

Enduring Love? Couple Relationships in the 21st Century

Survey Findings Executive Summary



Authors

Jacqui Gabb, Martina Klett-Davies, Janet Fink
and Manuela Thomae



Executive summary

1. Report background

This Report comes out of the ESRC-funded research project, *Enduring Love? Couple Relationships in the 21st Century*. This is a mixed methods investigation into long-term adult couple relationships. Its four main aims are:

- To understand how quality and stability are experienced and imagined in long-term relationships.
- To examine the **gendered** 'relationship work' that women and men do to stay together.
- To advance knowledge of how enduring relationships are lived and felt by couples at different **generational** points in the life course.
- To interrogate the experience of adult couples, living **with and without children**, and the impact of family policies and cultural narratives.

The Report is based on findings from the project's online survey questionnaire (completed by 4494 UK participants), which included 5 measures focusing on:

- relationship qualities
- the couple partnership
- relationship maintenance
- happiness with relationship/partner
- happiness with life.

Open-ended questions on what was liked, disliked and appreciated in relationships were also included in the survey.

2. Survey Findings: relationship measures

2.1 Age, sexuality, marriage/cohabitation, parental status and previous long-term relationships

- Younger men and older men tend to score higher in their relationship quality, relationship maintenance and happiness with relationship/partner than middle-aged men. The youngest group of women (up to age 34) score significantly higher on these measures and on relationship satisfaction than older women.
- Childless married and unmarried participants are happier with their relationship and their partner than parents. Unmarried parents are slightly happier than married parents.

- Non-heterosexual participants are more positive about and happier with the quality of their relationship, relationship with their partner and their relationship maintenance than heterosexual participants.
- Parents appear to engage in less relationship maintenance than childless participants. Heterosexual parents also scored lower than non-heterosexual 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.
- Fathers are less positive than childless men about the quality of their relationship, relationship with partner and relationship maintenance. Fathers 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.
- Participants who had had previous long-term relationships scored higher on relationship maintenance than those who had not had such relationships.

2.2 Sexual intimacy

- 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. Mothers report that they want to have sex less often than their partners do, but dissatisfaction with sexual frequency per se does not appear to undermine overall relationship satisfaction for either mothers or fathers.

2.3 Stressors in relationships

- Relationship satisfaction is positively linked with the number of stressors that participants have experienced in the previous two years. This is the case for both parents and childless participants. This supports the thesis that couples might be pulling together in difficult times.

2.4 Who is the most important person in the participant's life?

- Mothers are almost twice more likely than fathers to say that their child/ren are the most important person in their life. Fathers are much more likely than mothers to regard their partners as the most important person.

2.5 Support and advice seeking

- Women and men both indicated that they would use couple counselling as a source for support, help or advice before individual counselling. However men suggested that they were generally disinclined to consult anyone, while women indicated that they would consider turning to both couple counselling and individual counselling.

3. Survey Findings: Open questions

3.1 What makes participants feel most appreciated?

- Saying 'thank you' and thoughtful gestures were prized most highly by all participants. Recognition of the time and effort required to complete the everyday mundane tasks which underpin relationships and the smooth running of a household, was also highly valued.
- The need for good communication was identified as important by all participants. Open conversations were valued as a means to both 'touch base' with one another and unburden the stresses and strains of the day.
- Surprise gifts and small acts of kindness were valued highly, with 'a cup of tea' being singled out as a significant sign of their partner's appreciation. Bouquets of flowers and boxes of chocolates were seen as less important than the thoughtfulness behind the gesture.
- Sharing the practicalities of household chores and/or family responsibilities was viewed by mothers as something that particularly demonstrated appreciation. All participants valued the time and energy devoted to cooking.
- Saying or showing love featured for all participants. Saying 'I love you' appeared to symbolise the closeness of the couple relationship and provide individual affirmation and reassurance.

3.2 What do participants like best and least in their relationship?

- Sharing values, a faith, beliefs, tastes, ambitions and interests with their partner was very highly regarded. Holding things in common was seen as a key 'connector' in the couple relationship. Participants expressed disappointment when the everyday experiences of life could not be shared.
- The pleasures of being in a relationship scored very highly, often being expressed through shared humour and laughter. Alongside these pleasures, however, ran the daily irritations of living with someone, with annoying habits being identified as a source of irritation.
- Talking and listening were appreciated as one of the most effective means by which couples came to understand, reassure and comfort each other. Arguments and poor communication, notably around money issues, were most frequently cited as one of the least liked aspects of a relationship.
- Being 'best friends' with your partner ranked very highly amongst all women and men, with the trope of friendship being used to signify emotional closeness. Respect, encouragement and kindness were valued features of such relationships, together with a confidence that concerns and problems could be shared.