



## Towards Creating Peaceful Relationships

Discussions around the subject of creating peaceful relationships in Australian society

### Family Relationship Centres

A discussion of the Australian Governments recent proposals, August 04, for relationship shop fronts, as a mechanism to achieve greater equity and peace in the resolution of relationship breakdowns.

By Patrick Murray: B.Comm UNSW, Grad. Dip Counselling UNC

Patrick has relevant experience in this field both as a counsellor and consultant. He practices as a relationship counsellor in Goulburn NSW, facilitates a support group for men in crisis, including family separation, depression, suicide and a range of anger issues. He is also trained and experienced in running programmes for men involved in family violence. He has carried out research on mens needs in the community. He also keeps up to date with worldwide progress in a range of family therapy and family violence prevention issues. His earlier training and work in business and economic research for the private, government and foundation sectors gives him a useful perspective on the broader implications of government policy.



**Gender Perspective:** I am writing as a male who works regularly with men and am part of the loosely defined men's movement. The focus here is on the needs of men. I and most in the mens movement fully support the struggle of all genders, races or classes of people in seeking equity and justice in our society. In relationships I and most men do not seek to bolster any concept of patriarchal dominance. We see our goal as moving towards equality in relationships and acknowledge that our society has not yet achieved that goal. Men will need a lot of help in adjusting to the major changes in our society. Just as women are frustrated by what we call the glass ceiling, men are conscious of the cracks in the glass floor through which many men are falling. Working together on both these issues is a productive way forward

**Comment and contact** with the author is invited.

My email is: [padriac@hinet.net.au](mailto:padriac@hinet.net.au).

Or phone 02 48837830 mob. 0427837830

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### Background

The federal government at the end of July 2004 announced its intention to establish 65 family relationship centers around Australia. They are to provide counselling, mediation, education and information to couples in the process of separation. Up to three hours of free service will be provided. It is understood that the use of the service will be made compulsory under the family law. The government is expected to announce a position paper setting out detailed proposals by the end of August. It is expected that this service will be tendered to existing family counselling providers funded by Family and Community Services e.g. Relationship Australia, Centrecare, Anglicare, Uniting Care etc. This proposal has arisen as a new initiative to meet the aims of the recent parliamentary inquiry on joint custody in relation to the Family Law.

This is an attempt to provide a positive response to assisting more peaceful resolution of family breakdown or reconciliation than the adversarial legal system.

Since this is a significant attempt to change our society's way of dealing with this issue it deserves serious examination and discussion to advise government of the most effective way of implementing these significant changes. Not to do so risks a great deal of community and personal hardship, waste of money and programme failure which will diminish the governments credibility to assist our society in this area as well as diminishing society confidence in the area of whole area of family law and related services such as the funded relationship industry. This discussion paper attempts to highlight some of the important issues for discussion. The writer a researcher and counsellor around the special needs of men is looking at the equity, access and outcome issues for men.

## Stepping Back and Climbing The Mountain

Often in human affairs we find ourselves rushing around fire fighting, slapping on Band-Aids, posing ever-new solutions, and not seeing the wood for the trees. The relationship-family nexus somewhat reflects this; a play with a large and varied cast:

- The Family Law Court, with a retiring and contentious chief justice, and a new chief justice with a change agenda.
- A Family law court culture, with its own biases and agendas
- Many parliamentary inquiries.
- Aggrieved fathers, with their organisations, “Lone Fathers” “Dads In Distress” etc.
- The legal family law industry
- The multi faceted women’s movement in its government department, media and agency strong holds.
- The relationship agency industry constantly moving to maintain its funding bases.
- Women’s refuges and the whole anti violence industry with its strongly defended manifestos.
- A counselling profession with countless therapists providing services, writing countless articles and teaching students.
- The countless government agencies involved daily with matters arising from family conflict and breakdown.
- The individual suffering of women, children and men, alcoholic binges, road accidents and a rising rate of male suicide after separation.

Many involved in trying to protect their positions or beliefs, one could say, ‘changing deck chairs on the Titanic’, rather than focussing on designing a ship suitable for modern seas.

So what do we see if we climb up the mountain and look down at what is happening in our society. Denis Ladbrook, Associate Professor of Social Work at Curtin University, WA, has done a good job of describing this question in his paper, ‘Social Contexts of Marriage and Family In Australia - In The Mid to Late 1990’s’ published by Prepare/Enrich Australia 1995.

He sees the inevitable changes in our society as reshaping the fundamental structures of family. The family has lost its traditional social and legal support structures as well traditional roles for men and women are no longer fixed, with family no longer accepted as a model of patriarchal power. We are in a brave new world of family, stripped of traditional roles, structures and sanctions. There is no longer one dominant model, but a general expectation that it can be a negotiated relationship of equals. This, in Ladbrook’s terms is a big ask, and one for which women and especially men need much preparation. Its success presumes heightened relationship skills such as exploration and resolution of conflict, communication, problem solving and the acquisition of a more self contained persona. **In the midst of this turbulence and chaos**

people are struggling with a loss of personal and social identity which brings with it fear, insecurity, anxiety, emotional pain, anger and violence.

It is perhaps this identity loss that is the engine driving the breakdown and conflict. Paraphrasing, Ladbrook – we need to learn how to integrate these massive social changes with a new found expression in our moral and or spiritual tradition. We will be without the structural safety net previously supplied by traditional gender stereotypes and old fashioned religious and legal rules. This will require the learning of a whole range of new personal and spiritual skills. Who is to teach us?

Perhaps as the management guru Edward De Bono suggests, we should clean the white board of our existing ways of dealing with this. We should start with a fresh mind and think creatively about how we might more effectively deal with the central problem of loss of personal and social identity. *Maybe, as counsellors say, if what you have been doing has not been working, what makes you believe that more of it will help. I heard a wise monk say recently 'it is OK to do nothing'. If we do not know what to do at the moment, rather than rushing in with more of the same under a different guise, lets wait untill we do, while keeping it as a top priority to come up with a better way.*

### What Is Being Proposed?

The basic concept providing access to counselling, mediation, education, training and information to conflicted families at no cost is not new at all. We already fund 100 organisations to provide relationship services in more than 400 locations around the country. A new dimension of Primary Dispute Resolution services has already been added to the sector, including mediation, counselling, education, post separation support groups etc. What appears to be the new aspect is the re-badging of the product at 65 so called shopfronts around Australia. The issues of what types of service, how best to structure and deliver the service and effectively monitor its quality are far from clear. Any major new service like this, public or private, is normally subject to sound independent market research of the needs of consumers who would be expected to use this service and a sound analysis of the best way of meeting them. It does not appear that this has been done. *If this is essentially an extension of the funded relationship agency industry that is more of the same, lets look at how effective that is.*

### Major Review of Relationship Agencies

Whilst researching for this paper, I came across the following review on the Family and Relationship Services Programme, run by the Dept.

Family and Community Services.

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS SERVICES PROGRAM Client Input

Consultancy FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS SERVICES PROGRAM Client Input Consultancy Australian ..

This review was done in June 2004 and contains much useful data. It is an excellent review and carefully read, there are many issues where debate is invited. The fact that it overlooks some issues, the subject of this paper, is more a product of the dominant frame of reference maintained in the industry at government and agency level rather than neglect by the consultants. The reality is that the agency sectors, especially the large secular ones and, the power bases they represent. would cease to exist without government funding. It is only human that they are extremely defensive of this position and fearful about its loss. Counsellors often remark that our fears often create the very circumstances we are trying to avoid. The lack of public debate on the policy issues posed by this sector at academic, industry and foundation levels, is a great weakness in our society. The report can be downloaded from the Web. It will be referred to in this paper as the FRSP Review.

## Some Questions

1. What are the goals, objectives and expected outcomes for this initiative? Even if some of the outcomes are hard to measure, what are they?
2. What is the most appropriate distribution channel for this government-funded service? It seems at the moment that the existing funded relationship agencies are seen as the main or only distribution method. There are many other options. National call centres, like Mensline, violence against women hot line and lifeline could be used as a central contact for all Australia. For instance **The Australian Relation Support Line**, could allow calls at any stage in family conflict to receive appropriate information (brochures, CDs etc) and referrals to counselling, education, support groups etc. Some courses and groups could be on the Internet, phone based, Internet video calls or family education correspondence courses. There are existing government agencies with skills and resources in this area. CRS, the Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service, Centrelink (call center and on ground resources) and the Vietnam Veterans Counselling Service. Therapy, training, mediation, and education or support groups, could be provided privately by psychologists, counsellors, facilitators, mediators etc. Relationship agencies need to be one of the providers thus allowing greater choice and flexibility. It seems there is a great danger here of saying, because we have a relationship counselling agency industry, that this is the way forward. As Marshall McLuhan said, "*don't make the mistake of walking into the future looking into a rear view mirror.*"
3. Access to clients in need. The FRSP Review reports that the current groups disadvantaged in terms of access to relationship and related services are low income groups, men, victims of domestic violence,

indigenous and newly arrived cultural groups. It also reports major problems with providing services in regional and rural areas. Overseas research shows that lower income/working class clients suffer the highest early drop out rate from relationship services. Therefore it is not just the availability of service, but the suitability of the service to the client group as well.

4. Quality control and accountability. This is a major issue in the NGO (all relationship agencies) industry. The lack of accountability in these organisations is the subject of many current public policy debates. The reality is that they are not publicly accountable in a transparent way. If the right to service (as in a voucher to buy a service), belongs to the client, then the client must have access to an independent body to register satisfaction or dissatisfaction with service. A simple replied-paid card or phone number for a national support line should be available for use by clients at all points in the service delivery process. An independent body, would then enable client satisfaction to be monitored. This information, allowing for privacy considerations, should be publicly available.
5. The price of failure. This initiative in whatever shape will be launched into what has become a combative public arena involving many extreme emotional positions. The new Family Law Chief Justice has publicly acknowledged the community crisis of confidence in the perceived evenness of treatment between men and women. She sees a significant part of her job as changing that perception through concrete action and education. If this new initiative fails in this regard, it will do great damage to those involved in the process and reinforce the existing negative perceptions of governments' ability to deliver. A flexible, modular strategy with consumer choice which can be adapted and modified as feedback is obtained has a greater chance in succeeding in this regard. Going with fixed term contracts with mainstream agencies with an element of in built rigidity and bias could be a highly risky strategy.
6. Resourcing of services. The FRSP review acknowledges that there is a mish mash of training, information and material resources in the industry. Much of this is a variety in house agency initiatives and materials (brochures, handouts, courseware etc.). Although all created with government funds this information is not available across the community. The review talks about more centrally provided training and resource provision with access to all. This could also facilitate a more flexible service delivery model with the use of private and agency providers, as well as allowing for new entrants that are more innovative, equitable and effective. At the moment the barriers to entry as a new tenderer in the FRSP programme are prohibitive.

### **The Relationship Industry**

This industry has its origins in the church based welfare field as well as the secular voluntary movement. For example, the marriage guidance council in NSW became Relationship Australia NSW. It has grown from

humble origins to a \$55 million dollar a year industry involving 140,000 clients. Taking into account client fees, subsidy by underpaid staff (estimated at \$10,000 per worker), govt. admin costs, subsidies from Church based bodies for overheads and rent free buildings, the industry could be valued at \$80 million.

The FRSP review page 50 states:

“FRSP services, as previously noted, are delivered by around 100 separate organisations, operating from some 400 outlets across the country. (Figure 2.1 in chapter 2 of the report provides an illustration of the distribution of services in three States.) These FRSP-funded organisations vary greatly in size and in the extent to which FRSP services are a major focus for them. The percentage of an organisation’s income that is provided by FRSP funding may range from 5 per cent or less up to 90 per cent or more (see also chapter 7 on costs and funding).”

One of the issues raised in the review was the lack of clear and focussed programme goals: *‘there is a lack of clarity about objectives and about departmental expectations; it is noted that lack of clarity about goals may tend to weaken FRSP claims for additional funds;’*

One of the conclusions of the programmes meta evaluation was:

*“Family relationships services are in strong demand and enjoy widespread community support;”*

No one could disagree with that sentiment but it could be said about many services or goods. However is it an adequate basis for \$55,000,000 targeted government programme?

The question could be asked: **‘Has the increase in government spending in this industry corresponded to a decrease in the divorce rate or conflicted and disputed family breakdowns or the decrease in the rate of children suffering long term damage from this process’**

On the surface there appears to be no definite evidence of this. We know that this is due to a range of contemporary social factors mentioned at the beginning of this paper. What we do not know is whether it has been demonstrated that the relationship industry has been able to significantly affect the outcomes.

### **Pricing, Competition and Distortion Effects.**

Most of this funding is the subject of competitive tenders by the Fed. Dept. of Family and Community Services (FACS). Some points for discussion in this area are:

1. The Relationship Industry could be regarded as a government monopoly in that it would not exist in its current form without its \$55 million subsidy. It is also seen as having a government guarantee in

terms of equity and access. It would be interesting to see it examined under the National Competition Policy.

2. It is a basic tenet of the modern mixed market economy that government intervention should be focussed in areas where the operations of the 'for profit' sector disadvantage or neglect sections of the community. It is clear that the lower socio-economic group could not afford to pay market prices for these services. Other groups specified as disadvantaged in the FRSP review are: regional and rural areas, men, victims of domestic violence, indigenous communities and newly arrived culturally different migrants.
3. It would be interesting to see a listing of funded relationship agency resources ranked by size and by location against a measure of the degree of need in each location. One of the large secular agencies in NSW has a large presence in the North Shore and Eastern Suburbs, areas of high socio-economic status, and one part time female counsellor in one of the states higher areas of need, the Macarthur region centered around Campbelltown. This is an area starved of relationship services particularly ones that are suited to men. There are almost zero services for men in this region. There are most probably many examples of this geographic inequity around Australia.
4. Many agencies charge a fee for service on a means tested basis. It can range from \$35 per session for those under \$20,000 per annum, \$65 for those earning between \$50,000 and \$60,000 and \$90 for those around \$80,000. It is part of contract provision that clients on pensions cannot be refused service because they cannot pay a supplementary fee. There could be a link between this and some agency choices to stay located in areas with a high average income and have a very token service in lower socio-economic areas. It would be interesting to know how the current government justifies this type of questionable resource allocation.
5. Not all agencies ignore high need areas. The FRSP makes special mention of Centrecare (the Catholic welfare organisation) in WA which has a policy of locating in higher areas of need and concluded as a result it needs a better funding base.
6. There are many relatively high socio-economic areas around Australia with funded services with equally many lower socio-economic areas with high rates of relationship conflict that have almost no services at all.
7. There is commentary in the FRSP review about competitive tendering. It appears many of the agencies complain about it. There was criticism by agencies of the decision to fund a new small agency on the grounds that it lacked the economies of scale regardless of its worth. Is this just turf protection?
8. One wonders whether a policy of not subsidising services in higher socio-economic areas and providing higher subsidies in areas of greater need would not be more effective and equitable. A service to low income people in more well off areas could be handled by payments to accredited private providers accessed through Centrelink or as



suggested, a national hot line.

## Effectiveness of Marriage and Family Therapy (MFT)

One of the reasons for the creation and maintenance of separate MFT agencies are the claims that the training and techniques used are unique and more effective than those used by conventional therapists or counsellors.

The professional literature on this topic is very divided. It is accepted that in the industry many claims are made that are not the subject of rigorous outcome research. At best it seems that gains at the end of MFT are from 35% to 50%, but with relapse over the next two years these maybe drop to 10% to 25%.

A book 'What Works in Therapy', published by the American Psychological Association in 1999 by Hubble, Duncan and Miller is quite critical of the claims of MFT. Their work claims that the factors that most predict positive outcomes for clients are:

1. 40 % attributed to the unique qualities of the client and their environment (say strong internal resources and strong external support network, family, friends, workmates etc.)
2. 30% attributed to the quality of the relationship with the counsellor (trust, empathy, engagement, non judgmental environment, belief that therapist can help and wants to help)
3. 15% Client expectancy. (the extent to which the client expects and has hopes for a positive outcome and the extent to which these are reinforced through the attitude of the therapist)
4. 15% attributed to the models and techniques of the therapist and maybe only important to the extent it helps the therapist maintain a clear focus.

They comment that there are currently about 400 therapies all claiming some form of superior effectiveness.

They go on to specifically comment:

'Teaching Marriage and Family Therapy models as though they are primarily responsible for client changes verges on a professional scandal.....There is not a scintilla of evidence for the general superiority of "unique" models.' P353 of the book mentioned above.

There is no evidence that private therapists, with the benefit of some specific further professional education training in the MFT area, would not be as or more effective than relationship agencies. If that continuing education training was based on empirical evidence it would look like the statements from Dr. John Gottman in his 'Clinical Manual for Marital Therapy- a Research Based Approach' (pub. in 2000) on this point, attached to this paper.

There are references in the FRSP review to agencies listing core competencies for their therapists. These are mainly input measurements e.g. What the therapist can be seen to be doing in therapy. There is a presumption that these are linked to positive client outcomes. This is a

precarious assumption if one accepts the findings above by Duncan, Hubble and Miller. There is a great lack of properly validated outcome research in the Australian MFT context which also measures the input variables associated with those outcomes. This would require the study of control groups. With the spending of \$55 million of government funds a lack of such research is a cause for concern.

## Gender, Equity and Client Engagement in Relationship Therapy:

Men represent roughly half the equation in relationships and in two partner families. When we look at relationship agencies we see that from 90% to 100% of the counsellors are women. In most tertiary counselling courses the majority of students are female and almost all the teachers are female. The lack of experienced male relationship counsellors has been mentioned as a problem a number of times in Parliamentary inquiries.

It is said that many men are reluctant to use services because of a common male view of self-reliance, toughness and a reticence or inability to talk about feelings.

A recent report 'Evaluation of the Men and Family Relationships Initiative', published by the Commonwealth Dept. of Family and Community Services in 2002, stated:

*"The evaluation findings indicate that there is a high level of unmet need for services specifically targeted to men. The experiences of the services clearly demonstrate that men are open to skills development and relationship support, provided that the approach is male-friendly and non-judgemental."*

It went on to say:

*"Information gathered through interviews with men's service workers and other service providers emphasises the importance of a men's service which is clearly badged and marketed as specifically for men . . . . The vast majority of men surveyed (89%) said it was important to them that the service had experience working with men. A service which is not identified as being specifically for men is unlikely to attract a large number of men."*

Research in this area has shown that many men are suspicious, skeptical or threatened by human services generally, as they expect them to be judgmental, patronising and not male friendly. This is particularly so with men from lower socio-economic groups. It has been found that services which see men as 'the problem', abusers and/or with a shame and blame attitude, are not acceptable to most men. They only attend such services if they are under threat or it is mandatory, and in those situations very limited benefits are achieved.

The recent research shows that if men perceive a service to have an honest, open and supportive attitude, and not in a physical environment

seen as primarily for the use of women and children, they are more likely to attend. Even if an appropriate service is available it is very important to conduct a strong promotional and educational campaign to encourage a high use of the service by them. Education and promotion that is targeted at male opinion leaders or respected men in a workplace are often used. Once the word gets around that such a service is male friendly and useful and that there is no stigma by other males to using the service, higher use of the service is expected.

The recently appointed Chief Justice of the Family Law Court has acknowledged some of these issues when stating that the public perception and confidence in the court needs to improve in terms of being seen as unbiased in any way and equally accessible to the needs of all members of the community.

If one intends to make counselling and related services equally accessible and effective to all genders, then clearly the current structure of the relationship industry needs a radical overhaul. If therapeutic engagement is a critical issue for effective outcomes in relationship therapy, then there clearly needs to be a choice for men to select an experienced male counsellor. There is no evidence that using an experienced male counsellor disadvantages female clients in any way. Though some female clients have a stated preference for a female counsellor, with agencies having 90% female counsellors, they do not have a problem with choice.

### Gender Neutrality or Equity in Therapy

*'pathologising the male: man as the problem.'*

It is a common observation that in a profession or agency environment dominated by women as managers, teachers and counsellors that the prevailing view of the male is as **'the problem' or the deficit model of the male**. Even if that is not the conscious or openly stated view, it is often the underlying cultural belief in many of these organisations which informs the way they work with clients. As renowned therapist Irvin Yalom says, you cannot fool or lie to your clients, they know or sense where you are coming from. So if the male client senses this attitude then the creation of a positive therapeutic engagement is drastically diminished.

As a male client dramatically expressed **"I know I have got problems and I am sick of people telling me that - I need help – I don't know what to do – I feel I have nowhere to go"**. This is a common occurrence as those experienced in this work will testify.

A published comment by a female member of the Canadian parliament, although relating mainly to domestic violence, expresses this view of the male as a problem:

"Until the 1970's family violence has been a neglected subject matter. The treatment of wife abuse however, is now accompanied by

literature, social services, law enforcement response and coercive actions, which largely view the wife as a passive innocent victim, beaten by an aggressive guilty husband. Spouse abuse and wife abuse has become synonymous, and wife battering has dominated the definition of domestic violence. Here the concept of inherent moral inferiority of the male is buttressed by the male as the innate progenitor of all malice, violence and aggression. These two concepts are supported by aggressive feminist ideologies, by the terrorism of political correctness, and are consistently seeking dominance in the discussion of domestic violence.”

*Senator The Hon. Anne Cools (Canadian Government)*

*"Diversity And Domestic Violence" – A Paper*

*27th April 1995*

My own term for this phenomenon is the **MDM syndrome**. The morally diminished male syndrome. It is a meme or thought virus that infects many counsellors, males as well as females. It also has infected many policy makers. It affects the outcomes of therapy, and with policy makers, gives them the licence to see the emperor's new clothes when it comes to making effective and equitable policy in this area. **One might ask what is the cure for this virus? Words like courage, honesty, wisdom, integrity, equity and a fair go, come to mind.**

A salutary reminder of this **meme or thought virus** is the episode of the **"Penis Wavers"** that happened to a male colleague of mine. He was being supervised by a senior female counsellor in a major relationship-counselling agency. She was also a lecturer in family therapy at a university. They were listening to a tape of a couple therapy session. As this was the couples first session, the male counsellor was giving an introduction to the counselling process. When he finished, he asked the clients if they had any questions. The male client asked the therapist what his qualifications were. The counsellor answered and thought it was a reasonable question. The female supervisor observed, that this was an example of "penis waving", further explained as a classical power play between two males. The male counsellor was astounded at this interpretation, did not see it as power play and thought that if he had made a similar observation describing a female interaction as 'pussy waving', he would have been dismissed. **That this is seen as acceptable behaviour in a funded agency and in tertiary courses for family therapy is clearly ethically questionable.** When discussing family violence, male perpetrators are referred to as "Tyrants and Exploders" or "Cobras and Pit Bull Terriers" in technical papers written by senior agency staff. Most psychologists are content to use value neutral terms such as planned or reactionary violence, or controlled and uncontrolled. In family breakdown

situations where use of aggression or violence is not uncommon, this type of attitude is certainly not useful, and questionable.

Stories about men feeling disadvantaged by relationship counselling are common. Some anecdotal stories give an idea of what they feel:

- *A man went to counselling with a major agency after his wife and child had been for a couple of sessions. The senior counsellor informed him, 'I am not interested in you, I only care about your wife and child'. He just left.*
- *A couple struggling with a brief episode of violence in their relationship, partially influenced by the mans unemployment, was told by a major agency counsellor, 'there is no hope, you should split up'. The man and his partner hunted around for another counsellor, a private one, who helped them resolve their problems. As a result they stayed together and their relationship was OK.*
- *A wife, told by a female counsellor from a major agency, 'You would be better off with two dollars of chips alone on a beach, than staying with your husband'. The counsellor refused to see the man in counselling after an initial session. When he returned for help after the break up, the agency offered no redress or support.*
- *A man involved in a complex matter of family violence, and estranged from his children, was told by a family counsellor, without being listened to, " Until you feel shame and accept the blame for all this there is nothing I can do", as a result the man nearly committed suicide. After receiving more appropriate counselling from a private counsellor he was reconciled with his children.*

This type of discussion might seem an uncomfortable or inappropriate fit for a public discussion paper. Men who raise these issues are often dismissed or diminished by being referred to as fringe groups, angry brown shirts, whingeing men etc. Some women in Federal parliament have used this style of diminishing language. **However this behaviour and attitude, as it effects men, is a reality. Subjectivity and high emotion are at the heart of relationship disputes. It is also in the attitudes that lie behind many policies. It is irresponsible and dishonest not to discuss it, regardless of the topic's status as being a politically incorrect taboo in many quarters.**

**As counsellor Peter Milne says 'If men and women are going to be truly equal it will only be by acknowledging and valuing each other's pain, giving each other room to heal and then looking at how we can grow together. As a profession counsellors and therapists must model this if we expect these changes to happen in our society.' Quoted from a paper by Peter attached to this paper.**

## Lack of Male Counsellors

*(Some definitions, here. Counsellors can be people who have done a tertiary graduate diploma in counselling at a university, where they mostly require a prior degree of some sorts. They can be people who have done a counselling course through a private training institution. They can be a trained psychologist who has done training in counselling. It would be expected that they would belong to a professional association)*

It is acknowledged that there is an acute shortage of experienced male counsellors around Australia, especially in the area of relationship counselling and violence prevention programmes. Some of the reasons for this could be:

1. Being a non-traditional male area of employment. This has definitely affected the current availability of older male counsellors. I believe more younger men are taking up training and are less affected by the traditional stereotyping. There is a large pool of unemployed, underemployed, early retiree or sea change males that could be attracted to the profession given the right incentives and appropriate training.
2. The somewhat unconstructive atmosphere of female dominated counselling courses. The paragraph below best expresses this. They are taken from an article about difficulties for men in counselling courses. (full article attached) *“As Counselling Team Leader in a men’s agency I have provided clinical supervision for several students on placement from counselling, psychotherapy and social work courses in the various Auckland Polytechs. They all talk about how difficult they find it for them in female dominated programmes and when I look back far enough to my own Nursing training and the various training’s since or when I talk with many of my male colleagues the stories are very similar” and later on in the article:.....”The results of this are that many good men are discouraged from getting involved in counselling. It causes some to drop out and also be lost to a profession that badly needs more good men. “*
3. Similar to the above: the somewhat unsupportive employment environment for men in female dominated relationship counselling agencies. These agencies often have an overt or covert culture of the male as a problem/perpetrator with an expectation or pressure for male counsellors to adopt these attitudes.
4. Wage rates in the agency sector are quite low for a tertiary trained, professional work force. Rates for counsellors are not much more than \$40,000 per annum with part time rates varying from \$19 to \$25 an hour. Many counsellors choose not to work more than three days a week due to the demanding nature of the work. This could involve seeing from 15 to 18 clients in three days. Some refer to them as counselling factories. Others choose to do private work as well or take another job especially if they are running a one parent household.

Many have a partner with a well payed job. Some men in the industry have a female partner earning a good income. The origins of this are the typical start of most agencies from a voluntary sector (eg: the old marriage guidance council) Agencies have high overheads and managerial superstructures. It is a paradox that many NGOs are poor employers who underpay staff, and can often be conflicted work environments. One large regional office serving a population of over 300, 000 people in NSW has had a 100% staff turnover for at least the last five years and has no male counsellor. An agency or business set up as a co-operative with a flat management structure could pay better wages and generate a more healthy employment environment.



## Meta Context of this paper.

These instances of systemic bias against men, the drastic lack of male counsellors and its consequences were not raised in the FRSP review. It is not the fault of the review but symptomatic of the current cultural paradigm which regards these issues as unimportant. This reluctance to publicly table these matters is evident in professional, government and academic circles. There is no equivalent institution to the Office of Status of Women, University Gender Studies (women's studies), or media willingness, that has a socially sanctioned role to raise these matters of concern. Political parties are reluctant to directly address these concerns. The lower income blue collar males are facing a crisis. It is as if the parties who once rode to power in their name have abandoned them. Men in paid positions in counselling organisations or government departments who wish to seriously address these matters often feel their career threatened or sometimes their job at stake. The worst example of this is the policy in NSW of prohibiting any government agency from providing services to males who are seen to be involved in behaving in an abusive/violent manner towards anyone in a family. This includes by definition the use of financial, social, psychological, verbal and physical abuse. These factors are involved in many conflicted relationships. This means in practice that the Community Health Centres in local areas (who provide counsellors) as well as the Department of Community Services cannot help any of these men. A community organisation in regional NSW recently submitted a comprehensive programme towards the prevention of family violence in regional areas. This submission was made to the Federal Attorney General under a crime prevention grant initiative. The NSW Department of Health refused to support the application, on the grounds that it was not able to support the provision of services to perpetrators of domestic violence. Most people are just not aware of these matters and when told about it, find it hard to believe.

Family conflict and breakdown involves men as part of the equation. If we want more peaceful families either together or separated, we must provide services for them. It is an unwell society that remains silent, or attempts to silence those speaking up on this matter.

## Summary Points

1. The relationship shop fronts may not be the most effective solution. We need to step back and think more creatively about possible solutions.
2. Should we consider building up a newly titled, **Relationship Mentor** resource in our community? It could apply to a range of people, elders and other people (nurses, health educators, teachers, doctors, counsellors) Imams, Monks, Clergy, Nuns. There could be a nationally resourced training scheme. These mentors could be supported in some way to conduct a variety of individual and group support sessions, education and training programmes etc. People around the country could access them from a national call centre and Web site.

3. A national Relationship Mentor Centre could create a range of resource materials, visual audio and text based, or computer interactive instruments, (which is already happening at the ANU mood control site.)
4. The Relationship agency industry should be given some gender equity targets to achieve for obtaining more balance around male and female counsellors
5. The government should develop a new labour force initiative to attract and train more male counsellors. This should be done in a way that removes the current gender bias from counselling training. Maybe a nationally based training programme auspiced by a University with experience in this area, such as Newcastle's Uni's Family unit run by Richard Fletcher, could be funded to develop and provide such a course.
6. If the relationship shop front idea is to go ahead, it should have from the outset a balance of male and female counsellors, with limits of how far from a 50/50 balance, any service can move.
7. Family relationship Services Programmes, should be clearly targeted at areas of need.
8. Consideration should be given to including the private therapist, mediator, education industry, in the delivery of Family Relationship services programmes, especially in any relation shop fronts.
9. A national relationship call centre approach be used to allow access by all Australians to range of relationship support resources.
10. If the Relationship Counselling industry is to be an ongoing strategy, then the government must conduct comprehensive and scientifically conducted research on the effectiveness of its outcomes and the variables associated with those successful outcomes.
11. One of the meta evaluation points made in the FRSP review was that **consumer empowerment and client partnership** was not always carried through in practice. Agencies should exist for the clients, but often clients can be the means of maintaining a power base, through government funding. Any funded service in this area must have a clear and simple way for clients to register their satisfaction with the service. A post replied card, or number of a national phone line, should be given to all those who even contact such a service, to be able to register their satisfaction. This information should be continuously available on a public basis, to make this a completely transparent matter.
12. External support networks for people coping with relationship conflict and breakdown is of great importance in assisting a more peaceful resolution. It is well known that most men have a less well developed support network than women do. Mens support groups that have started to operate around the country are proving to be a major success. Maybe promoting and resourcing more of these groups would greatly assist in the resolution of family conflict.

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Milne, Peter. 1999 "Abuse of Male Counselling Students", New Zealand Association of Counsellors Newsletter, 20(2):38-39. Also published in Doctors For Sexual Abuse Care Newsletter and Healthy Connections Ezine.

## **Abuse of Male Counselling Students**

I recently had the good fortune to take part in the Advanced Supervision Workshop run by NZAC and Auckland University. At one stage we were talking about the need to take into account cultural issues including race, gender, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion. During this conversation I was struck by the need to also take into account the environment our clients are in at the time – and sometimes this is not so obvious.

To quote Samuel Osherson in his article entitled 'The Wounded Father within' ('Reclaiming The Inner child') "For all that feminism has contributed to our culture, it has also brought a subtle idealisation of women and a less subtle denigration or misunderstanding of men." Nowhere is this experienced more by men than within counselling circles, and particularly within counselling education.

As Counselling Team Leader in a men's agency I have provided clinical supervision for several students on placement from counselling, psychotherapy and social work courses in the various Auckland Polytechs. They all talk about how difficult they find it for them in female dominated programmes and when I look back far enough to my own Nursing training and the various training's since or when I talk with many of my male colleagues the stories are very similar.

Some of this is as simple as being the minority gender in an area that is predominantly women's terrain. Occasionally they may experience tutors who give them a hard time because of the tutor's own prejudices against men. But much more common is the difficulties they experience from the women who are in their classes who are being newly politicised (or re-politicised) about the negative effects that patriarchy has on women – and who are then perhaps having this reinforced by clinical placements where they see a lot of women who have been badly abused by men.

Most male students or ex-students I know talk about the hostilities they have felt through this. This can be both covert and overt and comes at times from the rest of the class as a whole - and from individuals at other times. One colleague has felt this so strongly that he describes it as 'the toxicity of counselling programmes'.

This is often reinforced in many subtle ways such as always being chosen to play the abuser in role-plays and the like. Along side of this comes the mixed dialogue that go something like this:-

"Men are bastards"

"Hey I'm a man"

"But you're different"

What does this really mean? 'Am I less than a man – as a male in a traditionally woman's profession I'm already getting that message from many areas of society. Or does it mean that I'm more than a man.'

The results of this are that many good men are discouraged from getting involved in counselling. It causes some to drop out and also be lost to a profession that badly needs more good men.

It also puts subtle pressure on those that who do manage to stay to take on one of two attitudes. One is to work with women so that they can save them from the destructive forces of other men (rescuer role), the other is to work with men so that they can punish these abusive men who are not as aware as them (persecutor role).

Neither of these roles is healthy for the clients, society or the counsellor themselves. Both are frankly still patriarchal, and the latter results in the further shaming of clients many of who already feeling shamed.

I encourage our training establishments to urgently make the following changes:

- Be open to male friendly paradigms that encourages men to change in positive ways rather than ones that punishes men who do not. I see this paradigm as complimentary to the feminist ones rather than trying to compete.
- I would also ask that we discourage paradigms that emphasis blaming the other gender. I believe that this is extremely damaging and that there has been more than enough blaming from both genders – and damage to both genders.
- Include in all courses significant education about the damage that the conditioning of a patriarchal society does to men. Male tutors who are well-versed in men's issues should do this.
- Include in the programmes regular times that are gender segregated, and have the male groups facilitated by men who have good knowledge of men's issues. This would amongst other things acknowledge that male conditioning is isolative and that being a male in a female dominated profession is even more isolative.

In summary I believe that it is essential that we encourage more good men into this profession. I also believe that our current systems are keeping many good men out by inadvertently being abusive to the men who do try to enter the profession.

If men and women are going to be truly equal it will only be by acknowledging and valuing each other's pain, giving each other room to heal and then looking at how we can grow together. As a profession counsellors and therapists must model this if we expect these changes to happen in our society.

## Gottman's Suggestions for Marital Therapy Training

From 'Clinical Manual For Marital Therapy – A research based approach' by Dr. John M. Gottman. 2001 The Gottman Institute, Seattle USA, Website: [www.gottman.com](http://www.gottman.com)

### **What to draw from the outcome literature, even if you reject my ideas**

Suppose that you did the following thought exercise. Suppose you intensely disliked everything that I said, and all you wanted to know from this workshop was what could you take from the marital therapy research to improve your practice. This means that you do buy the scientific approach to knowledge, and you wish to learn what to discard and what to accept from the library of marital interventions currently available. What would you pick?

I will give you my best answer to this question. I think that the current evidence suggests that you should follow the five-component model of marital therapy listed below:

- Drop Active Listening as an approach. It is too hard for most couples to do once they leave your office. Also, it doesn't work well as an intervention (The Munich study).
  - Substitute Behavior Exchange in the way it was revised by Richard Stuart (in his classic book *Helping Couples Change*) as focused on non-conflict, and non-contingent (that is, not "give to get" but instead "give to give").
  - Add Problem Solving Training as exemplified by Jacobson & Margolin (1979) and more recently by Jacobson & Christensen (1997) in their acceptance-based therapy.
  - Add Snyder & Wills' approach to insight into dysfunction by examining projective identifications from past relationships (including the primary families).
  - Add Greenberg & Johnson's (1988) emotionally focused marital therapy approach.
- Include a stress-management component to buffer the marriage from the spill-over of stresses from outside the marriage (Jacobson, Holtzworth-Munroe, & Schmalings, 1987).

On the basis of empirical work, this is probably all I would suggest taking from the scientific literature. This means that if you do all five things your effectiveness as a therapist should dramatically increase.

**What are these components? Let me define them a bit now:**

- **Behavior Exchange.** This means setting up exchanges in which the couple increases caring and love in the marriage. Stuart called these "love days." It is also important that we recognize that changing behavior alone will not be adequate in this intervention. Robinson & Price (1980) had observers in couples' homes trained to detect positive interaction while the couple was also trained in the same manner. Happily married couples and observers agreed, but unhappily married couples underestimated positivity by 50%. Stuart has each spouse keep secret what positivity they plan to do, and then in therapy has people try to guess what their partner did during the love day that was positive.
- **Problem Solving Training.** This means a host of skills in: communicating problems without blaming and without pejoratives, giving appreciations, stating one's needs clearly, compromising, and negotiating agreements.
- **Insight into dysfunction.** This means understanding how past unresolved relationship issues are affecting this marriage, how one is responding to the partner as if the partner were someone else.
- **Emotionally focused.** This means emphasizing emotion in the moment, having all the teaching occur as process learning, in which the couple remains in an emotional state while processing the emotions, all of them. Emotionally focused marital therapy adopts an attachment theory perspective in which the central concept is that in a healthy marriage there is a central dialectic in which there is a need to balance autonomy and independence with connection and closeness.
- **Stress management.** This idea is that the marriage needs to be buffered from stress spillover of stresses outside the marriage. This is a two-pronged result from a 1987 paper by Jacobson, Holtzworth-Munroe, & Schmaling. There needs to be (1) fewer stresses, and (2) less impact of each stress on the marital relationship. These two prongs may often imply fundamental life changes.

## Executive Summary

Discussion Paper by Patrick Murray, Aug. 2004, ver 1.02

### Family Relationship Shop Fronts Proposal

A proposed solution by the Federal Government to the Family Law parliamentary, hearing known as the joint custody inquiry.

Moving forward on the findings of the parliamentary review of the family law is a political hot potato. The main recommendation was to establish a new family tribunal to arbitrate enforceable parenting plans for warring couples. The Prime Minister has side stepped the issue by proposing a feel good solution with a position paper due in two months time thus placing it outside the current election battle zone.

He is proposing 65 family relationship shop front centres, with a range of information, advice, education, counselling and mediation services. Three hours of free counselling or mediation would be compulsory for conflicted couples. These shop fronts would be tendered out to the existing relationship agencies, such as Relationship Australia or Centacare. Is all

this just palliative care for terminally ill relationships or a breakthrough cure?

Avoiding band-aids and fire fighting involves taking a broader view as does Professor Denis Ladbrook from Curtin University. He sees us in a brave new world of family stripped of traditional roles, structures and sanctions. There is no longer one dominant model (patriarchy), but a general expectation that it can be a negotiated relationship of equals. This requires the acquisition of more effective personal skills that women and especially men are yet to achieve. It also requires a society that models the new behaviour (by treating men and women as equal in relationships). The stripping of traditional roles leaves us faced with significant losses of personal and social identity particularly for men. This brings with it fear, insecurity, pain anger and violence. Should we step back and take a fresh look at how to deal with this? Rushing in with new solutions that appear to be more of the same may look good to a confused and hurt society, but will it help?

It is not new. We already have a 55 million-dollar government funded relationship agency industry (100 organisations 400 locations). It is already under its primary dispute resolution programme doing the bulk of what is being proposed. Has this been working? Will more of it work better? A major review of the industry was done in June this year titled 'Review of The Relationship Services Programme' (available on <http://www.facs.gov.au> ).

The question as to whether **the increase in government spending has resulted in a decrease of the divorce rate or disputed family breakdowns with associated damage to children has not been asked?**

The review raises a number of critical issues: the lack of clarity around objectives and outcomes, the lack of access for rural and regional areas, men, indigenous and new migrant groups, victims of family violence and low income groups.

Studies published by the American Psychological Society are quite scathing about claims of effectiveness for marriage and family therapy models used by agencies. They use words like 'professional scandal' and 'not a scintilla of evidence for the general superiority' of these particular therapies.

There is no significant scientific research on the effectiveness of outcomes for clients using these agencies compared with those attending private therapists or no therapists at all. There are no stated outcomes for this government funding, which can be effectively measured. Staff competencies are stated in terms of therapist inputs and not linked to effectiveness for the client. The \$55 million is presumably about preventing a problem. Without answering that why is more of the same being proposed.

It seems to be accepted that fathers and their children are not receiving equitable access and treatment under the current system. Any new

proposals should clearly attempt to remedy this. Research in this area has shown that many men are suspicious, skeptical or threatened by human services generally, as they expect them to be judgmental, patronising and not male friendly. This is particularly so with men from lower socio-economic groups. It has also been shown that where services are demonstrably male friendly, men use them and outcomes are positive. Parliamentary inquiries for a number of years now have stated that there are a lack of experienced and mature male counsellors available in the broader family law system. Nothing has been done to rectify this. Male counsellors make up less than 10% of most agencies counselling staff numbers. Government needs to address this imbalance with a pro-active labour market programme aimed at getting more male counsellors. Much of counsellor training industry dominated by women has a pro female and anti male bias which does not encourage male students. This also needs to be considered.

There is a strong culture of portraying men as 'the problem' in this field. It is called pathologising the male or using the deficit model of men. I have coined a syndrome for this, MDM, the morally diminished male. This syndrome has infected many counsellors in this industry. As soon as men seeking help sense this, therapeutic effectiveness goes out the door. These problems are addressed in recent reports, conferences and by many men working at the coalface. They are not isolated observations.

So what are some positive elements for consideration:

- National access for help and resources through a relationship support line
- Subsidised services to low income clients via private and agency therapists. (which could be partly funded by ceasing subsidising funding in high income areas)
- Providing Internet based centrally accessible training and other resources, courseware etc., available to any potential provider.
- Providing relationship mentor training for regional and rural areas, where almost no services exist.
- Providing transparent and public feedback of client satisfaction for all services.
- Getting more male counsellors. Putting some quotas for an acceptable minimum percentage of male counsellors for government subsidised services.

A service with these ingredients would be flexible and modular, capable of being adapted to feedback. Rigid relationship agency contracts as proposed may not work and not be readily changeable. If any such initiative is seen as a failure it will entrench the current perception of bias and lack of equity for men and their children

The current proposition may well be a feel good diversion that avoids many of the hard issues. Both parties are frightened of tabling concrete policies that effectively deal with the serious lack of services for men in family law and other areas. Where are the brave Aussie politicians and bureaucrats?