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This paper discusses challenges facing family practitioners and researchers in identifying factors involved in satisfying family relationships, and identifies priorities for research.



# Healthy Families and Relationships

## Challenges for Families, Practitioners and Researchers

For most adults, intimate and enduring couple relationships contribute significantly to physical, mental and social wellbeing (Gove, Style and Hughes 1990). It is from this broader definition of 'health' that this paper is written.

Problematic relationships are likely to have adverse effects on health, exposing individuals to greater stress (Burman and Margolin 1992) and exacerbating existing mental health problems (Sanders 1995). Conversely, health can have a major impact on the quality and outcome of relationships – for example, an illness in one spouse may cause the couple to renegotiate the structure of their relationship (Burman and Margolin 1992). Changes in family structure through permanent disability of a family member or death of a child are key turning points in family relationships.

In some families, relationships can become stronger through coping with chronic illness, a health-related crises or other major

stressors, while other couples experience negative consequences, irreparable differences and separation. Strong, mutually beneficial family relationships can provide an environment for physical, mental and social wellbeing for family members, while in other families, members may live in a state of unresolved conflict.

From this perspective, satisfying relationships are central to healthy families and, despite the school of thought that income, jobs and housing are the key factors in family policy, this is a focus which should not be lost.

The benefits to health of intimate relationships most likely occur because family relationships engender high levels of social support (Reis and Franks 1994). For many individuals, family remains the main element of their social support system throughout life.

Here, it should be remembered that, although statistics define families as two or more related people living together in the same household, families are not, in fact, confined to households. Increasingly, through separation, divorce or stepfamily relationships, members of a family with dependent children do not always live under the same roof. Familial roles and caring responsibilities for physical, emotional and financial support extend to adults who do not live in the family home – for example, adult offspring, adult siblings, ageing parents and, for migrant families, families in their country of origin. Some people have to construct a new family because of serious problems in their family of origin; others may construct families based on alternative choices such as sexual preference. The important thing is that, in reality, what people regard as their family *is* their family.

There is a reluctance in some areas to define families broadly because of the impli-



cultural nature of Australian communities. Relationships Australia sees the need for research that aims to identify positive characteristics contributing to healthier relationships, the times or life stages when intervention is most likely to be effective, and the types of interventions or environments that assist families to develop healthier relationships.

This calls for broad conceptualisation of the issues and adoption of a range of research methodologies, including practice research. The following areas are viewed by Relationships Australia as being key research priorities.

### Changing Expectations in Couple Relationships

Within the broader definition of family, intimate couple relationships form the core element from within which the majority of family relationships function. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS 1992), in Australia almost 80 per cent of couples are in registered marriages, with de facto relationships representing 7 per cent of all couples. Approximately 14 per cent of families are sole-parent families where the parent was divorced or separated, or other families.

Over time, marriage expectations have changed markedly (Hartin 1992). In the past, the assumption was that a husband would be content if his wife was mother of his children, kept house and was a reasonably willing sexual partner; his wife would be satisfied if her husband worked hard, supported the family, was not too intolerant of the children, not too demanding sexually, and was not violent when drunk. By today's standards such expectations seem minimal. The modern partner is expected to be the ideal companion for every occasion, a wise and understanding person to confide in, an all-coping parent, an exciting sex partner, and a loyal sympathiser and supporter.

One of the most obvious social changes in recent times has been the influx of women into post-secondary education and into the labour force in increasing numbers. This has had a profound effect on themselves and on the way families now function – for example, greater educational and occupational opportunities for women have reduced their economic dependence on marriage.

At the same time as these social and economic changes, marriage has been gradually losing its special status in the eyes of the law. Couples who choose cohabitation rather than marriage now find that the law provides them and their children with many of the rights and protections once the exclusive province of the formally married.

This raises the question of the extent to which marriage is viewed as a special relationship and perceived as being much more than a legal or economic relationship.

Little is known about the characteristics of satisfying couple relationships. We observe the mysteries of couplehood – how apparently incompatible couples stay together for

a lifetime and seem to be happy with each other, and at the other extreme, couples who approach potential conflict like a fatal virus, unable to resolve critical issues in their marriage, but celebrating 30th and 40th wedding anniversaries in spite of doomsday prognoses (Gottman 1994).

On the other hand, increasing numbers of couples do not remain married. We see that divorce rates have increased significantly since the 1950s and 60s. Following a sharp rise around 1976 under the operation of the new Family Law Act, divorce rates in the early 1980s dropped to a level well above the rates in the 1960s and have increased steadily from there into the 1990s. Currently, about 10 per cent of all marriages are likely to end in divorce by six years of marriage, 20 per cent by ten years, 30 per cent by 20 years and 40 per cent by 30 years of marriage. People who remarry following divorce are more likely than others to divorce (ABS 1995).

These statistics pose an interesting question. Are divorce statistics an indication of the difficulties being experienced in relationships, or are relationships now so important that couples do not settle for less than supportive, caring relationships which recognise the changing needs of both partners?

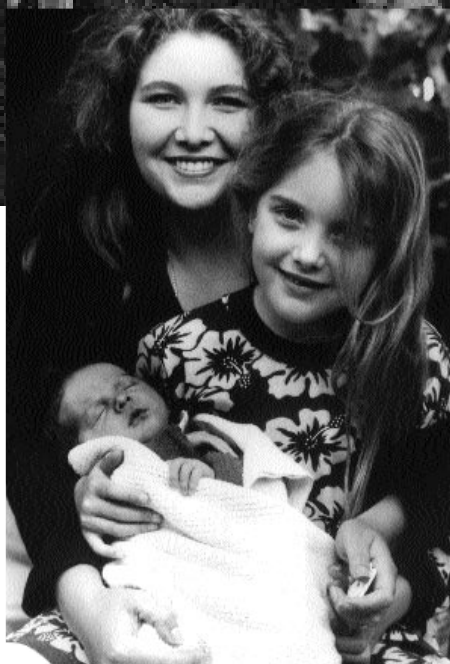
Here, we need to recognise that marriage and divorce are only one window on couple relationships. Much of the research on couple relationships focuses predominantly on marriages and does not include other significant couple relationships such as couples who do not marry, people in same-sex relationships, and young people living together.

Most couples, in the first instance, are committed to resolving difficulties in their relationship. Wolcott and Glezer (1989) found that the main issues couples identified for exploration at their first relationship counselling session were more likely to be about potential threats to the stability of the relationship than about ending the relationship, and Relationships Australia's (1995) Annual Report showed that the focus of counselling for the majority of clients was on reconciliation or enhancing relationships.

An important avenue of services provided by Relationships Australia is education programs for enhancing relationships. These programs focus on prevention strategies for all stages of relationships – formation, separation and re-formation – as well as on pre-marriage education (the traditional area of relationship education). As an example, Relationships Australia in Western Australia has commenced a community relationship education project, 'Build Better Relationships', designed to promote, enrich and enhance the relationships of couples aged 23–30 years in committed relationships.

Developing relationship education programs and providing counselling services puts us at the coal face in working through complex issues such as identifying the characteristics of satisfying couple relationship, factors which lead to separation, and the basis for what appear to be strong inclinations to build new couple relationships.

Although some research exists (for example, Gottman 1994), there is a need for further research on identifying characteristics that contribute to satisfying couple relationships. Important questions include: Can the factors



Picture: Howard Birnstihl

Picture: Jacqueline Mielman

increased understanding of the crucial elements of satisfying family relationships helps the planning and provision of more effective support services tailored to particular family needs.

As an organisation working closely with families, Relationships Australia sees a strong need for researchers to continue to build on the type of family research that recognises the systemic nature of family relationships, the complexity of factors that mediate these relationships, and the multi-

which promote positive relationships be identified and measured? Are these characteristics constant across families from different backgrounds and cultures? Are there gender differences? What approaches are most effective in building satisfying family relationships? For whom and at what stage of relationship formation and re-formation are these approaches most beneficial? There is also a need for more information on relationship history (the formation and re-formation of relationships over lifetimes) since much of the existing data capture relationship status at only one point in time.

### Relationship Issues for Young Adults

Aggregated statistics mask emerging trends and differences in pressures on sub-groups within the overall picture. The danger is that the needs of these groups will be overlooked in family policy and service provision.

One group experiencing recent, significant social and economic change is young adults. Based on current statistical and demographic information, couples aged 25–30 years are more likely than other age groups to be at risk of experiencing early relationship difficulties or potential relationship breakdown. The divorce rate for males aged 25–29 years is 20.1 per 1000 married population compared with an overall rate of 12 per 1000. For females, the rate for 25–29-year-olds is 21.7 compared with 12 overall (ABS 1995).

Major social and economic changes in recent years mean that young adults are experiencing a profoundly different lifestyle which will not change as they grow older because the system has altered permanently. One key development is the trend to living at home with parents longer, the effects of which on young adults and the families of origin need to be investigated.

The other key development is the massive change in the labour market which has particular significance for young adults. Casualisation of work, the increase in part-time work, and the fact that the majority of new jobs have been in the service industries and are on a 24-hour, seven-day week basis. This represents major restructuring of the labour market, the workplace and the economy. Many young couples seem to be living on two part-time incomes, but with children, the costs increase and a family's standard of living can be adversely affected. What pressures will this bring to a relationship?

One of the top priorities for research is a study looking at the effects of these matters specifically on 25–30-year-olds (and not aggregated for all age groups) to establish whether or not this age group is experiencing a different social and economic system.

### Effects of Family Separation and Re-formation on Children's Wellbeing

The family is a primary source of influence for a child's social, emotional and cognitive development, particularly for young children, and the quality of family relationship is likely to have a direct impact on children's behaviour, anxiety levels, social competence and academic achievements.

For children living in families where parents are experiencing difficulties in their

relationship, the key factors for children's health and social wellbeing appear to be how that conflict is expressed – whether it is expressed directly to children, whether it is covertly expressed in such a way as to make children feel caught in the middle, or whether parents find ways to express conflict that does not involve the children.

There are differences in the literature reporting the long-term effects of parental separation divorce on children. Research and practice indicate that changes for children brought about by their parents' separation need not necessarily cause undue long-term stress. Important factors include the child's relationship with both parents before separation, the amount of time spent with the parent with whom the child is not living (where the child has been close to that parent), and how parents resolve parenting arrangements (Kelly 1996).

Supportive extended family networks are another factor in children's adjustment to family separation. Grandparents may provide stability, support, and a sense of identity and 'roots' to grandchildren when parents separate, providing grandparents are acting in the child's best interests (Weston 1992).

Another challenging area is family systems involving stepfamilies. These families comprise a growing proportion of our population. In 1992, 8.5 per cent of all couple families with dependent children included stepchildren (Boss, Edwards and Pilmar 1995). Parents and children in blended families often have the expectation that these families will relate in the same way as they did in the nuclear family. We see children who are experiencing conflict in adjusting to not one, but two or more blended family networks.

Research in this area needs to acknowledge the complexity of these family systems and sub-systems and the fact that the patterns in stepfamilies may be different from those in first family models, but equally satisfying (Webber 1991).

In the past few years there have been advances in thinking on the question of children's rights and family law which has resulted, in particular, in legislative changes to the Family Law Act (with an increased emphasis on the interests of children), and the United Nations Convention on Rights of the Child. These legislative changes will see more children participating in mediation and counselling processes. This brings an urgent need for more research, particularly in an Australian context, which identifies the effects on children of living in conflict situations, how parents can minimise the effects on children in managing separation, shared parenting arrangements and family re-formation, and finally, what children themselves are saying on these issues.

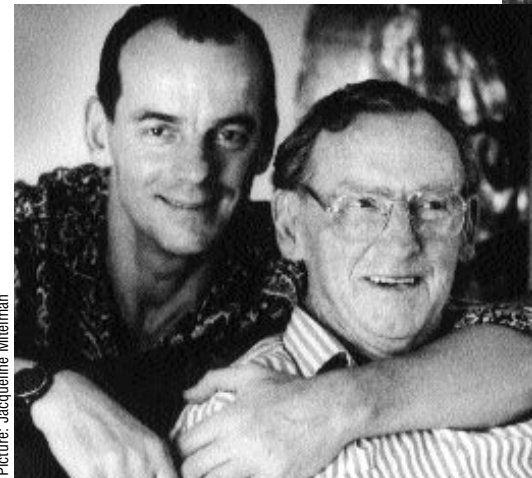
### Impact of Society's Management of Violence and Abuse

The increased awareness of the impact of child abuse and family violence on relationships and the healthy development of children and other family members, has been a positive development. However, there are many questions regarding the way in which society manages these issues and a growing concern that some interventions are in fact as potentially abusive and damaging

as the original abuse or violence.

For example, the children of the last generation of parents who have been subjected to our various child welfare/child protection systems are becoming increasingly vocal about the impact of welfare interventions on their lives. Simultaneously many professionals have begun to question the extremely punitive approach to the management of child abuse manifest in the removal of children from their families. They believe that an integrated approach incorporating a variety of services such as counselling and community development to support the family, and structural interventions to address disadvantage, would be more effective and just. Because of the reduction of public expenditure on welfare, along with the huge increase in reporting as a consequence of mandatory reporting, resources are being channelled into investigation and policing. A group such as the Australian Association of Young People in Care is important in that it gives voice to previously unheard evidence of this.

There is little research on alternative



Picture: Jacqueline Meilman

approaches to the management of child sexual abuse and family violence, and the current community treatment of perpetrators and their families is not reflective of an informed and compassionate society.

While we know that violence has an impact on the ability of people to form lasting relationships and on future parenting patterns of many survivors of violence and abuse, there is growing anecdotal evidence that the way we manage both these issues as a society can have an equally profound negative impact. For example, on both issues the way we have conceptualised the problem and focused on adults has resulted in the impact on children being ignored. The focus on women leaving a violent relationship has not helped us deal with the reasons why women go back into these destructive relationships.

Longitudinal studies of the effects of violence for those who have lived in violent relationships and those who are still experiencing violence are needed because, although many of us know of the problems, we do not have the powerful empirical evidence of the impact of violence to convince the community and the decision makers.

In co-sponsoring the resolution on 'The Elimination of Violence Against Women' adopted by the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, Australia made a strong

commitment to working towards the elimination of violence against women. Research in the area of prevention and effectiveness of programs on family violence would provide essential support for this commitment.

### Adolescents and Families

A number of studies indicate that despite conflict which may arise within families, and particularly between parents and adolescents, parents are generally respected and looked to for advice on work, career and personal matters, and are seen as people to turn to for help and emotional support (Hartley and Wolcott 1994 quoting the Age/Saulwick Poll 1989).

Yet, on another side of the picture is the anecdotal evidence from welfare and youth accommodation agencies which suggests that in recent years there has been an increasing proportion of young people under 16 years, particularly young women, seeking



Picture: Howard Birnshih

assistance (Hartley and Wolcott 1994).

Relationships Australia is involved in services for adolescents through its Adolescent Family Therapy and Mediation Service in a number of States and Territories. The program has a charter to develop innovative strategies to prevent family breakdown and reduce the incidence of youth homelessness by assisting relationships which promote growth into adulthood in a caring, safe emotional and physical environment. The area of adolescent and family relationships has been accorded priority status with the Prime Minister's recently announced Youth Homeless Taskforce.

Research issues are concerned with identifying the positive factors which build strong family support networks which remain significant even when young people move away, and those factors which make refugees or family placements necessary for young adolescents.

### Extended Families

Earlier, the importance of social support networks which extend beyond the nuclear family through cross-generational and cultural family traditions was raised.

#### Cross-generational family systems

A number of studies have identified stresses for the 'middle generation', usually women, due to the intensity of the daughter-mother (or mother-in-law) relationship, particularly with cohabitating mothers. Middle-aged women are frequently responsible for spouse, aged parents, children (and perhaps grandchildren), and the pressures of these often conflicting roles can be deleterious to physical and emotional health, as well as to social and career opportunities (Millward 1994).

#### Families vary across cultures

Definitions of who is part of family varies across cultures and this has impact on the circle of people considered important in resolving family issues. Multiple-family households, economic and emotional support of family in the country of origin, differences between youth and parents during the period of transition from dependence to independence, and gender roles are but some of the issues facing migrant families, particularly those from non-English-speaking backgrounds (McDonald 1991).

Cross-cultural awareness has improved, but a recent report entitled 'Partners in Any Language' (Stoyles 1995), on the use of family and relationship services by the many communities in Australia, made a number of recommendations to ensure access and cultural appropriateness of services.

Another challenge for family and relationship support services in Australia is that of the recognition and needs of the indigenous community. Major government inquiries into Aboriginal deaths in custody and the removal of Aboriginal children from their families are establishing the history and the need for recognition, restitution and healing. Important recommendations for reform have been identified. It is important that our field responds to these findings and recommendations. Family is a vital element of Aboriginal communities and is complex, extensive and powerful. We are aware that we need to work with Aboriginal communities to assist them to achieve their goals in family and relationship matters.

As a priority, family relationships research should take account of the cultural diversity of Australian communities.

### Conclusion

It is important to recognise the pressures which families are experiencing and to work in partnership towards better ways of resolution – both through influencing family policy, and through enhanced service provision. Relationships Australia looks to researchers for support in achieving both of these goals.

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