

Factual – Measured - Critical

Enduring Love? Couple Relationships in the 21st Century **Dr Jacqui Gabb and Dr Janet Fink, The Open University**

From the 7 year itch to the 3 year glitch. From grey divorce, Facebook affairs and cheating love rats to sumptuous celebrity weddings, childhood sweethearts and the power of love to conquer all adversities. Stories about couple relationships saturate the media. Tales of broken hearts, divorce and betrayals and accounts of love, romance and long-term commitment move in and out of the headlines – attracting and repelling readers equally! But does this reflect how people think about and experience their relationships? How do couples work through the ups and downs, pains and pleasures, hopes and fears of being in a relationship in Britain today?

Who and how we love may be changing but our desire to be in a relationship endures. 70% of households are still headed up by married couples and many heterosexual and same-sex couples are staying together for significant periods of time. The two year (2011-2013), ESRC funded, *Enduring Love?* study is exploring what it means and feels like to be a couple in contemporary Britain. Shifting the emphasis away from media hyperbole and the ‘stressors’ which may contribute to relationship breakdown, we are focusing on the ‘things’ that help people sustain their relationships. Our data indicate that couples not only accept that relationships take and need work; they also appreciate, cherish and even at times relish the mundane emotional and practical labour that is required to sustain long-term relationships.

Long-term relationships

Long-term may no longer mean forever after, but there is no sense that couples perceive their relationships as time-limited when they are together. Instead there is an acknowledgement and valuing of the everyday mundanities that are required to make a relationship work. What constitutes relationship work in this context and who is part of the fabric of couple relationships call into question simple understandings of coupledness. Our findings provoke us to rethink what constitutes a couple (dyadic) relationship and its slippage into and conflation with cultural understandings of the Western heteronormative ‘couple norm’.

Stressors in relationships

Much may have been said about the stressors which fracture long-term relationships, but what the *Enduring Love?* survey findings indicate is that ‘what doesn’t break you, will make you’. If the pressures exerted on the relationship from external factors, such as bereavement, financial uncertainties, the birth of children, changes in employment and housing do not stretch the couple to breaking point, then they appear to actually consolidate the relationship. Pulling together and being there for each other through such difficulties and heartache are identified by female and male participants alike as some of the things which made their relationships stronger.

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Parenthood

In all of the five measures deployed in the survey and running throughout the open questions, it is parenthood which appears to shape experience and perceptions of relationship quality more than other underlying differences, such as gender. This does not suggest that gender is unimportant, indeed the experiences of mothers and fathers appear to significantly diverge, but it does point to the absence–presence of children as crucial in understanding the diversity of couple relationships. Fathers are less positive than childless men about their relationship quality, relationship with partner and relationship maintenance. They are also less happy with their relationship/partner but as happy as childless men about life overall. Mothers are more negative about relationship quality, relationship with partner, relationship maintenance, happiness with relationship/partner than childless women. However, mothers are significantly happier with life than any other group. This indicates that children could be a primary source of happiness for women rather than their partner.

Overall, parents appear to engage in less relationship maintenance than childless participants. However, heterosexual parents score significantly lower than lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer (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. LGBQ participants are more generally positive about and happier with the quality of their relationship, relationship with their partner and their relationship maintenance than heterosexual participants.

Sexual intimacy

The intangibility of feelings and the ways that love and intimacy are experienced, understood and deployed in couple relationships is something which emerged strongly through the survey data. Sexual intimacy is typically embedded within emotional dimensions of the relationship rather than seen as a simply physical encounter, *sex per se*. Mothers report that they want to have sex less often than their partners do, while fathers are over twice more likely than mothers to include different needs or expectations around sexual intimacy in the things they like least about their relationship. LGBQ couples with and without children are less likely to perceive differences in sexual frequency/desire for sex. While the longevity of the relationship does appear to have some impact on couple’s sex life, it is gender and parenthood which are by far the more significant underlying factors.

Overall, however, for both mothers and fathers, dissatisfaction with sexual frequency does not appear to undermine overall (high levels of) relationship/partner satisfaction, something that contests previous research which has shown a correlation between relationship and sexual frequency satisfaction. Instead, the inference is that sex means something different for men and women. This does not simply illustrate the adage that ‘men love to live and women live to love’, it points to the ways that in long-term parenting couple relationships, men may be more

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inclined to miss the partner closeness which they experience prior to children. Fathers' answers are thus perhaps more reflective, looking back to being childless men when sex equals something more, a demonstration of appreciation, being there for each other, togetherness as a couple.

Money

Mothers and fathers in our sample are likely to emulate the male breadwinner/female homemaker model with half of the fathers often or always supporting their partners financially. Just over 40% of mothers work part-time. Notwithstanding this, in our survey most mothers and fathers seem to think that financial resources are often or always fairly distributed in their relationship. They share the view that any arguments are not typically over money, with about 75% of them indicating that they never or only occasionally argue over money. Nonetheless, money is obviously an important issue. When participants were asked to note down two things that they like least about the relationship, money issues are highly ranked.

Who is the most important person in your life?

The character and quality of intimacy and intimate relationships remain hotly contested in sociological research. The *Enduring Love?* survey sought to directly address the arguments, for and against the individualisation thesis. It asked the question 'Who is the most important person in your life?' Participants could choose one from the drop-down list, which included children, partner, father, sister, other family members, friend, mother, brother, self and other; they were also asked to provide an explanation for their choice. In response, mothers are almost twice more likely than fathers to select their child/children as the most important person in their life. Fathers are far more likely to value their partners. With the increase in the age of the child/ren living at home, there is a decrease in selecting the child/ren but the downward trend is steeper for fathers than for mothers. Mothers and fathers in living apart together (LAT) relationships (comprising 10% of our sample cohort) are almost three times more likely to say self than their co-resident counterparts. LAT fathers are twice more likely to state children than co-resident fathers of whom 70% identify their partner.

The male and female participants who perceive their partner as the most important person score highest in all of the five relationship satisfaction measures. When asked to explain these choices many described the question as presenting a Sophie's Choice. Importantly though, of those who ticked self, their explanations are often grounded in the need to know and like yourself in order to be able to make a relationship work. Self does not equate with selfishness.

Good communication

Survey findings indicate that good communication is crucial in sustaining a long-term relationship. In-depth conversations and casual chats are equally valued as a way of both divesting stresses and strains routinely encountered and consolidating a sense of closeness. It is instead the time and mutuality of talking and listening that are

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appreciated, a means through which couples come to understand, reassure and comfort each other. Good communication is often conjoined with a sense of 'having a laugh'. In this context humour thus appears to serve as a pressure valve. Laughing together alleviates, or puts into perspective, the everyday strains and difficulties of life. Sharing a sense of humour may also be experienced as a sign of being close because sharing values, a faith, beliefs, tastes, ambitions and interests with their partner is also seen as a key 'connector' in the couple relationship.

Indeed, shared time, in the past, present and the future, is not only perceived as a 'connector' in the couple relationship but also an emotionally meaningful dimension of their relationship experience as a whole. Couples often have to work hard to balance work and home life. However, while couple time is perceived as crucial, the value of personal space and 'time out' emerges as a distinct feature in many women's responses. Having time away from one's partner is valued and appreciated by men and women alike because this generates a sense of independence and agency as well as opportunities to pursue personal interests and spend time with friends alone.

Romance is Dead. Long Live Relationships!

Love remains a slippery concept. Love is readily invoked but 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, however a loving gesture appears to be far more highly valued. Thoughtful gifts and generous acts of kindness are framed as expressions of love; they are not dependent on money and appear independent of external significant dates (such as a birthday or Valentine's Day). It is what the gift signifies which is important, that is to say, the selflessness of the gesture and/or the touching and intimate knowledge that it demonstrates. A rose picked from the garden is more treasured than the delivery of a grand bouquet from Interflora. The smallest of acts, such as being brought a daily 'a cup of tea', speaks volumes.

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Data from the online survey (completed by 5445 people) are now being combined with qualitative interviews with 50 couples, enabling us to dig deeper into everyday experience. This will enable us to interrogate the minutiae and mundanities that often go unseen in the lives and loves of enduring couple relationships and how couples work to sustain these relationships.

For more information on the Enduring Love? study, please visit the project website: www.enduringlove.co.uk. The research is funded by the ESRC (RES-062-23-3056).