

Review of THREE CORNERS: EXPLORING MARRIAGE AND THE SELF, by Stephen R. Marks

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Three Corners: Exploring Marriage and the Self.

Stephen R. Marks. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1986.
259 pp. \$25.00 cloth, \$9.95 paper.

Marks's explicit purpose in this book is to present an inductive, exploratory theory of marital dynamics. Analyzing rich biographical data obtained through interviews with 57 married couples and 15 recently divorced persons, he traces the linkages between early socialization experiences and subsequent values, decision-making strategies, and marital trajectories. While he makes no attempt to generalize his findings and while it would be unfair to judge this book on quantitative criteria, it is important that readers bear in mind certain characteristics of the respondents: married members of the sample had all been married more than 10 years at the time of the study, the vast majority were in their first marriage, couples whose children had already grown up were overrepresented, and the sample consisted mostly of white-collar professionals and managers.

The simile of marriage as represented by three corners is a useful one, analytically as well as descriptively, in that it illustrates the very real connection between one's self and the agendas that one brings to marriage. Simply stated, each partner in a marriage can be viewed as a triangle with three corners: an inner corner representing private concerns, thoughts, and feelings; a partnership corner in which one is oriented to the spouse's interests and needs; and an outer corner symbolic of activities and relationships outside the marriage. Over the course of a marriage the three corners shift as new roles are acquired, life transitions occur, and personalities change. In the first part of the book Marks carefully probes and analyzes the fascinating accounts of his respondents' life histories to formulate a typology of marriage agendas. What emerges is an insightful explanation of why particular marriage partners were chosen—that is, what motivated particular mate-selection strategies. The explanation is heavily dependent on one's family history, particularly the parents' marital experiences, and the effects of these experiences on individual personality. Herein lies one of the limitations of Marks's framework: driven (inductively) by individual-level data and by a psychoanalytic perspective, the analysis falls short of a sociological explanation of life trajectories and interactional dynamics. As one example, "avoiding the demon" is described as a marriage agenda in which people structure their lives so as to prevent the recurrence of a tragedy experienced in one's family of orientation (e.g., an alcoholic or abusive parent). While such early experiences are certain to form lasting impressions, they tell us little about daily social interactions between husbands and wives decades later. The psychoanalytic orientation also manifests itself in countless references to projection and to needs for females to "bond" and males to "individuate."

But the important contribution of this book is its description, not its explanation. Parts II and III describe marital dynamics more clearly and provide more provocative illustrations of balanced and unbalanced relationships. The theory of three corners is smoothly integrated into these sections, amply demonstrating the utility of this exciting new framework for understanding the relationship between marriage and the self.

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