

## **The voice of the client. Key findings from a national outcome evaluation of relationship counselling and mediation services.**

**Andrew Bickerdike, Relationships Australia (Victoria)**

**Paper presented to "Steps forward for families: research, practice and policy", Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference, February 2003.**

Clients attending offices of Relationships Australia for counselling or mediation between January and July 2000 were asked to participate in an evaluation of services. Relationships Australia operates in 78 locations across all States and Territories throughout Australia. The University of Queensland's Computer Assisted Telephone Interview facility under the direction of the Social and Economic Research Centre at the University of Queensland conducted telephone interviews with 1229 counselling and 258 mediation clients. Interviews occurred between October and December 2000. The questionnaires used were developed by Relationship Australia specifically for this project and involved extensive internal and external consultation with clinicians and researchers, and reference to existing instruments in the literature. The counselling instrument was piloted on 350 counselling clients and subsequently modified prior to the main study. It was not considered necessary to pilot the mediation questionnaire as it was based upon recent similar and well-tested evaluation instruments (Bickerdike & Littlefield, 2000; Kelly & Gigy, 1988).

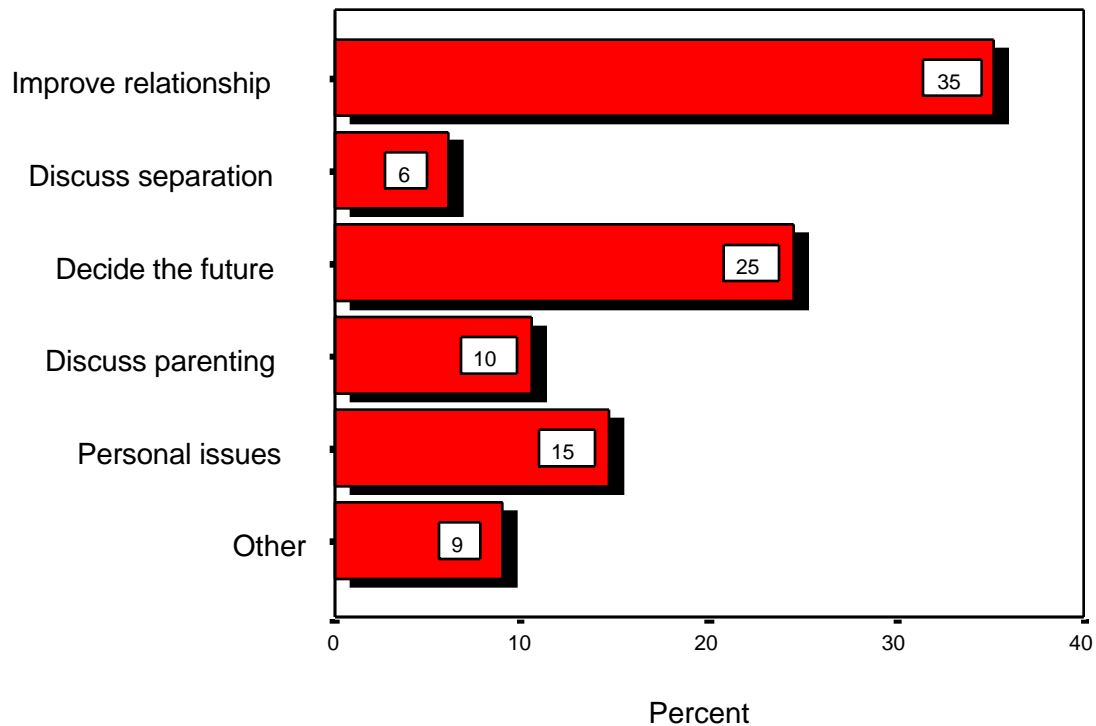
The purpose of the evaluation was to gain an understanding of:

- Reasons for seeking service
- Strategies used prior to attending mediation and counselling
- Satisfaction with the process of counselling and mediation
- Client outcomes and skill development approximately 6 months after service delivery
- The likelihood of recommending services to others
- Information that might assist and inform clinical practice

### **Counselling Sample:**

The counselling sample was very heterogenous. Roughly 40% of participants (N = 502) attended counselling alone. Of the remainder (couple clients), 320 responses were received from both members of the couple and 407 from one member of the couple. Mean age of the sample was 39 years, with 63% of responses coming from females. Clients reported a wide variety of reasons for attendance, with just over a third indicating their main reason for attending was to improve their relationship. A further third were less optimistic about their relationship – either wishing to decide the future of their relationship or to actually discuss separation. If the sample is limited to those who attended as couples then, as would be expected, the percentage of those who attended to improve the relationship rises (45%). Interestingly so does the percentage wishing to

decide upon the future of the relationship – indicating that many clients enter counselling as a couples to jointly discuss whether they will remain together.



Clients were asked what they had already done in an attempt to “sort out” the problems for which they were now attending counselling. Answers ranged from trying to solve them myself (94%), reading books/literature (55%) talking things over with family (48%), seeing a medical practitioner (35%), seeing a private therapist (33%), and seeking religious help (12%). Females were significantly more likely than males to indicate they had attempted all of the above strategies, with the exception of seeking religious help, prior to attending.

Clients were asked to indicate what topics were discussed in counselling. Twenty topic areas/types were identified. Communication issues were the most frequently cited focus (87%), followed by concerns about closeness (74%), concerns about commitment (62%) and concerns about fairness and equity (57%). Within the couple sample, females were significantly more likely to identify the following issues: concerns about fairness and/or equity, communication issues, balancing work/family issues, separation issues and gambling. Males were (non-significantly) more likely to identify that discussions focussed on sexual difficulties, conflict with in-laws and concerns about commitment. These findings are discussed below in the matched pairs analysis.

## **Outcome Analyses - counselling**

### **Key Findings:**

1. **Satisfaction with process and outcome** (examples from numerous individual items)
  - a) Eighty two percent reported that they were mostly or totally satisfied with the counselling process (further 10% neutral).
  - b) Sixty five percent reported themselves satisfied with the outcome of counselling (further 22% neutral).
  - c) Sixty seven percent agreed that counselling had given them insights into how to improve their relationship
  - d) Seventy one percent of couple clients reported that counselling had improved the level of understanding and empathy in the relationship
  - e) Over a range of these single item outcome variables, females were significantly more positive about the counselling process and outcome.
  
2. **Global Outcome Variables:** Principle component factor analysis was used to group individual outcome items into three global outcome scales: Satisfaction with the Quality of Counselling (**SQC**), Impact upon Relationship Skills (**IRS**), and Impact upon Presenting Relationship (**IPR**) (couples only).
  - a) **SQC** levels varied significantly across the types of issues that were addressed in counselling. “Personal issues to do with building relationships” produced the highest satisfaction and “Parenting / step-parenting issues” the lowest.
  - b) Females reported significantly higher **SQC** and **IRS** than males.
  - c) However, male scores were significantly lower when counselling turned to “Parenting Issues”. When these are excluded there is no significant gender differences. (In fact men report non-significant higher satisfaction when the main reason for attending counselling is to improve a relationship)
  
3. **Matched Pairs Analyses** – 159 couples where both parties responded.
  - a) In only 46% of couples both parties entered counselling with the same purpose. However 75% of couples thought they did.
  - b) If clients attended with different goals they were significantly less likely to be together at follow-up.
  - c) Females were significantly more likely than their male counterparts to regard the following issues as important in their counselling (in order of size of difference):
    - Balancing work/family issues
    - Sexual difficulties
    - Personal issues
    - Health issues
    - Concerns about fairness/equity

➤ Separation issues

- d) Males were more likely to identify concerns about commitment as the most important issue discussed.
- e) When asked what were the issues discussed (rather than the importance of each), not surprisingly most couples agreed. However, females were significantly more likely to identify gambling and drug/alcohol issues while men were significantly more likely to identify concerns about commitment.

## **Mediation Sample:**

Of the total sample of 258 mediation respondents, 130 were females and 128 males. One hundred and twenty eight of these clients responded with their partner – providing a sub-sample of 64 couples with dual responses (matched sample).

The majority of clients reported that the main reason for attending counselling was to discuss property issues (55%), followed by parenting discussions (33%) and discussions about how to separate (7%). Almost half of the sample had sought legal advice prior to mediation with females significantly more likely than males to report seeking assistance from a friend or a lawyer before attending mediation.

## ***Outcome Analyses - mediation***

### **Key Findings**

1. **Satisfaction with process and outcome** (some examples from numerous individual items)
  - a) Eighty percent felt that the mediation was carried out in a skilled manner
  - b) Seventy three percent felt that “the mediator(s) was often helpful in proposing ways to resolve disagreements with the other party”
  - c) Seventy six percent reported overall satisfaction with the process of mediation (a further 12% were neutral), while 60% were satisfied with the outcome of their mediation (15% neutral).
  - d) Seventy one percent of clients reported that agreements had been reached in mediation.
2. **Global outcome variables.** Principle component factor analyses produced four global outcome variables: Sensitivity of Mediator (**SM**), Impartiality of Mediator (**IM**), Effectiveness of Mediation Process (**EMP**), and Effectiveness of Child – Focussed Process (**ECP**).

- a) Clients who mainly entered mediation to discuss property issues reported higher satisfaction, with significantly higher **EMP** ratings than those who primarily came to discuss parenting issues.
- b) Females were significantly more likely to feel that the mediation process was effective (**EMP**).
- c) Clients who received sole-mediation (N=154) were significantly more satisfied than those who received co-mediation (N=99) across a variety of outcome measures (**EMP**, and many individual outcome items). Further analyses within gender groups found that men in particular preferred sole mediation. Women also showed this preference, but not to the degree of their male partners.

**Note:** It needs to be recognised that the sampling methodology requires qualification of this finding. Some states specifically allocate “difficult cases” to co-mediation. These cases might be less satisfied because of the difficulty of their situation. Arguing against this interpretation, it is also the case that a number of states only undertake co-mediation and others allocate co-mediation in part according to mediator availability, not perceived complexity. In addition, there were no other significant differences between co-mediation and sole-mediation groups across any other variables (issue type, agreement rates, further litigation etc). Finally, the lower satisfaction scores for co-mediation occurred across a wide variety of outcome and process measures, many one would not necessarily associate with intrinsic case complexity. In summary, while these analyses need to be treated with caution, and interpretations qualified due to potential sampling bias, they are also sufficiently robust to warrant at least further research, and possibly an initial reconsideration of existing views within the discipline (see discussion below).

### 3. **Matched Pairs Analyses** (N = 64 couples)

- a) Most couples agreed upon the main reason for entering mediation (80% of couples). The most common disagreement occurred when males reported the main reason to be property issues while their spouse reported the main reason to be parenting issues (8% of couples).
- b) Gender variance in satisfaction interacted with issues discussed. Males were more satisfied when mediation mainly focussed on parenting issues, whereas females were more satisfied when mediation focussed on property issues

## **Summary**

### **Counselling**

- Most clients were satisfied with their experience of counselling. Overall, females are more positive, however this is predominantly a function of the type of issues brought to counselling. Males were significantly less satisfied when parenting issues were brought to counselling, but similarly satisfied when the purpose of counselling was to deal with various other issues.
- Couples often entered counselling with different agendas / purposes, and absence of agreed purpose was predictive of separation at follow-up.

- Although most couples agreed about what was discussed in counselling they did not always agree about the importance of the issues addressed, with some interesting gender effects. For example, males were more likely to identify commitment as an important discussion whereas women identified work/life balance and sexual difficulties as important.
- If clients brought Domestic Violence, Drug and Alcohol, Affairs, or Separation Issues (no surprise) to counselling, they were less likely to be still together at follow-up.

### **Mediation**

- Most clients were satisfied with their experience of mediation. Overall, females were more positive about the mediation process, however, as with the counselling sample, satisfaction interacted with the focus of discussions. Men were significantly more satisfied with parenting discussions and females with property discussions. It could be interpreted that these issue/gender satisfaction patterns reflect the type of issues that each gender group feels least capable to influence. Previous research comparing mediating and litigating clients has suggested that males tend to be more obstructive around parenting issues, and females around property discussions (Emery, Matthews & Kitmann, 1994). The clients in this sample may have felt sufficiently empowered to effectively negotiate in the issue domains they were least competent or confident to influence.
- Unexpectedly, clients appeared to prefer sole mediation across a variety of outcome and process measures. Males in particular preferred sole mediation. This finding is contrary to widely accepted views within the mediation literature about the superiority of the co-mediation approach. There has been little research comparing the effects of co-mediation and sole mediation and the prevailing attitudes have come about through clinical judgment. While the findings of this study need replication, and the sampling methodology limits interpretation, the consistency of the pattern across a wide variety of outcome measures certainly suggests a re-examination of the arguments for the co-mediation model. Do clients prefer co-mediation, or mediators?

Bickerdike, A.J & Littlefield, L. Divorce adjustment and mediation: Theoretically grounded process research, Mediation Quarterly, 18(2) (winter), 2000.

Emery, R.E., Matthews, S.G. and Kitmann, K.M. (1994) Child custody mediation and litigation: Parents' satisfaction and functioning one year after settlement. Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 62(1), 124-129.

Kelly, J.B. and Gigy, L. (1988) Measuring clients' perceptions and satisfaction. Mediation Quarterly, 19, 43-52.