

THE CHAOS OF LOVE ... THEORY & THERAPY

ONE PLUS ONE ANNUAL CONFERENCE December 1997

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One Plus One
Marriage & Partnership Research

- Can love survive today's interests between love, family life and personal freedom?
- Are we living in an 'anything goes' era or are men and women responding to deeper economic, social and cultural changes?
- Can the trend to greater marital instability be reversed?
- Why are current marital interventions so unsuccessful?

These were some of the issues discussed at Annual Conference on 3rd December by speakers psychologist Prof John Gottman of the University of Washington at Seattle, and Dr Jacqueline Scott, assistant director in the faculty of Social and Political Sciences at Cambridge University.

SYNOPSIS OF PRESENTATIONS

Theory Prof John Gottman 'An empirically based theory of marriage'. Dr Jacqueline Scott 'Changing attitudes and marital stability'.

Therapy Prof John Gottman 'The case for minimal marital therapy'.

THEORIES FROM THE 'LOVE LAB'

Prof Gottman has spent over 20 years researching couples and families in his much publicized Seattle 'love labs' programme. His presentation centred on his theory of what makes marriages work — his 'Sound Marital House'. Gottman claims he can predict whether a couple will stay together or eventually divorce, based on certain characteristics he has identified in stable, happy marriages.

Limited success of marital therapies

Prof Gottman noted that there is only a 11-18% success rate of marital therapy over a two-year follow-up. The take-up of marital therapy is also low — only 1% among divorcing couples; while the lag of up to 6 years or more before requesting help also means marital stress is greater.

Divorce fallacies: the 'Baker's dozen'

One of Gottman's 'baker's dozen' of divorce fallacies is that affairs frequently lead to divorce. In one Californian study

- only 20% of respondents cited adultery as the main reason (although measuring adultery accurately is problematic);
- 80% of couples cited drifting apart and loneliness as the main reason.

Marital success v. failure — the crux

Gottman's research findings and their implications are, he maintains, very simple:

- successful marriages have high ratios of positive to negative interaction — 5:1;
- in failing marriages the ratio is 1:1.25;

"Marriage failure is inevitably accompanied by the four horsemen of the apocalypse: criticism, defensiveness, contempt and stonewalling."

Contempt is central to the demise of a marriage and is linked to ill health in women. Stonewallers are mainly men, because they become physiologically upset when criticised and more likely to avoid conflict.

Who will divorce?

Gottman lists several factors he believes are likely to predict divorce, including failure of repair attempts and harsh 'start up' by wives.

Men who *can* accept their wives' influence, Gottman refers to as 'emotionally intelligent'.

"One predictor of divorce is a husband's failure to accept the influence of his wife."

This leads to his theory of **'The sound marital house'**, consisting of seven components which he believes must be incorporated into marital therapy, including a foundation of friendship, and conflict regulation — this, rather than resolution, affects marital success.

Is marital dissatisfaction inevitable?

As Gottman reiterated, "most people marry a set of unresolvable problems", and blaming either sex is not helpful. It is how couples deal with the differences that predicts success.

He has observed that 'emotionally intelligent' husbands — those who accept their wives' influence and share power — are in the 25% of marriages which are successful after the first seven years. Likewise, wives who can help 'soothe' their mates during conflict and avoid 'the harsh start up' are also predictors of marital satisfaction. Thus both partners benefit from the relationship.

MARRIAGE: CHANGING ATTITUDES

The gender perspective was also central to Dr Scott's examination of changing attitudes in relation to marital stability. She concluded that traditional marriage is likely to come under increasing strain as attitudes towards the changing role of women come into conflict with the lack of a comparable change in men's behaviour and attitudes.

Social revolution and marital stability

In her presentation, Dr Scott questioned the idea that the 1960s sexual revolution was the first, since the 1920s was characterised by the same factors. So, either sexual and family change has been going on for most of the century or claims of such a revolution are exaggerated.

Anything goes?

Sexual morality is also not as permissive as commonly believed:

- nine out of ten British people believe that extra-marital affairs are not acceptable.

Gender roles and tension

- Traditional gender roles are being increasingly rejected, more by women.
- Men, while endorsing a working wife's financial contribution are more likely to see her separation from young children as having negative effects for children.
- Women still do nine hours more domestic work than their husbands, even when working the same paid hours.

Dr Scott concluded that there is a tension between gender roles and individualism and clear gender differences between attitudes and behaviour in key areas. Also, the extent of sexual and family change has been exaggerated and individualism has not had the pervasive effect on family life that is commonly believed.

MINIMAL MARITAL THERAPY?

Prof Gottman observed that

- **relapse in therapy is more common for couples who spend less than five hours a week on their marriage;**
- couples also do better who work harder at therapy and are not as far along the 'cascade' to divorce.

He believes there is a real need for a **developmental epidemiology of marriage** to be used alongside marital therapy, targeting couples at key points, such as after the birth of the first child.

The therapist as 'coach'

He outlined the factors likely to reduce the chance of couples relapsing after therapy. He believes the therapist should act primarily as a 'coach' to enable couples to make their interaction in the future less divorce prone, for example by:

- allowing couples to converse directly, rather than overly through the therapist;
- allowing all emotions to be expressed then allowing the couple to 'soothe' each other.
- Intervention should seem easy for couples, involving low psychological cost to them.