The Structure of Marriage as shown by Marital "Games"*

Eric Berne, M.C.
Carmel, California

It is generally considered bad practice to treat two marital partners simultaneously. Under such conditions it is extremely difficult for the therapist to avoid interventions which can with only slight distortion be exploited to damage the treatment situation, or at least render it inordinately complex. So much so, that a successful outcome is considered an event unusual enough to report in the literature. In so-called "marital counselling" (as distinct from therapy), the counsellor by all accounts sets as a kind of coach, or he may perform the functions of an umpire. He tends to become a third party to the marriage itself, usually *in loco parentis.* Hence amoun conservative therapists there is a strong tendency to aviod marital therapy or marital counselling because these difficulties are recognized and formulated in some terms or other, and make those procedures uncongenial to many conscientious and sensitive clinicians. A common practice is to tell the couple that therapy is designed to treat individuals rather than situations or relationships.

Conventional group therapy with married couples is usually open to the same objections because it too often takes the form of many-handed "games," one of which will be described presently. For this reason, before the significance of such "games" was recognized, the writer followed the conservative policy in both individual and group therapy, with an occasional experimental exception. These experiments did not always end happily, and their course could not be followed or controlled with adequate precision or intelligibility.

After the principles of structural, transactional, and game analysis had become sufficiently clear, however, a pilot experiment was tried to test their usefulness in the marital situation. This consisted of taking a "group" consisting

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of one couple. The results were so gratifying, from both the therapeutic and scientific points of view, that it was decided to form a full-fledged marital group.

The fundamentals of this therapeutic approach have been described elsewhere (1,2). Briefly, it is based on the separation and investigation of exteropsychic, neopsychic, and archaeopsychic ego states, colloquially known as Parent, Adult, and Child, respectively. Structural analysis refers to the intrapsychic relationships of these three types of ego states: Their mutual isolation, conflict, contamination, invasion, predominance, or cooperation within the personality. Parental ego states, collectively called "the Parent," are those known to be borrowed from external sources; Adult ego states, collectively called "the Adult," are oriented in accordance with current reality; Child ego states, collectively called "the Child," are relics fixated in childhood. If these distinctions are appropriately demonstrated by clinical material, they can be easily understood by patients, who soon learn to appreciate the social, behavioral, psychological, and historical significance of the simple structural diagram shown in Figure 1.

Transactional analysis (2) refers to the diagnosis of which particular ego state is active in each individual during a given transaction or series of transactions, and of the understandings or misunderstandings which arise due to the perception or misperception of this factor by the individuals involved. Thus a patient or therapist who had an adequate insight into structural analysis is prepared to proceed to transactional analysis. He can then begin to understand, again on the basis of clinical material, the meaning and consequences of various types of transactions.

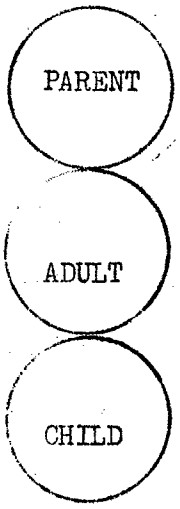

Figure 1.
A Structural Diagram

Once these principles are clearly grasped through dozens or hundreds of clinical demonstrations during the actual proceedings of the group, the patient or therapist is prepared to undertake game analysis (2). A game may be defined as a recurring series of transactions, often repetitive, superficially rational, with a concealed motivation; or more colloquially, a series of operations with a "gimmick." The object of the game is for the first player to obtain the maximum of primary, secondary, and social gains by manipulating or exploiting the other player or players. The notion of a "game" is very precies; it does not refer to an attitude, or to a single operation, but to an organized set of transactions with a well-formed outcome.

The most common game played between spouses, for example, is called colloquially: "If It Weren't For You!" Mrs. Fabbro complained that her husband would not allow her to indulge in any social or athletic activities. As she improved with treatment, her husband became less sure of himself and withdrew his prohibitions. Because of her "starved" adolescence, she had always wanted to take swimming and dancing lessons, which her "domineering" husband had forbidden up to that time. Now she was free to sign up for her courses, when she discovered to her surprise and dismay that she had phobias of both swimming-pools and dance floors, so that she had to abandon both projects.

This exposure partly clarified the structure of her marriage. She had picked for a husband a man who would yield her the maximum of primary and sedondary gains. It will be recalled that Freud describes (3) how an illness can yield three possible types of gain; internal paranosic (primary), external paranosic (primary), and epinosic (secondary). This concept can be extended (by committing a solecism) to the gains derived from personal relationships. When Mrs. Fabbro picked an autocrat for a husband, the external primary gain was that he helped her with her phobic aviodances; the internal primary gain was that she could turn on him and say, "If it weren't for you, I could . . .etc.," which was not only gratifying but also helped her handle the underlying guilts and anxieties; the secondary gains lay in the material advantages which derived from her position; the

"justifiable" resentment gave her leverage in controlling their sex life and other aspects of their marriage, and elicited concessions and gifts which he offered to indemnify her for his severity.

Transactional analysis postulates a fourth type of gain, the social gain, which is identified by answering the following question: How does the situation contribute to the individual's structuring of time? Mrs. Fabbro set up the game by seducing her husband (if he needed any seduction) into imposing prohibitions. Besides serving the purposes already mentioned, these prohibitions supplied an ever-renewed reservoir of resentment. Whenever material activities, such as child-care, were lacking, or intimacy threatened, this resentment provided a substitute way of filling time with the game of "If It Weren't For You!" with its interminable attacks and counter-attacks. In addition, it put Mrs. Fabbro in an advantageous position in her female social circle, since she could always participate in their conversation with a sense of gratification and accomplishment by playing the derivative pastime "If It Weren't For Him!" Thus her marital relationship provided not only psychic equilibrium, protection, and perquisites (the Freudian gains), but also the privilege of playing "If It Weren't For You" and "If It Weren't For Him." As an important by-product, the Fabro children's emotional education included an intensive field course in playing the same games, so that eventually the whole family could and did indulge in this occupation skillfully and frequently.

Mr. Fabbro's gains from this situation can only be guessed, since he did not come for treatment; the male partners in this game are not the type who customarily seek solutions in psychiatry. From experience with similar marriages, however, it may be surmised that the internal primary gain was sadistic or couterphobic; the external primary gain was the same as the wife's, avoidance of feared situations such as sexual intimacy and social life, without loss of self-esteem, by provoking rejection; the secondary gain was freedom for the hunting-lodge and tavern; and the social gain was the pastime of "Nobody Understands Women."

The transactional analysis of "If It Weren't for You!" is shown in Figure 2. The therapy is based on a clear understanding in social, behavioral, psychological, and historical detail of the significance of this diagram. At the social and behavioral level, the paradigm is as follows:

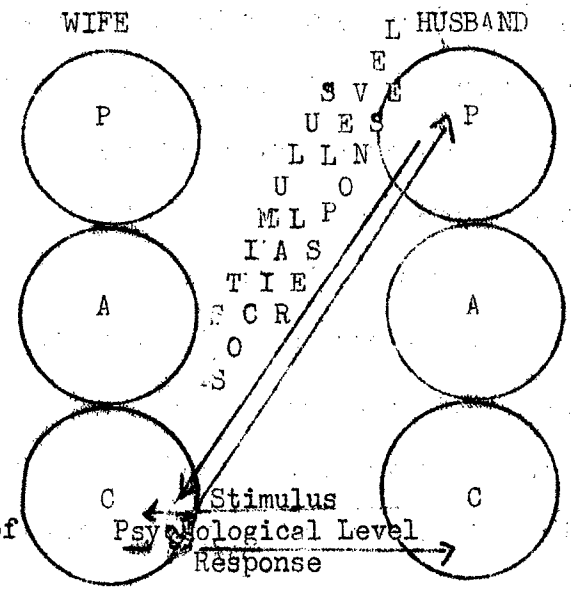

FIGURE 2.
A GAME

"If it weren't for you!"

H. "You stay home and take care of the house."

W. "If it weren't for you, I could be having fun."

Here the transactional stimulus is Parent to Child, and the response is Child to Parent.

At the psychological and historical level (the ulterior marriage contract) the situation is quite different.

H. "You must always be here when I get home. I am terrified of desertion."

W. "I will be if you help me avoid phobic situations."

Here both stimulus and response are Child to Child.

At first Mrs. Fabbro reported one or two isolated examples of this game, but as the analysis proceeded over the weeks, she began to perceive, as is susal with games, that she played it not in occasional instances, but almost all day long every day, whenever there was nothing else to do while her husband was at home.

Games appear to be segments of larger, more complex sets of transactions called scripts. Scripts belong in the realm of transference phenomena; that is, they are derivatives, or more precisely, adaptations, of infantile reactions and experiences. But a script does not deal with a mere transference reaction or transference situation; it is an attempt to repeat in derivative form a whole

transference drama, often split up into acts, exactly like the theatrical scripts which are intuitive aritstic derivatives of these orimal dramas of childhood. Thus in transactional analysis, as in psychoanalysis, Oedipus is a personality with complex feelings toward his mother and father. In script analysis, as in the theatre, he becomes a tragic figure carried by a well-defined sequence of decisions toward a pathetic destiny. The penultimate goal of marital group therapy is script analysis, which is necessary for the ultimate goal of reorganization of the marriage. Operationally, a script is a complex set of transactions, an unconscious life plan, by nature recurrent, but not necessarily recurring, since a complete performance may reuqire a whole lifetime. A common tragic script is that based on the rescue fantasy of a woman who marries one alcoholic after another. The disruption of such a script leads to a condition which is known in script analysis as despair, somewhat akin to the existential despair. Since the magical cure of the alcoholic husband which the script calls for is not often forthcoming, a divorce results and the woman tries again. A practical and contrructive script, on the other hand, may lead to great happiness if the others in the cast are well chosen and play their parts satisfactorily. The therapy group, however, by nature encounters the tragic forms.

Mrs. Bruno came in such a state of despair after her husband divorced her as a nag. For a long time the structure of her marriage remained obscure. One day she arrived in considerable excitement, however, and reported that she had had lunch with an old friend whom she had avoided for a long time. The friend had informed her that it was common knowledge in the ciry that Mr. Bruno had been having an affair with his manicurist for many years. Looking back, Mrs. Bruno was astonished at how she had been able to overlook this during her marriage, in view of the many obvious clues which had been offered. She felt now that she must have known all along what was going on, but had taken great pains to conceal it from herself, such as avoiding ond friends who might bring up the subject. Then, instead of confronting her husband with the real issue, she had quarreled with him

about other things which were not really very serious, so that the household was habitually in a state of uproar.

This game of "Uproar," which was the formal occasion for the divorce, was first analyzed structurally. Ostensibly it was a case of adult marital discord based on financial and drinking problems, but the underlying provocations, anxieties, and guilt-feelings of the Child soon became clear, together with some of the primary, secondary, and social gains which the Child derived. Mr. Bruno then confessed that ever since she had heard the news she had been obsessed by images of the most intimate anatomical details of the relationship between her former husband and the other woman.

The script which was the basis of the marriage now began to emerge. Out of all the men she met, Mrs. Bruno had always been attracted (and still was) to those who were interested in playing Uproar. From this group of selected candidates she had picked as a husband one who she know from certain indications would take a secret mistress. Her Child's desire was to spy on his sexual activities, and this determined her marital choice; but it was just here that her Parental prohibitions were most stringent, so that she was never able to gratify her perversion. In fact she had devoted a great deal of energy to denying simultaneously the perversion and the possibility of gratification. The presumptive evidence was that her husband had made a complementary choice. Out of all the girls who interested him, namely, those who would play Uproar, he had chosen as wife the one who would permit him to take a mistress and yet never confront him with it. Thus the marriage promised indefinitely prolonged satisfaction for both her voyeuristic fascination and his bigamous teasing.

The early <u>protocol</u> of Mrs. Bruno's script called for the following sequence; she watches two grown-ups having intercourse, the man deserts her, she seeks refuge with a friendly older man, preferably a physician. This is represented in adult life by her marriage, her husband's divorce, and her flight into treatment. The historical determinants certre around early tenement life

her father going to the hospital to die there, and a peculiar relationship with the family physician conditioned by the fact that her mother was a strong Christian Scientist. The divorce fulfilled the conditions of the script insofar as it was a desertion, but actually it was a faute de mieus, a disappointment. Her husband was a travelling man, and she used to entertain herself with fantasies of his death in an airplan crash.

Some of the more elegant games involved in marriage have been amusingly described by Balzac in his "Physiology of Marriage." Balzac frankly uses sporting terminology in discussing the maneuvres. The ineluctable quality of the script, which if not mastered inevitably determines the individual's destiny and choice of players, was most clearly perceived in modern times by Stendahl, as related in "The Red and the Black" and "The Chartreuse of Parma."

II

The first marital group was started as an experiment. There were four couples; in three cases one spouse, and in the fourth case both spouses, had had previous experience with structural and transactional analysis. They all wanted to do something about their marriages, and they all understood that neither the aims nor the prodecure could be stated in advance. Things went st well, however, that by the third meeting the marital difficulties could be formulated in transactional terms and the goals set. The nature of the marriage contract had been clarified in a way which was confirmed again and again as new couples entered the group to replace those who had left.

The four-couple marital group constitutes the most stimulating experience in the writer's psychiatric career. This is partly because the games between married couples have been going on for a long time. They are therefore played with strong feeling and confidence, quickly become evident, and are easily observed and understood by other members of the group. And it is partly because true intimacy, which takes a long time to establish in a general group, if it ever

can be established at all, is already present between married couples. Nothing is more edifying and touching to the onlooker than the expression of deep and real love between two human beings, especially when there are others present who are equally moved. Speaking rhetorically, whoever has been saddened by loss of confidence in the essential goodness of people should attend such a group. And sometimes it is the sickest people who give the most beautiful pictures of their souls. Among the members who share the therapist's feelings in this respect, two of them have described this group as "the greatest invention since the wheel."

There were sixty weekly meetings during the sixteen-month life of the group. Nine married couples attended for varying lengths of time, and to date there have been no divorces. Three came for fewer than six consecutive meetings, three came for about fifteen meetings, and three for about forty meetings. It was the opinion of the last group that it took about six months to get a workable, applicable insight into the structure of a marriage. These three couples now successfully exert a considerable degree of mutual social control over their marital relationships. In the language of the group, they have to a large extent stopped playing games, are capable of greatly increased intimacy, and face directly the fundamental problems of their marriages. Five of the couples attained a firm distinction between the problems of the marital relationship and the archaic personal problems which require individual therapy. Some of the patients were in concurrent individual therapy and some were not, but all of those who attended for a long time, and several of the others, now have a clear understanding of their individual therapeutic needs. For the amount of time and money invested in the treatment, the gains to the spouses and their children are far in excess of those offered by individual treatment.

The structure of marriage, that is, the American and Canadian marriages, the <u>mariage d'inclination</u>, can be described from three different aspects, as revealed in such a group.

(1) The <u>formal contract</u> takes place between the two Adults, and is

contained in the marriage service, in the course of which the parties promise to adhere and be faithful to each other in various situations. The statistical evidence is that this contract is not always taken seriously, and is rarely, in spite of its outward solemnity, the chief determinant in the outcome of the marriage.

(2) The relationship contract is a psychological one which is not openly stated. During the courtship there is a tendency for one party to functionsas a Parent and the other as a Child. This may be in the nature of an implicit parasitic agreement, or it may be a sensible arrangement in which the parties switch attitudes as the occasion demands. If it is a parasitic agreement, it may be abrogated after the honeymoon is over, when one of the parties may want to switch roles, whereupon the other party (quite justifiably under the circumstances) cries: "Foul!" If the woman has mothered the man during the courtship, he implicitly assumes, and she implicitly agrees, that this relationship will continue after the marriage, as it is essentially part of the secret marriage contract. If she now turns and demands that he take care of her instead of her taking care of him, trouble is likely to follow, and the situation may or may not be compromiseable without outside help.

(3) The essential basis of the marriage, however, is the secret contract between the two Children, the contract of the script. The selection of a mate from among all the possible candidates is based on this. Each prospective spouse is in the position of a casting director. The man is seeking a leading lady who will best play the role called for by his script, and the woman seeks a leading man to play the role adapted to her protocol. During the try-out period, candidates are first sorted into those who give appropriate transactional responses, and those who do not. The field is then narrowed down among the former by game-testing. Provocative maneuvres are designed to reveal which of the transactionally eligible candidates will play the required games. Among the game-eligible candidates, the final chioce falls on the one who seems most likely to go through with the whole script; that is, partners are drawn todether by the intuitive assumption that their scripts are complementary. Thus in a free marriage, the choice of a spouse is inevitably

governed by the needs of the Child.

The insufflation which is called love cannot be delt with by transactional analysis any more than it can be psychoanalysis, and if this sentiment exists between the two parties, it is a bonus which is at present beyond the reach of psychiatric investigation.

III

The marital group brings out quickly and clearly the operating relationship between the spouses in a way that individual therapy can never do. Mrs. Neor never allowed Mr. Nero to answer a question for himself. At times he bore this like a martyr, and at other times he protested vehemently. Eventually is emerged that he suffered from erythrophobia, and was afraid that if he spoke up he might blush. Thus he was playing a game of "If If Weren't For You!" He married the talkative, domineering Mrs. Nero as a protection against his erythrophobia, and when she performed her function, he complained against her. She had married this man who was more intelligent than herself partly because the marriage license in this case was a perpetual license to make him look like a "jerk." When it became evident in the group that he was not really a jerk, it became more and more difficult for either of them to continue this game, and they were then free to turn their attention to more cogent problems.

Another prevalent marital game is "Frigid Woman," which is played as follows. The husband makes a pass at the wife. She says all men are alike, all he is interested in is sex. He replies with some asperity, and after several exchanges during which such matters as money, ancestry, personal habits, and neighboring households come up, the slamming door which marks the climax of a game of "Uproar" is heard. The husband begins to desist for longer and longer periods. At length, after several months of restraint on his part, the wife tends to get careless. For one reason or another, she has to call him into the bathroom while she is in the tub, or walk by him half-dressed. On one such occasion,

after six months of chastity, she asks him to kiss her. If this has the natural effect, she pushes him away and cries: "Just as I've always told you! All you're interested in is sex!"

The actual technique employed in the marital group is the same as that used in any other therapy group. The members are first educated in structural analysis, then in transactional analysis, then in game analysis, and finally in script analysis, all with the aim of giving them the option of controlling their behavior toward their spouses and actual children, and eliminating compulsive provocations and compulsive responses to provocation. This option, in which the Child and Parent are brought under the hegemony of the Adult, is called social control. If the treatment is successful, the situation progressively improves. As underlying intrapsychic problems are laid bare, they can be delt with by more conventional methods if so desired.

The favored form of resistance in such a group, which is almost universally employed by unsophisticated members, is a game called "Court-Room." The husband tells the group a long story about what the wife did, attempting to elicit support for himself as the plaintiff. The wife then states her defense, explaining to the group what her husband did to provoke her behavior. On the next round, the wife may be the plaintiff and the husband the defendant. In each case the group is expected to function as a jury and the therapist as a judge.

There are two ways to break this up. One is to expose the game by tentatively agreeing with the plaintiff, and then asking him how that makes him feel. Then the therapist disagrees with the plaintiff and asks him how he feels in that case. When this was tried with Mrs. Nero, she said she felt better when the therapist said she was right; when he said she was wrong, she replied: "Oh, I knew that all along!" This device should be employed judiciously, however; in any case it should not be used more than twice or thrice a year.

Another way is to interdict the game, and this can be done very elegantly by a simple maneuvre. The group is told that they can speak either about

themselves, in the first person, or to their spouses, in the second person, but that they must not use the third person.

One of the unique advantages of transactional analysis is that by and large it is enjoyable for everyone concerned. It is not unusual after a meeting for all the members, including the most depresses and paraniod people who may not have so much as smiled for many months, to exit laughing.

The function of a therapist is to aid the vis medicatrix naturae, and that may be encouraged if a patient can smile, not bravely, but with insight, through the blood and sweat and tears.

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