

## **NEW ZEALANDERS' EXPERIENCES OF SUPPORTING COUPLE RELATIONSHIPS**

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### **Abstract**

This paper provides an overview of a qualitative study on access to information and support for sustaining couple relationships. Fifty people from diverse backgrounds and life experiences were interviewed for the research. Relationship support is an under-researched topic, particularly in New Zealand. The results discuss three central sources of support: family and friends (informal); people working in communities without primary roles or responsibilities for relationship support, such as general practitioners (semi-formal); and professionals focused specifically on relationship wellbeing (formal). The research also gives insights into the barriers to and facilitators for accessing support for couple relationships.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The quality of people's interpersonal relationships has a powerful impact on their individual wellbeing and the wellbeing of their family. Strong, well-functioning relationships are associated with resilience to stressful events, better physical and mental health, and greater productivity. Poor-quality relationships can affect children's development and wellbeing.

A key theme from the Families Commission's consultation workshops (in May 2007) with government and non-government organisations that have roles in supporting relationships was that there was a real lack of New Zealand research on how and why people access support for their couple relationships. This workshop finding created the momentum to conduct a qualitative study specifically focused on the barriers to and facilitators of access to information and support for couple relationships.

The research examined:

- how, why and when people access information and support (formal and informal) for their couple relationship
- where people seek information and support
- the barriers to and enablers of access to information and support
- people's experiences of being supported.

### **METHOD**

Fifty face-to-face interviews were carried out in February and March 2008 with people from diverse backgrounds and life experiences.<sup>1</sup> A snowballing approach was employed to recruit most participants because of the sensitivity of the subject matter and the need to engage hard-to-reach audiences. People working in community organisations, or people with strong networks with Māori, Pacific and same-sex communities were asked to select and recruit

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<sup>1</sup> The interviews and analysis were conducted by Litmus Ltd, a private research company specialising in social research.

participants according to agreed demographic criteria. A recruitment company recruited some participants where the snowballing method did not produce the required numbers. Potential participants were excluded if it were known that they had experienced physical, sexual or psychological abuse in their current relationship. Only one person of a couple was included in the sample, to avoid the risk that participants' disclosure of information might damage their relationships. The characteristics of the sample are detailed in Table 1.

**Table 1 Sample Characteristics**

Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Relationship type	Location
Women (25)	20–35 years (12)	Pākehā (22)	Heterosexual (37)	Urban (32)
Men (25)	36–50 years (26)	Māori (12)	Same-sex male (10)	Provincial, including rural (18)
	51–65 years (12)	Pacific (11) Asian (5)	Same-sex female (3)	

It is important to note that people with a history of violence in their current relationship were excluded from the study as their participation could have risked further violence within their couple relationship.<sup>2</sup>

The qualitative data were analysed to find patterns and themes. Three central kinds of support for relationships were identified. Each type of support is discussed below and supported by verbatim quotations from participant interviews to illuminate key points. Pseudonyms have been used to protect participant anonymity.

## RESULTS

### Informal Support from Family and Friends

It is difficult to find any clear definition in the research literature of “informal support” provided by family and friends (Manthei 2005, Robinson and Parker 2008). Research on supporting relationships is heavily focused on communication within couple relationships, rather than exploring the role of supporting the couple relationship played by external sources (Berscheid 1999, Felmlee et al. 1990, Milardo 1982).

It is of significant interest that most of the participants in this study preferred informal support from family and friends to that provided by professional services. Family and friends supported people in a wide variety of ways by: giving their opinion on whether an attitude towards or perception of the relationship was justified; just listening; providing practical advice and direction; or intervening directly in the relationship issue. Sometimes family and friends also provided resources (e.g. a room to sleep in when someone was leaving their partner).

Generally participants felt that informal support met their needs and relationship issues were resolved. Participants saw the process of providing and receiving support as particularly strengthening their relationships with family and friends.

<sup>2</sup> History and risk of family violence were determined through the recruitment process.

The informal support participants received from their friends became more effective as their friends grew older. In late adolescence and early adulthood (up to 25 years of age) the support received from friends mostly involved passive listening without providing advice and offering resources, such as a place to stay. This is apparent in Gloria's reflections on her first relationship:

"I was in a relationship that was going nowhere. I was 17 and my friends were around the same age. I would go to their houses and they were great. They would sit and listen – give me a listening ear and shoulder to cry on." (Female, Pākehā, 36–50 years, same-sex, urban)

As friendship networks grew older, people were more likely to intervene actively to help with relationship issues. This increase in active intervention could be as a result of the confidence that comes with age, more experience on which the individual can draw, and/or more physical and financial resources.

Participants' age, personality, gender, sexual orientation and ethnicity influenced whether they sought informal support, and from whom. The impact of gender and personality on support-seeking behaviour was pronounced. Female participants were more likely to verbalise experiences, while male participants were more likely to work through issues privately. A recent study of New Zealanders' relationships found that women, in particular, seek help from family and friends to resolve relationship difficulties (Robertson 2006).

Numerous barriers were identified to seeking support for relationship issues. Participants often did not seek support because they had a low awareness of the options for support, combined with a belief that relationship issues are insignificant or normal. This situation was a particular feature in female participants' accounts of their relationship experiences in adolescence and early adulthood (up to the age of 25 years).

In the quotation below, a participant reflects back on her experience of vulnerability and isolation in young adulthood:

"I constantly felt trapped and dispossessed. I was home with the baby and Daniel would be gone all weekend. Sometimes there was no food in the house. I did not realise that what I was going through was wrong; I did not realise that I was terribly depressed. I thought my problems were insignificant [compared] to other people's. Also I thought it would be a sign of weakness to tell people I wasn't coping. (Female, Māori, 36–50 years, heterosexual, provincial)

### Semi-formal Support

This study created a new category to describe support that was not previously defined in the research literature – semi-formal support. We defined semi-formal support as assistance provided by people working in communities without a primary role or responsibility for relationship support. The most commonly mentioned semi-formal supporters were: general practitioners (GPs), nurses (including Plunket and visiting nurses), church elders and ministers, school teachers, and budgeting service providers.

Although participants did not usually access semi-formal support with the specific intention of benefiting their couple relationship, this was often the result. Often the reason for seeking support (e.g. budgeting advice or acute illness) had placed stress, confusion or worry on the

relationship. Seeking semi-formal support could help to relieve pressure on the couple relationship and also create an environment where people could talk about relationship issues.

As an illustrative example, some participants spoke of their feelings of anxiety and isolation experienced after giving birth. The support received by their midwife or Plunket nurse not only encompassed practical advice about parenting, but also emotional support, which better equipped them to improve communication with their partner and reduce tensions in their couple relationship.

Participants most frequently mentioned their GP as a provider of semi-formal support. This finding is perhaps not surprising, as an established relationship between the provider and recipient of semi-formal support was a central factor facilitating access to it. Participants said that it was trust in the service provider that helped them to disclose stresses on their couple relationship. The main barriers to seeking semi-formal support were cost and transience, which affected people's ability to establish a trusting relationship over time with service providers.

### Formal Support

The study used the term "formal support" to describe assistance that was focused specifically on individual or relationship wellbeing. The professionals providing formal support were counsellors, psychotherapists, psychiatrists and psychologists. Just under half the participants interviewed (22) had accessed formal support: 10 as individuals and 12 as couples. Formal support was almost exclusively used by Pākehā and Māori heterosexual participants.

The research literature canvasses a number of barriers to accessing formal support. The barriers discussed are not specific to relationship support, but they are seen as relevant to the exploration of engagement with relationship support services by some researchers (e.g. Robinson and Parker 2008). Barriers found include financial costs (Halford 2000, Padgett et al. 1994), the belief that relationships are private, the time required to access support, the need for childcare, and the presence of family violence (Robinson and Parker 2008).

Negative attitudes to formal support were relatively common among the research participants and included scepticism towards formal support, a fear of negative reflections on the person seeking support and their whānau (see Robinson and Parker 2008 for a discussion of stigma), and particular negative views of counselling. Participants felt sceptical towards formal support because they did not understand why or how it could benefit them personally, or they did not trust the quality of the professionals providing it:

"Counselling has become an industry. There are so many of them out there. Many people can be good counsellors without labelling themselves a counsellor, can't they? A good counsellor is someone who is a good listener. Some people have the gift and others don't." (Male, Pākehā, 51–60 years, heterosexual, provincial)

Formal support was also avoided because people feared that they or their family might be judged as failures.

"You don't want people to know that you can't cope. To admit that is to admit that you are not a very good person or not good at what you are doing." (Female, Māori, 20–35 years, heterosexual, urban)

The majority of Asian and Pacific participants who had not accessed formal support regarded relationship counselling as culturally foreign. They highlighted their discomfort with seeking support outside of family relationships, as this could be seen as disloyal:

“A lot of people would feel embarrassed to go to someone else. A lot of mother-in-laws like to keep it within four walls and don't want anyone else knowing about their business, and that is how it is and always has been.” (Female, Asian, 36–50 years, heterosexual, urban)

Of interest was the very low awareness of how to access formal support demonstrated by participants. Some people said they would seek advice on how to find services through their local GP or Citizens Advice Bureau. However, many simply did not know where to begin to find a local relationship counselling service:

“If there was more information about what counsellors do and what happens at counselling, then even Islanders would go.” (Female, Pacific, 20–35 years, heterosexual, urban)

People with a below-median household income were unlikely to access formal support, and perceptions about cost emerged as a significant barrier. Participants spoke of how their financial circumstances affected their ability to access formal support, not just in terms of their ability to pay for it, but also their capacity to focus on and provide for anything other than their family's immediate physical needs.

The research also explored the factors that promoted or facilitated participants' access of formal support. Three key facilitating factors were identified through the research: demystifying support, the role of the support facilitator, and the experience of a crisis event.

Participants' scepticism towards formal support sometimes decreased after they became exposed to the possible benefits of therapeutic approaches to relationships. This could happen by simply viewing television talk shows such as Oprah and Dr Phil, or by encountering different viewpoints and experiences through their workplace. The most powerful influence for some participants was exposure to formal support for relationships through their tertiary studies. For these participants, onsite campus counselling was affordable and easily accessible.

The stories of the majority of participants who had accessed formal support included a “support facilitator.” The role of the support facilitator can be described as “a key individual who works proactively to influence an individual's decision to seek assistance.” Support facilitators had several defining characteristics, including being:

- credible in the eyes of the person needing support
- proactive in either referring a person to support or directly advocating them to access it
- perceptive of a person's need for support
- convinced of the benefits or need for formal support.

GPs, visiting nurses and Plunket nurses could all operate as pivotal support facilitators. Other examples included family members trained in counselling or psychotherapy, or family members who had previous positive experiences of formal support.

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This research challenges the view that informal support is usually a first step along a help-seeking pathway culminating in access to formal services. Participants in this study preferred the informal support for relationships provided by their family and friends, and found this support to be sufficient for their needs.

Most participants in the study turned to those they knew for support. However, it is not known how well equipped with knowledge and confidence those family members and friends felt when placed in the role of "relationship supporter." This research finding draws attention to the importance of not just educating and encouraging people who may face relationship problems to be aware of options for support and information, but also educating their family members and friends. Information about how to safely and effectively respond to relationship issues is needed to "help the helpers", and should be targeted to those who may find themselves in the role of supporter.

This research uncovered an area of relationship support happening widely in communities but not covered in the research literature to any real extent – semi-formal support. GPs, nurses, school teachers, church ministers and community elders were all found to be supporting couple relationships. This highlights the need for people in these roles to be equipped with knowledge and training in how to support couple relationships, including information about relationship issues and their impact, services, and web and print resources to which people can be referred.

There is much more to be learnt about people's experiences of formal support for relationship issues. Key areas for further research and discussion include focusing on why Pacific and Asian people are less likely to access formal support, how to improve awareness of formal support options, and how the relationship skills and knowledge of young people can be strengthened and developed.

Overall, these research findings should serve to stimulate debate and discussion about how to effectively support couple relationships in New Zealand.

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