The influence of social components in marriage counseling

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to focus on an additional counselling tool that complements the genogram and that will enable counsellors to successfully utilise the time spent during a counselling session. The article sets forth the thoughts of socialisation as well as various social components that influence the construction of reality of the self. These social components elaborate on aspects such as our identities, our beliefs, our evaluation, regulating our behaviour and focusing on our sense of self. The main objective is to answer the question: What is the influence of social components on marriage counselling?

Key Words: counselling, socialisation, counsellors**,** marriage**,** identities**,** behaviour.

Disciplines: Sociology, Psychology, Counselling, Family Studies.

1.   Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to focus on an additional counselling tool, complementary to the genogram and the egogram, which will enable counsellors to ensure successful utilisation of time spent during counselling. The goal of the marriage counsellor is not to effect any drastic change in the personality of either partner, but to help each to perceive his or her own reality, the reality of the partner, and that of the marriage or relationship more clearly, and to focus on social components which may influence the reality of both parties.

2.   Socialisation

Much of our self-knowledge comes from socialisation. During childhood, we are treated in particular ways by our parents, teachers and friends and we participate in religious, ethnic or

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cultural activities that later become significant aspects of ourselves. Children who spend their weekends being taken to art exhibitions and concerts by their parents, for example, may come to think of themselves as cultured individuals. Socialisation, then, forms the core of our experience. The regularities in those experiences may eventually become internalised as important aspects of the *self-concept*. The self-concept becomes the

> *collection of beliefs we hold about who we are...* (Taylor, Peplau and Sears 1994).

The self-concept is heavily influenced by factors that make us distinctive and, according to Taylor, Peplau and Sears, we will mention things about ourselves which make us distinctive in a particular situation. A deaf woman, for example, is more likely to mention that she is deaf if there are relatively few deaf people in her particular group, whereas she is more likely to mention the fact that she is a woman where she finds herself in a predominantly male group.

There are several concepts embedded within socialisation that help broaden our self-knowledge and that play a vital role in the socialisation process. Before we continue with the main focus of the article, we need to briefly discuss these concepts.

2.1 Reflected appraisals
Berne (1987) states:

> *Parents deliberately or unwarily, teach their children from birth how to behave, think, feel and perceive. Liberation from these influences is no easy matter, since they are deeply ingrained and are necessary during the first two or three decades of life for biological and social survival.*

C.H. Cooley, as referred to by Taylor, Peplau and Sears (1994) developed the concept of the *looking-glass self*, maintaining that people perceive themselves as others perceive and respond to them. Our perception of how other people react towards us is called *reflected appraisals.* Sometimes people give us explicit feedback about our qualities. This process often begins in socialisation, when our parents tell us not to be so shy, how good we are at the piano, how math is not our strong point, or what good readers we are. Generally speaking, there is a strong relationship between how parents think about their childrens' abilities and the own self-conceptions of the children on these same dimensions. In later childhood and early adolescence, feedback from peers may be more important. Adolescence brings with it additional sources of direct feedback, such as whether one is asked out on a date by many people or only a few, or whether the persons one asks out accept or decline the invitation. On the whole, people prefer objective feedback about their personal attributes.

> *Objective feedback is regarded as less biased and fairer than personal opinion* (Taylor et al. 1994).

The opinions of others still count, however. This is particularly the case when those opinions are shared by a large number of people when we may come to believe that they are true. We also learn about ourselves through interpreting the reactions that other individuals display towards us.

2.2 Self-perception
When we observe ourselves, we see that we tend to prefer certain activities above other activities, certain foods above other foods, or certain persons above other persons. Self-knowledge is gained when we are able to observe these regularities. On the other hand Bem's (Taylor et al. 1994) *self-perception* theory suggests that this source of self-knowledge may be useful primarily for aspects of the self that are not particularly central or important. For

example, we do not need to observe ourselves avoiding anchovies to know that we do not like anchovies. Bem feels that many important aspects of the self have clear internal referents in the form of enduring beliefs, attitudes and affective preferences.

2.3 Social comparison

At times, when we want to evaluate ourselves on a particular dimension or quality, some of the information is not readily available. As a result of this we assess our personal qualities by comparing ourselves to other people. Taylor, Peplau and Sears (1994) provide us with an example:

> *(Y)ou know if you are a good dancer or not by observing those around you and noting whether you seem to be dancing more gracefully than those people.*

Taylor, Peplau and Sears refer to this process as *social comparison*. We tend to compare ourselves with those who have similar abilities to us. We receive information from those with whom we can compete on an equal basis, and with this information we can evaluate our qualities and self.

Since the family is an intricate part of a larger network of culturally patterned ways of behaviour and shared ways of looking at the world, each individual becomes immersed in shaping mechanisms that vitally affect their own behaviours, perceptions and orientations toward all areas of life, including those relating to the opposite sex in dating, marriage and the family. The question can now be asked, what are the mechanisms that are brought into play to channel our perception and desires into socially approved and predetermined avenues?

While such orientational attitudes are ordinarily deemed a matter of personal preference, perceptions of marriage ability and desirability are, in fact, determined by a myriad of socio-cultural factors. These factors influence and shape each individual's reality. In a way, societies exercise control over their members and, to assure continuity over time, each society needs to exercise this control; it is a basic fact of social existence. An example of this can be gender-role, which focuses on the important facet of the socialisation of the members of both genders. Individuals must be socialised in order to become truly human. This process continues throughout life as new roles are played in each new situation or group that the individual enters. Social pressures mould newcomers so that they conform to the expectations and the customs of the particular group they are entering. Only then can the individuals accept their roles in the particular society. Each generation learns from the other in time (Duvall and Muller 1985). The resulting social control, however, is so pervasive that it affects almost every aspect of life. To demonstrate this aspect, as well as how the social components shape the individual's reality of what is expected or not, let us look at two people, Peter and Mary, as taken from the authors Henslin (1985), Goode (1982), Belkin and Goodman (1980), Bell and Vogel (1968) and Eshleman (1994).

Largely invisible to Peter and Mary, were the shaping devices put into effect by their society, culture and family, and what they constructed for themselves regarding their own schema. For example, their culture dictated that monogamy is the only acceptable form of marriage and their society had provided idealised expectations concerning the proper timing of marriage, which is after school. Their peer group becomes another shaping device and exercises remarkable influence over them. It exerts social control over personal choice in matters of height, weight, age, race, intelligence, social class as well as popularity and reputational qualities of their prospective 'dates'. Other sources of primary influence on Peter and Mary, that are worth mentioning, are their parents - whose residence in a certain social class and radically

segregated neighbourhood limits their choices, their religion - with membership typically following social class and radical lines and its highly specific teachings about right and wrong in dating and marriage, and their education whether private, public, or parochial schools - with their mix or lack thereof concerning social class and racial backgrounds.

In addition to all these influences are the broad socio-historical factors that become part of the choices that Peter and Mary make after their marriage. These influences largely determine their expectations concerning, for example what Peter is like as a male, Mary as a female, and their expectations of one another as a man and a woman. This becomes essential in their basic roles of husband and wife. Each of them experiences these roles largely as a matter of personal choice, generally remaining blind to the many pervasive cultural, social and historical factors that shape the choices they make.

These are the basic ideas and related behaviour moulds wherein we are immersed from birth and which constantly influence us regarding the ways in which we conceptualise and use space, time, money, work, property, leisure, sex and the behaviours considered proper among other people due to their designated relationships with one another. This idea, of proper relationships among people, becomes part and parcel of our basic orientation of life. We cannot escape these social influences, and they shape our expectations of life; directing not only how we ought to act towards others, but also our fundamental assumptions concerning who we are and, therefore, how others ought to regard, and act towards, us. We might say that these assumptions of relationships become rooted in our social being and that they become a major part of what goes into making us social creatures.

2.4 The dialogical nature of the self

Polischuk (1998) argues that the postmodern approaches to the understanding of the self are focused on metaphorical descriptions, of which the dialogical approach to the self (Taylor 1989 and Taylor 1991) is one of many. In this approach the self is conceptualised as multi-voiced and dialogical (Richardson, Rogers & McCarroll 1998). Hermans and Kempen (1993) explain the dialogical self as a combination of the concepts of "self" and "dialogue" in such a way that their theoretical integration opens up new vistas for the understanding of the social self. The function of the dialogical self can only be understood within the social nature of being human. The self is organized through socialisation in a context of dialogue.

Hermans (1999) points out that our thoughts frequently take the form of dialogue. Someone who thinks does not only experience a fleeting thought, he is also a thinker who perceives the thought, evaluates it, corrects it and reacts to it. At times other persons are involved in this process. Thoughts concerning a happening in the past, or an anticipated future event, are often incorporated in an imaginative discussion with others who ask questions, are of the same mind or differ and react in an agreeable or disagreeable manner. These events constitute the basis of the approach to a thinking self. Crossley (2000) believes that the construction of self is a temporal process during which a person has dialogue with various images of the self in both the future and the past. This construction of the self is mediated by the anticipated response of important and ordinary others. For the purposes of this study the dialogue of self is seen as the experience of an intercourse of voices which explains the identity of the person. Who, and what, a person is, is seen in the context of the voices which are incorporated in the dialogue of self.

The development of the dialogue of self finds its philosophical foundation in the writings of several scholars who were associated with the paradigm move from modernism to postmodernism in the description of the self. Richardson, Rogers & McCarrol (1998) point out

that the conceptualisation of the dialogue of self relies on theorists who visualise the self as a narrator of dialogue within the ambit of constructionism. Herman's, Kempen & van der Loon (1992) regard theorists such as Giambattista Vico (1968), Hans Vaihinger (1935) and George Kelly (1955) as important pioneers in constructivistic thought, as well as significant founders of the development of the dialogue of self.

The scientific work of Vico, *Scienza Nuova* (New Science) (1968), was originally published in 1744 and is accepted as one of the original works showing how the meanings of historical events are created by people (Hermans, Kempen & van der Loon 1992). Vico is thus generally recognised as the father of constructivism (Hermans & Kempen 1993). The approach of Vico (1968) to knowledge is focused on two important suppositions, namely that language has a body and that knowledge is created in relation to other persons (Hermans & Kempen 1993). He postulates that the relationship between thoughts and reality can only be understood in constructive behaviour-people create their own history. Contrary to the dualistic approach of Rene Descartes (1911), the father of modern philosophy (1596-1650), regarding the human body and spirit, Vico states that the body and the spirit are indivisible. Vico (1968) maintains that mankind, in a continual endeavour to understand the world, from the beginning of time, accepted the human body as a model to facilitate interpretation of the world and the environment. People still, in everyday life, use imagination as an instrument to interpret perceptual elements as significant forms of narrative in terms of which the environment is created and recreated. Vico (1968) calls this creative power in the person *ingenium* (imagination) (Hermans & Kempen 1993).

Hermans, Kempen & van der Loon (1992) state that the contributing work of Vaihinger (1935) sets out that fiction and myths are not reality, but only constructions that are easily formed from empirical elements. Vaihinger (1935) is of the opinion that fiction is a scientific instrument without which the higher development of thoughts would be impossible. According to Hermans, Kempen and van der Loon (1992) the constructionistic alternativism of Kelly (1955) is also of great importance for the development of the dialogue of self. When one wants to make sense of the world it should be interpreted, and alternative interpretations are always available. He views the person as a scientist who evaluates the constructed form by considering similarities and differences. Positive and negative experiences are interpreted and conseptualised as a construct. The individual invents constructs to describe the incident which is being experienced. Theories on life are created in this fashion.

All these pioneering theorists are responsible for challenging the concept of an objective reality, by acknowledging the idea of the subjective experience of a world wherein alternative interpretations may be made by the person.

Vygotsky (1986), James (1890) and Bahktin (1993) are among the theorists who made significant contributions in the conseptualising of the dialogue of self. (Hermans & Kempen 1993).

The dialogical view of self is based on the works of Vygotsky (1986), who creates the idea of thought as an internal discourse, and Bakhtin (1973), who creates the concept of dual voice discourse, as indications of the manner in which others are represented in a person's discourse and internal discussion (Hermans & Kempen 1993 and Richardson, Rogers & McCarroll 1998). Both theorists describe how external discourse is subjected to a process of internalisation and thus increasingly summarised and refined. It is pointed out by Taylor (1991) that this internalisation indicates that the entire conversation, including the inter-action of the

voices therein, is assimilated and united. The contributions of Vygotski (1986) and Bakhtin (1973) focus on the assumption that the 'thoughtworld' is socially constructed, that others play an important role in the development of this 'thoughtworld' and that the 'thoughtworld' then dictates the actions which are taken.

According to Day & Teppan (1996), both Vygotsky and Bakhtin indicate that the thoughtworld of a person is mediated and created semiotically and linguistically in the context of social relationships and interaction. Hermans & Kempen (1993) make the assumption that Bakhtin's ideas, regarding the dialogical character of the self, is in concord with what Mead (1934) believes is a process wherein the discourse, and the dialogue with others and the self, eventually develops into the reflective self. Mead (1934) points out that the self is not just a slavish experience and a reflection of social influence but rather acts as an innovative agent in a process of re-inspiration to take action personally (Hermans, 1999). Mead distinguishes between 'me' and 'my' in the experience of the self by pointing out that the social rules and rituals of the generalised others are placed in the 'my' while the 'I' continues to be innovative (Hermans, 2000). The 'my' represents the values and actions of the group, which the 'I', on the other hand, does not slavishly follow but rather initiates innovative actions which are contrary to what the group may expect. This interaction between the 'I - me' positions, which is described by Mead (1934), gives rise to alternative actions that are unique and different from what is expected from the individual.

Although all these theorists played an important role in the development of the philosophical foundation for the dialogical self, it is especially the concept of Bakhtin (1973) and his multitude of voices in a polyphonic self and the multiple 'I' positions concept of James (1890), that led to the conceptualisation of the dialogical self (Hermans & Kempen 1993).

Hermans, Rijks & Kempen (1993) approach their study of the self as a polyphonic narrative. A polyphonic narrative is a narrative wherein different voices, often with a variety of characters and representations of a number of multi-faceted relatively independent worlds, interact with the intention of creating a self-narrative. The idea of a polyphonic narrative is derived from the literary theory of Bakhtin (1923), concerning the poetry of Dostoevsky (Barresi 2002). The theory postulates that the self is, in some or other manner, constituted from a multiplicity of voices, each with its own quasi-independent perspective, and that these voices are related to one another dialogically. The idea of a polyphonic narrative accepts that there are several authors, each relating its own story in its own voice.

According to Barresi (2002), Bakhtin points out that there is a fundamental difference between the self and others. In order to understand a person's behaviour, it is important that integration takes place between first person (self) information and third person (other) information (Barresi, 2002). In the polyphonic narrative the various perspectives meet one another in time and space, in the narrative (and behaviour), often directed at one another, but never in an attempt to replace or overcome one another. Because no single voice in the polyphonic narrative can entirely agree with the other regarding interpretation of the deeds of one another, the self and the other is in continual discussion (dialogue) with one another. According to Tappan (2005), Bakhtin(1973) specifically points out that the power which drives the development of the self is the experience of dialogue. Dialogue makes it possible to study the internal world of a single person in the form of an interpersonal relationship (Hermans 1996). When the internal thoughts of a character are transformed into a judgement, the dialogical relationship between this judgement and the judgements of other persons spontaneously come to the fore.

James (1890), according to Barresi (2002), in his theory regarding the self, makes a clear distinction between the two aspects of the self, the self as the subject of 'I' (the self as the judge) and the self as the object of 'my' (the self as knowable). The 'I' organises and interprets experiences in a purely subjective manner and has three characteristics, namely continuity, distinction and desire (Hermans 1996).

Continuity is founded on a feeling of personal identity and stability over time, while reflecting the distinction of the personal experience of existence from that of others.

Continuity creates a feeling of personal identity and stability over time, while the distinction gives the impression of an existence divorced from others. An experience of own desire becomes possible in the continuing application and rejection of thoughts wherein the self (as knower) manifests as an active processor of experiences.

In his conceptualisation of the self, James, in Baressi (2002) points out that the 'my', as the objective experience of the self, can be distinguished as having three distinct facets, namely the materialistic 'my', the social 'my' and the spiritual 'my'. The 'my' is an empirical self which includes, in the broadest sense, all that the person can refer to as his (Hermans, 1996). The indication of what belongs to the person defines the basic aspect of the self as an extension, the extended self. Baressi (2002) makes a further deduction in stating that the subjective experience of the 'I' cannot be postulated in this fashion, but that the thought which is being thought is, in itself, the thinker. The border between what the self is and what the non-self is, lies in what the person's emotional attitude is regarding a particular object or a thought.

The development of the experience of the self is, according to Crossley (2000), related to a child's arrival in the world of language and symbols. This world of language and symbols provides a system of etiquette to the child to enable him to distinguish between himself (I and my) and other persons or things (you and it) in the development of an experience of himself. The development of the dialogical self is, for Hermans & Kempen (1993), founded upon two important goals, namely (a) to discover the forerunners to an adult self in closer proximity with the initial appearance of dialogue, and (b) to determine when and how the social environment and institutions form, organise and limit the potential attainability of I-positions in the dialogical self.

Dialogue develops from random routines, which Fogel, De Koeyer, Bellagamba & Bell (2002) refer to as a dialogical framework, which is either creative (it changes and develops continuously) or rigid (it remains unchanged). There is a non-verbal form of the dialogue of self which develops during the infant years. Hermans & Kempen (1993) show that an ability to make a distinction between the self and others (differentiation) develops from birth. This enables a person to establish an own orientation towards others. Differentiation and orientation between the two poles of communication (self and others) is necessary for the development of dialogue.

Lyra (1999) makes the assumption that an analysis of the process of dialogue between mother and infant serves as a microscopic lens which enables one to understand the dynamics which regulate dialogue. According to Hermans & Kempen (1993) there are four conditions required for the proper development of the dialogical self, namely:

- interaction between mother and child, where the mother creates the context for dialogue,

- a memory, to facilitate bringing the events from different contexts and relate them to the present moment,
- an imagination which combines actual events to form new significant structures, and
- language, which gives the child the ability to exchange recalled events with the products of his imagination, thus enabling him to relate them to others.

When children reach an age where they have developed the ability to converse and think about themselves (the 'I' concerning the 'my' dialogue), the community increasingly influences the organisation of their worlds. Because the 'my' is also a 'social my', it is not possible for children to think, feel or act in isolation from the community of which they are part. Children engage constantly in dialogue with members of the community (for example, father, mother, uncles, aunts) who position them (for example, child, friend) according to different social situations (for example, family, school) wherein the children then function. The feedback which a child receives in this process, whether positive or negative, is interpreted by the child, according to his construction of the self-narrative, from 'you are...' statements to 'I am...' statements. As the child develops the ability to understand the role of 'others' the child begins to speak to others in the same manner that others speak to the child. The child then arranges the spectrum of possible positions in the dialogical self accordingly. During this process certain positions acquire a more powerful or significant place in the dialogical self than other positions do. This domination, as an intrinsic element of dialogue, in placing one position above another, organises and limits the multitude of possible positions in the process of socialisation. In this fashion the child develops, resists or avoids certain positions more than others (Hermans & Kempen), 1993).

Children have a multitude of 'selves', but the number of voices increases drastically during adolescence as a result of the enlarging environment and a change in their cognitive capacities (Kunnen & Bosma 2000). These voices remain compartmentalised until they discover contradictions and confrontations in the self during mid-adolescence. This leads to confusion, ambivalence and conflict. It is only during late adolescence that a reflection on the voices, and a purposeful dialogue, takes place between the voices. At this stage the adolescent has developed the cognitive ability to construct higher levels of integration for contrasting and conflicting voices. During the development towards adulthood these voices are organised into more manageable patterns. This construction of an integrated and coherent system of multiple voices is a developmental accomplishment of adulthood. Tappan (2005) shows that identity, even in the development of oppressed minority groups, is a negotiated and dialogical phenomenon.

In order for us to expand our knowledge of socialisation, we need to look at ourselves, and more importantly, at the reality of the self.

3. Reality of the self

Counselling one person is a difficult task; counselling a husband and wife is eminently more difficult, and requires special skills and alertness in the counsellor. Frequently one, or both, of the spouses are filled with scepticism about the value of counselling, and sometimes there is an attitude of resistance or even hostility. It has been said that marriage counselling is "one of the most difficult and sensitive of therapies – filled with psychological traps and surprises". Before initiating therapy, and frequently thereafter, counsellors should look at themselves and clarify the understanding of the social components present and examine how they are able to derive a clear understanding of what reality of the self means. Counsellors should ask themselves: (1) What is the reality of the self? and (2) Where does self-knowledge come from?

Let us first pay attention to the question: What is the reality of the self?

Watzlawick, Weakling and Fisch (1974) stress the fact that the 'real' is seldom, in psychopathology or counselling, the 'real' of a thing in itself (if indeed such a thing can be comprehended), but rather the referent, as it is demonstrated and understood. 'Real' is thus made up of opinions, in the example of the meaning the situation has for a group of persons. 'Real' is what a sufficiently large number of people have agreed to call real (Watzlawick et al. 1974). Keeping this in mind Watzlawick, in his book 'How real is real' (1976), draws a distinction between two types of reality; a *first-order reality* and a *second-order reality*. A first-order reality is based on a consensus about perceptions. In other words, it is the physical properties of things such as 'Gold is a yellow metal'. The first-order reality is thereby based on experimental, repeatable and verifiable evidence. The second-order reality is the attributed meanings, significance, or values that people give things. It is thereby the symbolic or sociocultural value of the events of the first-order reality. To explain these two concepts more simply, we may refer to Watzlawick's example of gold as referred to by Geisler (1991):

> *The first-order reality of gold (that is its physical characteristics) is completely known and can be verified whenever necessary. The meaning that gold has had in human life since ancient times and the fact that it is given a value (which is a totally specific aspect of reality) twice a day in the City of London, and that this attribution of worth largely determines many other aspects of our reality – all this has very little, if at all, to do with its physical characteristics. It is however this second-order reality of gold which can make one immensely rich or bankrupt.*

The reality of the self consists of various other explanatory concepts, namely *social identity*, *self-schema*, *self-esteem*, *self-monitoring behaviour*, and *self-focusing*. An understanding of these concepts will add value to our understanding of the reality of the self.

3.1 Social identity
According to Tajfel, in Taylor et al. (1994), *social identity* is

> *...the part of an individual's self-concept which derives from [his or her] membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership.*

The self, or self-concept, is also a collection of beliefs which we hold about ourselves such as: What are our most prominent characteristics? What are we good at? What are we poorly at? What kinds of situations do we prefer or avoid? Therefore, we acquire our self-concept, or self-identity, primarily through our social interactions, and the self with its acquisitions regarding various components.

These social groups, as mentioned above, include one's family, community, religious or ethnic group, and other groups that highlight or reinforce important aspects of the self.

> *We are born into a particular family, a particular ethnic group and sometimes a particular religious group. As we get older, the attributes we value in ourselves lead us to pick social groups that reflect and reinforce those values"* (Taylor et al. 1994).

Thus the self-concept and social identity mutually determine and shape each other.

If we focus on ethnic identity to enlighten social identity, note must be taken of the complexity of this identity. Carmen Guanipa-Ho and Jose Guanipa (1998) provide us with the following statement:

> *Ethnicity refers to a specific characteristic of shared unique cultural traditions, and a heritage that persists across generations. Ethnic identification is defined as a real awareness of self within a specific group, which is followed by a great sense of respect and pride, and it constitutes a base for the development of a healthy self-concept.*

During the adolescent and young adult years when people are forming their sense of themselves, reconciling ethnic background with mainstream culture can be difficult. An example of this struggle is clearly illustrated by the effect that the Apartheid System had on the South African Black Community. Some of them still live according to traditions which closely resemble those of the pure African style of the past. There are others who resist urbanisation (the so-called migrants) and who, for example, attempt to strictly limit their interaction with people of the town, and who only try to associate with people from their own home areas and visit them in the rural areas as often as possible (Bester 1995).

Taylor, Peplau & Sears (1994) mention that some adolescents are caught between their parent's ethnic beliefs and values, and that of the mainstream society and therefore they may identify with both mainstream culture and their ethnic group, creating what is called a *bicultural* or *integrated identity*. Others may maintain a strong ethnic identity but have few ties to the majority culture, maintaining a *separated* identity. Individuals who give up their ethnic heritage in favour of mainstream culture are said to be *assimilated*. Finally, some adolescents and young adults develop only weak ties to both their ethnic culture and the mainstream culture and feel marginal, like outsiders in both cultures. It is important to note that ethnic identity is an identity that develops from within, instead of an image that is imposed by society stereotypes. However, Maldonado in (Guanipa-Ho and Guanipa 1998) states:

> *It is important to say that the stereotypes that a large society places on ethnic groups can be a great contribution to the adolescent's sense of pride or shame.*

Therefore ethnic identity is an important part of self-knowledge with respect to social identity.

Altogether, the self-concept is a complex collection of diverse information that is somehow held together as if glued in place. If each of us is not just a random collection of information, what then is the 'glue' that holds all the information together in a unified self-image? The answer lies in the concept of the schema.

3.2 Self-schema

According to Taylor, Peplau & Sears (1994) a schema is

> *an organised, structured set of beliefs and cognitions about some concept or stimulus...self-schemas describe the dimensions along which you think about yourself.*

Each of us has a self-schema in which our self-knowledge is organised. Self-schemata reflect all our past self-relevant experiences; all of our current knowledge and existing memories about ourselves; and our conception of what we were like in the past, what we are like now and what we may be like in the future. From this the counsellor must take note. A person's self-schema is the sum of everything that the individual knows or can imagine about himself or herself (Baron & Byrne 1994).

People hold self-conceptions about their current qualities as well as conceptions of themselves that may become self-descriptive at some time in the future. Taylor, Peplau and Sears (1994) call these *possible selves*. Some of these involve goals or roles to which people aspire. Possible 'selves' function in much the same way as self-schemas. They help people to articulate their goals and develop behaviours that will enable them to fulfil those goals. Not all self-schemata are positive. People also hold well articulated beliefs about themselves on negative qualities.

If the self is the centre of our social universe, and if our self-schemata are well developed, it follows that we should do a better job of processing information that is relevant to ourselves rather than any other kind of information. Self-relevant information should be more likely to capture our attention, to be entered into memory, and to be recalled. Taylor, Peplau and Sears (1994) state that this tendency, for information related to the self to be most readily processed and remembered, is known as the *self-reference effect*. Though the self-reference effect has been firmly established experimentally, what is it about relating information to the self that enhances our ability to process it effectively? In an important study Klein and Loftus, in Baron and Byrne (1994), reasoned that the recall of self-relevant information might be facilitated in one of two ways, each of which has been shown to enhance memory. First, self-relevance encourages what is termed *elaborative processing*, or the tendency to think about the meaning of words or events. Second, self-relevance might facilitate *categorical processing*, or the tendency to place stimuli in specific categories. Both mechanisms underlie the self-reference effect, making it easier to recall self-relevant information.

But how do we make use of the self-relevant information or, in other words, how do we evaluate our self-schema? The answer can be found in the concept of self-esteem.

3.3 Self-esteem

Self-esteem refers to the self-evaluations each individual makes. Persons expressing high self-esteem believe themselves to be fundamentally good, capable, and worthy. Low self-esteem is a view of oneself as useless, inept, and unworthy. The opinions expressed by others probably help shape these attitudes and an outsider's opinions may sometimes bring about changes in one's self-esteem. According to Taylor, Peplau & Sears (1994),

> *People with high self-esteem...use feedback in a self-enhancing manner...people with low self-esteem...have more adverse emotional and behavioural reactions to criticism or other kinds of negative feedback.*

Self-evaluations are also affected by the characteristics of others with whom we compare ourselves.

Another aspect of self-esteem, that should be taken into account, is the discrepancy, or difference, between the self and the ideal self. The difference between persons' perceptions of how well they are functioning and how well they believe they should be functioning is known as a <u>self-ideal</u> <u>discrepancy</u>. For example, Michelle sees herself as anxious, a dreamer, and irresponsible, but she would like to be relaxed and responsible. The self-ideal discrepancy indicates the changes a person would like to make in order to achieve their ideal. We can also make the assumption that the less discrepancy there is between self and one's ideal, the higher one's self-esteem ought to be.

Research has consistently shown that having positive self-regard, or self-esteem, is generally beneficial, provided that it is not carried to extremes. For example, people with high self-esteem tend to be less lonely than those whose self-esteem is low, suggesting that a positive self-

evaluation is associated with good social skills. If self-esteem represents the characteristic evaluation an individual makes, it would seem to be an internal trait or dispositional variable. If self-esteem can be raised or lowered in response to the evaluations of others, it would seem to be a temporary state that fluctuates with changes in the external situation. In fact, both the trait and state concept of self-esteem are accurate.

When self-esteem is conceptualised as a trait, it is evaluated along a positive-negative scale that indicates where the person measures in relation to others. Dispositional self-esteem does not indicate a totally unchanging characteristic, set in stone, but rather a general tendency to evaluate oneself in a relatively consistent way at different times and in many different situations. If your dispositional self-esteem is higher than the person sitting next to you, you probably feel better about yourself than that person feels about himself, both now and in the future. Most studies of trait self-esteem concentrate on environmental factors that bring about individual differences. A classic example is that of a child whose parents divorce; self-blame follows when the child makes the false assumption that a parent is leaving because the child did something wrong. Such childhood misperceptions may underlie the finding that negative childhood events, such as having a parent enter a mental hospital, divorce, remarry or die, are associated with low general self-esteem as an adult. In contrast to the long-lasting effects of early experiences on dispositional self-esteem, situational effects in later life are likely to be temporary (Baron & Byrne 1994, Taylor et al. 1994 and Fullerton 1977).

Until now we have discussed how our identity is shaped by the societal groups, how we process information, and how we evaluate ourselves. A question that is raised when revising these aspects is: what is the influence of all these aspects on an individual? The answer lies within the concept of self-monitoring behaviour.

3.4 Self-monitoring behaviour
Self-monitoring refers to the degree to which individuals regulate their behaviour on the basis of the external situation and the reactions of others, or on the basis of internal factors such as their own beliefs, attitudes and interests. In the original formulation of self-monitoring it was assumed that high self-monitors engage in role-playing in an attempt to behave so as to receive positive evaluations from others. More recently, Schwalbe, in Baron & Byrne (1994), proposed that the high self-monitoring behaviour of some individuals is based not on skilfully tuned role-playing, in response to the reactions of other people, but on relatively permanent images or 'scripts' assumed to be appropriate in a given situation.

The ability to regulate our behaviour lies in our ability to become self-aware or self-focused. This is the final concept to be discussed within the reality of the self.

3.5 Self-focusing
Self-focusing refers to the centrality of an individual's sense of the self. The extent to which you are self-focused is indicated by the degree to which your attention is directed inward towards yourself as opposed to outward, towards the environment. Self-focusing is tied to memory and cognition. You can focus on yourself only if you can recall relevant past events and process relevant current information. Two areas of memory can be identified in respect of self-focusing. Self-focus affects the accuracy of biographical recall, or how well you can retrieve factual information about yourself, and the complexity of self-descriptive judgements. Duval and Wickland, in Baron & Byrne (1994), suggested that a person with a high sense of self-focusing, or self-awareness either acts to reduce any discrepancies between his self-concept and actual behaviour or avoids situations in which such discrepancies occur. In both instances, behaviour is influenced by whether or not attention is focused on the self.

As with self-monitoring behaviour, those whose self-focus is strong would be expected to show consistent behaviour across situations, while a weak self-focus would be associated with behaviour that changes as the situation evolves. Because self-concept contains multiple elements, it is possible to focus on only a portion of it at a time. Many people store positive and negative aspects of themselves separately in their memory. Thus, if the individual focuses on the negative, his mood and subsequent behaviour will be different to what they would be if the focus is on the positive.

Some individuals, however, seem to store positive and negative self-knowledge together; the result is a less negative affect and a higher self-esteem. The most general conclusion is that the organisation of self-evaluations affects self-esteem and mood beyond what could be predicted on the basis of the amount of positive and negative content. Though the self-content, on which a person focuses, influences his mood, mood also affects self-focusing behaviour, and environmental factors in turn affect the individual's mood. The extent and the content of the self-focusing behaviour, as well as mood, can affect expectations.

The second part of the question, which counsellors should ask themselves, with regard to self-knowledge, is: where does self-knowledge come from? With what has already been said in mind, it is apparent that knowledge of the self comes from many sources, such as receiving and processing information, self-evaluation, self-awareness, and focusing on the internal rather than external aspects. Some of it may be seen to be spontaneous, or a realisation that something is true of the self, without any certainty of where that knowledge comes from. More commonly, however, we can identify the origins of our beliefs about ourselves in specific experiences. To understand this question, one must focus on the process of socialisation as a tool to construct one's own perceived reality with regard to the marriage or the family. We cannot, however, ignore the complexity of the individual and the internal processes that form the perceptions of each and every person.

We have mentioned several factors which play a critical role in shaping our reality and contribute to our socialisation. What then is the influence of social components on marriage counselling? We answer this question in the following brief discussion.

4. Social components

We need to focus on the social components and their influence on marriage counselling and briefly discuss the various mechanisms that the counsellor should take note of when counselling a married couple. As was mentioned before, socialisation plays an important role in an individual's perception of reality. The following factors are the main focus: (a) religion, because it teaches the individual the rights and wrongs of dating and of marriage, (b) education, since the opportunity to mix with other social classes or racial groups, or a lack of such opportunity, can influence an individual greatly, and (c) ethnic or cultural background. We can combine these factors to see what influence they have on a married couple, for instance John and Mary, who present for counselling. John was brought up in a household where weekends were spent on either a rugby or a cricket field. His parents motivated him to participate in these sporting pastimes. He considers himself a sporting person. His parents also took him to church with them. They had a positive, yet strict, outlook on life. He attended a public school with mixed races and social classes and had friends in all spheres. Mary, on the other hand, had a different upbringing. Her weekends were spent with her parents at museums and at the theatre. She considers herself to be a cultured person. She attended the Catholic Church with her parents who were particularly strict regarding dating arrangements. Mary was generally not allowed to date in high school and when consent was given, it had to be with a young man from

their church. Mary also attended a private school for girls and had friends that came from the same social class. She barely mixed with persons from another race or ethnic group.

The marriage counsellor has to take these social components into consideration when counselling John and Mary, since most of their conflicts and differences lie within their different social upbringings. The way they view themselves are poles apart and they may experience conflict when giving their respective opinions about each other's socialised skills. It is safe to say that the way we've been socialised differs from person to person.

Personal preference, as well as our perception of marriage, is determined by socio-cultural factors because social components shape our reality of what is expected from us. Thus, depending on our social skills and cultural background, our perceptions of marriage will differ. Again it is important for the counsellor to take note of these different perceptions because they can create an atmosphere where both parties are allowed to share these differences and resolve their conflict. These social components also shape our reality of ourselves, and this aspect emphasises our identity, schema, esteem, behaviour, and focus. We need to take a closer look at the social groups involved because they also provide some of the social components that may influence marriage and the counselling process. These groups determine what we are born into, such as our particular family, particular ethnic group, and particular religious group. All these components make up part of a social package, and each individual belongs to one of them.

5. Conclusion

Each and every individual constructs his or her own reality regarding a marriage or a relationship. With that reality they enter into a relationship or marriage without relating the individual content thereof to their partner. Since each person or spouse has his or her own framework, containing their reality or perception of themselves, others, and of the world, we should rather refer to reality as a 'perceived reality'. This social construction of reality is the process whereby people assign meanings to social phenomena, such as objects, events, and characteristics, which almost always cause those, who draw upon these meanings, to emphasise some aspect of specific phenomena and to ignore others. These assigned meanings have remarkable consequences for the individuals involved, depending on how they interact with each other, what decisions they make, and what actions they take. Following this perspective, sociologist Jessie Bernard in Schwartz & Scott (1994) argued that men and women are likely to view and experience their marriages differently. During counselling the counsellor must take note of the perceived reality each individual has created for himself or herself through the process of socialisation. This reality must be identified, within each individual, by using narrative therapy, or any other accepted means, and, although it may be subjective, this method will enhance communication significantly during counselling.

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