

The Unity-Based Family

The Unity-Based Family:

*An Empirical Study
of Healthy Marriage,
Family, and Parenting*

By

H.B. Danesh with Azin Nasser

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Publishing



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**For the Betterment of the
Human Family**

CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS	xi
LIST OF TABLES.....	xiii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	xv
INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER ONE	5
WHAT IS MARRIAGE?	
▪ Your Marriage: Normal or Healthy?	
▪ Marriage Redefined	
• Marriage as a Union	
CHAPTER TWO	17
DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES OF MARRIAGE	
▪ Primary Union Phase	
▪ Differentiation Phase	
▪ Enlightened Union Phase	
▪ Case Studies	
CHAPTER THREE	31
LOVE IN MARRIAGE	
▪ People are Lovers	
▪ Developmental Stages of Love	
• One-Directional Love / Case Study	
• Competitive Love / Case Study	
• Cooperative Love / Case Study	
• Unconditional Love	
▪ Dimensions of Love in Marriage	
• From Mutual Attraction to a Mutual Point of Attraction	
• Case Studies	
• Mutual Point of Attraction	
• From Mutual Gratification to Mutual Purpose	

- Case Studies
- As Love Grows
 - Elements of Marital Love
- Love and Sexuality
 - Case Studies

CHAPTER FOUR 77

DYNAMICS OF PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

- Pondering Personal Development
- Fundamentals of Human Development
- Being and Becoming: The Case of Dawn
- The Mysterious Case of the IWs
- Main Human Powers
 - To Know
 - To Love
 - To Will
- Main Human Concerns
 - Concerns About Self
 - Concerns About Relationships
 - Concerns About Time
- Integration: From Divided Self to Integrated Self

CHAPTER FIVE..... 101

THE FAMILY

- Family Redefined
 - Research on the Family
 - Functions and Definitions of the Family
- Types of Family
 - Family and the Main Human Capacities
- The Power-Based Family
 - Conformity, Freedom, and Parenting
- The Authoritarian Family and its Children
 - Clinical Vignettes
- The Identity-Based Family
 - Case Study
- The Unity-Based Family
 - Characteristics of Unity-Based Families
 - Case Study

- Human Needs, Human Rights, and the Family
 - Human Needs and Human Rights
- Core Human Needs in the Context of the Family
 - Case Studies
- Moral Trauma in the Context of Marriage and Family
 - Case Studies

CHAPTER SIX..... 143

ON PARENTING

- Why Parent?
- Parenting as Gardening
 - Fruits of the Tree of Human Life
- Psychological and Relational Aspects of Parenting
 - Trust and Trustworthiness
 - Discovery and Unity Building
 - Encouragement and Unity
 - Creativity and Empowerment
- Spiritual Aspects of Parenting
 - Solitude, Meditation, and Prayer
- Three Approaches to Parenting
 - Power-Based Parenting
 - A Dramatic Transition
 - Indulgent-Based Parenting
 - The Most Consequential Transition
 - Unity-Based Parenting
- Parenting at a Glance

CHAPTER SEVEN 171

ON COMMUNICATION

- We Can't Communicate
- Developmental Stages of Communication
 - Self-Centered Communication
 - Competitive Communication
 - Considerate Communication
- Five Phases of Considerate Communication
- Unity-Based Decision-Making and Conflict Resolution
- Decision-Making: Processes and Components
- Developmental Stages of Decision-Making

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Dynamics of Decision-Making ▪ Elements and Stages of Consultative Decision-Making ▪ Communication and Decision-Making at a Glance 	
CHAPTER EIGHT	193
ON THERAPEUTICS	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What is Healing? ▪ In Search of Peace ▪ The Joy and Challenge of Healing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An Indication of Healing ▪ What is a Culture of Healing? ▪ Adaptation and Progression ▪ In Search of an Answer ▪ Unity: The Cause of Health, The Source of Healing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unity, Health, and Human Needs • Healthy Development of Psychological Powers • Unity and the Main Human Concerns • From Instinctual Love to Enlightened Love • The All-Encompassing Healing Powers of Unity ▪ In Summary 	
EPILOGUE.....	217
NOTES	219
GLOSSARY.....	225
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	231
AUTHORS	239
INDEX.....	241

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- Figure 1-1. Healthy and equal marriage union with similar personalities
- Figure 1-2. Unequal marriage union with dissimilar personalities
- Figure 1-3. Unequal marriage union with unequal, authoritarian, and rigid partners in an authoritarian community
- Figure 1-4. Marriage union with not yet fully developed sense of self and Life purpose
- Figure 1-5. Marriage in which one partner engulfs the other
- Figure 1-6. Disjointed marriages and families
- Figure 2-1. Marriage in its romantic primary union phase
- Figure 2-2. Marriage in its phase of differentiation
- Figure 2-3. Marriage in its phase of enlightened union
- Figure 3-1. Core dimensions of love
- Figure 3-2. Four stages in the development of love
- Figure 3-3. Marriage with evolving mutual points of attraction
- Figure 5-1. Dynamics of core human needs

LIST OF TABLES

- Table 3-1. Developmental stages of love and their characteristics
- Table 3-2. Facets of love
- Table 3-3. Developmental stages of biological, psychological, and relational facets of love
- Table 4-1. Main human powers and main human concerns under healthy conditions
- Table 5-1. Impact of worldview on human needs, human rights, and family functions
- Table 5-2. Psychological state of the mind in the context of moral conflict
- Table 6-1. Main characteristics of different types of parenting
- Table 7-1. Developmental model of decision-making and conflict resolution
- Table 7-2. Communication and decision-making overview and reflection
- Table 8-1. Human needs and human rights in the context of family types
- Table 8-2. Healthy development of the powers of human psyche
- Table 8-3. Integration of the main human powers and main human concerns within the framework of unity
- Table 8-4. Expressions of love under healthy and unhealthy conditions
- Table 8-5. The all-encompassing healing powers of unity

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My collaborating author, Azin Nasser, and I are particularly pleased for the publication of this book by Cambridge Scholars Publishing and most grateful for their professional services and efforts to bring the book to the attention of their impressive readers.

INTRODUCTION

This book is a clinically based study of the main characteristics of healthy marriage, family, and parenting.

Human life takes place in the context of relationships, and the institutions of marriage and family provide the ideal settings for our most intimate relationships. In the context of marriage and family, we get to know ourselves better and more deeply. We learn about heretofore unappreciated capacities within us. We learn new ways of expressing love and of being compassionate, encouraging, self-sacrificing, and generous. We learn of our deficiencies, our self-centeredness, our insecurities, and our consequent need to change and transform. The institutions of marriage and family function as mirrors of our private and public self and, in a magnified and authentic manner, show a profile of our true self. These facts alone should be sufficient reasons to marry and to form a family. We cannot find better environments for our personal development and transformation: to live a life of self-knowledge, to develop capacity for selfless and unifying love, to perform just and compassionate deeds, and to make meaningful and lasting contributions for the betterment of society and the progress of civilization.

In our current times, the institutions of marriage and family are undergoing dramatic and consequential change. Many people choose to remain single, to cohabitate, to have a same-sex marriage, or to establish other unconventional types of living arrangements. Concomitant with these changes, the classical traditional type of marriage—between a man and a woman with religious and/or civic binding commitments—has become increasingly weak and unstable. Many marriages end in divorce because of a variety of reasons, the most significant of which is gender inequality, usually with men having more privilege, power, and opportunity than women.

From ancient through contemporary times, it was and continues to be understood that the powerful forces of physical attraction, emotional attachment, and personal sense of identity, which naturally develop between men and women in the context of intimacy, must be appropriately and effectively channeled. One important reason for the need to formalize intimate female-male relationships in the context of marriage has always

been to avoid the negative outcome of their failure. Failed intimate relationships are often the source of sadness and despondency, aggression and violence, extreme jealousy and competition, and profound doubt about one's self-worth and lovability. Not infrequently, failed intimate relationships become the breeding grounds for depression, self-destructive behavior, and aggression towards others. Another extremely important reason for encouragement of marriage in all societies is the paramount role that marriage and family play in the life and education of children and youth.

Over the course of history, and still in many contemporary societies, social and religious laws governing the institution of marriage have been quite restrictive and frequently administered in an authoritarian, unequal, and punitive manner. There is ample evidence that in these types of marriages everyone, but particularly girls and women, suffer. New types of marital and family structures and relationships are needed in order to safeguard and promote the welfare of all involved. The current experiment with new types of marriages and families is one example of this broad rejection of authoritarian and conflicted types of marriages and families.

This book is a clinically based study of the main characteristics of healthy marriage, family, and parenting that are commensurate with the demands and opportunities of our ever-changing and ever-challenging world. It deals only with marriages between men and women. However, much of the topics covered are also applicable to other types of relationships. Written for health and counseling professionals and therapists, as well as for a general, interested readership, the book contains many case studies and vignettes to demonstrate the practical aspects of the concepts presented.

Marriage and family counselors and therapists will recognize that many of the concepts presented are new and integrative in nature. This integrative model explores the bio-psycho-social and spiritual aspects of these vital human endeavors within a unity-based framework. It draws from the existing research on these issues; my five decades of experience and observations as a clinician, educator, and researcher on issues related to the focus of this book; and the illuminating transcultural experiences of my dear collaborator. An important dimension of this integrative model is its universal applicability to marriages and families in all societies and cultures. These two institutions are indeed universal, and the models presented here are also universal.

The first three chapters focus on the institution of marriage: "What is Marriage?" "Developmental Stages of Marriage," and "Love in Marriage." In these chapters the three developmental stages of marriage—Primary Union, Differentiation, and Enlightened Union—are described and their

main features further elaborated by several case examples. These chapters describe the process of healthy development of marriage as a dynamic and evolving institution, with the development of love as the main unifying force in marriage.

In this developmental context, chapter four is devoted to an in-depth review of the “Dynamics of Personal Development.” The chapter focuses on the three fundamental human capacities—knowledge, love, will—and three main human concerns—self, others, time—as well as on the dynamics of personal development and transformation. All of these issues are essential for the healthy growth of the institution of marriage and for the preparation of the wife and husband in their future roles as parents and in creation of a healthy and evolving family.

Chapter five—“The Family”—describes the connection between the family and the main human capacities; the archetypal types of the family—power-based, identity-based, unity-based—and the relationship between the family and the main human needs and rights. Several family sketches depicting the manner of expression of these issues in everyday life are provided.

Chapter six, “On Parenting,” asks why parent; likens parenting to gardening; explores the psychological, relational, and spiritual aspects of parenting; describes the three main approaches to parenting—power-based, indulgent-based, and growth-based—and concludes with the summary: parenting at a glance.

Chapter seven, “On Communication,” is dedicated to the complex issues of communication, decision-making, and conflict resolution in marriages and families. It begins by analyzing one of the most common complaints by couples: “We Can’t Communicate.” The chapter then covers such fundamental issues as developmental stages of communication, five phases of communication, types of communication, and unity-based decision-making and conflict resolution.

The book ends with chapter eight—“On Therapeutics”—that begins with the question: “What is healing?” It connects healing with peace, outlines the challenges and joys of healing, and describes the nature and dynamics of a culture of healing. These and other related issues are reviewed at some length in the context of a detailed case study. The chapter ends with a synopsis of unity-based psychotherapy and a summary. The epilogue points to the fact that health of our families and the health of the human global family are totally interdependent. No civilization thrives without healthy families as its building block.

A glossary has been included to familiarize the readers with some of the new concepts, terms, and definitions used in the book.

This book is an amalgamation of my several decades of clinical, educational, and research on marriage, family, parenting, and other related issues. In addition, I have had the much valued and appreciated input of a dear colleague, Azin Nasseri, PhD, who has reviewed all chapters and contributed several case studies as well as conceptual additions to the book. It is hoped that through the comments, recommendations, and inquiries of readers, subsequent editions of the book would encompass new insights and examples from a wide range of cultures and perspectives.

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Victoria, Canada
Spring 2017*

CHAPTER ONE

WHAT IS MARRIAGE?

This chapter explores the ever-present and ever-changing profile of marriage and its place in our times and our increasingly diverse, interconnected world.

Marriage is the oldest human institution that is potentially the best medium for satisfying our deep-rooted quest for intimacy and our inherent need for unity. In marriage, the human capacity for love is given the required milieu and opportunity to be expressed in its fullest, most creative, and most gratifying manner. It is through this institution that the human family acquires form and order, and becomes a fortress of wellbeing. Ideally, within marriage, our feelings of estrangement, isolation, and loneliness are replaced by feelings of friendliness, association, and togetherness.

Because of its many diverse functions, marriage has the potential to satisfy the basic physical, emotional, social, and spiritual needs of both men and women. It can allow for the expression and fulfillment of some of the most personal and intimate emotions and desires, and can create novel opportunities for the blossoming of those human qualities that are characterized by purpose, direction, and will. Therefore, it is not surprising that throughout history and across all cultures the institution of marriage has evolved as the building block of human societies.

It is from this perspective that the study of contemporary marriage becomes meaningful, and the current doubts and concerns surrounding its usefulness, viability, and effectiveness are either validated or discounted. The continuing practice of getting married and the alarming rate of marriage breakdown reflect both the fundamental necessity for marriage and its ineffectiveness within the context of current values, challenges, opportunities, and practices. While, ideally, marriage should be a vehicle through which some fundamental human needs and aspirations are fulfilled, many married individuals experience frustration of their hopes and a growing sense of boredom within the confines of their marital life.

For some, marriage has become a trap that prevents or inhibits free expression of their sexual and sensual desires; others see marriage as an obstacle to their efforts for personal growth and self-discovery; and still others experience constant frustration, dissatisfaction, and disappointment with their marriage partner. The long-sought ideals of marriage seem distant and unrealistic for many contemporary marriages, and people are frantically searching for remedies and alternatives to this state of affairs. These feelings of disappointment are further intensified by the fact that love—the eternal quest of the heart—cannot easily or assuredly be found in many marriages.

In response to these challenges, various academic and clinical specialties and subspecialties have emerged. These experts deal with a range of marital and family-related issues such as sexuality, communication, conflict management, individual growth, compatibility, complementarity, love, dependency, self-reliance, alternative types of marriage, communal living, shared partnership, nuclear family, extended family, parenting, serial monogamy, and contractual marriage. These and other marriage-related issues are symptoms of unhealthy marriages along with misconceptions about the nature and dynamics of healthy marriage.

Your Marriage: Normal or Healthy?

A broad review of popular ideas and current literature and research on marriage shows that there is: (1) a rampant confusion and disagreement as to the nature, purpose, and place of marriage in the life of the individual and the society, (2) a considerable but not very successful effort to define a “healthy marriage,” and (3) a tendency either to search for the ever-eluding romanticized marriage or to look for marriage alternatives, thus ending the institution of marriage as it has been previously known and practiced.

Among many reasons for this bleak situation are (1) the absence of a consensus about the purpose and nature of marriage and its place within the overall purpose of human life, and (2) the widespread confusion between normal and healthy marriage. The concept of health requires the maintenance of an optimal state of wellbeing for the ever-evolving institution of marriage. In contrast to health, the state of normalcy encourages adoption of concepts, attitudes, and practices that are the prevailing norms of the society, thus tending to reduce all marriages to the level of the lowest common denominator.

The tendency towards being “normal” is probably one of the most subtle and most dangerous obstacles in our attempts to create “healthy” and evolving institutions such as marriage and family. This tendency is present

in both those societies that are rigid and authoritarian and those that operate within relativistic and adversarial perspectives on the purpose and ethics of life. When a society fears diversity, change, and transformation, it tends instead towards sameness, conformity, and the maintenance of the status quo—that which is considered to be the “norm” in a given environment at a given time. Once the norms are established and entrenched, all members and institutions of that society are judged against these norms and are evaluated as normal, below normal, above normal, or abnormal. This categorization, in turn, gradually but surely influences our lifestyle because many of us want to be “normal”—to be similar to others, not “oddballs.” Many people are afraid to be different. But the fact is that we *are* all different. We are unique individuals and create unique marriages, families, and cultures. However, in the context of this uniqueness (diversity), we are also in many important, fundamental ways similar to our fellow human beings. The dynamics of uniqueness and sameness, in an integrated and evolving context, bring richness, novelty, and creativity to our lives and our marriages. When societies and their institutions demand conformity and encourage sameness, efflorescence of the unique and creative endowments of their members is discouraged, and development and adoption of new ideas and experimentations becomes suspect. Instead, such societies—authoritarian in their worldview—encourage superficial, stifled, and unsearching lifestyles.

Likewise, in those societies and populations where the shackles of authoritarian norms and practices have been replaced with relativistic and self-serving standards, people in their search for normalcy primarily depend on public opinion polls, various surveys, popular trends, and superficial scientific and often pseudoscientific ideas. In the absence of well-formulated values and purpose for their lives, these individuals less and less can depend on their own knowledge and judgment and their lives become a combination of imitation, surface exploration, denial of deeper realities, along with the distrust for anything that is not “popular” or “normal.” That which is different and “meaning-demanding” becomes abnormal. These conditions apply to both individual and marital life.

Added to the confusion about the purpose of marriage and the desire for a “normal” marriage is the search for alternatives to marriage. In our view, this process will continue and will gain momentum, and many new types of marriages will be experimented with. Eventually, through the costly, but necessary, process of trial and error, the most appropriate, healthy, generative, and growth-inducing types of marriage and family life, commensurate with the requirements of this time in history, will become the norm. However, acceptance of new patterns of thought, sentiment, and

behavior usually happens only when we become convinced that our current approach is no longer effective. This awareness develops either in response to new insights or, much more commonly, through learning from crises and painful and often destructive experiences.

The attempt to replace the historically established male–female marriage—the *classical* marriage—with new alternatives is now actively underway in different parts of the world. It remains to be seen if these efforts are successful. However, the classical marriage between a man and a woman will probably continue to be the primary choice in all societies because it is the main vehicle through which some of the most essential human needs are fulfilled. Classical marriage is the ideal milieu for the propagation of the human race and the ongoing advancement of civilization. The health of future members of the human race and their ability to safeguard and advance human civilization depends greatly on the development of well-established, harmonious, equal, and loving marriages and families that can provide the next generation of humankind with proper education, training, guidance, and role-models. It is within this framework that we need to search for and understand the characteristics and dynamics of healthy marriage.¹

Marriage Redefined

Marriage has been variously defined in different cultural and historical contexts. These definitions are largely utilitarian in nature. For example, in those cultures where women are kept in dependent socioeconomic and political positions, marriage functions primarily as a social institution that provides for the economic and (some) social needs of women, contributes to men's desire for comfort and supremacy, and creates a semblance of sharing and order in keeping with the norms and values of that culture. Even in more modern societies where women have a greater measure of social strength and personal control, many marriages are burdened with power struggle, competition, conflict, and different forms of manipulative behavior on the part of both partners.

Recent changes in the status of women have created much greater awareness on the part of society in general, and of women in particular, about the systemic gender inequality practiced in their midst. This awareness about gender inequality is apparent in various institutions and many aspects of life in different societies, and is most crucially felt within the institution of marriage. Women, in their legitimate quest for equality, are demanding an equal voice and an equal share in most aspects of marital life, ranging from economic rights, social and personal freedom,

housekeeping activities, and childrearing responsibilities; to ideological independence, individual growth and creativity, and personal fulfillment. These endeavors are novel to both men and women. At certain level, both sexes are inexperienced and clumsy in their attempts to approach and achieve these objectives. Many of the problems of contemporary marriages can be traced to this state of affairs.

We need to arrive at a new definition of marriage that allows for a proper understanding of the institution of marriage; its place in the modern world; and its role in fulfilling the aspirations of truly equal partners in a loving, cooperative, creative, and purposeful relationship. Such a definition needs to view marriage as an *evolving union* with biological, psychological, social, and spiritual dimensions.

Marriage as a Union

The concept of marriage as a *union* is a crucial definition of marriage that we will explore in this book. Union is the cause of life and constancy, while disunion produces disruption and death. The harmonious and unified relationship of the constituent parts of the atom allows it to function as the building block of the basic structure of all physical realities. Likewise, it is the harmonious union of the various cells, organs, and systems of the human body that makes both life and growth possible. If this harmony and unity is disrupted even briefly, the person's life is jeopardized, and if disharmony and disunity continue, death is inevitable. The same dynamics apply to the institution of marriage and other institutions of society. Another important characteristic of union is the process of orderly and purposeful growth and development. The third important quality of union is its creative capacity. Every marriage union has the potential to create a family with parents, children, and a broader circle of extended family and, through the vital process of parenting, to secure ongoing development and efflorescence of civilization.

These fundamental aspects of union—life, growth, and creativity—apply not only to biological union but also to psychological, social, and spiritual unions. Marriage is one such comprehensive union. Every marriage, therefore, should be seen and dealt with as an organic social entity distinct from the two individuals whose union constitutes the marriage. This new entity—the marriage—is evolving in nature and follows the same laws of life, growth, and creativity that govern all other living, growing entities.

Marriage is a conscious, deliberate, and purposeful union.

Marriage, according to this concept, is the outcome of the conscious, deliberate, mindful, and purposeful union of a man and a woman. At the beginning, this marriage is frail and susceptible. It is weak, dependent, and incapable of dealing with demands beyond a limited capacity. It needs love, care, and attention. It requires guidance and support, and must be nurtured and educated. In a way, the marriage is the first child of the union. If, these essential requirements are not fulfilled, and if the couple, as well as the immediate community in which the marriage is born, are unaware of the needs of this newly born marriage and are negligent in their responsibilities towards it, the marriage will stop growing, gradually withering and becoming weak. If neglect and abuse continue, the marriage will end in separation or divorce, or worse (different types of violence).

However, if this new marriage receives the necessary nurturing, care, guidance, encouragement, and support from the couple and the community, it will begin to grow and gradually becomes stronger and more capable of facing the many challenges of marital life. Under these circumstances, the marriage finally reaches that level of maturity when it is able to facilitate the personal growth of both spouses and to create an appropriate milieu for children, supporting their proper development and contributing to their advancement.

The concept of marriage as an entity distinct from that of the husband and wife also implies that marriage is not simply the sum of the qualities, abilities, desires, and hopes of the couple. Although the developing institution of marriage depends on the continuing union and harmony between husband and wife, at the same time, by nature of its distinct existence, it is able to contribute to the enrichment of the life of the couple and to influence the course of their ongoing personal growth. Union is a creative process that brings two or more living entities together to create a third unique entity. For example, in the womb, before a sperm and an ovum come together, each has a short lifespan of its own. However, when they come together and create a fertilized egg (zygote)—i.e. when they achieve union—then the life of a unique human individual begins.

Each of us is the result of that primal union, which is far greater and very different from either the sperm or the ovum. It is an entity in its own right; it has a life of its own; it has a reality of its own. This analogy has its limitations. There is a fundamental difference between the union of sperm and ovum and the union of a man and a woman.

Marriage is not simply the sum of the qualities, abilities, desires, and hopes of the couple.

This difference is due to the developmental nature of life. In nature, we observe that as a result of union a new organic entity comes into being. This new entity then begins its own life process, independent of those constituent parts that brought it into existence—hence the fundamental difference between the fertilized human egg and the ovum or the sperm when not united. A zygote grows to be a human embryo then a foetus, a human child, and finally an adult human being.

A similar process applies to the union of a man and a woman in the institution of marriage. At this level, however, the constituent parts of the marriage—husband and wife—are more complex, more complete, and more advanced forms of being than are the sperm and ovum. Consequently, while at the moment of conception both the sperm and ovum cease to exist as distinct entities, at the time of marriage neither husband nor wife ceases to exist. Rather, they, under healthy conditions, continue their own individuality and growth, while, at the same time, through their union give birth to a third entity—their marriage—and help it grow and develop through their unity.

The process of simultaneous and harmonious growth of all the entities within the context of the marriage and later of the family is an example of the developmental nature of life from simplicity and primitiveness to complexity and sophistication. But, successful realization of this evolution depends on the participants' awareness of this process and their willingness to facilitate its optimal realization. More specifically, in the context of a healthy marriage, the couple need to be aware that their marriage has its own specific life processes and that they must take special measures to facilitate its development and growth. The following figure (1-1) shows the three components of a healthy/equal marriage.

However, neither are all marriages equal with respect to power, nor are they all similar with regard to personalities of the husband and the wife. Figure 1-2 demonstrates an unequal and potentially authoritarian style of marital relationship.

When a marriage comprises an overpowering and controlling partner, the episodes of abuse and violence are frequent. In these marriages, the dominant person usually has an aggressive and conflicted personality, which negatively impacts the wellbeing of all three components of marriage. Figure 1-3 is one rendition of these types of marriages.

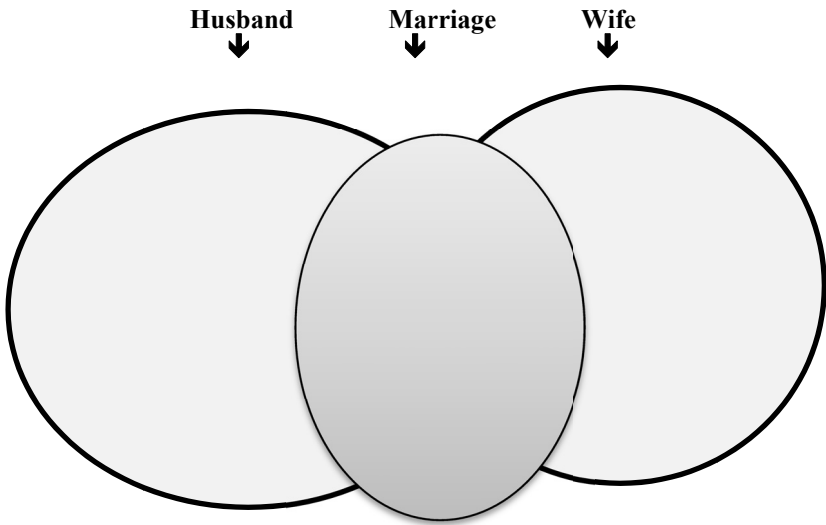


Figure 1-1. Healthy and equal marriage union with similar personalities

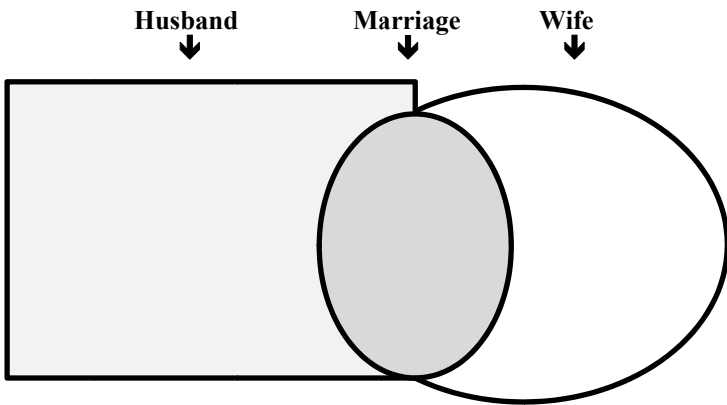


Figure 1-2. Unequal marriage union with dissimilar personalities

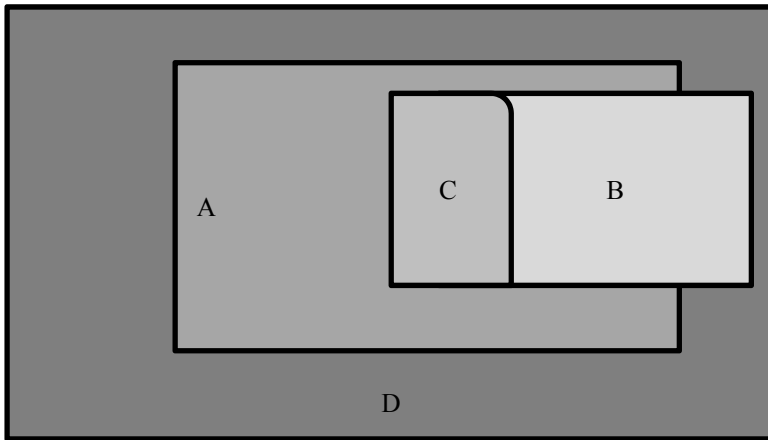


Figure 1-3. Unequal marriage union with unequal, authoritarian, rigid partners in an authoritarian community, where A=Dominant, rigid partner, B=Dominated partner, C=Confined marriage, and D=Rigid community

The personality make-up of the spouses and their respective levels of psychological maturity also affect the type of marriage they create. For example, many individuals, particularly young individuals who are still in the process of formulating and establishing their respective identities, often marry in a whirlwind of passions. Such marriages are extremely unstable and unpredictable. It is like two amoebas giving birth to a third amoeba. These marriages are erratic and erotic with frequent episodes of conflict and reconciliation. They easily succumb to the inevitable challenges of marital life. Figure 1-4 is a depiction of such marriages.

And then, there are marriages in which one partner totally engulfs (imprisons) the other (Figure 1-5). Women in many restrictive authoritarian societies experience such marriages.

Also, we increasingly encounter marriages, particularly in extremely busy and materially oriented, individualistic societies, in which each partner is almost fully focused on his or her respective personal objectives, wishes, and plans. These families tend to delegate the welfare of their marriage and the upbringing of their children to third parties. Thus, all entities of the union—wife, husband, marriage, and children—live their separate lives with inadequate meaningful communication, love, and intimacy among them. Figure 1-6 depicts this state of the marriage.

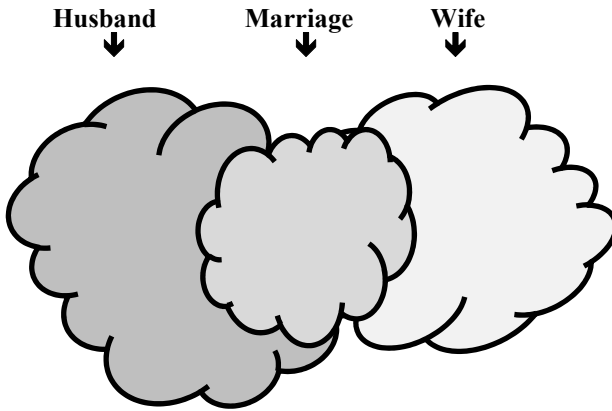


Figure 1-4. Marriage of union with not yet fully developed sense of self and life purpose

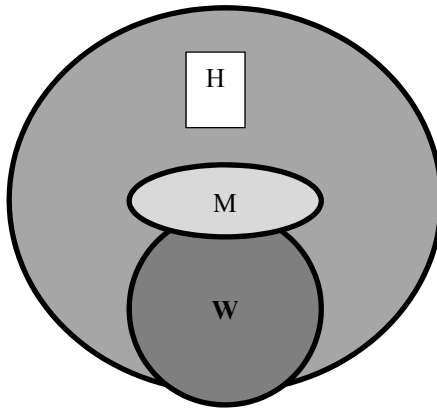


Figure 1-5. Marriage in which one partner engulfs the other (H = Husband, M = Marriage, W = Wife)