

Enduring Love? Couple Relationships in the 21st Century

Qualitative mixed methods: a practical guide for researchers

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Meeting 1

In the first meeting you will introduce the project and the methods to be completed. Participants should be made fully cognisant of the ethical issues and how we deal with these. They need to then sign a consent form. If they have not already done so they should then individually complete a questionnaire. Ask for immediate thoughts, comments or questions on questionnaire. Give them each a copy of the 'methods information and instructions' along with a notebook and set of emoticons.

You should then accompany participants around their house and draw up a floor plan. This forms the basis of their emotion map. You will take this away and transfer it to a Word document using Microsoft Draw. It then needs to be returned to both participants along with a set of coloured stickers.

Meeting 2

Here you should respond to any questions that participants may have and introduce the practicalities of the emotion map and diary methods, as below. You will need to give to each of them an A3 copy (2xA4, one sheet per floor of house) of the floor plan that you have reproduced in Microsoft Draw. You should also leave each of them with a notebook to use as their diary.

Emotion map

Emotion maps are completed by individual participants. They aim to find out about everyday experiences as these take place around their home. In this sense, they ask participants to think about and 'locate' what they do and where in terms of their couple relationship and also their wider relationships with other people.

The method is completed individually by participants over the course of a one week period. Different colours should be used for the different people, including participant, partner, children (if any), family, friends, pets, and so on. Emoticon stickers are:



These emoticons denote some of the kinds of emotions that participants may have experienced over a typical week. They should complete this method over the course of the day when they have time or at the end of the day, thinking back to what has happened and where.

Once this method is completed you will either pick it up from participants or arrange for them to send it to you. If they are posting it to you ensure that you

have left an A4 SAE with them in advance. Once you have the completed emotion map you will need to make a copy. This will be used as the basis of the first interview where, with reference to the emotion map, you will talk with the participant about the experiences, interactions and feelings that are represented on the emotion map.

Diaries

Diaries aim to find out about everyday routines, for example what participants did and when. Diaries should be completed over the same one week period as the emotion map, at a time and in a place of the participant's choosing. It should be used to reflect upon any aspect of the couple relationship during the week. We would also like participants to include as part of their diaries mementos of the time they spend together, such as receipts for the cinema, a menu from a meal out or take away, photos etc. As such, the diary is a kind of scrapbook.

The diary format is flexible. Participants can use the notebook given to them by the researcher, a Word document on their computer, or an Outlook calendar on their phone; whatever format works for them. Photo can be attached to an electronic file and sent to us. We will then print these out and stick them into the diary on the relevant day.

In the written diary, participants should be encouraged to include their experiences of some or all of the following areas:

- Time spent together with their partner, including the kinds of activities you did and the times of day and duration of these activities
- Time spent apart from their partner, including the kinds of activities you did and the times of day and duration of these activities
- Things, both inside and outside the home (such as their job, TV programmes etc) that have made them think about and/or have affected their relationship in some way
- Conversations or contact with people (such as family, friends, children etc) who have made them think about and/or have affected their relationship in some way
- Anything they or their partner have done (gestures, actions, words) for each other
- Anything they have done for themselves
- One good moment in each day
- One challenging moment in each day

Once they have completed their diary it needs to be sent or given back to you in whatever format you have chosen, as per the emotion map. You will then need to make a copy and, along with the emotion map, this will be used as the basis of the first interview, when you will ask participants to talk through their week with reference to their diary and the experiences and interactions that were included.

Meeting 3a

Interview 1a: individual

The first interview is in two halves and will be completed with the individual participant. The first half of this interview follows the BNIM (or FANI) format. It aims to open up discussion to experiences across the lifecourse through the posing of an open question.

Tell us about your relationship: how does it work?

It should facilitate participants to talk about different people, events and influences and how these may, in some ways, have shaped how they experience and think about relationships. You need to listen most attentively during this interview because any threads that are picked up must come from what the participant says, using their language and framing of events. Connections between different aspects of their life may be chronological, a similarity of events, the same people being involved, associated feelings and so on. The agenda and sequence of the interview is, therefore, structured by their free association of thoughts.

During the course of this interview we do, where possible, want to also address some or all of the research themes. These include:

- Things that they and/or the couple do to sustain the relationship – thoughts, words, gestures etc
- Parents'/family background, childhood, upbringing, faith etc
- The ways that children effect the couple relationship
- Expectations and dreams of/for past, present and future
- Managing stresses, including money, relations with 'others'

Interview 1b: individual

During second half of the interview you will talk through the events, experiences and feelings that they have described in the diary and emotion map. Participants should be encouraged to provide detail of these events, their personal significance, and to fill in any gaps ie to add anything which they forgot to include at the time.

Meeting 3b

Interview 2a: individual

Interview 2b: individual

The above instructions should be followed for both individuals in the partnership. Both individual interviews (1a+b and 2a+b) can be completed if this works for the couple and the researcher. Do have a break in between though as it will be otherwise gruelling and you may find it hard to concentrate on what the second individual is saying.

Meeting 4

Interview 3: Couple

In the second interview you will talk to the couple, together. This will ordinarily be completed on a separate day to individual interviews. This couple interview will involve photo elicitation, using a set of six images/collages on different aspects of long-term couple relationships. Working through the images/collages, you will show them to the couple, one by one, and ask them to respond to and to reflect on how these connect with or diverge from their personal experience and/or opinions on the meanings of enduring long-term relationships.

The images/collages will address the following themes:

1. Ceremonies and celebrations – commitment rituals, anniversaries, special days
2. Relationship work – household chores, 'I love you', gifts, special things
3. Intimacy – embodiment, sex, touch
4. Children - new born, young children, teenagers, young adults, generation
5. Money – bills, income, cash, bills
6. Significant others – friends, family, in-laws, pets, faith community
7. Policy – law, family-focused policies, tax system
8. Cultural reference points – media representations, headline stories

This is the final method completed by participants and so it is important at the end of this interview to do a 'debrief', talking through what will happen next, how they can contact you and how to keep in touch with what's going on in the project. Most people will be unaware of just how long a research project such as this may take, so be realistic with dates and do not make promises that we cannot deliver. You should also leave any follow up information that has been asked for, such as leaflets on relationship support, if requested.

You need to ask whether they would like to receive copies of their interview transcripts and if so where these should be posted to or sent via email. You should remind participants that if they do not wish their partner to see their individual interview we can return transcripts to a private email or work postal address.

For more information on using a qualitative mixed methods approach please see: Gabb (2009) 'Researching Family Relationships: A Qualitative Mixed Methods Approach', *Methodological Innovations Online*, Vol. 4(2):37-52:
<http://www.pbs.plym.ac.uk/mi/pdf/12-8-09/4.%20Gabb%20-%20final%20August%209%2009.pdf>