

Preface

'What Works in Relationship Education? Lessons from Academics and Service Deliverers in the United States and Europe' **Samantha Callan, Edinburgh University**

'What Works in Relationship Education? Lessons from Academics and Service Deliverers in the United States and Europe' was a unique event in a unique location. We drew together a dozen or so global experts for a colloquium on relationship education: a field which is no longer in its infancy but is in some ways perhaps going through a rather misunderstood adolescence. Our setting in the magnificent Westminster Hall, part of the public area in the United Kingdom's Houses of Parliament, underscored the profound policy relevance of the subject under discussion.

Over the two days of the colloquium we took a 'deep bore' look at the state of international research in couple relationship education and its implications for policy and practice. One key aim of our funders, the Doha International Institute for Family Studies and Development, was that we should produce a body of work that could be drawn on by designers of Qatari relationship education services. The intention was that this aim would be largely met by publishing the proceedings of the colloquium with each paper presented at the event given a separate chapter.

An expert invited audience were carefully chosen for their ability both to contribute to the high-quality discussion (which helped to shape the final content of the chapters here) and to take back the best practice and research findings and integrate them into service and policy design. Again, the development and dissemination of information about positive family values and the promotion of strong family relationships through education, training and publications are part of the core remit of the funders. They were delighted with the level of engagement in the colloquium by the invited audience, which included members of both Houses of the United Kingdom Parliament, from different political parties.

Not only were the House of Commons and the House of Lords both represented but the event was sponsored by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Sustainable Relationships. We were also joined by senior executives of many non-governmental organizations, researchers from top UK universities and practitioners who are working 'at the coalface' of couples' relationships on a daily basis. Although some of these practitioners usually work therapeutically with couples, the emphasis of the whole event was on how to work preventatively in such a way that severe and pronounced relationship difficulties do not emerge or become full-blown.

It was appropriate therefore that the organisers of the event, Care for the Family, have for the last 25 years been working primarily to *prevent* family breakdown in the UK as well as to help those suffering from its effects. They have for instance designed the first marriage preparation course specifically for step-parents. With their partners at the Marriage Preparation Course they have set up the National Couple Support Network. At present, only around one in 12 engaged couples in the UK do some kind of serious marriage preparation (other than briefly with the vicar or chaplain who will marry them), almost all of which is organised and run through churches. This new network aims to put all couples in the UK who want marriage preparation in touch with a full service that includes access to a support couple. One question they are often asked, particularly from registrars performing civil weddings, is whether or not marriage preparation and other forms of relationship education actually make a difference.

As the keynote speaker, Scott Stanley, has said on many occasions,

There is a vast amount to be learned about relationships, about marriage, and about the most effective ways to intervene to help more couples. But we know enough to take action and we need to take action to know more. (Stanley 2001)

However some commentators challenge even the aspiration to stay the course with one person, suggesting that serial monogamy might just be the new norm (see for example Wilkinson 1997) and that we should just expect relationships to be temporary and also unfaithful.

In her book, *The Best Kept Secret* the psychologist Janet Reibstein rails against
...such ignorance regarding the insatiable, ongoing, time-honoured and even animal need to be in a happy, secure, erotic and deepening union with one other person. We may not be skilled at getting there: we obviously lack the secret to having them. But the evidence of partnership breakdown does not convince me that we do not strive for or want desperately to have lasting and wonderful relationships.

For the people she has studied,
being in a marriage-like partnership is the central, transformational and ever-replenishing relationship of their lives...instead of perfect contentment, they strive for pragmatic, imperfect solutions.

She claims that
Every individual love story today pivots around the same conundrums: the tension between individual freedom and commitment, the task of regenerating mutual interest and desire in the teeth of predictability and routine, the need for security and stability against the push for novelty and the sheer difficulty of the economy of time and energy for each other within two complex lives. All these over increasingly long lives. (Reibstein 2006:3)

Hers is a recurring theme. Over two decades ago Burgess (1981:179) observed that
we tend to have an idealised conception of marriage and the family. It is often portrayed as a romantic and intimate oasis. In reality, it is often an intimate battleground. Mutual investment in one another generates its own risks and pains.

The tensions Reibstein describes are being played out all over the Western world and globalisation means they are impinging on relational realities in societies usually associated with different marriage expectations. One implication of this is that what we learn in one country through research and practice can be adapted for other cultures. Yet, despite high rates of divorce and relational distress in many countries, and all the negative fall-out this entails for couples, children, employers, and society, surveys suggest perhaps only a fifth of divorced adults sought help for relationship problems.

To quote Scott Stanley again,
Until recently, few large-scale efforts have been mounted to help couples increase chances

for a successful marriage, despite the availability of evidence-based prevention programs. However, a new era has begun where policymakers are recognising that such efforts may benefit diverse couples on a large scale. (Markman et al 2008)

Would that we were on the brink of a similar recognition by policymakers in this country and elsewhere in Europe. Family breakdown costs the UK taxpayer £20-24 billion each year (Callan et al 2007). Yet the Government's Parenting Fund is currently spending just £8 million each year, the equivalent of spending £1 on prevention of family breakdown for every £2500 spent on the consequences, and impacting only one in every 1200 children (based on their own figures). Support for mainstream couples is at an even more meagre level and has been on a downwards trend, because of the drift away from a clear focus on supporting marriage ten years ago to its status as just one of seven criteria in the current Parenting Fund (programmes eligible to apply for funding fit the category of "*strengthening existing parental couple relationships*").

However calls for a properly funded and targeted strategy to prevent family breakdown are growing in volume. Last year's *Breakthrough Britain* report from the UK's Social Justice Policy Group made nearly thirty policy recommendations to build stronger families (Callan et al 2007). It looked at family breakdown as a driver of poverty and recommended that there be a national roll-out of relationship education. The architect of the suggested scheme, Harry Benson, the senior editor of this book, proposed that individuals, couples and families draw down money from a personal 'budget' to access pre-marriage, antenatal, and parenting services. The report also recommended the revitalisation of the health visiting service in the UK which is under severe pressure but inspires a lot of confidence and trust in new parents. People who are inclined to shy away from a course or the very concept of relationship education might be grateful for some timely advice from a health visitor.

There is no doubt that any society intent on tackling family breakdown needs a very wide range of interventions. Various trends are increasing the likelihood of growing up in a fractured family; the norm is increasingly to live together before marriage and more than 50% of births are now outside marriage. This matters because our latest figures show that more than one in three cohabiting couples are breaking up before their child is five, compared with fewer than one in eleven married couples. In addition, in the UK, as in the United States, we are seeing a widening Marriage Gap – poorer, less educated people are less likely to get married than those higher up the social scale.

Yet statistics do not shed much light on *why* cohabitation is so much less stable and what can be done to help couples build stronger relationships. Papers included in this publication discuss how many people are making important relationship transitions and decisions long before they are married. Relationship education cannot be solely targeted on married couples and those planning to formalise relationships. They also describe measurable differences in behaviours and attitudes between married and cohabiting couples and how partners in both categories can make the behavioural changes which could transform their relationships. Programmes and approaches discussed throughout this publication focus on building relational competence, ultimately helping people to fulfil their aspirations.

A recent analysis of the marital aspirations of young people in the British Household Panel Survey found, once again, that three quarters of men and women were either planning, or expected, to get married and that marriage is *most* popular amongst cohabiting respondents (LSE

2007). Although it is socially acceptable to live together unmarried in Britain today, the survey shows that formalising a relationship through marriage is a widely held aspiration. Swedish data reveals similar attitudes: sociologist Eva Bernhardt has found that an overwhelming majority of young cohabiting couples in Sweden expect to get married (Bernhardt 2004). Moreover when people walk down the aisle they want it to be for life. Helping couples achieve a lifelong and satisfying relationship is what this colloquium was all about.

Our discussions took place just as some of our most trusted lending institutions and the economies of whole countries were facing almost complete collapse. This degree of financial pressure has enormous potential to destabilise couple relationships as households struggle to adjust to new economic realities with their difficult implications for families. Jordan's Family Law Newswatch said in September 2008 that family law solicitors were bracing themselves for higher than normal divorce and separation levels, with the economy and massive work pressures cited as the cause. Economists at the Institute of Social and Economic Research at the University of Essex have analysed data from 5,000 households across a 14-year period (the British Household Panel Survey, BHPS, together with the Halifax House Price Index, HHPI) which shows clearly that sudden falls in house prices increase the rate of separation. They found that for every unexpected 10% fall in house prices, an extra 5% of couples will split up. The causal arrows must point both ways because on average divorce or separation increases the risk of default on mortgages 4.5 times (Rainer & Smith 2008).

The obvious danger in economic downturns is that the prevention of family breakdown becomes a luxury which governments feel they cannot afford to invest in, and yet it is during precisely those times that the lessons learned from relationship education most need to be imparted and disseminated. When public funds are short it is even more important that the evidence-base for interventions is uncontroversibly robust. This publication aims to strengthen the evidence base for relationship education as well as to draw attention to the need for ongoing research. As such it meets a pressing need for policy makers and others from many countries, who are greatly exercised by the need to prevent family breakdown and strengthen relationships across society.

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