**Marriage Counselling**

LINA KASHYAP

This article first provides a feminist understanding of the marriage scenario in India and the sociocultural nature of problems faced by Indian couples using the ecological systems and power relations frameworks. It then describes an empowerment based-practice, which is built on a synthesis of structural and individual perspectives which includes couple counselling for relationship and psychosexual difficulties, interventions with the third force and interventions with couples and their children. The article also contains a lesson plan on this topic and includes learner objectives, session plan, teaching and assessment methodologies.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Marriage counselling, like other family-centred interventions, has to be embedded in the sociocultural, economic and political milieu in which it is offered. In the Western conception of marriage, it is assumed that the marital partners are adult independent persons who hold clear-cut roles in the marriage, have a couple identity, and the family unit is largely nuclear in structure. Marital conflict is viewed as a manifestation of pathology among its partners (Strean, 1985) or as a result of dysfunctional communication (Satir, 1983). The emphasis in marriage counselling in the West is more in the areas of mate selection, communication and decision making in marriage, handling sexual problems, and working out parenting as a joint responsibility.

The realities in the Indian situation are very different. In India, marriage takes place between two families rather than two individuals. The partners are often very young in age and/or emotionally immature. The family unit is extended in spirit if not in composition and this has a major influence on the quality of the marital relationship. Additionally, in the Indian situation, very often, the marital conflict between the couple is instigated and complicated by a third party’s involvement in the relationship, which is generally more destructive rather than facilitative. The influence of this ‘Third Force’ has to be taken cognisance of and dealt with in marriage counselling.
Therefore, to begin with, marriage counselling in India has to be based on an understanding of the social construction of marriage in Indian society and the status and roles of the marital sub-system within the family system as these have implications for the couple’s adjustment to each other and to the family system. Marriage counselling in India has also to be wider in scope and has to take a holistic approach. Firstly, the marital relationship cannot be treated as a unit outside the family and community systems. Secondly, marriage counselling in India has to take cognisance of the systemic nature of difficulties faced by the couple, the power equations between the marital dyad and the role of patriarchy in couple relations. Thirdly, it has to recognise the possible adverse influence of the third force on the couple relationship.

MARRIAGE, MARITAL ADJUSTMENT AND MARITAL DISCORD IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

A conceptual understanding of the marriage scenario is sought to be provided through the ‘Pinch-Crunch Model’ (Figure 1) adapted by the author from RELATE (UK). The discussion of the various aspects of the figure is substantiated by a review of relevant research studies and through a critical analysis of the systemic nature of couple difficulties and the power dynamics within the couple relationship using the feminist perspective.

As shown in Figure 1, most Indian marriages are arranged by parents and members of the kinship group with religion, class and caste positions being important considerations. Today, although patterns of partner selection vary in terms of the extent of choice given to the young man or woman, family approval is still essential for the marriage to take place. A marriage is expected to fulfil the patriarchal family’s needs and ensure family cohesion which takes precedence over individual compatibility and individual fulfilment. In present day marriages, the relationship is more congenial in nature. Nevertheless, young couples today are grappling with balancing traditional beliefs and practices with modern concepts and values.

Most couples in India start their married life in the house of the husband’s parents. As most marriages are arranged, the couple has to move from commitment to the marriage to commitment to the marital relationship. This also means that the couple has to shift their primary relationship from parents or family of orientation to their marital relationship. Each partner brings into their marriage their conceptual image about their ideal partner, expectations from the marriage, expectations from each other, as
well as expectations their partner’s family of orientation (Bhatti and Juvva, 1997). In fact, the spouses have to learn to strike a balance between the marital unit and relations with the parental unit. In the process, the couple has to negotiate expectations, roles and patterns of behaviour not only between themselves, but also individually and together with both the family units. The nature of expectations varies according to the educational background and socioeconomic status of the partners. Similarly, expectations from marriage and the partner’s family of orientation also vary as per the educational achievement and the socioeconomic status of the spouses. But such expectations are always there in each and every marriage by every partner in all strata of society (Bhatti, 2003).

In India, the marital partners are influenced by gender-based traditional values and norms in their perception and practice of marital roles. These roles are culturally bound, but shaped by the individual family to some extent, in accordance to its socioeconomic status. Each spouse has two sets of roles towards both families — the family of orientation and the family of procreation. These sets of role expectations from both these families influence the spouses even when they are away from the family of orientation. In the patriarchal family system, the carrying over of the culture of the husband’s family of orientation is primary, but not that of the wife. A man after marriage may continue to play roles expected by his family of orientation but it is not culturally accepted if the wife plays roles expected by her family of orientation, once she is married. Moreover the wife is expected to adhere to the traditional standards of her marital family, rejecting those of her family of orientation (Channabasavanna and Bhatti, 1985).

In the patrilocal family system, it is the new bride who enters the husband’s family as a new member. She, therefore, has to make adjustments to meet the needs and expectations of not only her spouse but also those of his relatives. Her status is clearly viewed as inferior and subordinate to that of her husband. One of the basic realities of Indian marriages is the unequal status roles of the spouses in marriage and the relative importance of the two families of orientation. The system of marriage, the manner of negotiation, the payment of dowry and the rites of marriage, sets the seal on the inequality of marital relations. Ramu (1988) and Jain and Dave (1982), who studied roles and power in conjugal relationships, have noted that majority of husbands wanted to be seen as decision makers and wives helped them to maintain such an image.
Research studies have indicated the following factors as influencing marital adjustment: personality characteristics, sexual relationships, extent of verbal communication between the spouses, and certain demographic characteristics such as age difference between the spouses, their educational level, occupation, women’s employment, socioeconomic background, and number of children (Bhattacharya, 2000; Bhatti, 2003; Kapur, 1972; Kumar and Rohatgi, 1986; Mohan and Singh, 1985; Srivastav, Singh and Nigam, 1988).

As seen in Figure 1, if the couple is able to cope with the stress brought on by various kinds of adjustments they have to make, they are then able to achieve some stability in the relationship and are able to commit not only to the marriage but also to the relationship. However, if the couple is not able to cope with the adjustments, they experience the ‘pinch’ leading to marital discord.

Some of the problems in marriage faced by Indian couples are similar to those faced by couples anywhere in the world, such as alcoholism or drug abuse by spouse, infidelity, desertion, verbal, physical or sexual abuse of spouse and sexual incompatibility. However, some of the distinctive factors that impinge on Indian marriages are more socioculturally based and linked to expectations from the partner’s family of procreation, such as childlessness or no sons (Chaudhary, 1988; Kawale, 1985; Pothen, 1986); dowry demands by in-laws (Bhattacharya, 2000; Ghadially and Kumar, 1988; Parihar, 1990); and interference by immediate and extended family members who exert power and control over the couple as a unit or individually on the husband or wife in a manner which is destructive to the marital relationship (Bhat and Surti, 1979; Ghadially and Kumar, 1988; Kashyap, 2000).

Traditionally, appropriate ways of handling marital relationships and problems were undertaken by elders in the family, doctors, lawyers and priests. Compromise, adjustment, family honour were the key words used which were basically aimed at maintaining and strengthening the family bond through the maintenance of the dominance–submissive relationship within the couple dyad. In such situations, the couple attempted to return to the earlier status quo and some renegotiation of expectations and roles. Given the unequal status roles of the spouses in marriage, it is usually the less powerful one, the wife, who is required to make the adjustments required to preserve the relationship. Professional counselling may be sought at this stage — almost as a last resort — when everybody has tried
everything and failed. In an all-India study of the Central Social Welfare Board’s scheme of family counselling centres (FCCs) by Kashyap, Dabir, and Akhup (2004), it was found that an overwhelming majority of clients came to the FCC for help with marital problems. Even at this stage, professional counselling may help the couple to renegotiate with each other and work on bringing about changes in their behaviour patterns, communication and emotional interactions with each other. If this happens, the couple may be able to renew their commitment to the marital relationship.

When this renegotiation or attempt to return to status quo does not work, the couple experiences the ‘crunch’. Stress overwhelms the relationship, which leads to marriage breakdown, and, in turn, can either lead to (i) desertion, destructive bitter termination of the relationship, or (ii) mutually agreed separation, judicial separation, divorce, or (iii) the couple may continue to live together in an ‘empty shell’ or dead marriage. As noted in a study by Kurian (1981), very few people are willing to consider separation or divorce as a solution to their marriage problems because of two main reasons: unhappiness of children and social disapproval. Another reason is the economic dependence of the wife.

According to Chavan (1999), maximum couples approached the family court in the first year of marriage and within three years of their separation. Therefore, the first three years of marriage appear to be the critical years. Research on couples who have gone to court (Chaudhary, 1988; Damle, 1956; Pothen, 1986) showed that environmental factors affecting marital adjustment mentioned earlier seem to have contributed more to the breaking of the marriage than personality factors.

**COUPLE COUNSELLING**

The Western orientation in couple counselling of focusing mainly on the couple and their status roles and emotional interactions without reference to the structural imbalance in couples which actually determines the nature of emotional relationships between the partners, will be ineffective in the Indian context. This is not to say that relationship counselling is not important. However, for relationship counselling to be effective in the Indian context, it will be first necessary for marriage counsellors to make a major shift in conceptualising the nature of counselling intervention with couples by acknowledging the relationship of gender role socialisation to conflict between the marital pair and addressing the core inequalities in their relationship. In order to do so, some concepts from the ecological systems
theory, the power relations framework and feminist practice will need to be used by counsellors for developing a broader theoretical framework for understanding inequality and the use of power within the marital relationship as a basis for intervention.

The concept of power relations has been defined by McNay (1992) as where relations are so structured that one person or group of people benefits at the expense of another person or group of people, then the people who benefits can be said to have greater power in those relations. The power can be manifest at an individual, family, group, community or society and can take material, emotional or ideological forms.

Systems theory tells us how the distribution of power in macro social structures in society is reflected and reinforced in micro social structures like the family. For example, the sexual division of labour in the economy, where men predominantly have status and power, is reflected in the sexual division of labour in the family, where men often hold power, particularly in major areas of decision making. Though the inter-relations between these processes are complex, material and ideological power have a major bearing on emotional power, and it is this interaction that needs to be understood in couple relationships.

One of the challenges faced by marriage counsellors in India is to become aware of and acknowledge gender as a social construct and as a basic organising principle with reference to culture, large systems (government) family systems and their own individual thinking. Further, they will need to become aware of the impact of gender role socialisation on the marital pair and also on themselves because at least some conflicts between partners result from gender role stereotyping, which polarises partners and becomes the basis for inequalities and power differentials. Counsellors will need to recognise that gendered thinking resulting from socialisation will arise in all discussion topics: money, sex, parenting, and task assignments inside and outside the house (Boss and Thorne, 1989). Therefore, the major areas of male privilege within the family and the ways in which men benefit from it at the cost of the less powerful woman needs to be understood by both men and women and challenged.

Schneider (1990) has described six principles of feminist family therapy which can be applied while developing gender sensitive practice. They are:

1. Counsellors need to acknowledge that gender divisions are based on inequalities in the society and family and are reflected in couple
relations. They then have to inquire into these assumptions about men and women within the present and past family, combined with a focus on the power distribution and use of language, particularly such things as possessive pronouns such as your and mine, when referring to property or children.

2. Counsellors need to identify the different power bases within the family, whether they are domestic, affective, sexual, economic, language or physical, and then work to negate their destructive impact.

3. The counsellor can never be gender neutral and this involves self—reflection on his/her part about his/her position on matters such as feminism and gender relations.

4. The counsellor’s thinking and practice must be congruent.

5. A conscious effort must be made by the counsellor to empower women by validating their experience: sexist assumptions that may be made routinely by both men and women need to be challenged; responsibility for the dysfunction in the marriage should not be placed on the woman; and the counsellor should relate to the woman as a named person and not a social role.

6. There is always a need to connect the private relational difficulties encountered in the therapeutic setting to the wider public political culture and the patriarchal institution which shape people’s lives.

Keeping the above discussion in mind, a mode of intervention with couples in marital conflict is being suggested here which is non-pathologising and is empowerment-based. This approach conceptualised by McNay (1992) draws from the power relations framework to help people articulate their needs and to understand what blocks them from realising such needs. It is geared towards concentrating on the positive aspects of people’s situations rather than focusing on negative aspects and to helping people gain more control and hence more satisfaction in their lives. This approach is empowering since it entails helping people work with their power relations, and with the interdependent systems within which they operate. This non-oppressive mode of intervention is through the use of ‘dialogue’ between the couple and the social worker and ‘praxis’, which is the process of constructing, testing against practice, and reconstructing theory. In practice, it means that social workers will have to construct the analysis from the spouse(s)’ experiences, holding ideas and knowledge as prompted until shared understanding develops between the spouse(s) and the social worker.
The Process

Ideally, both the marital partners should be involved in the counselling process. However, in India, as the wife’s status-role is clearly viewed as inferior to that of the husband, men are less likely to come in for marriage counselling voluntarily partly because they may be opposed to talking to ‘strangers’ or because what the wife sees as the problem the husband does not, as often he is the one who calls the shots in marriage. Much of the counsellor’s energy is spent in trying to induce the absent spouse to come for counselling or quite frequently, the burden of convincing the spouse is left with the initial client, most often the wife. One of the most hotly debated issues in marriage counselling is whether counselling one spouse is as effective as conjoint counselling.

Given our view that human problems are embedded in the interaction between people, rather than individual pathology, we feel that it is possible to work with the one person who comes in for counselling and still bring about some changes in the relationship and the nature of the couple system. Of course, the preferred approach would always be to work with both partners.

In couple counselling too, genuineness, warmth and empathic responses have to be used by the counsellor in order to build a facilitating and containing relationship with the marital pair. The primary focus in couple counselling is on the couple relationship, which involves strengthening the partners’ communication with each other; fostering learning about themselves and each other; including the distribution of power within the marital dyad; encouraging new ways of perceiving themselves and each other; consciously empowering the woman by validating her experiences; challenging sexist assumptions that may routinely be made by both men and women; promoting understanding of the workings of their relationship and the links between the influences of the families of orientation and the larger environment and current behaviours; and aiding the couple’s negotiation to agreed changes in behaviour.

The Three Stage Model

The Three Stage Model of counselling developed by Egan (1982) has been used as the basic structure for developing an eclectic model for counselling, which can be applicable to marriage counselling in India. This model has a three stage enabling process and an organised framework of counseling, skills.
Stage 1 involves responding so as to stimulate exploration of where the spouse(s) are and what their experiences of the world are. A holistic assessment of the couple’s situation in terms of shared understanding of the presenting problem which is blocking them from realising their needs is also initiated. This includes:

- Presenting the problem — what is the problem, who owns it, precipitating factors, duration, perception of each spouse, attempts to resolve, commitment to resolve.
- Demography of both families of orientation and their role in the conflict.
- Marriage details — age of each spouse, procedure of selection of partner, financial exchanges, years of marriage, number of children, if any.
- The couple dyad — level of commitment to the marriage and the relationship (boundaries and cohesiveness), power equations, role expectations and functioning, communication patterns, decision-making patterns and sexual adjustment.
- Environmental factors influencing the couple dyad — unemployment, both spouses working, financial difficulties, and presence or absence of social supports.

Stage 2 involves personalising so as to clarify the personal implications of the couple’s current situations and develop their understanding of what they want for themselves. It also involves exposing unmet needs of each spouse, exposing the unequal nature of power distribution within the couple dyad and its effect on the dyad, facilitating communication, empowering the woman by validating her experiences, challenging sexist assumptions routinely made by the man and woman, strengthening each spouse’s capacity to make decisions, building the confidence of the spouses in themselves and in each other so that the source of conflicts lay exposed. Many conflicts internal to the couple system are caused by external systems. Clarifying such issues can help the couple relocate the conflict and direct their energy to where the source of the problem exists. Personal goals emerge as understanding progresses.

Stage 3 involves initiating so as to facilitate the couple’s work by turning goals into action plans, and in implementing them. The approach is to work with change that can enhance both partners. This includes tackling resistance of the more powerful to their loss of power by helping them to
understand what they will gain if they are to give up some of their privileges (for example, a happier partner who will be able to meet the partner’s other needs). The purpose of the action stage is to assist the couple to bring about a more permanent change by changing the attitudes and awareness of the situation, rather than just to find a single solution to a problem.

The counsellor’s role is to join the couple system as a participant observer and build an equal relationship with them. The couple must feel that the counsellor understands them both and is working with them and for them in a collaborative manner. The counsellor also needs to be flexible enough to maintain a focus in the session, guide treatment goals and maintain a connection with both partners. At the same time, the counsellor can never be gender neutral and his/her thinking and practice must not be contradictory. For example, the use of methods must be such that there should not be reliance on strategic means, which are intrinsically sexist and unfair to women in order to achieve a sound goal.

Each of the three stages of the model has specific purposes and each state requires the development of particular set of counselling skills. Table 1 describes the purposes of each stages when working with a couple and the strategies and skills required. Added to these skills are those operationalised from the principles of feminist sensitive practice described earlier.

**COUNSELING COUPLES WITH PSYCHOSEXUAL DIFFICULTIES**

Dissatisfaction with the sexual relationship is one of the important factors influencing marital adjustment (Agarwal, 1971; Kapur, 1972; Kundu and Ghosh, 1980). Masters and Johnson (1966) have expressed an opinion that about half of all married couples develop sexual problems of one kind or other. Psychosexual problems refer to sexual difficulties or dysfunction, which can affect physical function and are largely psychological or emotional in origin. While some sexual problems are due only to physical causes, these are not so common. The physical causes may be due to inherited defect, disease, accident or the effect of aging. However, even if there is a purely physical cause, there is invariably an emotional reaction that can intensify the problem (Christopher, 1986).

It is now widely understood that sexual problems do not have much to do with the state of the physical organs or even the way they are used. However, they have much to do with one’s attitudes, and feelings about what
ought to happen or about what ought not to happen (Mace, 1983). In short, the cultural context is very important.

**TABLE 1: Summary of Counselling Skills**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Stage 1</th>
<th>Stage 2</th>
<th>Stage 3</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• To establish a working relationship</td>
<td>• To reassess the problems</td>
<td>• To decide on appropriate changes</td>
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<tr>
<td>• To classify and define problems</td>
<td>• To maintain a working relationship</td>
<td>• To implement changes</td>
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<tr>
<td>• To make an assessment</td>
<td>• To work towards the contract</td>
<td>• To transfer learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>• To negotiate a contract</td>
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<td>• To end the counselling relationship</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strategies</td>
<td>• Exploration</td>
<td>• Challenging</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Prioritising and focusing</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Goal setting</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Communicating core values</td>
<td>• Challenging</td>
<td>• Action planning</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Appraisal</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Evaluation, action and sustaining change</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Confrontation</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Closure</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Skills</td>
<td>• Attending</td>
<td>• Confrontation</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Observing clients</td>
<td>• Giving feedback</td>
<td>• Decision making</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Listening</td>
<td>• Giving information</td>
<td>• Problem solving</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Reflecting a word or phrase</td>
<td>• Giving directives</td>
<td>• Knowledge, resources</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Paraphrasing</td>
<td>• Self disclosure</td>
<td>• Facilitating change in behaviour</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Summarising</td>
<td>• Immediacy</td>
<td>• Teaching skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Probing skills</td>
<td>• Timing and packing</td>
<td>• Force field analysis</td>
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<td>• Questioning</td>
<td>• Goal setting</td>
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<td>• Making statements</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Being concrete</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Empathy</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Basic and advanced</td>
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In India, there are still very rigidly held views about the role of sex in society. Young men and women are not expected to be sexually intimate with each other before marriage and strict segregation of the sexes is prevalent, especially for girls after they achieve puberty. Virginity is expected in girls before marriage. Since marriages are arranged, they are more in the nature
of patriarchal/kinship alliances, rather than a love match. Outside the bonds of marriage, sex is generally regarded as something bad or disgusting or sinful. Masturbation is frowned upon and homosexuality is regarded as abnormal and unacceptable.

In India, sex is linked to procreation. Sex is regarded as a duty and must result in children, especially sons. A childless union is regarded as a disaster. The reality still is that newly married couples are often sexually ill-informed and anxious or fearful about sex. Other fears that may cause anxiety during sex may be fear of losing self-control, fears of promiscuity, fear of unwanted pregnancy, and fear of being infected by sexually transmitted disease(s), or HIV/AIDS by partner. It is still a widely-held view that it is the wife’s duty to meet her husband’s sexual needs, regardless of her own feelings in the matter. In our culture, the sexual needs of men have been given a lot of attention, while those of women are hardly recognised. Also, for the man to admit that he has a sexual problem means extreme loss of face, and therefore, the woman is often blamed for sexual difficulties in marriage. Women rarely present with sexual difficulties directly; it is far more probable that a difficulty is presented indirectly — as a problem connected with anxiety about conceiving.

Therefore, psychosexual counselling becomes very important in our context because a sizable proportion of couples who seek marriage counselling may also be experiencing difficulties in their partnership but do not talk openly about it. Hence, marriage counsellors will need to be equipped to offer psychosexual counselling. However, in order to do so, they will first need to be better informed and enlightened and more importantly, become aware of their own feelings about sex and comfortable about their own sexuality.

When counselling couples with sexual difficulties, the concentration is on the psychological blocks rather than physiological difficulties that couples are experiencing. These can range from conflicts and unresolved difficulties from the past that come through to the current relationship to straightforward ‘performance’ anxieties fuelled by poor information.

A model which integrates well with Egan’s model of counselling has the acronym ‘PLISSIT’ (Butler and Joyce, 1998). The acronym stands for:

P - Permission (Exploration)
LI - Limited Information (Understanding)
SS - Specific suggestions (Action)
IT - Intensive Therapy (PST or Psychosexual Therapy)
Permission: At this exploration stage, the tasks are building a therapeutic relationship so that the individual or couple feels safe enough to discuss sexual matters, obtaining a clear picture of the couple’s sexual relationship, of both the behaviours and the feelings attached to the behaviours, exploring the myths and their impact on the couple’s sexual activity. At this stage, the counsellor will need to recognise some of their own myths and the feelings these evoke. A vital task of the counsellor is to give permission to each client to say how he or she feels about his or her sex life, the failures and the needs.

Limited Information: Though people may have information about sex, it is not the content only that is important; the way information is processed is equally important, as there is every possibility of it being misunderstood. The counsellor, at this stage, will need to sensitively challenge the half-truths and misinformation that emerges. Then using straightforward anatomical terms, the counsellor will need to give the necessary information that clients need to know in order to understand their own sexuality.

Specific Suggestions: Some clients may need more than permission and information. They may benefit from specific suggestions about how they can make changes in attitudes and behaviours, now that they are better informed. The specific suggestions may be related to exploring their own body in order to examine their own self-image or talking and touching exercises or re-thinking positions for intercourse. These suggestions are meant to facilitate sexual communication and understanding between the couple such as ways in which they can get more privacy.

Intensive Therapy: This should not be attempted by the counsellor unless qualified in psychosexual therapy. Couples who require intensive therapy should be referred to a sexual therapist.

INTERVENTIONS WITH THE THIRD FORCE

There is another dimension of the power dynamics which can instigate and complicate the couple relationship, namely the ‘Third Force’. Generally, the third force could be members of the couple’s social milieu who directly or indirectly influence the behaviour of the husband and/or wife, or are in a position to control or exert power over them causing marital distress and sometimes separation or divorce. They may be members of the immediate family or colleagues from the workplace or people from one’s social circle,
generally from the opposite sex and they derive their social power from the following five sources:

1. **Reward Power**: When the third force is in a position to financially, emotionally or physically (sexually) reward the husband or the wife, this reward power is the basis of power for the third force. Because certain behaviour has been rewarded by the third force, the husband or wife learn to comply with most of the things suggested by the third force. The rewards could be sexual gratification, ego boost, praise, flattery or emotional attachment.

2. **Coercive Power**: is a source of power which is based on fear. The third force exercises influence by inflicting punishment or threat of adverse consequences if the husband or wife does not follow the instructions given by the third force.

3. **Referent Power**: This source of power is used by the third force when the third force, generally a person from the opposite sex, is perceived by the husband or wife as ideal, attractive and desirable and totally identifies himself/herself with the values, ways of thinking and mindset of the third force. In this situation, there is a self-satisfying relationship between the spouse and the third force.

4. **Instrumentality Power**: Sometimes, the third force is seen instrumental, that is, the third force may be in a position to play a critical role which is beneficial to one of the spouses such as taking care of the children when both parents are working. The mother or mother-in-law, whoever is the third force, then uses her unique position to manipulate either the son or daughter-in-law and gets them to behave the way she wants them to.

5. **Legitimate Power**: Because of the internalised values of the husband and wife, they may have a feeling of obligation to obey the dictates of the third force. Here the couple gives the third force the right to influence them. For example, the mother is treated as a superior person and the husband feels obligated to obey her wishes above the wife’s wishes.

Only when the spouses are able to identify the third force and understand the source of that power over them, will they be able to work towards neutralising or minimising the influence of the third force. When the main problem is the negative or adverse effect of the third force on the couple relationship, marriage counsellors will have to help the couple identify the
third force, the reasons for their interference in the couple relationship, and then develop interventions. Figure 1 provides a framework for such interventions, which is adapted from Sinha’s model.

**FIGURE 1: Interventions with the Third Force**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who is the Third Force?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Members of the biological family</td>
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<td>Members of the in-law family</td>
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<tr>
<td>Extended family members</td>
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<tr>
<td>Colleagues from the workplace</td>
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<tr>
<td>People from couple’s social circle</td>
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<tr>
<th>Why does the Third Force Interfere?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Because of the need for power and control</td>
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<tr>
<td>Because of feelings of insecurity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Because of a fear of being left alone/abandoned by son/daughter</td>
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<tr>
<td>Because of a feeling of self-righteousness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Because the third force has made herself/himself indispensable</td>
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<tr>
<th>Suggested Interventions</th>
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<tr>
<td>Help the couple to find a non-interfering substitute to the third force</td>
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<tr>
<td>Help the couple to minimise the importance of the third force in their lives</td>
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<td>Help the couple to understand the time motive of the third force</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reduce proximity of the third force to the couple</td>
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<td>Prescript the couple’s psyche with reference to their perception of the third force</td>
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**CHILDREN AS VICTIMS OF MARRIAGE BREAKDOWN**

Various Indian researchers, like Pothen (1986) and Chaudhary (1988) who studied the impact of marriage breakdown on children, found that parental conflict was detrimental to the well-being of children and had a profound
effect on children’s overall development throughout their formative years. According to Gupta (1991), even after such children attain adulthood, they are likely to face problems in their own married life. One of the main reasons is that dysfunctional patterns of interaction in such families often impair the ability of parents to understand and meet the developmental and emotional needs of their children.

In spite of the extreme trauma that children of such families go through, they are often the forgotten victims of a marriage breakdown. For marriage counsellors to intervene in a manner which would be in the best interest of the children and enhance their quality of life in the altered or re-constructed family, counsellors will first need to understand the behaviour of parents in a conflictual marriage towards their children and the reactions of the children to their situation. The counsellor’s major goals for intervention would be to:

- devise strategies for reducing symptoms commonly associated with the trauma of parent’s marriage breakdown;
- help the child perceive the changed family situation accurately, understand it intellectually, and accept it emotionally;
- increase the psychological distance between parent’s problems and children’s problems in order to limit children’s concerns to more manageable levels; and
- strengthen the parent–child interaction.

To achieve these goals, the counsellor would need to work directly with the children at individual and/or group level as well as indirectly with them through parents and other support systems. The first task of the counsellor is to make a comprehensive assessment in order to determine the extent to which the children have been affected, their vulnerabilities, strengths and coping strategies, and the capacities of caregivers and the community to support the child. A good assessment can then become a part of the treatment process.

For many children, a programme of developmentally sequenced treatment may be most appropriate as many children may benefit from several brief periods of treatment over the course of their development. A child-centred model of counselling using a variety of media would be helpful in correcting cognitive distortions about the event, allowing children to express their emotions and enhance children’s sense of competence and self-esteem.
II

COURSE OUTLINE AND LESSON PLAN

Learner’s Objectives

1. To gain a gender sensitive understanding of the marriage scenario in India and the sociocultural nature of problems faced by Indian couples using the ecological systems and power relations frameworks and feminist practice.

2. To be exposed to relevant approaches and skills in counselling couples having relationship and psychosexual difficulties.

3. To develop strategies for helping couples to identify the third force when it adversely affects their relationship, understand the source of its power, and neutralise or minimise its influence on their relationship.

4. To understand the impact of parental marital discord on children and to help children and parents to cope with the situation more effectively.

Lesson Plan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Module</th>
<th>Topics</th>
<th>No. of Hours</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Gender sensitive understanding of the marriage scenario and problems faced by couples through the ecological systems and power relations framework and feminist practice.</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Socio-legal infrastructure for marital disputes—Lok Adalats, Special Cells in Police Stations, The Family Court, Counselling Services provided by NGOs.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Counselling Couples for Marital Adjustment — Egan’s Model</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Counselling couples with sexual problems</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Understanding the influence of the third force on the couple relationship and suggesting interventions.</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Children: The forgotten victims in a marital conflict.</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Teaching Methodology

A variety of training strategies will be used for the different modules in this course. Module 1 which is on marriage scenario and the nature of problems faced by Indian couples will be taught through lectures, brainstorming and discussions. For Module 2, practitioners will be invited to make presentations on socio-legal infrastructure for marital disputes and the role of the counsellor. Hand-outs and case material will also be used to highlight the role of the counsellor. Modules 3 and 4 will include an exposition on the models/strategies, followed by skill practice sessions by the learners in small groups of three or four persons. Each learner will, in turn, take the role of client(s), counsellor and observer to practice skills and give each other feedback. The practice sessions will end with the learners sharing with the whole group their key learnings and observations. In the session on counselling couples with sexual problems, true/false statements will be used to deal with myths and misconceptions. Reflective experiential exercises will be used to enable learners gain an insight about their level of comfort with their own sexuality.

For Module 5, case studies may also be used and the learners in small groups may be asked to identify the third force, analyse the source of their power, and suggest intervention strategies. Each group will be asked to make a presentation of their work to the large group. For Module 6, learners may work in small groups to analyse the behaviours of young children and adolescents whose parents are in marital conflict as well as the behaviours of parents towards their children during the different stages of the conflict. Hand-outs and case material will also be used to highlight the role of the counsellor and strategies used by the counsellor for strengthening the parent–child interaction.

Exercise I (for Module 3): The Power Gram

**Purpose:** Before using exercises with couples during a counselling session it is useful for the social workers/counsellors to experience the affective, intellectual and behavioural outcome, so that the exercise is used more effectively.

**Duration:** 60 minutes

**Materials Required:** Papers and Pen

**Instructions/Ground Rules:**

• All information shared in the group will be kept confidential.
• No judgments will be made about any member of the group.
• No loose discussions outside the class.

**Methods/Description:** The Power Gram developed by Stuart (1980) is a method for clarifying the power balance in a marital relationship. It has been adopted here so that it can be used as a teaching tool.

Decisions made in marriage may be along a continuum of power balance which will vary for different couples depending upon education and employment status of both spouses and for different types of decisions.

Some decisions might be made separately by each spouse; some might be made by each spouse after consulting the other; and some might be joint efforts. Couples are asked to individually to list out commonly made decisions in their family.

They are then asked to identify how they believe decisions are made currently and then indicate how, ideally, they would like decisions in the different areas to be made. The social worker/counsellor then helps them compare notes and negotiate the desired change.

For using the exercise for training the marriage counsellors, the trainees will be asked to make a list of areas in which he/she and their spouse, if married or their parents or any significant person in their life commonly make decisions.

The trainees will then be asked to identify how they think decisions are currently made by them and the significant person in their life. They will then be asked to indicate how, ideally, they would like decisions in the different areas to be made.

The trainees will then work in pairs in which each person will discuss the list with their partner, their feelings about what they discovered about themselves in terms of their role in decision-making in their family, the areas in which they would like to change the decision-making pattern, and the manner they will negotiate this change. The partners may make suggestions as to how the desired change could be negotiated.

**Debriefing:** After both persons have shared their list, the group will meet in a plenary. The teacher/trainer will discuss feelings aroused during this exercise and tie up the learning gained from this exercise.
Exercise 2 (for Module 5): Interventions with the Third Force

Purpose: To understand the dynamics of the Third Force Effect on the couple relationship and to evolve intervention strategies for helping the couple to neutralise or minimise the effect.

Duration: 90 minutes

Materials Required: Papers for noting discussion points by small groups, blackboard/white board/chart paper.

Four to six case scenarios (A fictional case scenario is given with this exercise).

Instructions/Ground Rules:
• All information shared in the group will be kept confidential
• No loose discussions outside the class

Methods/Description: The teacher/trainer gives a brief exposition of the concept ‘The Third Force’. The large group is divided into small groups of four to five to five persons per group. Each small group is given a case scenario. The small group is expected to
• read the case scenario;
• identify the third force;
• analyse why he/she/they interfere in the couple relationship; and
• think of interventions which will reduce or do away with the negative/adverse influence of the third force.

The trainees reconvene in the large group for a plenary presentation. Each small group will read aloud their case scenario and make a presentation on each of the points mentioned earlier. The teacher/trainer will write the outcome of the discussion of each small group on the blackboard/whiteboard/chart paper in a matrix. After each small group presentation, teacher/trainer will invite comments from the large group.

After all the small groups have made their presentations, the teacher/trainer then ties up the discussion and gives a conceptual exposition on the third force effect, the sources of their power and possible interventions (20 minutes).

Sample Scenario: Jayant and Sudha’s marriage was arranged by their respective relatives. After marriage the couple lived with Jayant’s widowed aunt, who had looked after him since childhood. They have a one-year old
daughter named Lata. According to Jayant, everything went well for two years. Subsequently, Sudha did not want to stay with his aunt and she began insisting on their taking up separate accommodation. He tried his level best to explain to her that he had moral obligations towards his aunt who was more than a mother to him. Further, as there were no quarrels between the two, there was no need of separating and setting up a new house. However, Sudha was adamant and one day she left the house with their daughter. According to Sudha, the aunt was very possessive of Jayant and used to try her utmost to ensure that they had very little time alone with each other. She was a rich lady and had no children of her own and had no one else expect Jayant. Hence, Jayant’s aunt could not tolerate Jayant’s attachment to her. Sudha felt that Jayant, too, was over attached to his aunt. Sudha could not stomach the strong bond of affection Jayant and his aunt had for each other that often excluded her. Jayant, on the other hand, was not ready to part from his aunt. However, he loved his wife and wanted her back. He, therefore, filed a petition in the family court for restitution of conjugal rights.

Assessment

Since the emphasis in this course is on the learner’s ability to develop skills in various aspects of marriage counselling, the assessment will be based on the following:

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<tr>
<th>Assessment Area</th>
<th>Marks</th>
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<tr>
<td>Class Participation</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>Group presentation</td>
<td>40</td>
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<tr>
<td>Written individual assignment of a case during field practicum</td>
<td>60</td>
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<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
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III

CONCLUSION

Marriage counselling is increasingly being recognized as a specialised area of intervention in India. However the development of this field in India has to follow a radically different course from that taken by western countries. Contextualising the roles and power play within marital interaction in India as well as the systemic nature of couple difficulties is important for Indian
counsellors to acknowledge, understand and to bring this understanding into the counselling relationship is important.

In the final analysis, what will matter the most is the maturity of the counsellor and his/her ability to communicate effectively with the couple and where necessary their children, which also means speaking in the clients’ language, being sensitive to their religious and cultural background, and being able to imbibe and then to transfer to the clients the newer values of equity and human dignity.

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McNay, N.  

Mohan, V. and Singh, S.  

Parihar, L.  
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<th>Author</th>
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