

PORIG Newsletter #6 / September 2008

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1- Introduction

Welcome to Relationship News, one vehicle for relationships in PORIG. As a result of the forum of Committee members at the November 2007 Conference, we want to encourage membership participation in creating new approaches to our mission:

“We should seek to be the commentators of choice on relationship issues in Oz:

- with focus on disconnectedness and failed relationships at various social levels
- and, depathologising interpersonal conflict with the aim of prevention (psycho-education)”

We solicit contributions roughly in these areas. Contributions could include suggestions for other areas of priority focus for PORIG. Please keep to 750 words max.

A sixth and seventh contributions appear below. they express the opinions of their authors only.

2 – Opinion

“What is a girl to do?”

By Kylie Murphy

Over one-third of Australian women who have ever been in a domestic relationship report experiencing violence within one or more of their relationships; and an even higher proportion report experiencing emotionally abusive and socially controlling behaviours (Mouzos & Makkai, 2004). As a result of serious relationship abuse, more than 20,000 women in Australia seek shelter in women's refuges and take out protection orders each year (Women's Services Network, 2000).

Longitudinal data suggests that psychological (i.e., emotional and social) abuse is a precursor to violence in both adolescent (e.g., O'Leary & Smith-Slep, 2003) and adult (e.g., O'Leary, Malone, Tyree, 1994) couples. Examples of early warning sign behaviours include domineering or

disregarding behaviour; denigrating and disparaging comments; attempts to gain the greater share of control during disagreements; jealous and emotionally needy behaviour; and retaliatory verbal aggression.

Though girls tend to be worse affected by relationship violence, girls do not enter romantic relationships as powerless victims. In recent studies of adolescent relationship abuse, high rates of bi-directional abuse have been documented (e.g., Foshee et al., 2004) and several studies have found that girls use violence with their partners more frequently than boys (see O’Keefe, 2005). These findings are concerning. Bi-directional violence in adolescent relationships (Gray & Foshee, 1997)—as it is in adult relationships (Temple, Weston, & Marshall, 2005)—is associated with more frequent violence, more severe injuries, and worse mental health outcomes for females than unreciprocated violence.

In Australia, male and female adolescents in all age groups report equally high rates of perpetration of, and exposure to, psychological and physical relationship abuse (Crime Research Centre & Donovan Research, 2001); but girls more frequently report feeling fear. Considering that patterns of victimisation established in adolescent relationships can carry through into later relationships (e.g., Smith, White, & Holland, 2003), preventing the victimisation of adolescent girls by their partners is imperative. But, given what is known about the ways in which abusive dynamics become established in relationships (see Murphy & Smith, in press), how is youth-targeted relationship abuse prevention (or YRAP) best tackled?

In Australia, a gender-based approach to YRAP predominates. This approach to preventing relationship abuse appears to be founded on theoretical literature pertaining to the prevention of sexual assault (e.g., Carmody, 2006). In Australia, relationship violence and sexual assault tend to be issues bundled closely together in governmental initiatives to reduce violence against women (see http://www.ofw.facs.gov.au/womens_safety_agenda/index.htm); even though sexual assault by partners is reportedly very rare (ABS, 2006; Carmody & Willis, 2006; Murray, 2006).

At the heart of the gender-based approach to YRAP is the belief that harmful outcomes for females in heterosexual relationships can be attributed to social constructions of gender. According to this view, cultural beliefs need to be addressed in order to curb violence against women (Dyson, Mitchell, Dalton, & Hillier, 2003; Gourlay, 1996; Mulroney, 2003; Smith & Welchans, 2000). In particular, there is concern that attitudes that implicitly condone male violence against women might be reinforced by prevention initiatives that place any responsibility for violence prevention upon girls (Fergus, 2006; Keel, 2005). Careful to avoid supporting “victim-blaming” attitudes, gender-based YRAP programs focus on helping boys to examine “the links between the social construction of masculinity and the use of violence” (Fergus, p. 26).

Ironically, this approach to preventing relationship violence tends to preclude interventions that might empower girls who are in, or who might enter, at-risk romantic relationships. That is, advice provided to girls tends to be limited to messages such as: expect respect, violence against women is unacceptable, and seek support (e.g., call a helpline) if you are a victim of abuse. The role of girls in reinforcing or resisting abusive patterns is skipped over.

But are girls really powerless to avoid relationship abuse? “Expect respect” but, if that doesn’t work, the next step is to “seek help”? The reality is that most girls are not so insipid! Girls entering into romantic relationships play a highly instrumental role (consciously or not) in determining the course of these relationships; but this assertion need not be viewed as being akin to “blaming” victims for any level of abuse they suffer.

It is time in Australia to recognise that relationship abuse is not just *violence against women*. Relationships are inherently dyadic. Let’s give girls some credit and bring them into their own picture! If we are serious about preventing *relationship* abuse, we need programs that help all young people in relationships to recognise warning signs of abuse but, also, that help them to learn responses that preclude accommodating, rewarding, reciprocating, and escalating such behaviours, from the outset of their earliest relationships. Such a gender-inclusive approach might empower young would-

be victims to take more conscious control over the course of their relationships. It would certainly represent a less patronising view of Australian girls. Most importantly, it might ultimately help to reduce the number of relationships in which women are so badly hurt.

Kylie Murphy (B.Ed., B.App.Sci.Hons) is a PhD candidate at RMIT University, Melbourne, developing a skill-based program to help young women stay safe in romantic relationships. For more information visit www.rmit.edu.au/psychology/safe-relationships

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3 – Opinion 2

Money, Money, Money

By Rana Jewell

Money is usually an incredibly private aspect of our lives. Anecdotally, Dr Silvia Camastral, a process-oriented psychotherapist, finds that generally clients will talk in great detail about sex before they will talk about money. There is a widely held belief among practitioners and couples that money problems are a primary factor in divorce. Yet during research for a Master of Counselling Thesis entitled *Couples with financial difference: can a saver and a spender live in harmony?* I found no empirical evidence to support these regular assertions. However I did discover substantial research to corroborate the finding that financial problems are stressors that affect marital quality and satisfaction. One of these later studies included a recommendation that financial counselling be provided with the view of improving a couple's quality of life, and not as divorce prevention. One study concluded that there seems to be not only a deficiency in training marriage and family therapists to deal with couples who experience financial conflicts, but also a general lack of academic attention to the whole matter of marital financial issues. So where do practitioners get adequate [financial] training for self-employment as well as offering this service to clients? Melbourne-based psychotherapist Yvette Wroby said "I think it is interesting that it [financial training] isn't part of counsellor or psychotherapy training, even though we are all doing this work to earn a living and make money."

Where do couples go to find professionals who are trained in both relationship and monetary matters? In Brisbane, there appear to be various agencies who offer crisis financial counselling as well as specialist gambling services to individuals and couples. Couples experiencing some stress from financial differences are not necessarily in crisis and often aren't addicted to gambling. Take Sally and Ben. Last week Ben hit the roof because Sally bought a new pair of shoes when she already had ten pairs in the cupboard—he didn't seem to understand that none of them matched her new outfit as well as this new pair. She was hurt and upset but did not want to rock the boat, so she told Ben that she would return the shoes. When tomorrow came Sally could not bear to part with them, so she said nothing more and hid them in the back of the cupboard. A few days later, Ben did not blink an eye when he went out and bought a slab of beer—in his thinking, this was an "essential" item. Sally could not see the difference between beer and shoes—if she was supposed to give up some shoes why shouldn't he give up some beer? She wondered to herself: "...but Ben seems so happy when he has a few drinks with his mates, maybe I shouldn't say anything to him?"

So what? Thesis findings that may be of interest to practitioners

Talking about money with your clients is always going to be sensitive, emotional and probably confronting for one or both of them, perhaps even for yourself. Tread carefully from the start. It is even more crucial at the outset to properly assess the nature and level of relationship distress, as well as the degree of friction concerning finances. In one of the studies I looked at for my thesis, at least one third of couples seeking financial counselling were experiencing relationship distress that measured above the average for couples entering marital therapy; and matching this, approximately one third of couples entering marital therapy reported financial difficulties exceeding the standard for couples specifically seeking financial counselling. So it may be that your clients aren't aware of the level of stress in certain areas of their relationship and need your help to clarify and agree on priorities for therapy. I recommend an initial interview with the couple combined with application of the MSI-R questionnaire¹ which is an excellent tool to assist with this essential assessment process.

Next, it is vital for practitioners to evaluate the current limit of their clinical skills, and to make appropriate referrals as needed, or better yet to work in partnership with other practitioners utilising your respective talents as required for the benefit of your client. For example you may specialise in relationship therapy while a colleague is dedicated to financial counselling. Or perhaps make use of the resources of some of the non-profit and charitable institutions for budgeting and financial management services to supplement your skills. The study mentioned above also emphasised the need to bear in mind gender differences, citing that while societal roles are changing, for many men there is still a great importance placed on financial competence and success, and this impacts on how they experience their marriage overall and how they interact within the marital relationship. At the same time, through my experience as a public accountant, I have observed many women who do not take financial responsibility for their lives and appear to be waiting for a partner to come along and rescue them in this area. In either of these scenarios, you would need to deal with the underlying issues as well.

To deal with the emotional rigour and confronting nature of the topic, your clients may well benefit from slipping into third person characters as and when needed because sharing about money can be so deep, personal and threatening that there may just be no other way to get past the barriers to their truth. Be sure to draw out personal, as well as joint, goals from couples as their individual desires are often markedly different.

Watch out for “ah hah” moments for the couple where they might start to see their respective differences and begin to put them into perspective—allow time and space to discuss and expand on these treasures. For example, their similarities may actually be a weakness for them if you have two savers or two spenders hooked up together; whereas if you have a saver and a spender living under the same roof, then accepting and harnessing their differences may actually become a strength for them as a couple.

Savers are not mean-spirited. They are wonderful people to have on your team if you want the bigger things of life, like a deposit for your home or an overseas holiday. They will quickly formulate a way to save for such things. Spenders are not irresponsible and if you are a saver, they are great people to have on your side. Why? Savers often experience high anxiety when they spend money

¹ Marital Satisfaction Inventory-Revised (MSI-R) (Snyder, 1997) a self-report multi-dimensional measure of marital interaction. Los Angeles: Western Psychological Services.

on whatever they perceive to be frivolous and this is where their spender partner can be of great support and assistance. For example, like the day my husband (spender) helped me (saver) to spend \$60 on two statues that I absolutely adored but could not bring myself to buy, even though I could well afford them. Now they have pride of place in my bathroom and I smile every day as I take in their beauty and am reminded of the loving support of my (spender) husband.

In this frenetic life we mostly lead where instant gratification is greatly revered, you probably would not ever consider suggesting a three-year programme to your client. So it is with some reservation that I suggest time and patience are probably the key elements required by both practitioner and client in order for the couple to reach real and lasting resolution of their financial differences. Perhaps a mixture of some close-together intense sessions followed by three month gaps, and then repeating this cycle over time may be appropriate.

Based upon her academic research, Rana Jewell PNA, Public Accountant, has released a book *Couples with Financial Difference: Can a Saver and a Spender Live in Harmony?* For more information or to order a copy of the book (or thesis) please visit www.beneaththesurface.com.au

4 - **Teleconference minutes – August 6th , 2008**

See attached PDF