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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Mental Health Issues in Children Born to Parents in Harmonious Relationships: A Theoretical Consideration

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: Dysfunctional children are usually associated with discordant families. However, children growing up in families where the partners share a mutually cordial relationship may also face stress and mental health issues. Not all children of mutually loving parents face difficulties in building relationships as adults. For those who do, it may be due to failure to anticipate these difficulties in later life while growing up. This aspect has not received any attention from mental health professionals so far.

Methods: The author tries to consider the difficulties that may be faced by children who grow up in compatible families and yet face trust and relationship difficulties as young adults.

Discussion and Conclusions: The treatment for these adults becomes challenging as they may present with a variety of mental health problems. The treatment of these adults presents a challenging aspect to mental health professionals. More studies are required to understand the nature of the psychological issues faced by these individuals and plan treatment for them.

Keywords: harmonious relationship-congenial relationship-compatible couples-mistrust-happy marriage-children-commitment

INTRODUCTION:

Development of trust towards a partner is often a naïve and fragile expression of hope¹. It assumes that the partner has similar feelings about the relationship. Marital and societal adjustment is intricately linked to mutual trust levels between partners².

The family forms the primary social institution, constituting a unit of the society at large. The love and affection children receive and witness while growing up from other members aids the socialisation process in the growing members³. Children growing amidst partners in a discordant and mistrusting relationship, in adult life, may find difficulties in establishing normal trust beliefs and behaviours which may affect their equations with their partners or spouses⁴. Whereas the mental health problems faced by these children⁵ have been studied and given importance by mental health professionals^{6,7}, the problems of adults growing up in non-discordant families have been depicted only in literary fiction so far. Whereas many of them may go on to lead normal lives, there may be individuals who fail to cope with the mismatch between reality and platonic ideals⁸ formed in their mind. *Gone Girl*⁹ brings this neglected developmental issue to our notice.

Familial theories of child rearing and its impact on growing children are intricately related and can mutually influence each other. With the world in the grip of a pandemic, social distancing has brought together erstwhile dispersed families, justifying both the origin and the need for this paper.

AIMS AND SCOPE:

Through this descriptive theoretical study, the author attempts to offer a unique perspective in the relationships of discordant and estranged couples versus those who share a cordial relationship. This is an attempt to introduce and discuss a relatively novel concept requiring more attention and understanding from mental health practitioners worldwide. More work is required on this future.

DISCUSSION:

Trust is an entity which is formed in early childhood¹⁰. Without trust, a person is incapable of revealing oneself. Trust is the cornerstone of having a life of harmony and integrity¹¹. Where trust is lacking, it is difficult to form mutually satisfying relationships¹². Lack of trust impedes free exploration of the world¹³. However, excessive trust can lead to vulnerability as well¹⁴.

Growing up amidst loving couples, affected individuals may develop an unreal schema of the society and have hopes of a utopian world in which the partner displays unwavering trust in them. They are more likely to develop anxiety as they discover that their partners may not mirror those ideals. Yet others may develop a phobic attitude to commitment to a marital, or a live-in partner^{15,16}. In certain cases, they may even undergo a traumatic alteration in the orientation of their gender^{17,18}. Disillusioned from setbacks, these adults are not able to confront the reality which does not match the settings of their happy parental upbringing. This issue can lead to maladjustment, culminating in myriad mental health issues, ranging from adjustment reactions to even psychosis. Crisis situations may be just as likely to arise with these children.

Commitment, which is also necessary for relationships to be fruitful in the long run, has links to partner dissatisfaction, devaluation of attractive alternatives and constructive responses to negative partner behaviours^{19,20,21}. Strong commitment predicts the individual's ability to make sacrifices in case need arises and also feel satisfied after sacrificing for the partner's benefit^{22,23}. Children growing up in families with loving relationships may be unable to perceive the need to sacrifice for their partner due to paucity in their experience of witnessing similar situations with their parents.

In terms of treatment, too, there are hurdles. Mental health professionals have traditionally been able to conceptualize the problems faced by children raised in conflicting homes. Schools of therapies used in such cases include family/couples therapy alongside treatment of the symptoms of the child or adolescent. However, when the problems of children growing in non-dysfunctional families are considered, family therapy as we know it, has no place. The key here lies in being able to enhance the individual's coping abilities and make them understand the societal needs and usual scenarios. Even then, the person may fail to adequately comprehend the pertinent issues due to a false sense of hope, failure to 'expect' and be realistic. The only solution in such cases may be to let the child come to terms with the world by himself with time. It may turn out to be calamitous in cases where the child is unable to sustain mental strength through an adequate repertoire of coping skills.

In the current age, where support systems and tolerance to stress are being stretched and personal dysfunctions are on the rise, the old paradigm where marriage is still a desirable

social institution has not entirely lost its validity but is in crisis. The new paradigm promotes self-importance and need for self-gratification as primary. This goes in conflict when commitment and long-term relationships are brought into consideration. This is further shaped by childhood experiences and societal expectations^{24,25}.

Many psychoanalysts, starting with Sigmund Freud²⁶, and then Melanie Klein²⁷ attempted to understand child development in the context of conflicts faced by a growing child. Their ideas have stood the test of time, though there may have been others whose views were found more acceptable and relatable to the social context. Erik Erikson²⁸ believed that the stages of life went on in such a way that any conflict generated at any stage would have a negative impact on the next. Lack of trust in personal and intimate relationships hinders the resolution of fidelity issues in these individuals. Thus, they are not able to gain success, joy, and contentment, much like those children who have seen their parents

dissatisfied with their marital lives. Therefore, these children too end up sharing the same fate as their explicitly troubled counterparts raised in discordant families.

CONCLUSIONS:

Management of these adults poses challenges to mental health professionals. However, in this 'brave new world' where mental health issues and relationship problems have become more common, this topic merits a study and likely to have interesting results. Future interventional studies in this area should offer a fresh perspective into understanding relationship difficulties in a world where maintaining these commitments grows more challenging than ever before.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT:

The author has no financial or personal conflict of interest to disclose.

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