data:
   A. Case number_______  B. Date of Application_______
   C. Age: Wife__________ Husband____________________
   D. Children in the home: Age__________ Sex__________

II. Marriage Data:
   A. Number of marriages: Wife_______ Husband________
   B. Cause of previous separations or divorces
      1. Wife:

      2. Husband:

III. Early Social History Data of Wife:
   A. Reared by natural parents____, foster parents____,
      relatives________________, other___________________
   B. Number of siblings______________.
   C. Economic status of parents________________________

   D. Religion__________________.
   E. Information regarding adjustment in home:

   ____________________________________________________

   ____________________________________________________

   38
IV. Early Social History Data of Husband:
   A. Reared by natural parents______Foster parents______
      relatives______________, other______________.
   B. Number of siblings__________.
   C. Economic status of parents______________________.
   D. Religion______________________.
   E. Information regarding adjustment in home:
      ____________________________________________

V. Marital Conflict:
   A. Nature and cause as seen by:
      1. Wife:
      ____________________________________________
      2. Husband:
      ____________________________________________
   B. Worker's impression of nature and cause:
      ____________________________________________

VI. Early relationships as causative factors in marital conflict:
   A. Information regarding early relationships which seem related to present difficulty:
      ____________________________________________
   B. Other aspects of problem traceable to early relationships:
      ____________________________________________
   C. The type of relationship which adversely affected the marital harmony:
      ____________________________________________
D. The extent of difficulty which emerged from early relationships:

VII. Economic Status of Couple:
A. Occupation: Husband__________ Wife:__________
B. Earnings: Husband__________ Wife:__________
C. Family income___________________.
D. Home: Owned__________ Rented__________
E. Requested financial help___________________.

VIII. Plans and attitudes about conflict when case is closed:
A. Wife:

B. Husband:

IX. Additional Information:
A. From agency record:
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