

Class 4

HEALTH SCIENCES LIBRARY
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
701 WEST 104th ST.
NEW YORK, N. Y. 10032

(7)

Normal Crises, Family Structure and Mental Health

RHONA RAPOPORT, PH.D.*

THERE IS A GROWING body of work in the social-psychiatric field known as "crisis" studies. Although these studies have been conducted by people with different approaches and different topics, with no single set of theoretical and clinical interests, there is a common factor among them in that the crises being considered are viewed as *turning points*—as points of no return (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6). If the "crisis" is handled advantageously, it is assumed the result for the individual is some kind of maturation or development. If the stresses engendered by the "crises" are not well coped with, it is assumed that old psychological conflicts may be evoked or new conflicts may arise and a state of poorer mental health may be the result. Further, it is suggested that persons undergoing the crisis are amenable to influence when skilled intervention techniques of relatively brief duration are applied.

In a program of Family Research recently initiated in the Community Mental Health Program at the Harvard School of Public

* Director, Family Research Project, Community Mental Health Program, Harvard School of Public Health. This paper is based on one presented to the Research Seminar in Psychoanalytic Medicine at the Columbia University Psychoanalytic Clinic for Training and Research in March, 1962.

Many colleagues have contributed to the work reported on in this paper, which was done under the auspices of the Community Mental Health Program of the Harvard School of Public Health under the direction of Dr. Gerald Caplan. I wish particularly to thank Robert Rapoport for his help at all stages of this work. In addition, thanks are due to the following for help at different stages of the research: Thomas Brigante, Ivor Browne, Peggy Golde, Beatrice Horvitz, David Kaplan, Thomas Plaut and Rae Sherwood.

This work was supported by funds from the National Institute of Mental Health, Developmental Grant #6710.

Health, there is an attempt to focus on the application of some of these ideas to a more prevalent type of crisis than in the studies referred to above. Our concern is with the critical transition points in the *normal, expectable* development of the family life cycle: getting married, birth of the first child, children going to school, death of a spouse, or children leaving home. These, too, are seen as points of no return. While both normal and expectable, these standard status transition points in the life cycle of the family always have elements attached to them that are novel for the individuals experiencing them. This is perhaps especially true in our society where *rites de passage* are limited, where anticipatory socialization for new familial roles tends to be minimal, and where the prescriptions for behavior expected in the new roles may be highly variable. Thus these critical turning points often provoke disequilibria both in the individuals concerned and in the family system. It is postulated that the way these normal "crises" or status transitions are handled or coped with, will affect outcome—both in terms of the mental health of the individuals and in terms of the ensuing family relationships. It is also assumed, in line with Lindemann's (2) and Caplan's (1) assumptions that, to the extent that these critical periods have a limited time of "acute" disequilibria, it may be possible to do preventive intervention in a limited time so as to improve outcome levels.

The Initial Exploratory Study

For this program of Family Research the initial exploration lasted nine months and was aimed at collecting data that would improve and alter our early conceptualizations about engagement, honeymoon and early marriage. It was undertaken, too, to map the field of our interest and to order it in such a way that it would be possible to make intelligent strategy decisions for future research.

Though we are interested in various developmental phases of the family, the study has so far focused systematically on the first phase, *getting married*. Some data has been obtained on the next phase—the first pregnancy and the critical point of having a first child—as some of the young couples we have worked with quickly enter this phase. In the "getting married" phase we have delineated three sub-phases: the engagement period which ends with the *rite de passage* of the wedding, the honeymoon period, and the early marriage period up to three months after the wedding. For each of these subphases we

postulate a series of tasks inherent to it, and we will attempt to see how people have performed on these tasks and how this is related to outcome a year after marriage. The type of variables we are concerned with in outcome are (a) individual health status: this will include physical and psychological symptoms, feelings of satisfaction with the marital relationship and other spheres of life, and happiness; (b) state of interpersonal relationship: an evaluation of the "fit" between the couple and the degree of harmony in their relationship, and (c) the state of functioning of the couple as a social system, which includes the degree to which the functions of the family group are performed and the readiness of the couple for the next phase, that of having a child.

GAINING ACCESS to engaged couples presented a number of difficulties. For one reason or another it was not feasible to obtain couples from the local marriage registries, through newspaper marriage announcements or via public health nurses, all of which were explored. Finally, we obtained our initial subjects from the clergy, who were most cooperative. We worked with various denominations, making it a point to go from the top of the clergy hierarchy down. This was particularly helpful with our Catholic contacts. The Catholic Church runs a large pre-cana (premarital) counselling program which seemed to be a potential pool for later research subjects.

In the first instance, we were not very selective about the characteristics of the couples we obtained. We tried to obtain young, married couples, allowing them to vary in social class, religion and occupation. In the initial period we ended up with six couples, three having been referred by the Catholic clergy (1 engaged, 1 just married, 1 just pregnant and in second month of marriage); 1 Unitarian couple, and 2 Episcopalian couples. Both Catholic and Protestant clergy referred couples to us randomly from among those on their lists awaiting marriage. Among the Catholics, the sanction of the clergy was more effective in assuring participation in the research, with only one couple so referred (a mixed marriage) declining cooperation. Among the Protestant couples, the clerical referral was a much less decisive factor in determining individuals' responses to our approach, with about half the couples refusing to participate.

The initial sample of six couples was investigated in a relatively intense way. A great problem when seeking complex, intimate data is how to get meaningful material through relatively limited contacts with subjects. Unless this problem is solved, we cannot obtain suffi-

cient numbers to test our hypotheses and we always remain with very tentative formulations. In addition, repeated intensive research contact with the same people increases the chances of affecting our subjects and altering the very phenomena we are studying.

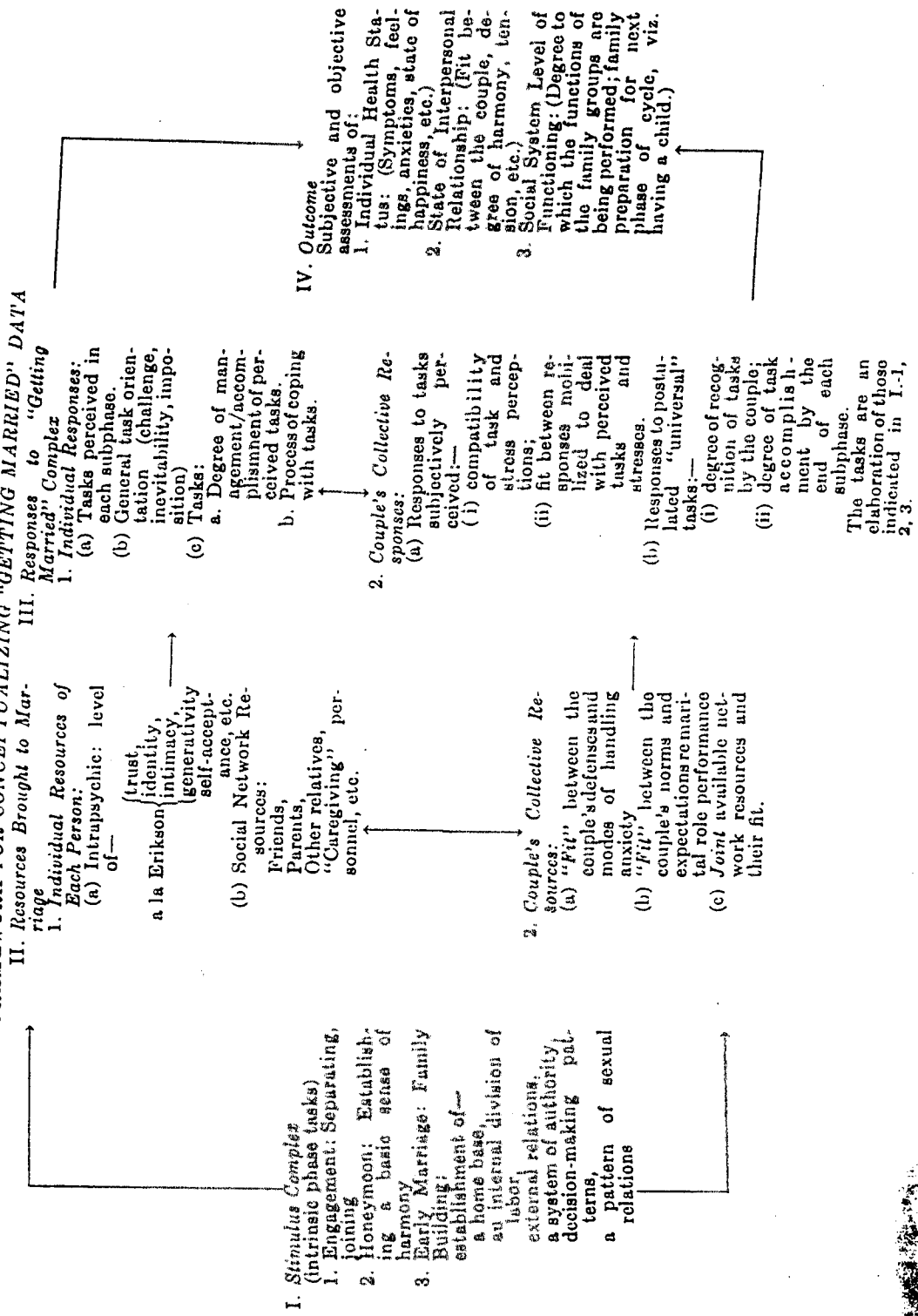
Our interviews were relatively unstructured for this exploratory phase because we were experimenting with methods to obtain data about extremely complicated social and psychological phenomena where we are uncertain of the specific crucial dimensions. Many aspects of these complex phenomena are pre- or unconscious and differentially sensitive for different respondents. Also the data collected comes through an interpersonal relationship of interviewer and interviewee, the nature of which affects the data obtained. Furthermore, as we were dealing with concurrent processual material obtained by repeated contacts (approximately 12 interviews over a period of five months) there was the probability that we might actually change some aspects of the phenomena under study. In such a situation it was felt that the continued contact might set up expectations (counter-transference) in the interviewer that might affect his eliciting of subsequent data. One attempt to minimize the effect of the latter was to supervise each interview and deal both with counter-transference problems as well as data gaps from the research point of view.

While we still place high value on obtaining current data, it is also felt there is a definite place for retrospective data. In some instances we found retrospective data to be more accessible and accurate. This was especially true of certain events that were emotionally loaded at the time of the interview but which could be talked about with less anxiety later. For example, it seemed that most couples could only discuss details of the honeymoon sometime after the event.

The Conceptual Framework Developed

The original set of six couples were followed for varying periods after marriage. Some became pregnant, and we continued work with them in a relatively unstructured way up to six months after marriage. We then attempted to examine the data and order it into a more manageable form. The conceptual framework diagrammatically represented in the chart indicates our over-all orientation to the data on the "getting married" phase. From this field of concern, we have selected a portion in which to do more systematic research in a later phase of the research.

FRAMEWORK FOR CONCEPTUALIZING "GETTING MARRIED" DATA



I. Stimulus Complex
(Intrinsic phase tasks)
1. Engagement: Separating, joining
2. Honeymoon: Establishing a basic sense of harmony
3. Early Marriage: Family Building; establishment of a home base, an internal division of labor, external relations, a system of authority, decision-making patterns, a pattern of sexual relations

II. Resources Brought to Marriage
1. Individual Resources of Each Person:
(a) Intrapsychic: level of
- {trust, identity, intimacy, generativity, self-acceptance, etc.
a la Erikson
(b) Social Network Resources:
Friends, Parents, Other relatives, "Caregiving", personnel, etc.

2. Couple's Collective Resources:
(a) "Fit" between the couple's defenses and modes of handling anxiety
(b) "Fit" between the couple's norms and expectations
(c) Joint available network resources and their fit.

III. Responses to "Getting Married" Complex
1. Individual Responses:
(a) Tasks perceived in each subphase.
(b) General task orientation (Challenge, inevitability, imposition)
(c) Tasks:
a. Degree of management/accomplishment of perceived tasks.
b. Process of coping with tasks.

2. Couple's Collective Responses:
(a) Responses to tasks subjectively perceived:
(i) compatibility of task and stress perceptions;
(ii) fit between responses mobilized to deal with perceived tasks and stressors.
(b) Responses to postulated "universal" tasks:
(i) degree of recognition of tasks by the couple;
(ii) degree of task accomplishment by the end of each subphase.
The tasks are an elaboration of those indicated in I-1, 2, 3.

IV. Outcome
Subjective and objective assessments of:
1. Individual Health Status: (Symptoms, feelings, anxieties, state of happiness, etc.)
2. State of Interpersonal Relationship: (Fit between the couple, degree of harmony, tension, etc.)
3. Social System Level of Functioning: (Degree to which the functions of the family groups are being performed; family preparation for next phase of cycle, viz. having a child.)

The chart presents a schematic organization of concepts that have been found useful in organizing the data on the process of "getting married" as a role-transitional crisis. At present, problems of carrying out research on these concepts and testing out our ideas about the ways in which they are interrelated are less fully worked out than the framework itself.

Research Strategy

It can be seen from the diagram that we are concerned with the personal and social resources that couples bring to a marriage, the way they cope with the tasks presented by the first phase of family life, how much their personal resources alter between engagement and the first few months of marriage, and how coping techniques and task accomplishment relate to outcome, say a year after marriage. These concerns imply at least five sub-studies. They are:

A study of the relation of couple's task accomplishment to outcome; a study of the relation of coping processes (individual and couple) to outcome; a study of the fit between the salient intrapsychic levels of each person of a couple and the relation of the various types of "fits" to outcome; a study of the relation of intrapsychic level of development of the individual to coping processes, to task accomplishment in each subphase, and to total outcome; a study of change in the level of intrapsychic development along salient dimensions, after one year of marriage.

We decided to begin with a study of the *relation of couple's accomplishment of the postulated phase-specific tasks to outcome, measured independently one year later*. (See III, 2.[b][ii] in diagram.) In the present paper only the tasks specified for the engagement period are presented as illustrative of our methods in this exploratory study.

The tasks that confront engaged persons have been divided into two major groups—intrapersonal and interpersonal. It should be noted that different people accomplish the tasks at different times; some only begin working on them during the engagement period, while others have accomplished many of them by the time they get engaged. Our concern is with where individuals and couples stand with regard to task accomplishment by the *end* of the engagement period, i.e. by the time they actually get married, irrespective of when they began working on them.

With regard to the intrapersonal tasks, we are concerned with the

way people make themselves *personally prepared* for marriage and how far they get by the time they actually do get married. This set of tasks is the most "individual," relating primarily to each person's intrapsychic factors as they interplay with the requirements of the interpersonal and sociological requirements of "getting married". This set of tasks implies some review on a conscious, preconscious or unconscious level of psychological maturity or readiness for marriage. The standards used for "readiness" will be affected both by the individual needs of a person and by his perceived subcultural norms.

THE THREE TASKS considered by us to be salient in this area of intrapersonal preparation for marriage are: (I) making oneself ready to take over the role of husband/wife; (II) disengaging (or altering the form of engagement) of oneself from especially close relationships that *compete* or interfere with commitment to the new marital relationship; (III) accommodating patterns of gratifications of premarital life to patterns of the newly formed couple (marital) relationship.

For the first task our concern is with assessing each person's degree of *readiness to take over the new role of husband/wife* by the time of marriage. How ready is each, *as an individual*, to enter into the new status of married person and to perform adequately in the marital roles? In speaking of personal readiness we refer to a more general "set" of expectations for oneself and the other that cross-cuts subcultures. The detailed aspects of what we mean can be subsumed under the two large categories, emphasized by Freud and others, as the individual's capacity to love and to work, whether it be "woman's" or "man's" work.

For both man and woman, the love relationship involves the whole prospect of living in close physical relations with another person. While it is extremely difficult to gauge a person's readiness for entering into this new dimension of intimacy, it seems essential to make some assessment of it—based on the person's own expressed feeling of readiness and the interviewer's assessment of whether or not the individual has a realistic notion of what this will involve. We can already indicate some of the signs of readiness among individuals of the lower middle class range, from which most of our exploratory research couples come. Here it is expected that the male be prepared to take on the breadwinner role in the family. Signs that he is ready to do this are found in his work plans, his assessment of the financial requirements of the marriage, his activities toward providing for the fulfillment of these

requirements and his readiness to accept the idea that others will be dependent on his stability and productivity.

Whatever the work situation, we are concerned with whether the particular individuals feel ready to enter into a situation in which they know what the potentialities and limitations are from an economic point of view, and in which they are able to work out an arrangement that deals both with keeping the household financially viable and with their own self-images as worker, breadwinner, supporter on the one hand, and homemaker, helper, enhancer on the other, such that the individual's sense of readiness is realistic in the context of the relationship that he is entering.

For the second task, we are concerned with assessing *how far people have disengaged themselves from relationships that interfere with commitment to the marital relationship*. Some people have dealt with this issue before they become engaged to marry; others deal with it focally during the engagement period. From our exploratory material, it seems that avoiding the issue altogether leads to difficulties later. These close relationships may be with a parent, sibling, some other relative, a friend, a peer group, a workmate, and so on. In order to assess the degree of accomplishment on this task, we will want to know whether each person had such relationships, with whom, and how they perceive that such ties relate to the proposed marital relationship. We are concerned with the fiancée's perceptions, what each person does with these relationships, and how conflicts are handled. We wish to know how much actual work of reconciliation has been done and how much still remains. Where the relationships have been gratifying, the work may be the loosening of a positive dependency tie. This then becomes involved in the third subtask of this area: giving up premarital gratifications. Where the negative aspect is uppermost, the work of the subtask relates to revising one's ideas about familial roles and attempting to make one's behavior fit this revision.

Accommodating the competing gratifications of premarital life to the new couple (marital) relationship is the third task in making oneself personally prepared for marriage. We are concerned here with whether individuals feel that getting married does involve relinquishing gratifications. Some can tell us the answer to this, others cannot and we shall have to infer from what they say what the psychological reality is for them. For instance, if someone thinks their premarital activities, such as going to frequent dances, will continue during marriage, and we find that the prospective spouse has no interest in this

activity and does not intend to pursue it, we probably have a situation in which relinquishing this premarital gratification is not being dealt with. We want to know what individuals find particularly gratifying in their premarital life, whether these gratifications are likely to be possible in married life and if not, how far individuals give them up by the time they get married. It may be extremely difficult, for instance, for a woman to give up the gratifications of romantic courtship behavior. Outcome may be greatly affected, however, by how much recognition is given to this task and how far she is able to accomplish it. For men, this task seems in our exploratory couples to center more on the question of whether or not his "freedom" will be drastically curtailed. This involves no longer being able to think only of oneself in decisions and actions.

What we are primarily concerned with here, then, is estimating how far the *shift from self-orientation to mutuality* has been made by the end of the engagement period, for both men and women. This involves obtaining some data from the couple on how far they already have gone in the development of a couple identity. Again, the actual form of the couple identity will vary by subculture and should be rated accordingly. Agreeing to segregate activities may involve as much idea of such couple identity as agreeing to do things jointly.

THIS LEADS TO CONSIDERATION of the second major group of engagement tasks, namely those involved in the couple's *interpersonal* preparation for marriage. We are concerned with the work the couple has to do to develop an interpersonal adjustment or accommodation that will be satisfactory in the marital relationship. We are interested in many facets of this interpersonal work and want to relate how far the couple get in their interpersonal tasks by the time of marriage to various outcome measures a year after marriage.

The set of *interpersonal tasks* that we are concerned with here relates to and draws on intrapersonal phenomena and extrafamilial (or couple) relationships, but focuses on the phenomena in the premarital (engaged) couple's relationship. The concern throughout is on the work necessary to make this relationship a satisfactory and harmonious one. Our key organizing concept is that of *fit* (10). We wish to assess the couple's *fit* on a number of salient variables. A good fit may be arrived at in various ways. Partners need not be identical in the way they do things or in their personality configurations. Two partners may have a similar orientation to some aspect of life and the result

may be conflict or unhappy competition in the relationship. Conversely, discrepant orientations do not necessarily indicate a poor fit. They may complement one another. The essential point is the effect of their "fitting together" efforts. A good fit is one that has the effect of harmonizing needs and values whether these are similar or dissimilar at the outset of the relationship. Conversely, a bad fit is one where there is disabling discord or conflict regardless of *a priori* resemblances or dissimilarities.

We are interested in how far the couple has accomplished the work involved for each of the tasks detailed below. This involves understanding where each person is on the dimension, and making a rating about the degree of accomplishment for the couple on the task. Thus, in considering a task such as "developing a mutually satisfactory friendship pattern for the couple," we need to know about each person's norms about friendship patterns, what they consider the pattern ought to be for an engaged couple, and what each feels he needs in his/her friendships. The rating, however, relates primarily to the accommodation made by the two persons to achieve a mutually satisfactory pattern, during the engagement phase.

The tasks we have specified in this area are:

1. establishing a couple identity;
2. developing a mutually satisfactory sexual adjustment for the engagement period;
3. developing a mutually satisfactory agreement regarding family planning;
4. establishing a mutually satisfactory system of communication between the pair;
5. establishing a mutually satisfactory pattern with regard to relatives;
6. developing a mutually satisfactory pattern with regard to friends;
7. developing a mutually satisfactory pattern with regard to work;
8. developing mutually satisfactory patterns of decision-making;
9. planning specifically for the wedding, honeymoon, and the early months of marriage that lie ahead.

Assessing Task Accomplishment

Each task has been broken down into a battery of items which are rated on a 7 point scale both for the individual and for the couple at the completion of our interviewing program. For example, the intrapersonal

task of "making oneself ready to take over the new role of husband or wife" has a battery of 10 items as follows: degree to which the individual shows signs of readiness to be an exclusive sexual partner; shows signs of being able to enter freely into an intimate sexual relation with his/her fiancé; shows signs of tenderness, affection, for the other; shows signs of interest in the other's emotional life and development; shows signs of sharing intimacies with the other; shows signs of merging his own plans with those of the other; degree to which the individual has a realistic appraisal of the personal characteristics of the prospective spouse; degree to which the individual has formed a realistic conception of the economic problems entailed in forming a marital pair; degree to which the individual has formulated a realistic picture of his own capacities to contribute to the economic needs of the new family unit; and degree to which the individual is ready to become a husband/wife (global rating).

WE HAVE NOW STARTED to work with a second exploratory series of six young couples. Our major aim with this group is to work out more clearly what items seem useful to retain, to define them as operationally as possible, and to work out coding procedures so that we shall cease to be dependent on the ratings of expert clinical judges for our assessments.

In order to serve all these aims, we adopted the following procedures: A pair of interviewers, one male and one female, interview each couple. Four interviews are conducted during the engagement period, spaced so as to allow for one immediately before the wedding; a further interview is conducted as soon as possible after the honeymoon, one three months later and one a year later. The couples are interviewed jointly and separately. All interviews are taped. Each couple is then rated for all the items three separate times—once by the interviewers together with the supervisor of all the interviews, while second and third ratings are made by other interviewers who do not know the subject couple but have only listened to the recorded interviewing sessions. In these ratings by interviewers and supervisor, all of whom are trained clinicians and sociologically oriented, rationales for choosing one point in the scale rather than another have been elicited.

One further procedure we are attempting with this group of couples is to use an adaptation of what has been called a self-anchoring scale by Kilpatrick and Cantril (11). This enables each individual of the couple to indicate the content of the scale on the item in which we are interested. We have used this scale for two main areas—to get at individuals'

own ideas of the characteristics of a man and a woman who is most ready for marriage and their own ideas about what constitutes a happy marriage one year after the wedding. After giving these notions, the interviewees are asked to rate themselves and each other on a scale anchored by the content they have given. We thus hope to get at their psychological realities about these factors and to relate them to outcome. This in itself might turn out to be a significant predictive device for types of outcome.

SUMMARY

This paper has emphasized some aspects of the conceptualizations and formulation of a research design to investigate a complex series of problems in the field of community psychiatry. The phenomena that have been discussed operate on many different levels, and it can be seen that personality dynamics is only one set of contributing forces in explaining them. It will be a long time before we are able to understand the weight and combinations of different kinds of factors in explaining the total variance of the phenomena with which we are concerned. However, we do know that it is important in understanding how people cope with various critical situations to take systematic account of significant elements of the family structures from which they come; the network of family and other relationships that is available to them when they enter the "newly married" state, and their own expectations of the way familial roles should be performed. Both the personal and social resources a couple bring to their marriage will affect its outcome, as will new aspects that later develop autonomously from their daily living together.

This paper has not concentrated on results as these are not yet systematically available. It has, rather, elaborated on the development of ideas and methods in an intensive exploratory study which should hopefully form the basis for a more decisive formulation and testing of hypotheses.

REFERENCES

1. CAPLAN, G., "Patterns of Parental Response to the Crisis of Premature Birth: A Preliminary Approach to Modifying the Mental Health Outcome," *Psychiatry*, 23, 365-374, 1960.
2. LINDEMANN, E., "Symptomatology and Management of Acute Grief," *Amer. J. Psychiat.*, 101, 141-148, 1944.

3. TYHURST, J., "Individual Reactions to Community Disaster," *Amer. J. Psychiat.*, 107, 764-769, 1951.
4. ERIKSON, E., "Identity and the Life Cycle: Selected Papers," *Psy. Issues*, 1, 1-171, 1959.
5. BIBRING, G., et al., "A Study of the Psychological Processes in Pregnancy and of the Earliest Mother-Child Relationship," *Psychoan. Study of the Child*, Vol. 16, New York, Int. Univ. Press, 1961. pp. 9-27.
6. JANIS, I., *Psychological Stress*, New York, Wiley, 1958.
7. KAPLAN, D., and MASON, E., "Maternal Reactions to Premature Birth Viewed as an Acute Emotional Disorder," *Amer. J. Ortho.*, 30, 539-552, 1960.
8. BALINT, M., *Primary Love and Psychoanalytic Technique*, London, Hogarth Press, 1952.
9. RAINWATER, L. and WEINSTEIN, K., *And the Poor Get Children*, Chicago, Quadrangle Books, 1960.
10. RAPOPORT, R., "The Family and Psychiatric Treatment," *Psychiatry*, 23, 53-62, 1960.
11. KILPATRICK, F. P., and CANTRIL, H. "Self-Anchoring Scaling, A Measure of Individuals' Unique Reality Worlds," *J. Ind. Psy.*, 16, 158-173, 1960.