Marriage Counselling Services:

Priorities and Policy

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The Institute of Family Studies is a Commonwealth Statutory Authority established under the *Family Law Act* 1975. The Institute began operations in February 1980 and by the beginning of 1981 all staff positions had been filled. It is, first and foremost, a research and information dissemination organisation charged with conducting, encouraging and coordinating research into the factors affecting marital and family stability in Australia. As a result, the Institute has made the impact of public policies on the well-being of families a major focus of its research program.

The Policy Background Paper series is aimed at raising the level of public debate about major policy areas affecting families in Australia. At times they will be commissioned papers written by leading experts in each field; at others, they will be papers developed within the Institute in our effort to identify areas in need of further research and action.

The Institute hopes readers will respond in writing to the conclusions drawn and/or the policy proposals made. In this way we trust our Policy Background Paper series will contribute to a better understanding of the importance of a 'families perspective' in the development of policy.

**Titles in the Policy Background Paper series are:**

No. 1 Services to families: with many a slip  
No. 2 Towards a national child care policy  
No. 3 Marriage counselling services: priorities and policy

Copies of the above papers are available from the Editor, Institute of Family Studies, 766 Elizabeth Street, Melbourne 3000 Victoria, Australia. Telephone (03) 342 9100.
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Foreword

This paper by Ilene Wolcott represents another step in the Institute's efforts to identify which forms of 'support' for marriages and families will be most effective. It is our belief that 'family support' must be looked at broadly rather than in terms of either narrowly focused 'preventive' programs such as pre-marriage courses or equally narrow 'remedial' programs such as marriage or divorce counselling.

Such programs have their place of course, but must not be seen as in any way adequate to the task of encouraging stable, equitable marriages or of tackling the causes and consequences of family instability. Too often governments, churches and other agencies feel that a few funded programs are enough to show their concern for marital and family well-being. But to be able to point to such funded programs does not mean enough is being done, or even that the right things are being done.

The Institute's major study of divorced persons suggests that expectations of marriage are often unrealistic or not even articulated clearly. Two major reasons given for divorce apart from difficult financial and employment circumstances, were 'infidelity' and 'my partner changed'. The Institute interprets both as symptoms of the same problem — a failure to understand the nature of inevitable change within marriage over time. Sexual compatibility and satisfaction in marriage is an affirmation of trust and intimacy, a symbol of the bond of love that seals modern marriage by choice. The ardour of early marriage almost inevitably diminishes, and while this is understood and accepted by most, it is too often felt as a failure or rejection. So, too, is change inevitable in other ways: a partner takes a new job, a baby comes along and dominates the scene, a woman may return to college, unemployment may strike, people's motivations and priorities change just as do their age and physical appearance. Yet these changes are seen as another denial, a breach of trust, a growing apart, because many people are incapable of changing with or adapting to the change in their partner.

There is no easy solution to this failure to adapt and accept change. It is an educational problem, reflecting the media images of 'perfect love'. It ignores the very meaning of the typical marriage ceremony words 'for better for
worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health'. But it also reflects a wider and more significant shift in modern values, the optionality of modern life.

There is a vast unmet need for marriage preparation, advice and counselling. That alone will not solve marriage problems and that is why the Institute has chosen to develop the concept of 'marriage support' rather than to focus narrowly on 'guidance' or 'education' or 'family therapy'.

We have started first, however, with marriage support services that are currently available. In our view they are inadequately funded and often poorly conceptualised. There is a long way to go in developing an alternative framework.

One of the Institute's roles is to review current provisions and future needs in the areas of marriage counselling, pre-marital education and other marriage and family support programs. To meet this objective the Institute has built into its long-term research agenda as a major research subject area evaluation studies of programs which prepare people for marriage or which support them in marriage. Evaluation in this sense refers to an examination of what is being done, its appropriateness in meeting community needs and how existing services could be improved or extended.

As this paper by Ilene Wolcott points out, this is no easy task. The effectiveness of specific counselling can only be evaluated in the light of the many other factors which make up the complexity of marriage. Moreover, the very nature of community attitudes to marriage, living together, de facto unions, divorce, the rights and obligations of partners, parents and children is changing. It is difficult then to answer even the simple question of what should be the 'content' of counselling.

We shall pursue these issues in subsequent reports and research studies. Our hope is that wider community understanding and a more determined desire to educate people for satisfactory lives both as individuals and as equal partners, will lead to better programs and better marriages. Far from being private matters, the state of marriage and the quality of family life should be a public concern.

The author of this paper, Ilene Wolcott, joined the Institute of Family Studies as Research Fellow from the Social Biology Resources Centre. She has had wide experience in the United States as an advisor to the government on women's health policy and as a member of the President's Commission on Mental Health. At the Institute she has specialised in the area of marriage guidance, human relationships education and other forms of family support programs.

Don Edgar
Director
Institute of Family Studies
Introduction

The aims of this paper are, first, to examine the role of marriage counselling as one of a number of community resources which have objectives of encouraging more satisfying and harmonious marital and family relationships, second, to explore the role of government policy in the provision of marriage counselling services and, third, to establish Institute priorities and policy recommendations in this area of marriage support services.

The functions of the Institute of Family Studies as defined under Part XIVA of the *Family Law Act* 1975 are:

- to promote, by the encouragement and coordination of research and other appropriate means, the indentification of, and development of understanding of, the factors affecting marital and family stability in Australia, with the object of promoting the protection of the family as the natural and fundamental group unit in society; and
- to advise and assist the Attorney-General in relation to the making of grants, out of moneys available under appropriations made by the Parliament, for purposes related to the functions of the Institute and the supervising of the employment of grants so made.

One of the Institute’s roles under this brief is to review current provisions and future needs in the areas of marriage counselling, pre-marital education and other marriage and family support programs.

To fulfil this role the Institute built into its long-term research agenda the Preparation and Advice for Families Project as a major research subject area. It is anticipated that the Project will have several components and that the Institute will work closely with those involved in providing and evaluating services. Evaluation refers to examination of what is being done, the appropriateness of services in meeting community needs and how existing services could be improved or extended.

During 1982-83, the Board of Management of the Institute decided that a portion of the Institute’s Support Grant funds be allocated specifically for pilot studies evaluating the effectiveness of marriage counselling and other family life education programs. It was hoped that the proposals received would assist the Institute in determining priorities for future research in this area by highlighting those issues in evaluation of particular importance and interest to service providers and researchers.
While several worthwhile submissions were received, few focused on the issues of evaluation and effectiveness of marriage counselling. Others contained the genesis of innovative studies, but overall the proposals lacked clearly delineated descriptions of methodology.

Because the issues surrounding marriage counselling are complex and because comprehensive studies require commitments of time, staff and funding, the Institute proposed to convene several Design Seminars about preparation and advice for families. The first was held in Melbourne on 29 April 1983. The seminar objectives were:

- to generate ideas and stimulate thinking about the current and potential role of marriage counselling organisations as community resources;
- to review the relationship of marriage counselling and marriage counselling organisations to other community resources;
- to assess current issues in marriage counselling research, evaluation and policy; and
- to define Institute priorities for future research and policy recommendations.
Social context of marriage counselling

Before elaborating on themes of government policy and priorities, it may be useful to examine first the social context in which marriage counselling now takes place. The current and potential role of marriage counselling cannot be reviewed in isolation from the social environment which reflects the diverse attitudes and values that men and women associate with the institution of marriage and attribute to the personal relationships between men and women. In a paper presented to the Institute’s Design Seminar, Warwick Hartin, Director of the Marriage Guidance Council of Victoria, summarised the major changes that have taken place in recent decades which challenge assumptions and perceptions about marriage and the roles of men and women (Hartin, 1983). Among the changes noted in the discussion were:

- a shift in emphasis, especially among the educated middle class, away from viewing marriage predominantly in terms of economic support, social status, and security towards a view of marriage as a relationship with the primary objective of satisfying personal and emotional needs for affection, companionship and self-fulfilment — that is, a move from institutional marriage to companionate marriage;
- a concomitant rise in the expectations of marriage as fulfilling personal and emotional needs;
- a philosophy of individualism which emphasises personal freedom and self-expression;
- a relaxation of sexual mores and a retreat from parochial or secular proscriptions on how individuals should lead their adult lives;
- a movement towards male and female equality reinforced by the increased proportion of women, both married and single, in the workforce which in turn contributes to the social and financial independence of women;
- advances in contraception that enable couples to plan and limit the number of children, with a consequent decrease in the number of children and a reduced span of child rearing years;
- increased life spans for both men and women which affect and prolong the boundaries of the marital relationship;
- changes in the legislation regarding divorce, legal aid and supporting pensions and benefits that influence the costs and consequences of maintaining or dissolving unsatisfactory marital relationships.
Paralleling the social changes referred to, and frequently considered to be a consequence of these events, the following demographic statistics are of relevance to the discussion:

- in 1982, 44,088 divorces were granted;
- 53,010 dependent children were involved in divorces in 1982, and since 1976, a total of 350,000 children under 18 experienced divorce;
- 13 per cent of all families with dependent children are one-parent families, the number of such families having doubled since 1969;
- the proportion of divorces occurring in the first five years of marriage has risen from 15.5 per cent in 1976 to 20.3 per cent in 1982;
- the average duration of marriages ending in divorce has fallen from 11 years in 1976 to 10.4 years in 1982;
- the proportion of second or further divorces has increased, with the proportion of both previously divorced males and females who divorce again rising from 8.4 per cent in 1980 to 10.3 per cent in 1982;
- the proportion of marriages involving at least one previously married person has risen, e.g. from 10.3 per cent in 1976 to 32.1 per cent in 1982;
- of all persons remarrying in 1982, approximately 86 per cent had been previously divorced and 14 per cent had been widowed — the proportion of remarrying individuals who have been divorced has increased by 45 per cent since 1961;

Table 1  Trends in marriage and divorce, Australia: selected years 1961-1982

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No. of marriages</th>
<th>No. of divorces</th>
<th>Per cent of divorces in first 5 years or less</th>
<th>Per cent of remarriages (as a percentage of all couples marrying in a given year)</th>
<th>Number of children affected by divorce</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>76,686</td>
<td>6,751</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>7,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>93,546</td>
<td>9,921</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>11,426</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>106,345</td>
<td>10,791</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>14,561</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>117,637</td>
<td>13,002</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>18,451</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>110,673</td>
<td>17,744</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>25,505</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>103,973</td>
<td>24,307</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>34,992</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>109,973</td>
<td>63,267</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>29.2</td>
<td>73,645</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>104,918</td>
<td>45,175</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>31.2</td>
<td>57,878</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>102,959</td>
<td>40,633</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>31.2</td>
<td>51,599</td>
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<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>104,396</td>
<td>38,021</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>31.6</td>
<td>46,130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>109,240</td>
<td>39,258</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>31.5</td>
<td>46,836</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>113,905</td>
<td>41,412</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>31.8</td>
<td>49,616</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>117,275</td>
<td>44,088</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>32.1</td>
<td>53,010</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

• among males, 20.8 per cent of those marrying in 1982 were previously divorced and among females this figure was 19.5 per cent, up from an average of 6 per cent and 5.9 per cent respectively in 1966-70;
• the number of couples choosing to live in de facto relationships has increased as has community acceptance of these relationships — in 1982, 167,200 couples or 4.7 per cent of all those classified by the Australian Bureau of Statistics as married couple families reported they were living in a de facto relationship; of these couples 35.7 per cent had dependent children.


An additional demographic statistic of significance concerns the changing composition of the Australian population. By 1981, nearly 28 per cent of the populace had been born overseas with one-third of those born in a non-English speaking country.

Table 1 shows various trends in marriage and divorce in Australia over the past two decades highlighted in the previous discussion.

It is against this pattern of marriage, divorce and remarriage that a review of government policies relevant to the provision of marriage counselling services or marriage support programs becomes pressing.

Changes have also occurred in the sphere of marriage counselling. Since the 1960s when the Australian government first became involved in funding such services, the overall availability of specific and general counselling resources has proliferated. Resources for counselling now include health centres, Citizen Advice Bureaux, women's refuges, family therapy clinics, school counselling and College of Advanced Education courses (Harvey, 1982a).
Government provision of services

Since 1960, the Australian government has been involved in the provision of marriage counselling services through its subsidies to marriage counselling agencies approved by the Attorney-General.

The 1983-84 Appropriation Bill provided $3650000 for grants to approved marriage counselling organisations which represents an increase of 9.4 per cent over the previous year. An additional $100000 was allocated specifically for the purpose of promotion activities. The monies are distributed among 22 organisations which operate 180 counselling centres. In 1982-83 approved agencies handled 33535 counselling cases (Harvey, 1983b). These figures acknowledge the influence the government has had in the provision of marriage counselling services from its modest initial role in funding 20 centres in 1961.

References to the government’s role in the provision of marriage counselling and pre-marital counselling services are contained in the *Family Law Act* 1975, 1976, and the *Marriage Act* 1961 along with regulations to that Act. Previously, authority was vested in the *Matrimonial Causes Act* 1959.

An examination of the three documents mentioned above reveals an indirect awareness that the institution of marriage follows a dynamic path and is not a static entity. This idea is reflected, if somewhat obliquely, in the provision made regarding the support given marriage counselling services along a continuum from pre-marital to post-divorce situations. For example, since 1977 all persons intending to marry must recieve from the authorised celebrant at the time of notification of intention to marry a document (prescribed in Regulation 39A of the Marriage Regulations to the *Marriage Act*) titled *Marriage and you*. This pamphlet summarises the legal obligations and consequences of marriage and advises of the availability of pre-marital education programs. Form 14A of the *Marriage Act* says:

If you have any doubts about your decision regarding the marriage, you might like to consider discussing the matter with specially trained counsellors. You may also find it helpful to attend a pre-marital education program.

At the same time, provisions for the approval of grants to voluntary organisations that conduct programs of pre-marital education are currently set out in Part 1A of the *Marriage Act*. The total subsidy to approved
organisations to conduct pre-marital education programs amounted to approximately $50,000 per annum during the past three years. This sum was divided among all the approved organisations. The 1983-84 subsidy has been increased to $80,000.

Section 12 of the *Family Law Act* sets out the provisions established for encouraging the availability of specific marriage counselling services. This section pertains mainly to conditions for approval of subsidies to organisations in which 'marriage counselling constitutes or will constitute the whole or the major part of its activities'.

The *Family Law Amendment Act* 1976 incorporated a definition of voluntary organisations so that agencies with only one branch or section of the total organisation engaged in marriage counselling would be eligible for funding. The significance of this distinction between single purpose and multi-purpose agencies will be referred to again. Grants for agencies providing marriage counselling previously existed in the *Matrimonial Causes Act*.

In giving support to marriage counselling organisations, the *Family Law Act* sought to encourage (as did the *Matrimonial Causes Act*, which it superseded) an environment in which couples had every opportunity to achieve reconciliation (Sections 14, 15, 43). For example:

S.14(5) Where a court having jurisdiction under this Act is of the opinion that counselling may assist the parties to a marriage to improve their relationship to each other and to any child of the marriage, it may advise the parties to attend upon a marriage counsellor or an approved marriage counselling organisation and, if it thinks it desirable to do so, adjourn any proceedings before it to enable the attendance.

In the original *Family Law Act*, counselling had been mandated before the divorce application hearing could be held in situations where parties married for less than two years sought a divorce.

S.14(6) Where it appears from an application for dissolution of a marriage that the parties have been married for less than two years preceding the date of filing of the application, the court shall not hear the proceedings unless the court is satisfied that:

(a) the parties have considered a reconciliation with the assistance of a marriage counsellor, an approved marriage counselling organisation or some other suitable person or organisation nominated by the Principal Director of Court Counselling of the Family Court or by an appropriate officer of a Family Court of a State.

This clause has been amended in the *Family Law Amendment Act* 1983 to require persons married less than two years to see a counsellor before they can file for a divorce.

S.44 (1B) An application for dissolution of a marriage shall not, without the leave of the court granted under sub-section (1C), be filed within the period of two years after the date of the marriage unless there is filed with the application a certificate in the prescribed form—

(a) stating that the parties to the marriage have considered a reconciliation, with the assistance of a specified person or organisation, being—

(i) a marriage counsellor or an approved marriage counselling organisation;

(ii) another suitable person or organisation nominated by the Principal Director of Court Counselling of the Family Court; or
an appropriate officer of a Family Court of a State; and
(b) signed by that person or on behalf of that organisation, as the case may be.

Provision is made in Section 44 (1C) for special circumstances where such proceedings could not be followed, for example, where one partner could not be contacted.

Under the Family Law Act, the process of conciliation as well as reconciliation has been recognised. The Act provides for the availability of counselling and welfare staff to be appointed to the Family Court (Section 37 (8)) to assist the parties to consider reconciliation and, if reconciliation is ruled out, to assist the parties to reach agreement on property, custody and access issues in a conciliatory atmosphere that promotes a positive future outlook for the adults and children involved in marital dissolution (Section 62 (1)). As will be noted later, in practice, the bulk of Family Court counsellors' time has of necessity been devoted to conciliation rather than reconciliation.

Recent amendments to the Act (Section 16A) strengthen this support for conciliation counselling. It is interesting to note the special mention of lawyers in this regard:

S.16A The Family Court and any other court exercising jurisdiction under this Act, and any legal practitioner acting in proceedings under this Act or consulted by a person who is considering instituting proceedings under this Act, shall have regard to the need to direct the attention of parties to such proceedings and persons considering such proceedings to—

(a) the facilities provided by courts exercising jurisdiction under this Act for counselling to assist parties to marriages and children of marriages to adjust to the consequences of marital breakdown; and
(b) the procedures available for the resolution by conciliation of matters arising in the proceedings.

The Family Law Act thus provides subsidies to specialised marriage counselling agencies, services within multi-purpose agencies and established counselling facilities within the Family Court itself which can utilise the services of the specialised agencies where appropriate.

Administration of the Family Law Act

Specialised marriage counselling services funded through the Family Law Act are administered and monitored by the Special Services Branch of the Attorney-General's Department. Supervision and administration of this scheme involves pre-approval evaluation of agencies requesting a subsidy and post-approval monitoring of the agencies to ensure they continue to meet standards as set out in the Act and in statements of policy by the Attorney-General. Organisations must first apply for approval. It is general policy not to approve an organisation without also funding it.

Collection and analysis of statistics related to the counselling activities of the agencies as required in the Act is another function. Section 13 (1) (a) (b) sets out these data-collecting requirements:

S.13(1) An approved marriage counselling organisation shall, not later than 30 September in each year, furnish to the Attorney-General, in respect of the period of 12 months that ended on 30 June in that year—
(a) an audited financial statement of the receipts and payments of the organisation, in which receipts and payments in respect of its marriage counselling activities are shown separately from other receipts and payments; and
(b) a report on its marriage counselling activities, including information as to the number of cases dealt with by the organisation during the year.

Analysis of data by the Department is currently limited to information about caseload structure (e.g., whether interviews are joint or individual), where referrals come from (e.g., doctors, lawyers), evaluation of outcome by client and counsellor, and expenditure and administrative details. No statistics are collected by the Department on socio-economic or demographic characteristics of clients, so the data, for the purpose of research, have limited relevance.

The Institute of Family Studies, at the request of many of the approved agencies, is in the process of developing a uniform data collection sheet which, it is hoped, will be adopted by all approved agencies and be incorporated into the statistical return required by the Attorney-General's Department. This would make possible a national profile of marriage counselling trends and client characteristics.

More critically, staff of the Attorney-General's Psychology and Counselling Section have indicated that limited funding, combined with inadequate staffing, have hindered the Department's efforts to supervise adequately the counselling standards of agencies (Harvey, 1983b). This is a serious allegation since a primary rationale for having approved counselling agencies should be to provide the public with an assurance that these services meet certain monitored standards. Department staff would like also to have the resources to disseminate information to agencies about the new techniques in the field.

Government's view of marriage counselling role

In summarising the debates in Parliament and pertinent sections of the Family Law Act, L. V. Harvey, Principal Psychologist, Attorney-General's Department, states that the provision of funding for marriage counselling organisations was to encourage people to be:

- helped to reconcile and remain married; or
- helped so that the adverse effects of separation and divorce on themselves and their families were reduced; or
- helped to negotiate periods of stress in their relationship more rapidly and constructively even when divorce was not an option for them (Harvey, 1983b).

Harvey makes the point that the government sees its role as encouraging and assisting voluntary marriage counselling organisations, but not as taking the full responsibility for providing a national marriage counselling service. This distinction seems somewhat unclear since the sections of the Act referred to by Harvey and the yearly grants of more than 3.5 million dollars for provision of services imply the latter role.

Confirmation of Harvey's view is supported by reference to the words of former Attorney-General, Sir Garfield Barwick, in debate over the Matrimonial Causes Act before the House of Representatives:
The Government has decided that these voluntary and independent organisations should be encouraged and subsidised. Consequently, in this bill, provision is made to approve marriage guidance organisations and to subsidise them.

Mr Speaker, I do not hold with the view that this work can be done satisfactorily by people who make no more than a means of livelihood. The work will best be done by those who, as well as being trained, have a sense of vocation and who, to a large extent, volunteer their good offices in this very skilful and sympathetic task. Consequently, the subsidy is not intended to institutionalise these organisations, but rather is confined to giving them that financial support which will assist them in their administration, and enable them to do their work adequately and to train those who are to perform it (quoted in Harvey, 1983c).

Marriage counselling organisations reinforce this last statement since most of their activities labelled marriage counselling are funded through grants from the Attorney-General’s Department. Access to marriage counselling services for many clients probably depends on the sliding scale of fees or absence of costs that government support allows. However, as noted earlier, while Family Court Counselling services are free to all, marriage counselling agencies are expected to charge clients who can afford to pay. Thus there is an ambivalence in the philosophy underlying government support for different points of stress in a marital relationship. One might with some justice question whether support for marriage prior to total breakdown is not more important than conciliation after the event.

Cost of services

Policies relating to whether or not agencies charge for services appear ambivalent and are not codified. It would seem that the policy of the Attorney-General’s Department is to subsidise services but not to provide free counselling services.

Initially the approved agencies did not charge fees. To keep costs down, many agencies did, and still do, rely on the use of volunteer counsellors. In the 1970s, the Attorney-General’s Department began to encourage the charging of fees although advising that no agency was to refuse a client because of the inability to pay.

The recommended fee is about $15 a session, the average difference between the actual cost of counselling and the subsidy provided. Agencies, however, set their own fee scales. In 1981-82 the average of the grant per interview paid to all organisations was $23.04, about 67.3 per cent of the total cost (Harvey, 1983b; Fox, 1983).

Most of the Catholic agencies claim that they do not charge fees. These agencies argue, moreover, that it is unfair that Family Court Counselling services are free to those who divorce while those who seek reconciliation assistance at marriage counselling agencies have to pay. A number of organisations, including all the Catholic agencies, accept donations from clients. According to a memo from the Attorney-General’s Department (Harvey 1983d) the government intended that donations to approved marriage counselling agencies be tax deductible to encourage community contributions to the agencies. Confusion exists over this ruling, however, with the Commissioner of Taxation ruling in some cases that client donations are in actuality fees-for-service and therefore not deductible by the donor for income tax purposes. Again, clarification of policy is required in this area.
Table 2 presents a summary of income received from clients of all approved agencies for the year 1981-82. However, statistics submitted by the agencies to the Attorney-General’s Department do not clearly distinguish between fees charged and donations made in all cases. The table must be interpreted with this caution in mind.

Whether Sir Garfield Barwick’s philosophy regarding the commitment of counsellors, quoted above, is still workable is open to debate. Without the assistance of trained volunteer counsellors, many agencies would not be able

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agency</th>
<th>Fees Received</th>
<th>Interviews</th>
<th>Average fee per interview (in dollars)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marriage Guidance Council</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>195,329</td>
<td>20,862</td>
<td>9.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIC</td>
<td>105,246</td>
<td>17,487</td>
<td>6.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QLD</td>
<td>60,243</td>
<td>9,647</td>
<td>6.24</td>
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<tr>
<td>SA</td>
<td>27,662</td>
<td>4,886</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>WA</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>9,529</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAS</td>
<td>8,261</td>
<td>2,968</td>
<td>2.78</td>
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<tr>
<td>ACT</td>
<td>39,805</td>
<td>4,387</td>
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<td>NT</td>
<td>3,877</td>
<td>733</td>
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<tr>
<td>Catholic Family Welfare Bureau</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>SYD</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>4,997</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MELB</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>6,871</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BRIS</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>4,359</td>
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<tr>
<td>ADEL</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>2,940</td>
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<tr>
<td>PERTH</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1,598</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HOB</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1,642</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAN</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>817</td>
<td>—</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anglican</td>
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<tr>
<td>SYD</td>
<td>21,587</td>
<td>3,341</td>
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<tr>
<td>MELB</td>
<td>26,884</td>
<td>4,571</td>
<td>5.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizen’s Welfare Service</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>MELB</td>
<td>32,893</td>
<td>10,618</td>
<td>3.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Life Movement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>SYD</td>
<td>62,394</td>
<td>8,096</td>
<td>7.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uniting Church Marriage and Family Counselling Service</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>SYD</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>5,726</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adelaide Central Mission</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>ADEL</td>
<td>4,456</td>
<td>1,732</td>
<td>2.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cairnmiller Institute</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MELB</td>
<td>640</td>
<td>243</td>
<td>2.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>589,277</td>
<td>128,050</td>
<td>4.59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Attorney-General’s Department, Canberra, 1983 (personal letter)
to offer counselling services at an affordable level to clients. The Tasmanian Marriage Guidance Council (TMGC) reported that the use of volunteer counsellors reduced expenditures by between 13-19 per cent depending on whether volunteer counsellors would have been replaced by paid sessional workers or fully salaried staff (TMGC, 1983). The Marriage Guidance Council of Western Australia (MGCWA) relied on volunteer counsellors for 50 per cent of its counselling sessions in 1981 (MGCWA, 1982).

It is a concern in many agencies that volunteer counsellors who have benefited from internal agency supervision and training to become highly skilled practitioners frequently leave for work in private practice or in salaried organisations. Other agencies are committed to the diversity of expertise that individuals from outside the organisation can offer in a voluntary capacity even if this means a loss of continuity in staffing arrangements.

It is unclear whether all agencies will eventually have to become fee-for-service organisations. Such a policy, while encouraged by the Attorney-General's Department, is not yet mandated (Fox, 1983b).

Although all agencies state that no client is now turned away because of inability to pay, it is not known how many potential clients are deterred from seeking help because of the cost they assume is involved. A mandated fee of $10-15 would put marriage counselling out of the range of many working class couples. Certainly any significant increase in demand from non-paying clients without an accompanying rise in subsidies would create financial difficulties for many agencies.

Clarification of the government's position in relation to all aspects of funding marriage and divorce counselling services is essential if a uniform system of marriage support services is to be available to all who could benefit from assistance and information.
As is often the case with the provision of community services, policies and directions of a service are connected to the source of funding and to any constraints imposed by that funding agency. Under present policies, a number of organisations have felt constraints on the services they can offer under the rubric of marriage counselling as defined by the Act and interpreted by the Attorney-General's Department. Two issues are relevant. Are the constraints felt by the agencies legitimate? Are the provisions for marriage counselling, as conceived under the Act, the most appropriate response to meeting the marriage support needs of the community? Clarification of these issues depends, in part, upon how marriage counselling is defined.

Background

For agencies dependent on government funding, definitions have always been problematic because marriage counselling, until passage of the Family Law Amendment Act 1983, has never been legally defined in the Family Law Act beyond the mention that approved agencies should be 'willing and able to engage in marriage counselling' (Section 12 (2) (a)). Harvey (1983b) points out that in practice the following de facto policy definition has operated:

The process by which a trained counsellor assists a person or persons to resolve the problems that trouble them in their inter-personal relationships as they move into marriage, live within it, or make a decision to terminate it. The focus is on the relationship between the two persons moving into or already involved in a marriage rather than, as is the case with much psychotherapy, on the re-organisation of the personality structure of the individual (Mudd and Goodwin, 1961, quoted in Harvey, 1983b).

Specialist marriage counselling is thus distinguished from other personal, practical, or even family counselling services in this somewhat arbitrary manner. That marriage counselling as opposed to generalist counselling is being practised by approved agencies rests on evidence of the numbers of conjoint interviews (Harvey, 1983b). Although not actually stated, the emphasis on conjoint counselling that has evolved in policy implementation of the approved agencies implies that other forms of counselling services
should be provided under other auspices and funded through other sources, for example, the Departments of Social Security, Health, or Education (Harvey, 1983b).

Constraints placed on meeting client needs, if strict adherence to these guidelines were enforced, were mentioned by participants in the Institute's Design Seminar in April 1983. As Graham Wilks (1983) noted, 'Few clients know the kinds of services they want when they present for counselling. The focus for them is on the need, the difficulty, the problem'. Specialised agencies see a broader spectrum of services coming under the marriage counselling umbrella. Group counselling, marriage education or enrichment programs, and family counselling are part of this spectrum. Pre- and post-divorce cases are seen to benefit from individual sessions perhaps more than joint interviews. Under present guidelines for funding, such activities may or may not be considered eligible.

New definition

Recognising that the absence of a definition for marriage counselling generates confusion and imposes constraints on the provision of services to meet community needs, the Joint Select Committee on the Family Law Act advocated that:

Marriage counselling be defined under the Act to encompass pre-marital counselling, marital counselling, pre-divorce and post-divorce counselling. The Committee further recommends that education for marriage and family life be further supported either by incorporating provisions in the Act or by reinforcing those in the Marriage Act (Recommendation 61, Vol. II Parliamentary Report of the Joint Select Committee 1980).

Heeding these recommendations, the 1981 Amendments to the Family Law Act sought further to clarify the issue by suggesting the following addition to Section 4 (1):

'marriage counselling' includes the counselling of a person in relation to:
(a) entering into marriage;
(b) separation of the parties to a marriage;
(c) reconciliation of the parties to a marriage;
(d) the dissolution or annulment of a marriage; or
(e) adjusting to the dissolution or annulment of a marriage,
whether that counselling is provided in relation to the proposed marriage, marriage or former marriage of that person or in relation to the proposed marriage, marriage or former marriage of another person or other persons, and whether that counselling is provided to that person individually or as a member of a group of persons.

This definition was incorporated unchanged into the Family Law Amendment Act 1983 which was passed by Parliament in October 1983.

Although policy relating to de facto marriages is not spelled out in the Family Law Act or in Departmental guidelines, the definition is assumed to include persons in de facto relationships.

The new amendment appears to expand the definition of activities that may be funded and provided by approved agencies to clients. Certainly both pre-marital counselling and post-divorce counselling are accounted for as would be family counselling if this was part of 'adjusting to the dissolution' or
'reconciliation of the parties to a marriage' where children were part of the equation. (In this sense, the work of marriage counselling agencies would overlap or intersect with the objectives of Family Court counselling.)

The two issues raised earlier can be clarified further by looking at

- what activities are currently funded
- current practices and type of interviews conducted
- reported counselling outcomes
- the sorts of clients currently served.

**Funded activities under present guidelines**

According to the Attorney-General's Department (Pers. comm. Fox, 1983), all of the activities mentioned in the new amendment have been reportable funded activities under current Departmental policy. A glance at the statistical form required for submission by each agency shows provision for family interviews 'where the focus of the session is on the marriage relationship' and for counselling group sessions excluding educational or discussion groups.

If family counselling thus defined is considered germane to the relationship dynamics between the couple it would appear to qualify under present guidelines for reimbursement. Family counselling would have to be distinguished from family therapy which is excluded from funding.

According to present interpretation of the Act, activities that are excluded from reimbursement are individual psychotherapy, family counselling not related to the marriage relationship and counselling about health and welfare matters such as where to find accommodation or employment (Harvey, 1983c). This raises several difficulties about the interpretation of guidelines and about how agencies may choose to operate.

Multi-service agencies report that it is often difficult to isolate specific marriage counselling from other counselling and advice offered to clients who present with problems identified as something else. It may happen that marital difficulties are intertwined with financial or employment problems or trouble with children and these more pressing issues have to be addressed within the marital relationship context if counselling is to be effective. This may result in a lot of shuffling around of clients and statistics within multi-service agencies in order to meet Departmental guidelines for funding. The Institute of Family Studies believes such artificial distinctions are untenable and undesirable.

Another important distinction is made between counselling and educational activities. General educational and informational activities are not funded under the current *Family Law Act* or Departmental policy guidelines since they are not considered to focus specifically on the marital relationship. Yet a substantial number of agencies report a demand for educational or support group activities in the area of step-parenting, remarriage and adjustment to divorce (NMGC, 1983). Agencies that run these groups generally charge a fee according to a sliding scale if necessary.

Some pre-marriage educational programs are funded by the Attorney-General under the *Marriage Act* provisions, however post-divorce educational programs would not come under the guidelines unless there was a counselling focus. Again, pre-marital counselling and divorce counselling as distinct from educational activities are funded.
It is mainly in relation to these kinds of so-labelled non-counselling activities that marriage counselling agencies feel the bureaucratic constraints operating, be they under de facto or de jure guidelines. Distinction between counselling and educational formats would seem difficult and artificial to maintain and whether such distinctions are justifiable is debatable. Moreover, it would seem that marriage support services, whether called counseling or education, should be available to meet the needs of the community.

Part of the confusion appears to stem from an absence of clear policy guidelines concerning the definition of marriage counselling activities funded under the Act. Even the new definition of marriage counselling will not bridge the gap entirely. At least in relation to reimbursement for activities sanctioned under the Family Law Act, approved agencies rely on interpretation of policy. From time to time the Department’s Special Services Branch issues guidelines and discussion papers regarding policy. However, only by requesting the Attorney-General to rule on a particular question can de jure policy be established.

The Institute of Family Studies therefore recommends that, in order to avoid confusion over what marriage counselling activities are encouraged and supported under the Family Law Act, implementation policies and regulations for approved marriage counselling agencies should be clearly set out in written guidelines. Moreover, as will be discussed in more detail later, these guidelines should stress ‘family support’ rather than only a narrowly defined notion of ‘marriage counselling’.

Marriage counselling practices

Current caseloads

Despite fiscal and regulatory constraints, the 22 approved marriage counselling agencies which operate 170 centres throughout Australia handled 33,535 cases and conducted 133,134 interviews in the year 1982-83. The average number of interviews per case in 1982-83 was 4.0.

Statistics compiled by the Psychology and Counselling Section of the Attorney-General’s Department indicate that while counselling caseloads are still increasing, the rate of increase has levelled off in recent years. Table 3 presents a summary of counselling caseload statistics over the past decade.

Most agencies encourage joint counselling sessions. This practice is based on conclusions from research studies that suggest joint interviews improve prospects for both partners (NMGC, 1978; Weiderkehr, 1981). It has also been Departmental policy to encourage joint interviews as one indication that relationship counselling (not individual therapeutic counselling) is taking place to meet the requirements of the guidelines for organisational funding. Nevertheless, although the proportion of joint interviews has increased over the years, separate husband and wife interviews consistently have accounted for more than half of the total interviews conducted. Of all clients in 1982, 44 per cent were men and 56 per cent were women.

More conspicuous is the continuing discrepancy between the number of female and male client interviews with female clients accounting for nearly twice as many interviews as males. While a question that always arises in discussion of marriage counselling is the apparent reluctance of many men to
Table 3  Number of cases and interviews conducted by approved marriage guidance counselling agencies for selected years 1972-82

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cases</td>
<td>17448</td>
<td>22028</td>
<td>27256</td>
<td>29481</td>
<td>30971</td>
<td>31162</td>
<td>33535</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joint</td>
<td>18216</td>
<td>26188</td>
<td>32527</td>
<td>38983</td>
<td>41630</td>
<td>47010</td>
<td>53153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife</td>
<td>28050</td>
<td>34391</td>
<td>43996</td>
<td>45829</td>
<td>50454</td>
<td>52597</td>
<td>51454</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband</td>
<td>15951</td>
<td>19945</td>
<td>22456</td>
<td>21631</td>
<td>23553</td>
<td>23967</td>
<td>24067</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family</strong></td>
<td>2133</td>
<td>3181</td>
<td>3548</td>
<td>3557</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other</strong></td>
<td>2676</td>
<td>2609</td>
<td>3455</td>
<td>546</td>
<td>1171</td>
<td>928</td>
<td>903</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*(pre-marital)</td>
<td>4002</td>
<td>7245</td>
<td>9596</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>68895</td>
<td>90378</td>
<td>112030</td>
<td>109122</td>
<td>119989</td>
<td>128050</td>
<td>133134</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Prior to 1979 separate figures were not calculated for family interviews.
** Before 1979 pre-marital interviews were included as a separate category.

Source: Annual Statistics, Psychology and Counselling Section, Attorney-General’s Department, Canberra, 1980, 1983.

Table 4  Percentage of interview type for all marriage counselling cases, 1979-83

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of interview</th>
<th>1979-80 %</th>
<th>1980-81 %</th>
<th>1981-82 %</th>
<th>1982-83 %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Joint</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wife alone</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband alone</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Annual statistics, Psychology and Counselling Section, Attorney-General’s Department, Canberra, 1980, 1983.

agree to, or to initiate, marriage counselling, it may be just as important to query why men do not stay for as many interviews as women.

Some counsellors believe that conjoint interviews are most effective for couples who wish to maintain the relationship, while individual counselling is more effective for those desiring to separate (Cookerly, 1980). Conversely, others stress that even if a couple seek to separate, counselling can improve the outcome and enable both partners to achieve a more positive separation (Weiss, 1975).

As Table 5 indicates, there has been a general trend towards an increase in the number of single session interviews with approximately 23 per cent of all cases in 1982-83 consisting of one interview compared with 19 per cent in 1979-80. It is too soon to determine if this trend will continue. Nor is there conclusive agreement on the effectiveness of single session counselling, although several studies reviewed by Wiederkehr (1981) supported the efficacy of one session counselling.

Most agencies claim that they are stretched to capacity in meeting client demand under present funding constraints and do not actively seek to increase their client load without the means to recruit additional staff.
Table 5  Average number of interviews per case and per cent of single session interviews 1979-83

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Average number of interviews per case</th>
<th>Per cent single interviews, total cases</th>
<th>Total number interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1979-80</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>109,122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980-81</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>119,989</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981-82</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>128,050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982-83</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>133,134</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Annual statistics, Psychology and Counselling Section, Attorney-General's Department, Canberra, 1983.

Table 6  Group counselling cases conducted by approved agencies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pre-Marital</th>
<th>Marital</th>
<th>Separated/Divorced</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1979-80</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>1,346</td>
<td>290</td>
<td>1,814</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980-81</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>352</td>
<td>430</td>
<td>999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981-82</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>277</td>
<td>410</td>
<td>748</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982-83</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>360</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>793</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Annual statistics, Psychology and Counselling Section, Attorney-General's Department, Canberra, 1983.

Group counselling

An additional category eligible for funding is group counselling. Types of groups include pre-marital, marital and divorced and separated.

The figures in Table 6 reveal a general overall decrease until the most recent year for this mode of counselling, however there are fluctuations over time within specific group types. Since groups that have a purely educational or informational focus do not qualify for funding under the same parameter, pre-marital clients may, for example, be absorbed into education groups which are eligible for separate funding. A recent survey conducted by the Australian Association for Marriage Education (1983) reported that 10,083 people attended a total of 322 pre-marriage education courses in 1982.

Although we have no hard evidence, this decline in marital counselling groups may reflect a diminished emphasis or interest in group dynamics and encounters promoted so lavishly in the 1970s. As mentioned previously, a number of agencies have reported a demand for educational/informational groups for recently divorced and remarried clients. Again, the labelling of group counselling or educational formats may relate more to the dynamics of reimbursement categories than to the focus of the activity or of client demand.

Counselling outcomes

There is consensus among marriage counsellors that most clients seek counselling too late in the process of the breakdown when successful intervention is less likely to occur.
The National Marriage Guidance Council estimates that nearly one-third of their clients had separated or made the decision to separate at the time of the initial interview (NMGC, 1983). A proportion of counselling cases thus involves helping couples achieve a constructive termination of their relationship. One hoped-for result of 'separation counselling' is to enable each partner to enter into a future relationship with improved understanding and skills for success in any new union; another is the added opportunity for couples with children to reduce conflicts left over from their marriage that would interfere with their continued co-parenting roles after divorce. Here, the intention of Family Court counsellors and marriage counsellors merge.

An analysis of marriage outcome statistics lends support for a broad definition of marriage counselling which incorporates the potential for intervention at any point in the relationship whether reconciliation or conciliation is the ultimate objective.

In 1982-83, marriage counsellors rated three-quarters (75.7 per cent) of cases as having a positive counselling outcome, whereas clients indicated a positive result in 82.3 per cent of cases where a response was obtained. Approximately 20 per cent of client attitudes are unknown in those cases where clients did not fill in the evaluation form. If total client numbers are included, then 66 per cent of clients rated counselling positive. The definition of positive outcome, however, has varied meanings as Table 7 illustrates.

The figures in Table 7 reinforce the notion that counselling can benefit both those who have separated or eventually make the decision to separate and those whose relationships are strengthened. It is not known whether individual improvement refers to the ability to cope better with a separation if that was the situation or whether it means that the person was able to make satisfactory changes within the relationship. Again, either outcome would seem beneficial.

Exact figures on the number of clients helped to reach a reconciliation are not available but one study of marriage counselling clients in New South Wales (Wiederkehr, Pitman and Villaroman, 1981) reported that, at the time of follow-up three months after counselling, 21 per cent of separated clients had reunited.

Table 7 Selected positive counselling outcomes for male and female clients as perceived by counsellors and clients 1982-83

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Counsellor ratings</th>
<th>Client ratings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% male clients</td>
<td>% female clients</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship improved</td>
<td>37.3</td>
<td>34.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helped to achieve positive separation</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>9.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual improvement</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>19.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive no change</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive other</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total positive replies</td>
<td>73.2</td>
<td>77.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Annual statistics, Psychology and Counselling Section, Attorney-General’s Department, Canberra, 1983.
The stated aim of most marriage counselling agencies is to assist people to explore and clarify their problems and to arrive at a reasoned decision that best suits their unique situation (Annual Reports 1982 of Approved Agencies).

**Client characteristics**

Patterns of clients' presenting problems reflect the general trends in marriage, divorce and remarriage described previously. For example, there has been a steady increase in the number of clients who come for help with separation and divorce decisions. Counsellors also report an increase in the number of couples who come with problems associated with remarriage or stepfamily situations (NMGC, 1983). Recently, several agencies have encouraged staff to obtain training in family counselling techniques and these agencies now offer a family counselling format to clients. Many agencies claim more clients are presenting with marital problems exacerbated by financial stress and unemployment.

**Presenting problems**

At a more specific level, the study in New South Wales (Wiederkehr and others, 1981) concluded that the three major presenting problems were communication difficulties, the decision to separate or coping with a partner's leaving, and complaints about a partner's personality or behaviour. Similarly, a survey in Western Australia (Katz, 1983) found the most commonly reported presenting problems were communication, incompatibility, and complaints about a partner's personality.

The basic list of problems is a shorthand way of characterising dissatisfaction and unhappiness that often have roots in more fundamental issues affecting marriages. Conflicts and incompatibility are affected by the rising expectations of marriage and the changing attitudes towards the nature of marriage and the roles of men and women. These attitudes and behaviours are set in a social environment of increased permissiveness and opportunities for alternative lifestyles outside of marriage. Counsellors report that both men and women face confusion in negotiating relationships within these changing frameworks of marriage and family.

**Client profiles**

Statistics on client characteristics are not collected uniformly by all approved agencies and even where data are collected, they are not always summarised or analysed. (As mentioned elsewhere in this discussion, the Institute of Family Studies is developing a uniform data sheet for use by the approved agencies.)

The National Marriage Guidance Council, whose constituent organisations see 60 per cent of all approved agency cases, prepares an annual statistical profile of its clients (NMGC, 1983). The brief summary of clients' characteristics for 1981-82 which follows is from the Council's Annual Report. In 17 per cent of cases at least one partner was of non-English speaking origin. Nearly 70 per cent of clients lived in the capital cities around
Australia. Over 50 per cent had been married for less than ten years with 29 per cent married under five years. Approximately one-half of all clients had one or two children, whereas 24 per cent had no children under age 18. Additional socio-economic and demographic details were not included in this summary.

Representativeness

Marriage counselling agencies have been criticised for serving mainly middle class people. Individual agency studies both support and refute this allegation. In the study by Weiderkehr and others (1981) it was shown that 16 per cent of clients were in unskilled jobs, another 16 per cent in semi-skilled occupations and 13 per cent in trades. The majority, 42 per cent, were in clerical jobs, with only 6.5 per cent in the professions. At the Newcastle centre, 52 per cent of clients were in unskilled occupations. Diversity of socio-economic and occupational status was also reported by the Marriage Guidance Council of South Australia (1983) with 17.8 per cent of their clients in unskilled jobs, 21.1 per cent in professional occupations and 27.4 per cent in skilled work. The recent study by Katz (1983) in Western Australia revealed that 23 per cent of clients were in professional or administrative occupations while 13 per cent were in trades and 11 per cent in clerical positions.

Although many clients would be considered middle class, these studies indicate that marriage counselling agencies are serving more than just the affluent and educated, and experience of multi-service agencies would support this opinion. A more critical factor may be the location of agencies and accessibility to various groups in the community.

Resource centres that assist migrant communities indicate that clients with marital problems are generally referred to the Family Court Counselling Service which has interpreters available. A number of marriage counselling agencies have undertaken to train workers in migrant welfare centres and several agencies have counsellors who are fluent in various languages. Organisations which work with migrants will refer to agencies known to have bilingual staff. The National Marriage Guidance Council claims that 17 per cent of its 1981-82 caseload included at least one partner of non-English speaking background. In 1981, about 12 per cent of all divorcing people had been born in a non-English speaking country (ABS Divorces, 1981). Of all people married in 1981, 12 per cent were born in non-English speaking countries (ABS Marriages, 1981).

Consideration of the marriage counselling needs of migrant communities was highlighted at the 1983 Conference of the Australian Association of Marriage and Family Counsellors. Speakers at the session on ethnic counselling emphasised that, for many clients, socio-economic and educational variations in background may generate more differences than country of origin. A major issue for many migrant couples centres on the changing expectations of marriage away from a traditional to a companionship model.
4 Seeking help for marital problems

Marital disruption is considered to be among the most stressful life events (Holmes and Rahe, 1967). Numerous studies (Bloom, Asher and White, 1978; Ladbrook, 1976; Gove, Hughes and Style, 1983) have linked marital stress, separation and divorce with a wide variety of subsequent physical and emotional disorders in adults and children involved. But not everyone identifies or recognises marital problems as the source of their distress. Worries about unemployment, illness, inadequate housing, a misbehaving child or financial needs may take precedence over personal relationship concerns and obscure the adverse impact such worries can have on the relationship. In fact, their role in generating marital tensions may be overlooked entirely.

How people define their problem, the acceptability of seeking help in their social-cultural context, and their knowledge of available resources all will influence whether or not, where, and to whom individuals turn for help (Brannen, 1980).

People with marital problems clearly seek help, both formal and informal, from a variety of sources. A recent study by the Institute of Family Studies (IFS, 1983a) surveyed 416 families living in Geelong, Victoria, to ascertain where people went or would go for help, information or advice in a variety of circumstances. For the 267 persons who responded that they had looked for support during a personal crisis, marital conflict was identified as the problem in 21 per cent of cases. However, only 4 per cent turned to marriage counselling services. Another Institute study of 295 divorced individuals revealed that only 20 per cent of participants in the study had been to a marriage counsellor (IFS, 1983b). Many of the people in both studies identified relatives and friends as important sources of help.

For many people, counselling still has a stigma attached to it. For them, admitting to having a marital problem is unacceptable and marital distress is often disguised as a more ‘acceptable’ problem. General practitioners report seeing increased numbers of patients where the underlying cause of complaints such as depression, ‘nerves’ or migrane is marital distress (Marriage Matters, 1979; pers. comm. Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, 1983). In the study of divorced individuals (IFS, 1983b), 11 per cent of respondents turned to a doctor for help during the process of marriage
breakdown. A recent survey of 16,500 Australian doctors (Medical Practice, 1982) found that 47 per cent of the doctors listed human relationships (marriage, family breakup, divorce, and family problems) as the counselling area they were most involved in.

Infant welfare sisters, social workers, industry personnel officers and clergymen are frequent first contacts for people experiencing marital problems. Community workers, such as the police, are often involved in family disputes, and youth workers and teachers are aware of family conflicts. Citizens Advice Bureaux located in many communities are considered a neutral ‘door to knock on’ by many people. In Victoria during June 1983, 1000 out of 6865 calls to Citizens Advice Bureaux (CAB) concerned a family or personal matter, almost always related to marital problems (pers. comm. CAB Victoria). Other people trust only institutional authorities, such as the law, to solve problems. Since overall statistics are not available, it is not known how many individuals or couples experiencing marital distress or contemplating divorce turn to private psychologists, psychiatrists, doctors, infant welfare sisters, lawyers or other sources, for advice or counselling.

Referral agents

Since so many people in marital distress turn to community workers or ‘gatekeepers’, it is essential that these helping professionals recognise the underlying difficulties and make appropriate decisions about referral where it would benefit the client. Helping professionals seeing people who present with specific problems such as a truant child or an inability to pay the rent may fail to connect these concerns with an existing or potential source of marital tension.

Many of these gatekeepers could therefore benefit from brief training or educational programs that would enable them to use their influence to refer people to counselling when appropriate or to provide basic assistance at first contact. Over one-fourth of the doctors interviewed in the survey mentioned above (Medical Practice, 1983) believed they were coping inadequately with their patients’ counselling needs and approximately 44 per cent indicated that they had taken or were considering taking additional training and education in counselling. Alternatively, marriage counsellors may branch out of their offices and work part-time or full-time in other settings. In England, approximately 100 counsellors are located on the premises of general practitioners’ surgeries and others work in prisons, hospitals and Citizens Advice Bureaux (Marriage Matters, 1979).

A number of organisations have sponsored seminars for doctors or lawyers and several agencies are hoping to develop industry and business contacts. In 1982-83, 4 per cent of referrals to marriage counselling agencies came from lawyers and 14 per cent from doctors. As the Act is presently interpreted and implemented, provision of training for gatekeepers or other community helping professionals is not eligible for funding.

The Institute therefore recommends that funds be made available to marriage counselling agencies under the Family Law Act to provide training to community gatekeepers to assist them in identifying marital problems and in making initial intervention and appropriate referrals.
Community awareness of marriage counselling services

While recognising that not everyone needs the assistance of expert advice or counselling to resolve marital problems, and that many people prefer to use informal support networks, it is the 'hidden client' or the person who may benefit but who makes no use of marriage counselling services that is a concern of all agencies.

Although a detailed discussion of the reasons why some people seek help with marital problems and why others do not is beyond the scope of this paper, a few observations from the Institute's Dissolution Study (IFS, 1983b) are of interest. Over half the 295 respondents stated they did not seek any professional help for their problems. The most common responses for failing to seek assistance was the firm conviction that it would not have made any difference, that the relationship had deteriorated beyond repair, or that either or both of the partners no longer had a commitment to the relationship. Few of the respondents had thought of counselling as a way to achieve a more amicable or less stressful separation. Their image of counselling was of a 'marriage mender' and, if they believed that reconciliation was out of the question, then they did not see any purpose in attending. Even fewer respondents saw counselling as an early intervention to prevent the marriage from reaching a point of irretrievable breakdown.

The image people hold of marriage counselling will affect whether or not a service is seen as relevant. With so many clients seeking marriage counselling too late in the breakdown of the relationship for positive intervention to take place, it is important to consider methods of raising community awareness of services and what they offer. A recent survey conducted by the Marriage Guidance Council of South Australia (MGCSA, 1983) revealed that 21 per cent of individuals interviewed 'on the street' did not know of any organisation that provided marriage counselling and 54 per cent knew little beyond the name of the agency.

A number of organisations have been successfully involved in local television and radio programs that both raise community awareness of marriage counselling services and discuss relationship issues. Counsellors often speak to community groups with the same objectives in mind. However, many smaller agencies could not afford staff time for these extended activities and any major media campaign would be beyond the financial resources of individual agencies. Proposals to publicise marriage counselling services have been sent to previous Attorneys-General but have never been approved.

In the 1983-84 Budget, the Attorney-General, Senator Evans, finally included a $100 000 appropriation targeted specifically for promotion and publicity activities. A core group of representatives selected from the major marriage counselling organisations will develop a proposal for a media and poster campaign.

A major media campaign would have dual objectives. First, it would promote a general awareness of ordinary concerns, problems and doubts that can beset any relationship. Second, it would provide specific information about resources available for helping people deal positively with difficulties (e.g., anger, lack of communication) that arise in relationships and demonstrate that there are alternative ways of handling such issues. For example, a couple may be shown in a conflict scene accompanied by a short statement
such as: 'Is there a better way?' References to the approved marriage counselling agencies would follow (NMGC, 1983b). An innovative advertising campaign might be one way to reduce the reluctance of many people to seek help.

Section 16 of the *Family Law Act* makes provision for advertising and publicising the availability of Family Court counselling facilities:

S.16(1) The Principal Director of Court Counselling of the Family Court may advertise the existence and availability of the counselling and welfare facilities of the Family Court and of other courts having jurisdiction under this Act.

The Family Court reports great success with the use of a film that illustrates court proceedings and suggests ways of reducing the traumatic effects of divorce on the whole family.

Because innovative education and information resources aimed at helping people form satisfying relationships right from the beginning could act as a preventive measure for later marriage breakdown, the promotion of pre-marriage education and counselling services is also essential and should be part of any publicity campaign.

It is therefore recommended that the Attorney-General's Department continue to allocate sufficient funds for the development of a national advertising project to promote community awareness of the availability and nature of marriage counselling and pre-marriage counselling programs.
5 Meeting community needs

Marriage counselling services as defined in the operating definition under the Act allow for counselling of all types ranging from pre-marriage to post-divorce situations. Still there is a feeling in the professional communities involved that services are not reaching enough of the people who may be in need or that other types of intervention may be more acceptable and effective.

Marriage counselling agencies now assert that they provide a range of services to meet client needs including groups for the divorced, for children of the divorced, step-parenting groups and marriage enrichment programs.

Some agencies prefer to focus specifically on relationship counselling between couples at whatever point in the relationship they seek help. ('Couples' means both married and de facto couples in all circumstances.) Multi-service agencies stress the interrelationship between marital distress and general social welfare concerns of clients in counselling situations. Their experience indicates that for some couples counselling must be linked with information and education about other welfare services if marriage counselling is to be successful.

The Family Court Counselling Service provides assistance before and during the divorce experience on issues of custody, access and property with emphasis on conciliatory processes but has been criticised for not providing a comprehensive enough service to meet the continuous counselling education and information needs of adults and children involved in family breakup (Renouf, 1981).

Then the question is raised as to why pre-marital education programs receive such limited attention. The crucial role of general educational curriculum and specific human relations education courses in preparing young people for mature relationships needs to be recognised as part of the marriage support continuum. Research into the reasons for marital dissatisfaction and marital breakdown consistently describe lack of communications skills and unrealistic expectations of marriage and family life as critical dimensions in marital success or failure (Levinger, 1976; Hartin, 1977; IFS Divorce Study, 1983). Schools can be important mediating agents in improving skills in these areas and in exposing young people to more realistic views of family and married life.
For some people other forms of intervention may be more relevant. A booklet on ‘How to be a more successful step-parent’, for instance, may be more useful than attending a group. Local community forums sponsored by schools or civic clubs that present topics such as ‘Coping with divorce’ may motivate some to seek further help if necessary or trigger new awareness in others that make additional help-seeking unnecessary.
6 Coordination of marriage support programs

Concerns about definitions of marriage counselling raised earlier may have their origins in the broader question — 'what should marriage counselling be trying to do?' One approach may be to consider marriage counselling as one link in a chain of marriage (and family) support programs — programs that must be dynamic, not static, processes. Marriage follows along a continuum beginning with mate selection, progressing through the pre-marital relationship which may entail living together, to the early married partner stage, then family life with children and on to growing older as a couple again. Other key points in this relationship or life cycle model are times of divorce and remarriage. It becomes clear that there are many points of intervention in the progress of relationships where the provision of education, information or counselling may be useful.

Whether the Family Law Act's provisions for marriage counselling and divorce counselling services can or should encompass all these interventions is a matter for deliberation. Surprise is often expressed that marriage counselling policy is tied to the law of divorce (a little like a cigarette manufacturing company funding lung cancer research). One explanation given is that acquaintance with the effects of divorce might encourage the provision of services to prevent or to moderate the impact of unhappy marital relationships. Moreover, it was the intention of the Family Law Act to embrace several aspects of family law, not just that which deals with divorce.

While debate continues over who should have jurisdiction over marriage support services, a more pressing concern is the need for greater coordination of policy relating to the provision of services along the whole continuum of support for achieving satisfying marital and family relationships. Reinforcing the importance of coordination of services, The Joint Select Committee on the Family Law Act (1980) proposed early on in the debate that the Marriage Act and the Family Law Act be consolidated so that 'those contemplating marriage are appraised of not only marriage responsibilities but also the consequences that result from breakdown' (Recommendation 5, p.ix). Perhaps 'educated' would be preferred wording.

One example of the confusion in provision of services is the apparent
overlap of the role of the approved marriage counselling agencies and that of the Family Court Counselling Service. As originally envisaged, the Family Court Counselling Service provided both reconciliation and conciliation counselling depending on the client's presenting problems and needs. In fact, because of overwhelming demand in the area of conciliating custody and access disputes, the tendency has been for all cases that would benefit from marriage counselling to be referred to approved marriage counselling agencies (Marshall, 1980). In general, Family Court counselling services appear now to specialise in short-term counselling to resolve disputes over custody access issues resulting from marriage breakdown. Longer term counselling for reconciliation, separation, or post-divorce adjustment is referred to the approved agencies.

While the intent has been to evolve complementary spheres of influence for each counselling service, relations between the approved agencies and the Court counsellors have not always been clear or mutually satisfying (Joint Select Committee, 1980, pp. 169-171). To illustrate this state of affairs, marriage counselling agencies point out that in 1982-83 only 658 referrals or 3 per cent of total new referrals were made by the Family Court to the approved agencies.

In explanation, it needs to be mentioned that many clients who use the Court Counselling Service may be at a stage in their marriage breakdown where referral might not be appropriate and the conciliation skills of the court counsellors more suitable. This would be so particularly if the issues relate to property, custody and access negotiations and re-negotiations or where couples have been separated for an extensive period of time prior to filing for divorce.

Recently, however, concerted efforts have been made on the part of a number of approved agencies and the Family Court Counselling Service to improve relations with the intent of clarifying the role each can perform to assist people in marital distress. For example, the Canberra Marriage Counselling Service (Annual Report, 1982) reports that during the past year 'there has developed a good system of cross referrals so that each agency is clear about how they complement each other at different points in the process of marital breakdown'. Nevertheless, while individual efforts are to be applauded, a more systematic review of the roles of the two services should be undertaken to ensure the most effective use of both services.

The South Australia Marriage Guidance Council provides another example of coordination of services; in an outlying area, the community welfare centre books appointments and sets aside a room for the counsellor to use on the days the service is available. The Queensland Marriage Guidance Council, too, offers services from locations associated with Lifeline, an ambulance service and community health centres.

Along these lines, the Joint Select Committee (1980) in its report recommended the establishment of a Domestic Relations Commission in each State which, in addition to providing legal services, would develop educational material for media promotion of marriage counselling and for training counsellors. However, the proposal for a Domestic Relations Commission still does not address the question of how to fit all the pieces of marriage support programs together.
Consultative Committee on Marriage and Family Support Programs

The establishment of an inter-department review or consultative committee would be one way of achieving coordination of policy and linkages between diverse professionals, programs and agencies concerned with fostering positive and healthy relationships along the whole life cycle continuum.

Such a committee could include representatives from government health, education and welfare departments as well as from the Attorney-General’s Department. The Director of the Family Court Counselling Service and a representative of the Institute of Family Studies could be included. Representatives of the approved agencies as well as other practitioners and community gatekeepers could be selected when appropriate or seconded when required.

The basic aim of such a committee would be to coordinate the activities within existing government departments to ensure an overall perspective and sensible distribution of resources and responsibilities. Broad consultation with community organisations and involved professionals would be carried out and increased cooperation and definition of responsibility between the Family Court Counselling Service, approved marriage counselling agencies, education and welfare services could be promoted. Publicity and community awareness campaigns that educate the public about available services or offer useful information at a basic level so that individuals can recognise problems earlier and take steps to improve their situation themselves could be coordinated at the committee level.

In addition, the committee could investigate the feasibility of establishing more flexible rules governing the existing provision of services to encourage more localised community-based efforts.

To avoid some of the pitfalls of creating yet another permanent bureaucratic body, such a committee could begin as an interim body modelled on the United Kingdom’s Working Party on Marriage Guidance which was set up by the Home Office in consultation with the Department of Health and Social Security in 1979. As the authors of this report have noted:

... marriages at risk frequently show many inter-related aspects; and so do not fit appropriately within the boundaries of one government department; nor are they amenable to single solutions (Marriage Matters, 1979, p.100).

With these considerations in mind, the Institute recommends exploring the concept of establishing a Consultative Committee on Marriage and Family Support Programs to coordinate policy related to the provision of educational and counselling services. In this time of funding constraints an emphasis on coordination and collaboration, not duplication and competition, is required.

Referral network

The establishment of an integrated referral network based on accurate understanding of the strengths and limitations of each resource would be another way of ensuring coordination of services. If such a network could be forged, it may be more effective than a formal structure like a consultative committee in improving the chances of an individual finding the appropriate resource whenever he or she turns for help with a marital problem — either acknowledged or camouflaged.
Family centres

Another approach towards improved coordination of services that has been considered is the establishment of Family Advisory Centres where a variety of counselling and practical welfare information could be obtained without the stigma sometimes attached to fronting up at a designated marriage counselling centre. Financial counselling, vocational and employment advice are additional services that could be offered. A number of multi-service agencies operate in this manner already but have more of a welfare connotation. Expanding on the idea of advisory centres, Alexander (1983) has advocated setting up general family centres where child care, recreation, and programs for the elderly are offered. Provision for marriage counselling or marriage education services could easily be included at such centres. Several women's centres have operated along these lines providing recreation, child care and vocational skills training as well as counselling in marital, family and personal relationships.

However, one possible drawback of this family centre model is the confusion that could result when people are confronted by a bewildering supermarket array of family services.
7 Conclusion

Identifying community needs and matching these needs with services at the appropriate level and in the most suitable environment seems to be an overall objective in the area of marriage support programs. Achieving the most effective and efficient use of government resources in aiding and implementing marriage support services is another priority. The following are, first, suggestions for research to be conducted or encouraged by the Institute of Family Studies to meet these objectives and, second, recommendations for consideration by the Attorney-General.

Research suggestions

In line with the Institute's role in the initiation and encouragement of understanding those factors which affect marital and family stability, a primary objective of the Design Seminar held in April 1983 was to ascertain priorities and issues for research in the marriage support area. The following is a summary of the major suggested research issues.

1 The image of marriage counselling in the community

One major concern of practitioners is how the community views marriage counselling for themselves or as a resource for others with marital problems. Are people aware of such services and do they see them as relevant? Are their assumptions about what marriage counselling is and does accurate?

Studies focusing on the identity and image of marriage counselling could have several components varying in depth.

a General community survey For a general picture of community awareness, surveys modelled on the brief shopping centre interviews conducted by Marriage Guidance Council of South Australia would be useful. Sample populations from a variety of community contexts that reflect regional, cultural, ethnic and socio-economic differences amongst individuals would be a critical component of these surveys. Questions could include:

- Where would you go if you had a marriage problem?
b gatekeeper survey Given the importance of other individuals in the community who often have initial contact or act as referral agents for people with marital problems, a survey of prominent 'gatekeepers' may be valuable to ascertain their views of marriage counselling. Among those whose opinions could be sought are doctors, lawyers, industry personnel officers, social workers and infant welfare sisters. Questions could include:

- What advice do you give to clients, employees etc. who are having marital problems?
- Would you or do you refer clients to marriage counsellors? If not, why not?
- What is your opinion of marriage counselling? What are its objectives in your opinion?

c divorcing population survey Counsellors are always interested in learning more about why people who are divorcing do not take advantage of marriage counselling. As already mentioned, a recent study by the Institute of Family Studies of 295 divorced individuals revealed that only 20 per cent had been to a marriage counsellor. One possible approach then would be to take a sample of people entering the Family Court process at the time of filing for divorce and question them about their awareness of, or experience with, marriage counselling. Questions could address:

- whether or not the individual had been to a marriage counsellor and if not, the reasons why they decided against doing so;
- if they had been to marriage counselling how they felt about the experience;
- what had been their expectations of marriage counselling;
- whether or not an individual had been to another source for advice, information or counselling and if so, who or what this source was.

Relevant demographic information would be obtained so that some basic comparisons could be made between those who attended and those who did not attend counselling prior to the decision to divorce, for example, duration of marriage, age, country of origin, education, occupation.

A more comprehensive comparison between the population who attend counselling with those who do not would require a more extensive interview particularly with reference to the reasons for breakdown and quality of marriage.

2 A profile of marriage counselling organisation clients

Marriage counselling organisations are frequently accused of catering for a limited clientele — that is, mainly a middle class, better educated population. Although individual agencies collect statistics about their clients, no national overall profile of marriage counselling clients has been compiled. The Attorney-General’s Department collects data related only to the process and structure of counselling organisations — it does not require any demographic information about clients from the approved agencies.
a Uniform data sheets As a first step in the direction of developing accurate and relevant client profiles on a national basis, the Institute has agreed to undertake the development of a uniform statistical data collection sheet for use by all approved agencies. Based on the information already collected by most agencies, the uniform data collection sheet will allow national comparisons to be made across a comprehensive number of demographic variables.

b Client profile A study of clients would illustrate by comparison with broader population statistics whether particular groups of people do not attend counselling, for example, migrants or lower socio-economic status individuals. Information obtained from both the community awareness and client profile studies would assist agencies in evaluating the appropriateness of existing programs and in formulating new policies, outreach and techniques to serve a wider community.

c Client expectations A related study would examine specifically the expectations of clients in regard to marriage counselling. Several different aspects could be investigated:

- what the expectations are of clients who seek counselling;
- why clients drop out of counselling prematurely;
- why men appear less motivated to seek counselling as evidenced in the discrepancy between the number of male and female clients presenting to agencies;
- what aspects clients found most helpful, least helpful.

Information gained from such a study would illuminate discrepancies between counsellor aims and client objectives or perceptions and would help answer the question of whether client needs are being accurately identified, satisfactorily met, and even whether client expectations are realistic.

3 The nature of marriage

A number of research suggestions or areas of interest are centred more on the intrinsic nature of marriage and relationships rather than on the counselling process itself. The underlying theme is that marriage counselling can only be effective if it reflects the social environment of clients, their values and beliefs about marriage as well as their expectations of the relationship.

a Studies of married people The Institute has already undertaken a study of married individuals to ascertain their attitudes and feelings about their marriages. This and additional studies will explore:

- the kinds of needs marriage meets and if these needs change over time;
- whether the expectations of married people change over time, for example, before and after children;
- the satisfactions and dissatisfactions in the marriage and whether these vary according to the age, sex, socio-economic status, country of origin of the individuals;
- how couples negotiate conflicts and stresses within marriage.

b Young marrieds Because the patterns a marriage will take seem to be set early in the relationship it is suggested that a study of couples in their first year of marriage would be useful as a means of determining the early intervention and education strategies that could enhance these marriages or prevent future breakdown. Interviews with these couples could explore:
• what rules they have set up for negotiating conflicts;
• how they negotiate the roles each will fulfil;
• what their problems are and how they solve them;
• what their satisfactions and dissatisfactions are;
• whether and in what way their expectations about marriage have changed;
• what changes they expect to take place in their marriage in the near future.

c Pre-marriage education clients To evaluate the impact of pre-marriage programs on marital outcome, a study could be initiated comparing a sample of couples who have participated in such a program with a sample of couples who have not. Specific dimensions of marital progress such as communication skills and problem-solving skills could be looked at.

4 Evaluation of the counselling process
The research literature shows that most clients benefit from marriage counselling (Hartin, 1983) and statistics collected from marriage counselling agencies (albeit an interested source) suggest that between 60 and 70 per cent of clients are satisfied with the service. Satisfaction may not, of course, equal effectiveness. An evaluation of effective counselling depends very much on what the expectations were of counselling and of the outcomes desired. The impact of counselling can be looked at from several angles, for example:
• whether the marital relationship had improved and the problem been either completely or partially solved;
• in cases where the relationship had not improved, whether the clients felt that they had been helped personally by the counselling;
• where no improvement in the marital relationship was recorded, whether the clients felt that the counselling had not helped them in any way (Phillips, 1981).

The complexities involved in evaluation studies are enormous and have been reviewed by researchers both in Australia (Hartin, 1983) and overseas (Beck, 1976). To be taken into consideration are:
• the characteristics of clients
• the nature of the presenting problems
• the counselling technique and method
• bias and values of the counsellor
• duration of treatment
• definition of desired outcomes
• assessment methods used
• external influences outside of counselling intervention
• spontaneous remission
• deterioration over time after counselling (long-term effects)
• use of control groups

A few approved agencies, particularly the larger ones like the Marriage Guidance Committee of New South Wales and Victoria and the National Marriage Guidance Council itself, have conducted limited evaluation studies and several agencies, including the Marriage Guidance Council of Western Australia and Adelaide Central Mission, are currently in the process of carrying out studies on the effectiveness of counselling. These
studies will provide valuable feedback to the agencies involved regarding the appropriateness and effectiveness of their own services.

However, it has been suggested that a national study sampling all ‘approved’ marriage counselling agencies would provide a more realistic overview of the effectiveness of marriage counselling in the Australian context. A follow-up component would be requisite and the use of a control group would have to be addressed, elements usually absent from smaller localised studies. Some specific issues to be addressed could include:

- what constitutes a successful outcome of marriage counselling for both the client and the counsellor and how this can be evaluated;
- what techniques work better with specific sorts of problems and specific types of clients;
- what aspects clients find most helpful/least useful.

Careful consideration of all the methodological constraints mentioned above would be paramount.

Additional comments

The suggestion has been made that the Institute of Family Studies become a clearing house for the collection and dissemination of literature and research investigations in the area of marriage counselling and marriage support. The Institute has already gone a long way in this direction — since its inception it has requested that all researchers in the marriage and family field in Australia keep it informed of research in progress and completed research. Overseas contacts are widely maintained and literature and developments in the field are requested and collected.

The Institute Newsletter is one forum for disseminating information while the Family Information Centre is available for more detailed study of the collection materials. Other dissemination techniques could be considered.

Finally, as Harvey (1983b) cogently observes, one purpose of research involving marriage counselling should be to help the government arrive at better approaches for making decisions about social policy. As has been pointed out, there are several anomalies in both the laws governing approved marriage counselling agencies and the administration guidelines that apply to them. The Institute believes policy for marital and family support should be given higher priority than previously.

It is to be hoped that the issues suggested for research priority, particularly those exploring the needs of the community, will take a step towards this objective.

Policy recommendations

The provision of government funds and the interest taken by the government across the whole spectrum of marriage support programs needs to be reviewed in terms of its effectiveness in meeting the identified social needs of the community, in this case the support given to enable individuals to achieve satisfying marital and family relationships.

The following recommendations are made by the Institute of Family Studies for consideration by the Attorney-General.
1. To obtain clear and unambiguous understanding of current government policy concerning the provision and funding of marriage support programs, all legislation, regulations and implementation policies under the *Family Law Act* should be clearly set out and accurately interpreted. This would eliminate confusion over what activities are encouraged and supported and allow an evaluation of whether policies need to be reconsidered or legislation amended more effectively to meet community needs. The relationship between the Family Court Counselling Service and marriage counselling organisations is a case in point.

2. Consideration should be given to amalgamating the *Marriage Act* and the *Family Law Act* so that the policies relating to the continuum of marital and family relationships from pre-marriage to post-divorce are under one legislation. In this the Institute supports the conclusions of the Family Law Council and the Joint Select Committee on the Family Law Act.

3. That adequate funding be made available under the current *Marriage Act* and *Family Law Act* provisions for the development of a national advertising project to promote community awareness of the availability and nature of marriage counselling and pre-marriage education services and programs.

4. That adequate funds be made available under the *Family Law Act* to marriage counselling agencies to provide training for community ‘gatekeepers’ to assist them in identifying marital problems and in making initial interventions and referrals.

5. That an inter-departmental Consultative Committee on Marriage and Family Support Programs be considered to review and coordinate policy related to the provision of educational and counselling services. Such a committee could include representatives from the health, education and welfare departments as well as the Attorney-General's Department who currently have responsibility for providing a range of marriage support education and counselling services. Additional members could include the Directors of the Institute of Family Studies and the Family Court Counselling Service. Representatives from the approved agencies would be appointed and community representatives including gatekeeper representatives would be seconded when appropriate.

   The committee would address the availability of services and the duplication of services, and explore the most appropriate levels, modes and points of intervention along the whole relationship spectrum from pre-marriage to post-divorce. A variety of ‘doors to knock on’ would then be assured and an appropriate answer to the ‘knock’ made more probable.

6. That increased funding be provided for marriage education services in Australia. The present $80 000 per annum grant is totally inadequate and reverses the desired priority of prevention versus belated ‘cure’.
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