

Relationship priorities and the Australian marriage divide

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Policymakers tackle the 'problem' end of the relationship spectrum, but avoid investing much in early prevention programmes, thereby contributing to a 'marriage divide'. Although it is reasonable that distressed or divorcing couples receive more policy attention than intact families, preventative measures should be reconsidered. Addressing socioeconomic inequality, evaluating whether programmes can enhance relationship quality and acknowledging that couples – especially those at-risk – are unaware of, or uninterested in participating in preventative programmes would help.

key words relationship programmes

Introduction

The Australian government regards couple relationships/marriage as one of the foundations of society, the best place to raise children and good for people's wellbeing. Nevertheless, marriage is inherently unstable. Consequently, governments confront the difficulty of where and how to allocate resources when attempting to strengthen family relationships, raising questions about when to intervene on the relationship spectrum. The federal government wishes to develop strong foundations for family wellbeing and to reduce the costs of family breakdown, calculated at \$3 billion¹ per year (Department of Social Services, 2014). The public purse funds a range of services and support for families, with most attention on post-separation services that assist in reducing conflict and protecting the family unit and children (Parkinson, 2011). The government also funds programmes such as the Stronger Relationships trial, which provides counselling or a \$200 'marriage voucher' for any couples in a committed relationship, including same-sex couples (even though they are not permitted to legally marry). This article contributes to the discussion about this marriage divide by exploring programmes targeting couple relationships that are not in distress. As a 'social investment', couple relationship education (CRE) is different from 'late' intervention for couples going through separation and divorce. It encompasses early intervention measures that aim to enhance and strengthen relationships.

The article provides a policy analysis of how federal governments have been implementing strategies to address marriage and to strengthen couple relationships. It examines CRE as a policy response to changes in couple relationships that contribute

to the marriage divide. It traces the development of CRE since the 1960s. Incremental approaches have ensued, regardless of a few financial boosts at various times when influence and opportunities for expanding preventative programmes occurred. Overall, however, governments have directed spending to programmes that assist in reducing conflict during separation and divorce. I argue that while government policies must address issues such as family dispute resolution, there are policy challenges here that may exacerbate the marriage divide.

The potential of CRE

CRE is an early preventive and intervention programme providing structured education to couples about relationship knowledge, attitudes and skills. It may assist in sustaining healthy, mutually satisfying relationships, and in reducing relationship distress and separation (Halford et al, 2008). The interaction between partners is the strongest predictor of relationship satisfaction (Bradbury and Karney, 2004). Little effort in nurturing the relationship strongly predicts further deterioration in relationship satisfaction (Halford et al, 2006). Poor communication and negativity also foresee deterioration in couple satisfaction (Johnson et al, 2005). CRE aims to reduce or eliminate the decline in relationship satisfaction over time and could benefit high-risk couples if the risks themselves are recognised (Bradbury and Lavner, 2012). Unlike counselling or therapy that offers support to distressed couples, CRE's objective is to assist couples moving through the various phases of their relationship.

Government interventions in marriage

The marriage divide has triggered anxieties about when, where and how to deliver relationship support. Consequently, CRE has received less priority than other programmes. The Marriage Act 1961 introduced strategies to support stable marriage and families. The Family and Communities Programme delivered services via the churches and secular organisations working with educators and social workers. This involved marriage preparation, family skills training and parenting, marriage counselling and programmes aimed at harmonious separation and family mediation (HRSC/LCA, 1998). The greatest demand for government services involved high-conflict situations. Funding for marriage education programmes gradually increased, pursuant to provisions in the Family Law Act 1975. Section 43 of this Act includes legal principles of supporting marriage, stating that the Family Court shall have regard to 'the need to preserve and protect the institution of marriage as the union of a man and a woman to the exclusion of all others' to assist married couples with 'the improvement of their relationship to each other'. 1976 was a landmark year for the development of marriage support because the Attorney-General increased support for pre-marriage education as a preventative approach to the growing levels of marital breakdown. Employing trained, professional staff heralded the government as a new and active influence on the programmes (Harris et al, 1992: 13). By the 1980s, there was an expansion of adult education, with courses teaching communication skills and conflict resolution. Pre-marital education was developing into an instructive practice in its own right and responding to increasing community, church and government concerns for marrying couples (Harris et al, 1992: 12-3). Inventories

such as FOCCUS² and PREPARE/ENRICH³ allowed couples to answer questions about their relationships and then discuss any relevant concerns with a facilitator.

Public money for early intervention programmes was not particularly generous under the Hawke/Keating Labor government (1983–96). For instance, in 1989–90, it provided \$248,000 to 24 agencies (Andrews and Andrews, 1997: 111). By the 1990s, the divorce rate had increased, fewer couples were marrying and more were cohabitating. Various committees reviewed marriage education programmes and services, calling for early intervention and prevention. For example, the 1992 Joint Select Committee on Certain Aspects of the Operation and Interpretation of the Family Law Act (paragraph 4.97) supported:

a compelling cost benefit argument in favour of more funding for preventative education, which might help reduce the number of marriages which reach the stage of breakdown. Successive governments have given this field far too low a priority for funding . . . immediate actions should be taken to rectify this situation.

Nevertheless, the Labor government was reluctant to prioritise preventative programmes and there was little information about their effectiveness. By the early 1990s, it provided just \$500,000 annually towards CRE. In 1994–95, 28,173 people, three-quarters of whom were couples, utilised marriage education (Andrews and Andrews, 1997: 113). Labor increased funding in 1995, but the Opposition promised to double it.

In 1996, the new Liberal–National coalition government was anxious about the decline in marriage and increasing divorce rates. Its report *To have and to hold: Strategies to strengthen marriage and relationships* recommended preventive strategies as a pragmatic way of coaching people about marriage (HRSC/LCA, 1998: 67). The government expanded funding to \$4 million per year via the Family Relationships Services Program. One aim was to increase the participation rate of 30%: couples tended to be white, middle class, religious and did not cohabit. This aim has not been successful, due to an increase in civil ceremonies where couples tend not to consider CRE (Andrews, 2012).

The issue of government intervention in the marriage divide re-emerged in response to a parliamentary inquiry into Australia's custody laws in 2003. Fathers' groups lobbied for men's rights and greater access to children post separation. In 2005, the government invested \$397.2 million in the family law system. The new Family Relationship Centres (FRCs) allocated most of their funding for separating couples, family dispute resolution and the 'problem' end of the relationship spectrum rather than intact families (Moloney et al, 2013). Service providers commented that 'preventative' meant working with separating couples and that the FRCs were the 'ambulance at the bottom of the cliff', offering intervention after the damage had been done (cited in van Acker, 2008: 106).

The Rudd/Gillard Labor governments increased family relationship support funding by \$277 million from 2008 to 2011. There was, however, no specific attention to CRE, which continued but did not expand until the conservative Abbott government's \$20 million Stronger Relationships scheme in 2014. The Opposition leader Bill Shorten questioned the government's marriage priorities while cutting funds for schools, childcare and visits to the doctor (Chalmers, 2014). Budget reductions were also announced for pensions, unemployment and disability benefits. Tensions surrounding

the place of CRE continue as the government attempts to regulate various aspects of the marriage divide.

Discussion

There are three major challenges in developing CRE as a way of addressing the marriage divide in the policy area of strengthening family relationships. First, most participants are white, middle class and educated, while vulnerable couples at higher risk of confronting relationship difficulties are underrepresented (Halford et al, 2006). People from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, low-income families, those on welfare, people living in remote or rural communities, step-families and people experiencing substance abuse, mental illness or disability are the least likely to access early intervention and preventive measures (Simons and Parker, 2002; Catholic Welfare Australia and Department of FaHCSIA, 2006). Also, they are less likely to obtain support funded under the FSP (Department of FaHCSIA, 2012). Domestic violence and conflicts over financial difficulties add to relationships distress. Low participation by at-risk groups raises the problem that relationship-strengthening programmes are not connected to economic policies around alleviating poverty, reducing unemployment and improving work-life balance that impact on the wellbeing of couples and families.

Second, Australian evaluations of the long-term effects of CRE are scarce, but would be extremely useful in gathering data about the efficacy of programmes. International studies illustrate that CRE of approximately 12 hours can enhance the ways in which couples relate to each other and improve their relationship quality, thereby bolstering relationships over a period of one to five years (Stanley et al, 2006; Hawkins et al, 2008; Halford, 2011). There are improvements in observable relationship skills such as problem-solving and positive effects in communication skills, especially for well-functioning couples (Blanchard et al, 2009). Regardless of specific curriculum content, the act of participating in CRE with one's partner may have a positive effect on commitment (Hawkins et al, 2012). Research in the United Kingdom found that marriage and relationship education resulted in positive changes in people's relationship quality, wellbeing and communication (Spielhofer et al, 2014). Nevertheless, we need to know more about whether couples can apply complex new skills learned in these programmes in their everyday lives (Blanchard et al, 2009). It is especially important to gain knowledge about the effectiveness of CRE for step-families and low-income, non-English-speaking and other at-risk groups. More systematic knowledge is required about how to work with couples whose relationships function relatively well, but confront difficult family backgrounds, aggression and stress (Bradbury and Lavner, 2012).

Third, people who could benefit from the programmes may be unaware of them or their usefulness. For example, the trial response to the Stronger Relationships programme has been reasonable, with 2,982 couples applying for vouchers in the first five weeks of the offer. However, most of these couples did not know about the vouchers when they booked their classes. For example, they had been referred via their Church which encouraged them to complete marriage preparation. Furthermore, cohabiting couples may perceive CRE as unnecessary (although these are the people who are most likely to separate). A related obstacle is people's disinterest and perceptions that they will be 'preached at' (van Acker, 2008). The success of

CRE depends on increasing people's accessibility to services, raising awareness and motivating couples to participate.

Conclusions

As far as the marriage divide is concerned, governments have a limited role in influencing people's relationship choices and cannot regulate or persuade them to marry; they can merely finance programmes that they hope couples will use, whether they be prevention programmes such as CRE or programmes targeting the problem end of relationships, involving counselling, therapy and mediation. CRE tends to attract partners who are healthy, well-off and educated. If those on a low income confront unemployment or have inadequate access to good-quality housing, education and healthcare, participating in voluntary programmes such as CRE, developing stable relationships and getting married may not be feasible. Moreover, this cohort's relationships may be under stress precisely because they have insufficient resources necessary for socioeconomic security.

Policy makers need thorough evaluations of CRE conducted in Australia. If findings are positive, advertising the benefits could encourage more involvement. While some couples are open to participating in adult education programmes such as CRE, attitudinal barriers to accessing the programmes include the belief that adults 'naturally' know how to be good partners and do not need early preventative measures to develop relationship skills. Many couples expect a fairy-tale ending and do not want 'counselling', or they confront a range of life challenges so that CRE is not an important consideration. They do not want governments interfering in their personal lives, unless or until they require financial support or legal assistance when relationships are in trouble.

Notes

¹ All dollar figures quoted in this article are Australian dollars.

² www.focussinc.com/focuss-inventory.aspx

³ www.prepare-enrich.com.au/

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