

NOTE
THE PREDICTION OF SUCCESS OR FAILURE IN
FORCED MARRIAGES

One of the truly distressing problems which a busy pastor is bound to encounter from time to time is that of counseling both parents and child in the case of premarital pregnancy. Emotions usually run high at a time like this. The parents, no matter how much their neglect and carelessness may have contributed to the delinquency of their child, usually are deeply upset. The mothers in particular have a tendency to seek refuge in hysterical recriminations, and their emotional histrionics seem to be in direct correlation with their past failure to instruct, guide, and protect their growing child. Some parents, rising up in misplaced indignation, are for abandoning their "black sheep," shorn of all family protection, to the cold winds of public opprobrium. Others would seek vengeance on the offending (usually young) villain. Still others, trying to be realistic under these difficult circumstances, face the *fait accompli* honestly and ask themselves what they can do to make the best of an obviously bad situation. It is at this point that the pastor is usually called in for consultation. What advice shall he give?

When premarital pregnancy arrives, there are only three possible choices: marriage, illegitimacy, or abortion. All three choices are being used to a considerable degree at the present time. Although abortion is against both the laws of God and (if "criminal") of the state, a great many do take place: estimates range from a half million to well over a million annually in this country. Many believe that between 85 or 90 percent of these are with married women, but this still leaves an appalling number for the unmarried. Illegitimacy is chosen in a relatively large number of cases. From 75,000 to 120,000 babies are born out of wedlock each year. This is to say that about four babies out of every 100 born in the United States are born from illegitimate unions. In regard to marriage as a choice, it is not known how many marriage ceremonies come after the advent of pregnancy, but the number is believed to be considerable. The only study on this subject with which the writer is acquainted estimates that 20 percent of all first births within the marriages studied (1,670) were conceived before marriage.¹ Obviously, there is no way of ascertaining how representative of the country as a whole such a study may be. It would seem, however, that one would encounter great variation from one section of the country to another, between different

¹ Harold T. Christensen, *Marriage Analysis* (New York: Ronald Press, 1950), p. 153.

ances, and also among various social classes. At any rate, students of marriage are agreed that the phenomenon is prevalent and merits serious attention.

As the problem will be presented to the pastor, he will have the choice of counseling either marriage or illegitimacy. Are there any objective norms by which he can judge individual cases? One well-known marriage counselor found in his study of elopements that two-thirds of the marriages ended in failure when the elopement was motivated by pregnancy.² Other students of marriage present some evidence of a relationship between premarital intercourse and success or failure in marriage.³ Interesting as these findings may be, they present, after all, only statistical averages, and consequently are not too helpful in dealing with an individual case.

Very often there will be cogent reasons for the marriage: the reputation of the girl and her family, the legitimacy of the child to be born, the expense and difficulty of sending the girl away to some hospital where she will not be known so that the child can be born and placed in an institution secretly, etc. Further, *res urget*: there is little time to study the characters of the future partners, and under the fear, shame, and general emotional stress they are enduring, there is every possibility they will express feelings of affection and free consent which have little correspondence to the real relationship existing between them.

The experienced counselor will not be deceived by any of these phenomena. His chief interest will be to judge whether the prospective union offers some guarantees of happiness and stability to the parties, since matrimony was never meant to be a punishment for previous indiscretions. The following considerations will necessarily run through his mind. A "forced" marriage is one which by definition would not be contracted at this time except for the condition of the bride. In this case marriage is being sought as the easiest way out of a socially embarrassing situation. No doubt, considerable pressure is being brought on the young man by one or both of the interested families; his sense of duty and responsibility is being appealed to; in general, he is being made to feel that "this is the right thing to do." As a result he may be entering marriage emotionally unprepared, and his bride likewise. Both may eventually feel resentment because marriage was contracted under pressure. Both parties may find relations with their in-laws

² Paul Popenoe, *Modern Marriage* (New York: Macmillan, 1940), p. 225.

³ Katherine B. Davis, *Factors in the Sex Life of Twenty-two Hundred Women* (New York: Harper, 1929), p. 59; Gilbert V. Hamilton, *A Research in Marriage* (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1929), pp. 393-95; Lewis Terman, *Psychological Factors in Marital Happiness* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1938), pp. 324-25.

strained and tense, at least in the beginning. Further, when conflicts arise in married life, as they are bound to do, the whole sordid past may be cast up by one or both of the partners, and what started as a minor quarrel may soon assume the proportions of a bitter duel in mutual recrimination. Is it not possible that this sad state of affairs may continue until one or the other can endure it no longer and will decide to break the union, or else seek refuge outside the home?

Are there any objective tested norms which can guide the counselor in making his decision? I believe that there are a few fairly reliable and I present the following study with the hope that it will be of some assistance in dealing with individual cases. My study covered 368 marriages which ended in divorce or separation. These were "forced" marriages in the sense that the bride was pregnant at the time of marriage. The cases are sufficiently representative of a large urban Catholic population, since they are all the cases of this nature appearing during several years before a chancery separation court in a diocese where all divorce or separation cases must be brought before the chancery court under pain of severe penalties. Hence the cases are representative of the "practicing" Catholic population in this large urban center. Of course, there is no way of finding out how many cases of similar nature ignored the ecclesiastical penalties and went directly to the civil courts.

Let us study these marriages in some detail: first, in order to get acquainted with their general characteristics; secondly, to isolate some factors which may have predictive value. Since we do not have adequate data on the characteristics of happily married couples living in the same area, we shall use as our term of comparison the data we have obtained from the analysis of over seven thousand broken marriages drawn from the same urban environment. The necessity of using the larger group of broken marriages as a term of comparison is not ideal, but I feel that for many of the characteristics studied they approximate the general average of the total population. At any rate, although the discrepancies may not be as great as if we were to use the general average of the total population, where deviations do exist they will supply valuable insight into the cases under study.

The information on the occupation of the husband involved in the cases studied shows that they are drawn primarily from the working classes. It appears from Table 1 that the unskilled, semi-skilled, and skilled classes furnished 86.7 percent of the broken forced marriages and only 74.7 percent of the total group of broken marriages studied. This difference is quite informative, although we cannot conclude, on the basis of these data alone, that there are more cases of illegitimate conception among these classes.

The data merely show that there are more cases of broken marriage involving this factor among the working classes.

TABLE 1

Occupational Class of the Husbands in Forced Marriages and in All Cases of Broken Marriages

OCCUPATIONAL CLASS	FORCED MARRIAGES	TOTAL GROUP
Unskilled.....	26.7	27.8
Semi-skilled.....	30.5	24.0
Skilled.....	29.5	22.9
White-collar (lower class).....	7.6	15.3
White-collar (upper class).....	1.0	8.6
Professional.....	1.0	1.2

In all studies of separation and divorce considerable interest is shown in the number of children per family, on the premise that the presence of children in a family indicates marital adjustment and acts as a bond of unity in case of future difficulties. By the very nature of the case, there will be a child or children in most of the families under study. However, since it is possible that the child precipitating the marriage was not altogether welcome, it is naive to conclude that its presence would necessarily stabilize the forced union.

How many children were born to these families? The general average was 1.59 per family. Table 2 gives the breakdown according to number. It should be noted that the figure, 9.5, for "no children" in the forced marriage group indicated that there were no children alive at the time of separation. Perhaps the most interesting item in the table is that 51.5 percent had but the one child that was presumably the cause of the marriage. This would seem to signify that over half the marriages developed serious problems very early and gives added significance to the term "forced" marriage.

TABLE 2

Number of Children per Family for Forced Marriages and Total Group

NUMBER OF CHILDREN	FORCED MARRIAGES	TOTAL GROUP
No children.....	9.5	35.3
1 child.....	51.5	27.3
2 children.....	21.9	18.5
3 children.....	8.6	9.0
4 children.....	4.8	4.8
5 or more children.....	3.8	5.1

When did these unions tend to break up? Table 3 shows that they were relatively unstable. Approximately one out of every six failed within the first year and over 56 percent within the first five years of marriage. There may be those who will question the pertinency of premarital pregnancy in the disintegration of those unions which lasted for more than ten years. However, I am convinced from the testimony of the couples themselves that this was a real factor in the breakdown. These couples invariably prefaced the explanation of their difficulties with some remark such as, "You know, our marriage got started wrong in the first place."

TABLE 3
Duration of Forced Marriages and Total Group

DURATION	FORCED MARRIAGES	TOTAL GROUP
Less than 1 year.....	18.1	13.7
1 to 5 years.....	38.1	29.2
5 to 10 years.....	20.0	22.4
Over 10 years.....	23.9	34.7

What were the factors precipitating the breakdown of these marriages? The data on this point reveal clearly the areas where forced marriages find adjustment most difficult. Adultery had occurred in 41.9 percent of the cases (30.5 on the part of the husband; 11.4, the wife). Immaturity and irresponsibility in one party or both parties accounted for another 22 percent. Approximately 19 percent broke up after constant bickering and quarreling, so that they could be placed on the list of "incompatible," if that much-abused term still has any meaning. Hostility and interference from the in-laws were alleged in the remaining 18 percent of the cases. Hence, infidelity, immaturity, incompatibility, and interference of in-laws shape the prevalent patterns of maladjustment and disintegration in forced marriages.

Thus far we have been dealing with the characteristics of the actual marriages which followed premarital pregnancy. This gives us some idea of what may happen when an alternative to illegitimacy is sought in marriage. Let us turn now to the premarital characteristics of the group to see if it is possible to isolate some factors which may enable the counselor to predict the outcome of such a choice in individual cases.

In the first place, one out of every four of these unions was a mixed marriage. Obviously it is impossible to ascertain whether the disintegrating factor was the forced marriage or the difference in religion. At any rate, it is safe to conclude that the combination of the two makes for a very unstable marriage. This is true especially where the wife is the non-Catholic party.

Approximately three times as many cases of this type appeared in the forced-broken marriage group as in the general group of broken marriages. The great danger in any kind of mixed marriage under these circumstances is that the non-Catholic party, who does not hold marriage indissoluble, may readily use marriage as a facile means of escaping from a difficult situation, since a subsequent divorce is always possible.

The length of acquaintance and of engagement before marriage has always been considered important in predicting the success or failure of the marriage. It will be seen from Table 4 that over one out of five of the forced marriages were entered into after an acquaintance of less than six months, and nearly two-thirds after an acquaintance of less than one year. This is rather clear evidence of immaturity and precipitation. The information on the engagement characteristics of this group presents the same pattern. Approximately 70 percent were not engaged and the majority of those that were, had been engaged for less than six months. The engagement of a couple serves several purposes in our society. It is a clear declaration by two people that they are in love and intend to get married in due season. Further, it is a period when the prospective mates can come to know each other's character a little better and also can have some time to make definite plans for the future. Since 70 percent of the forced marriages had no engagement period, it would appear that many of them had entered marriage before they had reached that stage in their friendship where they were ready to make their mutual affection public by the act of becoming engaged. Further, they would be handicapped in their marriage by not having a sufficient knowledge of each other's personality. Finally, they would probably have been plunged into the difficult task of founding a home without having made adequate plans and preparation.

TABLE 4

The Length of Acquaintance and Engagement Period for Forced Marriages and for Total Group

LENGTH	FORCED MARRIAGES	TOTAL GROUP
Acquaintance		
Less than 6 months.....	21.0	17.6
6 months to 1 year.....	41.0	27.0
1 year to 2 years.....	13.3	19.2
Over 2 years.....	24.8	36.2
Engagement		
None.....	69.6	35.6
Less than 6 months.....	20.0	34.5
6 months to 1 year.....	8.6	22.1
1 year and over.....	1.9	7.7

One of the most revealing factors in the forced marriages being studied is the age of the parties at marriage. Maturity is not necessarily related to age, and it is well known that the age at which people marry varies according to culture, race, and social class. Nevertheless, any marked deviation from the prevalent standards of a given group is evidence of uncustomary behavior and is likely to result in serious maladjustment. This is particularly true if the deviation consists in a high percentage of early marriages. In any given cultural group, youth is brought to maturity and prepared to fulfill its obligations in life only at a certain age, so that circumstances forcing an individual to embrace a mature status in the group before this time are likely to find him unprepared for his role. Fortunately we know the age-at-marriage characteristics of the total population from which our cases were drawn. For all practical purposes they correspond rather closely with the figures of our total divorced group, so that when we present the comparative data any deviation which appears will be a deviation from the prevalent customs of the general population.

TABLE 5

Age at Marriage of Husband and Wife in Forced Marriages and in Total Group of Broken Marriages

AGE AT MARRIAGE	HUSBAND		WIFE	
	Forced Marriages	Total Group	Forced Marriages	Total Group
Under 18 years.....	3.8	.6	20.0	7.0
Under 19 years.....	10.4	2.8	42.9	17.7
Under 20 years.....	20.8	6.7	56.3	28.7
Under 21 years.....	34.2	13.0	64.8	39.7
Under 23 years.....	57.1	32.7	80.0	59.5
Under 25 years.....	71.4	51.9	86.6	73.2
Under 30 years.....	98.1	80.6	100.0	90.5

The percentages in Table 5 speak for themselves. It will be noted that one out of every ten husbands was married before reaching the age of nineteen, one out of five before twenty, and well over half at twenty-two or younger. The data for the brides present an even more deviant pattern. One out of five of the girls was married before reaching eighteen, over two out of five before nineteen, well over half before they were twenty, and approximately two-thirds before they were twenty-one. It seems scarcely necessary to observe that the chances of finding immaturity and emotional instability among such youthful couples are very great. A check of the age differences between husband and wife revealed little deviation from the

general average, with the exception of those who were the same age. This category was found to be approximately double (15.2 percent) that of the general average. To our knowledge, however, this has little significance for the present study.

We started to search for predictive factors. Has the study uncovered any that will be of practical assistance to the counselor in dealing with individual cases? I believe that it has. As the tables indicate, the factors to watch are difference in religion, length of acquaintance and engagement, and the age of the couple. In other words, when the proposed marriage will be a mixed marriage, or when the prospective bride and groom have known each other only a relatively short time, or when they have not been engaged, or when one or both are relatively young (that is, if the girl is under twenty and the boy is under twenty-three), then the counselor has a clear warning that it is risky indeed to allow the couple to choose marriage as the way out of their predicament.

The counselor must be especially cautious if, as so frequently happens, these factors are found in combination; for example, if the prospective marriage is to be mixed and the partners have known each other only a short time or one or both are quite young; or if the couple are quite young and have known each other for a relatively short time or have not been engaged.

We conclude, therefore, that when premarital pregnancy has occurred it will not be prudent to maintain any a priori position which on general principles either excludes or recommends marriage as a solution in all cases. Each case must be studied separately. The factors which we have mentioned as having predictive value will help the counselor to reach a prudent decision when his advice is sought in an individual case.

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