



Could marriage counseling actually harm a marriage?

KAITLIN WYNIA

Research Intern, Institute of Marriage and Family Canada



A review of Ian Dowbiggin's *The Search for Domestic Bliss: Marriage and Family Counseling in 20th-Century America*

When marriages hit rough patches, as they almost always do, many are inclined to seek counseling. It's generally a good impulse.

Yet Ian Dowbiggin, Professor of History at the University of Prince Edward Island, asks a question: Could marriage therapy actually harm marriages?

Sadly, in his recent book, *The Search for Domestic Bliss: Marriage and Family Counseling in 20th-Century America*, Dr. Dowbiggin argues that it can.

Modern marriage therapy has come to promote individualism over marital commitment. Today, there is an introspective emphasis in marriage that has contributed to marital instability and a tendency to dissolve marriages rather than seek alternative solutions. An excessive focus on self-fulfillment undermines marital security and has contributed to a changing cultural understanding of marriage.

A history of marriage therapy

The individualistic perception of relationships was an *intended* consequence of a small group of reformers in the 1930s and 1940s. These reformers shared the common goal of revolutionizing the way Americans thought about themselves and their relationships. They wanted to move marriage away from a patriarchal institution by reversing legal and social taboos. This would benefit housewives in bad marriages experiencing the "psychological tensions" often hidden in superficially happy families.

The influential founders of the marriage and family discipline advocated less stringent gender roles and more liberal views on sexuality, embracing contraceptives, sex education and eugenics. In their public health clinics, higher fertility among the upper classes and lower fertility among the lower classes was promoted. The then-groundbreaking Darwinian ideas of evolution permeated marriage and family life, where eugenics and birth control were seen as

a means of intentionally building stronger families. A major role of marriage counselors was simply to promote contraceptives and the “right eugenic decisions.” The reformers viewed marriage as an outdated institution in a period of flux that would eventually yield more relational freedom and more stable families.

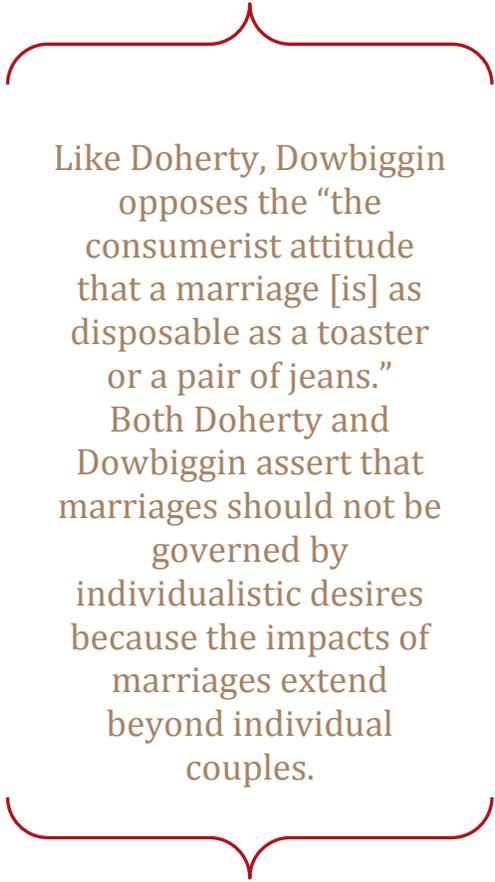
Dowbiggin also pinpoints how historical forces shaped this discipline. The Second World War created a social environment that encouraged developments in psychology and increasing post-war marriage rates. A watershed moment occurred when President John. F Kennedy signed the Community Mental Health Centers Act in 1963, reducing the stigma attached to therapy. Also, at the start of the Cold War, Soviet sympathizers advocated for socialist family policies in the United States. Marriage counselors admired how “working Soviet women with children enjoyed so many more rights than their sisters in the United States” and perceived the Soviet universalized day care system to be innovative. These events contributed to the general acceptance of the early reformers’ liberal ideals.

From counseling to therapy

The rapid expansion of the scientific study of relationships during the 1950s and 1960s transformed counseling into therapy by the 1970s. Marriage counselling emphasizes guidance whereas marriage therapy is rooted in research, theory and clinical training. Many universities and colleges began offering professional training programs mid-century, while simultaneously the public perception that therapy was only for the sick began to change. The growth in information technology, particularly television and radio, resulted in greater public exposure to family studies.

At this time, the ideas of Alfred Kinsey, William Howell Masters, and Virginia Johnson, who all challenged conventional sexual morals, were disseminated broadly to the public through these growing technologies. Alfred Kinsey is renowned for trying to “alter the accepted definitions of sexual deviance.” Likewise, Masters and Johnson are known for their research on sexual dysfunctions and for endorsing couple sex therapy.

Today, marriage therapy or “therapism” as some would refer to it is the norm in the marriage and family discipline. Dowbiggin cites William J. Doherty, professor in the department of Family Social Sciences at the University of Minnesota, who is critical of marriage therapy for promoting individual fulfillment over marital commitment. Doherty argues that therapism has excessively medicalized relationship issues, which has brought about a sense of fatalism. He partly blames America’s consumerist culture for these faulty approaches to marriage therapy.



Like Doherty, Dowbiggin opposes the “the consumerist attitude that a marriage [is] as disposable as a toaster or a pair of jeans.” Both Doherty and Dowbiggin assert that marriages should not be governed by individualistic desires because the impacts of marriages extend beyond individual couples.

Like Doherty, Dowbiggin opposes the “the consumerist attitude that a marriage [is] as disposable as a toaster or a pair of jeans.” Both Doherty and Dowbiggin assert that marriages should not be governed by individualistic desires because the impacts of marriages extend beyond individual couples.

Dowbiggin’s glimpse into the complex history of marriage therapy provides an explanation for society’s tendency to gravitate to the quick-fixes and how-to-books we are accustomed to seeing in bookstores when dealing with marital struggles. Marriage therapy is undoubtedly a valuable measure couples can take to strengthen their marriage. This book encourages couples to ensure that the professionals they invite into the most intimate areas of their lives are not diminishing fundamental marital values. He does not discourage the use of marriage therapy, but brings awareness to the ideologies woven into the discipline.

A broken marriage is not only financially, socially, emotionally, and spiritually draining on couples but also generates greater social breakdown. Understanding the downfalls of therapism will help promote healthy marriages, and simultaneously a healthier society.

Permission granted to reprint in full with attribution to the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada