

The Norwegian State

a Relationship Educator

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For the third year in a row Norway has seen an increase in the number of marriages, and a decrease in the number of divorces and separations. It is tempting to wonder if this is partly a result of the attention to and active support of relationship education programmes on behalf of the Norwegian state authorities over the last decade.

Since the modern marriage based on romantic love reached its climax in the years following the Second World War, the statistics have not been looking good. Since 1950 fewer couples have been getting married and the number of marriages ending in divorce has been increasing rapidly.

As an illustration of this, the proportion of couples who get divorced before their 50th anniversary has risen from an actual 12% amongst those who married in 1950 to a predicted 50% amongst those who married in 1995 (Statistics Norway, 2005).

However, last year in 2007, 10,300 Norwegian marriages ended in divorce, while 11,400 married couples separated. That is 300 fewer divorces and 700 fewer separations than in 2006. The divorce rate per thousand married couples was 11.8 this year and has varied between 10.4 and 12.6 per thousand since the beginning of the 1990s. One has to go back to the year 2001 to find a lower divorce rate than in 2007 (Statistics Norway, 2008).

Also last year, in 2007, 23,500 couples got married in Norway. That is 1,750 more than in 2006, and about 900 more than the average number of couples getting married over the last five years. There are signs that marriages rates – as well as marriage numbers – have increased across most age groups during the last two years.

Why this decrease in the number of divorces and increase in the number of marriages, and why now? Have we reached a turning point, or is it coincidental? The possible answer to these questions lies somewhere in the future, and not in this article. But it is tempting to at least wonder if the changes have something to do with the fact that the Norwegian state authorities have given much attention and support to the development and implementation of relationship education programmes in the last fifteen years. In the same period the Norwegian mass media – newspapers, radio and TV – have shown increasing interest in relationship and family themes. Every national newspaper in Norway has a weekend column on relationships, parenthood, marriage and/or family, and there is often a series on television that addresses family life.

The interest and investment both on the political level and in the media is important, and it is likely that it has influenced awareness, attitudes and values in the Norwegian population when it comes to themes concerning family life. The number of couples actually participating in relationship education therefore tells only one small part of the story of relationship education in Norway. Relationship education is also going on outside the 'classroom.' The attention paid to it during the last fifteen years is in itself likely to have educative and preventive aspects.

The aim of this article is therefore to give an overview of the development of the Norwegian field of relationship education. But first I must give a brief description of the cultural context in which this field of relationship education has emerged.

The cultural context – or a brief history of trends in Norwegian family life

Ideals and practices of family life have always been changing. The idea of the love relationship between husband and wife is fairly new, only about 200 years old. Yet the family model we use as a background for comparing the situation of the family today existed only for a short period in the 1950s. This is the model of the typical nuclear family, with a mother who took care of the home and the family, a father who took care of the bread-winning activity, and their children.

The housewife family

Hilde Danielsen (2002) has studied this family model, interviewing women who were housewives in the 1950s. This decade is thought to be the era of the “housewife family”, and matches the growth of the Norwegian welfare state after the Second World War. The stereotypical housewife family had, according to Danielsen, a homemaking mother, a moneymaking father, and outdoor-playing children. One of Danielsen’s findings was that the women were typically busy keeping the house tidy and did not spend much time on the psychological care of their children. The ‘typical’ woman did not think of herself and the husband as a unit on its own within the family. When married with children, the unit was *the family*. Women were not very concerned about romantic love and sex. The entire family slept in the same room, and when the housewives were asked what they would prefer if they could have another room in the house or flat, they preferred a dining room over an extra bedroom. They did not think they and their husband needed a separate bedroom. The relationship between husband and wife was, according to Danielsen, more of a mother-son relationship than a mutual one. For these women the possibility to be in charge of her own household represented a *freedom* compared to the life of their mothers’ generation, who often had to serve as servants in other people’s households (Danielsen, 2002).

Experienced lack of equality

But new chains were soon perceived. When women started to work outside the house during the 1970s, they ended up “triple working” as moneymakers, housekeepers and mothers at the same time, according to Moxnes (1990). The average man was not able to adjust to the rapid cultural changes in the role of his wife. Women became increasingly dissatisfied, experiencing a lack of equality between themselves and their spouses when it came to housework and child rearing. This experienced lack of equality is reported as a main reason for divorce during the 1980s. About 75 per cent of the Norwegian divorces in this period were initiated by women. They felt that they were alone with the housework and the organisation of the life of the children. This meant that dissatisfaction with the lack of help and participation of their husbands was a frequent explanation for break-ups and divorces during the 1980s (Moxnes, 1990).

Changing male identities

From the 1990s onwards, new ways of organising the distribution of domestic work has emerged in the Norwegian egalitarian middle class family. Drawing on a longitudinal study of egalitarian Norwegian couples in the period 1990 – 2005, Helene Aarseth (2007) draws a picture of dual-career couples interweaving labour and love in new ways, with the transformation of homemaking at its core. Homemaking assumes a new significance as the glue in egalitarian relationships. It has become a joint project in which both invest energy.

The change towards a fair distribution of domestic work is most apparent among couples where both are employed full-time and have high educational levels, according to Aarseth. These are couples who practice a high level of individualisation in accordance with Giddens’ vision for a pure relationship, that is, a relationship that is not produced by *dependency*, which was the case in the housewife family, but that exists as *confluent love*. The overcoming of gendered divisions of work introduces new possibilities in intimate relations – the ful-

filment of the ideal of romantic love as the melding together of two autonomous and equal life projects (Aarseth, 2007).

The state and the life of the family – changing ideologies

A relatively consistent characteristic of family policy is that Norway has been prone to accept the changing patterns of family formations *as social facts to be dealt with*. One example is that the policy aimed towards single parents over the last century has been to counter the disadvantages which might follow from individuals living in lone parent families (Skevik, 2001). Another example is the case of divorce and family transition: the focus is on what can be done to make divorce processes as constructive as possible, and how it is possible to compensate for disadvantages that might follow from a family transformation (Lærum, 2005).

Parallel to the acceptance of the changing patterns of family as social facts to be dealt with, is the will to *encourage development in a certain direction*. In the Nordic countries the process of individualisation, i.e. women's increased participation in the labour market, has been followed by a policy to encourage more equality in family life. This is regarded as so important that in 2005 the name of the Norwegian Ministry of Children and Family Affairs was changed by the present government to 'the Ministry of Children and Equality Affairs.' Men's participation in the family has been considered a key prerequisite for attaining this goal of equality in family life. This policy actually seems to have encouraged new identities and practices among men (Aarseth, 2007).

These two ideologies can seem paradoxical. On the one hand changing social norms are facts that are accepted. On the other hand there is a strong will to encourage development in a certain direction. Alongside an ideology of the strong welfare state, there has been a notion of an inner sphere of family life that is the 'private business' of each family and thereby withdrawn from state business (Thuen and Lærum, 2005). But this notion has been challenged from the 1970s onwards.

The debate emerging in the space between the private and the political included many themes that engaged women in the 1970s liberation movements. The themes were important in the daily lives of women, and offered models that made it possible to understand individual problems within structural and collective frameworks. The idea or notion of the political was broadened, and the sphere that earlier had been judged as private gained political significance.

The quality of family relationships has traditionally belonged within such a private family sphere, freed from state intervention other than in cases of severe dysfunction, e.g. child abuse and neglect. Both the policy which encourages egalitarian relationships in the family, and the policy which has been encouraging and supporting the development and implementation of relationship education programmes, are examples of this. During the past decades there has been a growing interest in preventive psychology, including in the field of family relationships. In the wake of this development, state interventions have emerged towards non-clinical populations in the form of educational programmes intending to enhance healthy family relationships. Examples of such interventions are maternity education, parental guidance programmes, mandatory mediation in cases of parental separation and relationship enhancement programmes (Thuen and Lærum, 2005).

In the following pages I will give a brief overview of this development, focusing mainly on the role of the Norwegian state authorities when it comes to relationship education. This role encompasses three main features: a) placing relationship education on the political agenda, b) funding the development and implementation of such programmes and, since 2004, c) developing, implementing and running public relationship education programmes. The structure and content of the following pages are partly inspired by Thuen and Lærum (2005).

Placing relationship education on the political agenda

In Norway there seems to be widespread agreement between the political parties that *one should form unions on the basis of love and sustain relationships on the basis of quality*. The quality of the relationship is not considered to be dependent on form; however, the more (legally) committed institution of marriage is often seen as beneficial in the case of children. Divorce is regarded as a legitimate way of pursuing a better life, although acknowledged to be painful for those involved. One is not expected to stay together just for the sake of children, but one is seen as obliged to work harder to save the relationship when there are children involved. On the other hand it is considered morally better to dissolve a dysfunctional family than to keep it intact. Further, it is acknowledged that less stability and greater diversity is a part of contemporary family practices, which means it is necessary to address how processes of relationship break-up can be achieved in the best manner (Myrvik, 2005; Lærum, 2005).

Against this background the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs in 1994 established a scheme whereby grants are provided for relationship education programmes (Ministry of Children and Family Affairs & Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2003). The concern for the benefit of children is an important reason for promoting relationship enhancement measures, both professionally and politically: teaching communication skills hopefully involves providing couples with conflict-lowering skills that are useful regardless of the direction the relationship takes in the future (Myrvik, 2005; Lærum, 2005).

Interest in implementing and attending relationship enhancement programmes has, very much as a result of the state authority efforts, increased steadily during the last decade in Norway (Thuen and Lærum, 2005). This is so not least on the political level. In fact, the work of putting relationship education on the political agenda has been so successful that the issue created big discussions in the Norwegian Parliament during the budget talks in 2006, when the Ministry of Children and Equality Affairs took away the grant scheme for relationship education work from the its budget. The case became part of a political drama with all the parties involved. The request for keeping the grant scheme was turned down by the Family Committee of the Parliament, but replaced by the Committee of Finance. They widened the economic frame of the Ministry of Children and Equality Affairs in order to keep the grant scheme, which rarely ever happens.

Funding the development and implementation of relationship education programmes – three examples

The grant scheme mentioned above was launched in 1994 by the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs. Its aim was to support relationship education programmes. Different organisa-

tions and local authorities have, since then, been invited to participate in these efforts, and apply for grants. Before this, relationship education in Norway consisted of only a few private initiatives, mainly offered by organisations within the church. The government initiative resulted in many new organisations and agencies involving in the field.

The Family Relations Centre (FRC) is the single largest organisation offering relationship education in Norway. In 2008 the centre received about 1.4 million Nkr (about £110,000 British pounds) out of a grant scheme total of 6.1 million Nkr (£600,000 pounds). This is roughly double the support of the previous year. In 2008 funding was given for PREP courses, the development and implementation of the programme "We are always parents: cooperating WELL ENOUGH after relationship break-up," and the development of DVDs, seminars and materials for relationship education in prison.

FRC is a unit within Modum Bath Clinic and Resource Centre, which is a private charity foundation with a renowned psychiatric clinic as its core. The Family Relations Centre was established in 1995. Its mission is to promote and sustain healthy family relationships as well as to prevent unhealthy ones from developing. The Centre works primarily on a national preventive level. Although it is a part of a psychiatric hospital, the centre works educatively rather than therapeutically.

1. Adapting and implementing the American PREP programme to a Norwegian context

The Family Relations Centre chose in 1998 to translate and implement the American PREP programme developed by Howard Markman, Scott Stanley and Susan Blumberg. This would not have been possible without funding from the national grant scheme mentioned above.

It was necessary to adapt the programme to a Norwegian context. This work has been done in two different phases. In the first phase of this process a fruitful collaboration between the Family Relations Centre and the founders of PREP in Denver was established. The adaptation process involved redefining the target group to be consistent with Norwegian family practices and ideologies, and to adapt, form and harmonise to some extent the content of the programme with Norwegian notions of healthy and desirable couple relations. In the second phase of the process we focused on the contextualisation of the PREP material within a Scandinavian research tradition, in order to show that the programme corresponded to this. This was done in order to answer those critics who did not approve of the programme because it was American. This phase included a revision of the first translation of the PREP material. A new workbook for couples and a new handbook for workshop leaders were written. The Ministry of Children and Family Affairs helped finance both the first translation of the programme, and the second revision of it.

Linguistic adaptation

To label and market the Norwegian PREP workshops as 'premarital education' would miss the target. FRC intended to reach couples at the stage of establishing a serious relationship, and because 90% of new marriages involve a period of cohabitation, this group is not likely to be married or planning to get married in the immediate future. Secondly, in reaching out to the general public and to professionals and politicians alike, it was necessary to use inclusive terms and inclusive concepts of families. In Norway there is a general distancing from viewpoints that

could be interpreted as moralistic and reactionary. Hence an important linguistic adjustment, in order to avoid ideological lines of conflict, lay in promoting PREP as a tool of *enhancing relationships* more than as a tool of preventing divorce. As mentioned above, appealing to the welfare of children makes it more legitimate to emphasise the benefits of preserving the couple relationship between parents, but as the term 'divorce' rules out transformations in families where parents are not legally married, the term and concept of divorce is not beneficial. The American book title *Fighting for your marriage* (Markman, Stanley & Blumberg, 1994) is, in Norwegian, translated as *The book of living together*. Throughout the book inclusive terms for lasting relationships have replaced the term marriage (unless the institution of marriage is addressed specifically).

Two themes are added to the Norwegian programme: *infatuation and love* and *gender roles*. *Love* was added to introduce the discourse of love and to somehow de-emphasise the 'problem' orientation of the programme. Gender roles were addressed more explicitly in the Norwegian PREP version because issues of gender equality are often brought to the political and private agendas when there is talk of family relationships. Gender divisions in shares of domestic work and child rearing tasks are important issues for most young couples, and also a common source of relationship conflicts. Without going into any depth, tentative examples have been subject to some alterations to fit with tacit cultural norms (Thuen & Lærum, 2005).

The situation of PREP today

The first grant came in 1998, and the implementation process started in 1999. In the first year 80 PREP workshop leaders were educated. Since then, and by the end of 2007, 1,300 PREP workshop leaders have been educated, and 9,000 couples have attended PREP workshops throughout Norway. Now workshops held both for professionals and for couples fill up without special efforts to market them. About 40% of the workshops are held under direct leadership of professional staff from the Family Relations Centre. The remaining 60% of workshops are arranged by independent workshop leaders who have received PREP certificates from the Family Relations Centre. Most of these independent workshops are held with financial support from the national grant scheme.

2. Development and implementation of the programme "We are always parents: cooperating WELL ENOUGH after relationship break-up"

The idea and initiative to develop the programme "We are always parents: cooperating WELL ENOUGH after relationship break-up" did not come from the Norwegian state authorities, nor from within the Family Relations Centre. It came from a grandmother and business woman who had experienced the turmoil and destructive conflicts that can occur between divorcing parents. She came to the Family Relations Centre with a large inheritance and the hope of being able to help children in difficult situations due to the break-up of the relationship between their parents.

The work with this project started in 2005, and has so far resulted in the development of courses for parents and workshop leaders, and the publishing of a book on parental cooperation after relationship break up (Helskog and Lærum, 2007). A handbook for workshop leaders (Helskog et al., 2008) and a workbook for parents (Helskog and Thuen, 2008) have also been

written. The core of the project is the realisation that some parents experience great conflicts both during the process of relationship break-up and when cooperating as parents after divorce. This can be very difficult for the children involved. Our hope is that participating in a “We are always parents” workshop will be of help for adults to the extent that children can have a freer relationship with both their parents. A central question at the end of the programme is, “Considering the situation you find yourself and your children in, what would be the wise course of action now?”

The book *We are always parents: cooperating WELL ENOUGH after relationship break-up* (Helskog and Lærum, 2007) is a collection of interviews with ten different researchers and clinicians in the field of psychology, sociology and family therapy. The book includes a prologue written by a cultural-analytical oriented family researcher (Myrvik 2007). With all the knowledge collected in the process of writing this book, the Family Relations Centre has developed an educational programme aimed at helping single parents focus on themselves and the life situation of their children. The idea is that in order to take care of others, you need to understand what you yourself bring into the relationship. The programme is organised into five themes: *The process of breaking up; Interaction, conflict and communication; Seeing the life situation of the children; Parental cooperation and Meeting the future*. The workshop is intended to give parents insight and understanding that can help them with the following:

- coping with their own difficult feelings
- seeing that the other parent can be a good parent even though the relationship between the spouses might have been difficult
- separating the relationship between parent and child from the relationship between themselves and their ex-partner
- becoming more aware of their own ways of acting and communicating
- reconciling with and learning from the past, in order to be able to focus on creating the life they wish to live in the future, together with their children.

So far 160 professionals have participated in the workshops, and about 80 have bought the material and are ready to start their own workshop for parents throughout Norway. The Family Relations Centre is currently in meetings with the Ministry of Family and Equality Affairs hoping to get the financial support needed to implement the programme on a large scale. In this context the state authorities on the national, regional and local level will be deeply involved in the further implementation of the programme.

3. *The Rainbow Project – preventive work for families of non-western ethnic background*

The Rainbow Project started in 2004, with the aim of preventing relationship problems in families of a non-western minority background, and to help families adjust to their social environment. The number of parents of a minority background separating and divorcing is high, and the couples have rarely been to therapeutic counselling at an earlier stage in conflict development. The Rainbow Project aims to reach families before the conflicts have developed to the stage where they are risking divorce. The course programme also aims to strengthen the competencies of the parents, to give them belief in their own caring abilities as well as knowledge of Norwegian family norms, rules and customs. (<http://www.bufetat.no>) Immigrant minority families often experience further difficulties in addition to ‘normal’

family problems which Norwegian families also encounter. These problems can come from the need to escape from conflicts in the home country, migration, and adjusting to a new culture and a new set of social norms (<http://www.bufetat.no>). By the end of 2007, 47 persons with a minority background had been educated as group leaders, and 17 had held workshops in their own minority group for a total of about 560 parents (Danielsen and Engebriksen, 2007).

The content of the programme is organised into four themes:

1. *Meeting Norway*: Possibilities and challenges in a new society. Topics include cultural identity and background, expectations in Norwegian society, integration and migration.
2. *Family Life*: Expectations of family life, gender roles and gender equality, communication and conflict handling.
3. *Norwegian rules and regulations that affect family life*: Democracy, the law of equality, rights and duties in marriage, negotiation when divorcing, the law of children, taboos, traditions and sexuality.
4. *Growing up in two cultures*: Child development, different cultural values in child rearing, the International Child Development Programme (ICDP), dialogue between parents and children, and youth in society and family.

“Living Together Nicely” – a government-run relationship education programme

As another example of relationship education, the state-run programme “Living Together Nicely” (Godt samliv) is offered to parents the first year after their first child is born.

Because of a belief in the potential benefits of relationship education when it comes to the welfare of children, funding was granted in the state budget for 2004 to start a process of developing a scheme whereby all couples will be offered one day of relationship education, free of charge, at the arrival of their firstborn child. It was a cross-political agreement that this would be a good family policy intervention. The development of this relationship education programme for couples was conducted by the state authorities themselves, within the Directorate of Children – Youth and Family Affairs. The aim of the programme “Living Together Nicely” (Godt samliv) is to strengthen relationships and prevent divorce (Familiemeldingen 2002-2003 Forpliktende samliv og foreldreskap).

In 2007, 335 of these government-run couple-courses were held all across Norway. At local level they are offered by the Social and Health offices in municipalities, and the aim is that these courses shall be offered all over Norway. 2,100 couples participated in courses in 2007, which have to be attended within the first year after the first child is born. Unfortunately there is insufficient data to indicate how many couples attended the courses. 58,500 children were born in Norway in 2007 (Statistics Norway 2008).

What interest does the Norwegian state have in offering a government-run relationship education programme? Norwegian state documents claim that “couple relationships are public health,” and argue that fewer divorces will have positive effects in society both on a human and an economic level. Divorce can result in difficulties at work. The most important argument though is that sustainable and stable couple relationships “are basically concerned with the life situation and growth of children.” Arguing for the best interests of children was also central in the debate in the Parliament about the intervention (Myrvik, 2005). This is also

stated in the workbook for participants in the programme: “Children need parents with good and stable relationships.” The aim of the intervention is to “stabilise and strengthen couple relationships among parents who have recently had their first child, and prevent relationship break-up in families where children are involved.” The welfare of the child is therefore the main reason why the Norwegian state involves itself in people’s couple relationships (Danielsen and Mühleisen, 2008).

Increasing media interest in the field of family, couples and relationship development

Over the last decade there has been a growing interest in the Norwegian mass media when it comes to relationships. All the big newspapers have weekly columns about couple relationships and often one or two pages in their weekend magazines. Relationships within the family generally are given much attention. This interest and attention is also important in showing that couple problems are common, and that experiencing difficulties within the family is normal. This again might make it easier both to ask for therapeutic help at an early stage of conflict development, and to attend relationship education workshops. The Norwegian association of psychologists offers a prize to individuals who have done important work in spreading and making psychological knowledge commonly available. In 2008 Professor Frode Thuen from the University of Bergen and Modum Bad – Family Relations Centre was honoured with the prize for his weekly column on couple relationships in the biggest Norwegian newspaper – *Aftenposten* – and for his books and contributions in a number of TV series. This prize can be an important incentive for researchers and clinicians to engage in such public education.

The Norwegian State acting as an extended family?

Cultural analysts have used the programme “Living Together Nicely” as a source for understanding the ideals and norms for couples in Norway. This is possible because the Norwegian welfare state on the one hand has to rely on ideals and norms that are legitimate both politically speaking and in the population, and on the other hand has to act like an expanded family, active in forming the ideals and norms for parenthood and couple relationships in Norway today.

The cultural analyst Hilde Danielsen looks at the state efforts through critical but humorous glasses, claiming that “the state has entered people’s bedrooms” (in an interview at NRK Hordaland 08.08.2008), and that “when the state lifts our bedroom blankets, it is in the best interests of children” (Hilde Danielsen interviewed in Hubro2 2008, The University of Bergen). Danielsen and her colleagues have concluded that the programme “Living Together Nicely” is consensus and harmony-oriented, allowing power differences related to gender, sexuality and economy to be preserved. They also say that the programme is lacking reflexivity regarding the societal structures surrounding the couples (Danielsen and Mühleisen, 2008). This is also the critique of the PREP programme (Hilde Danielsen at a seminar on relationship education, Dec 2007). In spite of this, they say the communication model aims at presenting intimate relationships as being possible to direct and change, where the subject is understood relationally and in constant motion (Danielsen and Mühleisen 2008).

This latter point is one possible to reflect on in the perspective of Enlightenment humanism¹. Philosophers debating education and politics at the turn of the eighteenth century

and beginning of the nineteenth century discussed how to create what they called a “true humanity” based on ideals of equality, respect, recognition and communicative democracy. The political and educational were treated as connected entities, as were the individual and the collective, the private and the public. In this tradition the human being was seen as someone who created himself or herself, as an individual and as a member of humanity. The German philosopher Herder was one of the first to formulate the idea of “education towards (true) humanity” (*Bildung zur humanität*). To become truly human a person needs education, he said. Becoming truly human is a task for every generation if they are to avoid sinking into brutality and destructiveness. In the process of becoming truly human, a person especially needs *language*. Words are like glasses or eyes, and language is the only way to see yourself, your actions and your relations to others and to the world (Helskog, 2003).

An optimistic way of looking at attempts to teach the Norwegian population how to communicate well and to solve their conflicts would be to interpret this work as being done in accordance with these ideals. This gives couples a language through which to see themselves, each other and their interaction, which again can prevent the sinking into brutality and destructiveness. The latter can be seen to be the case in destructive family relationships, both in sustained and disrupted ones.

Through the grant scheme the Norwegian state authorities have cooperated with private organisations, encouraging and supporting the development and implementation of relationship education programmes. PREP and “Living Together Nicely” are the most widespread programmes.

It is impossible to link these efforts conclusively with the decrease in divorce rates and increase in marriage rates during the last few years. But there is at least the possibility that fifteen years of talk and action on relationship education may have contributed to a cultural change. Relationship education is offered by newspapers and television as well as in PREP or “Living Together Nicely” courses. The reduction of taboos and shame connected to problems within the family and private sphere is likely to have diminished in some way because of the attention given to the field.

Finally, however, the question of the cultural analyst Hilde Danielsen is nevertheless important to restate: Should the bedroom life of couples really be the business of the state?

1 In the book *Religion and human fulfilment* (2008), Keith Ward, Professor of Divinity at the University of Oxford, defends the controversial thesis that the moral ideals of Enlightenment humanism were deeply rooted in a religious perspective.

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