For better for worse: What psychological science can tell us about the nature, prediction, and prevention of relationship problems in couples

GRIFFITH UNIVERSITY

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Inaugural Professorial Lecture

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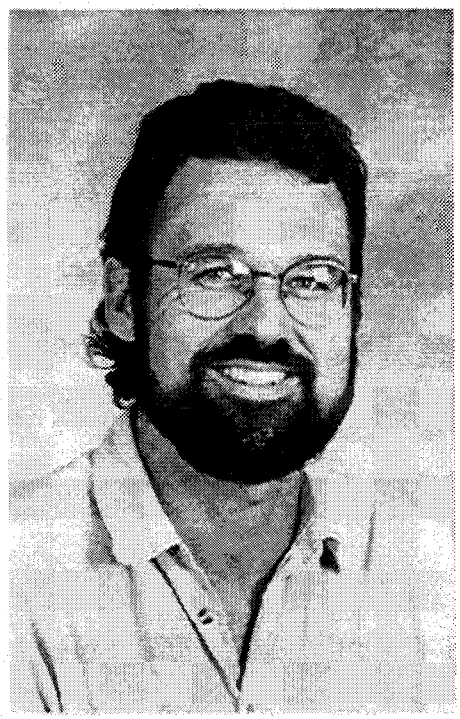

Kim Halford is Professor of Clinical Psychology, and Head of the School of Applied Psychology (Nathan Campus), at Griffith University, in Brisbane, Australia. He has occupied the position of Professor at Griffith University since February, 1995.

Professor Halford undertook his undergraduate training in a Bachelor of Behavioural Science (Honours), completed at LaTrobe University in 1975. He then worked briefly in the mental health system in Victoria, working in the Mont Park Psychiatric Hospital. He returned to LaTrobe University. He was appointed as a Senior Tutor in Psychology at the Lincoln Institute of Health Sciences, which has now become the School of Health Sciences at LaTrobe University to undertake a PhD in Clinical Psychology. He completed his PhD part time while in this position, graduating in 1979. Whilst at Lincoln Institute he was promoted from Senior Tutor to Lecturer. In 1981 he journeyed north to Brisbane to accept an appointment as Senior Lecturer in Counselling

Psychology at the Brisbane College of Advanced Education, which is now the Kelvin Grove Campus of the Queensland University of Technology. In 1985 he accepted a position as Lecturer in Clinical Psychology within the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Queensland. He was promoted to Senior Lecturer in Clinical Psychology in 1989. In 1991 he was appointed to the position of Associate Professor in Clinical Psychology and Chief Psychologist at the Royal Brisbane Hospital, this conjoint appointment involved clinical responsibilities throughout the hospital as well as research and teaching responsibilities within the University. In 1995 he made his move to Griffith University.

Professor Halford's major clinical and research interests over the last 15 years has been in couples' relationships, focusing both on therapy and prevention. He has published over 80 articles in scientific journals and books, and has recently published 2 books in the area of couples therapy. He had appointments as Visiting Professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Oregon in 1989, where he worked closely with Professor Robert Weiss, and in 1993 in the Department of Clinical Psychology at the University of Manchester, where he worked with Professor Nick Tarrier. Professor Halford has presented his work on couples' relationships in the United Kingdom, Germany, Norway, Denmark, the United States, New Zealand, and throughout Australia.

For better for worse:
What psychological science tells us about the nature, prediction, and prevention of relationship problems in couples

I want to talk this evening about what psychological science tells us about the nature, prediction, and prevention of relationship problems in couples. The work that I will present focuses largely on my own research, which has been conducted with a number of highly valued colleagues, and students. I do not focus on my own work because I believe it is the best in the field. Rather, my understanding of an Inaugural Professorial Address is that it is meant to address an area of particular passionate interest to the speaker, and to integrate the speaker's work. Couples' relationships is an area of passionate interest of mine.

Let me begin with a poem.

"How do I love thee?
Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
my soul can reach."
Elizabeth Barrett Browning

With these words Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the romantic poet, tries to capture something of the passion, the excitement, the overwhelming nature of being in love. Numerous other poets, painters, novelists, film-makers and other artists have tried to capture the essence of that wondrous human experience. A similar diversity of artists also have tried to capture the other side of human relationships, the feelings of betrayal, anger, hurt and

pain when relationships go wrong. These different artistic expressions are important lenses through which we can look at the nature of human couple relationships. However, the work of artists is not the only lens through which to look at relationships.

As an undergraduate student I undertook a major in genetics as well as psychology. In a recent article by the evolutionary psychologist David Buss (1994), he reminded me of the importance of the evolutionary perspective in understanding human behaviour. In reviewing a wide range of evidence he pointed out that long term pair bonding exists in many species, particularly in those species where the offspring are dependent upon the adults for survival for long periods. It is assumed that the existence of the couple bond confers adaptive advantage to the offspring, and enhances their chances of passing on their genes to the next generation.

The evolutionary perspective is another important lens, but again is not the only legitimate lens, through which to view relationships. Culture is yet another lens on relationships. The ideals of marriage and other couple relationships are largely culturally defined. In Australia, as in many western countries, there have been enormous changes in beliefs about the values and goals to which marital relationships are aimed. One example of the change is where marriages physically occur, and the symbolic significance of that. In 1974, prior to the revision of the Family Law Act later that year, couples wanting to marry had basically two choices: They could get married in a religious institution, or they could go to a registry office. The overwhelming majority of Australians, well over 95%, chose to marry in

religious organisations. Last year, in 1996, 45% of Australian marriages were performed by civil celebrants, rather than within religious organisations. Clearly this represents a huge shift in the religious significance attached to marriage by a very large proportion of Australians. However, the fact that still over half of all marriages occur in religious institutions indicates that this is still important to many. Given this diversity of views about relationships, is it possible to make some broad generalisations about what Australians expect of marriage and couple relationships in the late 1990's?

A few weeks ago the Australian Institute of Family Studies (1997) released a survey of just over 2,000 adult Australians asking them about their beliefs about how marriage should be. Table 1 sets out the percentage of people endorsing a variety of different beliefs. From this table it is clear that the overwhelming majority of people believe that marriage involves being sexually and emotionally faithful towards your partner, with some 98% of respondents agreeing with that view. People also see marriage as a significant long term commitment, with 80% of respondents endorsing the belief that marriage is for life. The acceptability of co-habitation has changed dramatically. In this recent survey 62% of Australian adults said that living together with a partner, without getting married, was morally acceptable. This contrasts greatly with the views held by Australians back in the early 70's, where less than 20% of respondents endorsed this view about the acceptability of co-habitation.

TABLE 1

In the 1990's Australians seem to have a somewhat mixed perspective about marital break up and divorce. Relatively few people see divorce as an "easy option", in the sense that people rarely endorse the view that if a marriage does not work out one can always get divorced. However, Australians do see divorce as an acceptable way to end an unacceptable relationship, with only 14% of Australians endorsing the belief that marriage is for life even if the couples are unhappy.

In summary, Australians on average in the late 1990's see marriage as a significant long term commitment, where living together is an acceptable alternative, and where divorce is seen as something that is a legitimate way to end an unsatisfactory relationship. However, divorce is a step only endorsed if the relationship is truly unsatisfactory. So, if that is what Australians think relationships should be like, how do they actually work out?

The prevalence and significance of relationship problems

Figure 1 presents data from a paper by Markman & Hahlweg (1993). Howard Markman recruited a cohort of approximately 120 engaged couples nearly 20 years ago, and has been following them ever since to see how their relationships worked out. He administered the Diadic Adjustment Scale, which is a self report global measure of relationship satisfaction. For the statistically minded, the mean score across the population on this measure is approximately 115, with a standard deviation of 15. By convention in the couples' relationship area a score of approximately 100 is regarded as the cut-off for relationship distress. In other words, if you score below 100 you are seen as being significantly dissatisfied with your relationship. As you can see

from Figure 1, most people begin their relationships with scores in the mid to high 120's. This is not very surprising, it is unlikely that you would be engaged to be married to someone unless you were reasonably happy with the relationship you had with them. That is the good news, the bad news is that the mean relationship satisfaction dips fairly dramatically in the first 3 or 4 years of marriage, plateauing out at the population mean of about 115. Of course, this trend in mean relationship satisfaction disguises high levels of variability between couples. Some couples sustain their high levels of initial relationship satisfaction and 10 years later are equally as satisfied with their relationship as they were at the beginning. Other couples have a rapid drop in their relationship satisfaction and head into the dissatisfied range. In Australia approximately 45% of Australians end their marriages in divorce (McDonald 1995).

FIGURE 1

So does the greater acceptability of co-habitation, and the avoidance of the legal aspects of marriage confer any advantages or disadvantages? Well, according to the data presented by McDonald (1995), and other researchers, co-habiting couples are more likely to break up their relationships than married couples, and there are higher rates of relationship violence in co-habiting relative to married couples. So, it seems that simply avoiding the legal aspects of marriage does not necessarily guarantee one a satisfying relationship.

Given that relationship distress is common, this does raise the question of whether people and the community should care about this. Is it important if relationships just don't work out? Could it be that marriage is simply an outmoded institution, and the rates of divorce and distress reflect its poor match with current social expectations? There is considerable data that relationship distress extracts a heavy toll on both the partners and the community more broadly.

If we compare a couple who are happy in their relationship with a couple who are distressed in their relationship, then the partners in the happy relationship are on average better off on any index of mental health that you might choose to look at. For example, relationship distress is associated with significantly high rates of depression, particularly in women (Bebbington, 1987; Coyne, Kahn & Gotlib, 1987; Hooley, Orleay & Teasdale, 1986), alcohol abuse, particularly in men (O'Farrell, 1989; Vanicelli, Gingereich & Ryback, 1983), and high rates of sexual dysfunction in both sexes (Zimmer, 1983). Whilst the causal connections between poor mental health and dissatisfaction in relationships is not always clear, it does seem that poor relationships can severely exacerbate individual mental health problems (Halford, Bouma, Kelly, & Young, in press).

Relationship problems also are correlated with poor physical health (Schmaling & Sher, 1997). For example, people who have significant relationship problems are much more likely to develop serious illness in middle age, and they show much poorer recovery from that illness than people in more satisfied relationships. The effects of relationship problems on

physical health are due both to the direct effects of distress relationships on physiological processes, and indirect effects when relationship problems lead to changes in health related behaviours. Direct effects include an association between marital distress and immunosuppression (Keicolt-Glaser et al., 1988), elevated blood pressure in people with essential hypertension (Ewart, Taylor, et al., 1991), and possibly through coronary heart disease (Gottman, 1990). Indirect effects operate through low adherence to medical treatment regimens by individuals in distressed relationships; through the effects of a distressed relationship on pain and coping behaviours in chronic illness, and the possible reinforcement of illness behaviour within distressed relationships (Schmaling & Sher, 1997).

In addition to the impact on the partners, relationship distress also has a major impact on children. Conflict between partners is associated with significant adjustment problems in children (Grych & Fincham, 1990). Children of distressed relationships show increased problems in conduct disorders, child anxiety problems, and childhood depression (Sanders, Nicholson, & Floyd, 1997).

There is also a strong associated between relationship problems and violence (O'Leary & Vivian, 1990; Rosenbaum & O'Leary, 1981). About 25% of marriages have at least one episode of interspousal physical aggression at some time (Strauss & Gelles, 1986; Strauss, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980). In Australia about 25% of all homicides and 20% of all reported offences against persons result from interspousal violence (National Committee on Violence, 1990). The consequence of interspousal violence are not just physical,

women victims of ongoing assault by their partners have a high risk of depression, alcohol abuse, and psychosomatic disorders, and also are high users of the health care system (Cascardi, Langhinrichsen, & Vivian, 1992; Jaffee, Wolfe, Wilson, & Zak, 1986; Stets & Strauss, 1990). Furthermore, marital aggression is linked to child abuse (Grych & Fincham, 1990), development of anti-social behaviour in male offspring (Grych & Fincham, 1990), and increased risk of children entering violent relationships as adults (Widom, 1989).

In contrast to the negative effects of being in a distressed relationship, being in a relationship that is satisfying confers protective effects on the partners. Being in a satisfied marriage is associated with low rates of psychological disorder (Romans-Clarkson, Walton, Herbison, & Mullen, 1988; Weiss & Avid, 1978; Weisman, 1987), low demand for in-patient and out-patient mental health services (Bebbington, 1987b), higher rate of life happiness, and higher resilience to the negative effects of major life stresses, such as unemployment (Gore, 1978; Gove, Hughes, & Styles, 1983; Halford, Kelly, & Markman, 1997).

So, let us draw all that together. Relationship distress is reasonably common, and it has a wide range of deleterious effects on the mental and physical health of partners and their offspring. Moreover, these problems are associated with higher rates of health care utilisation, and loss of work time through increased health problems. All of this translates to a substantial cost to the Australian community.

The nature of relationship problems

Given that relationship distress has such profound effects it is important then to try and understand the nature of relationship problems. One way in which we can evaluate relationship problems is to look at what couples coming to therapy complain about. In Table 2 is data collected from 100 consecutive couples who presented to me for couples' therapy (Halford, in press). As you can see from this table, the single most common complaint by both men and women is about poor communication, and difficulties with conflict. There are relatively few gender differences in the key complaints presented by couples. As communication is so central to the expressed concerns of couples with relationship problems, that has been a key focus of couples research including my own research.

TABLE 2

I want to describe a research paradigm which is widely used in the couples research literature, and which I have also used extensively myself. Couples are asked to identify an issue which is a source of disagreement in their relationship, and are asked to talk about this topic for 10 to 15 minutes. These discussions occur in a laboratory, and the resulting interaction is videotaped and then analysed to look at the way in which couples manage conflict. Susan Osgarby and myself have used this paradigm and applied a particular model of communication to try and analyse the differences between distressed and happy couples in their communication processes.

Table 3 is a brief summary of the key codes that we include when we analyse the video tapes of couple's discussions. The basic ideas underlying the coding system are adapted from some earlier work by a German researcher Kurt Hahlweg. Essentially the idea is that communication has two primary functions, speaking and listening. We suggest that there are positive constructive ways to do each of these tasks, and negative and more destructive ways of doing these. In our form of coding we look at the video tapes, and assess at the frequency with which people use these different categories of verbal behaviours. Figure 2 presents the percentage of time that happy couples and unhappy couples spend using positive and negative listening, and positive and negative speaking respectively. As you can see, relative to the unhappy couples the happy couples use much higher rates of positive listening and speaking, and substantially lower rates of negative listening and speaking.

TABLE 3

FIGURE 2

In addition to looking simply at the frequency of occurrence of particular types of communication behaviours, it is also possible to look at the patterns of interaction. Figure 3 presents the results of sequential analysis of a cross cultural study that I performed some years ago (Halford, Hahlweg, & Dunne, 1990). In this study my colleague Kurt Hahlweg recruited 20 couples who were distressed and presenting to a marital therapy clinic in Munich,

Germany, and another 20 couples who were happy in their relationships. In Brisbane, Australia, we recruited similar numbers of couples who were distressed and non-distressed in their relationships. All of these couples went through the problem solving task and were video taped in the method I have already described. In this case we coded their non-verbal expression of affect, and looked at the patterns of non-verbal negative emotional expression. This includes expression of anger, sadness, disgust, and so forth, through non-verbal behaviours.

In Figure 3 the lag 1 data shows the base rate probability of negative non-verbal behaviour. As you can see from this figure, approximately 20 - 25% of non-verbal behaviours were negative for the distressed couples across the two cultures, whereas only 2 - 3% of the behaviours were negative for the happy couples across cultures. The lag 2 probability is the conditional probability, assessed through sequential analysis, that if partner 1 exhibits negative non-verbal behaviour that the next response of partner 2 will also be a negative non-verbal behaviour. The lag 2 conditional probabilities are substantially higher than the lag 1 base rates, indicating that negative non-verbal behaviour is more likely to occur in response to other negative non-verbal behaviour. The lag 3 data shows the probability that if partner 1 is negative, and this is followed by a negative response by partner 2, that the next response from partner 1 also will be negative. Lags 4, 5 and so forth then show increasing lengths of chains of negative behaviour, with the conditional probability that if all of the previous lags were negative, that the next response also will be negative. The conditional probability of negative

non-verbal behaviour for the distressed couples asymptotes towards .95 after about 4 lags. In other words, distressed couples tend to get locked into reciprocity of negative non-verbal behaviour, and find it very difficult to cease being negative once it has begun. In contrast, negative non-verbal behaviour occurs so rarely in the happy couples, that we simply could not measure the frequency of its occurrence lag 2. In happy couples, if one partner is negative this is very likely to evoke a positive response from the other person, for example using a question to try to understand the other partner's upset.

FIGURE 3

Gerard Patterson, a leading family researcher, has referred to the tendency of distressed couples to be locked into negative cycles as the coercive escalation trap. In essence, the coercive escalation trap is that characteristic of distressed relationships in which there is rapid escalation towards mutual negativity, and once established this negativity is very difficult for the couple to terminate.

The phenomena of distressed couples' difficulties in managing conflict has been recognised for quite a long time (Weiss & Heyman, 1997). It occurred to Sue Osgarby and myself some years ago, that there must be more to good communication within relationships than simply being able to handle conflict. We thought about the distressed couples that we had both seen in therapy, and wondered what their relationships would be like if they just did not fight anymore. We concluded that there was the need for some

sense of positivity, for intimacy, that our current assessment methods did not capture all that well.

Sue and I developed the positive reminiscence task to try to capture positive intimacy skills. In this task each partner is interviewed individually and asked to identify a relationship "peak moment", a time when they felt particularly close and in love with their partner. The couple are then asked to talk together about these very positive times in their relationship. We videotape the interactions and analyse the way how the couple talk to each other using the coding system that I have already described. (Osgarby & Halford, 1997a).

Figure 4 presents the data from a cohort of happy and unhappy couples undertaking the positive reminiscence task. There are important differences between the happy and the unhappy couples, with the happy couples using many more of the positive communication behaviours than the unhappy couples. However, the differences between the happy and the unhappy couples in the positive reminiscence task is somewhat smaller in magnitude than it was in the problem solving task.

FIGURE 4

We thought there may be some additional aspects of positive communication that our existing coding system did not capture, and we added some additional codes. In Figure 5 we show the frequency of meshing behaviour by happy and unhappy couples during the problem solving and the positive reminiscence task. There are no gender differences in any of our

data, so the results are collapsed across gender. Meshing was defined as when one partner uses self disclosure or description of an event, and this is immediately followed by a self-disclosure or description by the partner which is consistent in affect and content with the first verbalisation. Essentially what this looks like is two partners conjointly telling a storry. For example, we had one couple who reminisced about a holiday to Sydney. She began the interaction by saying "Remember that time we went to Sydney?", and he followed up with "Oh yeah, that's right, we drove down in that old red heap didn't we. That funny old Falcon." She continues the description saying, "Yeah, yeah, and your mate Allan spent all that time trying to fix the damn thing up so that we could get away on time .....", and he continues, "Yeah, and then it did break down in the middle of the rain, half way down there."

FIGURE 5

What you can see from Figure 5 is that meshing is relatively rare in either the happy or the unhappy couples during problem solving. This is hardly surprising, since the topic is by definition one that the couple disagree about. We would not expect them to necessarily share the same perspective on a conflictual topic. However, when we look at the positive reminiscence task we can see that the happy couples spend abut half of their time meshing, whereas meshing is still very rare in the distressed couples. It seems that, for whatever reason, the unhappy couples find it much harder to jointly access shared views about positive times together. We also coded the non-verbal expression of affect by the partners during these two different

tasks, and the results of that data analysis is presented in Figure 6. What that shows is that the distressed couples show high levels of anger during the problem solving and high levels of sadness during the positive reminiscence task. The happy couples show significantly lower rates of anger and sadness during both tasks than the unhappy couples. The higher rates of negative affect across the two tasks for the distressed couples is important to note, but it also is important to note the affective specificity to particular tasks. Problem solving elicits anger, whereas positive reminiscence more typically elicits sadness in the distressed couples.

FIGURE 6

Of course, there is much more to a relationship than simply what outsiders can observe. There are important differences between couples in the way that they subjectively interpret what goes on in their relationship. Some years ago my colleague Matt Sanders and I were very interested in trying to examine what people thought about when they were talking with their partners. Using the problem solving paradigm, we developed a procedure that we called video mediated recall to assess cognitions during marital interaction (Halford & Sanders, 1988). The video mediated recall procedure is used after a problem solving interaction between the couple. Each is individually shown a video tape of the interaction they just completed. If you were a subject in this study you would be sat down in a room on your own looking at a TV screen. The instructions you would be given were as follows: "I want you to watch this videotape of the interaction that you have just

completed. Try to imagine that you are reliving the interaction, hear your own and your partner's words, and feel the way that you felt. At various points during the videotape I will pause the tape. I would like you to say out loud into this tape recorder whatever was running through your mind at that time. There is no need to do anything special, we just want to know what you were thinking." We took the tape recordings of what people reported they were thinking and content analysed these reports. Figure 7 shows the percentage of all reported thoughts which were positive about the relationship or partner, or negative about the relationship or partner, as reported by unhappy or happy couples. As you can see, the unhappy couples reported much higher rates of negative partner and relationship referent thoughts than did the happy couples.

FIGURE 7

The next step in our research program was to attempt to relate what people were thinking to what they were doing. From the videotaped analyses, and the coding of the audio tapes, we now had an important sequence of data. From the video tapes we could observe directly what people were actually doing and saying, and at various points in this behavioural sequence we had people's verbal reports of what they said they were thinking. We already knew from our previous research that we could predict what people would do later in the interaction, to a significant extent, from what they had done earlier. We posed the question of whether knowing what people said they were thinking enabled us better to predict future behaviour than simply

relying on past behaviour alone (Halford & Sanders, 1990). In Table 4 we show data which looks at the occurrence of negative non-verbal escalation. The first row of the table shows the unconditional probability of negative non-verbal behaviour. In other words, this shows that on about 23% of occasions across the whole set of samples of marital interaction that we had, the non-verbal behaviour was negative. The next row shows the conditional probability that behaviour at time 2 will be negative non-verbally, if behaviour at time 1 is negative non-verbally. The conditional probability is .55, which is statistically significantly greater than the unconditional probability of 0.23. We then looked at the probability that if negative non-verbal behaviour occurred at time 1, and both partners reported that they were thinking negatively about each other in the relationship, that they would then exhibit further negative non-verbal behaviour at time 2. The conditional probability there was 1. In other words, every time that people were both behaving and thinking negatively this always led to more negative behaviour. Whereas negative behaviour itself led to further negative behaviour on just over half of all occasions. Thus, knowing what people are thinking is very important if one is to predict what they are going to do next.

TABLE 4

We have been able in subsequent research to show that there are systematic biases in people's perceptions and recall of relationship interactions. In a recent study completed by Sue Osgarby and myself (Osgarby & Halford, 1997b) we looked at people's recall of relationship

interactions. Immediately after the positive reminiscence task that I described earlier, we had partners complete an affect check list. The affect check list includes a large number of emotions, and people were asked to indicate to what extent they felt these emotions during the positive reminiscence interaction. We then asked the couple one week later how they remembered feeling during the interaction that they had the week before. As you can see from Figure 8, immediately after the interaction happy couples reported significantly more positivity during the interaction, than did the unhappy couples. When we asked the couples to recall the interaction a week later the unhappy couples had significantly reduced the level of positivity of their feelings relative to what they reported immediately after the interaction. In contrast, the happy couples reported their affect in fairly much the same way a week later as they did immediately after the interaction. Thus, distressed couples showed a negative bias in the way in which they recalled relationship interaction. In other research we have shown that this negative memory bias in distressed couples is very robust across different methods of assessment (Osgarby & Halford, 1997b).

FIGURE 8

Thus, we now know quite a bit about the nature of the interactions of distressed couples. Unhappy couples are characterised by high rates of negative communication behaviours across both problem solving and positive reminiscence type tasks. Furthermore, distressed couples are likely to continue high rates of negativity towards each other in a given interaction, or

to be caught in the coersive escalation trap. Distressed couples also think much more negatively about each other, and are likely to selectively remember things as more negative than they actually were at the time. Given this information on the nature of relationship problems, this led us then to the question of whether we could predict who would become distressed? Remember, we opened this with the observation that almost everybody starts off being satisfied with their relationships, the question becomes "How do these characteristics of distressed relationships develop?"

Prediction of relationship problems

Figure 9 is adapted from a review published by Karney & Bradbury (1995), which summarised over 100 longitudinal studies on the prediction of couple relationship problems. Relationship outcomes refer to both relationship satisfaction, and divorce. Whilst not perfectly related to each other, people tend to get divorced after period of low relationship satisfaction.

FIGURE 9

Karney & Bradbury's model proposes that the variables that influence relationship outcomes can usefully be summarised as falling into three broad categories: Couple adaptive processes, stressful events, and enduring vulnerabilities. Enduring vulnerabilities refer to relatively stable individual characteristics which people bring to the relationship. There has been a huge amount of research on personality variables and whether they predict relationship outcomes. By and large personality variables have not been found to account for much of the variance in relationship outcomes, with the

notable exception of neuroticism. Neuroticism refers to the ability to regulate negative emotions successfully, and it has been found that people who have difficulty with this are more vulnerable to having relationship problems. It is also known that the adult offspring of divorce, and people exposed to high levels of interparental conflict, also are at higher risk for relationship problems.

Stressful events refer to major transitions, and traumatic events, which impact on people's relationships. For example, it is known that women who have experienced breast or gynaecological cancers, or men who have experienced severe coronary heart disease, are at high risk for relationship problems in the next 2 to 3 years (Schmaling & Sher, 1997). Similarly, people who experience unemployment also are likely to have relationship difficulties (Gore, 1978). It is believed that couples who lack certain communication skills and adaptive processes, are particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of stressful events. In other words, if the couple lack the skills to be able to negotiate change, then they will find it very hard when confronted with a major stressor.

Couple adaptive processes refer to the behavioural interactions, and the couple's thought processes, which I have been describing earlier. We know quite a lot about the behavioural correlates of relationship distress, and it has been shown that problems in communication prospectively predict relationship distress.

Markman and Hahlweg (1993) did a study which illustrates the ability of communication problems to predict relationship satisfaction. They video

taped couples who were engaged using the problem solving paradigm I have already described. They then followed these couples for 6 years and established which ones were satisfied, and which were dissatisfied with their relationship at their 6 year follow up. Figure 10 shows the rates of negative speaking and negative listening by the couples when they were engaged. What this slide shows is that those couples who were destined to be unhappy 6 years later showed significantly higher rates of negative communication behaviours premaritally. What is interesting about this finding, is that these rates of negative communication behaviours did not correlate with the couple's relationship satisfaction at the time the video tapes were made. Nor were the communication behaviours correlated with the couple's self-rated commitment to the relationship. In other words, the deficits in communication did not prevent people from falling in love, it did not prevent them from feeling satisfied in their relationship initially, and it did not inhibit their ability to be deeply committed to their partner. However, these problems in communication and conflict management were predictive of people having relationship problems later on. Suggesting that these difficulties in communication prevented the long term sustainment of relationship satisfaction.

FIGURE 10

Given that deficits in couple adaptive processes do prospectively predict relationship problems, this then leads to the question of where these deficits come from in the first place. In recent work we have been looking at

data to try and answer this question. In a large cohort of engaged couples who presented to us for relationship preparation, we assessed them on the problem solving tasks. We compared the rates of negative non-verbal behaviour expressed by these engaged couples, comparing couples in which the man reported that his father was violent in the family of origin, and couples in which the man did not report this exposure to paternal violence (Halford, Skuja, Sanders, & Behrens, 1997). Figure 11 shows the percentage of intervals in which negative non-verbal behaviour was demonstrated by these two groups of men. As you can see, men who reported lower levels of paternal violence showed substantially lower rates of negative non-verbal behaviour. In Figure 12 we present negative affect split by couples in which the woman reported her parents had divorced, compared with couples in which the woman's parents had not been divorced (Sanders, Halford, & Behrens, 1997). Again, there is a substantially higher rate of negative non-verbal behaviour demonstrated by the women who's parents divorced.

FIGURE 11

FIGURE 12

We believe that the greater rates of negativity in engaged couples where male partners father was violent, or the female partner's parents divorced, reflect learning processes from the family of origin. The ability to resolve conflict in a non-violent way which promotes intimate relationships is a crucial competency. The most important place where people learn these

skills is within the family of origin. We hypothesise that exposure to fathers who were violent particularly impacts upon sons, who learn inappropriate ways of managing conflict. We also hypothesise that women whose parents divorce also have learnt unhelpful ways of managing conflict. We suggest that this is associated with their observed deficits in communication skills.

It is important to note that not every woman whose parents divorced, or every man whose father was violent, showed deficits in communication skills. O'Leary (1988) suggests that the acquisition of adaptive communication skills primarily is determined by family of origin models, but that people can learn these skills from other people. For example, if a young man growing up with a violent father has a good relationship with an uncle, or a family friend, or some other appropriate adult male role model, then he may learn better communication skills from this other adult male. Similarly, women whose mothers may not be very good at conflict management, may have exposure to some other model who helps them to learn these crucial relationship skills.

In addition to the learning of behaviour, people also learn certain ways of thinking about relationships in the family of origin. An important construct in the psychological literature is the notion of attachment style. Bowlby (1969) proposed that early on in a child's life they develop certain internal mental models of what relationships with other people are like. If they are exposed to severely punishing or unpredictable environments, then they can often become anxious about close attachments with other people. For example, it has been shown that if parents are abusive towards each other or towards

their children, then often the offspring develop this view of close family relationships as being a source of anxiety. Children often reflect a fear about being abandoned or badly treated, and generalise this schema to other relationships.

In Figure 13 is the result of a recent study completed by Kathy Skuja and myself (Skuja & Halford, 1997), trying to predict aggression in dating relationships. We recruited approximately 300 young men and assessed their exposure to violence by their father in their family of origin. We also assessed from their own and their partner's reports, how aggressive they were in their current relationship, and assessed their attachment style. We found that those young men whose fathers had been violent were much more likely to have an attachment style associated with anxiety over abandonment. This attachment style in turn predicted aggression in the current relationship. Figure 13 shows a brief summary of a structural equation model of this analysis. Essentially this shows that when you account for the effects of the attachment style, family of origin violence no longer predicts current aggression. This suggests that the attachment style is mediating the relationship between the original exposure to violence and current aggression.

FIGURE 13

To pull all the material together, we find that some of the adaptive processes that we have been seeing as correlates of relationship adjustment, are prospectively predictive of relationship adjustment. Deficits in

communication are prospectively predictive of difficulties in relationships. Furthermore, it seems that these deficits in communication correlate significantly with family of origin experiences, suggesting that people may well learn maladaptive conflict management styles early on. We also found that certain ways of thinking about relationships, such as the anxiety over abandonment attachment style, is predictive of aggression in relationships. So, if we know more about the nature of relationship problems, and we can predict relationship problems, can we prevent these problems from developing in the first place?

Prevention of relationship problems

There have been a number of controlled trials evaluating relationship education programs. Whilst the relationship education programs offered broadly in the community are not related to the research that I have been describing today, there are a number of programs in the research literature which are based on trying to modify couple adaptive processes. Some years ago Hahlweg & Markman (1988) did a meta-analysis of seven controlled trials teaching couples relationship skills. The content of these programs was based around the sort of research that I have been describing. The programs were focused on teaching couples positive communication skills and conflict management, as well as intimacy enhancement skills. Broadly what this research has shown is that people can be taught these skills in a relatively brief number of sessions. Across the 7 controlled trials that Hahlweg & Markman identified, there was a mean effect size of 1.2 standard deviations in the acquisition and communication skills. This corresponds to a very large

affect. However, this literature did not include long term follow up to see if people kept using the skills after they had learnt them. Furthermore, the research simply offered these relationship education programs to whatever couples were interested. Given that there are predictors of people being more likely to have relationship problems, it is important to establish if high risk people were taking part in the programs and if they benefit from such programs.

Recently my colleagues Matt Sanders, Brett Behrens, and myself have conducted a controlled trial of a relationship education program targeted on high risk couples (Halford, Sanders & Behrens, 1996). Table 5, is a summary of the two conditions within this randomised controlled trial. The PREP program refers to the premarital relationship enhancement program. This is a 5 session, small group program, run with 4 to 5 couples in a group. Each group session lasts for approximately two hours and involves active skills training by demonstration and practice of core communication and intimacy enhancement skills. The control group consists of reading and group discussion about beliefs and expectations about relationships. The control group was meant to be similar to what many religious and community organisations currently offer as relationship education programs.

TABLE 5

We randomly assigned just under 100 couples to either the PREP program or our control program. We also stratified our sample into high and low risk couples. High risk couples were defined as couples in which the

man's father had been violent in the family of origin, or the woman's parents had divorced. Low risk couples were those who did not meet this criteria. Figure 14 shows the effect of the intervention from pre- to post-intervention and at one year. If you consider first the low risk couples what you find is that the comparison group showed no significant change in negative speaking across the time periods. There was a slight increase from pre- to post-treatment, and a slight decrease from pre-treatment to one year follow up in negative speaking, but neither of these differences are statistically significant. In contrast the PREP program for the low risk couples shows a significant reduction in negative speaking from pre- to post-treatment, and this is maintained through to the one year follow up. So this data shows that the positive gains for low risk couples are well maintained. If we look at the high risk couples, a somewhat different pattern emerges. Both the PREP and the comparison group are associated with substantial reductions in negative speaking from pre- to post-intervention. Furthermore, these gains are maintained right through to one year follow up. There was no significant difference between the treatment conditions for the high risk group.

FIGURE 14

Figure 15 shows the results of the effects of the intervention on negative listening. Essentially the pattern is the same as for negative speaking. In the low risk groups there is a significant reduction for the PREP condition which is maintained through to 12 month follow up, but no significant effect of the controlled comparison condition on this aspect of

communication. In the high risk group there is a significant reduction in negative listening for both the PREP and the comparison condition, and this is maintained through to 12 month follow up. There were no significant differences between the 2 conditions in terms of their effects for the high risk couples.

FIGURE 15

This pattern of results was somewhat unexpected. Initially we had hypothesised that the more intensive PREP program would be particularly beneficial to the high risk couples. This was based on the assumption that the more severe the communication deficits, the more intensive the training that would be required to improve their skills. This might be referred to as the compensation hypothesis, meaning that one has to compensate for severe skill deficits with the most intensive training.

An alternative hypothesis that has occurred to us since, which seems to make some sense, is the attenuation hypothesis. Essentially, this argues that it is easier to shift someone who has a severe skills deficit towards the normal range, than to take someone who is already quite skilled and make them even more skilled. By analogy, if you took someone who had never played tennis before and you showed them a few basic things about how to stand, hold the racket, and where to look, it is likely that you could improve their skill level substantially with a very brief intervention. On the other hand, if you have somebody who is already quite a good competitive tennis player but who aspires to be an elite player, then it might require considerable, highly

skilled coaching to produce increases in skill levels. In a similar manner, for our high risk couples who showed very poor communication skills initially, simply reading the book and having the opportunity to reflect on their relationship skills may have been adequate to produce measurable improvement. In contrast, our low risk couples already had quite good communication skills, and in order to enhance these skills further the more intensive skills training given in the PREP program was necessary. Consistent with this attenuation hypothesis, we find that the high risk couples going through both the PREP and minimal interventions improved their communication skills to about the level evident in the low risk couples before intervention.

In ongoing work we currently are collecting the 4 and 5 year follow up data for our cohort of couples in this outcome study. We are interested in posing two questions of this data: Do the couples who went through PREP show better relationship satisfaction, and lower relationship problems, than those in the comparison group, and, does this differ by high and low risk couples? We hope to have the answer to these questions later this year.

In ongoing work we are looking at other high risk couples for relationship problems, and looking at ways in which we can deliver relationship education in cost effective manners. For example, in work that I am doing with Ms Jenn Scott and Professor Bruce Ward we are looking at women recently diagnosed with breast and gynaecological cancer. We are working with the women and their partners helping them to support each other through this very difficult process of diagnosis and treatment, with the

goal of enhancing individual and couple functioning after disease treatment has been completed. Jan Nicholson, Matt Sanders, and myself are looking at stepfamilies as another high risk group. We are just completing a controlled trial in which we have combined our relationship education program with special parenting interventions targeted on the particular needs of stepfamilies. For example, we have put a lot of emphasis in that program on how partners can negotiate the parenting role of the step parent to their partner's children. This is based on the finding of other people that conflict about parenting roles is a frequent source of relationship breakdown in stepfamilies.

Another study looking at high risk couples is looking at people who enter relationships drinking at hazardous levels. Ruth Bouma, Ross Young, and myself are currently conducting a controlled trial of these at risk drinkers. In this program we try to teach people how to control their alcohol consumption, as well as teaching them core relationship skills. We hypothesise that this will enhance their outcome in terms of reduced risk of substantial drinking or relationship problems. Given that alcohol abuse is a substantial predictor of relationship violence, this also will give us the chance to establish whether these sorts of interventions can reduce the prevalence of domestic violence in a high risk group.

Finally, we are looking at ways in which we can make the delivery of relationship education more cost effective. Ms Carmel Dyer, Dr Keithia Wilson, and myself are developing a flexible delivery relationship education program. This will combine a mixture of video tape and printed materials so

that couples can do relationship education and preparation in the privacy of their own home. There are many people who prefer not to have face to face contact with psychologists, or because of the fact that they live in rural or remote areas find it very difficult to access more traditional face to face services. We think that these people will benefit from flexible delivery of relationship education.

Conclusion

The program of research that I have described this evening, I think can be summarised into 3 broad conclusions. First, it is clear that relationship problems are very important, and that the nature of those relationship problems can be measured using the technologies developed by psychology. Secondly, relationship problems are at least somewhat predictable. If we video tape couples talking together when they are engaged we can predict, with a fair degree of certainty, which of those couples will ultimately develop relationship problems, and which will go on to mutually satisfying relationships. Finally, we have shown that the skills that seem to be missing in couples who are at high risk for relationship problems can be taught. These skills can be gained relatively briefly, in a small number of sessions, and once acquired the skills tend to be maintained, at least for the first year or two of the relationship. What our ongoing work is doing is attempting to establish whether these acquired skills translate into more stable and mutually satisfying relationships in the long term, and whether we can deliver these programs effectively to high risk couples.

I want to conclude by thanking my colleagues and students who have worked with me over the last 15 years. Relationship problems is a wonderful and engrossing area to work, and I have developed many friendships and great working relationships through my involvement in the area. I am grateful to all of them for having the opportunity to work with them. Thank you for your attention.

Footnote

The work described in this paper is the result of a series of collaborations. Whilst I cannot thank everybody who has contributed, I do want to pay special thanks to: Brett Behrens, Ruth Bouma, Carmel Dyer, Kurt Hahlweg, Adrian Kelly, Howard Markman, Sue Osgarby, Denise Robertson, Matt Sanders, Jenn Scott, Kathy Skuja, Susie Sweeper, and Bob Weiss. The research recorded in this program has received generous support from the Australian Research Council, the National Health and Medical Research Council, the Queensland Cancer Fund, and the Research into Drug Abuse Grants Scheme of the Commonwealth of Australia. I also want to thank Rhoda Richardson for assistance in the preparation of this paper.

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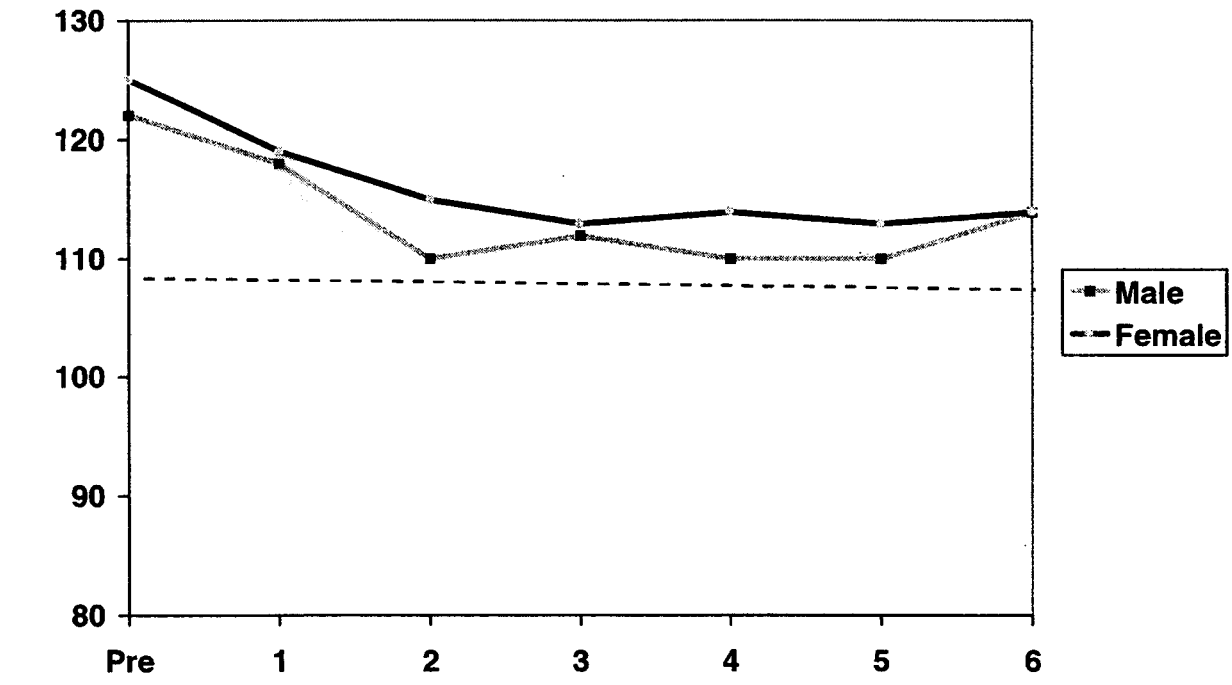
Table 1:Australian beliefs about marriage

Belief	% Agree
Partners should be faithful	98
Marriage is for life	80
Living together is OK	62
If marriage doen't work out one can always divorce	13
Marriage is for life, even if the couple is unhappy	14

AIFS (1997) survey of 2116 adult Australians

Figure 1: Marital satisfaction over time



From Markman & Hahlweg (1993)

Table 2: Complaints of couples presenting for therapy

Men	Women
Communication (75%)	Communication (78%)
Conflict (74%)	Conflict (72%)
Lack of affection (39%)	Lack of Affection (55%)
Incompatibility (36%)	Incompatibility (34%)
Sex (25%)	Sex (11%)

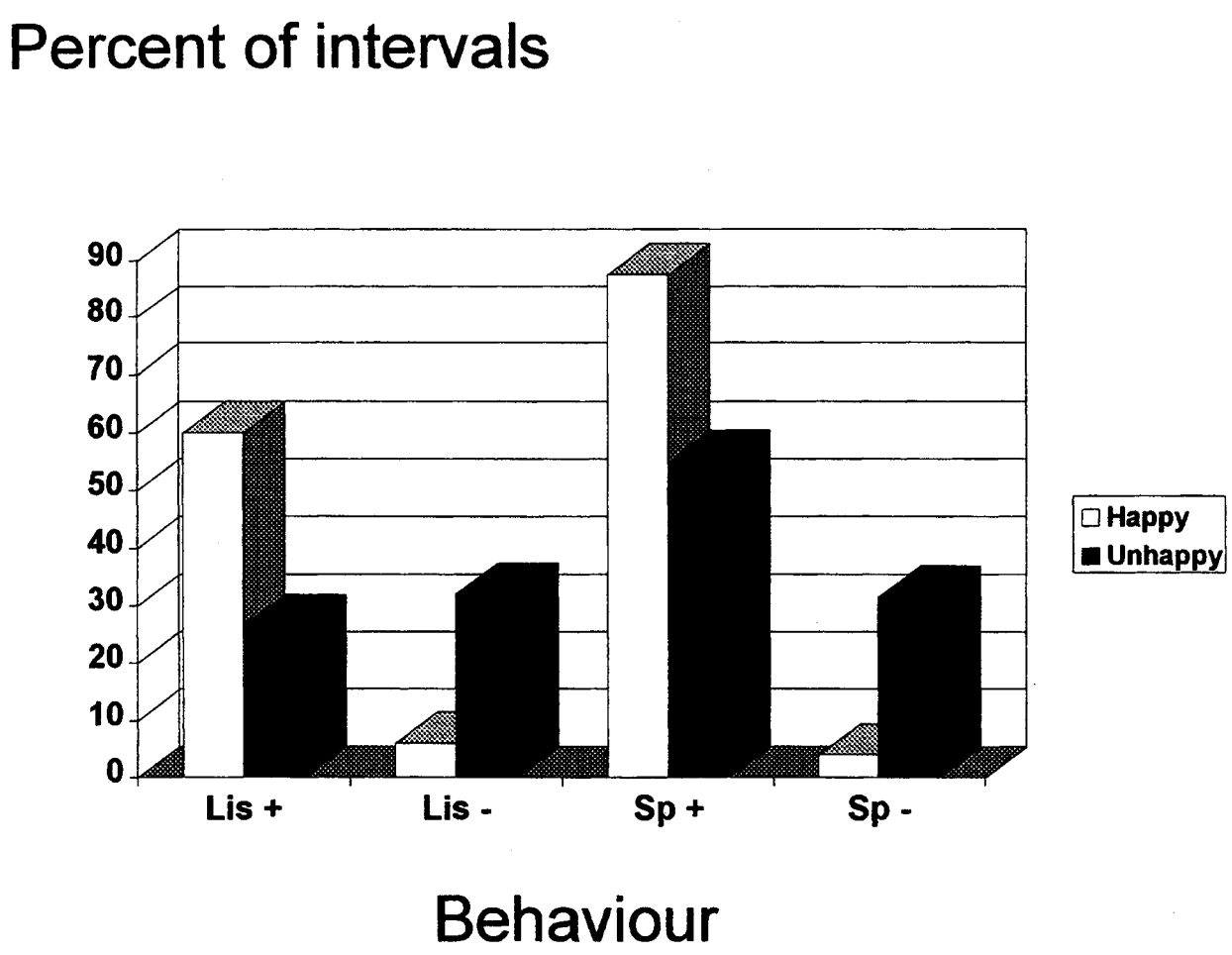
Based on 100 couples Halford (in press)

Table 3: Behavioural coding category definitions

Valence	Function	Categories
Positive	Speaker	Describe
		Suggest
		Self- disclose
	Listener	Agree
		Accept
Negative	Speaker	Critisize
		Negative suggest
	Listener	Negate
		Justify

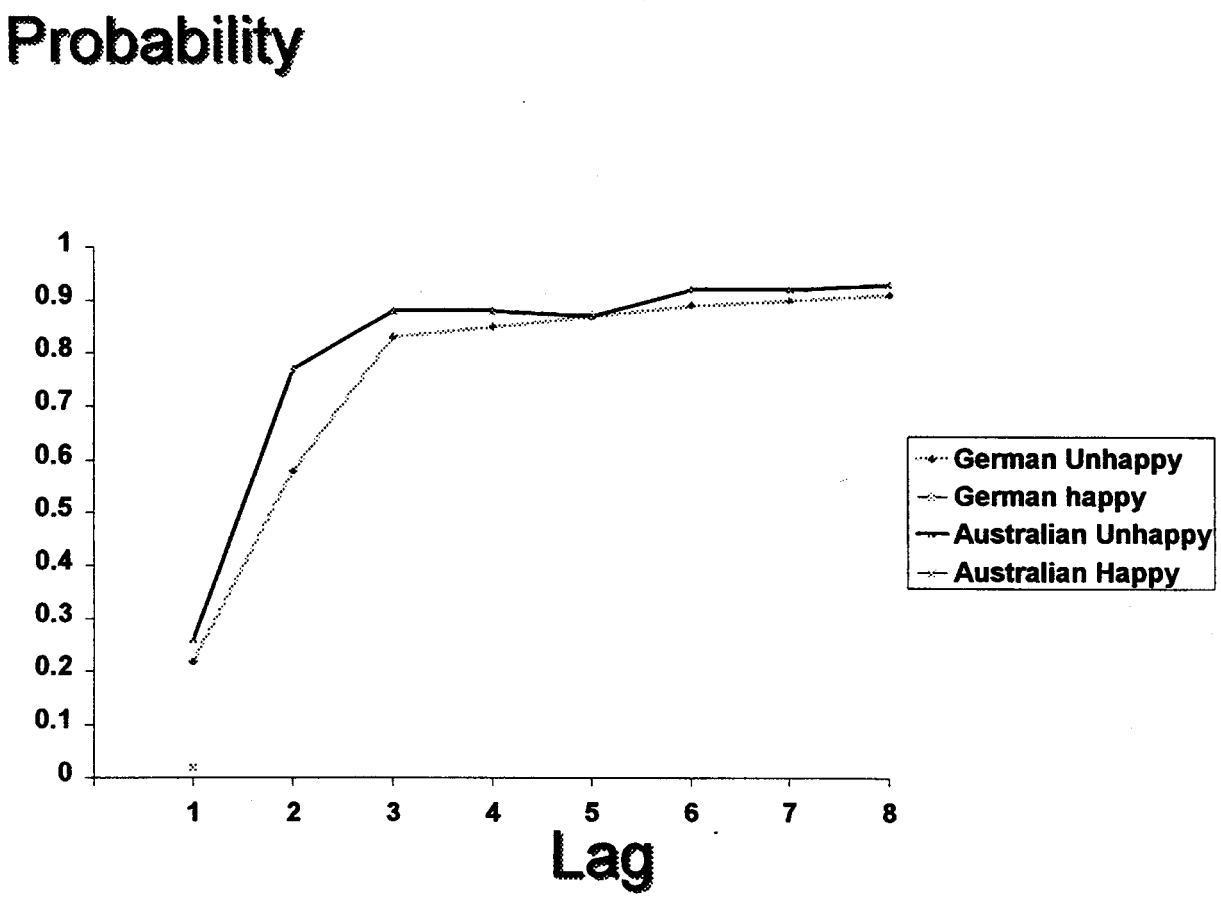
Rapid KPI; Halford & Osgarby (1992)

Figure 2: Problem solving behaviour



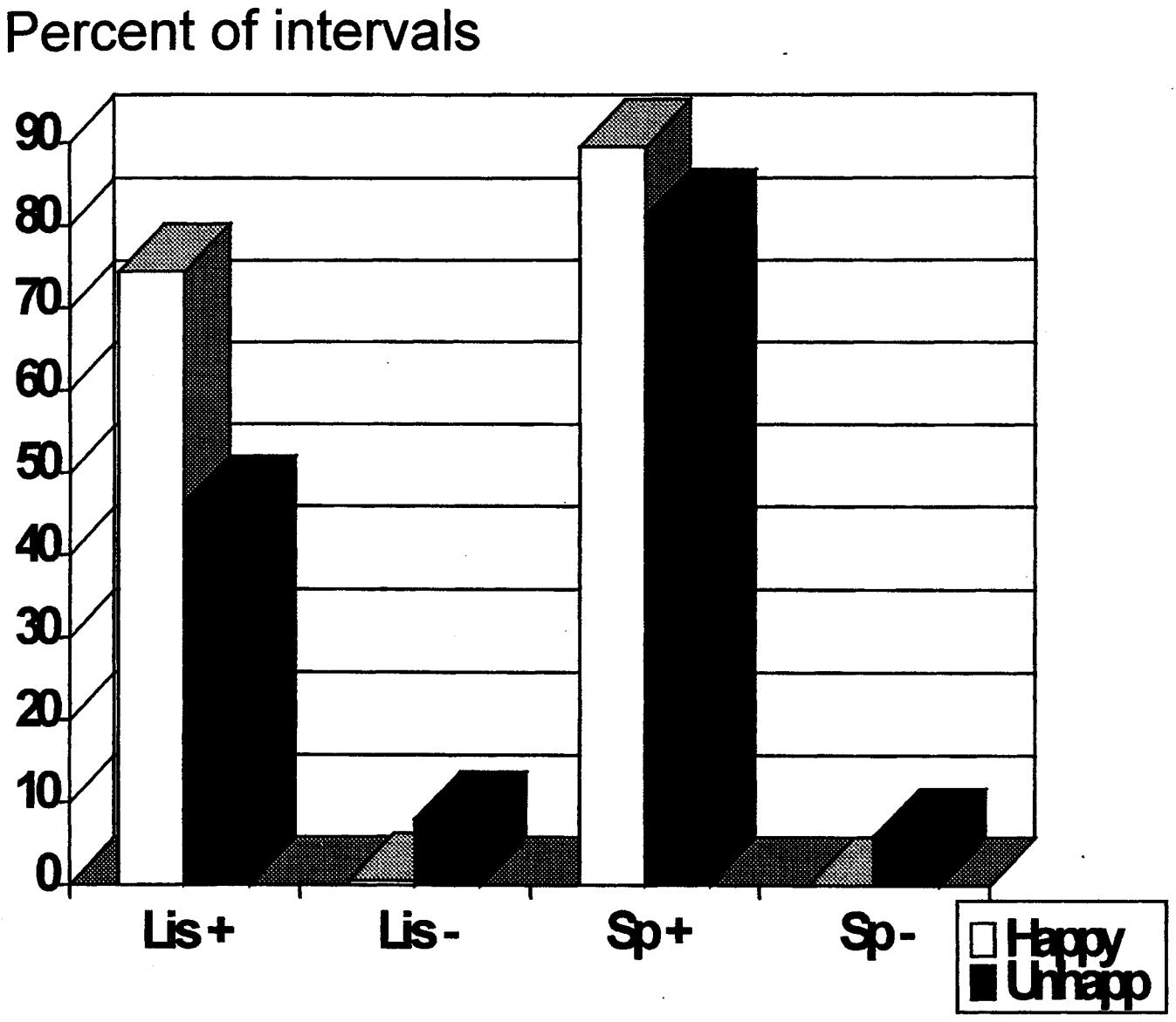
Osgarby & Halford (1997)

Figure 3: Negative nonverbal escalation during problem solving



(Halford, Hahlweg & Dunne, 1990)

Figure 4: Positive reminiscence behaviour



Osgarby & Halford (1997)

Figure 5: Meshing behaviour during interaction

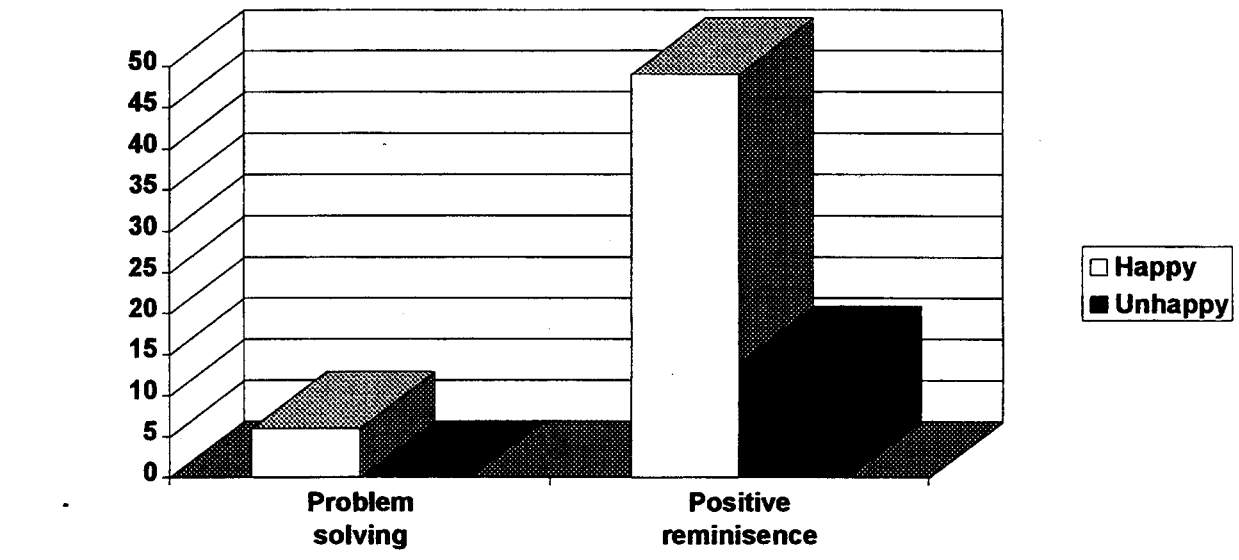
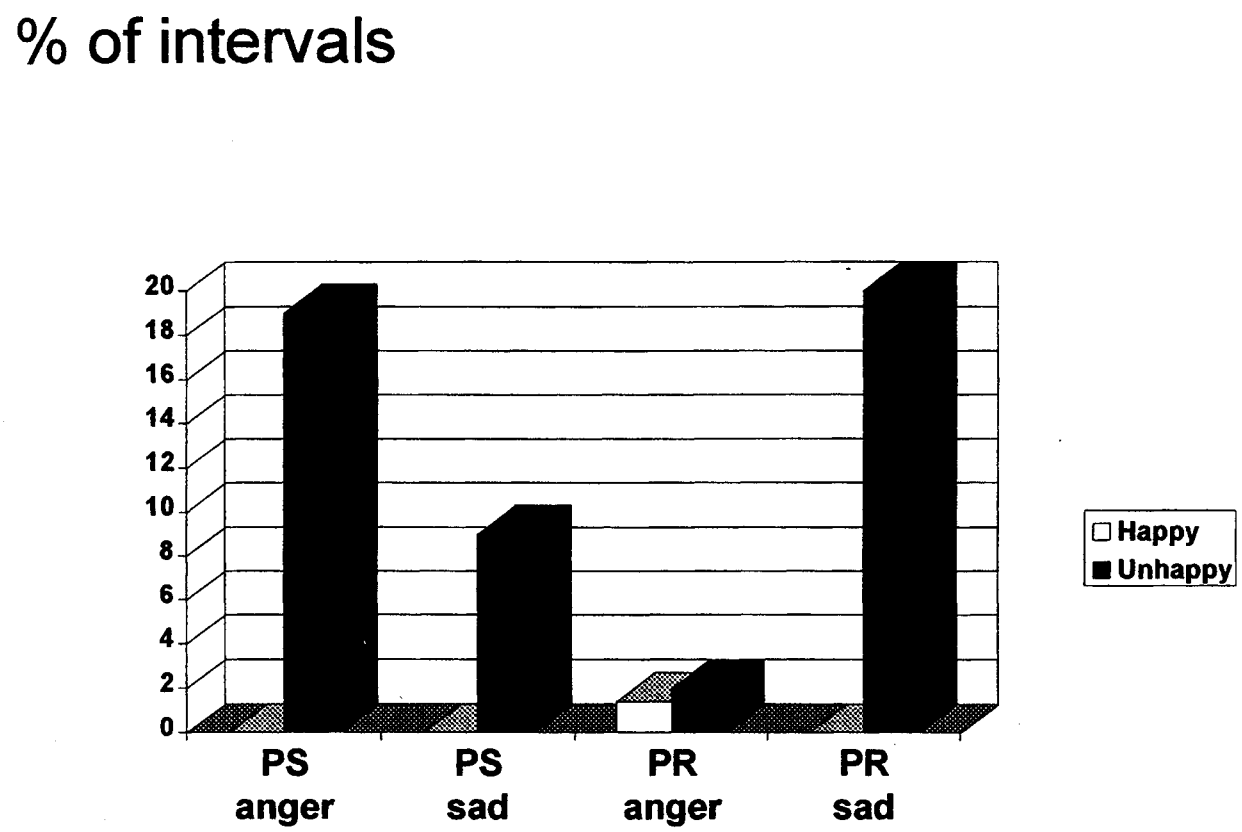
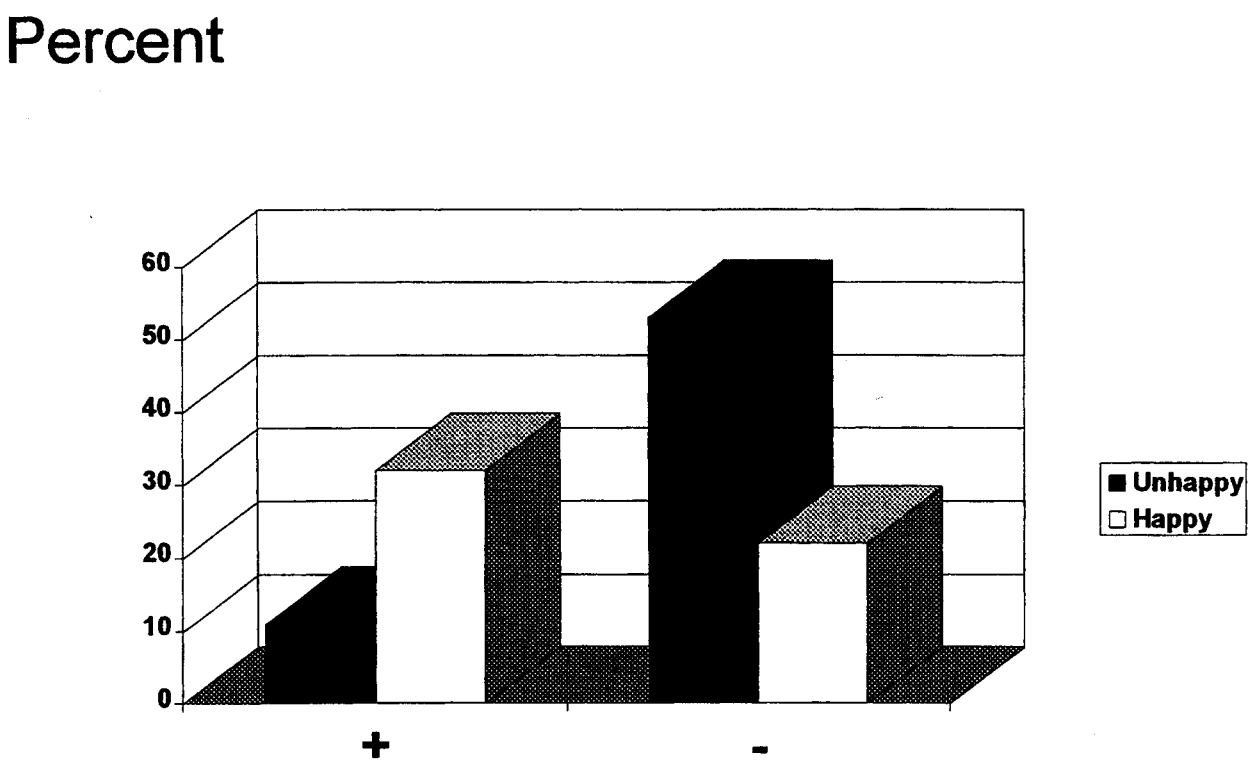


Figure 6: Negative affect during interaction



Osgarby & Halford (1997)

Figure 7:Reported thoughts during problem solving



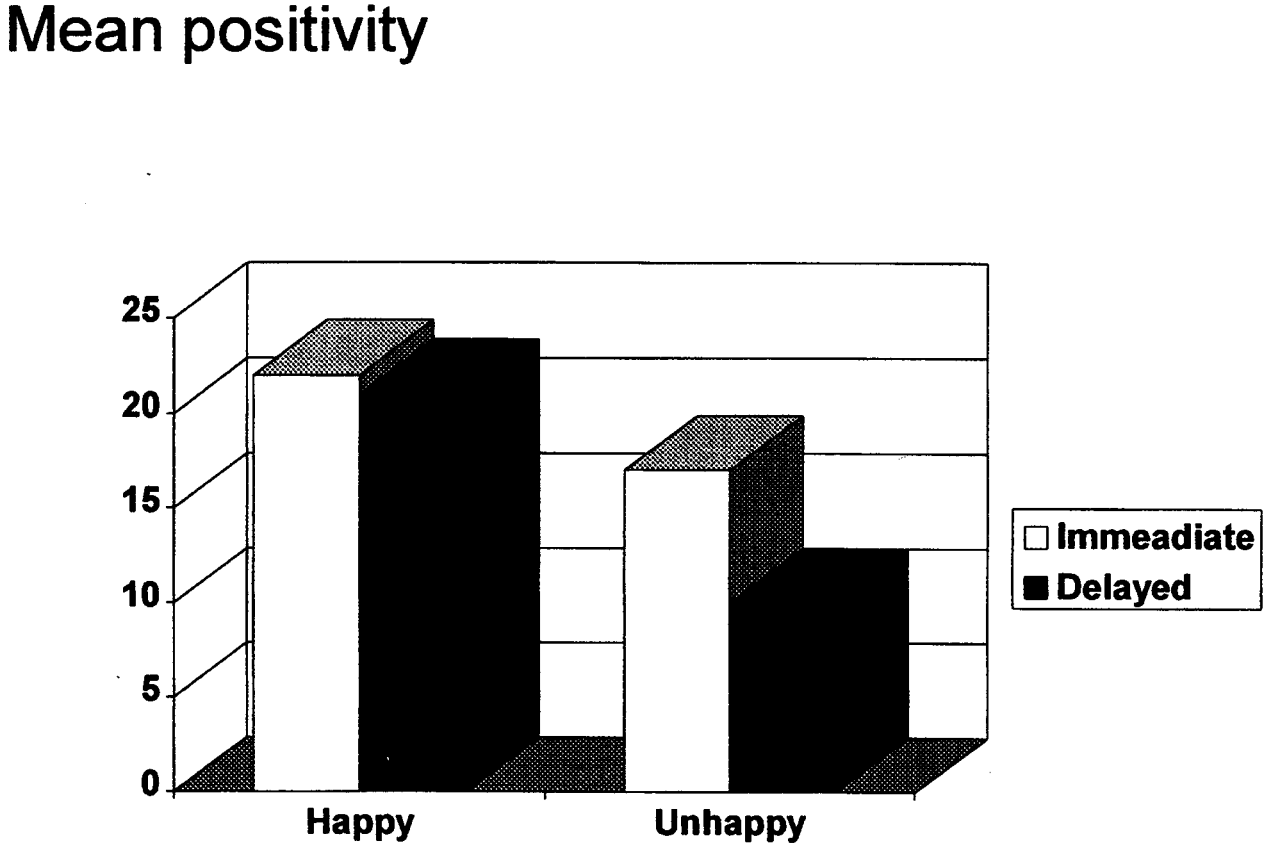
Halford & Sanders (1988)

Table 4: Thoughts and behaviour during problem solving

Behavior Time 1	**Thoughts**	**Behavior Time 2**	Prob.	Z score
NV-			.23	
NV-		NV-	.55	5.85*
NV-	(-,-)	NV-	1.0	9.89*

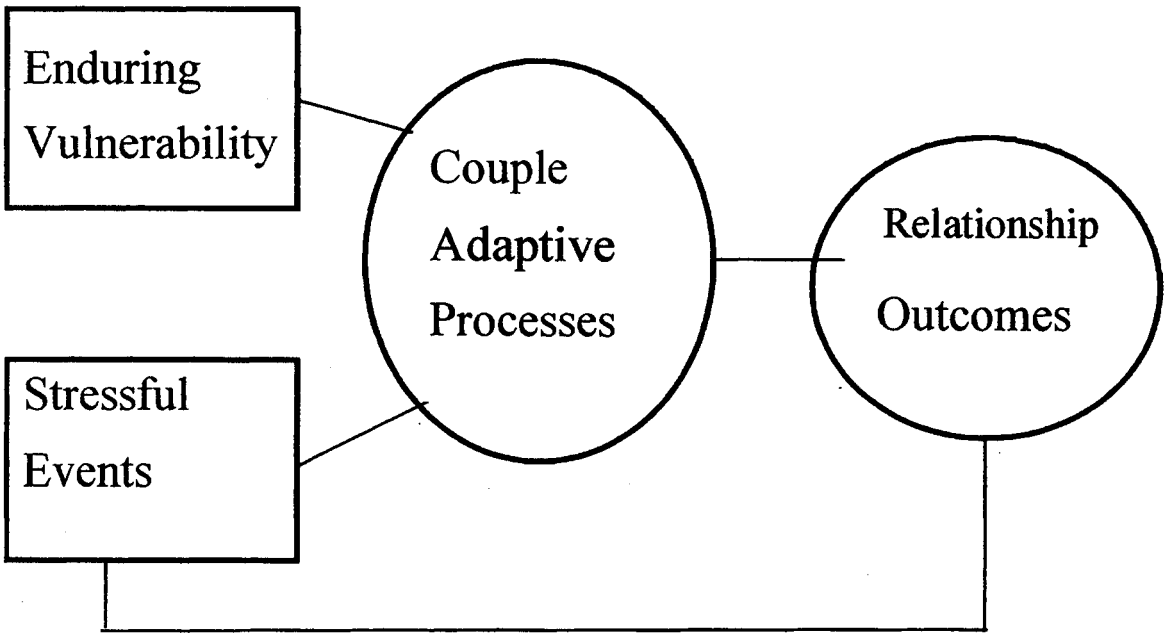
Halford & Sanders (1990)

Figure 8: Immeadiate and delayed report of affect during positive reminiscence



Osgarby & Halford (1997)

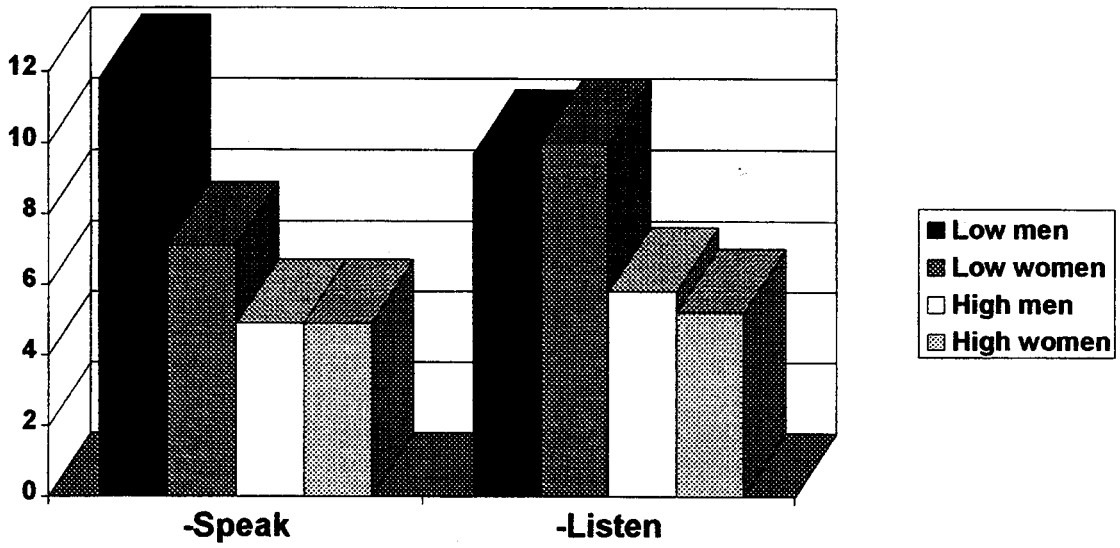
Figure 9: Predictors of relationship problems



Adapted from Karney & Bradbury (1995)

Figure 10: Premarital communication and relationship satisfaction over 6 years

Rate



Response

Markman & Hahlweg (1993)

Figure 11: Negative affect by paternal violence

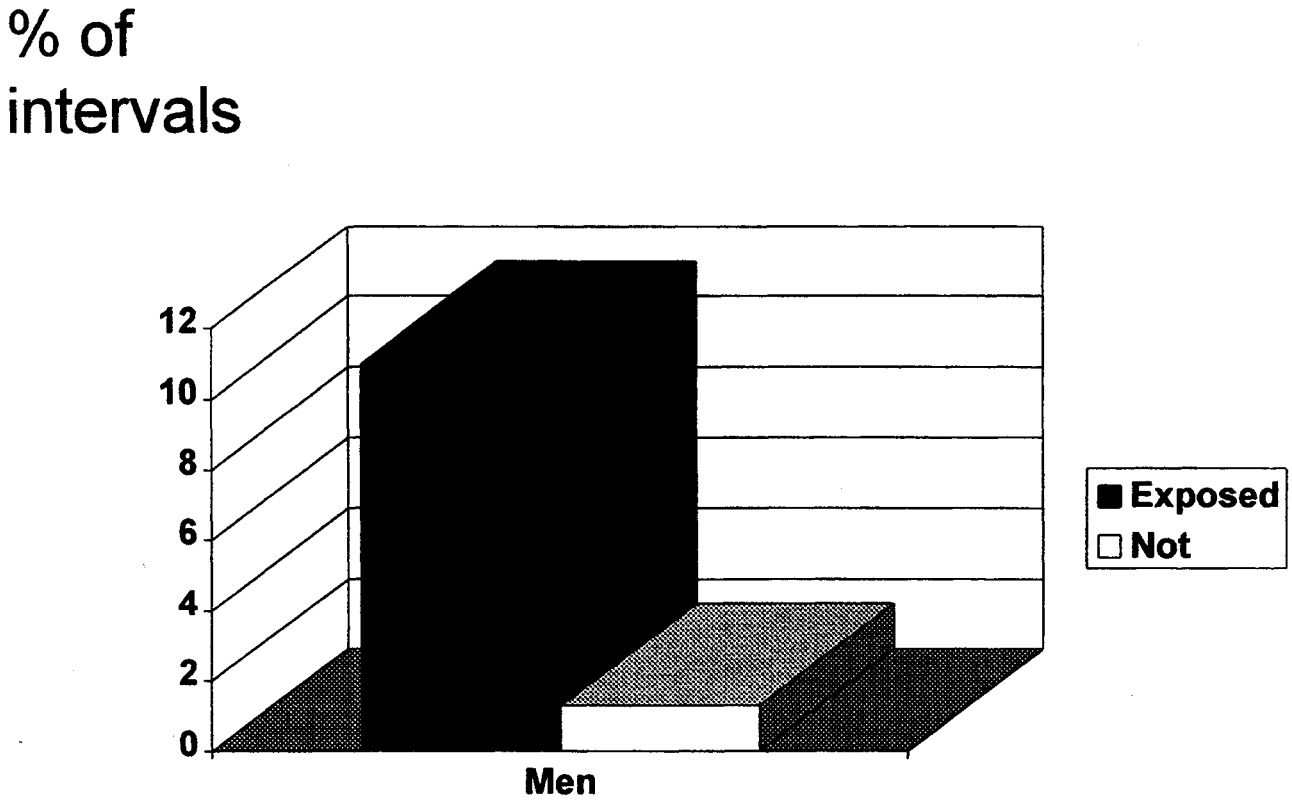
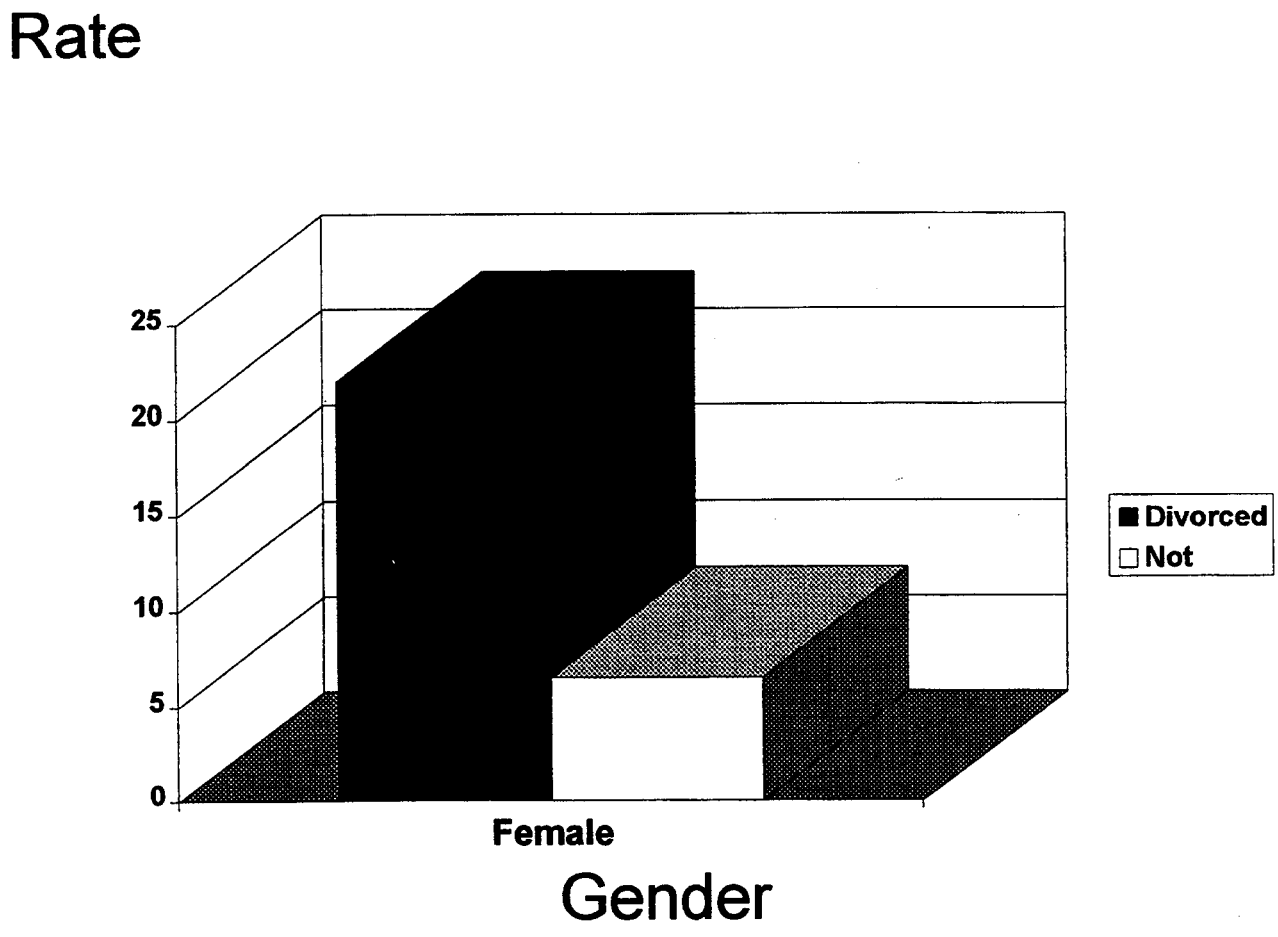
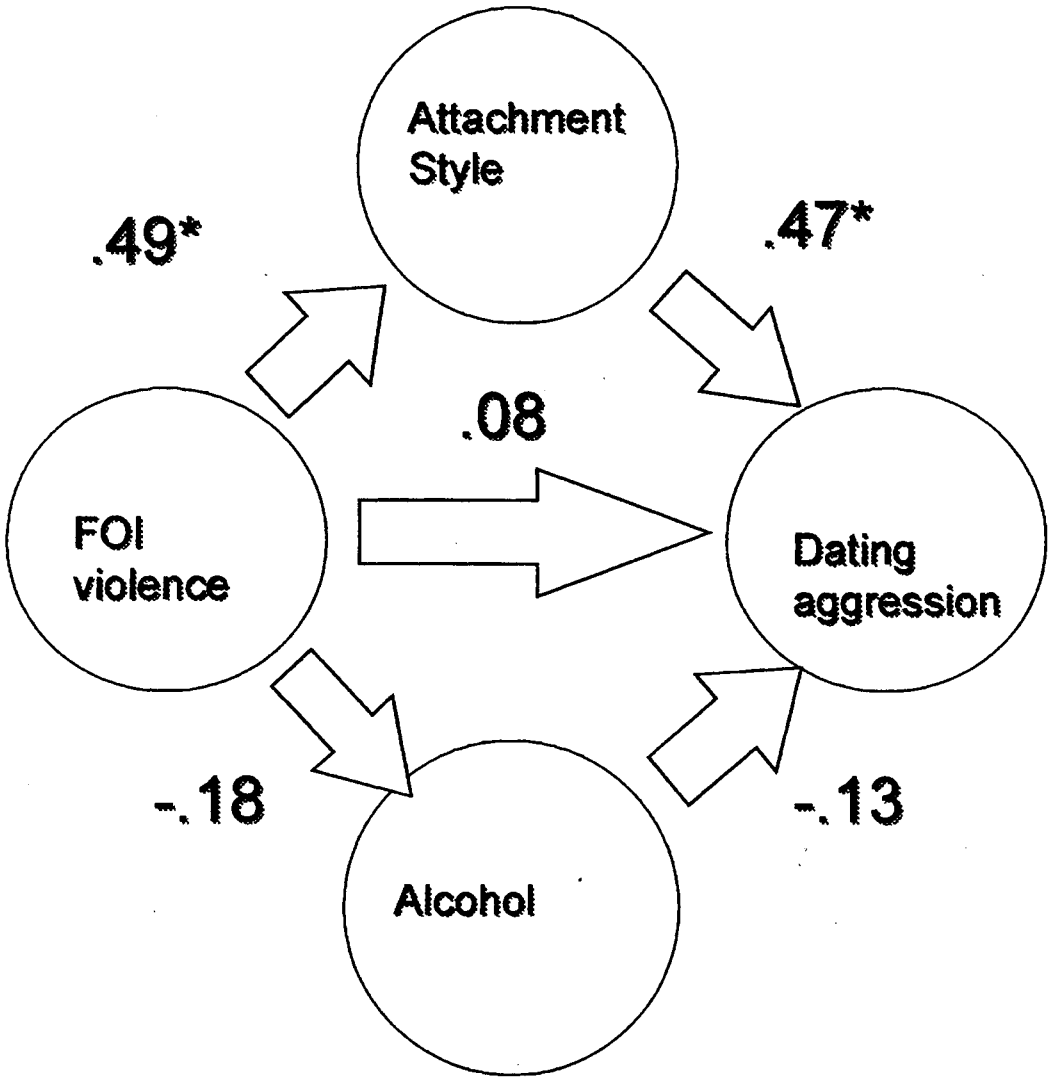


Figure 12:Negative affect by wife's parental divorce status



Halford, Skuja, Sanders & Behrens (1997)

Figure 13: Prediction of relationship aggression



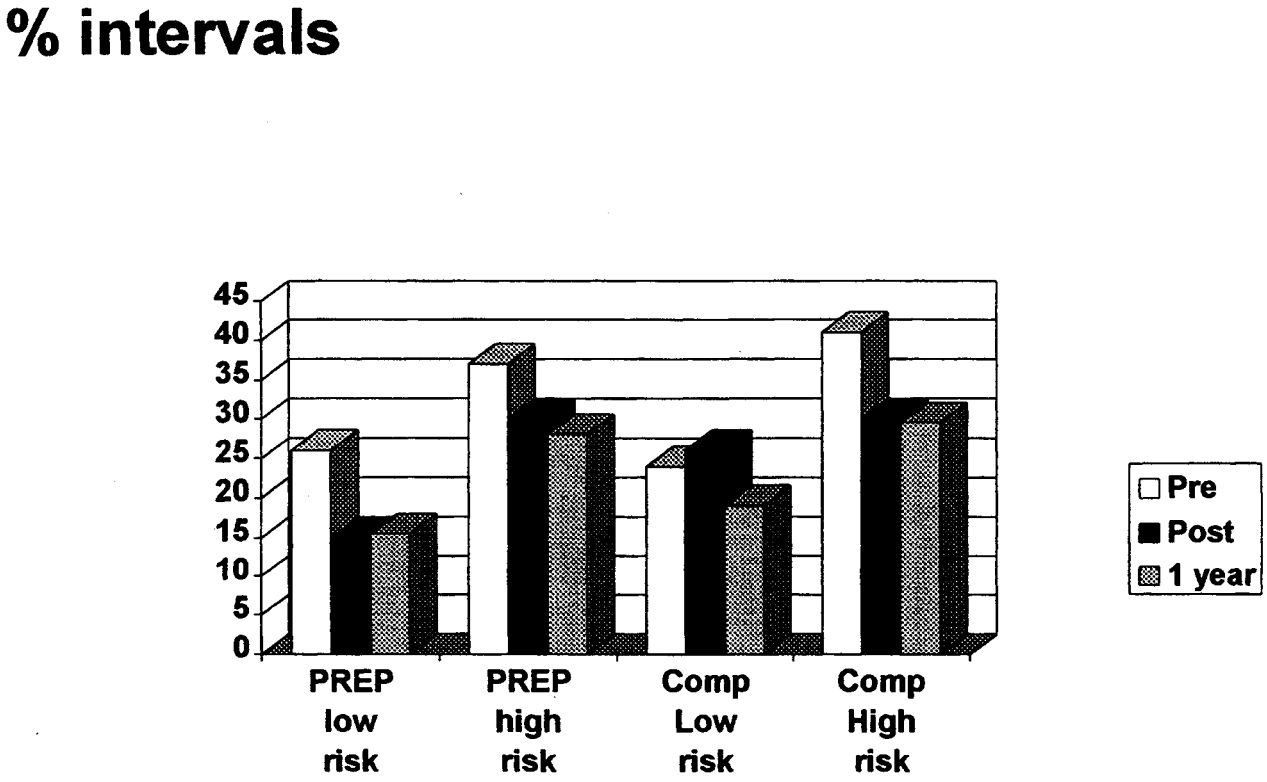
Bentler GFI =0.89; Skuja & Halford, (1997)

Table 5: Interventions

PREP	CONTROL
• Communication skills • Intimacy • Conflict management • Maintenance training	• Reading • Group discussion

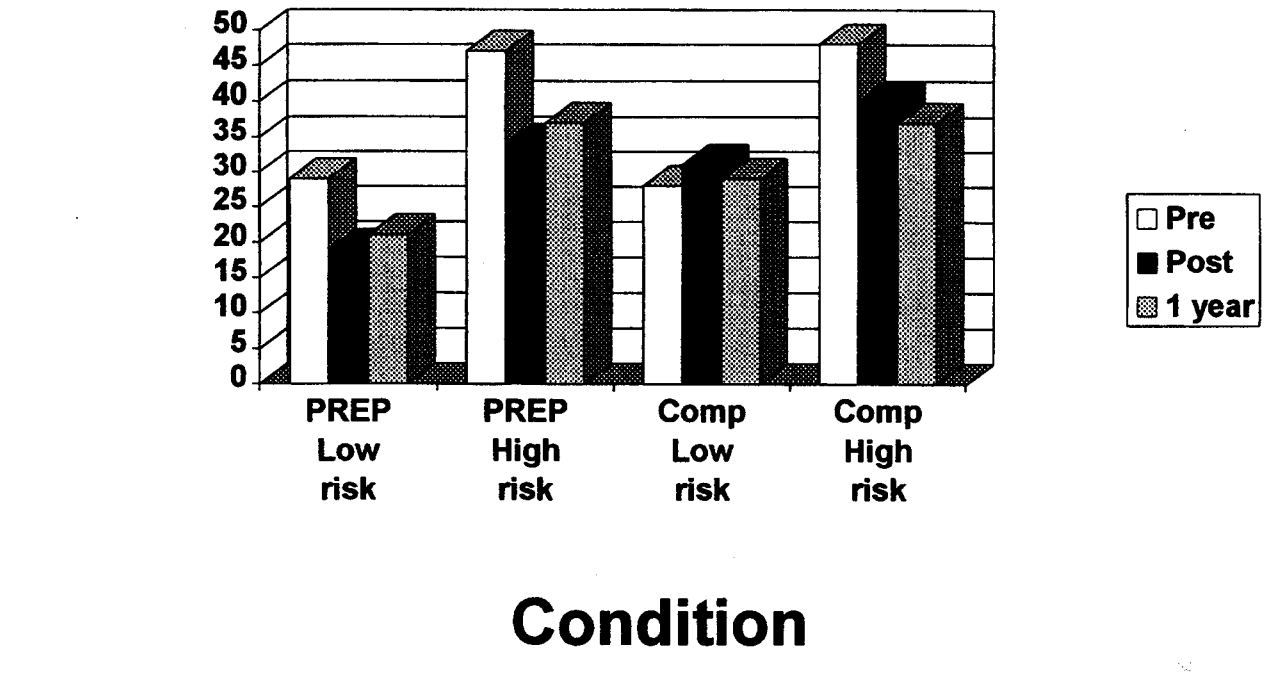
From Halford, Sanders, & Behrens (1996)

Figure 14: Effects of intervention on negative speaking



Halford, Sanders & Behrens (1996)

Figure 15: Effects of intervention on negative listening



Halford, Sanders & Behrens (1996)