

Research Briefing

Enduring Love? Couple Relationships in the 21st Century

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- Relationships are contingent and diverse
- Relationships are maintained through financial, spatial and emotional resources
- Relationships are sustained through everyday practices of care, thoughtfulness and kindness

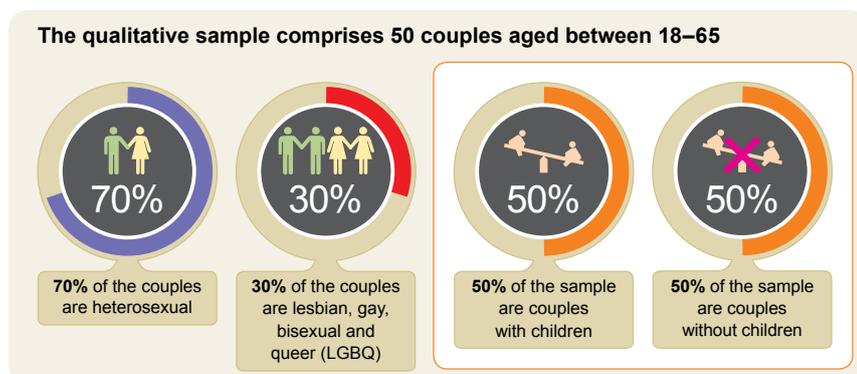


Enduring and endured couple relationships

Who and how we love may be changing but our desire to be in a relationship endures. Although long-term may no longer mean forever-after, there is no sense that couples perceive their relationships as time limited when they are together. How then do couples experience, understand and sustain long-term relationships in Britain today? *The Enduring Love?* study provides research evidence on this compelling question - for policy-makers, professionals and practitioners working in the field of relationship education and support, researchers and couples themselves.

A mixed methods psychosocial study

Qualitative methods were used to drill down into embodied lived experience.



Given that what connects two people together and makes a relationship work is often perceived as silent agreements or chemistry, then using a rich palette of methods was imperative. It enabled us to interrogate the minutiae and mundanities that often go unseen in the everyday lives and loves of enduring relationships.

Diaries generated temporal data on daily routines and the processing of day-to-day interactions that comprise relationship life.

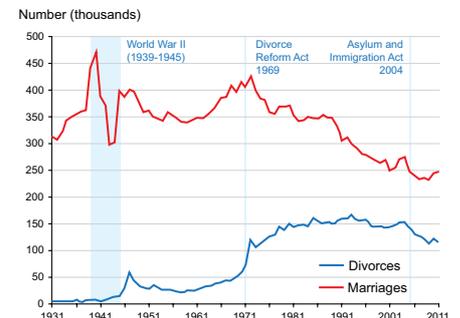
Emotion maps located experience in the home and depicted the emotional dynamic of couple relationships.

Biographical interviews focused on how relationships work, exploring relational experience across life course.

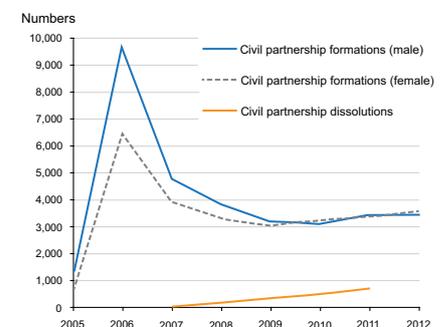
Couple collage interviews examined the socio-cultural contexts of relationships and addressed key research themes.

The **quantitative survey** generated a convenience sample of 5445 people and focused questions on relationship qualities, relationship with partner and relationship maintenance, which enabled us to scope trends in behaviour and the factors which signal relationship satisfaction.

Relationship Trends



Number of Marriages and Divorces 1931–2011



Civil partnership formations by sex and civil partnership dissolutions ONS (2013)

Research Team

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Researching relationships

Relationships are comprised of stoicism and passion, choices and lack of choice, contentment and disenchantment – and all the spectrum of feelings and experiences in-between. Studies have added significant insight into personal lives but often the very emotions that constitute the fabric of study have been wrung out of the analysis. We situate emotions at the conceptual, methodological and analytical heart of our multi-sensory psycho-social research inquiry, to access and portray vibrant and visceral accounts of relationships.

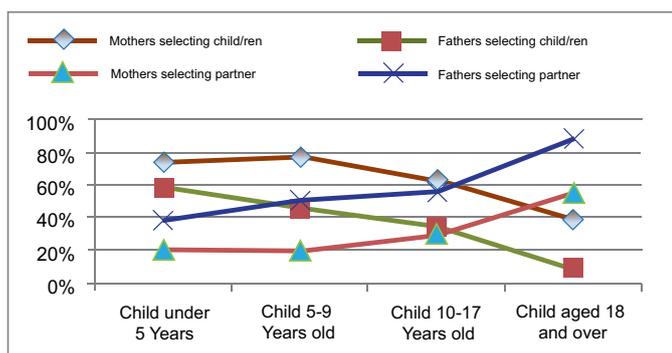
Foregrounding the everyday, our focus is on ordinary moments using these as a lens through which to advance understanding of personal life. Everyday moments open up an analytical crack to shed light on relationship process, practice and structure, grounding them in their biographical, socio-historical and cultural contexts.

Parenthood and gender

Survey data clearly indicate that it is parenthood which shapes experience and perceptions of relationship quality more than other underlying differences. Gender is an important factor, indeed the responses of mothers and fathers significantly diverged, but it is the absence–presence of children which is crucial.

Fathers are less positive than childless men about their relationships. Mothers are more negative about their relationships than childless women. However, mothers are significantly happier with life than any other group. From this it could be inferred that children are the primary source of happiness for women rather than a partner, something that is corroborated by other survey data including responses to the question: *Who is the most important person in your life?* Mothers are most likely to select their child/ren; fathers overwhelmingly select their partner.

*Who is the most important person in your life?
By gender and parenthood and age of youngest child*



The person identified as the most important person revealed both the patterning of gendered responses and also the tensions at play in balancing parenting and partnering.

"I used to go round to [partner's] and it was respite, because being a single mum with kids... I'd go round on a Friday and he'd run a bath for me and there'd be candles around it and yeah, it used to be really lovely. You don't do that now know! [Laughs]"

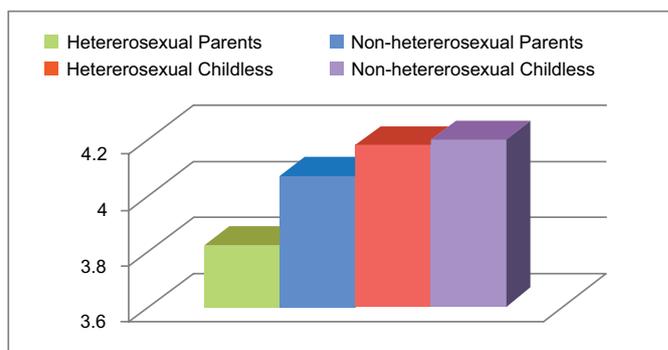
"It is hard to make time to be with each other with children and work commitments"

Sexuality

LGBQ participants are more generally positive about and happier with the quality of their relationship and the relationship which they have with their partner.

Survey data suggest that parents engage in less relationship maintenance than childless participants. Moreover, heterosexual parents score significantly lower than LGBQ parents on this measure. Heterosexual parents are the group least likely to be there for each other, to make 'couple time', to pursue shared interests, to say 'I love you' and to talk openly to one another.

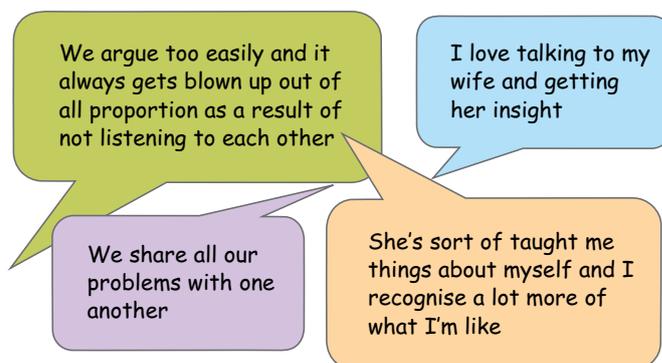
Relationship maintenance (means) by parenthood and sexuality



Communication

Good communication is crucial. Making time to talk and listen is highly valued, a means through which couples come to understand, reassure and comfort each other. Getting along and 'having a laugh' together alleviates, or puts into perspective, the everyday strains and difficulties of life.

Women often experience their partners' unwillingness and/or inability to express their feelings as adversely impacting on the emotional dynamics of their relationship. However some of the most difficult 'relationship work' that couples do is at the intersections of poor communication, arguments and conflict.



Money

Arguments and poor communication, notably around money issues, are frequently cited as one of the least liked aspects of a relationship. These are often linked to anxieties and difficulties generated by the problems of managing the household finances and/or not knowing about a partner's financial situation.

Money also features as one of the reasons why couples who live apart are unable to share as much time together as they would like and, in turn, share space too. Conversely, for unemployed couples, a lack of money can result in too few opportunities to spend time apart. For those also living in social housing this is often exacerbated by too little personal space in the home.

"We've got nothing to talk about because we've been with each other all day. And, of course, because you've been together all day you can wind each other up"

Generation

There is little evidence to support recent theoretical, policy and media emphases on growing social divisions between younger and older generations. It is rather that couples use generational difference as a way of understanding their own personal choices and how particular socio-economic contexts and couple norms shaped relationships in the past.

"I haven't modelled myself too much on them [parents] because they did do things differently. It was a generation thing"

Couples acknowledge equally the ways their own childhoods, 'biographical anchors' and relational histories have shaped their relationships. In this way they show an awareness of the significance of inter- and intra-generational transmission for relationship experiences, practices and expectations.

"My dream is getting married and then we'd be the old couple [like my nan and granddad] sat in the garden holding hands, sipping flat lemonade"

There are, however, inevitable differences in relationship experiences across the life course and these can affect relationship satisfaction. In our survey, younger and older men tend to score higher on relationship satisfaction measures than men in midlife. Younger women score significantly higher than women in the older age categories. Women over 55 years of age score lower on relationship satisfaction regardless of their parental status.

Reflexivity

Irrespective of age, class or sexuality, reflections on the nature of their values, choices, feelings, actions and personal biographies are systematically used by couples to explain and understand their relationships.

"I told [partner] I wanted a [bucket and spade] and she made sure she got me a set. Then we all went to the beach so I could build a sandcastle empire!... She knows happy memories or lost chances from my childhood mean a lot to me"

The determination to think reflexively is particularly marked in accounts by lesbian and gay couples and by those who had had previous long-term relationships; both of who – for different reasons - are determined 'to do things differently'.

"Well, I think because we're both second time around, we are very aware of the pitfalls, and things that didn't work in the past etc. I've learnt a lot since my first marriage"

Stressors

Pressures exerted on the relationship from external factors, such as bereavement, financial uncertainties, ill-health, the birth of children, changes in employment and housing, have been identified as posing a potential threat to relationship stability. In contrast, our findings indicate that 'what doesn't break you, can make you'.

"It is tough him being out of work... [though] doing the LGV licence and things like that we have a future, but it just depends on how long it's going to take to get there. But hopefully it will be this year, which will be nice"

Indeed, rather than stretching the couple to breaking point, stressors often appear to consolidate the relationship with couples pulling together and being there for each other through such difficulties and heartache. Surviving adversities, together, can make a relationship stronger.

Sex and intimacy

People in the UK may be having less sex than a decade ago (Natsal 2013) but there is consensus across the survey that sex remains an important part of a relationship. Deep divisions between understandings and the experiences of women and men are also evident.

"Has sex when she doesn't really want to"

"We have wonderful sex very often, it makes me feel loved and cared for"

Childless men and women are 50% more likely than parents to perceive physical affection as a sign of appreciation. Men are three times more likely than women to mention sexual intimacy as something which makes them feel appreciated. Notwithstanding these differences, dissatisfaction with sexual frequency did not undermine overall (high levels of) relationship/partner satisfaction.

"Hot sex and cups of tea... great combination!"

For some sexual intimacy is a means to consolidate couple closeness; for others it was taken-for-granted, a problem, or ordinary. As such, sex is everything, or nothing, or something in-between. It has no uniform meaning or sentiment.

Time, space and place

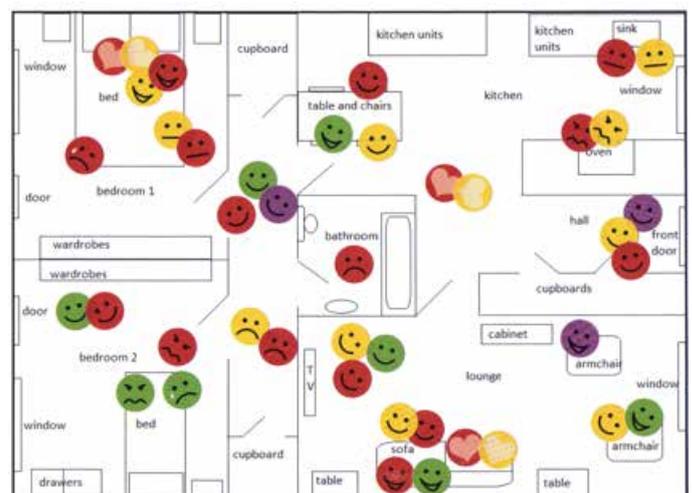
Couples relish opportunities to spend time together, either as a way of catching up with the minutiae of their everyday lives or of sharing experiences, such as trips to the pub, visits to the cinema or theatre, and holidays. The arrival 'home' after time spent apart is often framed as a highly cherished moment. The difficulties of not having 'couple time' feature regularly as an issue for those who are balancing work and family commitments. Yet couples appreciate equally the need for personal space and 'time out' from the relationship. This allows them a sense of independence and agency as well as opportunities to pursue personal interests and friendships.

The home, as the place in which their relationship is predominantly located, is highly significant in the ways couples describe their everyday practices, account for past experiences and imagine their future together. Home symbolises security, commitment and ways of being together as a couple, especially for those who are living in cramped or overcrowded conditions.

"I want [a home] that feels spacious enough. This space isn't suited to us. It's three rooms that we have to do everything in...We can't have a meal together"

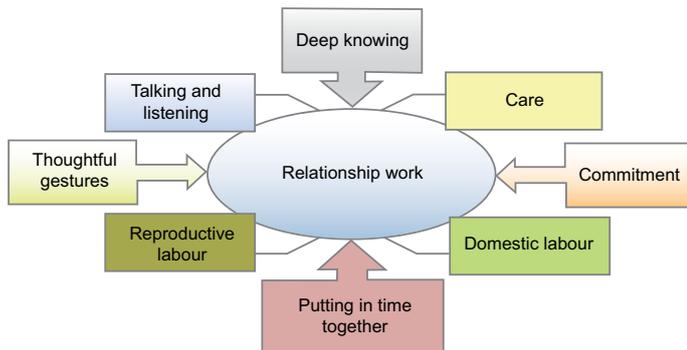
Emotion map

Key: P1 = yellow, P2 = red, P3 = purple, P4 = green



Relationship practices

Ideas about 'working at relationships' - and their therapeutic origins and policy imperatives - have informed the study. We have developed a multifaceted approach to 'relationship work', taking into account relationship diversity, including age, cultural norms, parenthood, sexuality, economic and social resources.



Yet our findings contest the differentiation of couples through distinct relationship types. We have instead identified four key forms of 'relationship practice' which cut across the dataset.

Nurturing the relationship

There are many activities which combine to 'feed' the relationship, emotionally, practically, and symbolically; these serve to consolidate togetherness, carve out shared time and create couple memories. Practices include eating together, watching the same TV programmes, sharing domestic tasks and making personally meaningful and thoughtful gestures.

"it was just a very intimate thing to do; to just sit there and be on the sofa together and watching a TV show. It just felt really nice"

Embracing the relationship

Notwithstanding the ebbs and flows of sexual desire in long-term relationships, sex is identified as important. However couples appear to equally cherish sensory intimacy, with cuddles, attentiveness and a caress being commonly identified as forging closeness.

"We often hold hands as we're going to sleep"

Public-private boundaries of 'couple display', however, remain sometimes fraught. Many LGBTQ couples, especially younger ones, say they would not hold hands in public for fear of reprisal.

Investments in the relationship

Emotional and practical work is required to keep relationships alive. Whether explicitly crafted or incidental, these investments in 'the couple' are perceived as crucial. Candlelit dinners at the kitchen table, cheeky texts, chocolate bar treats, post-it note messages and saying 'I love you' comprise the quotidian of lived and living relationships.

"When we're having a hard time... it feels like we're kind of not making any deposits in the 'bank account' of our relationship"

Marking the relationship

Long-term relationships also include a diachronic dimension; long-term is about a shared past, the present day and a future together. In different ways, to differing degrees, couples seek to mark special occasions that have personal meaning for them.

"Every year he brings me an orange rose from a garden that he maintains"

Love is...?

Love is a slippery concept. It is readily invoked by some but not mentioned by others; its articulation and meanings remain hard to pin down. The act of saying 'I love you' is identified as important by women and men alike, but a loving gesture is far more highly valued. Examples of such gestures are illustrated by the top five responses to the question in our survey: *What does your partner do that makes you feel appreciated?*

1. Says thank you and notices my accomplishments, such as being a good parent
2. Thoughtful gifts and kind gestures, with a cup of tea in bed being especially appreciated by mothers
3. Talks with me and listens to me
4. Physical affection, with cuddles and foot massage featuring prominently
5. Shares the household chores and/or childcare

Policy & Practice implications

Couple diversity

Couples are what couples do. Sets of contexts, predispositions and lifestyles combine in myriad ways and are underpinned by emotional, spatio-temporal and financial resources. The tension and problematic for policy and practice is to hold the specificities of experience in concert with differences in couples' lived lives.

Patterns of relating

Relationship typologies, defined through context and/or prescriptive dimensions of dys/functionality, efface the multidimensionality of lived lives. Focusing on 'relationship practices' highlights the work that couples ordinarily do and through which patterns of relating can be traced.

Generational landscapes

Relationship experience and expectations change across the life course. For younger couples relationships can be 'an adventure'; for those in midlife, responsibilities can often overwhelm; in later life there may be tensions between opportunities and obligations. Relationship education initiatives need to respond creatively to these shifting relationship landscapes.

Research implications

Unsettling coupledom

Findings provoke us to rethink what constitutes a couple (dyad) and its conflation with the 'couple norm'. Couple relationships are typically multidimensional in form, with 'significant others' such as children, lovers, pets, friends and deities being an integral part of the couple fabric.

Relationship practices

Literature and empirical studies often splinter familial, intimate and work relationships into discrete objects of study. Focusing on 'relationship practices' draws attention to how couples live and love across and within these different sites.

Multisensory methods

A multisensory research design can advance understandings of intimate lives, and especially how structure and agency, past and present, realities and dreams, culture and context intersect in constantly shifting ways.

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