Family medicine has had a close working relationship with the discipline of family therapy. In particular, the family life cycle model, derived from family therapy, has been useful to family physicians as they care for patients throughout their lives. Since many of our residents are in the new couple phase of the family life cycle, we developed a seminar focusing on the application of family systems concepts to couple dynamics that would be relevant to their professional and personal lives.

In preparation for the seminar, we ask residents to read a selection from the article Marital Life by Phoebe Prosky. This article presents a three-stage Model of Marriage and explains basic systems principles that are fundamental to understanding relationships and solving couples’ problems. We begin teaching the seminar with a parable by Prosky, “The Warrior and the Peacekeeper,” not included in her article, but reproduced in Appendix 1.

After reading the parable together in the seminar, we ask the residents, “How does the peacekeeper maintain the warrior?” The residents’ answers bring out the systems principles from the article, including the concepts that relationships are reciprocal and have mechanisms for self-regulation. Through the discussion, they gain an understanding of how the prince and princess represent two halves of a whole that maintain a delicate balance with no pure villain or hero. Only after the death of his “good” half is the prince forced to become a complete person. To further illustrate how two people dealing with the same developmental issue in different ways can come together as a complementary pair, we show examples of two classic movie couples.

The first example comes from the movie adaptation of Neil Simon’s play The Odd Couple (1968). This couple consists of two best friends, Felix Unger and Oscar Madison, who begin sharing an apartment after their wives throw them out. Within just a few days of living together, they are immersed in conflict because Felix cannot tolerate Oscar’s slovenliness, and Oscar is intolerant of Felix’s obsessive-compulsive cleanliness. The scene we show begins with an argument between Oscar and Felix over cleaning up after an evening of poker and ends with a fight about making coleslaw versus going out for the night. In our discussion with residents, we talk about the complementarity of the couple and analyze how the concepts of reciprocity and self-regulation apply to their relationship.

Disney’s “Beauty and the Beast” (1991) provides the second example

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of complementary pairing. In the video clip, the Beast surprises Belle by showing her his library and then they learn to eat together and play in the snow while singing “Something There.” During the scene they begin to see beneath their outer appearances and start to appreciate each other’s inner qualities. The residents readily recognize how this classic fairy tale utilizes the systems principle of complementary pairing to teach its moral lesson.

We explain Prosky’s three-stage Model of Marriage using a song, a classic television show, and a movie. Courtship, the first stage of the model, occurs when two individuals unconsciously choose each other because of some complementary fit. Couples in this stage tend to focus on their similarities and downplay their differences, although their differences may pull them apart in the future. To introduce this stage, we play the song “Mix Tape” from the soundtrack of the Broadway musical Avenue Q (2003). In this cute song about courting, Princeton asks Kate Monster out on their first date by bringing her a mixed tape of songs he made for her.

Stage two is more complex and may last for many years. If stage one is characterized by two people joining together as one, then stage two represents the struggle for each to become an individual again. Two questions typically surface at this time: “What happened to our romance?” and “Where is the partner I married?” Once the couple recognizes the differences between them and that they cannot change each other, their marriage can branch off in one of three possible directions: they can separate, institutionalize their differences, or evolve into the third stage of marriage.

Couples who have institutionalized their differences “function literally as each other’s ‘other half’ and specialize in their areas of proficiency.” While this enables them to navigate the outside world, it creates internal frustration as the partners become fixed in their roles like the Warrior and Peacemaker. Their individual characteristics can become exaggerated, and they behave in such a predictable fashion that they can be seen as caricatures of their pattern of behavior within the relationship. This kind of characterization provides excellent material for a television situation comedy like “The Honeymooners.”

“The Honeymooners” depicts the constant arguing between Ralph and Alice Kramden and their close relationship with neighbors Ed and Trixie Norton. During the episode we feature, Alice and Trixie want their husbands to take them out for New Year’s Eve (“The Honeymooners,” New Year’s Eve Party, December 26, 1953). As one of her New Year’s resolutions, Alice vows that she will not argue with Ralph. Ralph, who hates going out on New Year’s Eve, anticipates that Alice is going to ask him to take her out and decides to pick a fight with Alice to make her too mad to go out with him. In a decidedly funny exchange, Alice does not respond to Ralph’s usual provocations. He finally blurts out that he is not taking her out on New Year’s Eve. This prompts Alice to break her resolution and resume their fighting. Ralph and Alice make it easy for the residents to experience a couple that has institutionalized their differences.

The third stage of marriage occurs when two self-sufficient people choose to live together out of love and respect for one another. We illustrate this with a scene from the movie version of “Fiddler on the Roof” (1971). In the scene, Tevye tells his wife, Golde, that their daughter, Hodel, wants to marry Perchik because they love each other, a strange concept for their culture at that time. Tevye wonders if Golde loves him after 25 years of an arranged marriage, and they sing “Do You Love Me?” The song describes how they met for the first time on their wedding day and have grown to love each other while sharing their lives together. After admitting their love, they conclude by singing, “It doesn’t change a thing, but even so, after 25 years, it’s nice to know.” The contrast between Ralph and Alice and Tevye and Golde is quite striking and enables the residents to graphically see the different stages of marriage.

Prosky concludes her article by discussing systems principles that are useful for resolving relationship difficulties. Returning to “The Honeymooners,” we highlight the following three principles: “If you want to change someone else, change yourself; when you attempt something different in a relationship, the system will work against you; the underdog in any relationship will be the one who will have to initiate change.” Each of these principles is illustrated in “The Honeymooners” episode when Alice, the underdog in the marriage, attempts to change their dynamics with her New Year’s resolution, and Ralph successfully resists the change in order to resume their fighting.

We conclude the seminar by pointing out the importance of this material in understanding the couples residents take care of. We also invite residents to share their personal reactions to the article as well as how marriage in their various cultures compares to Prosky’s model. “Do You Love Me?” from “Fiddler on the Roof” enables us to discuss the pros and cons of arranged marriages since this is still practiced in some of the residents’ cultures. Overall, the multi-media couples bring Prosky’s article to life, making it easier for residents to understand and discuss these clinically relevant and potentially personal issues.
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REFERENCES


Appendix 1

The Warrior and the Peacekeeper

by Phoebe Prosky

Once upon a time there was a fierce prince who tyrannized his subjects with threats of violence. He would ride through the province snarling and casting angry, forbidding looks at those standing by. His princess was always by his side and was loved by the people because it was said that only she knew how to calm his fierce temper; in fact, it was said that were it not for her, many of the subjects would surely have met their deaths at the hands of the fierce prince. Inside their royal carriage, the prince could be heard making harsh and prejudicial criticisms of people, which spiraled until he swore he would kill or maim this or that group. The princess, always alarmed, would immediately intercede, explaining ardently how these couldn’t help it, or those were not really so bad, and begging him to reconsider his judgment and not to take action against the benighted subjects. The prince invariably consented to her pleas grudgingly and ended always by feeling that she had robbed him of his power to act, his very manhood. And so there was always an anger between them, as well as between the prince and his subjects.

One year, in the autumn, the princess was taken desperately ill, and died in a fortnight. The prince went into mourning, and then, after the accustomed interval, began again on his rides through the province, but this time alone. When news of the imminence of his first tour reached the people, they were terror struck. Surely now, without their beloved ally the princess, all was lost and they should be wantonly struck dead at the whim of the prince. As his approach was sounded along the ways, the people trembled. The prince within his coach was working up a good snarl, which he snarled at his subjects. But as he reached the part in which he began to threaten death and destruction, a peculiar thing happened. He heard his lips uttering the fatal threats, but his body did not move to act. He tried again, shouting more loudly and harshly that he could kill. But nothing happened. He did not even so much as rise from his princely seat. He was chagrined at the difference between his thought and deed, and quickly ordered the coachman to return him to the palace.

It was some time before he rode again through the province, but when next he went his trembling subjects found their prince a different man—saddened and mild and much more compassionate.

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