

Positive Pathways for Couples and Families: Meeting Existing and Emerging  
Challenges of Relationships

Gery Karantzas and Patricia Noller

There is a growing need to develop an understanding of the positive pathways that strengthen the relationships of Australian couples and families. The couples and families in contemporary Australian society are faced with many challenges and pressures that can mitigate against maintaining satisfying and enduring couple and family relationships. For example, increases in the need for dual income families, the working of longer hours, demographic shifts that see older people living longer and children staying at home longer mean that couples are often required to provide familial care across two generations – frail aging parents and children. These examples highlight just some of the pressures faced by modern day Australian couples which can lead to people not taking the time to cultivate their relationships.

The aim of the workshop was to deal with many of these issues by linking research, policy and practice in ways that would help families meet such challenges. The two-day workshop, held from November 1-2, 2008 in Melbourne brought together leading and emerging Australian and international relationship researchers with practitioners, educators, policy makers and service-delivery organisations. Alongside the Academy, the event was sponsored by Deakin University, the University of Queensland, the Department of Families, Housing and Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaCHSIA), the Attorney General's Department (AG Department), the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) and Lifeworks. The workshop comprised of seven papers sessions and two break-out discussions. A total of 28 participants attended the workshop. Of these participants, there were 19 speakers and 7 delegates from the various sponsor organisations that took part in group discussions.

Professor Alan Hayes (AIFS) provided the opening address for the workshop. His presentation highlighted that much of today's family policy is focused on the various forms that families take rather than on issues regarding family functioning. Professor Hayes urged workshop participants to think in terms of policy that incorporates the social, economic and developmental changes that influence family outcomes.

In the first session of the workshop, Professor David de Vaus (La Trobe University, FASSA) remarked that past social and familial models of what a relationship 'should be' do not assist today's young couples in negotiating their relationships. This problem is due to the diverse forms that modern day romantic relationships take. Professor de Vaus suggested that the key to handling these new models of relationships was in the capacity for people to make informed choices rather than failing to make decisions because of fear or uncertainty or making decisions based on past archetypes.

Robyn Fleming (FaCHSIA) and Sue Thomas (AG Department) reported on the current roll-out of the Family Relationship Centres (FRCs) and suggested that healthy family relationships should be considered a public good. Fleming noted that the maintenance of this public good may require young people to receive more relationship education. Workshop delegates discussed the idea that units and courses in relationships should be offered in more higher education institutions to assist today's youth in developing and sustaining positive relationships. Professor Kim Halford (Griffith University) noted that investing in such a public good would result in significant monetary savings for the Federal Government across legal and social spheres. The group of participants then discussed whether a preventative rather than diagnostic approach should be taken to marriage and the family – similar to the various health prevention campaigns that have been developed in the past. The group

agreed that, at present, the emphasis is to help couples and families deal with interpersonal difficulties rather than providing initiatives to decrease the probability of problems occurring.

In the second session – dealing with couple and family conflict, Professor Noller (University of Queensland, FASSA) provided a summary of findings demonstrating how marital conflict patterns influence children's learning of conflict, and how this in turn is transferred across to sibling relationships. Professor Noller also illustrated the negative effects experienced by children in intact and separated families exposed to marital conflict.

In a complementary set of papers, Associate Professor Julie Fitness (Macquarie University) and Associated Professor Judith Feeney and Dr Jennifer Fitzgerald (University of Queensland) examined the issues of betrayal and forgiveness in couple relationships. Associate Professor Fitness argued that forgiveness and punishment were not incompatible in reconciling issues of betrayal but suggested that the motivation for punishment was a key variable in forgiveness. Punishment designed to communicate hurt, and deter re-offence were viewed as adaptive forms of punishment and generally lead to partner forgiveness. Associate Professor Feeney and Dr. Fitzgerald discussed an emotion-focused therapy approach to relationship education in facilitating apology and forgiveness following hurtful events. The program, which required couples to put themselves into the role of offender and victim demonstrated promising findings with offenders having a heightened sense of remorse, victims forgiving partners and couples reporting increases in relationship satisfaction. The intervention highlighted the importance of psycho-educational programs grounded in solid theory as effective in dealing with relationship transgressions.

The third session highlighted many of the barriers and opportunities that exist in the areas of couple education and counseling. Dr. Sweeper (Deakin University) discussed the development of a tool to assist clinicians to identify and tailor counseling interventions to members of couples who are not adjusting well to partner separation. The simple-to-administer self-report measure was discussed as a possible diagnostic instrument that could be distributed widely to relationship counselors working privately and to the government funded FRCs. Dr. Ingrid Sturmey (Relationships Australia) suggested that the efficacy of therapists was in part compromised by the lack knowledge transfer to the profession of current advances in theory and research. Both the presentations by Mrs Denise Lacey (Centacare) and Professor Halford (Griffith University) noted that while numerous couples regard couple education as important, barriers to couples undertaking such programs include lack of time, stigmatization (especially for men), perceptions that unsolvable problems will be highlighted or that older couples already know how to make relationships work. Moreover, Mrs Lacey highlighted the way that government policies focus more on assisting troubled families rather than valuing prevention programs such as marital education. These difficulties in delivery prompted Professor Halford to develop a cost-effective online administration of a couple-education program. According to Professor Halford online couple education and face-to-face education and counseling may be viewed as on a spectrum. Couples who are at low risk of relationship problems but who wish to enhance their relationships could do so by engaging in online relationship education while those at high risk of marital disharmony could be encouraged to engage in face-to-face education and counseling. We discussed the fact that different modalities of administration may prove a more cost-effective means for service providers and the Federal government to increase the

uptake of such education programs.

The fourth session placed specific emphasis on two of the most common mental health issues experienced by families and couples – depression and anxiety. Dr Kerry Hurd (Brisbane Boys Grammar) reported that 25% of preadolescents' and adolescents' mental health concerns are due to issues of family functioning. Hurd however noted that government initiatives such as KIDSMATTER, have increased awareness about adolescent mental health concerns and have assisted in the reduction of youth suicide. Moreover, Hurd suggested that parents need to become more in tune with their children's psychological wellbeing, to reflect on their capacity as role models and to provide supportive environments for youth when dealing with distress or life failures. These comments were echoed by Dr. Nicole Highet (BEYONDBLUE) who specifically reported on BEYONDBLUE initiatives to support family carers of individuals with depression and anxiety. Highet presented the most recent phase of the BEYONDBLUE advertising campaign which targeted carers to assist them in helping a family member with depression or anxiety as well as dealing with their own worries and concerns. Professor Jeffrey Simpson (University of Minnesota) reported on his long research program into the transition to parenthood. His findings highlighted that insecure attachment bonds are a risk factor in couples experiencing negative mental health outcomes such as depression and anxiety. Simpson found that anxiously attached women who enter parenthood perceiving less partner support or greater spousal anger were most at risk of marital dissatisfaction postpartum and increased depressive symptomatology. Simpson suggested that screening couples for attachment-related insecurities and relationship difficulties during the antenatal period may provide a point at which to provide therapy or relationship education aimed at enhancing relationship functioning, and also providing psycho-educational material

on parenting. These comments were echoed by discussants who argued that relationship education may be best as part of existing services in the community designed to help couples deal with life transitions.

The fifth session examined issues associated with sexual intimacy and love. Dr Gillath (University of Kansas) reported on a series of studies that found increasing people's sense of attachment security increased people's prosocial behaviour and the use of sexual strategies geared towards enhancing the longevity of romantic relationships. He argued that couple interventions should incorporate security-enhancing techniques as these techniques seem to result in partners feeling validated and supported within their relationships. Professor McCabe (Deakin University) specifically discussed issues regarding sexual dysfunction for both women and men. Professor McCabe identified that a significant number of sexual dysfunction cases could be traced back to relationship problems in the dyad, and that these problems were usually present for some time prior to the manifestation of the sexual dysfunction. In particular, she argued that treatment of sexual dysfunction requires a couple approach due to the reciprocal effects sexual problems have on partners.

Session six, investigated the influence of positive and negative thoughts and actions in relationships. Dr. Zoe Pearce (Queensland University of Technology) reported on a set of studies that found that negative partner attributions influenced individual's perceptions that the partner was not working to sustain the relationship. Her findings suggested the importance of emotion-focused and cognitive behavioural therapies in assisting couples redress negative partner attributions to yield more accurate and positive attributions. Dr Nickola Overall (University of Auckland) examined the most effective strategies used by couples to regulate partner behaviour. Dr. Overall reported that positive indirect strategies used to change partner behaviour,

while perceived as effective, did not result in sustained change on the partner's behalf. Rather direct strategies where a problem was communicated clearly and framed in a positive manner resulted in lasting partner changes.

The final paper session of the workshop dealt with family issues at two ends of the life-span, parents and their adolescent children and adult children caring for their older parents. Dr. Ross Wilkinson (Australian National University) highlighted that adolescents and parents hold distinct views of parent-child relationships. Reviewing social trends data, Dr Wilkinson reported that most adolescents report strong and positive ties to their parents and turn to them in times of need, while parents feel less positive about the relationship. He argued that these discrepancies are exacerbated by media and policy responses that pathologise adolescent behaviour. Dr Wilkinson argued that population-level approaches are required to normalize the changing nature of parent-child relationships during adolescence and to promote well-being. Finally Dr. Gery Karantzas (Deakin University) reported on a program of research that investigated how families negotiate the care of elderly parents. Specifically he identified that older parents and adult children hold similar perceptions of how caregiving responsibilities should be undertaken by family and which tasks could be delegated to community care services. Secondly, in examining the motivations for the giving and receiving of care, filial obligation was found to influence current emotional and instrumental caregiving and care-receiving, while attachment insecurity was found to predict anticipated emotional and instrumental caregiving for both caregivers and care-recipients. Dr Karantzas suggested that an attachment approach may assist health care professionals in tailoring the counseling of families experiencing difficulties in caring for parents and identifying family members better equipped emotionally to deal with the role of being a carer.

Three key themes emerged from the workshop. Firstly, relationships in the 21<sup>st</sup> century come in all forms, and this means that our past models of relationships (which essentially focused on the roles and responsibilities associated with marriage) have changed. We have increasing numbers of de-facto and cohabiting couples living together with and without children, increases in homosexual couples and adult children staying at home for longer. Yet this diversity is only partly reflected in the way that pop culture, policy or science often talk about relationships. Also, pop culture places too much emphasis on the acquisition of financial stability and materialistic possessions as a means of ‘relationship progress’. Having said this, we argue that marriage and the family continue to be highly relevant and important institutions that are fundamental to the social fabric of the nation. Clearly, marriage continues to be the union of choice for many couples, and the evidence suggests that married couples fair better than those co-habiting during periods of relationship difficulties. However, our views of relationships need to broaden if we are to develop policy and practice that are relevant for today’s couples.

Secondly, more emphasis needs to be placed on thinking and promoting couple relationships and families as a ‘public good’. The various workshop presentations highlighted that relationships encompassing positive conflict resolution strategies, forgiveness and feelings of security and trust in partners lead to better couple functioning and child adjustment. In addition, these ‘secure’ relationships provide good examples for young people to follow on how to develop strong and healthy relationships. However, many couples and families are losing sight of how best to foster positive relationships, primarily due to the many stressors and pressures that today’s families are faced with. As a result, service providers and policy makers need to rethink ways to educate couples and families to help them maintain good



relationships. Relationship education is likely to become more important in the coming years, but at present there are many barriers that preclude couples and families from attending relationship education. Some solutions may be to provide relationship education as part of pre-existing curriculum in high-schools and universities, and programs dealing with life transitions, such as the many ante-natal programs existing around the country.

Thirdly, our capacity to care for others - whether it be our children, our aging parents or our partners needs to be understood more clearly, and policy needs to reflect the immense pressure that caring places on people as they juggle the many demands of today's family life. Specific attention needs to be given to policies that best assist adults in the 'sandwich generation' as their caregiving responsibilities involve caring for their children and their parents.

Given the challenges facing the contemporary couples and families, and the insights gained from the workshop, we are currently negotiating the publication of the workshop papers and discussions in the form of an interdisciplinary handbook on couple and family issues to be published by a commercial publisher. We believe that this publication will be of great interest and relevance to researchers, policy makers, service-delivery providers and practitioners. It is hoped that the text will provide insights into how best to integrate research, practice and policy in improving the wellbeing of couples and families in Australia and abroad.