

# Unhappy Marriages: Does Counselling Help?

## Summary

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## Report to ACCORD

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## Foreword

**"Family policy must have regard to the principle that continuity and stability are major requirements in family relationships. For many people marriage represents their commitment to long term continuity and stability"**

THIS DIRECT QUOTE FROM THE 1998 REPORT OF THE COMMISSION ON THE FAMILY ACCURATELY REFLECTS THE FOCUS OF CURRENT GOVERNMENT POLICY ON THE CENTRAL ROLE THAT MARRIAGE CONTINUES TO PLAY IN IRELAND.



The Government's 'Families First' approach focuses on the prevention of family breakdown through the ongoing development of marriage counselling services and greater promotion of the benefits of marriage preparation programmes.

We saw earlier this year that the publication of research into the first year of marriage painted a positive picture of the benefits of marriage preparation courses. Now this research project by Dr Kieran McKeown and his team provides us with an unprecedented look at marriage and the effects of counselling through a survey of some 3500 ACCORD clients.

Research has consistently shown that having a good marriage is good for our health, happiness, longevity and of course our children. However, for every positive enjoyed in a good marriage, there are negatives affecting people in difficult marriages.

There are new pressures on marriages. Traditional parenting roles have changed in Ireland. Society no longer considers that a woman's job is to stay in the home as wife and mother. The dominant, bread-winning father is a thing of the past. Increased female participation in the labour force and the sharing of responsibilities in the house are just two of many issues facing modern marriages.

The report identifies four main factors which can impact negatively on marriages; behaviour, conflict resolution, task sharing and to a lesser extent socio-economic factors.

The importance of good communication between spouses remains constant in these changing times.

Lack of communication seems to be a major factor in the cause of marital difficulty. The findings point to the importance of communication between couples being on an equal footing with both parties willing to listen to each other. Counselling can help with the establishment of a positive hearing environment where both parties, with the assistance of a sympathetic counsellor, can learn to give expression to their emotions, to listen to each other and to change negative behaviours.

My thanks go to Kieran and his team for their time and effort in compiling this excellent report and also to Fr John Hannan of ACCORD for putting forward this research proposal and seeing it through to completion.

I'd like congratulate ACCORD counsellors throughout the country who give their time on a voluntary basis to ensure that help is always available to couples when they need it most. This research proves just what an important job they are doing.

The Government remains committed to supporting the marriage and relationship counselling sector.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mary Coughlan'.

Mary Coughlan T.D.  
Minister for Social and Family Affairs  
November 2002

## Acknowledgements

We are extremely grateful to ACCORD for commissioning us to do this study. In particular we acknowledge its courage and openness in asking such a challenging question of itself: does counselling make a difference? It is a risky question because the answer is not a foregone conclusion. It is also a question of integrity since both counsellors and their clients have a right to know that the therapeutic process in which they are engaged makes a difference.

It has been a pleasure to work for ACCORD and to have the organisation's enthusiastic support for this project. We are grateful to all of the counsellors and secretaries throughout the organisation's 57 centres who have co-operated with the study by ensuring the completion of our questionnaires.

We are particularly grateful to the clients of ACCORD who, as individuals and couples, have taken the time to participate in this study. We hope that the faith which is implicit in their coming to ACCORD for counselling and their willingness to complete our questionnaires will bring them private benefits and contribute to the public good.

Our direct contact with ACCORD was through its head office whose staff have, at all times, been helpful and pleasant. One of our first contacts in ACCORD was Diarmuid Rooney whose work helped to build the foundations for this study and we are grateful for his unique blend of clarity and passion. We are also indebted to Maureen Warren who supplied us with data for Chapter Eight and who managed the process of printing and publishing the report with characteristic courtesy and efficiency.

The Assistant Director of ACCORD, Liz Early is the person with whom we have had most contact and is, by nature and disposition, probably a better researcher than any of us. Her organisational abilities combined with her understanding of the logic of the research process is a pleasure to behold and has made this a most enjoyable piece of work.

The Director of ACCORD, Fr. John Hannan is the visionary behind this research and his commitment to it has been enormously encouraging. He is a man of action and his patience has been tested by the three year gestation period of this Report between 1999 and 2002. We thank him for his patience and for the faith he has placed in us to come up with an answer to the question: does counselling make a difference?

We would also like to thank the Department of Social and Family Affairs for jointly funding this study through its Families Research Programme. The staff responsible for this programme in the Department - Catherine Hazlett,

Heber McMahon and Brendan Walker - have been extremely helpful and supportive of our work throughout the study and we are grateful to them.

In acknowledging our debts to so many people, we also wish to follow the usual convention in declaring that none of the above needs to worry about being held responsible for the quality of our research or the results of our analysis; we are happy to take full responsibility for that!

## Marriage and Well-Being

**“Most scientific studies have demonstrated the extraordinarily powerful role of love in relationships in determining health and illness.”**

MICHAEL MANN<sup>1</sup>, LONDON-BASED PSYCHOANALYTIC PSYCHOTHERAPIST AND AUTHOR.

### Popularity of Marriage

Marriage is the choice of most men and women in Ireland, as elsewhere. Throughout the EU, there remains widespread popular support for marriage as an institution,<sup>2</sup> despite higher rates of marital breakdown than in Ireland<sup>3</sup>. Even among young people in Ireland, the level of support for marriage as an institution remains high<sup>4</sup>. This is also evident in the fact that the number of people who describe themselves as ‘remarried following dissolution of a previous marriage’ has trebled in the ten years between 1986 and 1996 – even before divorce was introduced.

### Signs of Change

Notwithstanding the importance of marriage, there are also signs of change, such as a decline in the marriage rate in Ireland, a growth in births outside marriage and an increase in the extent of marital breakdown with up to a tenth of the age cohort who are most likely to be affected by separation (the 33-42 year-olds) now separated. This alone highlights the importance of the question at the centre of this study, namely the effectiveness of counselling in promoting relationships and preventing their breakdown. The evidence suggests that at least 10% of all couples under 40 years may be in a distressed relationship and may benefit from counselling.

### Marriage and the Irish Constitution

In Ireland, the importance of marriage is enshrined in the Irish Constitution, Article 41.3.1 of which states that: “The State pledges itself to guard with special care the institution of Marriage, on which the Family is founded, and to protect it against attack”. Notwithstanding the importance of marriage in the Irish Constitution, public policy in Ireland tends to focus on families rather than marriage. Policy statements indicate the Government’s “commitment to put the family at the centre of all its policies”<sup>5</sup>. A similar approach was taken by the Commission on the Family

1 Mann, 2002:15

2 It is customary to distinguish between marriage as a relationship and marriage as an institution. Marriage as a relationship refers to the interpersonal bond between a man and a woman who are living together in an intimate, long-term relationship. Marriage as an institution refers to the social structures which surround marriage including regulatory measures (such as the constitution and family law) and distributive measures (eg. income support and various benefits in kind)

3 Eurobarometer, 1993; Reynolds and Mansfield, 1999

4 Behaviour and Attitudes, 1999

5 Minister for Social, Community and Family Affairs, 2001a; 2001b; see also An Action Programme for the Millennium, 1997:15; 1999:15-16

(October 1995 – July 1998) whose report – entitled *Strengthening Families for Life*<sup>6</sup> - outlined six principles which should inform family policy although none of them refer to marriage<sup>7</sup>.

## Marriage and Well-being

We reviewed a number of studies on the impact of marriage on well-being, all involving large data sets in countries such as the US<sup>8</sup>, Britain<sup>9</sup>, Germany<sup>10</sup>, Belgium<sup>11</sup> and Ireland<sup>12</sup>. We found evidence that on average, controlling for a number of socio-economic variables, being married is associated with higher levels of well-being than being single, separated, widowed or remarried. This superior well-being takes the form of better health, longer life, higher income and better outcomes for children. On balance, it seems that men benefit more from marriage in the area of health, and women more in the area of income.

## Bad Marriages

Good marriages have very positive benefits for physical and mental health, but bad marriages have very negative effects. Studies have shown that marital distress is particularly associated with depression in women and poor physical health in men. The research evidence is quite inconclusive as to whether men or women are the more adversely affected by marital distress as measured in terms of physical health, mental health and health habits<sup>13</sup>. However, it is recognised that men and women respond differently to marital distress which sometimes takes the pattern of “demand-withdrawal,” whereby women’s demands for change in a relationship are met by their partner’s withdrawal in the face of those demands<sup>14</sup>. One recent review of the evidence found that “troubled marriages are reliably associated with increased distress and unmarried people are happier, on the average, than unhappily married people”<sup>15</sup>.

## A Role for Counselling

These findings highlight the important role which counselling might play in supporting marriage and couple relationships generally. Indeed, given the established importance of marriage for well-being, it would be difficult to underestimate the importance and relevance of the question which is at the heart of this report namely: does counselling make a difference to unhappy marriages? Before applying empirical evidence to this question, we first review the international research on this topic.

**“A growing body of evidence demonstrates the health benefits and the benefits to children of committed, harmonious couple relationships.”**

THE LORD CHANCELLOR’S ADVISORY GROUP ON MARRIAGE  
AND RELATIONSHIP SUPPORT<sup>16</sup> IN BRITAIN, 2002.

6 Commission on the Family, 1996; 1998

7 *ibid*, 1996:13-14

8 See Oswald and Blanchflower, 1999

9 Theodossiou, 1998

10 Winkelmann and Winkelmann, 1998

11 Sweeney, 1998

12 *ibid*

13 Kiecolt-Glaser and Newton, 2001

14 Christensen, 1987; Heavey, Layne and Christensen, 1993; Krokoff, 1987; Margolin and Wampold, 1981; Notarius and Markman, 1989; Roberts and Krokoff, 1990; Sayers et al., 1991; Levenson and Gottman, 1985; Markman, 1991; 1994

15 Kiecolt-Glaser and Newton, 2001

16 The Lord Chancellor’s Advisory Group on Marriage and Relationship Support, 2002:9

## Effectiveness of Counselling

“Throughout human history, individuals with social and emotional difficulties have benefited from talking with a sympathetic ‘other’ perceived as being able to offer words of comfort and sound counsel either because of recognised inherently helpful personal qualities, or by virtue of his or her role in the community. ... However, even in today’s world, the vast majority of individuals who are experiencing psychological distress do not seek help from trained and credentialed professional counsellors and therapists; they obtain relief by talking to individuals untrained in counselling or psychotherapy.”

JIM MCLENNAN<sup>17</sup>, AUSTRALIAN COUNSELLOR AND PSYCHOTHERAPIST, TEACHER, RESEARCHER AND WRITER.

### Counselling and Psychotherapy

The effectiveness of counselling and psychotherapy is of central importance to professionals as much as to their clients since the fundamental belief upon which both enter the therapeutic process is that it can ameliorate distress and difficulties and help couples meet their relationship goals. The terms counselling and psychotherapy are often used interchangeably and, according to one commentator, “there is a developing recognition that there are no clear distinctions between counselling and psychotherapy. The terms are interchangeable”<sup>18</sup>.

### Therapy Works

The effectiveness of all types of therapy has been extensively studied. The results of these studies have been summarised and synthesised using a method known as meta-analysis, which involves reducing all results to a common denominator – known as the effect size. Two remarkably consistent findings have emerged from over 50 meta-analytic studies, synthesising over 2,500 separate controlled studies<sup>19</sup>. The first finding is that therapy works and the second is that all therapies are about equally effective. We now expand on these findings.

### Marital Therapy

The effectiveness of therapy is indicated by the fact that, in general, cases which receive treatment tend to do better than untreated cases in about seven out of ten cases. This result is consistent across a number of meta-analyses which examined the effectiveness of psychotherapy generally<sup>20</sup>, child psychotherapy<sup>21</sup>, marital therapy<sup>22</sup>, and combined marital and family therapy<sup>23</sup>. Going beyond the effectiveness of therapy in general to marital therapy in particular, the consensus from different clinical studies seems to be that marital therapy results in about half the couples “reliably moving from marital distress to marital satisfaction by the end of therapy”<sup>24</sup>. Similarly, an earlier

17 McLennan, 1999:169

18 Thorne, 1999:227; see also Jacobs, 1996:5

19 Asay and Lambert, 1999

20 See for example, Smith and Glass, 1977

21 See for example, Weisz and Weiss, 1993

22 See for example, Dunn and Schwebel, 1995

23 See for example, Shadish, Ragsdale, Glaser and Montgomery, 1995; Baucom, Shoham, Mueser, Daiuto, and Stickle, 1998

24 Alexander, Holtzworth-Munroe and Jameson, 1994:613

review of clinical outcome studies found that “most tested treatments report no better than 50% success”<sup>25</sup>. Commentators have drawn both optimistic and pessimistic conclusions from these results. Some have used it to suggest that “marital therapy often yields results that are of demonstrable benefit even by this relatively strict criterion of returning couples to non-distressed states”<sup>26</sup>. Others point out that marital therapy often leaves couples still distressed after therapy and that “existing treatments for marital discord and distress need substantial improvement”<sup>27</sup>.

## Therapy is Inexpensive

Irrespective of how one interprets the clinical success of marital therapy, it is worth noting that these successful outcomes are generally achieved over relatively short periods, usually not exceeding six months<sup>28</sup>. In addition, the cost of these interventions is modest compared to the cost of distress over a much longer period.

## All Therapies Are Effective

One of the remarkable findings to emerge from the study of therapeutic effectiveness is that there is no significant difference between the effectiveness of different therapies<sup>29</sup>. Given that over 250 different therapeutic models have been identified<sup>30</sup> – each claiming to be effective and many claiming to be more effective than others – it is remarkable that all are relatively equal in their effectiveness. As one commentator has observed: “No psychotherapy is superior to any other, although all are superior to no treatment. ... This is the conclusion drawn by authoritative reviews ... and well controlled outcome studies. ... This is really quite remarkable, given the claims of unique therapeutic properties made by advocates of the various treatments available today”<sup>31</sup>. Even more remarkable is the finding of another review: “It is poignant to notice that the size of the effect between *bona fide* psychotherapies is at most about half of the effect size produced by treatments with no active psychotherapeutic ingredients (i.e. placebo versus no treatment)”<sup>32</sup>.

## Common Factors in Therapeutic Effectiveness

A key implication of these findings is that all therapies have something in common which make them similarly effective. Researchers have suggested that there are four common factors which influence therapeutic effectiveness<sup>33</sup>. These common factors, as summarised in Table 2.1, are: (1) client characteristics and social support, (2) therapist-client relationship, (3) client hopefulness, and (4) therapeutic technique.

**Table 2.1 Factors Which Are Common to the Effectiveness of All Therapeutic Interventions**

Name of Factor	% of Variance in Outcome Explained
Client Characteristics and Social Support	40
Therapist-Client Relationship	30
Client Hopefulness	15
Therapeutic Technique	15
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>

Sources: Compiled from Lambert, 1992; Miller, Duncan and Hubble, 1997, Chapter Two; Asay and Lambert, 1999.

25 Jacobson and Addis, 1993:86

26 Shadish, et al., 1995:348

27 Bray and Jouriles, 1995:463; Jacobson and Addis, 1993:86; Jacobson and Christensen, 1996

28 Asay and Lambert, 1999:24-27

29 Asay and Lambert, 1999

30 See Miller, Duncan and Hubble, 1997:1

31 Weinberg, 1995:45; see also Christensen and Heavey, 1999:172-173

32 Wampold et al., 1997:210

33 Lambert, 1992; Miller, Duncan and Hubble, 1997, Ch. 2; Asay and Lambert, 1999

## Clients Not Counsellors Determine Outcomes

The most important implication of this research for the practice of counselling is that clients – and not counsellors – are the main determinants of outcome effectiveness. The implication of this, in turn, is that interventions to support relationships must be tailored to the couple's definition of need and their goals in coming to counselling. It also implies cultivating a strong therapeutic relationship with the couple, building upon its existing strengths and resilience, and above all, restoring faith and hope in the couple's generic capacity to overcome its problems.

“

**“The paradox of love is that, at the very moment that the self searches out and finds another with whom it is possible to relate, it enhances and enriches itself.”**

”

HESTER MCFARLAND SOLOMON<sup>34</sup>, BRITISH JUNGIAN PSYCHOTHERAPIST AND WRITER.





“Until recently, the form and function of the male/female relationship, and marriage in particular, were carefully prescribed by family, society, and religion. ... For many of us today, however, intimate relationship has become the new wilderness that brings us face to face with all our gods and demons. It is calling us to free ourselves from old habits and blind spots, and to develop the full range of our powers, sensitivities, and depths as human beings – right in the middle of everyday life.”

JOHN WELWOOD<sup>35</sup>, SAN FRANCISCO-BASED PSYCHOTHERAPIST AND WRITER.

## Study Design

This study involved collecting information from clients, using self-completion questionnaires, at three points in time: (1) before counselling began (2) at the end of counselling and (3) six months after counselling. These questionnaires were completed at various stages between January 2000 and September 2002. We analysed the changes experienced by clients following counselling by making two sets of comparisons: first, we compared their pre-counselling with their end-of-counselling experiences; second, we compared their pre-counselling with their post-counselling experiences, this being six months after counselling ceased. We used Structural Equation Modelling to assess the separate influence of each variable on changes in marital quality and this gives us confidence that we have correctly identified the main factors which influenced change following counselling.

## Information Collected

The questionnaires collected a large amount of data on the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of clients including their age, sex, marital status, cohabitation, duration of relationship, number of children, occupation, employment status, hours worked, home ownership, subjective financial well-being and assessment of parent's marital relationship. We also collected information on the ways people resolve conflict and the prevalence of negative behaviours such as not listening, criticism, insulting, using force, drinking too much, and unfaithfulness. The sharing of housework and childcare as well as satisfaction with same, was also measured. Clients were asked about their reasons for seeking counselling and, at the end of counselling, they were also asked for their perceptions of the personal qualities of the counsellor. In order to assess the changes following counselling we used tried and tested instruments to measure the couple relationship and their stress levels.

## Measuring the Couple Relationship

We measured the quality of the couple relationship using the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) which was created nearly 30 years ago<sup>36</sup>. This scale distinguishes between four dimensions of the couple relationships: consensus,

satisfaction, cohesion and affection. The DAS is one of the most widely-used instruments for measuring the quality of a couple's relationship in outcome studies of marital therapy. By 1990, it is reported that over 1,000 studies have been undertaken using this scale, 90% of them with married couples<sup>37</sup>. The scale has been translated into several languages for use with various nationalities and cultural groups.

## Measuring Stress

We measured stress using the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ) - which was also created nearly 30 years ago<sup>38</sup>. The GHQ has been used in Ireland to measure the impact of unemployment on psychological distress<sup>39</sup>, as well as the impact of psychological distress on visits to GPs<sup>40</sup>. It has also been used to assess the impact of parenting programmes<sup>41</sup> and interventions to support vulnerable families<sup>42</sup>.

## ACCORD's Clients

The number of clients who participated in this study is summarised in Table 3.1.

**Table 3.1 Questionnaires Completed by ACCORD Clients, 2000-2002**

Pre-Counselling Questionnaires						
Gender	Couples		Individuals		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Men	1,025	50	355	25	1,380	40
Women	1,025	50	1,052	75	2,077	60
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,050</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>1,407</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>3,457</b>	<b>100</b>
End of Counselling Questionnaires						
Men	127	50	139	24	266	32
Women	127	50	446	76	573	68
<b>Total</b>	<b>254</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>585</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>839</b>	<b>100</b>
Post-Counselling Questionnaires						
Men	50	50	69	23	119	29
Women	50	50	236	77	286	71
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>305</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>405</b>	<b>100</b>

“There is a disturbing absence of informed debate about the many recent developments which affect marriage in our society in a most fundamental way.”

GARRET FITZGERALD,<sup>43</sup> FORMERLY MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND TAOISEACH, NOW JOURNALIST AND LECTURER.

37 Toulaitos, et al, 1990, p.221

38 Goldberg, 1972

39 Whelan, Hannan and Creighton, 1991; Hannan and O’Riain, 1993; Sweeney, 1998

40 Nolan, 1991

41 Mullin, Proudfoot and Glanville, 1990; Mullin, Quigley and Glanville, 1994; Mullin, Oulton and James, 1995; Johnson, Howell and Molloy, 1993

42 Moukaddem, Fitzgerald, and Barry, 1998; McKeown, Haase and Pratschke, 2001

43 Fitzgerald, 1999:92

## Chapter 4

## Socio-Economic Characteristics of Clients

“It is certainly the case that marriage is under pressure both as a relationship for life and as an institution which has a valued role in society in promoting continuity and stability in family life.”

THE COMMISSION ON THE FAMILY<sup>44</sup>, ESTABLISHED IN OCTOBER 1995,  
PUBLISHED ITS FINAL REPORT IN JULY 1998.

### Gender of Clients

The majority of ACCORD clients (60%) are women, which is consistent with the fact that women are more likely than men to initiate counselling.

### Demographic Characteristics

Half of ACCORD clients (49%) are aged between 30 and 40; the average age is 37 for women and 38 for men. They have been married for an average of 12.9 years, and eight out of ten are living with their partners; a tiny minority (3%) have been married before. Nearly all clients for whom we have information have children, many of them (77%) under the age of 11 years.

### Social Class

By and large, the social class characteristics of ACCORD clients are similar to the population in general, with some under-representation of both higher professionals and unskilled workers (see Table 4.1). Possibly due to their age, ACCORD clients have a higher level of participation in the labour force than the Irish population generally. Male clients work considerably longer hours than Irish men generally (an average of 47 hours, compared to the Irish average of 40.5 hours) while women clients work slightly less than Irish women generally (an average of 31 hours compared to the Irish average of 33 hours). Men are twice as likely to work unsocial hours as women – about 40% compared to 20% – in a pattern that is fairly similar to that in Ireland as a whole<sup>45</sup>. The fact that men are more likely than women to work full-time, to work longer hours, including unsocial hours, probably influences the distribution of work within the household since, as we shall see, women tend to do more housework and childcare than men<sup>46</sup>.

44 Commission on the Family, 1998:182

45 See McKeown, Ferguson and Rooney, 1998:132-138

46 See McKeown, 2001:4-5

**Table 4.1 Social Class Characteristics of ACCORD Clients, 2000-2002**

Social Class	Ireland*	ACCORD
Higher professional	22	9
Lower professional	12	29
Other non-manual	23	21
Skilled manual	19	23
Semi-skilled manual	13	14
Unskilled manual	11	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

\*Census of Population, 1996, Occupations, Volume 7.

## Dual-earner Households

The social class and employment characteristics of ACCORD clients indicates that a majority (61%) come from dual-earner households, higher than in Ireland generally (see Table 4.2). Most are well able to cope financially, with only 3% experiencing “extreme difficulty” in terms of making ends meet. The finding that very few ACCORD clients have financial difficulties contrasts with the larger picture in Ireland where 40% of poor households and 15% of non-poor households have “extreme difficulty” making ends meet<sup>47</sup>, a finding which simultaneously proves how enormously resilient many poor households are while also showing that people who are not poor also have difficulties coping financially.

**Table 4.2 Number of Income Earners in Household With Children**

Earners Per Household	Ireland*	ACCORD*
Two Earners	30	61
One Earner	48	33
No Earner	22	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

\*Labour Force Survey, 1996, Special Tabulations in McKeown, Ferguson and Rooney, 1998, p.21.

## Home Ownership

The pattern of home ownership among ACCORD clients is quite similar to the rest of Ireland. However, it may be symptomatic of the relationship difficulties experienced by ACCORD clients that less than half (47%) expect to be living in the same home in five years time.

## Perceptions of Parent’s Marriage

The majority of men (59%) and women (53%) coming to ACCORD perceived their parents as having a happy marriage although, 8% of men and 12% of women perceived their parents’ marriage as “extremely unhappy”; the proportion whose parents’ were either separated or divorced was the same for both men and women (13%). These findings are in line with previous studies in suggesting an association between a person’s marital satisfaction and their parents’ marital satisfaction although the association is not strong in this case and, as we shall see below, is not statistically significant.

## Overview

Overall, these findings suggest that clients who attended ACCORD for counselling between 2000 and 2002 are broadly representative of the Irish population on a range of socio-demographic variables. This suggests that ACCORD attracts a wider range of people to counselling than is normally the case in marital counselling; the typical profile of clients in counselling, according to one large US study, for example, suggested that they tend to be “predominantly middle class, with an average age of 32 years and 7.5 years of marriage; 70% of the couples had at least one child”<sup>48</sup>. The only striking absences in ACCORD’s client base seem to be individuals and couples living in disadvantaged circumstances and this may be due to the absence of ACCORD centres in some disadvantaged areas.

**“There is no single pattern of marital relations associated with happiness and fulfilment or with dissatisfaction and instability. To a large extent, success in marriage depends on the goodness of fit between the expectations, needs and behaviours of a husband and wife.”**

MAVIS HETHERINGTON AND JOHN KELLY<sup>49</sup>, US RESEARCHERS ON MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE.

## Relationship Characteristics of Clients

“Simply put, there is nothing, nothing in the world, that can take the place of one person intentionally listening or speaking to another. The act of conscious attending to another person ... can become the center of gravity of the work of love. It is very difficult. Almost nothing in our world supports it or even knows about it.”

JACOB NEEDLEMAN<sup>50</sup>, PROFESSOR OF PHILOSOPHY AT SAN FRANCISCO STATE UNIVERSITY.

### Marital Quality

We measured the marital quality of ACCORD clients using the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) and found that the extent of extreme marital unhappiness is quite considerable, particularly among women. About four out of ten women (37%) and two out of ten men (21%) are “very dissatisfied” with their relationship which implies that their marriage may be close to, or even beyond, breaking point (see Table 5.1). The greater distress experienced by women in unhappy relationships seems to be related to the greater importance of relationships in the self-concept of women and is also consistent with the finding that women are more likely than men to “mend or end”<sup>51</sup> marriages. A majority of men (56%) and women (49%) are “dissatisfied” with their relationship which seems to imply that they have made a decision to seek counselling before the marriage deteriorates any further. The key areas of greatest dissatisfaction within the relationship for both men and women are cohesion (a term denoting activities like having a stimulating chat or discussion, laughing together, calmly discussing something, working together on a project) and affection (a term referring to showing affection or having sex).

**Table 5.1 Scores on the Dyadic Adjustment Scale of ACCORD Couples, 2000-2002**

Sub-Scales	Very Dissatisfied (1)		Dissatisfied (2)		Satisfied (3)		Very Satisfied (4)	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
<b>Cohesion</b>	72	83	21	13	6	3	2	1
<b>Affection</b>	57	65	23	20	16	11	5	4
<b>Satisfaction</b>	28	49	52	40	15	8	5	3
<b>Consensus</b>	15	26	55	50	17	15	14	10
<b>Total</b>	21	37	56	49	20	12	3	2

(1) Very dissatisfied (DAS of 70 or under, corresponding to 46% or less of the maximum total DAS score of 151).

(2) Dissatisfied (DAS of 71-100, corresponding to 47% to 67% of the maximum total DAS score of 151).

(3) Satisfied (DAS of 101-120, corresponding to 68% to 79% of the maximum total DAS score of 151).

(4) Very satisfied (DAS of over 120, corresponding to 80% or more of the maximum total DAS score of 151).

Note that the contribution of each sub-scale to the total DAS score varies considerably: consensus (65 points, 43%), satisfaction (50 points, 33%), cohesion (24 points, 16%) and affection (12 points, 8%).

## Stress

We measured stress using the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ) and found that the vast majority of clients (85%) are stressed or very stressed, a finding which suggests that these unhappy marriages are considerably more stressful, at least at the point of presenting for counselling, than other life events such as unemployment or poverty (see Table 5.2).

**Table 5.2 Scores on the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ) in Selected Studies**

Category	Men Above GHQ	Women Above GHQ
	Threshold*	Threshold*
	%	%
(1) ACCORD counselling clients	80	89
(2) Pre-Marriage Course couples	7	13
(3) Persons in poverty * *		48
(4) Single	13.1	14.9
(5) Married	15.7	17.2
(6) Separated/divorced	22.5	44.3
(7) Widowed	15.5	29.6
(8) Employed and married	6.5	9.4
(9) Employed and single	4.5	7.2
(10) Unemployed and married	40.4	24.7
(11) Unemployed and single	29.8	30.9
(12) Spouse unemployed	12.3	27.6
(13) Self & spouse unemployed	43.4	33.3
(14) Parents in vulnerable families * *		65
<b>Total</b>	<b>15.1</b>	<b>19.0</b>

\* The GHQ threshold score is two which means that those above the threshold scored three or more.

\* \* The data is not broken down by gender.

Sources: (1) This Report. (2) McKeown, Haase and Pratschke, 2000, Table A5.3. (3) Callan, et al, 1999, p.49. (4) to (13) Whelan, Hannan and Creighton, 1991. (14) McKeown, Haase and Pratschke, 2001, Table 9.1.

## Styles of Resolving Conflict

We also measured how men and women deal with conflict by distinguishing between those with a 'validating' style (because they like to talk things out), a 'volatile' style (because they like to have a good row) and an 'avoidant' style (because they like to avoid arguments)<sup>52</sup>. This revealed that about half of all men – both in their own assessment and in the assessment of their partners – tend to avoid conflict; about a quarter of women also see themselves, and are seen by their partners, as avoidant; this is the one area where there is considerable agreement between men and women. There is also agreement that women are more likely to have a validating style than men; however although nearly six out of ten women (57%) see themselves as having a validating style, only four out of ten men (36%) experience them as such. Similarly, although about two in ten women (18%) see themselves as volatile, nearly twice as many men (38%) experience them as volatile. This pattern of findings is consistent with other studies which have documented a pattern of "demand-withdrawal" within unhappy marriages whereby women's demands for change in a relationship are met by their partner's withdrawal in the face of those demands<sup>53</sup>, possibly because her "demands" are experienced as a threat rather than an invitation and his "withdrawal" is experienced as a denial rather than a difficulty. There is a thin line between what is real and what is imagined in these – and indeed all – intimate relationships.

52 See Gottman, 1997; see also Markman, Stanley and Blumberg, 1994

53 Christensen, 1987; Heavey, Layne and Christensen, 1993; Krokoff, 1987; Margolin and Wampold, 1981; Notarius and Markman, 1989; Roberts and Krokoff, 1990

## Criticism, Insults and Not Listening

Turning to the prevalence of criticism, insults and not listening, we found that this occurred in around nine out of ten relationships and, in the majority of cases, tended to be mutual. For these behaviours, men and women see themselves differently from the way their partner sees them and this adds an additional layer of complexity in terms of understanding the dynamic of these relationships.

## Domestic Violence

We measured the prevalence of domestic violence by asking each client the following question, taken from a British Home Office study of domestic violence<sup>54</sup>: “People sometimes use force in a relationship – grabbing, pushing, shaking, hitting, kicking, etc. Has your partner ever used force on you for any reason? Have you ever used force on your partner for any reason?”. The results indicate that domestic violence occurred at least once in the lifetime of the relationship for more than half (53%) of all couples and was mutual in nearly half of these cases (46%), female-perpetrated only in three out of ten cases (30%) and male-perpetrated only in a quarter of cases (24%). The vast majority of women and men agree with their partner’s response to this question, suggesting that the self-reported prevalence is quite reliable. Within the past year, domestic violence occurred in more than a third (36%) of these relationships and, when it occurred, it was mutual in more than a third of cases (36%) while the proportion involving perpetration by women only (36%) was slightly higher than the proportion involving perpetration by men only (28%).

It is worth emphasising that these results do not tell us anything about the severity of the violence involved, the context, reasons or initiation of the violence or the extent of injuries resulting from it. Nevertheless, as far as they go, the results are consistent with the bigger picture of domestic violence as revealed by reliable prevalence studies in other countries. These studies, as summarised in Table 5.5, are based on large representative samples of men and women and, with one exception<sup>55</sup>, they show that men are at least as likely as women to be victims of domestic violence in the past year. The studies also tend to show that about half of all domestic violence is mutual with the remainder divided almost equally between male perpetration only and female perpetration only. That is true for physical and psychological violence, both minor and severe. However, where sexual violence or feeling in physical danger is measured, women are much more likely to be its victims. Two of the studies<sup>56</sup> show that women are more likely than men to be the victims of domestic violence when measured over the course of a lifetime but one study<sup>57</sup> shows the reverse. The biggest difference between men and women in the area of domestic violence seems to be that women end up more injured, both physically and psychologically, and are more likely to require and seek outside help. That is a very significant difference although it does not imply that men are unaffected by domestic violence and the general reluctance of men to seek outside help also needs to be taken into account.



54 Mirrlees-Black, 1999:103

55 Tjaden and Thoennes, 2000a, 2000b and 2000c

56 Tjaden and Thoennes, 2000a, 2000b and 2000c; Mirrlees-Black, 1999

57 Carrado, George, Loxam, Jones and Templar, 1996;

**Table 5.3 Prevalence of Total Physical Violence In Representative Samples of Men and Women**

Name of Study	% Reporting Violence in Last Year		
	F to M	M to F	Both*
1. US National Family Violence Survey, 1975/6 <sup>58</sup>	11.6	12.1	
2.1 US National Family Violence Re-Survey, 1985: Cohabiting <sup>59</sup>	9.3	7.2	18.1
2.2 US National Family Violence Re-Survey, 1985: Married <sup>60</sup>	4.2	3.4	7.1
3. US National Survey of Families & Households, 1987-88 <sup>61</sup>	3.4	2.9	
4. US National Youth Survey, 1992 <sup>62</sup>	37.7p	13.9p	48.5p
5. US National Violence Against Women Survey, 1995/96 <sup>63</sup>	0.6v	1.1v	
6. British MORI Survey, 1994 <sup>64</sup>	11.2v	4.5v	
7. British Crime Survey, 1996 <sup>65</sup>	4.2v	4.2v	
8. Canada Calgary Survey, 1981 <sup>66</sup>	13.2p	10.3p	14.3p
9. Canada, Alberta Survey 1987 <sup>67</sup>	12.5p	12.9p	
10. Canada, General Social Survey on Victimization, 1999 <sup>68</sup>	2.0v	2.0v	
11. Australia, International Social Science Survey 1996/97 <sup>69</sup>	5.7v	3.7v	
12. New Zealand, Dunedin Survey, 1972/73 <sup>70</sup>	34.1v	27.1v	

Studies based on men and women who are married, cohabiting, separated, divorced, widowed or remarried.

Definitions: F to M = Female to Male physical violence; M to F = Male to Female physical violence;

p = respondent is perpetrator; v = respondent is victim; \* = the term "both" refers to those respondents who reported being victim & perpetrator of domestic violence in all relationships in the past year.

## Drinking Too Much

Turning to the question of drinking too much, our findings suggest that twice as many men as women - about 38% of men compared to 21% of women - sometimes or often drink too much. These gender differences have been found in other studies<sup>71</sup> which also suggest that the association between marital unhappiness and excessive drinking is bi-directional with unhappy marriages leading to excessive drinking as well as *vice versa*. From a therapeutic perspective, a survey of US therapists found that alcoholism and extramarital affairs were among the most difficult problems to treat in couple therapy<sup>72</sup>.

## Unfaithfulness

Unfaithfulness is not only difficult to treat in therapy<sup>73</sup>, it also increases the likelihood of subsequent breakdown in the relationship<sup>74</sup>. Unfaithfulness is a feature in one third (31%) of all relationships coming to ACCORD, half of it caused by men only, a third by women only and the remainder involving both partners being unfaithful. Of its nature,

58 Straus, Gelles & Steinmetz, 1980

59 Straus & Gelles 1986; 1988; 1990; Straus, 1993; Stets & Straus, 1989; 1990a; 1990b

60 Straus & Gelles 1986; 1988; 1990; Straus, 1993; Stets & Straus, 1989; 1990a; 1990b

61 Brush, 1990

62 Morse, 1995

63 Tjaden and Thoennes, 2000a, 2000b and 2000c

64 Carrado, George, Loxam, Jones and Templar, 1996

65 Mirrlees-Black, 1999

66 Brinkerhoff & Lupri, 1988

67 Kwong, Bartholomew and Dutton, 1999

68 Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 2000

69 Headey, Scott and de Vaus, 1999; Heady, Funder, Scott, Kelley and Evans, 1996

70 Magdol, et al., 1997

71 Horwitz and White, 1991; Levenson, Carstensen and Gottman, 1993; O'Farrell, Hooley, Fals-Stewart and Cuter, 1998;

72 Whisman, Dixon and Johnson, 1995

73 Whisman, Dixon and Johnson, 1995

74 Glass and Wright, 1997

unfaithfulness is often kept secret but women are nearly twice as likely to know about their partner's unfaithfulness than vice versa: about 20% of men's acknowledged unfaithfulness is unknown to their partner compared 37% of women's acknowledged unfaithfulness which remains unknown to their partners.

## Sharing Housework and Childcare

On the issue of task-sharing in the home, we found that in about eight out of ten cases, women do more childcare (81%) and more housework (84%) than men. The fact that men are more likely than women to work full-time, to work longer hours, including unsocial hours, probably has some influence on the distribution of work within the household but beliefs and assumptions about gender roles are also likely to play a significant part. However, from the perspective of marital adjustment, the actual distribution of work in the home may be less important than the perceived fairness of that distribution by men and women. In view of this it is significant that half the couples (49%) are satisfied with the sharing of childcare but this falls to four in ten (39%) when it comes to the sharing of housework. Women are much more likely than men to be dissatisfied with their partner's sharing of housework and childcare. These findings contrast with other Irish studies which, while confirming that women tend to do more childcare and housework than men, found that the majority of women (70%) were satisfied with this arrangement<sup>75</sup>.

## Overview

These descriptive statistics throw a good deal of light on the type of relationship issues which are dealt with by ACCORD through counselling. These relationships are very stressful and unsatisfactory for those involved, involving a lack of affection and doing things together, and are associated with a good deal of mutual criticism, insulting, domestic violence and not wanting to hear what the other person has to say. A substantial proportion of women are dissatisfied with the way in which childcare and housework is shared. We cannot make any inferences from this data about what constitutes a satisfactory marriage, although the statistical analysis which we report in the next section will help to throw some light on the relative contribution of these different factors to marital unhappiness.

**“Just as it is customary for people to believe that pain and sadness should be avoided under all circumstances, they believe that love means the absence of any conflict. ... The reason for this lies in the fact that the ‘conflicts’ of most people are actually attempts to avoid the real conflicts. ... Real conflicts between two people, those which do not serve to cover up or project, but which are experienced on the deep level of inner reality to which they belong, are not destructive. They lead to clarification, they produce a catharsis from which both persons emerge with more knowledge and strength”.**

ERICH FROMM<sup>76</sup>, (1900-1980), US PSYCHOLOGIST AND SOCIAL PHILOSOPHER, BORN IN GERMANY.

75 Kiley, 1996

76 Fromm, 1956:95

## Chapter 6

## Factors Promoting Unhappiness in Marriage

“We are never so defenceless against suffering as when we love, never so helplessly unhappy as when we have lost our loved object or its love. ... For that reason the wise men of every age have warned us most emphatically against this way of life; but in spite of this it has not lost its attraction for a great number of people.”

SIGMUND FREUD<sup>77</sup>, (1856-1939), AUSTRIAN FOUNDER OF PSYCHOANALYSIS.

## Unhappiness in Marriage

It is not possible to discover the secret of happy marriages by studying unhappy couples. However, it is possible to discover more about the nature of unhappiness in marriage by looking more closely at those who came to ACCORD for counselling, in order to find out what makes some of them more unhappy than others. That is the purpose of this chapter.

## Four Factors Which Promote Marital Unhappiness

We examined why, among the men and women who come to ACCORD for counselling, some have more unhappy relationships than others. Using regression analysis we discovered that four sets of variables contribute substantially to unhappiness in marriage: (i) the partner's negative behaviours of criticism, insulting, not wanting to listen, and using force (ii) the partner's style of resolving conflict, particularly “volatile” and “avoidant” styles (iii) dissatisfaction with partner's task-sharing in the home, notably housework and childcare, and (iv) selected socio-demographic variables, particularly subjective financial well-being. We now summarise the results for each of these variables in more detail.

## Partners and Projection

Beginning with the partner's negative behaviours, it is striking that, although both men and women engage equally in these behaviours, it is perceptions of the partner's behaviour – rather than perceptions of one's own behaviour – which are most strongly associated with marital distress. In the language of counselling and psychotherapy, there seems to be some projection<sup>78</sup> onto partners who are blamed, implicitly or explicitly, for unhappiness in the marriage. It also suggests that a passionate, if somewhat negative, connection holds these couples together, as if confirming the truth in the observation that “the opposite of love is not hate but indifference. Love and hate both passionately bind the subject to the object”<sup>79</sup>.

77 Freud, S., 1985:270-1

78 The term projection is used in all schools of counselling and psychotherapy in a broadly consistent manner to refer to a psychological process by which “qualities, feelings, wishes or even objects, which the subject refuses to recognise or rejects in himself, are expelled from the self and located in another person or thing” (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1988:349)

79 Mann, 2002:45

## Partner's Negative Behaviours

The negative behaviours of criticism, insulting, not wanting to listen, and using force contribute more to unhappiness in marriage than any other variable and they affect men and women differently. For men, the experience of being criticised by one's partner has a particularly negative effect on marital quality— three times stronger than the impact on women – and reduces their marital adjustment by 9.8 DAS points compared to 3.3 points for women. Not being listened to by one's partner is the most negative influence on women's experience of the relationship and reduces their DAS score by 7.4 points compared to 6.3 points for men. Both of these variables combine to illustrate the pattern of “demand-withdrawal”<sup>80</sup> which is an established feature of distressed relationships between men and women where “demand” is experienced as criticism and attack while “withdrawal” is experienced as avoidance and denial. It is not difficult to see that this pattern may also be at the root of much of the mutual insulting which occurs between these couples and which has a somewhat more negative impact on women's sense of the relationship.

## Use of Force by Partner

An interesting finding is that the use of force by a partner decreases marital adjustment for women but not for men, even though the prevalence of domestic violence among these clients is similar for both men and women. It is also worth pointing out that domestic violence has a significantly lesser impact on marital adjustment for women than not being listened to, or being insulted by, one's partner. By the same reasoning, it is also much more hurtful for a man to be criticised by his partner than to have her use force against him.

## Partner's Style of Conflict Resolution

Marital quality is also affected by the partner's style of conflict resolution which we measured by distinguishing between those with a validating style (because they like to talk things out), those with a volatile style (because they like to have a good row) and those with an avoidant style (because they like to avoid arguments)<sup>81</sup>. This part of the analysis revealed that women are more adversely affected by styles of resolving conflict than men and are wholly influenced by how they perceive their partner in this regard. In other words, women's perception of how they resolve conflict has no influence on their marital adjustment which implies that they see their partner as the source of all conflict-resolution problems in the relationship. In a similar way, men who experience their partner as volatile also experience a decline in the quality of their relationship; however, men who regard themselves as having an avoidant approach to conflict resolution are also likely to experience a deterioration in marital quality which seems to imply an acknowledgement that their own approach to resolving conflicts is not in their best interests. Taken together, these findings have a consistency with other findings emerging from the study in showing that many men and women see and experience each other quite differently from the way they see and experience themselves; in this, as in all intimate relationships, the boundary between the real and the imagined is blurred.

## Dissatisfaction With Partner's Share in Housework and Childcare

Our analysis also found that dissatisfaction with the way one's partner shares housework and childcare is an important contributory factor in the marital distress of both men and women but, as other studies have also found<sup>82</sup>, is not related to the way in which housework and childcare is actually shared. In other words, dissatisfaction with sharing housework and childcare is one of the ways in which marital dissatisfaction gets expressed which, in turn, suggests that one's perception of fairness in the distribution of housework and childcare is shaped less by the actual distribution of those tasks and more by the quality of the marital relationship<sup>83</sup>. For women, their dissatisfaction with task-sharing is based entirely on how they perceive their partner whereas for men it is based on how they perceive both themselves and their partner. This finding is significant in suggesting that housework and childcare, despite their very practical nature, may be symbolic arenas through which the quality of the marital relationship finds expression; they are forms of “love labour”<sup>84</sup> because they act as a barometer of satisfaction in

80 Christensen, 1987; Heavey, Layne and Christensen, 1993; Krokoff, 1987; Margolin and Wampold, 1981; Notarius and Markman, 1989; Roberts and Krokoff, 1990

81 See Gottman, 1997; see also Markman, Stanley and Blumberg, 1994

82 Hetherington and Kelly, 2002:249-250

83 See Rabin, 1996

84 Lynch and McLaughlin, 1995

the love relationship between women and men. From a therapeutic perspective, this suggests that the love labour of childcare and housework may be a useful mirror for reflecting on the overall quality of the relationship between men and women and for linking disputes about this work to the quality of their love rather than the quality of their work or its distribution. Interestingly, another Irish study also found that while women tended to do more childcare and housework than men, it also found that the majority of women (70%) were satisfied with this arrangement<sup>85</sup>, possibly because, unlike the population of couples coming to ACCORD, they were more satisfied with their marital relationship.

## Socio-economic Variables

Socio-economic variables have a relatively weak influence on marital adjustment, especially in the case of women. The most important socio-economic influence on marital distress is subjective financial well-being which is associated with a decrease in DAS score of 3.1 units for men and 2.1 units for women. The greater importance of subjective financial well-being for men may be due to their more strongly internalised breadwinning role.

## Stress

The analysis found that stress has a rather slight effect on the marital adjustment and is mediated entirely through men's stress, a somewhat surprising finding given that the level of stress among women is higher than among men. We also found that men's excessive drinking has a slight negative impact on marital quality impact and was experienced by women only.

## Overview

These findings highlight the importance of the partner's negative behaviours and styles of conflict resolution, as well as dissatisfaction with the partner's sharing of housework and childcare, as the key influences associated with unhappiness in marriage. The greater direct impact of these variables compared to socio-economic variables suggests that counselling may indeed be an appropriate intervention for these couples. Our interpretation of these findings suggests that these relationships involve a good deal of projection, blaming and misunderstanding and are associated with a loss of warmth, affection and togetherness in the relationship. In view of this, a crucial role for counselling may be to restore a common ground of empathic understanding so that, for both men and women, the self and the partner can be seen and experienced in a more positive light, both cognitively and emotionally.

**“In spite of the fact that the roles, opportunities, and attainments of men and women have become more similar over the past thirty years, notable gender differences still remain in how husbands and wives ... function in close personal relationships. Men may not be from Mars and women from Venus; both have strong needs to be love and valued by another person. But the way they express closeness, communicate, and deal with conflicts often differs significantly.”**

MAVIS HETHERINGTON AND JOHN KELLY<sup>86</sup>, US RESEARCHERS ON MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE.

## Chapter 7

## Context for Seeking Counselling

“Zeus said: ‘I have a plan which will humble their pride; ... I will cut them in two’. ... Each of us when separated ... is always looking for his [or her] other half.”

PLATO<sup>87</sup>, (428-348 BC), GREEK PHILOSOPHER.

### Support Networks

As part of the context which leads people to counselling, we examined the informal supports which men and women used to discuss their relationship difficulties prior to coming for counselling. We found that a substantial minority of clients (20%) had not discussed their relationship problems with their partners, itself symptomatic of the communication difficulties in these relationships. We also found that women are more likely than men to discuss their relationship problems with others outside the relationship, which may be due to the fact that they have stronger support networks than men or that they experience more distress when their relationships are unsatisfactory. Similarly women – whether in the form of women friends or sisters – are more likely to be sources of support in relationship distress than men. For both women and men, the extended family in the form of parents, brothers and sisters, are an important source of support but so too are people at work. Outside of these informal supports, we found that a quarter of both men and women (25%) have been to counselling or psychotherapy before, either for personal or relationship problems.

### Thinking About Coming to Counselling

About half of all clients (54%) spent up to six months thinking about coming to counselling, the remainder (46%) taking longer. This suggests that while the majority of clients seemed to act relatively quickly to address relationship problems through counselling, a substantial minority take much longer, whether because the problems are not as intense, or because they only consider counselling when things become intolerable. Women spend longer than men thinking about coming for counselling.

### Initiating Counselling

Women are more likely than men to initiate counselling, in line with other research which shows that women are more likely than men to “mend or end marriages”<sup>88</sup>. Although both men and women emphasise certain goals of

87 Plato, 1951:10- 27

88 Kiecolt-Glaser and Newton, 2001:25

counselling as important – deciding on the future of the relationship (90%), understanding our relationship or my partner better (89%) – there are also significant differences.

## Client Goals in Counselling

Women give more importance to goals such as finding ways of coping (94%), feeling less troubled (92%), becoming aware of feelings (81%) and understanding myself better (81%) while men give more importance to goals such as improving (89%) and preserving (82%) the relationship. This pattern is consistent with the greater distress of women in unsatisfactory relationships and their need to reduce it while men are less distressed and seem more committed to their relationship. This pattern has also been found in surveys of counselling clients in Britain<sup>89</sup>.

## Perceptions of ACCORD

Six out of ten clients (60%) see ACCORD as a Catholic organisation but only a fifth of these (20%) were influenced by this in seeking its counselling services. This suggests that the majority of clients are primarily concerned with accessing counselling services irrespective of the denomination of the provider. ACCORD is an obvious choice for individuals and couples in distressed relationships since it is the main provider of such services in the country, and the only provider in some parts of the country.

**“We seem to expect of the other what we ourselves could not give. This is why even the very beginnings of honest self-knowledge bring, automatically, a certain degree of tolerance of others. In the moments when we honestly see how we ourselves are, we have the possibility of not demanding from another that which the other cannot give. All real self knowledge brings love and compassion with it.”**

JACOB NEEDLEMAN<sup>90</sup>, PROFESSOR OF PHILOSOPHY AT SAN FRANCISCO STATE UNIVERSITY.

“One of the reasons for the choice of name ACCORD is that it contained the Latin word for heart, cor. To call ACCORD a heart is, of course a metaphor, and a very apt one ... The heart is our hidden centre, beyond the grasp of reason or other people .... It is the place of encounter ... the place of covenant.”

DONAL MURRAY<sup>91</sup>, BISHOP OF LIMERICK.

### An Organisation of Volunteers

ACCORD is an all-Ireland voluntary organisation which is run under the direction of the Catholic Bishops of Ireland. It is the largest provider of counselling services to individuals and couples with relationship problems in the country. Its services are run by nearly 1,000 volunteers comprising marriage counsellors (39%), marriage education facilitators (41%), administration and voluntary support personnel (20%). Nearly three quarters of ACCORD's counsellors are women and nearly nine out of ten have been counselling for five years or more (see Tables 8.1 and 8.2).

Table 8.1 Composition of Counsellors in ACCORD, 1999

Category of Person	Men	Women	Total
Lay	93	267	360
Religious	7	2	9
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>269</b>	<b>369</b>
<b>Mean Age</b>	–	–	<b>51</b>

### Approach to Counselling

ACCORD's approach to counselling is summarised in its *Code of Ethics and Practice* as follows: “Counselling is done as part of the pastoral – as distinct from the teaching – ministry of the Church. Clients are accepted regardless of religious belief (or non-belief) or moral convictions or standards, or race or colour, or gender or sexual orientation, and as being unique and of worth and capable of self-determination and growth”. This approach to counselling is usually described, following the works of Carl Rogers, as “client-centred” and “non-directive”<sup>92</sup>. It is based on the

91 Murray, 2000

92 Rogers, 1961

philosophy that each person has an innate capacity to resolve his or her difficulties essentially because, at the core, every person has a trustworthy positive centre which is resourceful and capable of self-direction<sup>93</sup>. This means that the task of the counsellor is to help clients achieve their goals and overcome their difficulties, and this is best done in a therapeutic relationship where counsellors show clients unconditional positive regard, accurate empathic understanding and openness<sup>94</sup>. This also means that non-directive counselling is far from being directionless since the counsellor has a responsibility to be effective in terms of enabling the client to recognise alternatives to their present difficulties and seeing new opportunities for improving their life and relationships.

**Table 8.2 Length of Time Counsellors\* Have Been With ACCORD, 1999**

Up to 5 years	5-10 years	11-20 years	Over 20 years	Total
14%	39%	30%	17%	100%

\*Based on 349 counsellors for whom this information is available.

### Quality Control

The quality of ACCORD’s counselling services depends heavily on the selection of suitable volunteers, the provision of in-depth training as well as on-going support and supervision of counsellors. For this reason, ACCORD has developed extensive procedures and codes of practice to ensure that its services meet the highest standards of professional practice.

### The Key Question is ‘Does Counselling Help?’

The commitment of ACCORD and its counsellors to helping clients who have relationship problems is itself indicative of the huge stake which is involved in asking the question which is at the centre of this study, namely “does counselling help?”. Counsellors, no less than clients, deserve that this question be given careful consideration. It is that question which we now address directly.

**“Not only in love does giving mean receiving. The teacher is taught by his students, the actor is stimulated by his audience, the psychoanalyst is cured by his patient – provided they do not treat each other as objects, but are related to each other genuinely and productively.”**

ERICH FROMM<sup>95</sup>, (1900-1980), US PSYCHOLOGIST AND SOCIAL PHILOSOPHER, BORN IN GERMANY.

93 Ibid  
 94 Rogers, 1957  
 95 Fromm, 1956:24

## Chapter 9

## Changes Following Counselling



“Where intimate relations are concerned there is no passionate love without a tinge of hate, or hate without a thread of love. When love and hate are treated as mutually exclusive the tendency is to idealise the one and demonise the other.”

PAOLA VALERIO<sup>96</sup>, JUNGIAN ANALYST IN PRIVATE PRACTICE IN LONDON.

### Comparing Clients Before and After Counselling

We analysed the key changes experienced by clients following counselling by making two sets of comparisons: first we compared their pre-counselling with their end-of-counselling experiences; second we compared their pre-counselling with their post-counselling experiences six months after counselling ceased. Before making these comparisons, we established that the population of clients who completed the End of Counselling and Post-Counselling questionnaires were remarkably similar to those who completed the Pre-Counselling questionnaires in terms of age, social class, subjective financial well-being and length of relationship. This is a convenient and valuable result because it means that we can safely assume that any changes identified at the end of counselling are not attributable to differences in age, social class, subjective financial well-being or length of relationship between the different samples.

### Changes in Marital Quality

Against this background, we analysed changes in marital adjustment using the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) since this is our core measure of relationship quality. Our analysis revealed that there was a substantial and sustained improvement in the relationships of both men and women following counselling. This is indicated by the fact that more than a third of men and women (35%) experienced an improvement in their relationship at the end of counselling and this tended to improve even more in the six months following counselling (39%). Thus, in terms of changes in relationship quality, men and women tend to benefit similarly from counselling.

### How Many Are Satisfied with Their Marriage after Counselling?

A key question is whether there has been a clinically significant improvement in the sense that individuals and couples have moved from being dissatisfied to being satisfied with their relationship. The answer to this question indicates that about a third of men (32%) and a sixth of women (18%) moved from marital dissatisfaction to marital satisfaction following their experience of counselling. The substantial movement of men and women into more

satisfactory marital relationships following counselling in ACCORD is extremely encouraging even though it is less than that reported in other clinical studies of marital therapy<sup>97</sup>.

## Changes in Cohesion and Affection

The DAS, as we have seen, is made up of four sub-scales which measure consensus, satisfaction, cohesion and affection. Analysis of changes in these sub-scales revealed that the two areas in which men and women experienced greatest improvement in their relationship were cohesion and affection; “cohesion”, in the context of DAS, refers to things like having a stimulating chat or discussion, laughing together, calmly discussing something, working together on a project, while “affection” is measured by agreement on showing affection or having sex. A particularly noteworthy aspect of the results is that women experienced a greater improvement than men in both cohesion and affection and this improvement was stronger in the six months after counselling. These results suggest that men and women experienced an increased sense of warmth, togetherness and fun in their relationships in the period following counselling.

## Changes in Stress

Given that the vast majority of clients (85%) were stressed or very stressed when they first came for counselling, the changes in stress levels following counselling are both dramatic and positive. Among women, an improvement occurred for six out of ten at the end of counselling (59%), rising to two thirds six months later (66%). For men, more than half experienced an improvement in stress levels both at the end of counselling (55%) and six months later (53%). Although women entered the counselling process with much higher levels of stress than men, they also experienced greater improvements and, by six months after counselling, the gap in stress levels had almost disappeared. The scale of improvement in stress levels is significantly higher than that achieved by other family support interventions in Ireland<sup>98</sup>.

## Changes in Ways of Resolving Conflict

We measured ways of resolving conflict by distinguishing between individuals with a ‘validating’ style (because they like to talk things out), a ‘volatile’ style (because they like to have a good row) and an ‘avoidant’ style (because they like to avoid arguments)<sup>99</sup>. We found quite modest changes at the end of counselling and in the subsequent six months, with survey respondents becoming a little more validating and a little less volatile, possibly because this is a deeply ingrained pattern. However, given that women are more adversely affected by their partners’ conflict style than men, it is significant that women perceived their partners as having changed more than men.

## Changes in Negative Behaviours

We know that negative behaviours such as criticising, insulting and not listening are prevalent among most couples who come to ACCORD for counselling and that they have the most damaging effect on their relationships. Although these behaviours are authored more or less equally by men and women, it is the partner’s behaviour rather than one’s own which has the most damaging effect on marital quality; this, of course, is a psychological rather than a logical reality since everyone is a partner because each is both ‘self’ and ‘other’ within the relationship. Bearing this in mind, our analysis indicated that 20% to 25% of partners were seen to improve in terms of these negative behaviours. Women were experienced as improving more in the areas of being less critical and insulting while men were experienced as improving more in the areas of listening to their partner and drinking. The overall stability of these behaviours is indicated by the fact that the majority (around two thirds) of people did not change and this suggests that these habitual behaviours – and the way in which they are perceived – may not be amenable to quick change. It is also worth noting that changes observed in the partner’s behaviour are likely to be the outcome of

97 Alexander, Holtzworth-Munroe and Jameson, 1994:613; Jacobson and Addis, 1993:86

98 McKeown, Haase and Pratschke, 2001:64; Moukaddem, Fitzgerald and Barry, 1998

99 See Gottman, 1997; see also Markman, Stanley and Blumberg, 1994

changes in perception as well as changes in actual behaviour. In these relationships, where perception of a partner's behaviour is more important than perception of one's own behaviour – at least in terms of how it affects marital quality - it is inevitable that both perceptual as well as behavioural elements are involved in bringing about change as each becomes aware of the effects which their own negative behaviour is having on the other's marital quality. In this sense, changes in negative behaviour is both a cognitive as well as a behavioural process.

## Changes in Satisfaction with Sharing Housework and Childcare

In an earlier chapter we found that women do more childcare and more housework than men in about eight out of ten cases (see Chapter Five). The fact that men are more likely than women to work full-time and to work longer hours (including unsocial hours) probably has some influence on this, but beliefs and assumptions about gender roles are also likely to play a significant role (see Chapter Four). Our analysis revealed that there was a good deal of dissatisfaction with the sharing of housework and childcare, most of it expressed by women. In view of this, it is significant to find that there were substantial improvements in the level of satisfaction with the partner's sharing of childcare and housework, particularly among women, both at the end of counselling and in the six months after counselling. The improvements for women are on a similar scale to those experienced in their DAS scores. In the areas of both childcare and housework, men's satisfaction with their partners increased by about a quarter but women's increased by over a third. This finding is significant given that dissatisfaction with one's partner in sharing childcare and housework is related to the overall quality of the marital relationship more strongly than to the actual distribution of these tasks (see Chapter Six). In other words, housework and childcare, despite their very practical nature, seem to be symbolic arenas through which the quality of the marital relationship finds expression; they are forms of "love labour"<sup>100</sup> because they act as a barometer of satisfaction in the love relationship between women and men. From a therapeutic perspective, this suggests that the love labour of childcare and housework is a useful mirror for reflecting on the overall quality of the relationship between men and women and for linking disputes about this work to the quality of their love rather than the quality of their work or its distribution. Interestingly, another Irish study also found that while women tended to do more childcare and housework than men, it also found that the majority of women (70%) were satisfied with this arrangement<sup>101</sup>, possibly because, unlike the population of couples coming to ACCORD, they were more satisfied with their marital relationship.

## Number of Counselling Sessions

Clients who come to ACCORD can be seen as individuals or couples, depending on their needs and preferences. In addition, clients who present as a couple may have individual sessions as well as couple sessions. The results indicate that the "average couple" coming to ACCORD received 5.4 couple sessions as well as 1.6 individual sessions for the woman and one individual session for the man. This is equivalent to eight sessions in all. A noteworthy feature of the sessions offered by ACCORD is that some received over 50 couple sessions while others received as many as 25 individual sessions. Clients may also present as individuals and be offered individual sessions. When they present as individual clients, women receive an average of 5.3 sessions from ACCORD, while men receive an average of 6.3 sessions. As in the counselling of couples, there is significant variation in the number of sessions offered with some men and women receiving up to 50 individual sessions.

## Was Counselling Experienced as Beneficial?

We measured the clients' perceptions of counselling and found that about two thirds of both men and women experienced counselling as beneficial to themselves and to their children, while around six out of ten found it beneficial to their relationship. More than half of men thought it was beneficial to their partners but less than half of the women thought this, indicating that both men and women – but especially women – had a more negative appraisal of the benefits of counselling for their partners than for themselves. This confirms a pattern identified throughout the report, namely that people tend to see themselves differently from the way their partner sees and experiences them.

100 Lynch and McLaughlin, 1995

101 Kiley, 1996

## In What Areas Did Counselling Help?

The results show that the areas in which counselling was perceived to have “helped a lot” were broadly similar for men and women but there were slight differences; women experienced counselling as more helpful in terms of finding ways of coping and becoming aware of feelings, whereas men found it more helpful in terms of understanding, improving and preserving the relationship and understanding their partner. These differences are consistent with our earlier finding that women were more distressed than men on entering counselling and this might explain why finding ways of coping is important for women. Women also have a more negative appraisal of the relationship than men, which may account for men’s greater need to understand both their relationship and their partner during the counselling process. Whatever the reasons, it is clear that men and women enter counselling for slightly different reasons but also experience it as helpful for slightly different reasons. A similar study of counselling in the UK came up with a similar finding<sup>102</sup>.

## Client Perceptions of the Counsellor

We also measured client perceptions of counsellors in terms of the following qualities: attentive, responsive, warm, consistent, interested, helpful, accepting, affirming, positive, encouraging, understanding, genuine, good humoured, intelligent, broad-minded, sensitive, respectful and supportive. The results indicate that more than nine out of ten (94%) clients experienced their counsellor as good or very good on average. This is indicative of a strong “therapeutic alliance”<sup>103</sup> and suggests that counsellors show, and are experienced as showing, what Carl Rogers regarded as the three key elements in therapeutic relationships: unconditional positive regard, accurate empathic understanding and openness<sup>104</sup>.

## Overview

Overall, the results indicate that clients showed significant and sustained improvements in three areas of their lives following counselling. The first involved reductions in stress among five out of ten men and six out of ten women. The second involved improvements in the quality of marital relationships by about four out of ten men and women. The third involved improvements in satisfaction with partner’s share of housework and childcare among over a third of women and a quarter of men. Beyond this, there were also reductions in terms of criticising, insulting and not listening to one’s partner among about a fifth of men and women. These improvements occurred following an average of about eight counselling sessions per couple and in the context of a very positive experience of both the counsellor and the counselling process. Some of the changes – such as the reduction in stress – exceed those achieved by other types of intervention<sup>105</sup> while others – such as the improvement in marital quality – are lower than those reported in other studies<sup>106</sup>. Overall, however, the results are positive and indicate that significant and sustained improvements were experienced by more than a third of clients in the period following counselling with ACCORD. We now turn to an examination of how this improvement occurred.

**“Perhaps love is a world of strange spirits who at times take up their abode in men, subduing them to themselves, making them tools for the accomplishment of their inscrutable purposes.”**

PIOTR DEMIANOVICH OUSPENSKY<sup>107</sup>, (1878-1947), RUSSIAN MATHEMATICIAN AND PHILOSOPHER.

102 McCarthy, Walker & Kain, 1998:21

103 Miller, Duncan and Hubble, 1997:Ch.4; Sprenkle, Blow and Dickey, 1999; Howe, 1999

104 Rogers, 1957

105 McKeown, Haase and Pratschke, 2001:64; Moukaddem, Fitzgerald and Barry, 1998

106 Alexander, Holtzworth-Munroe and Jameson, 1994:613; Jacobson and Addis, 1993:86

107 Ouspensky, 1920:168

## How Do Marriages Change After Counselling?

“To love someone is to need them and to be dependent upon them, and therefore to hate them when they frustrate us, as they inevitably do, and to hate the fact of our dependence. ... Mature love has a fundamental respect for reality ... which means tolerating, even celebrating, the fact of difference, doubt and imperfection and above all else the reality of personal dependence and need.”

SUE GOTLIEB<sup>108</sup>, LONDON-BASED PSYCHOANALYTIC PSYCHOTHERAPIST.

### Our Analysis

We examined how the improvements in well-being following counselling in ACCORD were brought about, focusing on marital quality and stress levels. We outlined some of the typical pathways by which clients move towards greater well-being in their relationships, a finding which should prove useful in developing more effective strategies for counselling. Using Structural Equation Modelling we carried out a separate analysis of the influences associated with changes in marital quality (as measured by the Dyadic Adjustment Scale – DAS) and changes in stress levels (as measured by the General Health Questionnaire – GHQ) and compared clients at pre-counselling, end of counselling and six months after counselling (which we refer to as post-counselling). We will now summarise our findings on how counselling works, beginning with the factors which influence change in marital quality and proceeding then to the factors which influence change in stress levels.

### Main Factors Promoting Change

Our analysis found that the two main factors which promoted change in marital quality are perceptions of the partner’s negative behaviours and dissatisfaction with the partner’s sharing of housework and childcare; the other two factors are age and the personal qualities of the counsellor. Our analysis used perceptions of the partner rather than perceptions of oneself since, as revealed through the regression analysis in Chapter Six and through an inspection of correlation coefficients, these are more closely associated with marital quality and are therefore likely to offer a more robust explanation of changes in marital quality. The significance of this from a counselling perspective is that individuals in these relationships seem, either implicitly or explicitly, to attribute more blame to their partners than to themselves for their marital difficulties; conversely, each may be less aware of the consequences which their own, rather than their partner’s, behaviour is having on the relationship. We now briefly summarise how each of these factors exercise their influence on marital quality.

### Changes in Partner’s Negative Behaviours

As indicated above, we use the term negative behaviours to refer to criticism, insults and not listening because other research suggests that these behaviours, and the negative emotions associated with them, are key risk factors which

threaten marriages<sup>109</sup>. Our analysis found that these negative behaviours influenced marital quality prior to counselling and continued to constrain the possibility of change during counselling and during the six months following counselling. However, to the extent that there were improvements in perceptions of negative behaviours, marital quality also improved. These behaviours are highly inter-related, which means that they rarely occur in isolation; criticism and insulting usually go together and both are often associated with not wanting to listen to what the partner has to say. Change occurs when the partner's actual behaviour changes or when there is a change in how the partner's behaviour is perceived. This suggests that both cognitive and behavioural processes are at work and the balance of these processes is likely to vary from one relationship to another. This, in turn, suggests that the role of counselling may be to trigger and support these cognitive and behavioural processes.

## Changes in Satisfaction With Partner's Sharing of Housework and Childcare

We found that improvements in marital quality during counselling were influenced by the pre-existing level of satisfaction with the partner's sharing of childcare; thus, the more dissatisfied clients were with their partner's sharing of childcare at the beginning of counselling, the less scope there was for change in marital quality during counselling. Moreover, changes in marital quality were influenced by the extent to which satisfaction with the partner's share of housework and childcare increased over the course of counselling. As with changes in negative behaviours, therefore, changes in satisfaction with the partner's sharing of housework and childcare have the potential to boost the quality of the marital relationship. We also found a statistically significant correlation between dissatisfaction with partner's sharing of housework and childcare, on the one hand, and perceptions of the partner as criticising, insulting or not listening, on the other. This suggests that a two-way process is probably at work here: partners who are experienced as criticising, insulting or not listening are also judged negatively in terms of their contribution to housework and childcare; conversely, dissatisfaction with the partner's sharing of housework and childcare opens the door to negative appraisals of the partner's other behaviours. The systemic interlinking of negative behaviour and dissatisfaction with task-sharing suggests that change in one set of variables may encourage change in the other. From a counselling perspective, this suggests that the appropriate starting point will depend on the issues that are most pertinent to the individual client, since improvements in one or other of these areas will encourage improvements in marital quality.

## Influence of Subjective Financial Well-being

The experience of having financial difficulties had a negative effect on marital quality at pre-counselling, but financial difficulties do not influence subsequent processes of change.

## Role of the Counsellor

The personal qualities of the counsellor, such as being attentive, responsive, warm, consistent, interested, helpful, etc., had a small but statistically significant influence on the change in marital quality during counselling and six months after counselling. This result is consistent with other research which shows that therapeutic outcomes are strongly influenced by the therapeutic relationship. In particular, it is consistent with a growing number of studies which have found that client's ratings of the therapeutic alliance, rather than therapists' perceptions of that relationship, are more highly correlated with outcome<sup>110</sup>. By contrast, our analysis revealed that the counsellor's professional characteristics, notably the length of experience and the extent of additional training, had no statistically significant influence on the outcome of counselling, a finding which, while counter-intuitive, is not without precedent. For example, one review of a number of studies on the impact of training concluded that there was "little more than small differences in effectiveness between experienced, well-trained practitioners and less experienced non-professional therapists. ... Rather than professional training or experience, it looks as though differences in personal qualities make some therapists more helpful"<sup>111</sup>. It appears then that the effectiveness of counselling in ACCORD is more affected by the personal qualities of counsellors than by their professional training or experience. We also found that the gender of counsellors had no effect on outcomes.

109 Gottman, 1997; Markman, Stanley and Blumberg, 1994

110 Horvath and Luborsky, 1993; Orlinsky, Graw, and Parks, 1994

111 Tallman and Bohart, 1999:96-9; see also McLennan, 1999

## How Many Sessions Are Enough?

In global terms, we found that the number of counselling sessions had no influence on changes in marital quality. However, on closer inspection we found that mean DAS scores improved consistently for each group of clients who received up to eight counselling sessions while clients who received more than eight counselling sessions showed a much smaller improvement and clients who received 23-55 sessions showed almost no additional improvement for those additional sessions. This is an important result, because it suggests that, in the generality of cases coming to ACCORD, eight counselling sessions is a maximum upper limit on effectiveness; smaller numbers of sessions are also appropriate but, in the generality of cases, larger numbers of sessions are not. This result is broadly in line with other research<sup>112</sup>.

**Table 10.1 Number of Counselling Sessions and Associated Changes in DAS Scores in ACCORD, 2000-2002**

No. of Counselling Sessions	Changes in Mean DAS Scores	% of Clients in this Category (N=735)
1-2	3.0	19
3-4	5.7	19
5-6	8.7	23
7-8	7.9	13
9-10	1.3	8
11-16	10.0	13
17-22	8.9	3
23-55	6.0	2

## Factors Having No Influence in Changing Marriages

Our analysis also found that a number of variables had no statistical influence on marital quality after counselling, including gender, length of relationship, working hours, social class, drinking, unfaithfulness, use of force, and style of conflict resolution. Globally speaking, these results mean that counselling is an effective response to marital difficulties across a wide range of circumstances. It also means that these variables are not part of the engine which changes relationships towards greater marital satisfaction; as such, they should not be a major focus of attention in counselling for the generality of cases coming for counselling to ACCORD.

## Explaining Changes in Stress

We now turn to the results of our analysis of changes in stress as measured by the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ). Unlike marital quality, the symptoms of stress are often quite transitory and can change fairly easily and quickly, itself a reflection of the volatile nature of stress. As a result, our analysis could explain only 10% of the changes which occurred in stress levels. In the absence of any firm evidence to explain why the stress levels of clients fell so dramatically after coming to counselling, we suggest that the act of coming to counselling itself may be an important variable which reduces stress. We cannot prove this since we cannot compare those who went for counselling with those who did not. However there is considerable evidence to suggest that many interventions – therapeutic but also medical and even religious – have a beneficial effect simply by virtue of the client's belief that they are beneficial<sup>113</sup>. The reasons for this lie essentially in the hope of improvement which these "rituals" engender since people may come to counselling precisely when hopelessness takes hold and they feel there is nothing they

112 Kopta, Howard, Lowry, & Beutler, 1992; McCarthy, Walker & Kain, 1998

113 Snyder, Michael and Cheavens, 1999; Miller, Duncan and Hubble, 1997:Ch. 5

can do to improve their situation<sup>114</sup>. In other words, couples may seek help not when they develop problems but when they become demoralised with their own problem-solving abilities. As if to confirm this, it is remarkable how often people improve after they decide to seek help; indeed this may account for the fact – often cited by Hans Eysenck against the effectiveness of therapy – that clients can even improve simply by being on a waiting list!<sup>115</sup>. In short, the dramatic reductions in stress experienced by clients who came to ACCORD for counselling may have been strongly influenced by the restoration of hopefulness.

## Overview

The findings contained in this section draw attention to some of the typical pathways by which clients move towards greater well-being in their relationships, a finding which should prove useful in developing more effective strategies for counselling. By virtue of the statistical nature of the analysis, these results apply to the generality of cases coming to ACCORD. Naturally there are exceptions to the general patterns described here and this suggests that the practical implications of the results should be interpreted flexibly and sensitively. At the same time, the results offer a basis for developing counselling practices which are solidly evidence-based and this is a unique opportunity to facilitate the development of counselling services in Ireland.

**“Love distorts when partners do not assume their own psychological growth. ... The dark side of love is the desire to be relieved of the burden of being oneself.”**

SUSAN SCHWARTZ<sup>116</sup>, US JUNGIAN ANALYST AND LECTURER.

## Summary and Conclusion

“Almost everyone quarrels and almost everyone is disturbed by these quarrels. But two people living together and trying to love can help each other by a shared understanding of the nature of the emotions – both their overwhelming power when they are active and their overall secondary reality in the developing human being. ... There is a long and difficult discipline here, an art of intentionally relating to our emotions without, on the one hand seeking to suppress them, or on the other hand, indulging in their expression.”

JACOB NEEDLEMAN<sup>117</sup>, PROFESSOR OF PHILOSOPHY AT SAN FRANCISCO STATE UNIVERSITY.

### Our Answers to the Key Questions

This study has tried to answer three core questions which are central to the work of ACCORD and to other marriage and couple counselling services. The three questions are: (i) what contributes to unhappiness in marriage? (ii) does counselling help unhappy marriages? and, if so, (iii) how does counselling help unhappy marriages? In order to answer these questions, we undertook extensive research involving approximately 1,000 couples and 1,500 individuals who came to ACCORD for counselling between 2000 and 2002. We also reviewed an extensive body of research on these questions. Due to the statistical nature of our analysis, our answers apply to the generality of cases coming to ACCORD and, as such, need to be interpreted flexibly and sensitively. Beyond ACCORD, our answers may have relevance for understanding the type of difficulties which arise in different types of intimate relationships, both marital and non-marital, while also contributing to the development of more effective, evidence-based strategies for counselling couples with relationship difficulties. With this in mind, we now present our answers in simple, non-technical terms.

### What Contributes to Unhappiness in Marriage?

The road to unhappiness in marriage is generally paved with a series of negative behaviours and associated emotions involving criticism, insulting, not listening and sometimes using force. All unhappy couples engage in some of these behaviours and men and women engage in them equally. However, it is the partner's behaviour rather than one's own which is seen and experienced as the main source of distress in marriage. This, in itself, is an indication of how men and women who come for counselling feel powerless and hurt while apparently unaware of how their own behaviour is also affecting their partner. These couples seem passionately connected to each other as both cause and cure of their unhappiness, confirming the observation that “the opposite of love is not hate but indifference. Love and hate both passionately bind the subject to the object”<sup>118</sup>.

Men and women take different and complementary sides of the road on the way to unhappiness in marriage. For women, the main source of distress is that their partner does not listen while for men the distress comes from being criticised by their partner. This process can quickly escalate when the warmth, affection and togetherness in

<sup>117</sup> Needleman, 1996:50-52

<sup>118</sup> Mann, 2002:45

a relationship wane and women's need to talk things out is frustrated by men who experience this as yet another opportunity to be criticised. Gradually, a negative cycle takes shape where criticism is met with criticism, insult with insult and, in some instances, force with force. Negative perceptions of the partner spread to other areas of the relationship including dissatisfaction with the partner's share in housework and childcare, with women feeling particularly dissatisfied even if this is not connected to the actual distribution of these tasks. Both partners end up in a stalemate of distress and unhappiness, having lost faith and hope in their ability to resolve their difficulties as a couple. Since women typically end up more unhappy and distressed than men, they are more likely to "mend or end"<sup>119</sup> the relationship and it is often at this point that individuals and couples come to ACCORD, and similar services, for counselling.

## Does Counselling Help Unhappy Marriages?

Counselling helps people in unhappy marriages because about half of all clients in this study moved from being stressed to being stress-free. More significantly, counselling helped about four in ten clients to improve their relationship, with the result that a third of men and a fifth of women moved from being dissatisfied with their marriage to being satisfied; the slower movement of women towards a more satisfactory marriage is due mainly to the fact that women were much more dissatisfied than men at the start of counselling and therefore may take longer to reach a satisfactory relationship.

The fact that counselling works equally well for men and women is extremely encouraging and is probably a reflection on the quality of counselling offered by ACCORD through the creation of a safe empathic space where each hears, and is heard by, the other and where the counsellor regards both partners with respect and unconditional positive regard. It is encouraging also that counselling works equally well for all social classes. Counselling is slightly less effective with older people but its effectiveness is not affected by length of the relationship, excessive drinking, unfaithfulness, or the use of force. In other words, counselling seems to work in a generic way by restoring faith and hope in people's natural ability to solve their problems and can help them in widely different relationships and circumstances.

## How Does Counselling Help Unhappy Marriages?

Counselling helps by changing the partner's negative behaviours of criticising, insulting and not listening and by helping clients to become more satisfied with the partner's share in housework and childcare. Both of these sets of changes bring about an improvement in the relationship. In turn, each of these elements are linked so that a change in one can bring about change in the other: less criticism and insulting can lead to more listening and more satisfaction with the sharing of housework and childcare as the partner comes to be seen in a more positive light.

It may come as a relief to learn that changing one's partner is all that is involved in improving a marriage but, since everyone is a partner, it also involves changing one's self. These changes come about in two ways: changing the partner's actual behaviour and changing how the partner's behaviour is perceived. Both elements are important – although the relative importance of each may vary from one relationship to another – and both sets of changes seem to be triggered by the counselling process.

The precise way in which counselling triggers these changes seems to lie in the provision of a safe, accepting space where emotions generated in distressed relationships – including disappointment, loneliness, anger, sadness, hate, etc. – can be given expression and where, by hearing, and being heard by, the other, one sees and experiences the partner in a different light. It is possible that the setting and atmosphere of counselling itself may generate an attentiveness to how one relates to self and other, including attentiveness to the assumptions, expectations and judgements that influence how the relationship is experienced, which may lead one to a freer and more authentic sense of self and other.

The changes which follow from counselling can occur fairly quickly with 7-8 sessions being the optimum. The effectiveness of these sessions seems to be shaped more by the personal qualities of the counsellor – such as

warmth, attentiveness, helpfulness, etc. - rather than by their professional experience, additional training, or gender. It would also seem that the very act of going to counselling has a stress-reducing effect by virtue of restoring hope that maybe the relationship difficulties can be overcome if one seeks help.

One of the powerful images of counselling and psychotherapy is listening and some have even described listening as the centre of gravity of love itself: "Simply put, there is nothing, nothing in the world, that can take the place of one person intentionally listening or speaking to another. The act of conscious attending to another person ... can become the center of gravity of the work of love"<sup>120</sup>. Mindful listening and speaking can make it easier to see oneself and one's partner in a clearer and more honest light and to realise that each has strengths as well as weaknesses. This self-knowledge can help to ignite greater tolerance, compassion and love. Perhaps the space of counselling itself can model the possibilities of intimacy through the simple acts of attentive listening, speaking and looking. In this intimate space, hope can be restored, healing can begin and love can grow again.

**“A good marriage is that in which each appoints the other guardian of his [or her] solitude. ... Once the realization is accepted that even between the closest human beings infinite distances continue to exist, a wonderful living side by side can grow up if they succeed in loving the distance between them which makes it possible to see the other whole and against a wide sky!”**

RAINER MARIA RILKE<sup>121</sup>, (1875-1926), AUSTRIAN WRITER OF PROSE AND POETRY.

<sup>120</sup> Needleman, 1996:44

<sup>121</sup> Rilke, 1975:28

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