

Relations at Three Early Stages of Marriage as Reflected by the Use of Personal Pronouns

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In an attempt to explore connections between communication and role relationships for young couples at early stages of marriage, the present study compares the use of the pronouns "I-me-my-mine" to "we-us-our-ours" as these occurred in a series of interviews.¹ The rationale was simple. The general notion was that couples at the beginning of marriage, at least in present-day, middle-class, urban American society, are heavily involved in the issue of intimacy (Erikson, 1950, 1959). Bernard (1964), for example, suggests that, contrary to former times, married couples now must adjust primarily to one another, and only secondarily to roles; Blood and Wolfe (1960) find little evidence for clear-cut traditional domestic role performance; Bott's studies (1957) in England suggest an increasing cultural shift from segregated to joint functioning; Raush, Goodrich, and Campbell (1963) describe the increased interpersonal emphasis required by an "open" structure in marriage; other studies (Hurvitz, 1960; Tharp, 1963) find that traditional division of roles no longer holds. Rossi (1968), in a recent review, suggests a broad scope of cultural changes with respect to role conceptions.

Where cultural norms are fluid and change rapidly, where traditions have become attenuated, young couples must work out their own solutions to the opportunities and problems which marriage presents. One would expect then that couples' transactions (Goodrich, 1961; Goodrich, Ryder, & Raush, 1968) at the start of marriage would be characterized by relative emphasis on jointness; as husbands and wives become familiar with one another and with the tasks they face, stable, more segregated roles would develop. The studies described below deal with three early stages of marriage—newlywed, late-pregnancy, and early postnatal periods. In describing aspects of their marital functioning, couples might generally be expected to shift in the direction from speaking in terms of "We" to speaking in terms of "I".

Communications differ for different aspects of marriage. Some tasks, such as cooking, are still clearly assigned by the culture according to sex. Other tasks, such as the establishment of friendships or dealing with in-laws, lack such assignment. Where tradition presents no clear-cut norms for role assignment, we would expect a greater emphasis on joint-sharing. As the marriage develops in time, this emphasis may decrease, giving way to division of responsibility. Even so, it is likely that such an evolution from joint to individual responsibility will differ for different areas of the marriage. For example, an extension of Herbst's (1960) findings suggests that the establishment of a household and arrangements for housekeeping may shift in direction from jointness to more individual responsibility over the course of marriage; and again, that such a shift may be less likely in the area of friendships and social arrangements. Finally, individual couples might also be expected to differ in their orientations, some placing greater emphasis on joint, others on segregated conjugal role relationships.

In summary, then, there were three general expectations: (a) a shift in relative usage from "We" toward "I" as marriage progressed from the newlywed stage to the stage following the birth of the first child; (b) differences, specified further below, among areas of marriage in relative emphasis on "We" or "I" and differential changes in these emphases over time; and (c) differences among couples in relative emphases on "We" or "I". Subsidiary interests concerned interactive effects among stage, area, and couple variables, relations between use of "I" and "We" and length of marriage, and especially comparisons between couples who had children during the course of the study and those who did not. For the latter comparison two sets of couples were studied: one became pregnant and had children; matched with these were couples married an equal length of time but for whom pregnancy did not occur.

Until now we have spoken of marital roles and of the possibilities of these roles being reflected in couples' communications about their marriages. In fact—to jump ahead a considerable number of steps—the general expectations about the use of "I" and "We" were confirmed. Close examination of the data suggested, however, major inconsistencies if the I-We distributions were thought of as reflecting a range from segregated to joint conjugal role relationships with respect to performance of marital tasks. A more consistent picture emerges if we think of the I-We dimension as reflecting at one end ("I") a *task orientation*, that is, a focus on specific functional requirements and accomplishments of marriage, and the

other end ("We") as *reflecting a relationship orientation*, that is, a focus on the interpersonal aspects of the marriage.

METHOD

Subjects

The sample derived from a study of 50 newly married, generally middle-class couples who were first seen during the fourth month after marriage. Couples were followed up to ascertain if and when pregnancy occurred. If the wife became pregnant, the couple was seen again during the seventh month of pregnancy and again in the fourth month following the birth of the child. For each couple where pregnancy occurred, a couple was chosen who had been studied at approximately the same date as newlyweds but for whom pregnancy did not occur. These latter couples were also studied again, at a time matching the seventh month pregnancy period of their counterparts. There was, of course, some attrition by the time of the later investigation. The attrition, as well as the fact that some couples chosen for the non-pregnant sample later had children, interfered with exact one-to-one matches. The study reported here concerns mainly 21 couples, all of whom had children. A subsidiary study reports comparisons between 16 of these couples and 22 couples married the same length of time but for whom pregnancy had not yet occurred.

For couples from the pregnancy sample, there are three sets of data deriving from newlywed, late-pregnancy, and post-natal stages. For the non-pregnant couples, since they were not interviewed again when their matched couples were interviewed as parents, there are data only for the newlywed stage and for a point in time equivalent to the pregnancy stage.²

Procedures

As part of more extensive procedures, couples were seen for a number of interviews.³ At the newlywed stage these included an initial home interview with the couple seen jointly, two individual interviews with each of the spouses conducted in the research offices, and a final joint home interview. At the pregnancy (and the equivalent non-pregnancy) stage there was a single joint interview followed by individual interviews for each spouse. For the pregnant sample, these latter procedures were repeated in the fourth month following the birth of the child.

Interviews were semi-structured. Questions were generally open-ended, and some flexibility in approach was encouraged within a common core of topics. At each stage, interviews included material about seven areas of marital interaction. These were: (a) Housekeeping—the arrangements of home furnishings and upkeep, clarifying areas of satisfaction and dissatisfaction, as well as future plans; (b) Food—the nature of procedures for meal planning, food purchasing and preparation; (c) Budget—the arrangements for and concerns about handling income, expenses, and savings; (d) Parental Functioning—planning for and caring for a child; (e) Sex—the nature of sexual patterns, problems, and satisfactions; (f) Relatives—the nature of contacts with both sets of parents; (g) Friends—the patterns of socializing and entertaining. The seven areas overlap considerably with those which other authors have described as salient for issues of adjustment in marriage (cf. Bowerman, 1964).

Coders tallied frequencies of "I" and "We" type pronouns from typewritten transcripts of the interviews for each couple for each of the seven areas of discussion at each stage of the marriage.⁴ Because interviews differed considerably in length, raw frequencies were transformed into ratios of I-words/I + We-words. Two further transformations were necessary. Data suggested that the longer the discussion of a topic the more did couples tend to use "I";⁵ furthermore, some questions by their content tended to elicit "I's" and some tended to elicit "We's". Both these sources of bias were eliminated from the data. The effects of stage of marriage, area of discussion, and couple differences (and statistical interaction among these) were evaluated by multivariate information transmission analysis (Attneave, 1959). With the exception that there were only two stages, similar procedures were employed with the 22 non-pregnant couples.⁶

RESULTS

1. The major contribution to differences in I/I + We ratios derives from differences among couples. Couples differ in general from one another, but they also have characteristic ways of responding to different areas of discussion. That is, one couple may, for example, be relatively more oriented toward "We" in talking about friends, another couple may be relatively more oriented toward "We" in talking about plans for children. Similarly, couples change differentially over the three stages. Despite such diversities, the data leave no doubt that couples maintain a characteristic level of "I" to "We" proportions over an average of 25 months of marriage.

2. A somewhat lesser but still highly significant contribution to I-We usage is given by the area under discussion. As one might expect, discussions of food and of housekeeping, areas in which role assignment and division of function are still traditional in middle-class American society, rank high in proportions of "I's". At the opposite pole from tradition are relations with friends. Here the middle-class American norm, particularly for newly married couples, emphasizes mutuality

in the evolution of new, joint friendship patterns; discussions of relations with friends show the lowest proportions of "I". Areas of discussion involving parental functioning and budget handling are, as might be expected, intermediate in the balance between "I's" and "We's". Discussions of relations between the couple and their parents and in-laws were expected to be characterized by emphasis on mutuality; results show that this is not so; the I-We proportion for the area is intermediate in the rank orders. The major discrepancy from expectation is, however, in the area of sex. Discussions of sex were expected to show relatively high proportions of "We"; to the contrary, sex ranks near the top in proportions of "I". How to interpret this is not quite clear. It goes without saying that the sexual relation involves a high level of mutual interdependence, and the working out of this relation is for the young couple a mutual process; yet, at the same time, sex is an intensely personal, individualized matter, in one sense less shareable between a man and a woman than, for example, the planning of household activities. Perhaps the data point, then, to yet another paradox of sex: at the core of intimacy it is perceived in individual rather than shared terms.

3. Stage differences influence I-We usage to a small but statistically significant degree. The shift is, as predicted, toward increased use of "I", as marriage progresses from the newlywed stage to the stage following the birth of a child. The data suggest that the major change does not occur between newlywed and pregnancy stages, but rather that the general increase in use of "I" comes primarily after the child is born. Some areas of discussion change more than others. Discussions of meal planning tend to become more "I" oriented between newlywed and post-natal stages; relations with friends show the opposite effect, a shift after the birth of the child toward "We" orientation. As indicated in Table 1, the data do not bear out a common-sense expectation of an increase in "We" with respect to discussions of parents and in-laws; the trend is clearly contrary to this expectation. Discussions of sex and discussions of plans for having and rearing children also shift toward greater relative use of "I".

Note: The higher the mean score, the greater relative use of "I".

4. The findings for the 22 couples, matched for length of marriage with couples who became pregnant but for whom pregnancy had not occurred at the time of study, parallel almost exactly the above findings for the first two stages, newlywed and late-pregnancy, of the pregnant sample.

5. The general shift toward increased relative use of "I" is unrelated to length of marriage per se; it appears rather as a stage change which comes about with the birth of a child. Some specific areas of marital discussion do, however, appear to change simply as a function of the length of time that the couple is married. For example, length of marriage is positively correlated with the use of "We" in discussing friends; furthermore, the longer couples are married, the more do they tend to use "I" in discussions of plans about children.

6. Couples who became pregnant used higher proportions of "I" than did non-pregnant couples. This was true not only for the interviews during the seventh month of pregnancy (and at an equivalent time for non-pregnant couples) but also at the fourth month of marriage. Selection procedures eliminated couples who were knowingly pregnant at the time of the initial interviews. The data suggest, then, that couples who are not pregnant within the first months but who become pregnant within approximately the first year of marriage are at the start more oriented toward the use of "I".

7. I-We ratios were negligibly correlated with a factor dimension of Marital Role Orientation derived from factor analysis of an extensive body of data for these couples (Goodrich, Ryder, & Raush, 1968).⁷ It appears, then, that couples' relative use of "I" and "We" has little or nothing to do with whether role activities are shared or segregated. Although somewhat surprising, such a state of affairs is not entirely unreasonable. A husband and wife may sharply differentiate their functional roles in relation to specific tasks in marriage, he, for example, handling financial matters, while she cares for the housekeeping; nevertheless, they may think of themselves as a unit, a single whole, with differentiated, mutually interdependent parts.

In summary, personal pronoun usage differentiated couples, aspects of marriage under discussion, and stages of early marital development. Nonetheless, more than one finding called into question our initial notion that the use of "I" versus "We" references unambiguously reflected marital roles. To explore this matter of interpretation, we took a closer look at two couples, particularly at their roles, values, and interactions.

Table 1
Transformed I/I + We Mean Scores by Stage of Marriage and Area of Discussion Pregnant Couples

Area of Discussion	Stage of Marriage			Mean of Areas
	Newlywed	Late Pregnancy	Postnatal	
Housekeeping	.82	.69	.82	.78
Food	.78	.81	.81	.80
Sex	.75	.79	.88	.81
Parental Functioning	.65	.77	.79	.74
Budget	.68	.73	.76	.72
Relatives	.68	.70	.81	.73

Friends	.63	.60	.52	.58
Mean of Stages	.71	.73	.77	
Overall Mean Ratio				.74

A CASE COMPARISON

Consider two couples at the opposite extremes of the range of I-We scores. Mr. and Mrs. Allen used relatively more "I's" than any other couple; theirs were the highest I-We ratios at both newlywed and late-pregnancy stages, and, although they were only slightly above the mean at the postnatal stage, their overall ranking and mean I-We score were highest of all couples. Mr. and Mrs. Bradley used relatively more "We's" than any other couple; at each of the three stages, theirs was the lowest I-We rank.

Demographically the couples are similar. Both families come from the same religious background, and all of the individuals share in having had fairly traditional middle-class upbringing. Both Mr. Allen and Mr. Bradley come from small families—one is an only child and one has a very much older brother; both wives come from large families—one with five and one with seven children. Educational levels are similar; all have undergraduate college degrees.

Both couples went through traditional courtships and weddings, the Allens marrying a year and a half and the Bradleys some eight months after beginning dating. Unlike most other couples in the sample, both the Allens and the Bradleys wanted children as soon as possible, and the husbands and wives were agreed in this desire. Mrs. Bradley became pregnant about the time of or shortly after the initial set of interviews; Mrs. Allen became pregnant a year after they were seen initially.

Roles

With respect to marital roles the couples are strikingly similar. Both men are strongly involved in the development of their careers. In domestic activities the women play traditionally predominant roles. They do the cooking and the food shopping, although they get occasional help from their husbands on the latter. Mr. Allen often does the dishes, and he helps Mrs. Allen with other housekeeping activities when he sees she is tired. Rather than joint, their activities tend to be parallel—that is, he, for example, will do the dishes while she does the vacuuming. Mr. Bradley also helps Mrs. Bradley with dishes and shopping. One has some impression that although some activities are parallel—he doing the picking up while she dusts and sweeps—the sharing is more direct than in the case of the Allens. Neither couple budgets very carefully; accounts are joint, but it is usually the husband who writes the checks to pay bills. In sex, the husbands usually initiate activities, although both wives do so occasionally without seeming inhibited. Social arrangements with friends are made jointly to insure no conflict in schedules. The Bradleys would like to have more friends; the Allens would like to see more of the friends they have. Prior to and during pregnancy both wives expressed intention to breast feed their babies, and their husbands very much agreed with this aim; both Mrs. Allen and Mrs. Bradley began breast feeding, but Mrs. Allen discontinued after seven weeks because of physical difficulties. Both couples describe themselves as happy and content with their marriages.

Values

The two couples differ in general value orientations. One has the impression that the Allens are interested mostly in "things." This is reflected in the husband's occupation and, also, in the wife's comments. For example, during the pregnancy she takes courses in such things as sewing and cooking, and she shows greater preoccupation than does Mrs. Bradley with furniture and garden. Mr. Allen's many activities with Mrs. Allen's family seem to center around the making and building of things. The Bradleys, on the other hand, seem far more interested in people. The interest is not at a social—they seem to have no more friends than do the Allens—but at an intellectual level. His occupation is directly with people; during pregnancy she takes courses in sociology. There is an intellectual companionship and interchange shared by the Bradleys which is very different from the non-intellectual, home-centered activities of the Allens. These differences are reflected in the Allen's organized household in contrast to the somewhat disorganized one of the Bradleys. They are also reflected in the couples' attitudes toward their new babies.

The Allen's attitude toward their baby seems predominantly practical; the Bradleys seem more intellectually and emotionally involved. For example, in response to an inquiry about the importance of a father in the first few months of a baby's life, Mr. Allen answered, "I don't know how important anything is during the first few months of a baby's life...I know it's important for the baby to eat and like that, but I don't know to what extent a baby realizes what's happening." Mr. Bradley answered, "I think the baby kind of knows the difference right away...It shows the baby that there is somebody in the world besides his mother, so he doesn't get completely dependent or attached to only one person." In answering a

question about what had been the most fun in having the baby, Mrs. Allen said, "It's nice to have someone to take care of...It's nice to have somebody dependent on you." Mrs. Bradley said, "It is nice when he is awake and when he likes to play...I talk to him...show him various things." Similarly, in the wives' responses to an inquiry about what was most appealing about the baby, Mrs. Allen answered, "I don't know what's most appealing about her. Of course, there's not that much she does. She just sort of eats and sleeps with a few giggles and laughs in between." Mrs. Bradley answered, "I think I like most to get him interested in something and see his reaction." The Allens' focus is on their baby's physical condition. For example, in answer to the question: What problems have you discussed with your pediatrician?, Mrs. Allen said, "I've asked him about iron...Every time I go to see him I have a question or two. Usually about eating, of course." In answer to the question, how much trouble have you had with diaper rash?, Mrs. Allen said, "The minute she starts getting red, the slightest bit of red, I put some [medication] on." The same questions are answered by Mrs. Bradley: "I don't think we have really had any problems," and "He gets diaper rash every now and then, but it doesn't amount to anything." For both Bradleys, the focus is on their infant's growing responsiveness.

Interactions

Where the two couples appear strikingly different is in relation to Improvisations (Rausch, Goodrich, & Campbell, 1963), a procedure, developed by Paul Blank and Wells Goodrich, in which a couple is placed in scenes involving conflicts between husband and wife. Although the conflicts are defined, husbands and wives play themselves rather than an assigned role. The Allens show very little spontaneity in acting these scenes. They are primarily task oriented. In contrast, the Bradleys, who individually seem shyer, more introspective people than the Allens, are lively and spontaneous. There is much humor and playfulness in the interaction between Mr. and Mrs. Bradley. They enjoy the interplay between one another, and although they seem to have no more difficulty in resolving the conflicts than do the Allens, they extend the scenes so that they wind up on the average with four times as many interchanges as do the Allens. The orientation of the Allens toward one another is straightforward, and although not wholly unconcerned with the feelings of one another, certainly unconcerned with nuances. Theirs is, in a sense, a rather commercial set—"I do something for you, you do something for me"—a trade of favors in reaching a compromise. Following the birth of their child, the Allens seem to play out the scenes in an atmosphere of suspicion and never satisfactorily resolve the conflicts. The Bradleys, in contrast, seem exquisitely sensitive to one another's feelings and appear to delight in exploring the nuances of their relationship consistently throughout the three stages. In one scene, for example, Mrs. Bradley yields to her husband's wishes. He, however, fails to accept this victory, saying jokingly, "Don't think you're going to win that way," and they go on for quite a while exploring the ramifications of each other's feelings. Resolution of the specific conflict is achieved almost by indirection; unlike some couples who create long scenes by spreading the conflicts from their initial foci to a wide range of issues (Rausch, Goodrich, & Campbell, 1963), the Bradleys do not expand the issues; it is rather the exploration of feelings about the issue which is expanded. The Allens' stand is objective; they are independent people with independent wishes who, because they have a stake in one another and in the continuity of their relationship, need to work out tenable solutions to conflicts between them. The Bradley's stand is not only subjective but intersubjective. What counts is not the objective solution but the relationship itself—the mutual empathy, sensitivity, support, and playfulness.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The interview similarities together with differences between the couples in their modes of response to conflict scenes, together with their positions at the extremes of the I-We score range call for interpretation. An interpretation of the I-We dimension as reflecting segregated versus joint conjugal role relationships, although consonant with the "close-knit" network of the Allens and the "loose-knit" network of the Bradleys (Bott, 1957), fails to be supported by other clinical impressions; moreover, such an interpretation disregards the lack of correlation between I-We scores and the factorial dimension of Marital Role Orientation.

A conception of I-We in terms of orientation toward individuality versus mutuality comes perhaps a bit closer toward consonance with the diverse findings. Issues of separateness and connectedness are, as Hess and Handel (1959) note, fundamental problems to be worked out in the evolution of each family pattern. There is, however, little justification for conceptualizing individuality and mutuality as polar opposites. In fact, Hess and Handel suggest, as do Erikson (1950) and Buber (1957) that a capacity for mutuality depends on a developed sense of one's individuality. In the above illustration, the Bradleys use far more "We's" than do the Allens, yet it is the Bradleys who seem far more concerned with their development as individuals. Furthermore, to speak of the food area as reflecting high individuality or to describe the stage shift in these terms is, at least, obscure.

A tenable interpretation which suggests itself is that of *task* versus *relationship* orientation. The I-We dimension, conceptualized in terms of a range from task to relationship orientation, is consonant with couple differences and the clinical illustration. The dimension is suggestive of Cuber and Harroff's (1965) distinction between *utilitarian* and *intrinsic* marriages, but it should be noted that whereas they consider types of marriages, here we deal rather with a continuum. The

conceptualization is also consonant with the findings of differences associated with topics of discussion. For example, food management and housekeeping are generally task-oriented aspects of marriage, irrespective of who does what, whereas the emergence of friendship patterns is more likely to impinge on relationship aspects of the marriage. As to the findings of changes with stage of marriage, we might expect relationship aspects to be relatively more salient for newlyweds and to grow relatively less salient as the relationship stabilizes over time and as parental tasks develop (cf. Rossi, 1968). Furthermore, an orientation toward the specific tasks or functions of marriage might, in general, predispose couples toward having children early in marriage, whereas emphasis on the husband-wife relation itself would predispose toward delay in childbearing. Here again, a continuum ranging from predominance of *task orientation*, that is, a focus on specific functional requirements and accomplishments of marriage, to predominance of *relationship orientation*, that is, a focus on the interpersonal aspects of the marriage, is consonant with the findings.

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¹The method of studying interpersonal communications via personal pronouns was described by Lippitt and White in their classic study of authoritarian and democratic group atmospheres. They employed the comparative use of "I" and "We" as an index of group cohesiveness and found that the authoritarian atmosphere was characterized by a considerably greater proportion of "I-centered" expressions (Lippitt, 1940, p. 156). Mowrer, in a discussion of verbal behavior in psychotherapy, quotes a study by Zimmerman and Langdon illustrating systematic changes in the use of personal pronouns over a course of psychotherapeutic sessions (Mowrer, 1953, pp. 517-520).

²For the couples where pregnancy occurred, the mean length of time from the date of marriage to the procedures in the seventh month of pregnancy was 18.75 months, with a range from 9 to 36 months; for the nonpregnant couples the mean length of time was 17.05 months, with a range from 8 to 36 months.

³More detailed descriptions of the sample and the procedures are presented by Ryder and Goodrich (1966) and by Goodrich, Ryder, and Raush (1968).

⁴The couple was treated as a dyad with no distinction being made between husband and wife frequencies.

⁵This finding suggests the speculation that when issues are individualized, discussion needs to be longer. A possible use of the ratio, then, is as an index of unresolvedness or argument-proneness in relation to issues or couples.

⁶We are indebted to Richard K. Hertel for suggestions and statistical help.

⁷Neither did any of the other three major factors in Goodrich, Ryder, and Raush (1968) correlate significantly with I-We ratios.