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## DO “I” FIGURE IN MARRIAGE? Stability, Uniqueness And Relatedness Of Identity In The Context Of Marriage

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### Abstract:

#### *Identity*

*One of the first times the term Identity appeared in the discipline of psychology was in psychoanalyst literature by Tausk . However Identity was brought to the forefront with the work of Erik Erikson. In his identity theory he characterizes identity as a subjective sense of an invigorating sameness and continuity. It appears that according to Erikson a very important dimension of identity is that across different contexts and in different situations, one's understanding of themselves remains relatively stable. His definition even suggests that and a perception of this stability was in fact identity.*

Subsequent work on identity by James Marcia on Ego Identity Statuses took off from an Eriksonian perspective. Marcia introduced the concepts of 'commitment' and 'exploration' to identity research. According to him a mature and well balanced sense of identity forms after an exhaustive exploration of alternatives available to the individual following which a commitment is finally made to one. Individuals who manage to achieve this task are termed Identity Achievers. Marcia like Erikson seems to emphasize stability (in terms of commitment) as a prerequisite for the development of a healthy identity.

Although Erikson may have inspired Marcia with his work, his definition of identity however was by no means universally accepted. At the time Erikson's theory was criticized for its “relational” emphasis. His approach to identity being a psychosocial one was not seen in a favorable light.

### Among his critics was contemporary psychoanalyst Edith Jacobson.

She on the other hand proposed a linear model of identity formation which ranged from merger, oneness, or symbiosis to autonomy, separateness, and independence .It is evident in her writing that to her identity development was not complete till one had a clear understanding of what made them different from others. Her definition therefore

stresses development of uniqueness as an important dimension of identity formation. So while for Erikson the environmental social conditions are the foundation on which identity develops for Jacobson it is moving away from environmental factors and rising above them that identity formation is complete.

While Jacobson criticized the relational emphasis of Erikson's theory other aspects of his theory namely sameness and continuity as the precondition for identity development has been countered by others. Elli P. Schachter in his paper Identity Constraints: The Perceived Structural Requirements of a 'Good' Identity (2002) summarizes some of the opposing viewpoint:

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Côté claims that in certain sociocultural contexts, Foreclosure status or even Diffused Identity may be more appropriate. Following Zurcher's *The Mutable Self*, Côté claims that a versatile and constantly changing identity may be adaptive to cultures undergoing rapid social change and uncertainty. He posits that various forms of identity status are produced by the interaction between cultural contexts and the individuals' 'inner workings of identity formation'. Thus social contexts contribute not only to the content of identity but to their preferred structure and form. Gergen coined the term *The Saturated Self* and claims that 'the postmodern sensibility questions the concept of 'true' or 'basic' self, and the concomitant need for personal coherence or consistency'. Lifton's discussion of *The Protean Self* claims, possibly alluding to Erikson's theory itself, that the portrayal of identity that suggests inner stability and sameness 'was derived from a version of traditional culture in which relationships to symbols and institutions are still relatively intact – hardly the case in the last years of the twentieth. Finally, in contrast to the concept of closure, Bauman speaks of open-endedness in identity.

All these theoreticians suggest, in different ways, that identity is not inherently constrained by demands for closure, consistency, inner sameness and continuity or commitment.”

It is evident from the discussion so far that there are a variety of ways, based on the theoretical orientation, in which identity could be conceptualized and examined. Today a trend in Identity research is a shift away from a purely cognitive understanding of identity. Our thoughts about ourselves they argue are a part of who we are but one cannot be simply reduced to the other. Current research in identity is therefore trying to focus on the role of emotions in the development of self and identity. Another development in the area is moving away from an approach which mainly concerns outcomes, to one which focuses instead on the process of development and, more specifically, on a relational perspective on these processes.

Since identity is such a multidimensional and complex phenomenon, it would perhaps be more meaningful to study identity in the context of smaller sub-concepts which are recurrent in literature in the area. As outlined earlier three major dimensions of identity that has been under much theoretical debate are:

- Stability of identity- this dimension explores how individuals view themselves as stable and static or as dynamic in the context of time
- Uniqueness of Identity- this dimension addresses how individuals understand themselves as being different from others? What do they think sets us apart from others?
- Relatedness of identity- this third dimension examines questions like; to what extent do we define ourselves in relation to others? To what extent are our identities based on our social relationships and situations?

In this study identity is studied based on these three sub-concepts of identity. These three dimensions are not believed to be a comprehensive list of the components of identity; rather they are a way to organize the complex phenomenon of identity into smaller manageable units for the current study. It also makes the research question more focused by looking at only three aspects of identity.

## MARRIAGE

The present paper focuses on identity within the context of marriage. It therefore becomes important to review the body of literature in the area of marriage. Marita P. McCabe in her paper “Satisfaction in Marriage and Committed Heterosexual Relationships: Past, Present, and Future (2005)” summarizes the trends in marriage research over the last twenty years. According to her “a substantial body of literature has focused on divorce trends in Western countries and has examined factors related to the breakdown of marriage. More recently, this focus has shifted to consider factors related to a satisfying, happy marriage.” She also speaks of how most of the research in the last two decades in the area of marriage concern factors related to marital satisfaction in terms of the “characteristics of the individuals involved in the relationship (e.g., personality, attributions, affect), whereas others have focused on the dynamics of the relationships (e.g., communication, sexual satisfaction, conflict). Still others have considered the broader context of the relationship (e.g., role of children). “

What is striking is that even in this comprehensive review of literature on marriage, the role of the partners' individual and joint identity does not once make an appearance. The conjunction of the two areas identity formation and marriage therefore appears to be a poorly researched area.

Also Karney, B.R., McNulty, J.K., & Bradbury, T.N. in their article “Cognition and the development of close relationships” (2001) acknowledge that although cognitions are a crucial step towards understanding relationship development, interpersonal and environmental factors must also be looked at to get a broader understanding of marriage.



## INTEGRATION OF LITERATURE ON IDENTITY AND MARRIAGE

This study aims to look at some other areas besides those already mentioned (cognitive, interpersonal and environmental) that needs to be researched is identity formation in the context of marriage. The rationale being that in order to understand a relationship it is also important to understand how individuals feel impacted by the relationship. To understand marriage fully it becomes important to examine how both partners understand themselves because of marriage.

The operation that the definition of marriage I want to use here is an agreement between two heterosexual individuals to make a commitment to become part of the same family and having this commitment recognized by law.

This study is therefore based on the reasonable assumption that both marriage and identity formation have an impact on each other. One's identity formation in terms of its stability, uniqueness and relatedness will perhaps impact the quality and nature of the marriage union or the person we are will to some extent determine the characteristics of marriage we have. On the flip side entering into a marriage should in most cases impact the stability, uniqueness and relatedness of ones identity or in other words marriage to some extent impacts how we understand ourselves. These are the two main assumptions which the current research is built on however during the course of the study the assumptions are also questioned on the basis of the data that emerges.

## METHODOLOGY

The Specific Research Question

Therefore the specific research questions being addressed are:

- 1.How, if at all, is the stability (or consistency) of one's identity affected by entering a marriage?
- 2.How, if at all, is the uniqueness of one's identity affected by entering a marriage?
- 3.How, if at all, is the relatedness of one's identity affected by entering a marriage?
- 4.What is the nature of the relationship between stability, uniqueness and relatedness of identity in the context of marriage?

These questions are not only used in the generation of data but also to analyze the results in a systematic manner.

## SAMPLING TECHNIQUE

The sampling methods used are theoretical sampling based on the grounded theory paradigm. The specified context of the study is urban middle class, English-speaking Bangalore. Data collection is guided by theoretical sampling, or sampling on the basis of theoretically relevant constructs.

In the early stages of the project, open sampling of persons, involving purposive or fortuitous procedures has been used to discover and identify data which is relevant to the research question. Once the concepts arrived at were populated, an attempt was made to obtain a sense of variety in the data.

In later phases, relational or variation sampling was used to locate data which confirms, elaborates and validates relations between categories or limits their applicability.

The final phase of the project involves discriminate sampling, with deliberate and directed selection of persons to confirm and verify the core category and the theory as a whole, as well as to saturate poorly developed categories.

Flexibility with regard to the exact number of participants was inherent in the process of sampling mentioned above. For practical considerations twelve individuals or six couples were interviewed.

## DATA GENERATION METHODS

The method used is in-depth unstructured interviews with couples (interviewed separately) who have been married for a span of 2 months to ten years. The rationale to study individuals who have been married over such a wide span was to get a snapshot of couples in different family life cycle stages couple who had been married in the last six months were assumed to generate data when individuals are still getting accustomed to their new lifestyle and social roles. Couples who are married for a much longer period however are assumed to generate changes in identity that remain constant over the years. This allowed a broad range of issues related to identity to be highlighted. In-depth unstructured interviews were used to

discover both the perceptions of the participants and the context in which such perceptions arise.

To guide the interview topic cards were used as they offers a balance between maintaining an overall framework or structure for the interview and still allowing the flexibility to probe and if required change direction of the interview. Some interviews were tape-recorded, with the participant's consent, then transcribed. For individuals who were uncomfortable with the recording process copious notes were taken. A separate journal was kept to include the researcher's feelings and thoughts regarding each participant. This was done to minimize biases.

The following is a diagram of the topic cards used in the research:

- a.Introduction
  - i.Broad area of research
  - ii.Ethics/ Confidentiality
  - iii.Procedure
- b.Brief social/ personal characteristics
  - i.Family structure- both family of origin and family of procreation
  - ii.Socio-demographic details
- c.Marriage template
  - i.Earliest memories about marriage
  - ii.Attitudes, beliefs, feeling about marriage
- d.Family
  - i.nature of marriage
  - ii.power dynamics
- e.Culture
  - i.Marriages in the ethnic group/ community
  - ii.Class and caste issues
- f.Religion
  - i.Own views about religion
  - ii.Religions impact on marriage
- g.Geographic location
  - i.Moving relocating
  - ii.Bangalore as a city
- h.Gender issues
  - i.Who makes what type of decisions?
  - ii.Change of name wife- views, behaviors

#### POSSIBLE QUESTIONS-

“How would you describe yourself today? If I asked you this before you got married would your answer be the same or would it change?” (Exploring dimension of stability)

What about you is the most unique, or not shared by others? How important is it to be unique for you? Do you do anything to maintain or safeguard your uniqueness? If yes what?”(Exploring the dimension of uniqueness)

“How do your relationships affect you? What changes in how you relate to others have occurred after marriage?”(Exploring the dimension of relatedness)

“Do you think you have changed as a person; generally and in the context of marriage?”(Exploring dimension of stability)

#### FINAL QUESTIONS-

Feelings about the interview

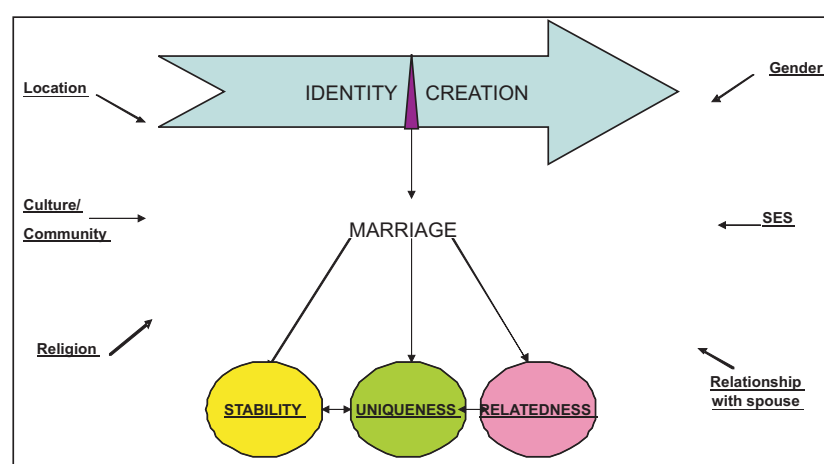
Definitions of marriage and identity

#### DATA ANALYSIS

The analysis will be based on the idea of the grounded theory approach, which is to read and re-read a textual data in the form of transcribed interviews and corpus process notes and discover concepts, categories and their interrelationships in order to generate a theory. In keeping with the grounded theory, two questions were predominantly asked to the data

1. What is the issue or area of concern that is spoken about? and
2. How is this concern resolved?

The following conceptual map was used to guide the research:



After each interview the data was used to populate the concepts mentioned in the concept map and subsequent interviews tried to generate data in sparsely populated concepts.

#### ISSUES CONCERNING THE RIGOR OF THE STUDY

Very often qualitative methods have been criticized because they fail to satisfy the positivist criteria of validity and reliability which quantitative studies are measured by. Such arguments fail to take into account the fact that interpretivist/constructivist position holds that an objective reality of human experience does not exist. If reality is internal and context specific then attempts at establishing its consistency (or reliability) is meaningless. Also the knowledge obtained is believed to be valid only in one specific context. This however does not imply that qualitative research has no constraints or checks in order to establish its quality. What it does imply is that a separate criteria be developed to evaluate the credibility of qualitative research.

Validity in its traditional sense is consequently not an issue in GT, which instead should be judged by fit, relevance, workability, and modifiability (Glaser & Strauss 1967, Glaser 1978, Glaser 1998).

Fit has to do with how closely concepts fit with the incidents they are representing, and this is related to how thoroughly the constant comparison of incidents to concepts was done.

Relevance. A relevant study deals with the real concern of participants, evokes "grab" (captures the attention) and is not only of academic interest.

Workability. The theory works when it explains how the problem is being solved with much variation.

Modifiability. A modifiable theory can be altered when new relevant data is compared to existing data. A GT is never right or wrong, it just has more or less fit, relevance, workability and modifiability.

Bias and subjectivity are important concerns which might affect the study. Some methods can be used to minimize their impact on the interpretation. With regard to issues of credibility a process journal was kept to record the researchers experiences of the interviews, and my reactions to the people being interviewed.

Finally it would be important to mention that the study does not make a claim that the findings will be applicable to all individuals in the context of marriage. The focus however is on exploring what happens to a small group of individuals in Urban Bangalore with respect to the stability, uniqueness and relatedness of identity in the context of marriage. The hypotheses generated will require further research to test them.

## ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study aims to safeguard the ethics of the participants in the following ways:

- Written consent was taken from the participants, the informed consent form included aspects such as the voluntary nature of participation and the risks and benefits associated with the study. The broad area of the research will be mentioned.
- Confidentiality was ensured through anonymity. All materials relating to the participants, including tapes and transcripts, are accessible only to the researcher and the research guide.
- As an interviewer attempts were made to be sensitive to any discomfort manifested during the interview process.
- In the instances that the individual participant is under clinically significant distress, a referral to a mental health professional will be made.

## FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Six couples were interviewed for the current study and several concepts were generated. These are discussed below with reference to the specific research questions.

### 1. How, if at all, is the stability (or consistency) of one's identity affected by entering a marriage?

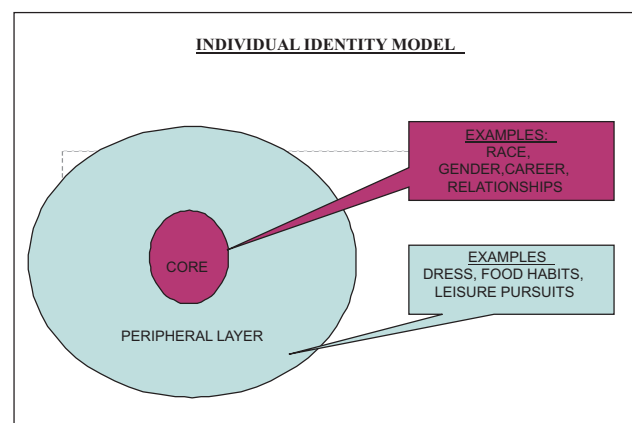
Through interviews with five couples it has been found that most individuals view themselves as very stable; they tend to believe that individuals possess a static unchanging core of what consists of their “self”, although outward change possible. For example one interviewee said “I don't think anybody changes, people don't grow up they just learn how to act in public.” However at a different time she also states that “If I were to describe myself I think that I'm at the threshold of being something completely different.” Such contradictory statements are common across several interviews where individuals claim to have not changed at all, but also describe changes in themselves occurring after marriage. One way to understand such conflicting comments could be by looking at statements stressing their stability of self as a resistance to changes that the marriage has caused in them. This was a trend that appeared more pronouncedly in the interviews of individuals in the first few years of marriage. Since for these couples interviews were conducted during the early months of marriage, perhaps most couples are not ready to part with their understanding of them self. In such a situation maybe asserting that they have not changed reflects the fact that marriage is a situation in which individuals feel that their identity is under attack; hence individuals feel the need to defend their identity by affirming its constancy. This conjecture is further backed by the fact that another interviewee's comments “If we did have to change as people then there would be problems in our marriage “.

At this point I would like to propose an identity model based on the interviews conducted. While speaking of their self a common trend across interviews was for individuals to speak of themselves as consisting of these two distinct parts. A part of them, at least according to their perception, seemed to be relatively more stable and unchanging.

This is referred to as the core in the model. Another aspect of them was relatively more fluid and relatively much more accommodative to change. This was called the peripheral layer.

The model does not tie down the contents of the core or the peripheral layer, a combination of personal identifications, choice and external political and social factors perhaps determines the contents and the size of the core and the peripheral layer, yet what is important to realize is that the core and the peripheral layer are qualitatively different. This is further explained in the diagram below. With respect to stability this would perhaps mean that based on the size of the individuals core (the more stable part of identity) individuals would be highly stable if their core was large and perhaps be more fluid if their cores were small.



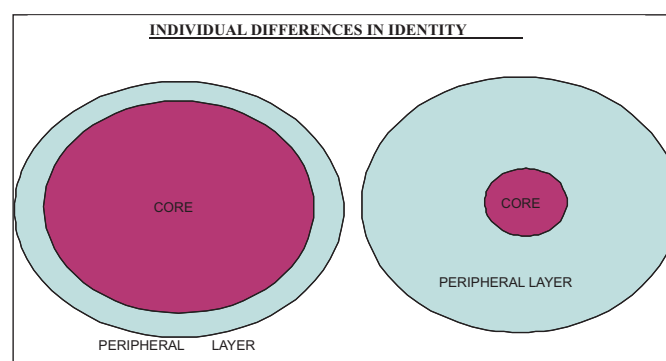


2. How, if at all, is the uniqueness of one's identity affected by entering a marriage?

Interviews have generated responses where individuals understand their uniqueness in terms of “non-shared activities” with their spouse. Interviewees also state that they feel the need to have areas of interest which are exclusive to them, yet pursuing such activities seems to take a back seat during the early months of marriage. In other words maintaining their uniqueness (which is understood as having distinct interests) was seen to be important on a conceptual level but when it came to actually performing actions to assert their individuality a pressing need was not shown by any of the interviewees. The men that were interviewed however spoke of a need to continue activities they took part in before marriage, the women that were interviewed believed that previous activities were important but newer ones such as “being a home-maker” took predominance. Both men and women however did not feel an additional need to maintain their uniqueness after getting married.

Again the identity model previously proposed could be used to examine the concept of uniqueness. According to this model the composition of the core and peripheral layer is distinct for each individual based on the size of the core and the peripheral layer and the what consists each based on choice, political and social influence. This therefore helps us understand uniqueness in terms of the unique formation of a core and peripheral layer in each individual. The model below depicts a few variations in the structure of identity.

As described earlier some individuals may have a relatively large core and a small peripheral layer while others show an opposite manifestation with a small core and a large peripheral layer. Even if two individuals possess a core and a peripheral layer of the same size the components that go into each layer will most certainly be different due to both individual and political factors. This model based on the interviews therefore helps us understand the uniqueness of each individual.



3. How, if at all, is the relatedness of one's identity affected by entering a marriage?

Relatedness was perhaps affects by the nature of the roles that one takes part in before and after marriage. A common concept that arouse across interviews is that of “a sense of peace or calm”. Couples

interviewed repeatedly affirmed that marriage has made them feel “less anxious”, “calmer” and “more peaceful”. For example one interviewee's words were “after marriage I feel a lot less impulsive, I think I'm more at peace with myself.” Another said “Marriage has definitely calmed me down.” A hypothesis that is being explored with regard to such statements across interviews is that perhaps before marriage (in the context of individuals belonging to upper to upper middle class, from an urban, English-educated background, settled in Bangalore) the roles are far less defined before marriage. Each interviewee spoke of how in a way their parents marriage formed a “template” of sorts to 'what a marriage should be'. Based on these templates perhaps these individuals have created a script of sort to guide their functioning in marriage. Roles that are performed before marriage are perhaps in today's day and age more amorphous. Hence the sense of calm that individuals speak of could perhaps be partly attributed to them entering a role that has more definite guidelines and in the early stages of marriage this provides a sense of security, hence reducing feeling of anxiety

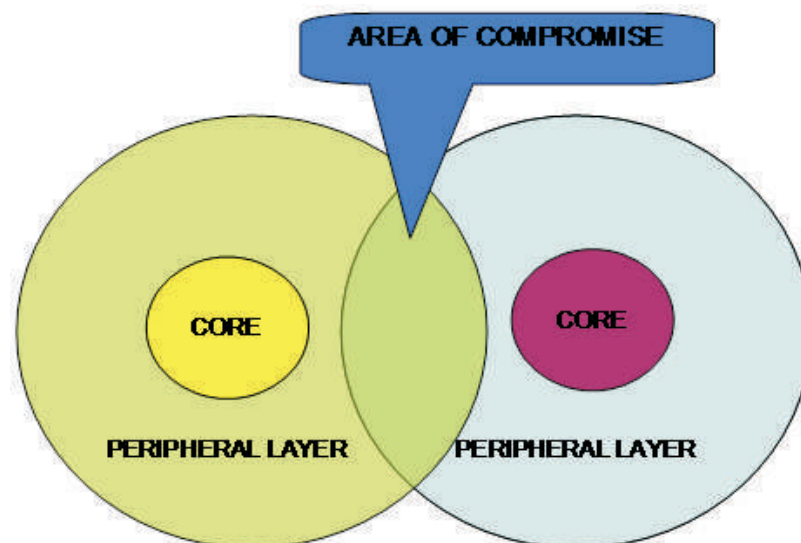
Another aspect of how relatedness of identity is affected, or how they understand themselves in terms of their relationships, pertains to the concept of “culture”. An interviewee commented that getting married at times feels like “studying a whole new culture” she continued to say “you have to spend time learning the little things about how things should be” Cultural differences were brought up repeatedly by interviewees as a primary area of concern. In continuing with the previous premise of marriage being a more structured role with a specific script, perhaps conflicts arise in one's sense of self when their personal “marriage script” differs from their partners. In other words this suggests that individuals based on their parents marriage, community, culture and religion form a “marriage script”, problems however could arise in the way they understand themselves when there is a disparity among the “scripts” of the spouses.

Interviews also seem to suggest that stability of their identity is perhaps derived from thinking of themselves in relational ways rather than what makes them unique. As one interviewee remarks “relationships have now become everything to me, they are damn important once you get married.” Similar statements have also been mentioned in other interviews, like for example “after getting married I feel like I need to be more responsible, you know...I would earlier think in terms of I am like this so I will do that...now I think more like I'm somebody's husband so I should do that.”

#### 4. What is the nature of the relationship between stability, uniqueness and relatedness of identity in the context of marriage?

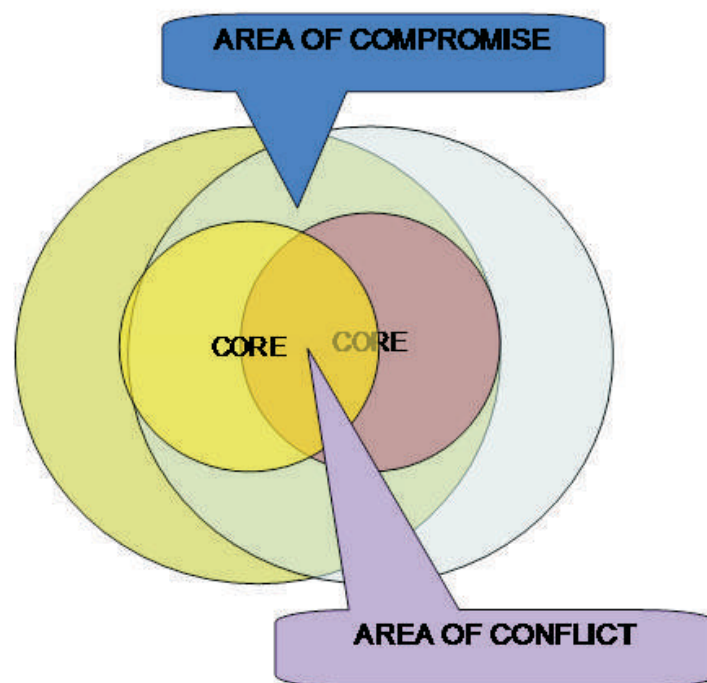
This final research question can be answered by using the identity model already developed to look at how an individual's identity interacts with their spouses' in a marriage. Since both individuals' identity consists of a core and a peripheral layer a marriage could be conceptualized as an interaction between these layers of personality.

In a marriage when only the peripheral layers of individuals interact, it gives rise to an area of compromise. Since both individuals contain peripheral layers which are relatively unstable and not central to their identity when in marriage the peripheral layers face it other it should not lead to conflict.

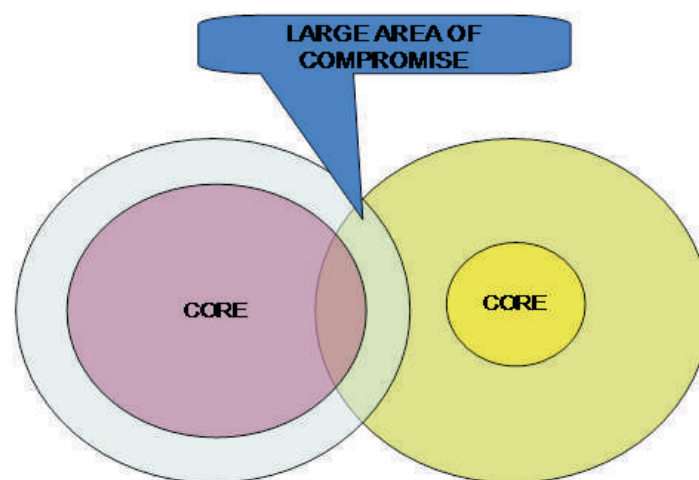


The matter however seems to be very different when the cores interact. On concerns where there is agreement between the spouses the cores of each partner can coexist however when the cores clash with each other this would lead to an area of conflict.

Both partners hold something central to who they are or their identity, (their cores) which disagree, this therefore according to the model is the source of incompatibility and discontent in a marriage. This is depicted in the diagram below:

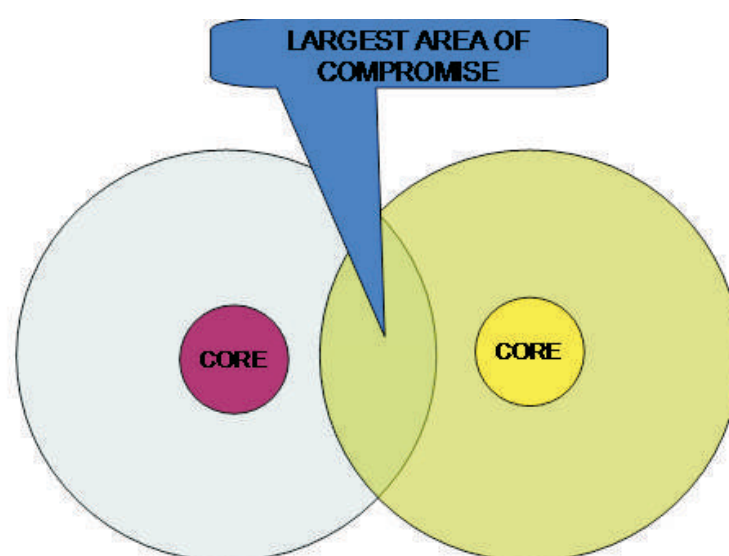


According to the model therefore there are three basic types of marriages. Firstly there are marriages where one partner possesses a large core while the other possesses a much smaller core. In such a marriage the area of compromise would be quite large and the area of conflict would be much smaller. This is depicted in the diagram on the following page:

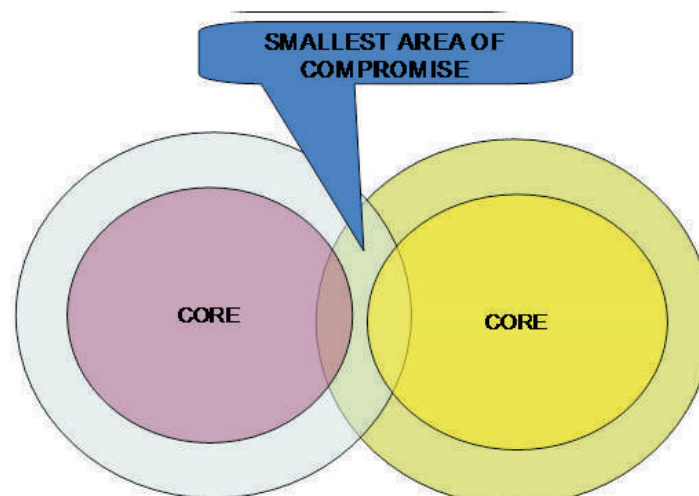


The second form of marriage consists of individuals who both have small cores. This would therefore lead to the largest area of compromise and the smallest area of conflict.

This is depicted in the diagram below:



Finally the third form of marriage is between individuals who both have large cores in their identity structures. For such individuals the area of compromise would be the smallest and the area of conflict would be the largest. This is depicted in the diagram below:



In this manner the identity and marriage model can be used to tie up the concepts of stability, uniqueness and relatedness of identity.

## CONCLUSION

The present study is not aimed at providing conclusions regarding how individuals view themselves in marriage. The study is more exploratory in nature and aims at generating hypotheses that must later be tested. The model that has been developed of identity and marriage needs to be further tested. One approach future research may take is to examine if all conflicts in a marriage are based on issues that

one considers central in making them who they are. In other words are all clashes in a marriage due to incompatible cores interacting? This can be done by examining what couples perceive as major problems in their relationship and how these disagreements relate to their identity.

If further research is able to uncover that all conflicts are based on matters central to identity then the model can have great therapeutic value. A new mode of family therapy with identity exploration as its major technique maybe develops to help couples in conflict come to a satisfactory resolution.

The challenges that have so far come up in this study closely relates to the researchers' gender (female) and life position (unmarried). As a trend, women were more receptive to allowing interviews than their husbands; this could perhaps be attributed to the researcher's gender being female.

The research study left the choice of the interview venue to participants. With respect to this another trend that is noted is that individuals usually suggest impersonal places like coffee shops and their offices or over the phone for the interview. As it is clear from the choice of locations, all interviewees thus far have chosen to place a considerable distance between the researcher and the interviewee in terms of the depth of information that can be shared. This apprehension on the part of the participants needs to be further explored.

To sum up the study has generated some interesting hypotheses with regard to concepts such as "threatened identity", "marriage scripts" and "marriage as a form of socialization" (in terms of the demands it places on "studying" a new culture.)

The model of identity and marriage formulated in this study may if tested as proven lead to a plethora of research in a new area.

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