A Conversation with Lawrence and Karen Kersten

Seeking Love Through Exchange

From "The Human Condition"

Bert Kruger Smith, interviewer

Lawrence Kersten, Ph.D., is Professor of Family Sociology at Eastern Michigan University. He is also in private practice in marriage and family therapy. Dr. Kersten specializes in interpersonal relationships in human interactions and in the study and research of personality and personality development. He has lectured extensively throughout the United States on marriage and family problems.

Karen Kayser Kersten, MSW, ACSW, is a former college educator who is now a clinician in private practice. She specializes in child and adolescent therapy in conjunction with family problems. Ms. Kayser Kersten is currently in the doctoral program in psychology and social work at the University of Michigan.

The husband and wife counseling team are also sex therapists and codirectors of the Center for Sexual Counseling and Therapy in Ann Arbor, Michigan. They are coauthors of the book *The Love Exchange*.

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We are very concerned about some trends in American society. Loneliness is widespread. The disintegration of family life, the growing lack of trust in one another, and a general lack of concern for the well-being of others are manifestations of a society that emphasizes values of extreme individualism and the legitimacy of self-centeredness. In essence, we live in a society losing the ability to love.

There are four primary choices our society offers to seek happiness. One is an "escape-coping mechanism" which emphasizes the use of drugs (prescription and non-prescription), alcohol and a multiplicity of sexual partners. The mass media increasingly suggest these means. Western culture gives us a second option in the "materialistic mechanism," that is, happiness will be found through monetary success and the accumulation of material objects. Our research shows that neither of these two approaches results in any long-lasting happiness.

Neither does a third approach: the "independence, freedom, growth mechanism." This approach is fed by idealists, opportunists, exploitative writers and therapists. It includes the voluminous explosion of self-help books, fad therapies and encounter-awareness techniques. The message of this "psychobabble" is that it is possible in life to "have your cake and eat it too" if you focus on number one (yourself). But we find that the vast majority of these people who try this approach are also lonely and unhappy.

All of our research and clinical work suggests that happiness is best found through human relationships where "positive exchange" takes place. In this "interdependence-relationship mechanism," certain realities and the understanding of human nature and motivation are stressed. We are dependent, social group animals, with unique personalities and temperaments. Rather than being found through "self-actualization," happiness is best achieved through "relationship-actualization."

We are born with a pyramid of human needs that applies both to children from infancy on into adulthood and to mature individuals in their everyday lives. On the lower level of our pyramid are such necessities as *food, water, sleep, and safety.* On the second rung is the need for *contact with other human beings.* Without contact

infants die and humans deteriorate. If the contact is consistent, of rewarding quality, and of some duration, we may develop an *attachment* with another individual.

Attachment involves an in-depth relationship and such relationships promote trust and increase our security. But our needs do not stop here—we continue to require *positive reinforcements* throughout life in order to maintain trust in people, be secure, and to interact positively. This continual process contributes to *self-esteem,* the second highest rung on the pyramid. In fact, our research shows that *self-esteem is the most important causal variable in producing the ability to exchange.*

Finally, we see *positive exchange* as a human need in itself. People who are capable of positive exchange will experience less loneliness and more happiness in their lives. We do not see the sexual drive as a critical factor in determining human happiness. Rather, it is a fringe benefit (albeit a delightful one). An individual who has developed an attachment as a child, who has a trusting and secure attachment as an adult, who has high self-esteem and—most of all—who is involved in positive exchange, will enjoy the best quality sex though not necessarily the greatest quantity of sexual activity.

"Exchange" involves giving and receiving evaluated according to rules of fairness and justice, the norm of reciprocity, and norms of social responsibility. These are universal principles found all over the world. While individuals differ, at least somewhat, in their exchangeability, or ability to exchange, there are identifiable patterns which result in specific types of exchange personalities. In addition, not all exchange is positive, since negative exchange—two people attacking each other and getting rewards from hurting back—is not uncommon.

The essential goal of therapy or counseling is to help people to learn how to exchange positively with other human beings—not only spouses, parents, and children, but also co-workers, bosses, neighbors, and friends. All human interaction involves exchanging. Positive exchange includes the ability to trust, to carry out commitments and obligations, to have empathy, to be psychologically intimate with people, to have self-esteem and some degree of power, and to understand the advantages

of enlightened self-interest and partisan group interest. The use of family therapy has many advantages over traditional one-to-one therapy approaches in teaching exchange concepts.

Exchange Personality Types

We have conceptualized sixteen exchange personality types—some of which are more common than others. One principal type is the *controller.* This person gets his or her rewards through being in charge, being the boss, being the decision maker. He tends to be opposed to change unless, of course, he thought of it first. Such people will even choose occupations where they can be in charge. They are department heads or law enforcement officers, for instance. They are not necessarily good or bad people. One can be a controller and be fair and just—the only criterion is that he or she is in control. On the other hand, some people use control to exploit others.

Another common type, usually male, is the *non-intimate exchanger.* These are people who do not share feelings, do not express emotions, do not feel comfortable opening up to others. These non-intimate individuals often have trouble with touching, they can have trouble sexually, and they are often ''workaholics" or "playaholics." The latter is a term used to describe the person who golfs every weekend, plays volleyball twice a week, bowls in three leagues, is always busy playing—all excuses to avoid intimacy. Their spouses usually end up being psychologically lonely.

A lot of married women feel alone because their husbands think that they are not supposed to show emotions, that sharing feelings is a sign of weakness. An extreme example of a non-intimate (and controlling) exchanger is Archie Bunker of television's "All in the Family." Archie loved to tell his wife (as well as everybody else) what to do, and he shouts orders constantly. But Archie also has trouble with intimacy. Whenever his daughter and son-in-law start touching and cuddling, Archie gets upset. His wife, Edith, of course,

represents a classic "pleaser." One primary reason for this show's popularity is that viewers can relate to it because a large percentage of men are non-intimate-controllers, and a lot of women are pleasers.

The *pleaser* is a person who gives and gives and gives and rarely takes a stand on anything, rarely says "no" to anybody, promises everything to everybody, and is well liked by everyone. These are nice people. They come from families where they have seen "love," but they define love in terms of giving. Pleasers often think they can change people through their giving.

However, problems exist for pleasers. They give so much that the recipient begins to resent it because it would be impossible to reciprocate. Or one can give constantly, and the other person begins to take the pleaser for granted. But most of all, pleasers can be exploited, used, and taken advantage of. Giving is only one side of the exchange process.

A lot of pleasers leave their marriages after long years of just giving. Their personalities change. They go back to school, they gain self-worth through their work, they become more assertive, and they come to recognize that they have some legitimate needs to be met also.

Such a turnaround is possible when people have a strong desire and motivation for change. Personality is generally quite constant, particularly when things are going well. But crises, hurts, resentments often stimulate people to make dramatic changes in their lives.

Pleasers are rather easy to change since they even want to please the therapist. They are terrific people to work with; they will attempt to try almost everything that might be suggested to them. Any exchange personality type, though, can change—and the motivation may lie in whether or not they want to keep their partner badly enough. The person needs to become strong enough to say to others, "I have some needs, too, and unless you start meeting them, I might not be here."

Another prevalent personality type, especially among women, is the *non-accepter.* These are persons who do not see themselves as being worthy of being loved or admired. They have low self-esteem and confidence. They often were belittled or torn down as children and therefore cannot conceive how anyone could love them.

Non-accepters are uncomfortable receiving gifts or compliments. You might say to them, "I like your dress." They might respond, "Oh, this old thing?" Many analysts have pointed out that persons cannot reach out to love other people until they first learn to love themselves. The non-accepters' lack of sense of self-worth prevents their being able to accept love from other people. Thus, non-accepters break the exchange process at the point of receiving.

Another type, almost in total contrast to the non-accepter, is the *dependency exchanger,* who functions as a spoiled brat. These are people who have been given most everything, or primarily got their own way as children. They may have been daddy's girl or mama's boy. When they grow up and get married, they do not know how to give—only to take. At least one parent was probably very controlling and continues to attempt to control their son's or daughter's marriage. These parents seldom stop trying to give.

The *intrinsic* person is a positive exchange type. This individual gives himself or herself a lot of rewards. The person may like to do things for others, but not need recognition or acknowledgement. The act itself produces good feelings for them. They do not need a reward from outside themselves as does an extrinsic person. Intrinsic exchangers are not afraid of people, they choose well in their relationships, they know whom to trust and how to build intimacy.

Love and Rejection

Our overall concern, however, is not the personalities of isolated individuals. We are concerned with the quality of relationships, or how two or more exchange personality types interact in their search for happiness. Thus, for example, choosing a marriage partner should go beyond "romantic love."

We do a poor job of choosing mates in this country because "love" is the sole prerequisite for marriage. Most new relationships involve infatuation and are highly idealized for a period of time. If people marry

quickly, they usually find that romantic love practically always dies and has to be replaced by a mature love. The subject of romantic love permeates our society in movies, songs, and on television. Love is the functional means used to get people to marry, to have children, and thus to maintain an ongoing society. It is a fragile proposition as the divorce rate testifies.

We define love as the continuous positive process of giving and receiving. But there are some people who make life miserable for spouses and children because they are unable to "love" or exchange positively. These individuals cannot trust; some are exploitative; some simply have difficulty in interacting with in-depth intimacy. Some resent obligations and try to avoid commitment. Becoming sensitized to recognize these types of individuals might save many persons a lot of grief.

No one ever gets used to being rejected, although most of us experience it in life. There are four stages in the process of recovery from rejection. At first, rejection involves shock and *disbelief*. It may involve a breakup of a marriage or a dissolution of a friendship or some other relationship. But at first one expects to wake up and find the bad dream is over. The next state is *ambivalence* or uncertainty. One day you want the person back, the next day you may never want to see that person again. This stage can last as long as a year or two.

The third stage is one of primarily negative emotions—*anger, resentment,* and *bitterness*. There is a lashing out against the person who caused the hurt. These feelings are functional in the sense that they create emotional distance between the parties and help in the disassociation process. The final stage is one of *regaining personal self-worth*. You can say now, "I can go on alone if I have to. There are other people in the world, there are other kinds of relationships." One is now ready to love again.

When people do not go through the entire process, complications are likely to develop. Remarrying quickly without completing the anger stage means that the anger is still present, and it is projected onto the new partner. In marriages within six months of a divorce, there is an exceedingly high chance of another divorce.

Hogg Foundation for Mental Health
The University of Texas
Austin, Texas 78712
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