
Relationship difficulties and help-seeking behaviour – Secondary analysis of an existing data-set

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Background

Couple relationship breakdown is prevalent in today's society (ONS 2008). Preventing relationship breakdown by strengthening a couple's relationship has profound benefits for adult and child well-being, and the parenting ability of the couple (Coleman and Glenn 2009). This report outlines findings from the secondary analysis of a dataset derived from focus groups and interviews with individuals who were in long-term relationships (for three years or more). The findings from this study make a valuable contribution towards our understanding of relationship difficulties and how relationships can be strengthened.

Key findings

- The main relationship difficulties reported by the participants were in relation to the transition to parenthood and the challenges of raising children; finance; health and well-being; the influences of in-laws, family and friends; and infidelity. Two key issues underpinned these difficulties: the unequal balance of control in a relationship and poor communication.
- The most valued aspects of the participants' relationships were closeness, independence, having children, and support.
- Participants perceived their relationships in different ways. Five groups emerged from the analysis representing the range of perceptions: '*...it's not right*'; '*...it's probably just average*'; '*We're completely happy*'; '*...we will get through it*'; and '*...solid, but it's one which we've worked at*'.
- Attitudes and beliefs about relationship development underpinned many of the themes which emerged within the groups. Two distinct groups were identified - those with a 'developmental' or 'non-developmental' relationship perspective.
- A 'developmental' perspective (in contrast to a 'non-developmental' perspective) involved beliefs that relationships were fluid and changed through time. These views were associated with participants who conveyed that they were active agents with control over the course of their relationship. They described change in their relationship; overcame difficult times and doubts in their relationship; reported learning about themselves, their partner, and their relationship; and put their knowledge to use by investing in relationship 'work'. Those with a 'developmental' perspective considered their relationship in the future as well as in the present.
- 'Non-developmental' relationship beliefs were not confined to those reporting dissatisfying relationships. To illustrate, some of the '*We're completely happy group*' were 'non-developmental' in their beliefs, although they had not yet reported any relationship strain.
- The most welcomed source of relationship support was through informal and 'unbiased' routes such as close social contacts. Support from friends and family was more acceptable than formal support such as relationship counselling. Many of the participants reported that using formal relationship support was intrinsically linked with feelings of failure and defeat. Some participants reported that by the time a couple

- decide to attend relationship counselling it was often too late to repair the relationship.
- Those supporting a 'developmental' view of their relationship were more likely to engage in relationship improving behaviour and seek out relationship support if they experienced difficulties. By contrast, those with a 'non-developmental' perspective felt that a couple could not learn to improve their relationship, and considered relationship support to be ineffective.
 - The findings from this study suggest that there is a role for a universal provision of relationship support services; relationship education in schools; and a crucial role for health visitors and other frontline staff in the relationship support arena.

Aims and objectives

The aim of the research is to explore the best ways to prevent relationship problems, overcome relationship difficulties and reduce the likelihood of relationship breakdown. The four main objectives are to enrich understanding about the following questions:

1. What are the main relationship difficulties reported and what are the consequences?
2. What do people think helps their relationships to endure?
3. What attitudes and beliefs do people hold about their relationships?
4. How do people try and improve their relationships and what are their attitudes to relationship support?

Sampling and research methods

A total of 112 in-depth interviews and eight focus groups (comprising 64 individuals) were undertaken. Fieldwork was conducted in London, Bristol and York. A short screening questionnaire was used to determine eligibility for interview and to purposively select participants. This ensured that the selected participants were demographically compatible with the general population in terms of gender; age; relationship status; relationship duration; number of children; socio-economic group; education; ethnicity; area of residence; and family composition.

Main findings

What are the main relationship difficulties reported and what are the consequences?

The main difficulties reported by participants were in relation to the transition to parenthood and the challenges of raising children (most commonly mentioned); finance; health and well-being; the influences of in-laws, family and friends; and infidelity. Problems during the transition to parenthood included difficulties associated with conception through to dealing with older children. Two key underlying issues were evident in many of the participants' accounts of their relationship difficulties: the unequal balance of control in a relationship and poor communication.

As a consequence of these difficulties, some participants had experienced periods of doubt about remaining in their relationship. In contrast, some reported that by working through their relationship problems they had become closer to their partner.

What do people think helps their relationships to endure?

The most valued aspects of the participants' relationships were closeness, independence, having children, and support. Feeling close to a partner involved understanding a partner and being understood, sharing a sense of humour and laughing together, and having a friendship with a partner. Independence allowed people to maintain personal friendships, spend time away from their partner and further their own interests. It also included respecting a partner's individuality. Participants found that it was important to balance independent activities with time spent as a couple and as part of a family.

People observed that over time there were changes in themselves, their partner and their relationship. Some participants recalled that they had a greater understanding of their partner, had become more mature over time, and that their attitude to their relationship had changed. These factors had sometimes altered their attitude and behaviour towards a partner in a positive way.

What attitudes and beliefs do people hold about their relationships?

Participants perceived their relationships in many different ways. Five groups emerged from the analysis, representing the range of perceptions: '*...it's not right*'; '*...it's probably just average*'; '*We're completely happy*'; '*...we will get through it*'; and '*...solid, but it's one which we've worked at*'. Each group was associated, to differing extents, with a variety of different themes which emerged through the data analysis. The themes concerned factors such as relationship satisfaction, conflict, the development of their relationship over time, closeness, communication, and emotional engagement.

Moreover, attitudes and beliefs about relationship development underpinned many of the themes which emerged within the groups. Further analysis revealed two distinct groups - those with a 'developmental' or 'non-developmental' relationship perspective.

A 'developmental' perspective (in contrast to a 'non-developmental' perspective) involved beliefs that relationships were fluid and changed through time. These views were associated with participants who conveyed that they were active agents with control over the course of their relationship. They described change in their relationship; overcame difficult times and doubts in their relationship; reported learning about themselves, their partner, and their relationship; and put their knowledge to use by investing in relationship 'work'. Those with a 'developmental' perspective considered their relationship in the future as well as in the present.

'Developmental' and 'non-developmental' relationship beliefs occurred across a variety of differently perceived relationships. 'Non-developmental' relationship beliefs were not confined to those reporting dissatisfying relationships. To illustrate, some of the '*We're completely happy group*' were 'non-developmental' in their beliefs, although they had not yet reported any relationship strain. Based on women's greater willingness to engage in discussion about their relationship and to seek out relationship support, they were also more likely than men to hold such 'developmental' beliefs.

How do people try and improve their relationships and what are their attitudes to relationship support?

The primary method of resolving relationship difficulties reported by the participants was by talking through issues with their partner. Although some participants found discussing issues was sometimes uncomfortable, the majority reported that it was important to talk through issues in order to maintain the long-term health of the relationship.

External to their partner, the most frequently used source of relationship support was through 'unbiased', informal routes such as close social contacts. The participants reported that having someone to listen to their relationship problems was beneficial, and helped them to understand their situation and get through difficult times. Many reported that because their friends and family knew the individuals in the relationship, they could offer new insights and this sometimes helped them to understand their issues more deeply and how they could work to resolve them.

Most of the participants reported that they would not use a relationship counselling service. Many of the participants reported that using formal relationship support was intrinsically linked with feelings of failure and defeat. A few of the participants suggested that if a couple required formal or professional relationship support to solve a relationship difficulty, then the relationship was not worth saving and unlikely to be successful.

The influence of people's 'developmental' or 'non-developmental' relationship perspective was apparent in the accounts of relationship improvement behaviour and attitudes to relationship support. A 'developmental' perspective was evident in behaviours such as initiating discussion about issues even if it was uncomfortable to do so, learning from difficult experiences, expressing dissatisfaction, and engaging in constructive conflict. Those with a 'developmental' perspective were aware of what made their own relationship endure, through closeness and time together, independence, providing support for each other, and communicating effectively. A person who has a 'developmental' view of their relationship held a belief that they had control over the outcome of their relationship. This made it more likely that they engaged in relationship improving behaviour and sought out relationship support if they experienced difficulties.

A 'non-developmental' perspective was apparent where people frequently avoided confrontation with their partner, by subjugating their own needs and resigning themselves to continuing their dissatisfying relationship and failing to resolve arguments. They commonly held a belief that a couple could not learn to improve their relationship, and considered relationship support to be ineffective.

Policy implications of the research

The research findings have clear implications for policy-makers and practitioners aiming to find ways to strengthen couple relationships.

A 'developmental' perspective

A key feature of this research was the investigation into the relationship beliefs of participants. These were considered to be either 'developmental' or 'non-developmental' in nature. Based on the assumption that people who hold 'developmental' beliefs are likely to be motivated to maintain and improve their relationship, the findings can be used to develop interventions which aim to modify people's attitudes and behaviour towards this perspective.

Those who have a 'developmental' stance are likely to be those primed to be able to learn adaptive skills early on. They are also already equipped with some wisdom about relationship trajectories and the ability to make improvements through the accumulation of knowledge and skills. These are both key to robustness in relationships and can be bolstered in couples such as those reporting relationship distress. Those not 'developmental' in their perspective, however, can be potentially reached through a prior step: one that would educate them about the benefits of such a stance.

A number of key points associated with this finding are presented below:

Universal early intervention

The results suggest the potential advantage of adopting a universal early intervention approach to relationship support. There are two groups of participants who may particularly benefit from early intervention. Firstly, those who are in the early stages of their relationships may benefit from increased awareness of relationship stages and likely changes (e.g. a decrease in sexual passion), and to inform them that it is normal for this to occur. Secondly, participants who perceive their relationship as 'good' but hold 'non-developmental' relationship beliefs may be ill-equipped to deal with relationship difficulties should they occur. Universal preventative interventions could provide, therefore, crucial learning to *all* couples, including those currently in satisfying relationships, even if they are yet to experience relationship difficulties.

Knowledge about relationships

Key pieces of information which relate to preventative interventions designed to encourage a 'developmental' relationship perspective include making people aware that:

- **Relationships change over time** – this is often associated with different levels of relationship satisfaction.
- **It is normal to experience periods of low relationship satisfaction** – people can learn to improve their relationships.
- **Certain circumstances are frequently associated with relationship difficulties and the erosion of relationship satisfaction** – for example, the transition to parenthood.
- **People can have the ability to control the outcome of their relationship** – relationships are flexible and can respond to ‘work’.
- **The way a couple communicate has a bearing on many aspects of their relationship.**
- **It is important to understand a partner’s behaviour** – understanding the reasons behind a behaviour may help reduce relationship tension.
- **Conflict and confrontation is normal in a relationship** – a lack of conflict in a relationship does not necessarily indicate a healthy relationship. The way people deal with conflict (constructively rather than destructively) is more important than the conflict itself.

This kind of knowledge described above can encourage a ‘developmental’ perspective. There is clear potential for relationships education in schools to promote knowledge that underpins a ‘developmental’ perspective.

Providing acceptable sources of support

Two challenges for policy and practice are to find ways to increase the uptake of relationship support services and how to make services acceptable to couples. This is especially important at an early stage, when the prospect for improving relationship quality is greatest. The vast majority of people preferred support to come from somebody familiar and who had been through similar experiences to themselves. This suggests that training peer mentors to develop their listening skills and ability to empathise might be an effective way of offering acceptable support.

An effective time for support is when a couple are becoming parents for the first time. During this time a couple are in routine contact with various professionals, such as Health Visitors, who are in a strong position to offer support. Broadening the purview of these professionals by training them to understand relationships, and be able to offer support and signposting could provide long-lasting benefits for the couple and for the baby they are going to raise.

Many of the participants reported that they were unwilling to use relationship support services and would only do so as a last resort. It is important that such services are not portrayed as a means of trying to resolve an already failed relationship but are seen as a means of improving the quality of existing relationships. In addition, incompatible preferences for anonymity and informal support from friends and family suggest the need for a menu of support provision. A menu of support options would also be appropriate to meet the needs of people at different stages of their relationship. Evidence also suggests that issues over availability, accessibility and acceptability prevent the uptake of more formal types of support. Innovative solutions such as internet technology may be a means of overcoming some of these barriers. Indeed recent research into the preferences of an innovative relationships support website (Coleman and Glenn 2010) suggests that the main attractions are that it is immediate, confidential, not face-to-face, and informative.

Future research and development

As a final note, this study has also identified a number of areas that require further investigation. One essential area of future study is to identify the antecedents behind the ‘developmental’ and ‘non-developmental’ perspectives and understand why people differ in their beliefs about relationships.

References

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Additional Information

This research report was written before the new UK Government took office on 11 May 2010. As a result the content may not reflect current Government policy and may make reference to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) which has now been replaced by the Department for Education (DFE).

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.