

Marital Relations: The Roles People Play

Daniel Benveniste

Being married isn't all bliss. In fact, it's often a lot of hard work. A marriage requires that the couple maintain good communication. Communication can break down when assumptions about roles are left unspoken, when the couple is no longer able to effectively problem solve and when adult-to-adult styles of relating are completely abandoned and replaced with a style of interaction similar to a parent and child. Couple therapy is about finding a new way to communicate.

Some imagine the intimacy of the marital relationship as being somehow beyond the rules and roles of other social relationships. It is not. The rules and roles of marital relationships are often more intimate in the sense that they may include, among other aspects, a sexual component, a commitment to stay together through good times and bad, the management of daily life tasks and the raising of children. Nonetheless, the rules and roles are there and negotiated consciously and unconsciously by every couple.

Marital problems are communication problems. "She over reacts." "He goes silent." "She's never satisfied." "He just can't listen." "She's always emoting." "He's like a robot." "She's not realistic." "He can't talk about his feelings." "She drinks too much." "He's too messy." "She sides with our daughter." "He undermines my authority." "She can't give me one reason to make me think I can trust her." "He can't let go of what I did." "She's just like my mother." "He's just like my father."

The illusion of the perfect marriage is just that – an illusion. A good marriage is not without problems, conflicts and rough patches along the way. No marital couple handles all aspects of the relationship perfectly. "We have a great sex life and deal with the children quite successfully but I can't really talk with him." "She's a great mom and takes care of the house beautifully but there's no love, no romance and sometimes I feel like I'm married to my sister."

Living in a marriage often requires not only the realization that the marriage is not perfect and that compromises are necessary but that to a certain extent one must also accept living with some of the limitations of the spouse. And yet before accepting the limitations of the spouse it is often helpful to really come to terms with one's own limitations.

When a couple comes together to make a marriage, there is often the sense of hope and a clean start. While the hope may be real, it is never really a clean start as each member of the couple always brings his/her own baggage to the relationship. Each brings the model of his/her parent's marriage and all its associated hopes and fears. Each brings expectations about their respective roles and how they will be managed. A man who was particularly close to his mother as a child may want to take on the same role as his own father in his own marriage. But if, for example, his father beat his mother he may want to

be different with his own wife in the way his mother wanted his father to be different. A woman may identify strongly with her father and may seek a man who in some ways resembles her mother. The parental ghosts that haunt the marital bedroom announce themselves in the form of inhibitions, moodiness and recurring conflicts that seemingly come out of nowhere. But internalized messages from the parents of the couple can also be supportive and encouraging. Furthermore, in addition to internalized messages from parents, the members of the couple can also internalize the messages and experiences from their siblings, friends, as well as from previous intimate relationships.

The marital relationship is first and foremost a relationship between two adults – a man and a woman who need to solve their problems and negotiate their pleasure with maturity. Nonetheless, in every marriage there are ways in which members of the couple will from time to time slide into the role of a child or into the role of a parent. Thus, the wife may play the role of a mommy who takes care of her husband as if he were a little boy and at other times he steps into the role of her daddy while she plays the little girl. Such slipping and sliding between parental, marital and child roles is inevitable in any marriage but problems arise when the couple gets locked into one set of roles. “He’s no fun. He’s boring. Work, work, work. I want love and romance and feelings and he’s just managing this and that. And it BORES me! – but he is someone I can count on” “And she’s the playgirl. Everything is a game to her. She’s irresponsible and has no time for thinking practically about money, time or work. I’m cleaning up after her constantly – but she is cute” “He’s like a little boy with his affairs and his toys. He’s never realistic about life. I feel like I’m alone in this relationship. I want him to get out there and get a job and start taking himself seriously – but I do like that he can speak from the heart and that he enjoys poetry.” “She’s always scolding me and getting after me to clean up the bedroom, and I do. It’s fine but she always needs to tell me what to do like a mother hen. Pick up your socks, put on your sweater, don’t go out with your hair wet, call me every time you go from here to there, be careful of this, don’t forget that. She is hovering over me constantly – but the house is nice and she is a great cook.”

The problems come when these roles get locked in place and the couple can’t get out of them or when one member of the couple wants to deal with a situation as an adult and the other insists on continuing to play the child or the parent role. Couples therapy is about finding a new way to communicate, unraveling the unspoken fears and assumptions, learning how not to cut each other off, and discovering how messages intended to convey one thing are interpreted differently. Couples that are good at turning each other off are also capable of turning each other on. But sometimes members of a couple will say, “Oh, I don’t want to work so hard at communicating. I don’t want to have to explain myself all the time. I don’t want to have to write my messages on paper for my spouse to get the idea. I don’t want to have to count to ten before I speak. I don’t want to restrain my tantrum. I don’t want to have to write my thoughts and feelings in a diary before I say what’s on my mind. First of all, my spouse should just know what I want and second of all, it’s my home so I don’t want to have to work at it.” To this, all one can say is “Sorry, relationships take real work. It took you quite a few years to get to this point and it won’t change over night. We need to work at it. But if we have a few small successes, we will build on them and then it may get easier with time.”

**The author now lives and works in Bellevue, Washington.
Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to:**

E-MAIL – daniel.benveniste@gmail.com