

Marriage support services and divorce: a contradiction in terms?

JANET WALKER & PETER MCCARTHY

Newcastle Centre for Family Studies, University of Newcastle, Newcastle, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT *At a time when fewer people are getting married and more marriages are ending in divorce, there is renewed focus on the role of marriage counselling in England and Wales. Knowing how best to support marriages which are in trouble is a consistent dilemma for governments. New initiatives in the provision of information about the consequences of marriage breakdown and the services available to help, and the offer of a novel meeting with a marriage counsellor have been piloted across England and Wales. There is much to be learned from their evaluation about the kinds of support couples need and the varied ways in which relationship counselling can be beneficial before, during and after divorce. The research evidence indicates that marriage support services at the time of divorce can help some people to work on saving their marriage; offer a gateway into the counselling process; or enable people to come to terms with the end of a marriage and move forward to a new future. The article argues for a reduced emphasis on marriage saving as evidence of the success of counselling and increased emphasis on the improvement in the quality of spousal relationships irrespective of whether couples stay together.*

Introduction

Although fewer people in the UK are getting married than at any time in the past 40 years, of those who do, twice as many are divorcing (Family Policy Studies Centre, 2000). The increase in the number of people divorcing in England and Wales has been continuous since divorce became a matter of civil law in 1957, but in the second half of the twentieth century a shift towards an increasing concern with the quality of relationships (Giddens, 1992) was reflected in far-reaching reconstructions of family living arrangements resulting from lower marriage rates and higher divorce rates. These changes have given rise to concerns that “the social fabric of our country is unravelling” (Lord Moran, 1995), and have placed new emphasis on the role of marriage support services.

Over the past 50 years, expectations of marriage have indeed changed: now, the private companionate aspects of marriage are rated more highly than the functional

Correspondence to: Professor Janet Walker, Newcastle Centre for Family Studies, 18 Windsor Terrace, University of Newcastle, Newcastle Upon Tyne NE1 7RU, UK.

aspects of adequate income and good housing (Clulow, 1995). As the basis for marriage has shifted in Western society, it seems that the greater the emphasis that is placed on companionate values, the more marriage is likely to fail to live up to people's expectations. If personal fulfilment is not achieved, there are few legal, economic and social constraints to keep couples locked into unfulfilling marital unions (Walker, 1995). This does not necessarily suggest that couples today do not take marriage seriously, nor that they do not think long and hard before splitting up. Marriage, however, has become an intensely private institution, and, as Clulow has said, privatized marriage is the hardest kind to help since couples are reluctant to disclose their problems and others are reluctant to intrude (Clulow, 1995). If it is accepted that marriage is essentially a personal, private matter between two adults, a difficult dilemma emerges—how to deal with the public consequences when this private and intensely personal relationship is threatened with dissolution.

Despite the widespread changes in family living arrangements, there remains a strong belief that the nuclear family is essential to the raising of psychologically healthy children and that marriage provides the surest foundation for family life. Much of the anxiety about rising divorce rates has centred on the potentially detrimental impact of divorce on children, such that, over the past decade, there has been a growing sense of urgent need to manage the changes to ensure a level of continuity in family life. The Family Law Act of England and Wales 1996 (FLA) was conceived, in large part, as a response to this need. It is now a familiar argument that there exists a great deal of anxiety about what the role of law should be with regard to the transformations in family relations (Walker *et al.*, 2001). This is a debate in which the issue of divorce reform, and the FLA in particular, has been of central significance. [1] It is generally agreed that the law cannot create happy, stable marriages or sustain unhappy ones, but it is expected that it should create a framework and appropriate processes which buttress and support family relationships in a variety of ways. Change, in all aspects of everyday life, presents challenges. Policy makers respond to these by trying to create some sense of order and continuity. This inevitably means that certain sets of values are reinforced and promoted. Strengthening families in order to support parenting has become a goal of successive government policies in the UK, and successive reforms in family law here and elsewhere have emphasized the importance of parental responsibility.

Family policy agendas tend to focus on a number of key themes: strengthening marriage, minimizing the detrimental impact of divorce, supporting parents irrespective of marital status, and protecting family members from violence and abuse. Although family-oriented political action is constantly changing as a result of political formulation and changing constructions of family life, the present Labour government in the UK seems to want to strike a balance between intervention and unnecessary interference in the private realm of the family. This is not an easy task. As Morgan (1999) has pointed out, modern family life is characterized by flux and fluidity. While family law has sought to address this fluidity, policy-oriented accounts of modern family life often lack a sense of fluidity, tending instead to list trends. Policies then seek to influence these trends. Presented in this way, the 'facts' about changing family relationships provide the semblance of a unified topic which

is in danger of neglecting individual everyday experiences and understandings (Walker *et al.*, 2001). These tensions were evident throughout our recent evaluation of new provisions contained in the FLA, namely information meetings for people contemplating divorce; and the offer of a one-off meeting with a marriage counsellor. These interventions were piloted in many regions of England and Wales so that the best possible kinds of meetings could be developed before the Act was implemented. Much of our final evaluation report (Walker, 2001) focuses on the actual experiences and practices of adults who took advantage of these innovations, in order to extend understanding of the everyday strategies of people whose marriages were in serious trouble and for whom divorce was either a serious risk or an apparent inevitability.

In this paper, we draw on that research in order to address three key questions:

1. What kinds of support are people looking for when they face the possibility of their marriage ending in divorce?
2. In what ways can relationship counselling be beneficial before, during and after divorce?
3. What services and interventions do people value when their marriage is ending?

The legacy of the Family Law Act

Debates about divorce have, for centuries, aroused strong feelings about the place of marriage in society. The previous Lord Chancellor introduced the Family Law Bill (England and Wales) into the House of Lords by reaffirming his commitment and that of his government to marriage (Lord MacKay, 1995). He pointed out that consultations had revealed a need for greater emphasis on and support for marriage. There was much discussion about the supposed advantages of providing information which would direct people towards marriage counselling prior to an application for divorce being made. Suggestions in Parliament that people should have a compulsory meeting with a marriage counsellor were withdrawn in favour of an information meeting which would direct people to counselling and marriage support services, services which would either work towards saving the marriage or put a brake on the divorce process, slowing it down and enabling people to take stock. The government was persuaded that an information meeting could provide couples with the opportunity to take whatever steps they could to save the marriage, and that an opportunity to meet a marriage counsellor voluntarily would

strengthen the institution of marriage by providing parties with more time to reflect on the information they had received, and ... give those parties the opportunity to receive specialist assistance in the attempts to save their marriages. (Evans, 1996)

The offer of a meeting with a marriage counsellor became enshrined in the legislation, and this meeting, together with any further counselling, was to be free for

those people eligible for non-contributory legal aid. The provision of public funding for counselling services was clearly predicated on the understanding that

such services will be focused on marriage counselling and not on any other form of counselling that does not have the couple's possible reconciliation as a primary objective. (Streeter, 1996)

Our subsequent research confirmed that this rather narrow objective was unrealistic. Several MPs had expressed the view that counselling might not save a marriage but might take the hurt out of an extremely stressful situation or help people "to deal with the trauma that is the inevitable consequence of divorce" (Boateng, 1996) and so come to terms with the ending of the marriage better equipped to face the future. Counselling services were seen as an important element in the development of a more constructive approach to divorce. On 16 January 2001 the Lord Chancellor announced that he would be seeking the permission of Parliament to repeal Part II of the FLA. After over three years of extensive piloting and evaluation, the compulsory provision of information and the offer of a voluntary meeting with a marriage counsellor have been rejected and will not be implemented. There is, however, much that can be learned from the evaluation of these novel provisions about the kinds of support people want and value as they face the ending of their marriage.

From information meeting to counselling

Although many hours of parliamentary debate were devoted to the need for divorce legislation to do as much as possible to save marriages, no one expected that very many people would be turned back from the brink of divorce. That some couples would be, however, was sufficient justification for a distinct focus on providing information about and access to marriage support services.

Many of the 7863 people who attended an information meeting during the pilots had already gone some considerable way towards ending their marriage beforehand. More than half (55%) had already separated from their spouse, 34% had consulted a solicitor about divorce, and 16% had already begun divorce proceedings. Moreover, many had sought help in trying to save their marriages. Around one in five (21%) had been to marriage counselling within the previous year, and it was evident that many others had done so earlier than that.

Almost half (46%) of those who had been to counselling in the previous year were still living with their partner, but the marriage was not necessarily saved since they were considering divorce and felt the need to go to an information meeting. The provision of information had some impact on the potential for marriage counselling: 22% of people interviewed within six weeks of their attending an information meeting (3311) indicated that they were more likely to use marriage support services. We noted that counselling was more likely to be seen as an option by those people who had not yet separated. Those living at the same address were twice as likely as those living apart to have gone to counselling after the information meeting, and those who had not gone to counselling were likely to have thought

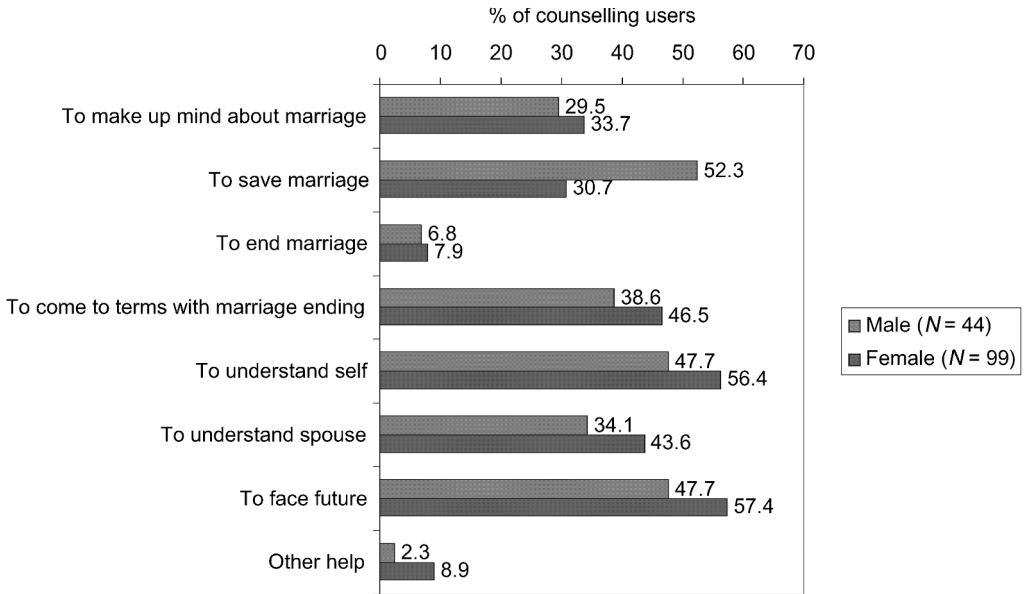


FIG. 1. Reasons attendees gave for going to counselling.

about going. In the two-year period following the receipt of information, 23% of those we interviewed had gone to marriage counselling. Relate was the agency used by the majority (86%), and it seems that Relate is the counselling service most have heard of (McCarthy, 2001a). This is not surprising given that it is the largest relationship counselling agency in the UK.

During our evaluation of information meetings we undertook a time-slice survey of samples of people who had attended an information meeting one year, 18 months and two years previously. Twenty-three percent of the 701 survey respondents had been to counselling, and of these 57% attended with their spouse while the rest attended alone. But why did these people choose to go to counselling? What were they hoping for? Around a third indicated that they had gone in the hope of saving their marriage. As Fig. 1 shows, men were more likely than women to have gone with that objective. Indeed, saving the marriage was the main reason men went to counselling, while women were more likely to have personal objectives such as obtaining help in understanding themselves and/or their spouse, or in facing the future after the ending of the marriage.

Of the 54 people who indicated that they had gone to counselling to save their marriage, only eight felt that they had been helped to achieve that objective, while 17 were in the process of divorce, 16 were already divorced and 13 were still uncertain about what they intended to do. Five people, however, told us that counselling had helped them to save their marriage, although they had not gone for that reason.

Although men were more likely than women to say they had gone to counselling in the hope of saving their marriage, they were less likely than women to have

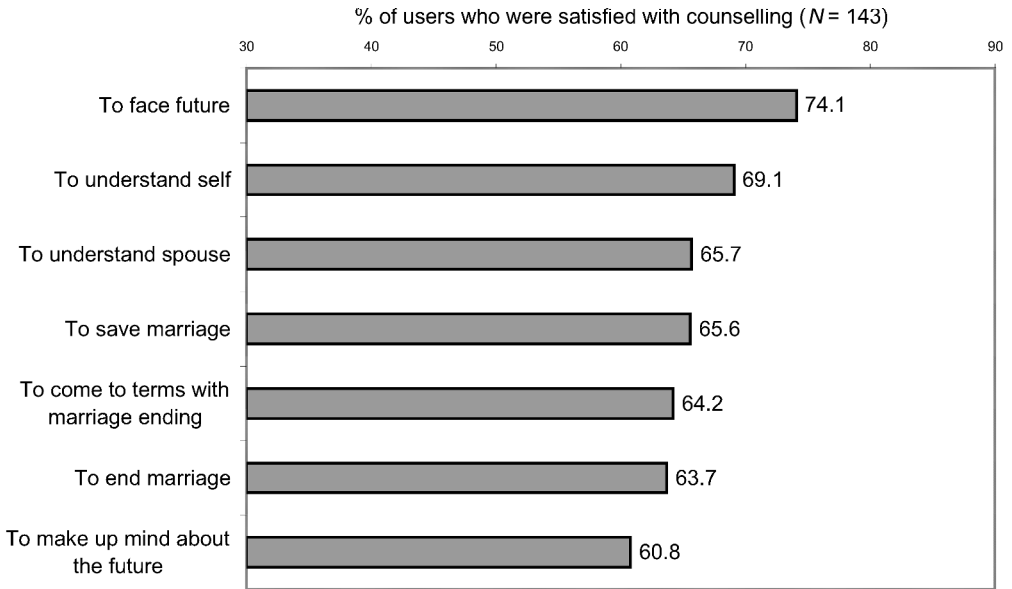


FIG. 2. Attendees' satisfaction with counselling in relation to the reasons they gave for using it.

achieved that objective. Of the 23 men who said they were hoping to save their marriage only two succeeded in doing so. Both of these had attended counselling with their wife, as had 12 of those people who failed to save their marriage. Thus, it seems that saving marriage is a difficult outcome to achieve when one party is seriously contemplating divorce, even when spouses attend together. We feel it is significant, however, that none of the people who went to counselling alone felt that counselling had helped them to save their marriage, while 17 per cent of those who went with a spouse felt this.

The most common reason people gave for not going to counselling—cited by 39% of the 542 people who did not go to counselling—related to the unwillingness of a spouse to participate. Thus, some people decided to attend a counselling appointment despite the fact that their spouse was not going with them, while others seemed to feel that counselling was not an option if their spouse was unwilling to attend. It was also apparent that many of those who did not go to counselling simply saw no need to, usually because they felt there was no prospect of reconciliation. Almost one in three of them had in fact tried counselling before, and saw no point in trying again. There was little evidence of people being desperate for counselling but unable to use it because of waiting lists, and only 12% indicated that the cost of counselling was a factor in their not using it.

Sixty-two percent of the 159 survey respondents who went to counselling indicated that they were satisfied with the service received (indeed, 29% said they were very satisfied), but 14% said they were dissatisfied and 7% were very dissatisfied. As Fig. 2 shows, satisfaction was most likely if attendees went to counselling with the objective of 'facing the future'.

Qualitative comments made by those who were dissatisfied tended to focus on negative feelings about counsellors or the perceived failure of counselling to provide those seeking it with the help they had hoped for. Nine people, including those who made the following remarks, felt that the approach of the counsellor had not been as directive as they had hoped:

The counsellor didn't offer any ideas, just listened to what we had to say. I went there for answers. (F) [2]

The counsellor in the end was a bit weedy; "leave it for a year and see how you both feel". That was enough to make me think hard about the reality, and that was not about 'wait and see'. (F)

I didn't feel that the counsellor aided the reconciliation process, either by suggesting positive action, or by objectively addressing the concerns of both parties. (M)

It would have been cheaper to talk with a friend, and the same results would have been achieved. The techniques employed by our counsellor could have been done by anyone with the relevant library book. (M)

I felt that counsellors were only able to prompt answers to 'how did it make you feel?' It wasn't enough. (F)

Others, including those who made the following remarks, felt that counselling had had a detrimental effect upon their relationship:

It opened up the dissatisfaction with marriage rather than the good things. (F)

It created more trauma and it did not help, or stop the hurting. (M)

Counselling helped me but did the opposite to my husband, as it opened his eyes to things that he didn't want to see. (F)

It must be remembered, however, that considerably more people were satisfied with the counselling they received than were dissatisfied.

Coming to terms with the ending of a marriage

It is clear that many of those who went to marriage counselling after an information meeting did so not to save their marriage but to be helped through the emotionally fraught process of ending it. Some of these may have preferred to remain married, but by then have felt that to be an unrealistic prospect. They would have learned from going to the information meeting, if they did not know already, that marriage counselling is not only concerned with saving marriage, and that individuals can go to counselling without a partner and receive personal support in coping with relationship change. As one attendee said:

In the meeting ... it wasn't just about marriage itself, it is about relationships ... It is like when people decide to give up smoking. (F)

It is evident that counselling helped some people to save their marriage, but the comments that were made about counselling illustrate that the benefits are not limited to saving marriages. Some people were clearly committed to getting divorced when they attended an information meeting, and no amount of persuasion would have changed their mind. On the other hand, others were hoping to prevent a divorce that their spouse was seeking. There were also considerable numbers of individuals, and couples, who did not know what they wanted. Although they recognized that their marital relationship was problematic, they simply did not know what to do about it. Counselling appeared to help some of them to make decisions, work through their problems and get on with their lives:

The particular lady that we saw was very good. She made it clear from the start that she was there to help, not necessarily to get us back together. She was there to get us through the muddle. It wasn't a sort of cure-all type of thing. She was just there to help, whatever the conclusion was. (F)

We went together for the first six weeks, then my husband decided not to keep going, but I am still going at the moment. It was really ... going to [counselling] that helped me to make my mind up that I wanted a divorce. (F)

Others, who wanted to end their relationship, gained the strength required to do so:

I found out he was having an affair, and I had to wait two months before I was seen. When I went to [counselling] I felt suicidal. I felt very low. [Counselling], for me, was tremendous. It got so that I needed the weekly meeting, and I'd store everything up for it. I went to see if we could salvage something. [It] made me stronger. It brought out so many things. I had never had the strength to make him leave, to kick him out. It made me so much more confident. I just learned so much. I look at my husband in a different light now, and the counselling told me what kind of relationship we had got. (F)

The woman who made the above comment was attempting reconciliation with her husband at the time we interviewed her, six months after she had attended an information meeting. She told us that she saw a period of separation as an essential element in putting the relationship back together. The evidence suggests, however, that reconciliation is difficult to achieve under these circumstances. Those who were not able to effect reconciliation tended to be satisfied with counselling if it helped them to come to terms with the fact that their marriage had ended:

I thought I would pursue [counselling] myself, not so much to save my marriage, but to get over the break-up of it. [Counselling] has helped me enormously. It makes you realize that you are not alone, and there is somebody there, who will be there to support you and help you through. It also helps you to come to terms with things a lot easier. (F)

Some people who attended counselling felt that being able to understand why the marriage went wrong was a necessary step to ensuring they would not repeat

mistakes in relationships they formed in the future. For them, the focus of counselling was on the future rather than on the preservation of an existing relationship:

It wasn't a very good experience. My expectations were somewhat different from what I got. I was expecting immediate help. The point at which we got [the counselling service] involved was probably too late to put things back together again, but I felt that it was still worth going for both our sakes, so if we do find new partners in the future we would know and understand a little bit of what went wrong. (M)

There is, then, clear evidence that counselling at the point of divorce can provide benefits that go beyond marriage saving.

The meeting with a marriage counsellor

The novel meeting with a marriage counsellor (MWMC) was enshrined in the legislation in order to provide an approach to marriage counselling that would be more closely integrated with the information meeting. It was thought that if people were given a direct invitation to talk to a marriage counsellor they might be more inclined to seek marriage support, and hence more likely to work on their marriage, and possibly save it. The marriage organizations in England and Wales funded through grant-in-aid by the Lord Chancellor's Department were invited to participate in the development of the provision. The meeting that was devised employed a solution-focused approach based on the belief that talking about the future is often more effective in providing rapid change than talking about the past. [3] Solution-focused approaches are client-led; look to the future; do not ignore the past; focus on health rather than on pathology; and seek to identify, address and plan desired changes. The meeting itself was not intended to be a counselling session. Rather, the objective was to achieve one of three particular outcomes:

1. The attendee would leave the meeting feeling that they had received enough information to work on their marriage.
2. The attendee would agree to go to marriage counselling with a view to saving the marriage.
3. An attendee who had been uncertain of whether to divorce would be enabled to make a firm decision.

During the information meeting pilots, 4811 people received an invitation to attend a MWMC, and 445 people took up the offer. They made an appointment through a centralized telephone booking service. One hundred and sixteen MWMCs involved the attendance of both spouses. Women were more than twice as likely as men to attend alone. The meeting itself was structured and the experienced marriage counsellors trained to deliver it were provided with a script.

In parliamentary debates hopes were expressed that attending a MWMC might increase the number of marriages saved. In reality, fewer than half (48%) of those

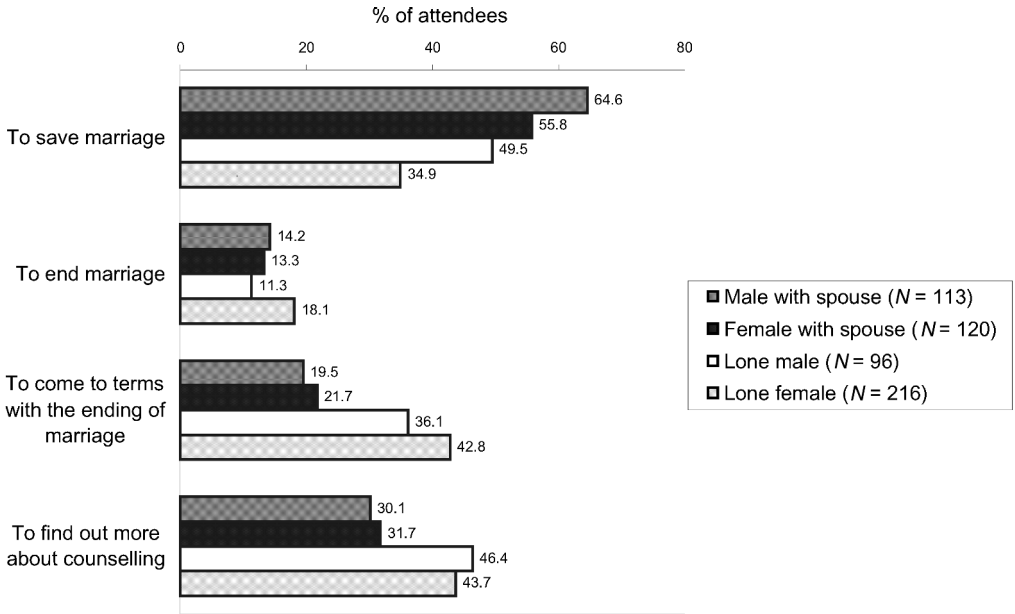


FIG. 3. Reasons attendees gave for going to a MWMC by gender and type of attendee.

who went to the MWMC went with the intention of getting help to save their marriage. Fifteen percent specifically wanted help in ending the marriage, and almost one in three (32%) were hoping to be helped to come to terms with the fact that their marriage was over. If we look at the reasons for attendance given by those who went with their spouse, and the reasons given by men and women who attended alone, we find that people who went to the MWMC with their spouse were more intent on saving their marriages than those who attended alone. There was also a gender difference. Men were more likely than women to want to save their marriage, whether attending alone or with their spouse. As Figure 3 shows, 18% of the women who attended alone were seeking help with regard to ending the marriage and 43% were hoping that counselling would help them to come to terms with the fact that their marriage was over. Just over a third of lone female attendees, as against half the lone males, were hoping for help in saving their marriage.

We received completed questionnaires from both partners relating to 108 meetings. In respect of 42 of these meetings, both spouses indicated that they wanted to save their marriage when they went to the meeting with a marriage counsellor, while in 22 cases neither party wanted to be helped in that way and in 44 cases one party wanted to save the marriage but the other did not. Thus, there were few meetings (42) attended by two people who were intent on saving their marriage, and the indications are that couple participation does not necessarily mean that marriage saving is on the agenda. If it is, it is more likely to be the objective of the husband than of the wife.

Perceived benefits of attendance

People who went to a MWMC experienced a range of emotions about it beforehand. Some indicated that they felt anxious since they did not know what to expect; others were hopeful that the meeting would provide the magic ingredient which would solve their problems:

I was unsure and anxious. Looking for someone to wave a magic wand and take my problems away. (F)

It was like going to the dentist. Pain before cure—not going to be easy. (M)

For some, the ‘magic’ seemed to work:

It has really helped us to communicate. I give my marriage a fifty-fifty chance of surviving now—instead of no chance before. (F)

I feel so glad that I went along. We are getting on so well together. I am so pleased with the way things have turned out. (F)

When the waving of the wand works, however, this does not necessarily mean a marriage is saved. One attendee told us:

It was absolutely 100 per cent perfect. I made an appointment with a solicitor two days later so we can start legal separation. (F)

On the other hand, some people who went to a MWMC were dissatisfied with the meeting because they felt under pressure to save their marriage when that was not what they wanted:

We were at cross-purposes. [The counsellor] was there to help put marriages back together again. I wanted to know how to get a divorce. The [counsellor] was very discreet and down to earth, but we were on different wavelengths. I wanted to split—she was trying to put people back together again. (M)

Almost half of those who attended a MWMC told us that they were uncertain of their feelings about the future of their marriage at the time, while a fifth felt certain that they wanted a divorce and a third indicated that they did not. As Table I indicates, the meeting did little to change the minds of those who had already decided they wanted to divorce. Indeed, the MWMC tended to confirm their decision. On the other hand, the meeting did offer some hope to those who did not want a divorce, 39% of whom felt divorce had become less likely because they had attended. In addition, 25% of those who were uncertain about their feelings felt divorce was less likely after the meeting. Overall, it seems that the MWMC tended to reduce the likelihood of divorce, although how things actually work out over time is a different issue. Saving marriages depends on both parties having the same agenda, while decisions not to divorce may be temporary.

Although 42% of MWMC attendees indicated that they did not know before they went to the meeting how counselling was conducted within the agency that provided the MWMC, most (98%) understood what was on offer after the meeting.

TABLE I. Impact of the meeting on attendees' likelihood of divorcing

Feelings about divorce before the meeting	Feelings about divorce after the meeting				Sign test
	More likely (%)	Less likely (%)	No change (%)	Total (100%)	
Wanted a divorce	22.6	5.7	71.7	106	$p = 0.002$
Did not want a divorce	5.6	38.5	55.9	179	$p < 0.001$
Uncertain	13.6	25.0	61.4	236	$p = 0.004$
All attendees	12.7	25.7	61.6	521	$p < 0.001$

In this sense, the MWMC seems to have been successful. Moreover, attendees were generally positive about the experience, and tended to make comments such as the following:

The [MWMC] was useful. It enabled me to say things to my ex-husband in a safe environment where he had to listen—which he would not have done on our own. We would not have gone for any counselling without this session. (F)

I found both the information meeting and the meeting with a marriage counsellor extremely helpful. Although my husband and I had already separated (his decision), I felt at a loss about how to deal with the situation I had found myself in and needed someone to point me in the right direction. I then went on to have several sessions with an excellent counsellor, who really set me on the road to recovery. (F)

Talking with someone who probed and asked the 'relevant' questions allowed me to open up more, and be honest with my husband and myself. The counsellor kept us on the right track without going on about the same things. (F)

More than half (58%) described the MWMC as very useful and 40% felt it had been fairly useful. Two-thirds indicated that they would definitely recommend it to other people, while 31% indicated that they might recommend it. Nevertheless, we received a number of negative comments. There was a feeling, for instance, that the meeting was over-structured, and insufficiently responsive to attendees' circumstances:

I didn't find the experience helpful. The ground rules were false and artificial. It needed more flexibility. (F)

The counsellor read from a prepared script and I felt the session was not worthwhile. (F)

We conducted telephone interviews with 226 people who had attended a MWMC within six weeks of their attending, and a further 14 who could not be contacted by

phone completed a postal questionnaire. Almost half the 240 people contacted indicated that they wished they had been able to attend a MWMC earlier than they did, while 30% felt they had gone at just the right time. Nevertheless, three-quarters said they were glad they had gone to the meeting. During the pilot, the MWMC was provided free of charge, but more than two-thirds (68%) of those we contacted afterwards indicated that they would have gone even if they had had to pay. The amount that they were willing to pay varied from £5 to £25, with a median suggested payment of £12. Of course, these people indicated a willingness to pay after they had experienced the meeting. There is no way of knowing whether they would have attended if they had known beforehand that they would be required to pay.

In terms of consumer satisfaction, the MWMC seems a distinct success. For instance, 85% of those whom we contacted after the meeting indicated that they were satisfied with the content of the meeting, and 76% indicated that they were glad they had gone. Almost half (45%) indicated that their relationship with their spouse had improved, while only 14% said it had deteriorated. One cannot be sure that such improvements were a result of attendance at the meeting, but the MWMC appeared an effective means of conveying appropriate information and of helping people who are uncertain how they feel about their marriage to make up their minds about whether to work on saving it or to seek a divorce.

Saving marriage

The comments attendees made shortly after attending a MWMC suggest general satisfaction, but the key policy questions are, what did people do as a result of the MWMC, and how many sought additional counselling help? We needed to ascertain why those who went on to counselling chose to do so, and what the results of their actions were. We examined these issues by way of a postal questionnaire sent a minimum of six months after attendance at the meeting to all those who had indicated that they would be willing to participate in further research. [4] We sent out 440 questionnaires and received 250 responses, a response rate of 57%. Of those who responded, 43% were already separated from their spouse when they went to the MWMC, while 26% described themselves as living separately in the same house and 31% said that they and their spouse were living together as husband and wife. Roughly one in four of this latter group indicated that they nevertheless expected their marriage to end.

Not surprisingly, those who were living together as husband and wife when they attended the MWMC were more likely than those who had already separated still to be married at the time of the survey; 58% of them were still married, as against 38% of those who had been living separately in the same house and 23% of those who had been living apart at the time they had attended a MWMC. In all, 97 of the 250 respondents described themselves as still married, while 105 said they were separated from their spouse, and 48 were divorced. It is important to note that just 14% of those who were still married described themselves as very happy, while 39% were fairly happy and 47% unhappy. Just 18% of the MWMC attendees told us that

they were still married and reasonably happy at the time of the survey. More than a third (39%) of those who were apparently still married said that they were intending to divorce, while others indicated that they had reasons for delaying divorce, the usual reason being that they were waiting until children were older.

As might be expected, saving marriage was a more likely outcome for those who attended the MWMC with their spouse than for those who attended alone. Almost a third (32%) of those who had attended the MWMC with their spouse indicated that they were happily married at the time of the follow-up survey, as against just 12% of those who had attended the MWMC alone. This may be because people who attended meetings with their partner were at less advanced states of relationship breakdown. Nevertheless, the findings confirm that marriage saving is an unlikely prospect when people attend meetings alone, although much depends on their feelings about divorce at the time. As far as those who were convinced at the time that they wanted a divorce were concerned, it made no difference whether they attended alone or went with their partner, and divorcing was what they inevitably did.

Encouraging counselling

Forty-two percent of respondents contacted a counselling agency to arrange a counselling appointment after attending a MWMC. Their feelings about divorce at the time of the MWMC did not seem to affect their decision as to whether to apply for counselling. Those who wanted a divorce were as likely to apply for a counselling appointment as those who did not or those who were uncertain about what they wanted. Most (62%) of those who opted for counselling (62%) attended alone, and half of these people indicated that they would rather have attended with their spouse.

We asked those people who attended a counselling appointment why they had decided to go to counselling. Just under half (47%) indicated that they were hoping to improve their relationship with their spouse, but 28% were hoping for help in ending their relationship. The most common reason for going to counselling was to get help in understanding the relationship, while more than half of those who went to a counselling appointment were hoping to understand themselves better. Forty-four percent were hoping for help in coming to terms with the way their relationship had changed.

As Figure 4 shows, the most common reason for going to counselling among those who indicated that they wanted a divorce when attending the MWMC was to enhance self-understanding, while more than half were looking for help in bringing their relationship to an end. Those who did not want a divorce tended to be seeking help with improving their relationship. It is noteworthy that 35% of those who wanted a divorce were hoping for a better relationship with their current spouse. A third of those who had initially indicated that they were uncertain about whether they wanted a divorce had gone to counselling hoping for help in ending their relationship, but among the uncertain group the most common reason for going was to enhance self-understanding.

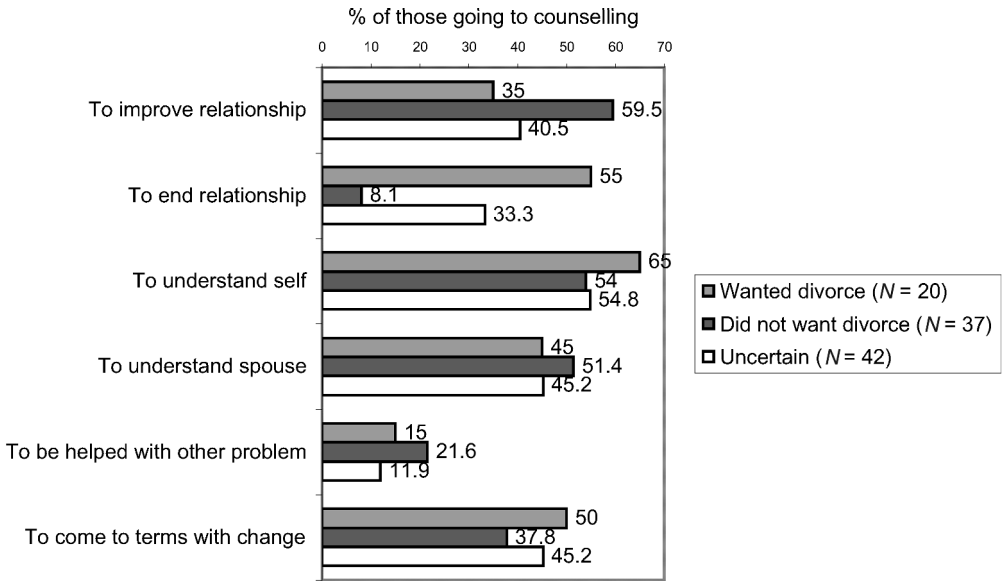
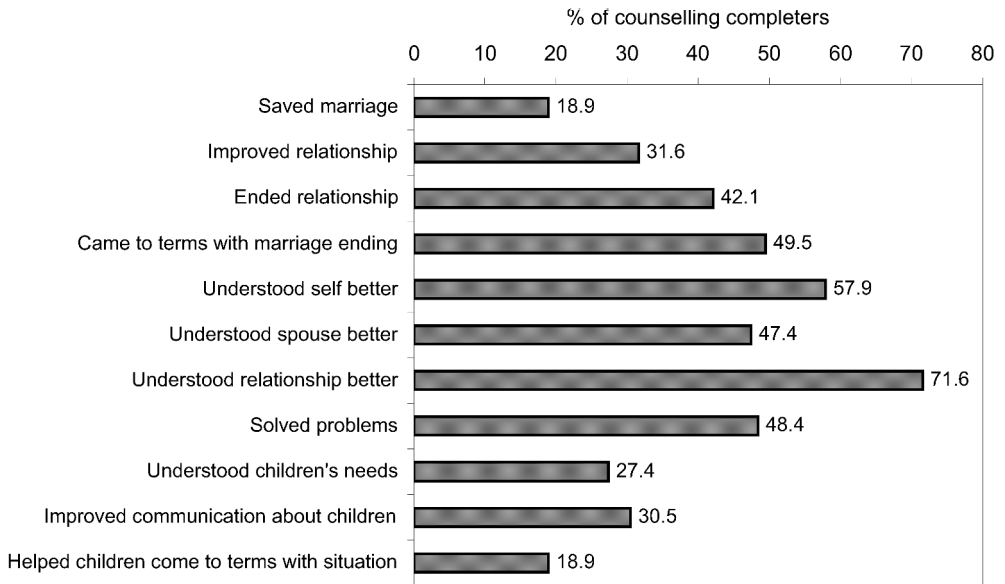


FIG. 4. Reasons MWMC attendees gave for going to counselling.

Almost one in four of those who went to counselling attended only one session. On the other hand, one in five attended 10 or more sessions; the median number of sessions was five. More than half (53%) went to all their counselling sessions alone, while 35% went to all or most of the sessions with their spouse and 12% were accompanied by their spouse at some of the sessions.

As Figure 5 shows, enhanced understanding, particularly of the relationship, was the most common outcome of counselling. Almost three-quarters of those who completed counselling told us that it had helped them to understand the relationship, while 58% felt they had enhanced their self-understanding and 48% had a better understanding of their spouse. Increased understanding seldom led to reconciliation, however, and just 19% of those who attended counselling indicated that it had helped them to save their marriage. Indeed, out of the 250 MWMC attendees who responded to our follow-up survey, only 18 (7%) indicated that they had gone on to marriage counselling and consequently saved their marriage.

Forty-two percent of those who attended counselling with their spouse told us that it had helped to save their marriage, as against only 5% of those who attended alone. In addition, those who attended with a spouse were more likely to feel helped in understanding the relationship. Eighty-seven percent of those who attended counselling with their spouse, as against 42% of those who attended alone, suggested that they had developed a better understanding of their relationship. Such findings emphasize the importance of partners attending together if the objectives include improving the couple relationship.

FIG. 5. Counselling outcomes ($N = 95$).

Learning from the MWMC pilot

The MWMC was seen as a kind of half-way house between receiving information and going to marriage counselling. Almost four in 10 of the 561 people who went to a MWMC indicated that they would have been unlikely to pursue the traditional route into counselling. Although only a small percentage of people who received an invitation to attend a MWMC took up the offer, the meeting seemed to work in terms of helping people to address their problems and make critical decisions. The first meeting between a client and a counsellor is often crucial, and agencies have long struggled to find the appropriate way of conducting it. A recent study of Relate counselling, for instance, concluded that clients might find a meeting that focused on problem solving of more value than either having to undergo an assessment meeting or being plunged straight into counselling that they then might not wish to continue (McCarthy *et al.*, 1998). Thirty-eight percent of the clients involved in that study did not go beyond an initial interview, and many of these gained little from their experience of using the counselling service. The MWMC pilots, however, provided encouraging evidence that a solution-focused session can be a useful prelude to counselling, helping people to decide whether it is appropriate for them and, if they do go to counselling, helping them to be clear about what they hope to achieve.

What comes through very clearly from the accounts of those people who went to the MWMC is the sheer complexity of people's lives and the complex decision-making processes that people work through when they recognize that their marriage is at an end (McMullen & McCarthy, 2001). For some, the one-off

meeting was enough to enable them to be proactive in repairing their relationships without the need for further counselling. For others, it offered a gateway to the counselling process, dispelled myths about counselling and helped them view counselling as a positive intervention, even though they might not have chosen to use it at that time. More research is needed to establish whether the solution-focused approach of the MWMC provides a more effective alternative to conventional approaches to counselling.

We have argued that there is an urgent need to disentangle the concepts of marriage support, marriage counselling and marriage saving (McCarthy, 2001b). The trend towards broadening the remit of marriage counselling from marriage saving to personal problem solving has shifted the focus on the 'we' towards a focus on the 'me'. Marriage and relationship counselling are marketed and used as a means of ending relationships as well as of saving them, and helping people to cope with the difficulties associated with withdrawing from problematic and painful relationships is a worthy objective. It may be more helpful to shift the thinking about relationship support from a focus solely on saving the relationship to a focus on improving the quality of that relationship irrespective of whether the parties continue to live together. This is particularly germane to the objective of supporting parents in their continued cooperation with each other after divorce. Responsible parenting post-divorce is demanding, and if counselling support can assist people in the process of ending a marriage (or cohabitation) it can clearly help them to get on with their lives and focus on important issues, such as parenting. We note that, although such support is available to the adults concerned, some of those taking part in our study expressed concerns about the lack of a similar provision for children. Some parents felt that schools might have an important role to play:

My 15-year-old daughter is the worst affected, and if she didn't have a good group of school friends I would be very concerned. She will not talk to them, as she is ashamed—I think—and embarrassed, but she was relieved to talk to a boy about parental difficulties recently. My 13-year-old lad is more open and seems to cope well. If there was something in school, where the kids with separated, divorced parents could actually talk to each other, share their experiences and even have a laugh, it would bring such relief for them. I remember 40 years ago having the same problem. Anything in school would be very tricky to handle, but what a pay-off if it happened for all those children feeling so alone and so torn. (non-resident father)

I have talked to my children's headmaster to see if an agony-aunt type of letter can be introduced in the school for children to talk out any problems. He says that this is far too complicated. Lots of children are going through all these upsets and worry but have not got anyone outside of the family to talk to. They tend to think that they are all alone and that it has not happened to other children. (resident mother)

The client-centred model increasingly evident in the work of the main marriage

support agencies has arguably led to marriage saving becoming less central to their activities, although support for the institution of marriage remains a central tenet. While government backing for marriage support agencies is historically connected with the marriage-saving agenda, a recent government report describes counselling as an “activity aimed at helping people to establish and maintain successful relationships with their partners” (Hart, 1999). There are suggestions that the major benefits of counselling relate to the individual well-being of spouses, and that counsellors have become increasingly neutral in terms of the value placed on preserving marital commitment. There is a sense in which the emphasis on marriage saving in the FLA was out of step with the current philosophy and practice of marriage support agencies, particularly given that counselling interventions were likely to come fairly late in the process of marriage breakdown. Marriage support agencies have long grappled with the problem of how to get people to seek help early in that process. Nevertheless, even if early intervention were encouraged, there would continue to be people seeking help with serious and perhaps intractable marital problems at very late stages. The emphasis in these cases might be better placed on assisting people to cope with the ending of the relationship.

There seems to be a rising tide of opinion in the USA that cognitive-behavioural approaches to interventions are more effective than those which focus on helping parties to stay together (Sollee, 1996). The evidence from our research suggests that counselling fulfils its broad remit of supporting adults who have relationship problems fairly well. The majority of those who completed a course of counselling seemed to be helped to come to terms with their circumstances, whether they remained married or whether they separated. Moreover, most indicated that they increased their self-understanding and gained a better understanding of their relationships. Perhaps one of the key policy imperatives is to ensure that people can take the next steps, and that the relevant support networks are available to help them when help is needed. This may be before separation, during the process of separation or beyond separation as family circumstances change, children get older, and parents enter new relationships.

Couple counselling is the choice of a relatively small number of people in England and Wales whose marriages are in difficulty. It is likely that each party has his or her own agenda, rendering the counsellor’s role extremely difficult. Working with each partner individually may be at least as, if not more, beneficial to the long-term health of adult relationships. As Reynolds and Mansfield (1999) have pointed out, underlying changes in attitudes to marriage and divorce represent a major shift in the prevailing world-view, a shift that has put more emphasis on the meeting of individual needs than on conformity to rules. They warn that policies and practices which ignore this reality are likely to prove irrelevant, if not counter-productive. One of the dilemmas policy makers and practitioners face, however, is how to balance individual needs and well-being with commitments and responsibilities to others. Marriage and parenthood are both major commitments. Children may provide a strong incentive to stay in an unhappy, unsatisfactory marriage, and it is children who constitute the main focus of concern when marriages end. People in the information meeting pilots saw being able to reflect on

the marriage and understand where and how it had gone wrong as an enormously helpful process, and one which could make it less likely that mistakes of the past would be repeated in future adult relationships.

It has been clear for many years that the divorce process can be a bewildering, distressing experience, and that many people find accessing the right help at the right time a considerable challenge. Whatever mechanisms or services are put in place, there needs to be flexibility in order to meet the advice, information and support needs of a wide range of people from a wide range of circumstances. It is essential to acknowledge that people seeking help are, first and foremost, individuals. They want those professionals providing the help to hear and understand their needs, anxieties, hurts and concerns. They may want someone to talk to, or they may be looking for a quick-fix solution to a long-term problem. Essentially, they value being able to feel confident about taking control of their lives and taking decisions about what steps to follow in order to find solutions to the problems they face. The following remarks of two people who went to counselling alone point to an important agenda for relationship support agencies:

It was very helpful. The counsellor helped me to make my own decision. Didn't advise but helped me to think about things from a different angle.
(M)

[The counsellor] gave me some good advice—[she did] not tell me what to do. Just sat there and listened to me. Told me that I shouldn't think I am not worthy. That I am a person, and should think of myself. She was very good. (F)

There are important decisions to be made about the role of marriage support services over the next decade. We need to know more about what works in which situations and for which people, but in the meantime it is clear that marriage saving is but one of the items on the agenda. Improving the relationships of people who are cohabiting, separating or divorcing is another. The evidence suggests that a variety of services and interventions is needed if the extensive range of people's needs is to be met. Ensuring that such a variety can be provided is one of the challenges facing marriage support agencies, which are constantly asked to demonstrate their capacity to 'save' marriages as the primary indicator of success.

Notes

[1] See, e.g. Bird and Cretney (1996); Bird (1996); Freeman (1996); and Bainham (1998).

[2] (F) and (M) denote female and male respectively.

[3] See de Shazer (1986).

[4] The meetings with a marriage counsellor had taken place during the 12 months beginning July 1998. The survey was held at one point in time (November 1999), and completed questionnaires were returned between November 1999 and February 2000. Thus, the time between the MWMC and the survey varied between 6 and 18 months.

References

- BAINHAM, A. (1998). Changing families and changing concepts—reforming the language of family law. *Child and Family Law Quarterly*, 10, 1–15.
- BIRD, J. (1996). *Domestic violence: the new law*. Bristol: Family Law.
- BIRD, J. & CRETNEY, S. (1996). *Divorce: the new law*. Bristol: Family Law.
- BOATENG, P., MP (1996). *Official report* (HC Standing Committee E), 7 May, cols 132, 133.
- CLULOW, C. (1995). Marriage: a new millennium? In: CLULOW (Ed.), *Women, men and marriage: tales from the Tavistock Marital Studies Institute*. London: Sheldon Press.
- EVANS, J. (The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department) (1996). *Official report* (Standing Committee E), 7 May, col. 155.
- FAMILY POLICY STUDIES CENTRE (2000). *Family change: a guide to the issues*. London: FPSC.
- FREEMAN, M. (1996). *The family law act 1996*. London: Sweet & Maxwell.
- GIDDENS, A. (1992). *The transformation of intimacy: sexuality, love and eroticism in modern societies*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- HART, Sir G. (1999). *The Funding of Marriage Support*. London: Lord Chancellor's Department.
- LORD MAC KAY OF CLASHFERN (Lord Chancellor) (1995). *Official report* (HL), 30 November, col. 700.
- MCCARTHY, P. (2001a). Saving marriages: the impact of information meetings. In: J. WALKER (Ed.), *Information meetings and associated provisions within the Family Law Act 1996*, Final Evaluation Report. London: Lord Chancellor's Department.
- MCCARTHY, P. (2001b). The provision of information and the prevention of marriage breakdown. In: J. WALKER (Ed.), *Information meetings and associated provisions within the Family Law Act 1996*, Final Evaluation Report. London: Lord Chancellor's Department.
- MCCARTHY, P., WALKER, J. & KAIN, J. (1998). *Telling it as it is: the client experience of Relate counselling*. Newcastle: Newcastle Centre for Family Studies.
- MCMULLEN, R. & MCCARTHY, P. (2001). Dealing with the uncertainty. In: J. WALKER (Ed.), *Information meetings and associated provisions within the Family Law Act 1996*, Final Evaluation Report. London: Lord Chancellor's Department.
- LORD MORAN (1995). *Official report* (HL), 30 November, col. 763.
- MORGAN, D.H.J. (1999). Risk and family practices: accounting for change and fluidity in family life In: E. SILVA & C. SMART (Eds), *The 'new' family?* London: Sage.
- REYNOLDS, J. & MANSFIELD, P. (1999). The effect of changing attitudes to marriage on its stability. In: J. SIMONS (Ed.), *High divorce rates: the state of evidence on reasons and remedies*, Research Series 2/99, Vol. 7. London: Lord Chancellor's Department.
- DE SHAZER, S. (1986). *Keys to solution in brief therapy*. New York: Norton.
- SOLLEE, D. (1996). Shifting gears: an optimistic view of the future of marriage. Paper presented at the Conference on Communitarian Pro-family Policies, Washington, DC, 15 November. <http://www.smartmarriages.com/optimistic.html>.
- STREETER, G. (The Parliamentary Secretary, Lord Chancellor's Department) (1996). *Official report* (HC), 17 June, col. 538.
- WALKER, J. (1995). *The cost of communication breakdown*. London: BT Forum.
- WALKER, J., TIMMS, N. & COLLIER, R. (2001). The challenge of social, legal and policy change, in: J. WALKER (Ed.), *Information meetings and associated provisions within the Family Law Act 1996*, Final Evaluation Report. London: Lord Chancellor's Department.
- WALKER, J. (ed.) (2001). *Information meetings and associated provisions within the Family Law Act 1996*, Final Evaluation Report, London: Lord Chancellor's Department.

Contributors

JANET WALKER, BA, BPhil, *Professor Family Policy*

PETER MCCARTHY, BA, MSc, *Principal Research Associate*

Copyright of Sexual & Relationship Therapy is the property of Carfax Publishing Company and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.