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THE LIVING TOGETHER ARRANGEMENT:
SOCIAL WORK AND THE LOST CLIENT

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ABSTRACT

A recent research study suggests that persons living together outside of marriage do not view social work services as a potential source of help for problems brought into the living together arrangement, those common to all intimate long-range dyadic relationships or those directly related to choice of lifestyle. A multi-faceted approach is suggested which would aim at reaching this potential client group in a climate which will neither stigmatize or judge the alternate lifestyle or the persons who practice it.

Social work has established specialized agencies and/or practice areas to help with specialized problems. Illness related problems can be brought to the medical social worker, school related problems find their way to school social workers, psychiatric social workers work with many areas of emotional illness and social dysfunctioning. Logically, family problems should be addressed by family agencies and "marital" problems by counseling agencies.

Many family and marital problems never come to the attention of social workers and other counseling professionals. They occur in an almost infinite variety of living arrangements. The very fact that two or more adults live in close proximity, share possessions and intimacy and confront mutual problems preordains them to certain areas of stress and interpersonal difficulty as well as to other prob-

blems inherent in the interface between their family system and other social systems. Many of these families do not possess the ticket to general social acceptance, a marriage license. Because of this they either are or perceive themselves to be (it makes little difference to the person in need of help) separated from sources of counseling and assistance which they may require. Who are these potential clients and what are the obstacles to their acquiring help?

The Living Together Arrangement

There exists a sizeable proportion of persons in America today for whom the institution of marriage is unacceptable as a lifestyle. They have chosen an alternative which affords a complex and paradoxical composite of freedoms and restrictions, sanctions and stigmata, superficiality and intensity. The living together (outside of marriage) arrangement may have arisen as a lifestyle as an indirect result of increased technology and demand for women's rights as suggested by Bernard,¹ the rising employment of women cited by Otto,² or from a number of other causes reflecting a reaction to the failure of contemporary monogamy.³ It is probably accurate to say that the reasons for its growth are as varied as the contracts which exist within the arrangement.

There are, in all cross-sections of our society, persons who have built a reasonably stable heterosexual relationship outside the legal sanctions of marriage. They do not attempt to deceive others by pretending to be married nor do they openly flaunt their lifestyle in a show of defiance. The relationship is characterized, not by the hedonism or promiscuity portrayed in popular media, but by variations on the themes which we have come to know and expect among married couples.

Reflection on Recent Research Findings

One recent research study⁴ sought to identify and categorize the problems of an alternate lifestyle and to attempt to learn what is necessary for social work to begin to relate effectively to this potential client group. The living together arrangement (LTA), was operationally defined as "a relationship of at least six months' duration consisting of an unmarried heterosexual couple who occupy the same household in a conjugal relationship. They adhere to an essentially monogamous lifestyle, but do not consider themselves to have a common law marriage." A case study design was employed. Four LTA couples were studied over an extended period of time. While generalizations from a case study must necessarily be limited, a number of the research findings have serious implications for social work practice.

The couples reflected wide diversity in some areas and surprising agreement in others. Rationale for the choice of the LTA included some combination of economic considerations, a desire for sexual intimacy and companionship, a reaction to perceptions of traditional marriages, and a desire for a deepening of intimacy as a prelude to a more permanent commitment.

Generally the male assumed a traditional "head of household role," although in one family responsibilities were divided with mathematical precision. While individual freedom varied, most couples adhered to a contract of sexual exclusivity and described little conflict in this area.

All the couples perceived considerable advantage to the LTA. They viewed it as being without constraints of traditional role structure and conducive to personal and interpersonal growth.

While they did not feel particularly alienated or discriminated against because of their lifestyle, the couples revealed a certain guardedness about open discussion of their arrangement with such people as employers, landlords and business associates. They believed that the intensity of their relationship and its potential for societal sanction limited their outside involvement with others. They regarded this as predictable result of a choice of their own making.

Actual problems of social stigma were generally not perceived, except in relationships with parents. While conflict over the LTA varied from virtual ostracism from the family of origin to a climate of "subtle hints," all the couples described an increased social distance from parents.

Problems of the LTA Couples

There are apparently three major categories of stress which are likely to occur within the living together relationships. It is important to remember, as in formal marriages, that health and adaptability are probably far more characteristic of the relationships than are pathology or narrow rigidity. Yet certain "problem patterns" can be observed to occur with some degree of regularity; it is these problems which must be addressed by those who seek to offer help through counseling and other assistance:

1. Problems brought to the LTA. The decision to enter into the LTA cannot and should not be viewed as an evidence of pathology. Like all persons, couples in the LTA may, however, have intraphysic problems of varying severity. These may not be more prevalent than those found among married persons; they are probably more potentially debilitating than actually obstructive to social functioning.

Among persons in the LTA, there seems to be a rather excessive (relative to traditional relationships) concern with capacity to establish relationships of intimacy, honesty and trust. (Whether the LTA is in fact, a superior alternative to marriage in its potential for meeting this individual need is not at issue here.) Persons who choose the LTA may take great pains to impress others with what they view as the advantages of their lifestyle in areas of intrapersonal need gratification. They seek an attitude or feeling of freedom, allowing for a continued love relationship based on choice. The search for this ideal while, perhaps, differing somewhat in degree of intensity is similar to that sought by most couples who elect marriage. The frustration resulting from the inability to attain it is but one area of potential intrapsychic stress which may require assistance.

2. Problems common to all intimate long-range dyadic relationships. Nearly any interpersonal problem inherent in the traditional marriage agreement can be seen in the LTA. Irritability, sexual problems, jealousies, "in-law" stress, financial tension, conflict over alleged impingements on individual growth, child-rearing disagreements and even boredom can be seen. (Role conflicts are generally less apparent, perhaps because some couples characteristically seem to have engaged in considerable role negotiation early in the agreement.) Any intimate relationship can and often does require outside professional intervention; the LTA shares many of the areas of stress seen in marriage and is in no less need of assistance with "normal" interpersonal conflicts.

3. Problems directly related to the LTA. A specific syndrome of tension with families of origin (relating to stigmatization and alienation) is a major difficulty inherent in the LTA. Another potential area of stress, perceived alternately as a strength or a weakness by persons within the LTA, is the absence of definable structure in the relationship. While on some occasions it may be described as creating a latitude conducive to interpersonal growth, some of the same individuals may, on other occasions, speak of their anxiety about future security and uncertainty. A characteristic turning inward and away from community interaction and involvement, whether voluntary or of necessity, represents another potential problem area. One can easily project long range difficulties for persons so heavily invested in a relatively closed system with minimal input from other social systems. Assistance in "bridging" system boundaries may be indicated.

The LTA and Social Services

The overall emotional health of LTA couples does not, in itself, suggest cause for alarm. It is reassuring to note that they have relatively few problems unique to the LTA or exacerbated by it. Unfortunately, however, persons in the recent LTA study did not view social services as a potential source of help for any problems which they may have individually, as a couple, or as a family. While social agencies are beginning to move away from viewing a marriage license as a prerequisite for family counseling, persons in the LTA continue to view social agencies as so judgmental and stigmatizing as to be unable to help them should problems arise. Agencies are often viewed as traditional, untrustworthy, and un-receptive to persons practicing alternate lifestyles.

These perceptions are not incompatible with the description of Cogswell and Sussman:

In performing their functions, human service systems make certain assumptions about the family. They gear their services toward an ideal of what the family ought to be, namely, a nuclear traditional one...Because agencies idealize the traditional family, their programs are aimed at restoring this form, and thus, are ill-equipped to provide relevant supportive services to variant family forms.⁵

In the recent case study, descriptions of social workers as "welfare workers" or "voyeuristic" were common. Respondents assumed that their lifestyle would be

viewed as a form of defiance. Even "normal problems" were not viewed as appropriate for social work intervention. All four couples saw dissolution of the relationship as the only viable alternative (despite the presence of children) should interpersonal conflicts become severe. One participant observed that, "No social agency would probably want to try to help until we could show them a marriage license. Even if they agreed to see us, probably their main goal would be to get us married. We would either work things out ourselves or split up."

Similarly, persons who choose the LTA do not view social work as a potential resource for problems relating to broader social systems. While they perceive legal and social policies as prejudicial in areas such as taxation, evictions, policies, and termination of employment, they rarely perceive social work as a source of potential advocacy, support or even referral to other resources of potential redress. The only known alternatives seem to be to brood in silence or to seek commiseration with another LTA couple.

Implications for Outreach and Services

Existing literature and the recent case study suggest that persons in the LTA are neither significantly healthier or less healthy than other persons in other long-range dyadic relationships. They do, however, represent a sizeable number of persons for whom problems will periodically occur which require skilled professional assistance. At present they feel cut off from services which could be of help. A three-faceted solution to this situation is suggested:

1. A loosening of "family" definitions and liberalization of attitudes among individual practitioners and agencies. The nonjudgmental stance of social work remains partially a myth in relation to this potential client group. While progress has been made (most notably in areas of birth control and abortion counseling) there remains a gap between verbalized values and those operationalized in attitudes of individual professional personnel and in some cases, even agency policies. Persons in the LTA are extremely sensitive to criticism of their lifestyle. An innuendo, an assumption about the maturity level of the couple or a hint of proselytizing can abort an attempt at seeking help before benefits can be achieved. A process of soul searching with particular emphasis on values related to marriage is indicated for all who seek to serve those who choose the LTA.

2. An active program of outreach employing mass media and other publication techniques. Persons in the LTA need to recognize that professionals in social agencies understand both the unique and the common nature of their problems. They need to know that social workers do not regard these problems as their "comeuppance" but rather as a normal byproduct of a long term, intimate relationship. The role of the social worker as a resource coordinator and source of referral available to facilitate access to all other human services, should be stressed. Persons in the LTA need to know that there are medical, legal and financial resources available to assist in those areas where social work services are not sufficient.

3. Intensive research into the LTA. Sociology and social work, with highly developed interviewing techniques and sensitivity to subtle communication, are

logical choices for the task of gathering extensive data on the strengths and areas of vulnerability of the LTA as an alternate lifestyle. If services to couples in the LTA are to be relevant and effective they cannot be based on mythology or stereotypes. At the present, additional case studies offer a beginning to help illuminate the variations which comprise the LTA. As fact begins to replace fiction, other "tighter" research designs will need to be employed, especially if a program of outreach based on scientific knowledge is to be undertaken.

In Summation

A recent case study of LTA couples revealed more similarities to marriage than differences. It also spotlighted a sizeable percentage of our population, (and, on that basis alone, a large potential client group) that feels cut off from traditional sources of help for marriage-type problems as well as those unique to the LTA.

The LTA is a lifestyle which may be growing and is definitely becoming increasingly visible. Persons who elect this alternative possess human needs and problems which must be addressed by the helping professions. At this time there are few services perceived by these persons to be readily accessible. Social workers have traditionally served as advocates in the area of marriage and the family. Now they can contribute a vital and needed service by emphasizing traditional social work practice roles and by finding new ways to meet the changing needs of a society in transition. If the social work profession does not move to fill a gap in human services, who will?

FOOTNOTES

¹Jessie Barnard, "Women, Marriage, and the Future," The Futurist, April, 1970, pp. 41-43.

²Herbert Otto, "Man-Woman Relationships in the Society of the Future," The Futurist, April, 1973, pp. 55-57.

³See e.g., Raymond Birdwhistell, "The Idealized Model of the American Family," Social Casework, LI (April, 1970), pp. 195-198, or William Lederer and Don Jackson, Mirages of Marriage (New York: W.W. Norton, 1968).

⁴Anne C. Blankenship, Sarah M. Friedman, Judy C. Rutledge, and Claudia A. Thompson, "The Living Together Arrangement: A Case Study," Unpublished MSW Thesis (University of South Carolina, 1974).

⁵Betty E. Cogswell and Marvin B. Sussman, "Changing Family and Marriage Forms: Complications for Human Service System," Nontraditional Family Forms in the 1970's, Marvin B. Sussman, ed., Minneapolis, Minnesota: National Council on Family Relations, 1972, p. 145.