

# Enduring Love?

## Couple Relationships in the 21st Century



### Newsletter 1 - February 2012

Welcome to the first newsletter of the *Enduring Love?* research project. This newsletter is scheduled to be published three times a year over the duration of the project; we hope you will find it thought provoking and useful. Please send us your responses and input concerning the topic, any news items that have caught your interest or reflections on your own participation. We will be delighted to hear from you.

### Project outline

The *Enduring Love?* research project is an exciting development in the study of personal and family lives in contemporary Britain. Much recent policy, academic and professional research has focused on the causes and effects of relationship breakdown, but many couples also remain together for significant periods of time. In some ways these couples appear to sit outside a growing tendency towards serial or transitory relationships. To understand more about couples who stay together, our research will focus on the meanings and everyday experiences of long-term relationships.

We will not, however, be presupposing that such relationships are uniformly loving or straightforwardly associated with contentment. As such, the question mark in the title is crucial! It indicates the potential for the endurance of long-term relationships to be double edged, signifying a matter for celebration, perseverance, or even basic survival. The project will, then, be concerned with what helps people sustain relationships and how cultural myths, such as finding 'the one' and living 'happily-ever-after', are understood and reconciled by adult couples whose own relationships may fall short of these romantic ideals.

You can read much more about the project's aims and methods on our project website.

[www.enduringlove.co.uk](http://www.enduringlove.co.uk)

## What we've been up to

The *Enduring Love?* project commenced in September 2011 and has ESRC funding to run for two years. In the first few months we've achieved quite a lot! We have:

- Launched the project website
- Produced a series of iTunes audio and video podcasts in which couples reflect on what their relationships mean to them  
<http://itunes.apple.com/itunes-u/enduring-love-for-ipod-iphone/id495106174>
- Refined the research tools for the qualitative fieldwork
- Interviewed key policy makers and third sector organisations who work in relationship education and support
- Completed an analysis of current policy in the UK (Klett-Davies, M. 2012) \*
- Designed the project survey questionnaire, which is available in both online and hard copy format. This has already been completed by over 2500 people in the first month alone!
- Secured funding for, and appointed, two doctoral studentships, one of which is funded in collaboration with Relate
- Participated in a panel discussion at the National Council on Family Relations (NCFR, Florida, U.S.) on qualitative mixed methods research
- And last, but by no means least, held a prestigious launch in central London

\* Klett-Davies, M. (2012) A critical analysis of family and relationships policies in England and Wales (1997-2011), *Families, Relationships and Societies* (1, 1).

## Project launch on 16 January 2012

At the project launch we were delighted to have a full house with around 70 people attending. The event took place in the Diana, Princess of Wales, Memorial Conference Rooms in County Hall, London. We celebrated the launch of the study with an interesting mix of policy makers, third sector organisations, researchers and academics.

There was some lively discussion at times, and particularly stimulating presentations from a range of speakers, including Annabel Burns, from the Department of Education, Kate Figes, author and journalist, Prof Lynn Jamieson, from the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships at the University of Edinburgh, and Prof Ann Phoenix from the Thomas Coram Research Unit at the Institute of Education. The launch has already been heralded as 'a triumph', so it should stand us in good stead as we move forward and begin the fieldwork. Slides of the presentations are now available on the *Enduring Love?* website, along with audio recordings.



## Dialogue

Through the duration of the project, we want to facilitate dialogue with others working in the areas of relationship education and support, and the study of relationships in all their myriad and diverse forms. Here we highlight just a few of the ways that we are trying to do this.

## Blogging

The project researcher, Martina Klett-Davies, is writing a blog which injects a personal note on the experience and progress of the project.

[www8.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/enduringlove/news-and-blog](http://www8.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/enduringlove/news-and-blog)

OU researcher Nick Mahony is also following the progress of the *Enduring Love?* project on his *Creating Publics* blog, focusing on how research such as this brings together many different audiences.

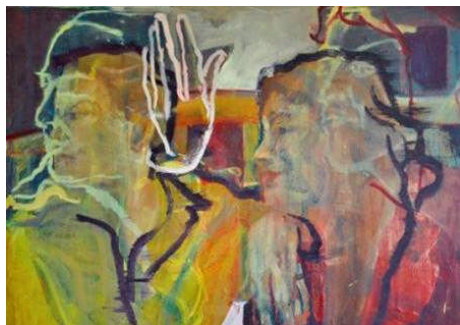
[creatingpublics.wordpress.com/2012/01/17/creating-publics-for-enduring-love](http://creatingpublics.wordpress.com/2012/01/17/creating-publics-for-enduring-love)

## Affiliates

We have a number of organisations and bodies already affiliated to the project. These include third sector organisations such as Relate and One Plus One, Government Departments, Research Centres, and research projects. So, as you can see, we believe that collaboration is crucial in consolidating and extending the scope of the project. Get in touch if you think your work or research might fit in with the *Enduring Love?* project.

[www8.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/enduringlove/affiliates](http://www8.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/enduringlove/affiliates)

## Facebook



Dr Meg Barker has been convening a lively Facebook discussion among Open University staff and students and among her blog followers more widely. Meg is a member of the *Enduring Love?* strategy group, Senior Lecturer in Psychology and a member of the College of Sexual and Relationships Therapists.

[www.facebook.com/theopenuniversity.socialscience/posts/120759978044304](https://www.facebook.com/theopenuniversity.socialscience/posts/120759978044304)

[rewritingtherules.wordpress.com/2012/01/18/enduring-love](http://rewritingtherules.wordpress.com/2012/01/18/enduring-love)

Meg has also just completed an important national report on bisexualities.

[www8.open.ac.uk/ccig/public-engagement/the-bisexuality-report](http://www8.open.ac.uk/ccig/public-engagement/the-bisexuality-report)

## What's happening out there

In this section we want to flag some recent publications, research and media stories that have caught our attention and which we thought may be of interest to some of you.

### Everyday lives and popular culture

Some advice on relationships, remembered by a 17 year old after a recent PSHE event at school, was about contributions to relationships, including: saying positive words; finding thoughtful gifts; expressing physical affection; small acts of kindness. Another thread suggested the need to be ready to sacrifice other priorities and activities in order to make time to be together. This event was certainly found to be enjoyable (a comedian came to school to give the talk!), and suggests that this school at least managed to improve on Jay's recent observation in *Eastenders*... If you missed the episode: Teenage couple Jay Mitchell and Abi Branning are the Romeo and Juliette storyline 'on the Square'. Making up after an argument, Jay bemoans that at school they learn all about the mechanics of sex but nothing about how to actually make a relationship work.

Couple relationships are also the focus of two new fascinating publications. Joanna Hodgkin's biography of Lawrence and Nancy Durrell, *Amateurs in Eden: The Story of a Bohemian Marriage* and Lily Tuck's novel, *I Married You for Happiness*, illustrate the complicated stories that are demanded by any account of marriage, whether biographical, autobiographical or fictional.

[www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/feb/05/amateurs-eden-nancy-durrell-review](http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/feb/05/amateurs-eden-nancy-durrell-review)

[www.nytimes.com/2011/09/18/books/review/i-married-you-for-happiness-by-lily-tuck-book-review.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/18/books/review/i-married-you-for-happiness-by-lily-tuck-book-review.html)

## Academic publications

### Unequal opportunities for love?

*Inequalities of Love: College Educated Black Women and the Barriers to Romance and Family*, by Averil Y. Clarke (2011) Duke University Press, presents an interesting and provocative dimension to inequalities research. Clarke argues that the achievement of personal goals around sexuality, relationships and childbearing should be seen as sources of inequality in their own right – rather than through their impact on gender in/equality regarding work and financial resources. Using quantitative analyses and qualitative

interviews, she suggests that structural barriers for college-educated black women in the US reduced opportunities for achieving their personal goals around love.

### **Commitment in relationships**

Research (Rhoades et al. 2012) on the commitment levels of cohabiting and married couples in the US reports on a gender difference, and the relevance of financial constraints. Read more about the recent Marriage Care seminar on this work in Martina's blog (14 February 2012) on the *Enduring Love?* website.

Rhoades, G. K., Stanley, S. & H. J. Markman (2012) A Longitudinal Investigation of Commitment Dynamics in Cohabiting Relationships, *Journal of Family Issues*, 33: 3, pp.369-390.

### **Statistics on marriage and divorce**

Recent statistics from the Office of National Statistics show that the proportion of the adult population of England & Wales who are married is one of the highest in Europe.

[www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/pop-estimate/population-estimates-by-marital-status/mid-2010/stb---population-estimates-by-marital-status--2010.html](http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/pop-estimate/population-estimates-by-marital-status/mid-2010/stb---population-estimates-by-marital-status--2010.html)

According to the most recent figures, more than 11,500 over-60s were granted a divorce in a year – a rise of 4 per cent in two years. By comparison, total divorce rates fell by more than 11 per cent in the same period from 2007 to 2009.

[www.nfm.org.uk/news/76-general/803-growing-number-of-over-60s-seeking-divorce](http://www.nfm.org.uk/news/76-general/803-growing-number-of-over-60s-seeking-divorce)

### **Legal matters**

A recent legal case has led to calls for reform to the law regarding couples who live together. A new ruling has, however, been welcomed as providing greater protection for cohabiting couples.

[www.resolution.org.uk/news-list.asp?page\\_id=228&n\\_id=166](http://www.resolution.org.uk/news-list.asp?page_id=228&n_id=166)

[www.nfm.org.uk/news/76-general/795-unmarried-couples-granted-new-legal-protection-by-courts](http://www.nfm.org.uk/news/76-general/795-unmarried-couples-granted-new-legal-protection-by-courts)

Concerns have been expressed that cuts will damage divorce reforms.

[www.resolution.org.uk/news-list.asp?page\\_id=228&n\\_id=165](http://www.resolution.org.uk/news-list.asp?page_id=228&n_id=165)

## **Research**

### **Parental relationships and child outcomes**

Current interest in adult relationships is often framed through the implications for the lives of children involved. Some insights into this question are available from the Millennium Cohort Study based at the Centre for Longitudinal Studies.

[www.cls.ioe.ac.uk](http://www.cls.ioe.ac.uk)

Recently published Briefings from the Centre include *Parent Relationships and Child Wellbeing*, and *Quality of Parental Relationship and Parenting Behaviour*.

### **Young people and marriage**

Recently published research has investigated why some newlyweds go on to divorce, even after several years of happiness together.

[www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22040353](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22040353)

Research in the US has shown that some cohabiting young couples are hesitating to marry because they are afraid of divorce, with social class differences apparent in expectations of marriage.

[www.rdmag.com/News/Feeds/2011/12/general-sciences-divorce-fears-widespread-among-young-couples](http://www.rdmag.com/News/Feeds/2011/12/general-sciences-divorce-fears-widespread-among-young-couples)

