

# Enduring Love? Couple Relationships in the 21st Century

## Survey Findings Report



### Authors

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



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## Executive summary

### 1. Report background

This Report comes out of the ESRC-funded research project, *Enduring Love? Couple Relationships in the 21<sup>st</sup> 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.

## Enduring Love? Couple relationships in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

### 1. Introduction

The *Enduring Love?* project aims to advance understandings of personal relationships and family lives in contemporary Britain. The research project was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC RES-062-23-3056) (2011-2013) to examine the ways in which gender, generation and parenthood get inscribed in meanings and practices around the idea of 'the couple'. Our psycho-social mixed methods approach is enabling us to interrogate what helps people sustain their relationships and to break down the dichotomy between *enduring* relationships of quality and good enough or *endured* relationships.

Much recent policy, academic and professional research has been concerned with the causes and effects of relationship breakdown. Studies have tended to focus on the 'stressors' that contribute to relationship breakdown (Walker, Barrett, Wilson, & Chang, 2010) and the adverse impact of 'marital distress' and 'family fragmentation' on the health and wellbeing of men, women and children (Markham & Halford, 2005). Concerns around 'family stability' and 'relationship quality' come out of an acknowledgement that although seven in ten households are still headed up by married couples, 42% of marriages end in divorce (ONS, 2012b) with between 200,000-250,000 couples separating every year (Coleman & Glenn, 2009). Recent trends in the UK divorce rate indicate a decline (ONS, 2012b) but nevertheless remain high. Many heterosexual and same-sex couples, however, remain together for significant periods of time. In some ways, then, these couples appear to sit outside a growing tendency towards serial or transitory relationships. The *Enduring Love?* study is exploring the gendered 'relationship work' undertaken by women and men which enables their relationship to endure and/or flourish in the socio-cultural context of shifting discourses on love, 'marriage', partnership, intimacy and commitment. We are, therefore, reorienting the conceptual emphasis onto the *connectors* which hold people together, that is to say, the meanings, practices and imaginings of *quality* and *stability* in long-term relationships.



Research completed under the umbrella of social psychology has emphasised how people understand their couple relationships as continually developing and lasting ventures (Duck, 2007; Mashek & Aron, 2004). Psychological research more widely has provided robust information on relationship satisfaction (for an overview see Hook, Gerstein, Detterich, & Gridley, 2003). A notable example that is frequently cited and used in the design of psychological relationship studies is the Golombok Rust Inventory of Marital State (GRIMS) scale (Rust, Bennun, Crowe, & Golombok, 1986, 1990). This psychometric scale produces an overall score to assess relationship quality and is designed around and administered through couples who are engaged with relationship support and counselling services. Our interests, however, is focused on lived couple experience and relationship practices rather than the psychometric measurement of relationship satisfaction. As such, the *Enduring Love?* study is grounded in the cross-disciplinary interest in intimacy and personal relationships.

Changes in personal and sexual commitment are much lauded (Beck & Beck-Gersheim, 1995; Duncombe & Marsden, 1993), alongside shifts in the configuration of intimacy (Giddens, 1992; Jamieson, 1998), intimate living and family lives (Jamieson, Morgan, Crow, & Allan, 2006; Williams, 2004) and different relationship–residence formations (S. Duncan & Phillips, 2008; Roseneil & Budgeon, 2004). Binaries traditionally invoked to distinguish between heterosexual and same-sex relationships are no longer fixed (Heaphy, Smart, & Einarsdottir, 2013). Research has, however, shown that the *romantic ideal* of one partner meeting all our emotional and sexual needs persists, stretching across differences in sexuality and circumstance (Smart, 2007). Work loosely collected together under the sociology of emotions has shown how heteronormative conventions continue to shape understandings and the experience of love, sex and desire (Berlant, 2012; Hockey, Meah, & Robinson, 2010; Illouz, 2012; Johnson, 1996; Stacey, 2011). Notwithstanding the evidence presented, great caution is needed before advancing theoretically-driven interpretations of love. As Stevi Jackson reminds us, ‘even sociologists fall in love’ (Jackson, 1993); matters of the heart often run counter to logic and reason. While it is true to say that the

discourses of love and romance are highly gendered (Langford, 1999), perception and gendered experience do not automatically correspond. For example, research has shown that men may be more inclined to fall in love and express these feelings earlier than women (Harrison & Shorthall, 2011), countering the myth that ‘men love to live and women live to love’. The *Enduring Love?* project examines how women and men experience relationships, analysing couple diversity and the factors which shape intimacy and personal life.

## 2. Research Methodology

*Enduring Love?* is a mixed methods project. The qualitative study used a rich palette of methods to drill down into realms of embodied lived experience which operate alongside perception and the spoken word. Given that what connects two people together and makes a relationship work is often perceived as ‘silent agreements’ or ‘chemistry’, then using this broad spectrum of research senses to listen and hear, to look and see (Back, 2007) is imperative. The approach affords insight into how emotional lives are experienced and how everyday, often momentary, ‘practices of intimacy’ (Jamieson, 1998) combine to sustain relationships. This qualitative dimension of the project draws on data from 50 couples. Fieldwork was completed in summer 2013, with End of Award findings being reported in January 2014.

In this Report we will be focussing on the quantitative and qualitative findings from our survey questionnaire. This survey included three sets of questions on relationship qualities, relationship with partner and relationship maintenance, which enabled us to scope trends in behaviour and the factors which appear to signal relationship satisfaction. Open-ended questions on the likes, dislikes and things that make someone feel appreciated add to understandings on the ‘relationship work’ that couples do – or don’t do – to sustain an enduring relationship. Detailed demographic details were collected, including information on gender, age, sexual orientation, the absence–presence of children in the household, employment/education, relationship status, ethnicity and religion. This

information facilitated analysis on the impact of contextual factors, such as parenthood, in shaping relationship experience.

The online survey has now become a widely accepted and utilised method in social and behavioural research, its proliferation aided by the recent emergence of reliable, cost-effective software solutions to assist in implementation (for discussions of the approach see Couper, 2008; Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2007). Web-based surveys have proven particularly popular over the last ten years or so, quickly moving from 'novel idea to routine use' (Dillman et al., 2007, p. 447). Good practice guidelines for internet-mediated research (IMR) - including online surveys - have emerged (for example Hewson, 2003; Hewson & Laurent, 2012). Web-based survey methods have demonstrated the capacity to obtain very large sample sizes which generate high quality data (for example Chang & Krosnick, 2009; Gosling, Vazire, Srivastava, & John, 2004). Particular advantages of IMR methods include cost and time efficiency, the capacity to recruit participants irrespective of where they live, the ability to target specialist and/or 'hard-to-reach' populations or to recruit a large and diverse convenience sample. Other benefits that have been identified include enhanced candour, brought about through heightened levels of anonymity, and reliability due to automated processes that can serve to minimise or remove human error.

### **3. Sample Information (UK)**

The *Enduring Love?* online survey was implemented using Survey Monkey and located on the project website. It opened on 16 January 2012 and closed on 14 January 2013. It was hugely successful, generating over 5000 completed responses (n=5445) from across the world. In this Report we will be only analysing the data from the UK cohort, comprising a convenience sample of 4494.<sup>1</sup> The survey was designed so that only those participants who stated that they were in a long-term couple relationship could go on to complete the survey.

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<sup>1</sup> We also implemented the survey in hard copy format by direct canvassing and among community groups and networks with the aim of recruiting those traditionally defined as 'hard to reach', but ultimately the survey cohort comprises a convenience sample.

Of these participants, 3613 (80%) were women and 856 (19%) were men. The majority of the participants (86%) were heterosexual, although there was a good response rate from non-heterosexual, gay and lesbian (6%) and bisexual (5%) participants. Just below half the sample expressed that they held some form of religious belief (44%). More than half of the participants (60%) were parents and the vast majority were white (91%). The majority of participants were also either married (60%) or cohabiting (24%). See Table 1 in Appendices for full details of sample composition. The large proportion of women in our sample is not unusual. Other large scale studies on relationship support have reported a similar participation rate including a gendered skew, higher than average educational qualifications and a predominantly white cohort (Walker et al., 2010).

Online survey participants were recruited through features and news coverage of the research project posted on various online forums, newsletters and community group noticeboards, especially those clustered around parenting, relationship support and The Open University student population. The high level of sexual diversity within the sample can be attributed to the circulation of project information among sexuality discussion forums. No explicit publicity strategy was deployed and the research team did not directly post a link to the questionnaire onto any individual forums. In order to access the questionnaire, participants were required to go to the project website where detailed information on the scope and methodology of the study were provided. The level of interest generated did take us by surprise but could be said to reflect contemporary fascination with the topic and wider investment in 'self-help' culture (Giddens, 1992). This is evident in the plethora of advice columns and books which offer guidance (and critique Barker, 2012) on 'relationship rules' and how to manage and sustain sex and personal relationships (Quilliam, 2001).

While we have no means of tracing the origin of participants' initial interest, looking at 'spikes' in survey completion rates indicates that there were several key forums which elicited participation. These included:

- MumsNet (over 8 million visits per month, posted on their Facebook page (13,000 likes) and also tweeted (21,000 followers) [www.mumsnet.com](http://www.mumsnet.com))
- NetMums (1.2 million members and 5 million visits) [www.netmums.com](http://www.netmums.com))
- Dad Talk (560,000 members) [www.dadtalk.co.uk](http://www.dadtalk.co.uk))
- Couple Connection (35,000 visits per month) [www.thecoupleconnection.net](http://www.thecoupleconnection.net))
- The Open University Student Association (OUSA) (250,000 students) [www.ousa.org.uk](http://www.ousa.org.uk) and *Open Minds* magazine (370,000 OU alumni).

Key relationship support organisations also circulated project information among their membership. These included:

- Relate <http://www.relate.org.uk>)
- One Plus One [www.oneplusone.org.uk](http://www.oneplusone.org.uk))
- Marriage Care <http://www.marriagecare.org.uk>)
- The Family and Parenting Institute (FPI) <http://www.familyandparenting.org>)
- Eastern Eye <http://www.easterneye.eu/> (also tweeted @EasternEye).

Through and beyond these forums the survey gathered momentum and numbers participating steadily increased through viral dissemination. The *potential* audience reached through online posting was therefore vast. It is, of course, not possible to say how many of this potential audience actually took notice of the circulated project information and how many saw it and chose to not follow the website link.

## **4. Relationship Quality, Relationship with Partner, Relationship Maintenance**

### **4.1 Survey design and measures**

As discussed above, the psychometric Golombok Rust Inventory of Marital State (GRIMS) scale produces an overall score to assess relationship quality. When designing the *Enduring Love?* survey we considered deploying some or all of the 28 GRIMS items. There were several contributing factors which guided our decision not to pursue this course of action.

GRIMS is a relationship inventory. Like other relationship satisfaction scales, it is specifically designed around and administered through couples who are engaged with relationship support services. Statements focus on factors which may be causing friction and stress in a relationship; with the aid of the counsellor, individuals/the couple are supported in addressing any issues that are identified. The purpose and scope of these questions, therefore, diverge from the principle aims and objectives of our study. Furthermore, rather than measure relationship satisfaction, we wanted to attend to relationship experience and everyday lived lives. This is a shift in emphasis. Differences in contexts are also crucial. The *Enduring Love?* survey was largely administered online and to a lesser extent in hard copy through face-to-face public encounters with the research team. There were, therefore, no direct support mechanisms should anyone become distressed through their participation. We had neither the skill set nor resources to offer any safety net, especially in the context of online participation. These different emphases and contexts inclined us to want to phrase items in different ways. For example, while a GRIMS statement refers to the 'brink of separation', the *Enduring Love?* item says 'We have grown apart over time'. Participants could and did award a low score to their relationship and/or partner in answer to positive statements presented, but they were also given an emotional space to hide. That is to say, they were not directly confronted with difficult or painful areas of their relationship and did not need to acknowledge these unless they felt able and willing to do so.

There were also several practical factors which contributed to our decision not to incorporate statements from the GRIMS scale. In the original research design, we perceived the survey primarily as a means of recruitment. In dialogue with a wide range of professional, practice, and research colleagues, we came to realise that it had far greater potential than this. It would allow us to scale up our findings to an extent otherwise impossible with qualitative research. The design and scope of the qualitative research was already in place and funded; rather than tagging on a survey, we wanted to ensure that there were robust conceptual and theoretical

links between the project's qualitative and quantitative dimensions. This complementarity will enable us to advance multidimensional mixed methods analyses in due course. Thus, we decided to construct three sets of survey questions which spoke to the structuring interests of the *Enduring Love?* research project overall, focusing attention onto relationship practices. Personal relationships are materialised and experienced through everyday circumstances; they are about money, employment, children and housework as much as the dyadic couple relationship itself. The statements in our survey were designed, therefore, to include these everyday contexts and mundanities as well as the more personal and sexually intimate dynamics of couple relationships. In analysing these data we devised scales of:

- Relationship quality
- Relationship with partner
- Relationship maintenance
- Happiness with relationship/partner
- Happiness with life

These comprise the five measures that were then used, as outlined below. A copy of the questionnaire, including all statements and questions is available on the project website [www.enduringlove.co.uk](http://www.enduringlove.co.uk)

From an initial pool of 13 statements we selected eight statements to form a measure of **Relationship Quality**.<sup>2</sup> Example statements for the relationship quality measure are 'We have shared values' and 'Our relationship is mainly about practicalities such as domestic chores and money' (reversed).<sup>3</sup> We therefore computed mean composite scores for each participant by averaging across the statements. All statements were accompanied by a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). See Table 2 Relationship Quality, in Appendices.

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<sup>2</sup> These items loaded highly (> .500) on the first factor of a Principal Component Analysis with Varimax Rotation.

<sup>3</sup> Cronbach's alpha indicates good reliability of this measure ( $\alpha = .83$ ).

For the **Relationship with the Partner** measure, we selected six statements from an initial pool of 13 statements, using the same procedure as above. Example statements for this measure are ‘My partner makes me laugh’ and ‘We have grown apart over time’ (reversed).<sup>4</sup> Again, we computed mean composite scores for each participant by averaging across the six statements. Participants indicated their agreement with these statements on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). See Table 3 Relationship with Partner, in Appendices.

Using Principal Component Analysis with Varimax Rotation, we selected five statements from an initial pool of 13 statements, using the same cut-off criteria of component loadings exceeding .500 to form the **Relationship Maintenance** measure.<sup>5</sup> Example statements are ‘We make time to be together, on our own’ and ‘We say “I love you” to each other’. All statements were accompanied by a 5-point Likert-type scale as described above. We averaged all statements for each participant to create the relationship maintenance measure. See Table 4 Relationship Maintenance, in Appendices.

The two **Happiness Measures** were formed using three survey questions. While **Happiness with Relationship/Partner** consists of two questions (‘How happy are you with your relationship overall?’ and ‘How happy are you with your partner overall?’)<sup>6</sup>, the **Happiness with Life** measure consists of the question ‘How happy are you with your life overall?’. All three questions were accompanied by a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (very unhappy) to 5 (very happy). See Table 5 Happiness Measures, in Appendices.

## 4.2 A guide to the results

We computed basic descriptive statistics for demographic information and some relationship outcomes. Since there are some missing data, statistics only refer to

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<sup>4</sup> For this measure, Cronbach’s alpha indicated good reliability ( $\alpha = .79$ ).

<sup>5</sup> Again, Cronbach’s alpha indicates satisfactory reliability of this measure ( $\alpha = .75$ ).

<sup>6</sup> Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .95$



the proportion of the sample for which data are available, i.e., those participants who responded to the statement in question. We also computed Multivariate Analyses of Variance (MANOVA) and correlation analyses to address more complex research questions.

The analyses presented in this Report include two different types of variables: continuous and categorical variables. According to Gravetter and Wallnau (2009), a continuous variable is a variable for which there is an infinite number of possible values that fall between any two observed values. In our Report, we treat all data collected using the measures explained above (relationship quality, relationship with partner, relationship maintenance, happiness with relationship/partner, happiness with life) as continuous. In contrast, according to Sheskin (2000), categorical data represent mutually exclusive categories. In this Report, categorical data include parenting status, marital status, age, sexual orientation and religion. If there are only two categories within a categorical variable (childless versus parent), one can also speak of a dichotomous (or binary) variable.

When comparing groups or providing descriptive information, we here report means (M) and standard deviations (SD). The **mean** is a measure of central tendency for continuous variables and is often accompanied by its standard deviation. When presenting means, we refer to the arithmetic mean (average) of the sample on a specific measure (e.g. relationship quality, etc.). The **standard deviation**, in turn, provides information about the dispersion of the data points in the sample around the mean. The smaller the standard deviation, the closer are the data points to the mean. Thus, in order to find meaningful statistical differences, for example between participant groups (e.g., parents and childless participants) it is necessary to have meaningful differences in means but also to have good sized standard deviations.

To test whether differences between groups (e.g., parent versus childless) are statistically significant, we use **Multivariate Analysis Of Variance (MANOVA)**. MANOVAs are a statistical test procedure for comparing means of several groups. We particularly used this procedure when testing for mean differences between groups on two or more outcome variables (relationship quality, relationship with partner, relationship maintenance, happiness with relationship/partner, happiness with life). Where we report MANOVA results, the relevant test statistic is the F ratio (F), which is accompanied by the *p* value, indicating whether differences between groups are statistically significant.

Where **correlations** are reported, *r* refers to the correlation coefficient and indicates the strength of association between two measures. The sign (+/-) of the correlation coefficient represents the direction of the correlation. Correlations can take on values between 0 (no relationship between two variables) and +/- 1 (a perfect positive/negative relationship). The correlation coefficient *r* represents the strength of the correlation. Yet, it is important to note that correlations do not imply causation. A common convention to deem correlations or group differences statistically significant is if they have a **p-value** of less than 0.05. Those with a *p* value of less than 0.01 are considered to be highly statistically significant.

## Findings

### 5. Attributes

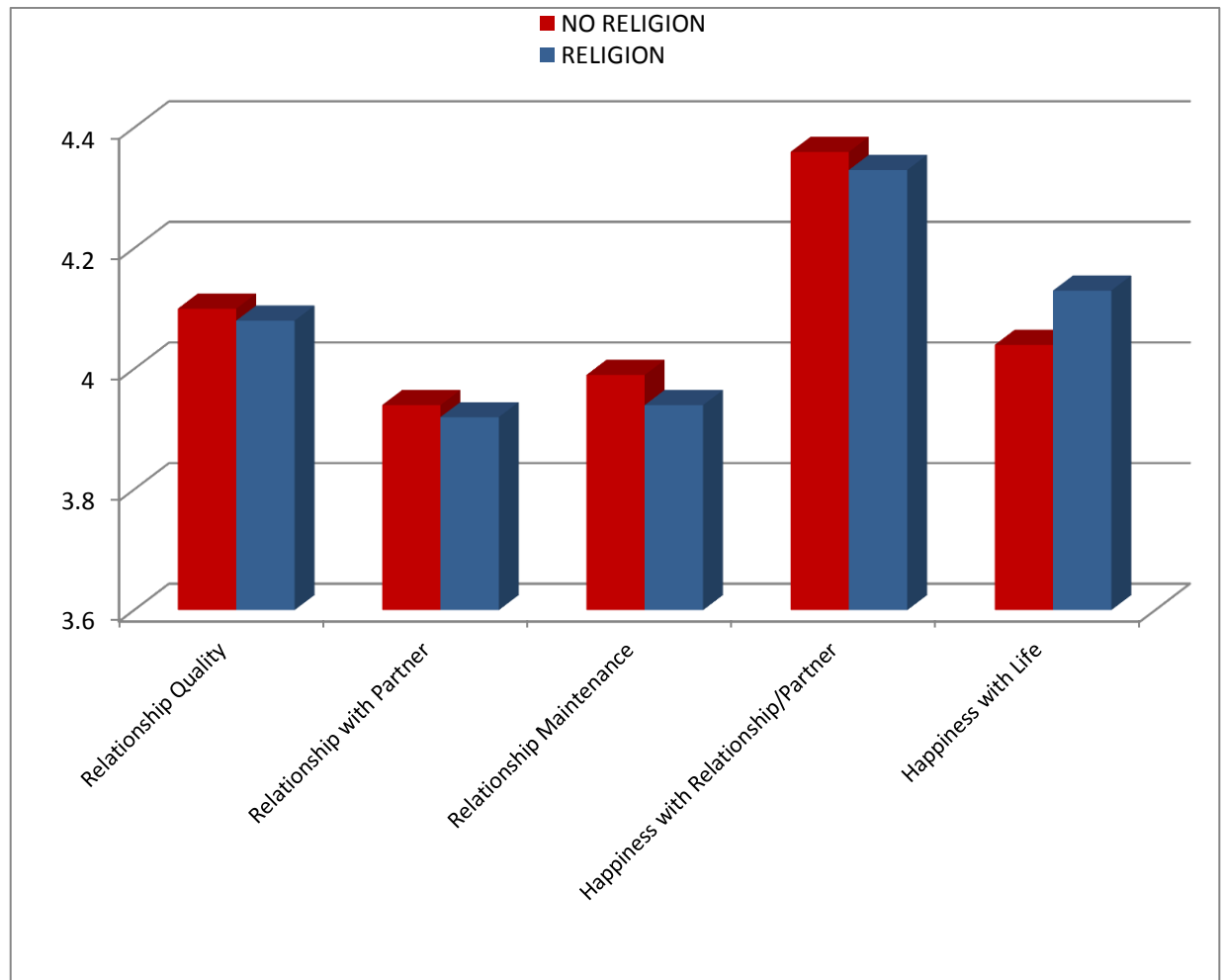
#### 5.1 Religion, educational qualifications, previous long-term relationships

We asked participants to identify their religion, if any. There were no statistically significant differences between the scores for relationship quality, their relationship with their partner and their happiness with their relationship/partner<sup>7</sup> among participants who answered affirmatively to one of the religions listed and those who answered 'no religion'. There are, however, significant differences between these participants in their overall happiness with life and their

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<sup>7</sup> All F's < 1.5, all p's > .200

relationship maintenance.<sup>8</sup> While participants who identified a religion are overall happier with their life than those who did not, the latter score higher on relationship maintenance. See Figure 1, below.

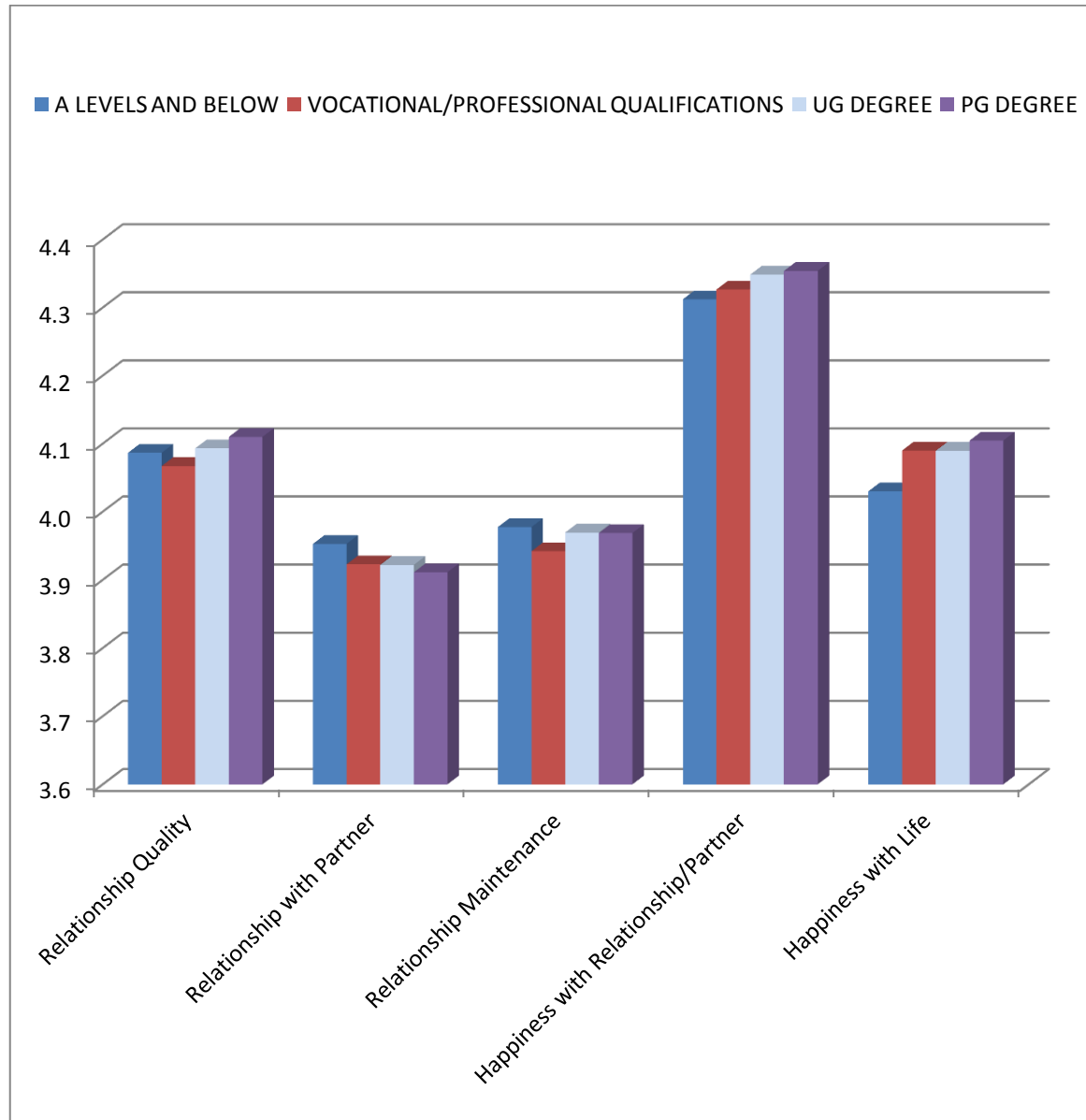


**Figure 1. Means for all five relationship measures by religion/no religion**  
**See Table 6 in Appendices for Table of Means and Standard Deviations**

More highly educated participants do not have better quality relationships than participants with lower educational qualifications. With regards to relationship quality, relationship with partner, relationship maintenance, happiness with relationship/partner and happiness with life, the survey analysis did not reveal significant differences between participants with higher qualifications

<sup>8</sup> Both F's > 4.0, both p's < .050

(Undergraduate Degree or higher) and those with lower qualifications (A level or below).<sup>9</sup> See Figure 2, below.

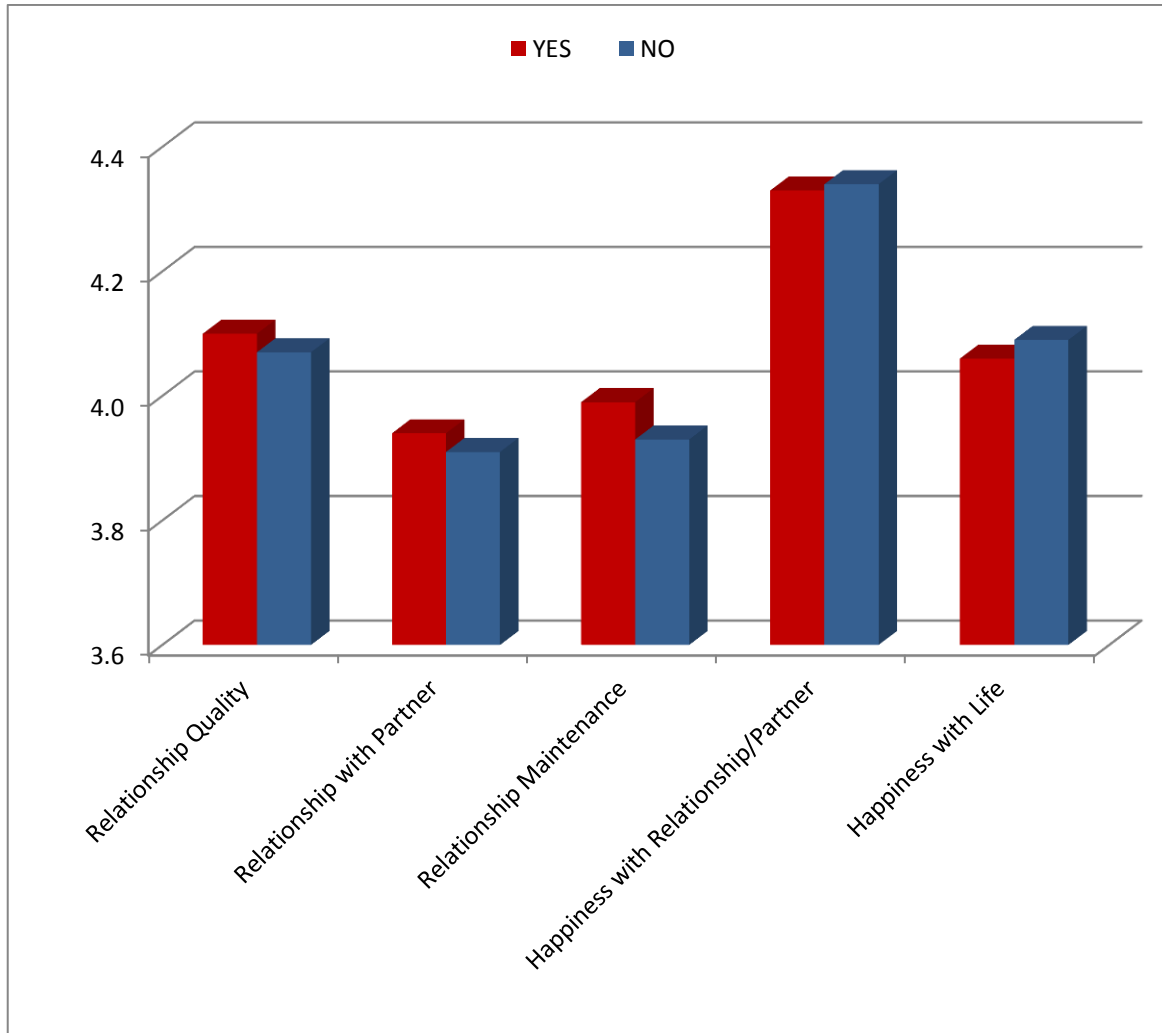


**Figure 2. Means for five relationship measures by educational qualifications**  
**See Table 7 in Appendices for Table of Means and Standard Deviations**

With regards to participants' previous long-term relationships there are no statistically significant differences between the responses to the relationship quality and relationship with partner measures and the two happiness

<sup>9</sup> All F's < 3.5, all p's > .05

measures.<sup>10</sup> However, participants who had previous long-term relationships score slightly but significantly higher on relationship maintenance than participants who had no previous long-term relationships.<sup>11</sup> See Figure 3, below.



**Figure 3. Means for five relationship measures by previous long-term relationships**  
See Table 8 in Appendices for Table of Means and Standard Deviations

## 5.2 Sexual orientation and parenting status

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. Non-heterosexual participants report

<sup>10</sup> All F's < 2.60, all p's > .050

<sup>11</sup>  $F(1, 4437) = 8.41, p = .004$

higher scores than heterosexual participants on the three measures of relationship quality, relationship with partner, relationship maintenance and one of the two happiness measures, happiness with their relationship/partner.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, there were no significant differences between heterosexual and non-heterosexual participants in happiness with life.<sup>13</sup>

However, in further analysis, we found that parenting is the divider for three measures: relationship quality, relationship with partner and relationship maintenance.<sup>14</sup> On all three measures, heterosexual parents score lowest, followed by non-heterosexual parents and heterosexual couples without children. Non-heterosexual participants without children score highest on relationship quality, relationship maintenance and relationship satisfaction. These differences are small but statistically significant. Parenting is the determining factor that cuts across these categories irrespective of sexuality. Parents report that they 'do' less relationship maintenance than childless participants. Heterosexual parents are the least likely to be there for each other, to make 'couple time', to say 'I love you' to each other, to talk about everything and to pursue shared interests. There are, however, no significant differences in happiness with life between heterosexual and non-heterosexual parents and their childless counterparts, although all parents score slightly higher on happiness with life than childless participants.<sup>15</sup> See Figure 4, below.

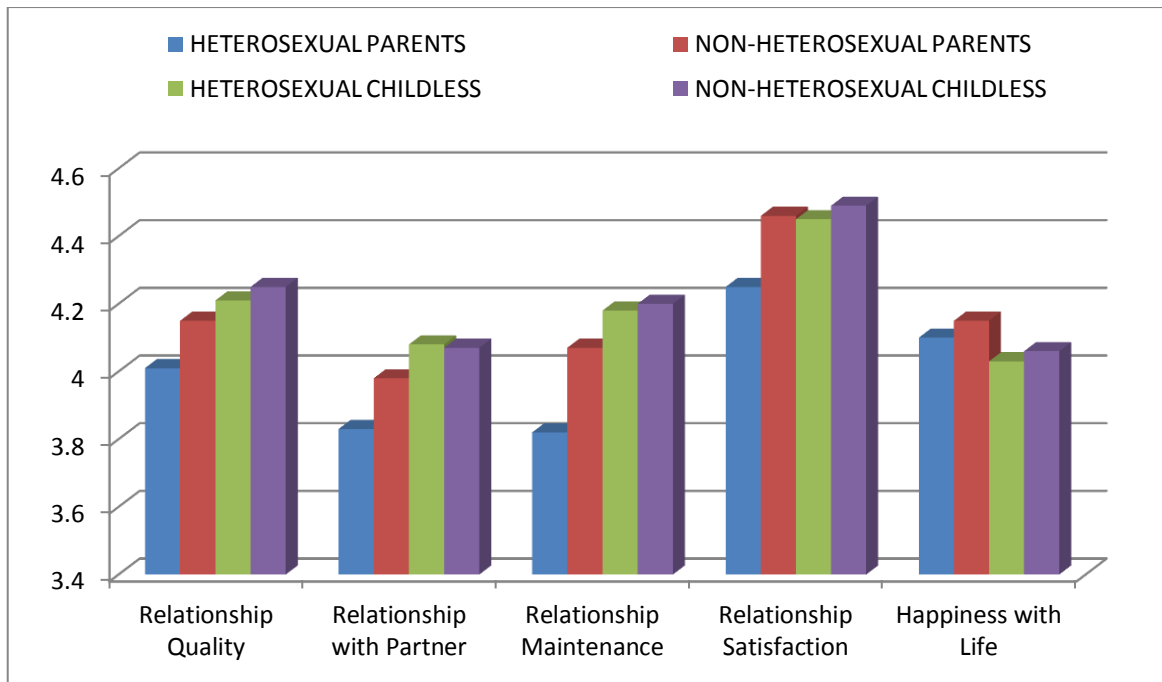
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<sup>12</sup> All F's > 16.00, all p's < .001

<sup>13</sup> F (1, 4370) = 0.18, p = .668

<sup>14</sup> all F's > 4.00, all p's < .050

<sup>15</sup> F(1, 4317) = 0.098, p = .754



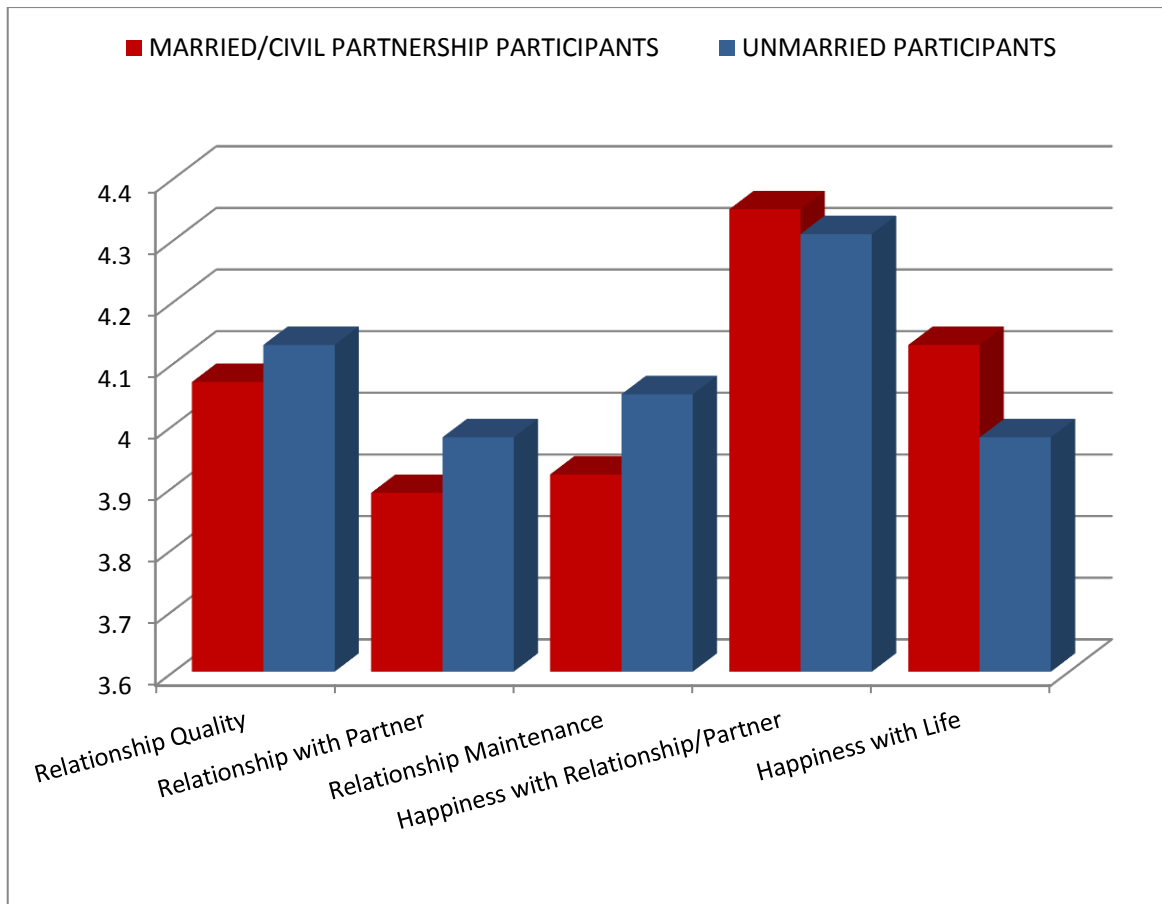
**Figure 4. Means for five relationship measures by sexual orientation and parenting status**  
See Table 9 in Appendices for Table of Means and Standard Deviations

### 5.3 Relationship and parenting status

There are significant differences between married/civil partnership participants and unmarried participants in all three measures of relationship quality, relationship with partner and relationship maintenance as well as happiness with life.<sup>16</sup> However, there are no statistically significant differences between married/civil partnership participants and unmarried participants in happiness with relationship/partner.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> All F's < 9.50, all p's < .050

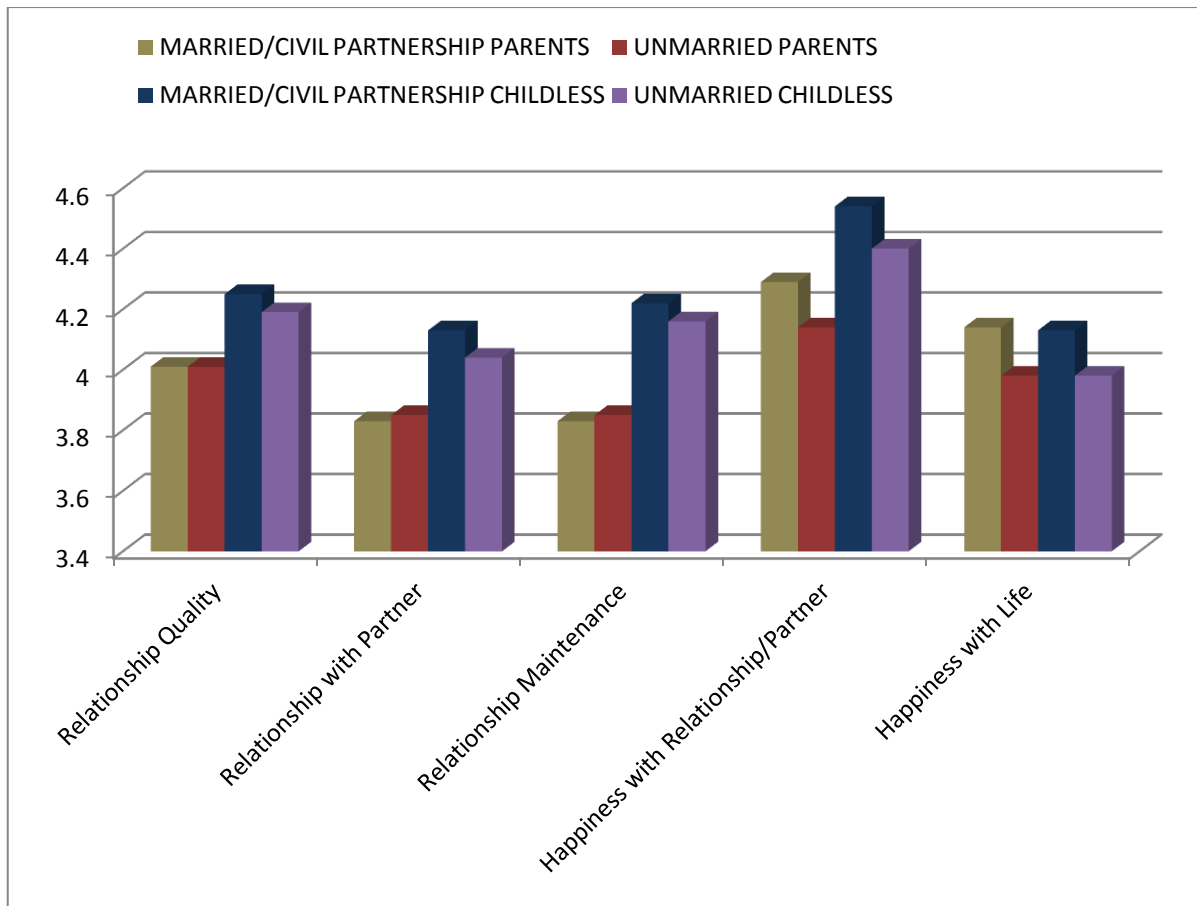
<sup>17</sup> F(1, 4434) = 1.68, p = .196



**Figure 5. Means for all five relationship measures by relationship status**  
**See Table 10 in Appendices for Table of Means and Standard Deviations**

Both married/civil partnership and unmarried people without children are happier with their partner than parents. Married/civil partnership participants without children do not score significantly higher on relationship quality and relationship maintenance. In general, participants without children score higher than participants with children on all four relationship measures, irrespective of their relationship status. But married/civil partnership parents are as 'happy with life' overall as couples without children and both groups score higher on this measure than their unmarried counterparts. See Figure 6, below.





**Figure 6. Means for relationship measures by parenting and relationship status**  
 See Table 11 in the Appendices for Table of Means and Standard Deviations

### 5.4 Gender and parenthood

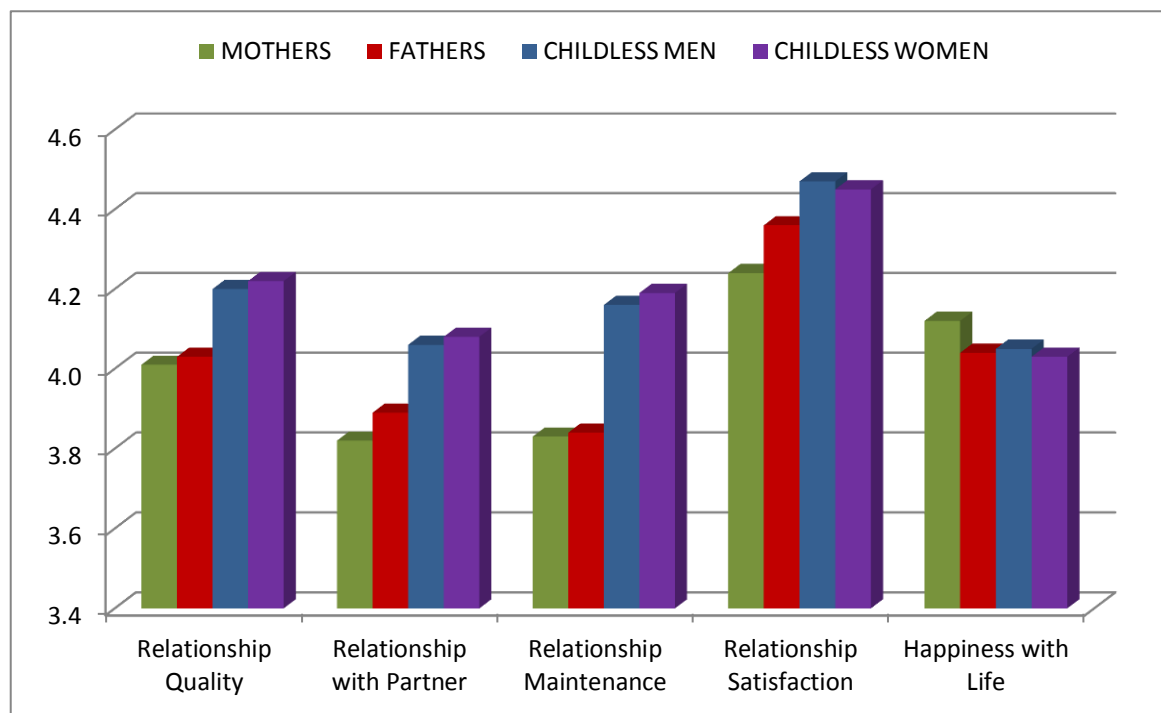
The survey finds no differences between the responses of men and women to the four measures of relationship quality, relationship with partner, relationship maintenance and the measure that refers to their happiness with life overall.<sup>18</sup> However, men are significantly happier with their relationship/partner than women.<sup>19</sup> There are differences if we look at gender and parenting status, with fathers scoring lower than childless men on happiness with relationship/partner and on each of the three measures of relationship quality, relationship with

<sup>18</sup> All F's < 2.50, all p's > .100

<sup>19</sup> F (1, 4385) = 4.55, p = .033

partner and relationship maintenance.<sup>20</sup> For all men, having children or being childless did not impact on their general happiness with life.<sup>21</sup>

Mothers are the most negative and score significantly lower on all four measures (relationship quality, relationship with partner, relationship maintenance, and happiness with relationship/partner) than childless women.<sup>22</sup> However, mothers are significantly happier with life than any other group.<sup>23</sup> See Figure 7, below. We can infer from this that children could be the primary source of happiness for mothers rather than their partner.



**Figure 7. Happiness with relationship by gender and parenting status**  
See Table 12 in the Appendices for Table of Means and Standard Deviations

Low rates of dissatisfaction with the relationship and partner should not, however, be taken to mean that the couple is going to separate. Data from the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS, 2010) shows that two in three parents who strongly agreed

<sup>20</sup> All F's >3.50, all p's < .050

<sup>21</sup> F(1, 841) = 0.10, p = .751

<sup>22</sup> All F's > 55.00, all p's < .001

<sup>23</sup> F(1, 3555) = 10.99, p = .001

with the statement 'I suspect we are on the brink of separation' were still with their partners two years later. Importantly, the lower rates of dissatisfaction that our participants scored were relative, when compared with that of other groups in the sample and contextualised in the generally high scores across the 'happiness' measures overall.

## 5.5 Age

For men, there are no significant differences in relationship with partner across three age categories (up to age 34, 35-55 and 55+).<sup>24</sup> However, there are statistically significant age effects for men for relationship quality, relationship maintenance, happiness with relationship/partner and happiness with life.<sup>25</sup> The data pattern indicates that younger and older men tend to score higher on these measures than men in the middle age category. See Figure 8, below.

In comparison, the youngest group of women (up to age 34) scores significantly higher on relationship quality, relationship with partner and relationship maintenance than older women. This group of younger women also scores significantly higher on relationship satisfaction than women in the older age categories. Yet women in the oldest age category score highest in their happiness with life.<sup>26</sup> There are several possible reasons for this, with research indicating that for older women marriage may encourage healthy behaviour, provide spousal care during periods of illness or poor health and increase material well-being through the pooling of resources (Gardner & Oswald, 2004).

Further analysis explored how age, gender and parental status intersect. This found that women over 55 years of age score lower on relationship satisfaction regardless of their parental status; similarly parenthood did not explain older women's high score in their happiness with life. The analyses for the relationship

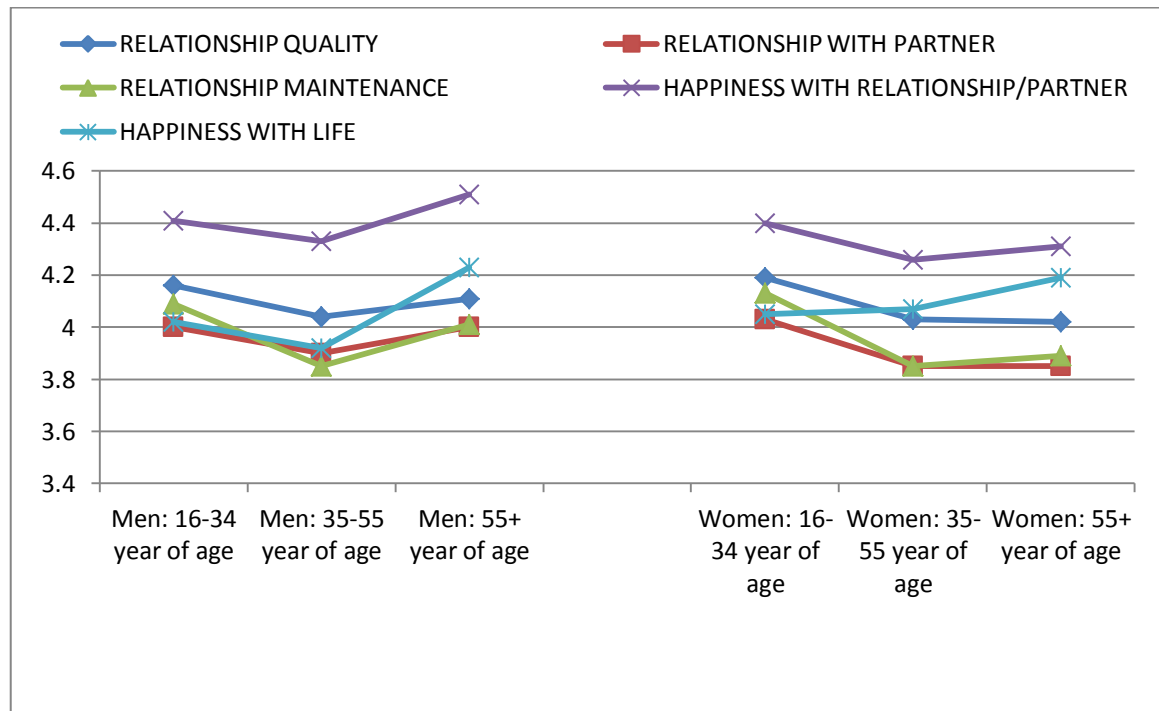
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<sup>24</sup>  $F(2, 850) = 2.23, p = .108$

<sup>25</sup> All  $F$ 's  $> 2.50$ , all  $p$ 's  $< .050$

<sup>26</sup> All  $F$ 's  $> 7.5$ , all  $p$ 's  $< .050$

measures grouped by gender, parenting status and age thus brought no additional results of statistical significance here.



**Figure 8. Relationship measures by gender and age**  
 See Table 13 in the Appendices for Table of Means and Standard Deviations

## 6. Money

Mothers and fathers are likely to emulate the male breadwinner/ female homemaker model. Only 14% of mothers state that they often or always support their partners financially. In contrast, half of the fathers (50%) often or always support their partners financially. These figures may thus reflect findings from feminist research which has highlighted the difficulties many mothers face in combining paid work with looking after young children because of the structural constraints of the employment market and lack of affordable childcare (S. Duncan, Edwards, Reynolds, & Aldred, 2003; Gambles, Lewis, & Rapoport, 2006; Lewis, 2001). Such difficulties are exacerbated by the gender pay gap, which is the difference between men and women’s earnings as a percentage of men’s earnings and which currently stands at 9.6%. They are also reinforced by the differences in pay scales between full-time and part-time work as 21% of women are currently in part-time employment (ONS, 2012a).

Wider external factors may also account, in part, for the significant number of participants (23%) in our survey who indicate that their employment status has changed over the past two years and the possible impact of this upon couples' sense of financial security. Notwithstanding this, most mothers and fathers in the survey seem to think that financial resources are often or always fairly distributed (82% of mothers and 87% of fathers). Both mothers and fathers share the view that they do not tend to argue over money, with about three quarters of them indicating that they never or only occasionally argue over money (74% and 76% respectively). Nonetheless, money is obviously an important issue. When participants were asked to note down two things that they like least about the relationship, answers pertaining to money issues featured 7<sup>th</sup> for mothers and 9<sup>th</sup> for fathers.

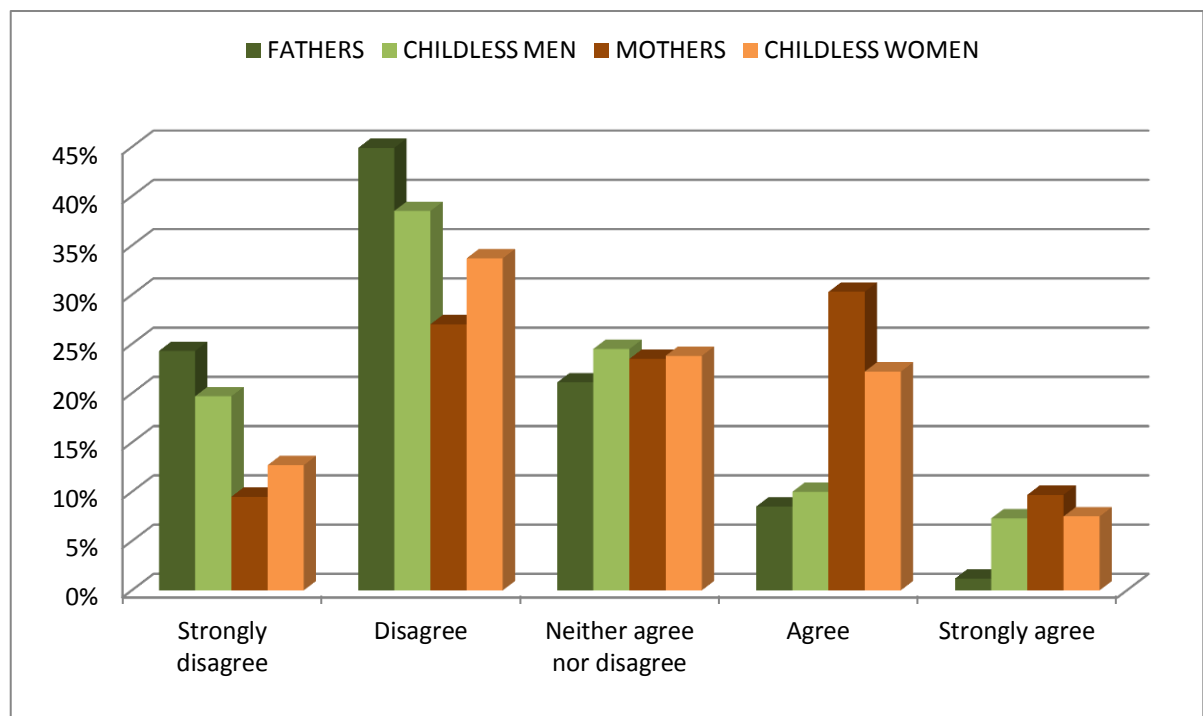
## 7. Sexual Intimacy

Sex research has tended to deploy psychometric scales designed to measure sexual activities in the context of health concerns (Johnson et al., 2001) and overall relationship satisfaction. Findings in this latter area have shown high relationship satisfaction ratings among women and men who are currently satisfied with the frequency of their sexual activities (Smith et al., 2011). However, these results do need to be treated with some degree of caution in trying to make sense of gendered sexual attitudes and practice. For example, research suggests that men are more inclined to overstate their sexual activity in sex surveys and 'big up' their conquests, whereas women tend to downplay this dimension of their relationship (Stephenson & Sullivan, 2009).

It is also important to note that in the *Enduring Love?* sample presented here, mothers, fathers, childless women and men span the spectrum of sexual diversity. Our sample included 11% LGB participants; what constitutes sex in non-heterosexual relationships and the meanings assigned to sexual intimacy can sometimes vary significantly from those framed through the lens of heteronormativity (Wilton, 1996). However there were no discernible differences when it came to answering the statement 'Sex is an important part of our

relationship'. Mothers and fathers, women and men without children, all responded similarly and mostly agree or strongly agree with this statement.

There were significant differences between the responses of mothers and fathers to the statement 'My partner wants to have sex more often than I do'. Mothers were four times more likely to agree with this assertion, with 40% of mothers agreeing or strongly agreeing compared to only 10% of fathers. See Figure 9, below. This suggests that among parents there is dissatisfaction about the frequency of sex in their relationship. While previous research has shown a correlation between relationship and sexual frequency satisfaction (Smith et al., 2011), this was not borne out in our data. The vast majority indicated a high degree of happiness with their life, relationship and partner. Nonetheless, there are gender differences if we look at gender and parenting status. Fathers score lower than childless men on happiness with relationship/partner, but both fathers and childless men score similarly on the happiness with life measure. In contrast, mothers score lower than childless women and men, with and without children, on happiness with relationship/partner but score significantly higher than childless women on the happiness with life measure, as the previous section shows.



**Figure 9. 'My partner wants to have sex more often than I do' by gender and parenthood**

One explanation to account for this divergence in findings is that a cohort which responds to sexual frequency surveys is different in character from that which takes part in more broadly defined relationship research. Further research, however, would be required to prove or disprove this. The other plausible answer is that mothers and fathers understand fluctuations in desire and sexual activity as a component part of parenthood. As such, while this may be a source of divergence, it does not *per se* lead to relationship dissatisfaction. Like mothers, childless women also perceived that their partner wanted to have sex more regularly but the contrast between childless women and men is less marked. Nevertheless childless women are almost twice more likely than childless men to agree or strongly agree with the statement 'My partner wants to have sex more than I do' (30% and 17% respectively). It seems there is a gender divide that becomes magnified by parenting. As with parents, these participants were also largely happy with their life, partner and relationship and so they too contest the convergence of relationship and sexual frequency satisfaction.

## 8. Stressors

Research has demonstrated that couple relationships come under pressure in times of transition (ONS, 2012b; Walker et al., 2010), for example, around the birth of a child couple separation rates increase significantly. Knowledge on relationship 'stressors' (Walker et al., 2010) has played a crucial part in developing relationship support strategies. For this reason the *Enduring Love?* survey asked participants whether they have experienced any stressful events in the past two years, indicating which (if any) these were, from a list of 12 items.

The responses indicate that such stressors are relatively common place rather than being extraordinary events. Almost a third of our participants have started an educational course (31%) within the past two years, although this might well be characteristic of the research project sample. What might suggest a sign of the financial downturn is that almost a quarter of participants had experienced job

loss or redundancy (22%) and/or starting work (23%) in the past two years. A similar proportion of all participants have moved house (32%) and a quarter had experienced bereavement (25%) in this time frame.

Moreover, and importantly, in contrast to previous research findings (Walker et al., 2010) there appears to be *significant positive relationships* between the number of events in the past two years and relationship satisfaction. The more events participants reported, the higher their scores on our three measures of relationship quality, partner relationship and relationship maintenance. While relationship satisfaction correlates positively with the number of stressors experienced in the past two years, the number of stressors is weakly but negatively related to overall happiness with life. The same pattern of results re-occurs if we only look at parents and the data pattern remains very similar when comparing parents and childless participants.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) reports a slightly decreasing divorce rate between 2010 and 2011 in England and Wales (ONS, 2012b). There are several explanations that account for this. Declining divorce rates may simply be a result of increasing rates of cohabitation and thus no inference can be drawn on the endurance of marriages (Beaujouan & Bhrolcháin, 2011). Two competing theories offer other views on the decrease. One proposes that financial hardship may contribute to a rise in partnership break-up but, because of the costs of separation, the impact is delayed; that is to say couples decide or have no choice but to wait for an economic recovery to lift the value of their assets so they can 'afford' to divorce. The other suggests that partnerships are less likely to dissolve in an unfavourable economic climate because of an increase in family solidarity during difficult times (ONS, 2012b). Findings for the *Enduring Love?* survey appear to support this latter thesis, that couples might be pulling together during the current recession. This assertion does remain highly tentative. It is important to recognise sample bias. It is most plausible that couples who pull together in difficult times are also more inclined to reflect on their relationship; it is this population that completed the *Enduring Love?* questionnaire.



Further analysis shows that the links between the number of stressors and relationship measures and happiness measures are also significantly gendered. Comparing men and women shows that the links between the number of stressors in the past two years and all relationship and happiness measures are largely driven by the women in the sample. While for men, there was only a significant positive link between stressors and relationship maintenance, for women the links between stressors and all relationship questions turned out statistically significant.

### 9. The most important person in your life

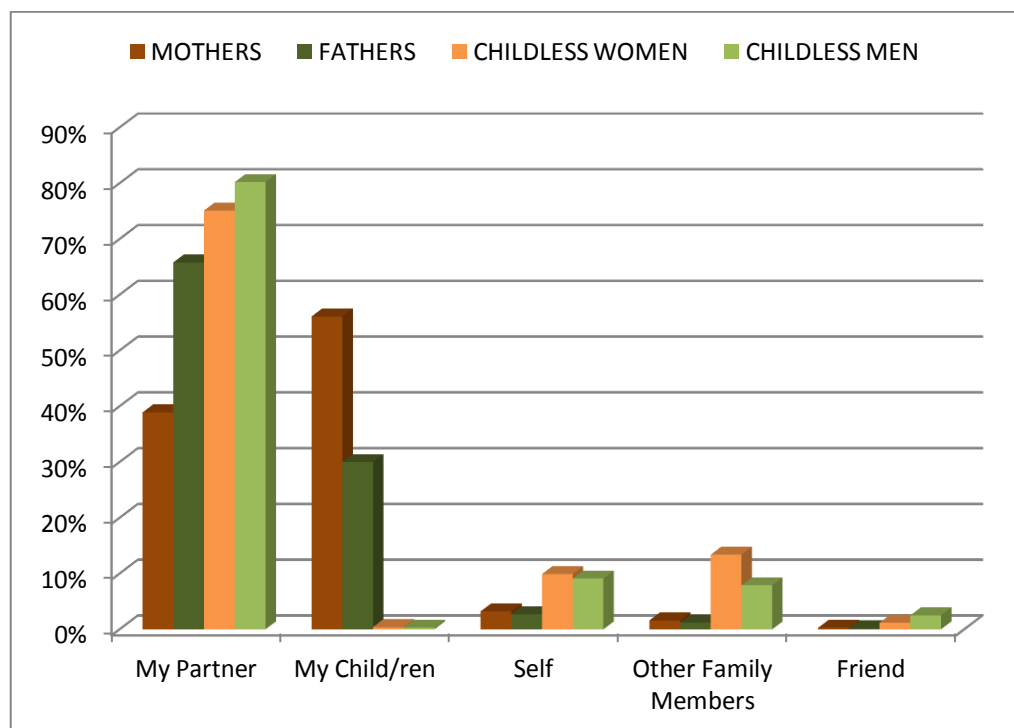
Over the past 20 years, intimacy, personal life and family relationships have been the focus of critical and contested examination. Social theorising has suggested that in the context of contemporary self-help culture (Giddens, 1992) and the breakdown of community and extended kin networks (Bauman, 2003; Beck, 2000) couple relationships are becoming ever-more fragile and a culture of individualisation is emerging. This does not signal the end of intimate relationships *per se* but does point to ‘transformations’ in how we live and love. In contrast, empirical studies highlight relationality and embeddedness as the structuring principle behind lived lives (Smart, 2007). Personal relationships have not lost their appeal (Jamieson, 1998), although their form may be more diverse than ever before (Jamieson et al., 2006; Williams, 2004). There is, however, a sense that people no longer depend on the adult couple as a permanent relationship, ‘til death do us part’. In its stead, the parent-child relationship is experienced as the unconditional and reliable source and repository of love (Beck-Gernsheim, 1999).

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 item from the drop-down list which included children, partner, father, sister, other family members,

friend, mother, brother, self and other. Analysis of the answers not only indicated which one relationship counted above and beyond another, it also asked participants to explain their choice. For some this prioritisation was characterised as untenable: a ‘Sophie’s Choice’ scenario. For others, their answers revealed a high degree of reflexivity and pragmatic reasoning.

The male and female participants who perceive their partner as most important score highest in all of the five measures – relationship quality, relationship with partner, relationship maintenance, happiness with relationship/partner and happiness with life. This is followed by participants who see themselves as the most important person, and then participants who see their children as the most important person. These findings are independent of parenting/childless status.

It is obviously unproductive to compare the answers of parents and childless women and men to this question as childless women and men are highly unlikely to feature children in their selection. Looking within these gendered responses, at the response pattern for parents does, however, reveal some interesting data.

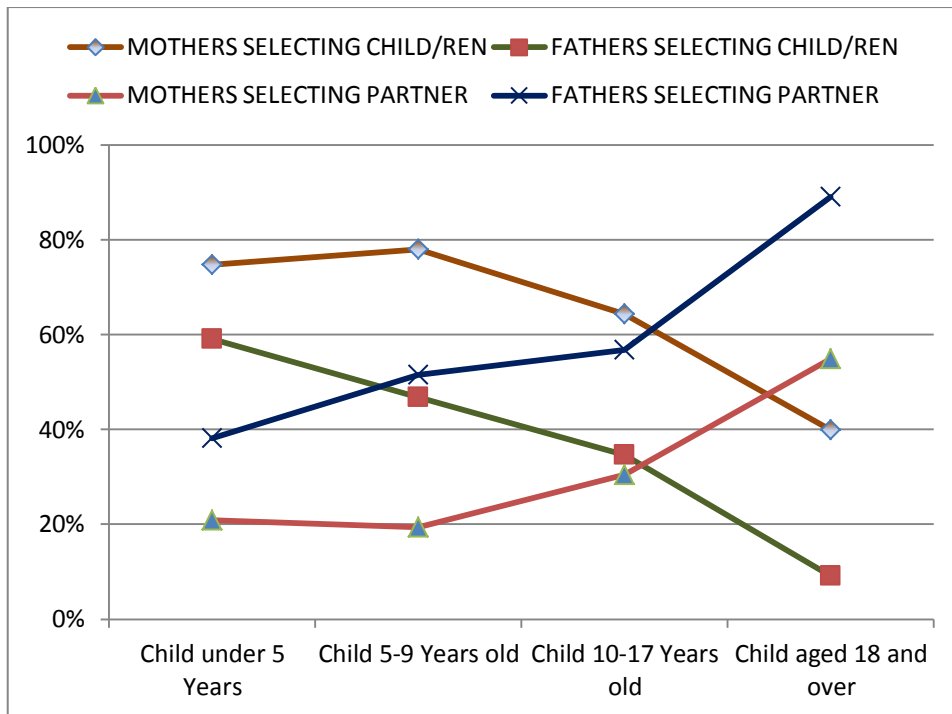


**Figure 10. ‘Who is the most important person in your life?’ by gender and parental status**

The answers of mothers and fathers are significantly gendered. Mothers are almost twice more likely than fathers to select their child/children as the most important person in their life (56% and 30% respectively). Fathers are far more likely to value their partners as the most important person (66% and 39% respectively). We will be completing further analysis of these data, including their relationship with response patterns to the five measures and individual questions more specifically.

We have found that with an increase in the age of the child/ren living at home, there is a decrease in answers that select child/ren as the most important person with the downward trend being steeper for fathers than for mothers. With an oldest child under four years old, 75% of mothers selected child/ren and with an oldest child aged five to nine, it was 78%. With a child aged between 10 and 17 years, this figure goes down to 64% and the downward trend continues to 40% if the mother's youngest child is aged 18 or over. For fathers the downward trend is steeper, falling from 59% with the youngest child/ren under four to 9% with a child aged 18 or over.

These decreases, and their dependence on the age of the child/ren, correlate with increases in naming the partner as the most important person in mothers' and fathers' lives. Fathers start from a much higher percentage than mothers when the child is under four years old. See Figure 11, below.



**Figure 11. ‘Who is the most important person in your life?’ Gender and parenthood by age of youngest child**  
 See Table 14 in the Appendices for Table of exact percentages.

Participants were also asked to explain the rationale for their choice. Many participants lamented the requirement to pick one person above another. Their relationships were intertwined; feelings are not readily divisible or quantifiable. The justifications were, however, often highly revealing. For example, relationships with children and partner were perceived as substantively different.

### 9.1 My child/ren

Because my son is the reason for being

Participants who chose child/ren felt that love for a child is forever, unconditional and irreplaceable and that a child can give one’s own life meaning. Participants invoked essentialist parental discourses, citing the importance of ‘blood ties’ and a child being part of one’s self. Children’s needs and vulnerabilities at particular life stages were also considered; as children’s independence increased, the partner’s status as the most important person could be reinstated.

I could never walk away. I can imagine my relationship not working in the very long term, but not being part of my children's life

I helped them into this world and will remain forever bound to them, I didn't like having to choose between them and their mother, but she has more agency than they do, so I feel more obligated to them

## 9.2 My partner

Participants who chose their partner framed this in terms of embedded lives (Smart, 2007) and mutuality; their partner gives meaning to their own life. Participants mentioned shared experiences, how having gone 'through thick and thin' and survived 'ups and downs', a stronger couple connection had been forged. This was described in terms of their partner being their 'other half', an 'extension' of themselves; this close relationship created an intimate private world that was sustained by and through the couple.

Because she is literally my other half. I have lived with her over half my life

After 5 years together, with so much love and affection shared and so many in-jokes, routines, experiences etc, it just feels like we have created our own private universe. It's hard to think of anything (or anyone) beyond that universe, which is the great constant in my life

## 9.3 Self

Because if I can't look after myself, I can't look after anyone else

Participants who selected 'self' in answer to this question could too easily be taken as the epitome of individualisation. Their answers, however, often situate the self *in relation* to others. The self was justified in terms of constancy, that is to say, in opposition to temporary and/or serial couple relationships. This looking

after and valuing ‘number one’ was not typically characterised as selfishness, but was described as a means to provide the foundation for any relationships that might emerge. To look after a relationship and meet the needs and expectations of someone else requires a sense of personal robustness and security.

My partner has greater needs than I do and our relationship feels more focused on meeting those, so I feel I need to look after myself so I am able to be there for her

### 10. Help Seeking and Advice

The survey asked participants to whom they would consider turning for any support, help or advice with their relationship. Respondents had to choose one source from a drop-down list. Figure 12 shows the options available and the ones that were most/least selected by participants.

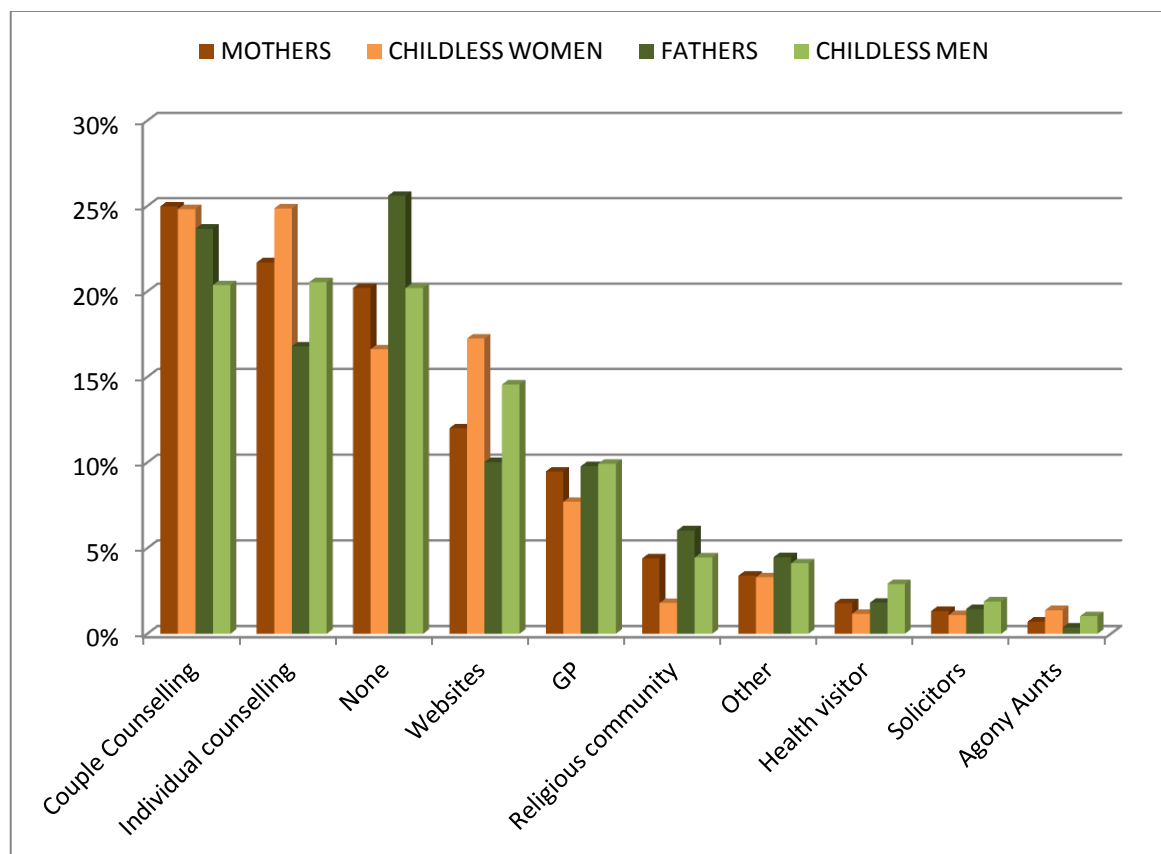


Figure 12. ‘Would you consider turning to any of the following for support, help or advice with your relationship?’ by gender and parental status

Women and men both indicated that they would use couple counselling as a source for support, help or advice before individual counselling. This might well be a characteristic of the sample as the *Enduring Love?* survey was widely circulated on relationship support websites. It is also plausible that people who complete a questionnaire on their couple relationship are particularly inclined towards relationship support and advice. Overall, however, men indicated that they were actually unlikely to consult anyone, indeed this choice ranked highest in their answers (23%). In contrast, women indicated that they would consider turning to both couple counselling and individual counselling (25% and 23% respectively).

The use of websites as a means of delivering relationship support services is growing exponentially. It is, therefore, perhaps unsurprising that this option featured in 4<sup>th</sup> place for both women and men. Another explanation for this may be sample bias in that the survey was implemented online, thus the participant cohort were already internet users. Further answers to this question show that men would consider turning to their religious community and GP, and, perhaps more surprisingly, to other sources including friends and family. This seems to conflict with research on friendship. This research highlights the ways that female friendships provide a space where confidences can be shared and issues talked freely over (Pahl & Pevalin, 2005) and suggests that men typically see their partner as their best friend, and do not have confiding relationships beyond that of the couple (Gabb, 2008).

Significant differences in responses by parenting status are also apparent (see Figure 12). Both mothers and childless women equally rated couple counselling (25%). Individual counselling was, however, the more favoured option by childless women, with responses ranking it alongside couple counselling (25%). Mothers' responses positioned it slightly less (at 22%). Childless women rank the use of websites higher than mothers (17% and 12% respectively). Fathers would rather turn to individual counselling and then to couple counselling than to any

other sources (20% and 21%). Fathers would also be less likely to consider websites for help and advice than childless men (10% and 14% respectively). Overall, therefore, childless men are more inclined to consider some form of support than fathers. The difference in attitudes here can be seen most clearly in the positioning of 'no support'. This was the highest ranking answer for fathers, while for childless men it was in third place (26% and 20% respectively). Further analysis shows that it tends to be fathers over 55 years of age and childless men under 35 who would not consider asking for help, support or advice with their relationship.

*Enduring Love?* survey findings thus appear to corroborate assertions advanced in recent research which conclude that there are considerable barriers to help seeking, with men feeling particularly marginalised. Men's perception that support services are oriented around and focused on women or mothers (Walker et al., 2010) would account for the high incidence of 'none' among their answers. In contrast, however, those participants who had previously sought relationship support and advice found this to be a positive experience. 25% of men and 29% of women indicated that they had made use of relationship support sources. Of these, almost two thirds of them were parents (65% mothers and 64% fathers) and the vast majority of both women and men found the relationship support and advice helpful (85% and 86% respectively).

## 11. Open Questions

As indicated in the Methodology section of this Report, the survey asked open-ended questions on what participants liked and disliked about their relationship and what their partner did that made them feel appreciated. Their responses to these questions are examined here. What emerges are some insights into the 'relationship work' that couples do and the sorts of 'work' and qualities that are cherished, unacknowledged, wished for and/or expected in long-term relationships. The findings are informed by the demographic details that were collected in the survey, including information on the gender, age, sexual orientation, the absence–presence of children in the household,



employment/education, relationship status, ethnicity and religion. The absence–presence of children was particularly significant amongst these contextual factors. Thus in the findings presented in this section, we have focused our analysis on gender and parenthood.

The questions in this section were free-text, with no multiple choice answers being available. While not all participants answered these open questions, the vast majority did so. There were, therefore, over 10,000 responses in total to these questions. Some participants identified only one ‘thing’, others identified several. Where more than two answers were given, only the first two were coded. We considered coding only a random sample extracted from these data, but the quality of the answers was too rich to lose and so all were ultimately coded. This process of quantifying the qualitative data was a daunting task. The results presented below and the insights which they afford into couple relationship experience, among such a diverse and large population, demonstrate that it was nevertheless a highly productive endeavour.

Initially, the responses were all read. We then deployed a grounded theory approach (Miles & Huberman, 1983), organizing the many emerging ideas and themes into clusters of answers that mapped onto the extended coding frame being developed for use with our qualitative data. This iterative process was very demanding and time-consuming but we wanted to ensure that the codes used captured the flavour and diversity of sentiments expressed in the free-text answers. We also needed to ensure that the quantitative and qualitative coding frames used the same concepts and codes in order to facilitate future mixed methods analysis, across the dataset. As recurrent structuring themes emerged, the quantitative coding frame was refined. We eventually agreed upon a 25 item quantitative coding sheet, to be used for each of the three open questions.

In this section of the Report we provide detailed discussion of the themes that emerged through answers to the open-ended questions. These include

participant quotes comprising some of the qualitative survey data alongside analysis of the relative rankings of these answers, primarily according to gender and parental status. Below, in summary, are the top answers which also comprise the options presented in a follow up online poll. A statistical breakdown of these answers and their rankings can be found in the Appendices, Tables 15-24.

**What does your partner do that makes you feel appreciated?<sup>27</sup>**

- Says thank you and/or gives me compliments
- Gives me cards, gifts, flowers etc.
- Does/shares the household chores and/or childcare
- Talks with me and listens to me
- Is physically affectionate
- Says and/or shows s/he loves me
- Cooks some/all of our meals
- Makes kind and thoughtful gestures
- Makes me tea, coffee and/or breakfast in bed
- Supports and looks after me
- Is always there for me
- Values me and respects my opinions
- Makes time to be together, as a couple
- Supports my personal interests/career
- Sexual intimacy

**What do you like *best* about your relationship?<sup>28</sup>**

- Laughing together
- Sharing values and interests
- Being best friends
- Being cared for and feeling supported
- Feeling safe and secure
- Being happy

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<sup>27</sup> See Figure 15 for responses by gender and parenting status

<sup>28</sup> See Figure 16 for responses by gender and parenting status

- Trust
- Sharing a close relationship
- Talking and listening
- Being in love and/or being loved
- Physical affection
- Spending time together
- Being a family and/or having children
- We support each other
- Sexual intimacy

**What do you like *least* about your relationship?<sup>29</sup>**

- Poor communication
- Arguments and/or conflicts
- Housework and/or childcare are not shared fairly
- Issues with balancing work and home life
- Few shared values and/or interests
- Not enough couple time
- Money issues
- Living apart and/or housing issues
- Different needs/expectations around sexual intimacy
- Lack of closeness
- Partner's undesirable personality traits
- Annoying habits
- Issues with partner's friends or family
- Nothing
- Trust issues

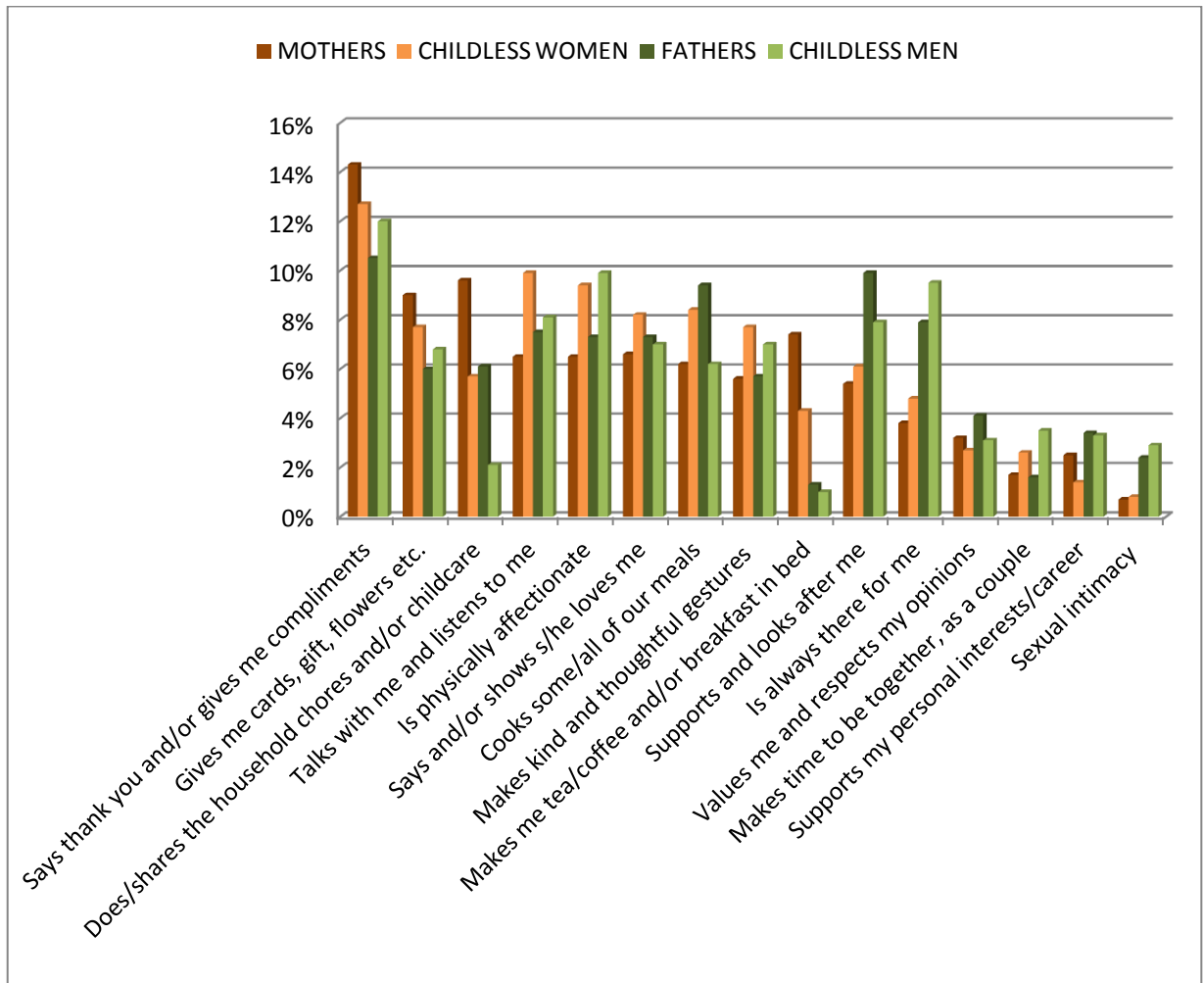
**11.1 What does your partner do that makes you feel appreciated?**

Participants were asked to identify 'two things that your partner does for you that makes you feel appreciated'. This was a free-text question and no multiple choice answers were available. The level of agreement among participants is, therefore,

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<sup>29</sup> See Figure 17 for responses by gender and parenting status

remarkable. Answers were coded using 23 of the 25 item quantitative coding sheet, but 91% of all responses featured in the top 15 categories. There are, however, notable differences in the answers of women and men, and between parents and childless couples. In the section below we discuss these findings through the key themes that emerged.



**Figure 13. 'What does your partner do that makes you feel appreciated?' by gender and parenting status.**  
 See Tables 15-18 in the Appendices for statistical breakdown of data

### 11.1.1 Saying 'thank you'

She notices things I have done and thanks me for doing them

Simply saying 'thank you' was prized most highly, by all participants. Recognising the time and effort required to complete the everyday routine tasks which underpin relationships and the smooth running of a household, was thus the most commonly cited answer.

Thanks me for cooking and eats it even if it is awful!

Expressions of appreciation were not only verbalised. How a partner makes you feel also featured prominently in this category. Participants' sense of feeling appreciated at times appears to rely upon or be bolstered by a partner's acknowledgement of them and the 'work' which they do among family, friends and colleagues. Encouraging children to appreciate the parental love and labour which goes into them was also noted, by both mothers and fathers.

Tells the children they have a great mother!

Says nice things to me, says nice things about me to others

Spoken forms of appreciation also featured as praise, compliments and a validation of both the partner and the 'relationship work' they undertake, comprising 41% of the answers in this category. The emphasis placed on feeling valued or being told and/or made to 'feel' attractive was highly gendered, with most answers in this vein coming from women.

He still thinks I'm attractive (and tells me so) after 32 years of marriage

Compliments about personal appearance and a job well done were often accompanied by a deeper level of appreciation. Women valued their partner's appreciation of the personal qualities which they brought to the relationship, situated in the context of close and intimate knowledge.

Tells me how much he loves and appreciates me not only for what I do for our family but for being who I am and loving him the way I do

### 11.1.2 Gifts and thoughtful gestures

*Lots of small gestures, such as leaving me the last chocolate*

*Makes me tea! No really, it's the little things*

Surprise gifts, thoughtful gestures and small acts of kindness were valued highly. We have disaggregated these into separate categories (see Figure 13 and Tables 15-18) to reveal the nature and practices of the gestures being referred to. When combined, however, they comprise the most popular category for women, with 22% of mothers and 20% of childless women ranking these as one of their two things which make them feel appreciated. Fathers and childless men rate this combination slightly lower (13% and 15% respectively). When describing written forms of appreciation, from Post-It notes, to slips of paper, to personally selected cards, it was the sentiments expressed that held sway. The meaningful of words were prized irrespective of their presentation.

*He writes me love notes and folds the laundry (which I hate to do)*

*She leaves little cards for me to find that say nice things on them*

Media depictions of courtship rituals and demonstrations of love in couple relationships often include bouquets of flowers and boxes of chocolates. These items did feature highly in this category of answer, but not typically in such extravagant forms. Tangible objects such as gifts, cards and flowers did comprise 41% of all answers within the category of gestures; however it was usually the thoughtfulness behind the gesture that was most appreciated.

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

As the above statement illustrates romance was there, but commercialised formulations of the romantic gesture were seldom mentioned. Indeed descriptions typically applauded the spontaneity and mundanity of thoughtful acts and practices. 'Grand gestures' and the commemoration of special occasions did not feature highly in participants' comments. Very few people appeared to value the financial cost of the gift at all. It was the kindness of a gesture which counted.

Shows he loves me - runs me a bath after work, helps with the children in the mornings

The kinds of gestures that were mentioned were wide ranging and often very personal. Their meaning and import were private. These gestures were appreciated because of a shared understanding between the couple; they were 'quiet gestures' of intimacy and affection.

If he is the first in the bathroom before we go to bed he puts the toothpaste on my toothbrush for me

From scraping the ice off a car to taking the dog out for a walk in the wind and rain, it was a partner doing everyday routine tasks that was identified as kind and considerate.

Takes out the bins and always clearing up after dinner

Surprising me with such things as a nice bath, cuppa, favourite TV show or film at just the right time

A 'cuppa tea' (and to a lesser extent a mug of coffee and/or breakfast in bed), while being a thoughtful gesture among many others, featured so prominently as an answer it was assigned an individual code. Many of these answers were almost apologetic in their phrasing. Others identified this small act of generosity as a form of silent 'couple communication'; the way their partner expressed their love and appreciation. For mothers this small thoughtful gesture comprised 34% of answers in the overall category of gestures and was often associated with 'time out', away from the demands of childcare. It thus signified an appreciation of their role as a mother. In this scenario and more generally, a cup of tea in bed spoke volumes.

A cup of tea in bed every now and again makes you feel so appreciated

Take kids out without me, brings me cup of tea in bed in mornings

This might account for why childless men seldom mentioned this item, placing it in 15<sup>th</sup> place, in contrast to mothers who valued it highly, ranking it in 4<sup>th</sup> place. This does not, however, explain the similarly low ranking afforded by fathers (15<sup>th</sup>) and that of childless women (11<sup>th</sup>). It would appear, therefore, that while parenthood does have an impact on this form of appreciation, it is also significantly gendered.

### 11.1.3 Household chores, childcare and cooking

#### Shares the childcare and household chores

Couple relationships endure for many diverse reasons, including the strength of a connection, the intimacy of the partnership bond, an intensity of feelings or a sense of 'deep knowing' (Jamieson, 1998). These emotional dimensions have featured in many of the items thus far identified as 'things' which a partner does to make one feel appreciated. One category which stands apart from this is that of household chores and childcare. For many women and for some men, it was the practicalities of sustaining a family and/or household which determined their answers.

*He vacuum cleans the house, he knows I hate it. Helps around the house and with the kids*

*We have a new baby. He will take him in the morning to let me sleep*

Feminist research has demonstrated the need to recognise the distinctiveness of household labour and the roles and responsibilities associated with childcare (Klett-Davies & Skaliotis, 2009). Housework and childcare were initially coded separately. In the survey data, however, they were so often interwoven that this distinction became untenable. Thus, in line with other research completed on this topic (Oakley, 2005), we collapsed these items into one category described here as household chores and childcare. Mothers were most inclined to rate the sharing of household chores and childcare as a priority, with their answers ranking it in 2<sup>nd</sup> place as something which demonstrated appreciation. No other



group of participants afforded it a high status. The answers of fathers positioned it in 8<sup>th</sup> place while those of childless women and childless men ranked it 9<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> respectively.

The other (much documented) factor that should be acknowledged is the gendering of assessments around household labour (Doucet, 1995). Men tend to overestimate their contribution to housework, to boost their self-image as a caring and involved partner, and tend to take women's contribution towards these areas somewhat for granted (Coltrane, 1996; Klett-Davies & Skaliotis, 2009). In contrast, women are likely to notice and appreciate small amounts of household chores, childcare and cooking that are completed by men.

*Taking on lots of childcare responsibilities and doing more than his fair share*

*Although he works full time, he takes care of the kids often so I can have time for my self*

The identification of a 'fair share' remains highly gendered and may serve to obscure the uneven division of labour in the household and with childcare. As such it is perhaps not surprising that women tended to frame their answers in terms of gratitude and valued time away from tasks ordinarily assigned to them. In contrast, men generally framed their appreciation in terms of what domestic labour gave to them, as individuals. This commentary in no way diminishes men and women's appreciation and/or the contribution being made, it does however draw attention to the significance of gender in making sense of data on household chores and childcare.

*She looks after me...washing up, cooking, etc.*

One other factor that needs to be teased apart is the descriptors deployed in childcare activities. Parents appear to value this activity more highly if the partner is not the birth parent of the children, or, in the very least, they frame their appreciation through this differentiating characteristic.

Looks after our children most of the time

Looks after my son

This dimension requires further analysis that we will complete over the forthcoming months. What is apparent thus far is that both mothers and fathers appreciate the domestic support that a partner does within the couple relationship, but the nature of this support differs between women and men. Mothers are more likely to feel appreciated by their partners' household and childcare participation, alongside other tokens of appreciation such as gifts or thoughtful gestures like a cup of tea. Fathers tend to articulate feeling appreciated through gratitude for the emotional and practical support which they receive; support which enables them, we might infer, to function effectively both inside and outside the home. This finding has the flavour of a study that was written 30 years ago (Finch, 1983), which asserts that when a woman marries she takes more on than a husband; her life becomes structured by his occupation and more likely than not she will be drawn into it to some degree. Thus if she herself is employed she will do not two but three jobs: hers, 'theirs' (managing household and childcare responsibilities), and some of his as well. That is to say, she facilitates his labour power through the 'emotional work' of moral support (Hochschild, 1989).

As indicated above, when a single item was frequently identified it was assigned a separate code; as such cooking was separated out from domestic chores and childcare. This has analytical merit and will facilitate close interrogation of the data in due course. However, housework and cooking are ordinarily seen as part and parcel of household labour. Bringing together the activities of cooking, household chores and childcare significantly changes the ranking of this item. Identified thus, household chores, cooking and childcare are clearly ranked in 1<sup>st</sup> place by mothers, childless women and fathers alike. For childless men it is positioned in 4<sup>th</sup> place. Verbal expressions of appreciation and thoughtful gestures lay some way behind this recognition of the sharing and/or provision of

everyday household labour as the primary means that a partner demonstrates their appreciation.

*She takes the time to prepare incredible meals that are also healthy*

*He cooks my dinner for me so that I don't have to when I get home from work*

Cooking dinner for a partner can be seen as literally and metaphorically 'feeding' the couple relationship. In the descriptions used of these culinary activities, there appeared to be a real sense of appreciation for the time and energy devoted to cooking and the successful results of this domestic labour. The answers of childless women (4<sup>th</sup>) and fathers (3<sup>rd</sup>) were particularly keen to recognize this activity. There are conflicting factors within these rankings in that a childless woman/man will by default not identify childcare and so may rank household chores lower by virtue of this fact. Notwithstanding this factor, its prevalence and significance remain high.

#### **11.1.4 Good communication**

The need for good communication was a quality identified as important by all participants, with childless women's answers positioning it 2<sup>nd</sup> in what made them feel appreciated. Mothers' answers rated it slightly lower in 5<sup>th</sup> place, with fathers' answers also identifying it 5<sup>th</sup> and childless men rating it 4<sup>th</sup>.

*Talks openly with me*

*We talk every day, and share all of our problems with one another*

Answers illustrate that women and men value conversations which are open, a means through which they can get to know each other and unburden themselves of the stresses and strains that have encumbered them over the course of a day. Open communication also appears to include a sharing of feelings, characterising 'disclosing intimacy' (Jamieson, 1998) through the investment of one person in

another; a verbalisation and means of embedding shared lives which fosters intimate knowledge.

She communicates really well with me so I am always aware of how she is feeling

He makes me feel like I can tell him anything - anything, really. He is so open about his feelings, he never hides anything from me and when he tries to, he ends up telling me about it in this very cute way of his

Communicating with a partner was not dependent on proximity. Indeed while talking and open conversations comprised 23% of the answers featured in this category, long-distance communication, mostly in the form of texts (and to a lesser extent, phone calls, emails and letters) seems to be afforded greater significance, at 29%. Touching base, therefore, appears to be just as important and meaningful as a way to show appreciation as long heart-to-heart conversations.

She sends texts for no reason other than to say she is thinking of me.

Calling or texting to share something with me

The emphasis on dialogue appears to lie behind the conjoining of talking, listening and understanding in the answers of women and men. Partners are not simply a sounding board for talking ideas through, divesting emotions after a troublesome day at work and/or reflecting on parenting and childcare issues. Answers appear to indicate that a partner is one of the few sources where women and men believe their voice is heard and the opinions and feelings being articulated are valued.

My partner always talks to me and listens when I feel the need to talk and to be heard

Listens to me and makes me feel understood and cared about

For men listening was often tied into feeling cared about and supported. This desire or need to feel supported by and within their relationship was so prized by fathers that it was rated as the 2<sup>nd</sup> thing in their answers about what their partner did to show their appreciation. Childless men's answers also ranked it highly, placing it in 5<sup>th</sup> place. In addition both fathers and childless men listed their partners' support for their personal interests or career as a form of appreciation more often than mothers and childless women. For women, it featured less prominently, with the answers of childless women ranking it 8<sup>th</sup> and mothers affording it 10<sup>th</sup> place in their identified items.

Another similar item that reflects a skew in the gendering of answers is that of 'being there'.

*Listens to me, supports me*

*Sharing things with me - including her frustrations. Looking out for me*

Childless men identified 'being there, for me' as the 3<sup>rd</sup> highest response in their answer categories, and the answers of fathers ranked this quality in 4<sup>th</sup> place. In women's answers, it ranked far lower; in 10<sup>th</sup> place for childless women and 11<sup>th</sup> place for mothers.

There are no ready and easy explanations for gendered differences of this kind. The low priority afforded to the idea of 'being there' by mothers could be read as a sign of their emotional needs being met through the mother-child relationship. The previous section has already shown that mothers are more likely to select their children as the most important person in their life. But contemporary research suggests that men significantly invest in 'intimate fatherhood' (Dermott, 2008) and as such fathers would thus follow the parental logic in ranking. Another explanation which does fit with research in this field is that women are more likely to draw support from sources outside the couple relationship, such as close friendships. It is not possible to say with any certainty which explanation has greater validity, although it is hard to see how gender does not run through this dimension of the survey findings. A further, perhaps less palatable explanation

could be that women simply do not feel that their partner is there for them. They do not, therefore, value 'being there' because boyfriends, partners and husbands cannot be counted upon. Far more in-depth research is needed before this reading is justified; subsequent analysis of the mixed-methods data will allow us to test out this thesis in due course.

### 11.1.5 Love, affection and sexual intimacy

*He tells me he loves me multiple times a day*

The final area that was identified as important, to a lesser or greater extent, by all women and men was that of love and physical affection. Saying or showing love featured in the mid ranks of all participants; the answers of women positioned it in 6<sup>th</sup> place, for fathers and childless men it was 7<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> respectively. For some their partner saying 'I love you' appeared to symbolise the closeness of the couple relationship and provide reassurance of them, as an individual. For women, these three words and the continuing expression of desire and the appreciation of their physical attractiveness seemed highly prized.

*Says "I love you" often and tells me how beautiful I am even when I'm undressed!*

Simply saying 'I love you' was singled out by some, however, as not enough in and of itself; it was belief in the meaning and sincerity of these sentiments that was valued alongside demonstrations that 'proved' the integrity of these sentiments.

*Saying I love you and meaning it*

*Tells me she loves me and always puts me first*

Understanding and appreciating 'a look' as it passed between the couple, was identified as characterising both depth of feeling and intimate knowledge. These private repertoires of love appeared to be highly regarded and cherished. They

symbolised and fostered the intimate 'couple world' that is special, private and personally meaningful.

*His eyes are quite often so full of love*

*Having our own little traits that make me feel loved cause it's "our"  
little thing*

The answers included under the rubric of physical affection ranged from fleeting gestures to tender moments of intimacy. Although participants did sometimes distinguish between everyday routine interactions and those that were deeply meaningful encounters, this was not consistently done and so this dimension cannot be included in our analysis here. The temporal descriptions used to characterise affection are, however, noteworthy. Many of the answers either explicitly stated or implicitly implied that it was the regularity of intimate contact that was appreciated alongside the gesture itself.

*Greets me with a kiss every evening when I come in from work*

*He gives me a foot rub every evening*

There was marked congruence in the rankings of parents and those of childless participants. Both childless women and men equally appeared to highly appreciate physical affection, with the answers of male participants ranking it 2<sup>nd</sup> and those of female participants placing it in 3<sup>rd</sup> position. The answers of mothers and fathers placed it 6<sup>th</sup>. This suggests that parenthood diminishes either the need for couple affection, or more likely, the time and capacity to factor this in to busy family lives. The descriptions deployed included standard phrases such 'hugs and kisses'. These forms of 'affective shorthand' (Gabb, 2008) denote diverse forms of intimacy, expressed through private codes and shared understandings among those intimately involved. Notwithstanding the form they take, embodied interactions are thus perceived as deeply meaningful because of their import to the individual and/or couple.

Strokes my hair until I sleep

Rubs my back every night

Massage, of the feet and/or back, was mentioned by many participants under this category. These touching gestures appear to be taken as a sign of their partner's appreciation both because this practice was selflessly given and also because of the mutual pleasure and intimacy of the encounter. A tactile gesture can never be singular because when we touch something we are automatically touched back (Gabb, 2011).

Snuggles up to me in the night

Couples emotionally and symbolically connect through these reciprocal interactions. These embodied sensations of touch fold us back upon ourselves and produce a reflexive response, as partners are situated *in relation* to each other (Grosz, 1993, p. 45).

Where divergence appeared between participants was both in the priority afforded to, and the framing of, desire and sexual intimacy. Both childless men and fathers were the groups most inclined to identify sexual intimacy as a sign of appreciation; it was 13<sup>th</sup> in the ranked order of things identified in their answers. For childless women and mothers it rested 15<sup>th</sup> overall out of 25 items. For those participants who cited sexual intimacy, it was framed in various forms. For some it was openly described in erotic and sometimes playful terms, as one of the several ways that couples expressed their appreciation.

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

We occasionally meet with an escort, to help maintain an exciting and maybe risqué secret life. Very consenting and fully enjoyed by us both.

For others, especially women, it appeared to be the generosity and attentiveness of their partner during sex that was identified as something which made them feel appreciated.

Very selfless and considerate during sex



He is an incredibly generous lover

In contrast some answers provided by men were cast in more selfish terms. A partner was seen to show their appreciation by doing something for them and in several cases this was described in arguably denigrating terms.

Indulges my sex fantasies

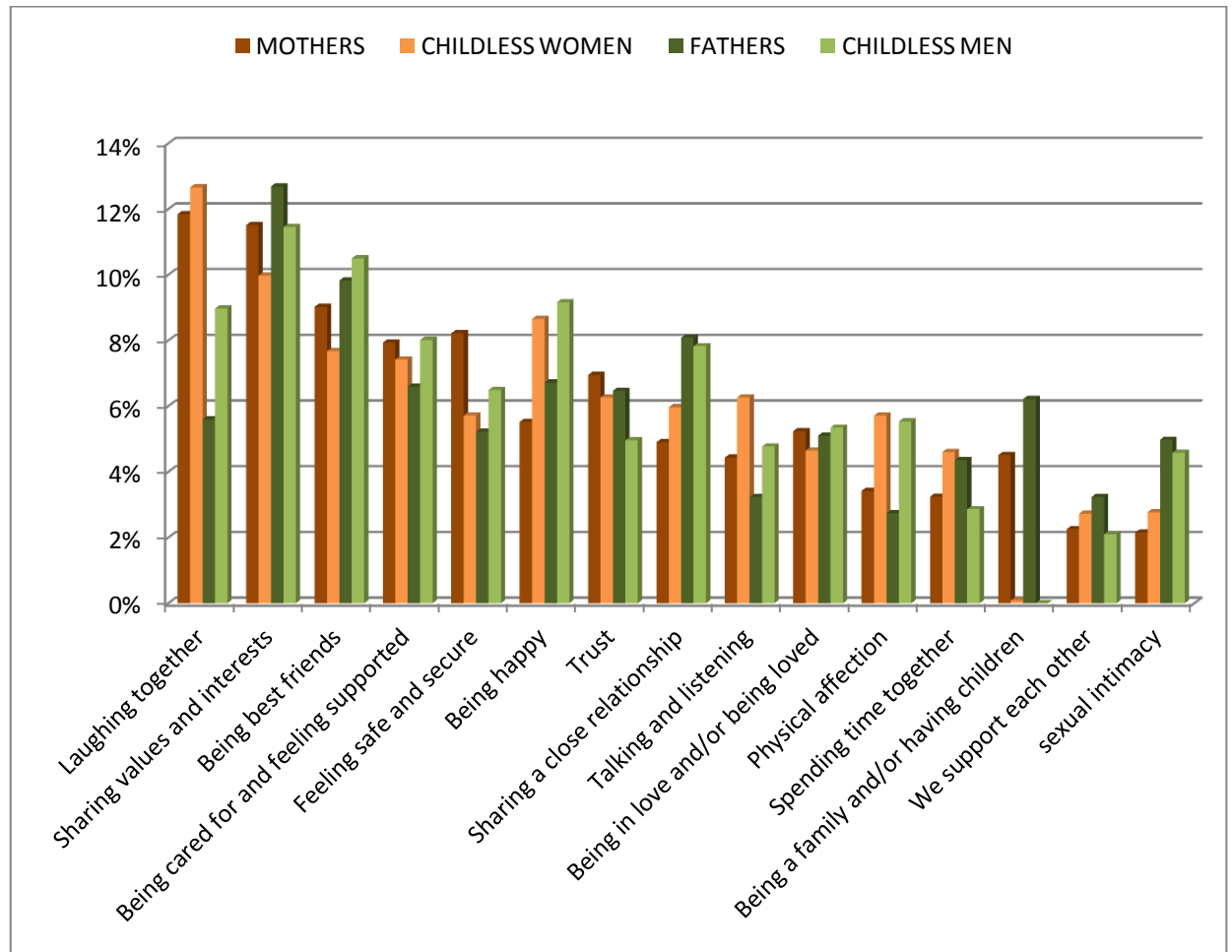
Has sex when she doesn't really want to

However, some degree of caution is again needed here. Forms of desire and different forms of sexual practice cannot be mapped simply onto men and women. This category of answers was not identified by many women and therefore we do not know how they would have described their sexual relations had they included them. Also, as discussed earlier, in sex survey research men appear to be more inclined to overstate their sexual activity and conquests where women typically downplay this dimension of their relationships. Thus a gendered ranking of sexual intimacy may actually tell us something about relationship perception but little about relationship practice. Furthermore, the answers and discussion advanced at this point do not differentiate between heterosexual, lesbian and gay sexual intimacy. As previously stated, what constitutes sex for these different cohorts may be widely divergent. In future analysis we will interrogate these dimensions in closer detail.

### **11.2 What do you like *best* and *least* in your relationship?**

In the open-ended questions, participants were also asked to identify 'two things that you like *best* in your relationship' and 'two things that you like *least*'. These were both posed as free-text questions and no multiple choice answers were available. Answers were coded using a 25 item quantitative coding sheet. As with the 'feeling appreciated' question, there was notable agreement among participants, with over 80% of all responses featuring in the top 15 categories.

Figures 14 and 15 (below) illustrate the top 15 answers provided to the 'likes' and 'dislikes' questions.



**Figure 14. 'Two things that you like best about your relationship' by gender and parental status.**

See Tables 19-21 in the Appendices for breakdown of statistical data

As with the responses about feeling appreciated, there were notable differences in the answers of women and men, and between parents and childless couples with regard to what is liked *best* and *least* in relationships.

### 11.2.1 Sharing and not sharing

The sharing of absolutely core principles and values

*We share the same values and attitudes, towards raising children in particular*

Issues of sharing featured very prominently in all participants' responses, with particular emphasis being placed on sharing values, a faith, beliefs, tastes, ambitions and interests with their partner. Men's answers rated this item in 1<sup>st</sup> place in the things they liked *best* about their relationship, while the responses of mothers and childless participants placed it 2<sup>nd</sup>. Answers illustrated that what sharing meant and how it was practiced by participants ranged from the most abstract to the most particular. They also suggested that the idea of holding ideas and thoughts in common was very much a key *connector* in the participant's relationship with their partner as was the capacity to share the everyday often mundane experiences of life.

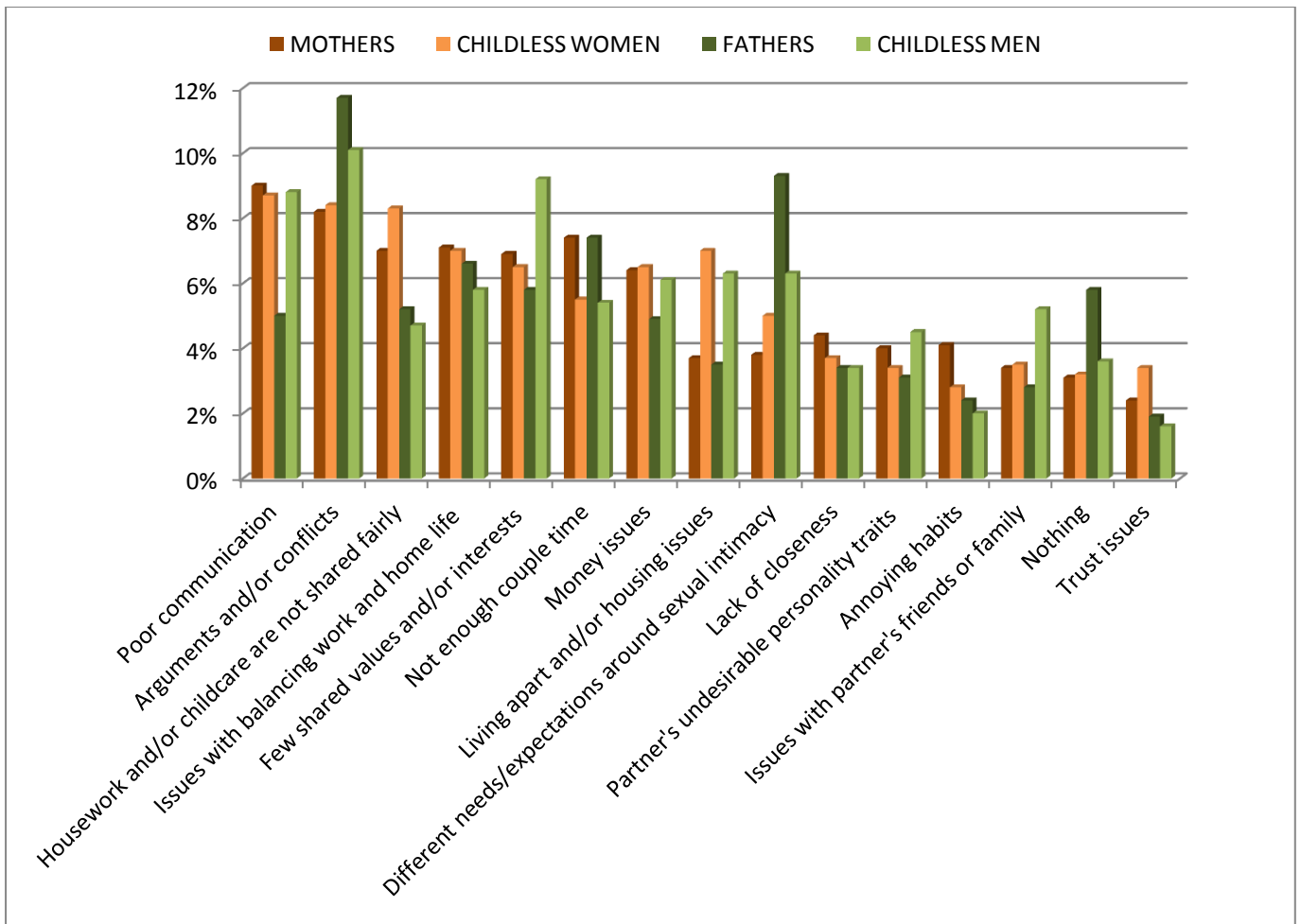
*We have a shared vision of the world*

*We share our love of food, interest in cooking*

As Figure 15 (below) indicates, however, sharing few values and interests was not ranked as highly in what participants *least* liked, with the answers suggested by women and men ranking it 5<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>th</sup> respectively. Despite this, some participants' responses indicated regret about the absence of shared experiences in their relationship, which was expressed as a yearning for a closer connection to their partner or a return to a closeness they had had, together, in the past.

*We don't share similar interests the way we used to*

*I wish we had more common interests*



**Figure 15. Two things you like least about your relationship by gender and parental status. See Tables 22-24 in the Appendices for breakdown of statistical data**

At other times, there was a sense of more fundamental difficulties in the sharing of values and attitudes. The lack of a shared faith or different political views was cited in answers as examples where participants struggled to accommodate a partner’s beliefs and values. Different class backgrounds were similarly used to explain what appeared to be the absence of a shared approach to employment and life aspirations more generally.

*We almost come from two different classes - while I want to get a university education and a well-paying job, my partner just wants to work in an easy, unskilled job*

There appear to be few gender differences in these responses about the expectations and practices of sharing (or not) core beliefs, suggesting that these were viewed in very similar ways by women and men. But, looking more closely at the absence–presence of children in the participants' relationships, there was a marked difference in the answers by childless men. Their answers ranked having few shared interests and values as the 2nd *least* liked aspect of their relationship compared to childless women and mothers whose responses placed it in 6<sup>th</sup> position and those of fathers where it was placed 5<sup>th</sup>.

The importance participants placed on sharing extended, however, far beyond the expression of values and interests. Answers revealed how shared time was valued and also how the sharing of experiences, such as hobbies and activities, added a particularly enjoyable dimension to the relationship.

*We make time to do nice things together that we both enjoy*

*Spending time together and sharing those experiences*

More especially the difficulties of finding shared time as a couple featured in issues raised by participants around balancing work and home life; an answer which ranked 4<sup>th</sup> for women and 6<sup>th</sup> for men in the *least* liked things of their relationship. This confirms much of the research into the pressures faced by couples in juggling their respective commitments (Gambles et al., 2006).

*My partner's job, as he does many hours and he's continuously there either in mind or body*

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

Money also featured as one of the reasons why participants were unable to share as much time together as they would like and, in turn, share space too. Living apart was not typically perceived as either a choice or a long-term scenario. It featured in the top 15 items identified by all participants, being especially disliked

by childless women and men who placed it in 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> place. Conversely, in the open question on things that make you feel appreciated, the arrival 'home' after time spent apart was often framed as an intimate moment that was highly cherished; reunions were longed for. It is estimated that around 4 million people in Britain live apart from their partner (Roseneil, 2006) and participants in the *Enduring Love?* study acknowledged and valued the time and effort they each invested in the relationship to maintain a sense of closeness while being apart. For many, physical and emotional proximity was a relationship goal; this finding supports living apart together (LAT) research which points to the prevalence of temporariness and transition in some LAT couples' perception of their separate living arrangements (Simon Duncan & Phillips, 2010).

For financial reasons we both live with our respective families, which means it can be difficult to be on our own to talk, cuddle and relax with each other

We do not live together due to financial and logistical circumstances so we do not spend enough time together

However, while time spent apart was perceived as an issue, the value of personal space and 'time out' emerged as a distinct feature in many women's responses, featuring in what they both liked *least* and *best* about their relationships. The possible tensions within relationships when one partner needed to claim some personal time and space were regularly included in answers.

Sometimes I want to be alone and he wants togetherness

Having time away from one's partner was valued and appreciated by men and women alike because this generated a sense of independence and agency as well as opportunities to pursue personal interests and spend time with friends alone.

That we can do our own things without hassle

We are not in each other's pockets

The balance of sharing time together with opportunities to share some time apart was, therefore, valued by all participants although parenthood does appear to be a significant factor here in ratings. It is perhaps not surprising, for example, that the answers of both mothers and fathers ranked not having enough couple time 3<sup>rd</sup> in their *least* liked issues compared to the answers of childless women and men who both positioned it in 8<sup>th</sup> place. However, regardless of parenting status and gender, women and men alike rate spending time together equally highly in 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> place respectively.

More broadly the ways in which couples share time through past experiences and imagined futures was also illustrated in participants' comments about what they liked *best* about their relationships.

#### Shared history and commitment to a shared future

##### *We have shared wonderful memories*

Through examples such as these, participants identified how shared time, in the past, present and the future, was not only a *connector* in their relationship but also an emotionally meaningful dimension of their relationship experience as a whole. Further analysis will allow us to explore the extent to which relationship longevity reinforces time as a *connector* or whether the power of shared time is such that couples rate its significance independently of relationship duration.

Alongside these comments about sharing time were other responses about the ways in which the more mundane aspects of everyday life are shared by couples, especially around who takes responsibility for which aspect of maintaining the home and family life. In this context, a clear emphasis on an unequal sharing of tasks emerged.

#### Lack of shared responsibility for children and chores

Unequal share of housework and children stuff - no matter how many hints I drop

As suggested by these examples, and as discussed in the section above on what makes a partner feel appreciated, it is difficult to tease apart household chores from childcare. Nevertheless both mothers' and childless women's responses identified unfair sharing of housework and/or childcare responsibilities as the 5<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> *least* liked dimension of their relationship. However for fathers and childless men it ranked in only 7<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> place respectively, arguably suggesting awareness that unequal responsibilities in the home can create difficulties for the quality of relationships. This is further reinforced amongst the many references in women's responses to what they liked *best* about their relationship, in which they acknowledged and valued their partners' contributions to both household chores and childcare.

He shares the housework

Partner is a good father and helps me a lot with parenting

### 11.2.2 Pleasures and frustrations

The pleasures associated with being in a relationship scored very highly in the survey, with respondents making frequent comments about the different ways in which they enjoy their time together.

We have so much fun together

Enjoying many of the same things and therefore being able to share many different experiences together

This idea of pleasure and enjoyment is coded as 'being happy' and in men's answers this ranked higher than for women's (4<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> respectively). The idea of pleasure and enjoyment was reinforced further by women whose answers ranked 'laughing together' in 1<sup>st</sup> place in the *best* liked items of their relationship with their partner.

We laugh a lot and bring out the best in each other

We laugh at ourselves and each other



Here both mothers and childless women appreciated the ways in which they could have a 'good laugh' with their partner and how this often alleviated the everyday strains and difficulties of their life. Having a good laugh may also be seen as a sign of being close. Although men's responses ranked 'laughing together' in 6th place in their list of what they liked *best* about their relationship, it is worth noting that only 6% of fathers compared to 9% of childless men answered in this way.

Issues of physical affection and sexual intimacy were also significant features within this cluster on pleasures and frustrations. References to hugs, kisses and physical closeness were categorised specifically as physical affection. All participants rated this relatively highly; for childless men however it ranked significantly high, in 8<sup>th</sup> place. Sexual intimacy was similarly positioned although there was more congruence between the answers of women and women, parents and childless participants. Combining these responses with those to the previous question, on what makes you feel appreciated, does however suggest that responses were characterised by the combination of gender and parenthood. Childless men and women were about 50% more likely than parents to perceive physical affection as a sign of appreciation. For sexual intimacy the responses reinforced traditional gendered differences with men (childless and fathers) being almost three times more likely than women (childless and mothers) to mention sexual intimacy as something which makes them feel appreciated. Notwithstanding these differences, overall, the framing of responses typically testified to the importance of sexual intimacy in the relationship and the sharing of enjoyment in physical affection and sex.

*I love having sex and cuddling with my partner*

*The intimacy, passion and sex*

Gender differences around sexual intimacy were more marked in what men and women liked *least* about their relationship, with men's responses ranking the different needs/expectations around sexual intimacy in 2<sup>nd</sup> place and those of

women placing it 9<sup>th</sup>. It should not be assumed, however, that these differently gendered expectations can be easily mapped onto cultural stereotypes about women wanting less sex than their partners and men wanting more. Some answers from women suggest this but others show a more complicated picture of women's feelings of loss when their sexual desires could not be fulfilled within the relationship.

*Lack of sex - not feeling like the centre of his universe*

*I'd like to have sex with him more frequently*

Mothers also showed an awareness of the impact of having children on their sex lives.

*We don't have sex very often (small children) and we don't talk about this*

*Our sex life is not great since having children*

And the examples above may indicate some of the reasons why the responses of fathers rated highly the different needs/expectations around sexual intimacy. Their answers positioned it 2<sup>nd</sup> in their *least* liked list compared to childless men whose answers ranked it lower, in 5<sup>th</sup> place.

While sexual intimacy can be traced in both the pleasures and frustrations of couple relationships other issues appeared, not surprisingly, only as irritations and annoyances. The subject of annoying habits was one of the most dominant in this cluster and included a range of behaviours from eating noisily, driving too slowly, not locking doors and windows, not recycling, as well as:

*Sharing a bed - he snores!*

*Profligacy with heating and lighting*

*Biting his nails*

The answers given by men rated their partner's annoying habits at 14<sup>th</sup> in their *least* liked items while women ranked it 12<sup>th</sup>. However in the responses there is

an equal recognition amongst both women and men that such habits can become more problematic the longer the relationship lasts.

*Long term relationships are difficult! We find each other annoying*

*Over time one develops strategies to stop the little things becoming annoying ... or just ignores them!*

Similarly, both women and men mention annoyance at their partner's personal traits with laziness, insecurity, moodiness, unpunctuality, impatience, forgetfulness and procrastination being listed most often. Negotiating, acknowledging and finding a way to manage the often delicate issues of a partner's annoying habits and traits interestingly illustrate, therefore, a dimension of the 'relationship work' that couples do and one that might easily be lost when the mundane details of everyday life are not the sustained focus of study.

### **11.2.3 Communicating – and not**

Brought together in this section are a number of issues around communication to which participants provided responses; to these could also be added the experience of 'laughing together'. As the discussion above illustrated, laughter was an indicator of effective couple communication and, more especially, an appreciated form of engaging with each other. Other forms of communication that featured strongly were talking and listening. Participants' responses to the question about what was *best* liked in their relationship point to the pleasure, reassurance and comfort that having someone to talk to can bring.

*I love talking to my wife and getting her insight*

*Talking to each other, hearing each other's news, sharing worries*

This dynamic of communication was valued by childless women featuring 7<sup>th</sup> in their list of *best* liked issues. Men's responses, however, ranked it lower. Fathers featured as different from all other groups of participants, with their responses rating talking and listening in 13<sup>th</sup> place.

Gender differences appear even larger in the rating of poor communication in the *least* liked aspects of relationships, with women's responses ranking it 1st overall and those of men placing it 4<sup>th</sup>. Women, for example, experienced their partners' unwillingness and/or inability to express their feelings as particularly significant for the emotional dynamics of their relationship. However the issue of empathy – acknowledging how the *other* was feeling – was important for both women and men, with participants being critical when it was absent in the relationship and appreciative of its presence.

Again, however, the factoring of children into the rankings equation reveals some interesting differences and unsettles further the seeming gender differences in communication dynamics in couple relationships. The answers of childless men rated poor communication highly in their list of *least* likes (placing it in 3rd position), while fathers' answers rated it much lower in 8<sup>th</sup> place. There are clearly additional issues to be explored in how communication, poor and otherwise, is understood by fathers and, arguably, the extent to which it is linked by them into the issue of different needs/expectations around sexual intimacy. This item, as noted above, was rated in 2<sup>nd</sup> place in fathers' list of *least* likes and was perhaps understood by them as a different signifier of poor communication than it was for other groups of participants.

Poor communication also features around the issue of money in participants' responses. This was particularly prevalent in answers framed around the anxieties and difficulties generated by not knowing about a partner's financial situation and/or difficulties of managing the household finances.

*His reluctance to talk about money*

*Communication about finances - husband is secretive about money and I find it frustrating*

Moreover it seems that some men continue to have control over the financial management of the household and how this is communicated, despite the major

changes in women's employment and the decline of the male breadwinner model of family life (Lewis, 2001). This is illustrated in the details that some women provided to the open question about what they liked *least* about their relationship.

Having to ask before making a big purchase

He is tight with money!

Other examples of poor communication were indicated in participants' responses about arguments and conflict. Both fathers and childless men's answers identified 'Arguments and/or conflict' as the thing which they liked *least* in their relationship and it was ranked 2<sup>nd</sup> in women's responses. The range of issues that men included in their responses ranged from 'nit-picking and bickering', disagreements over minor issues to major disputes.

Her utter inability to stack the dishwasher

We often have problems resolving conflicts/ending fights

And women's accounts were similarly diverse; however in contrast to those of men, these answers also often acknowledged a shared responsibility for this perceived negative dimension of the relationship.

Bad tempers (both of us)

We argue too easily and it always gets blown up out of proportion as a result of not listening to each other

Many such answers suggested awareness amongst participants of how this *least* liked aspect of the relationship could be addressed if not entirely resolved. Yet differences in each other's views, attitudes and opinions, and the disagreements that they generated, were also understood as a potentially positive feature by some participants in that they could strengthen a relationship and a couple's capacity to communicate. Some of the most difficult 'relationship work' that couples thus did appears to be at the intersections of poor communication, arguments and conflict.

Because we grapple with our disagreements, we make sense of the world and we both make compromises - at times struggle is part of a good relationship

Different communication styles, but we both work hard at it

#### 11.2.4 Relating to each other

The ways in which participants described their partner, in the context of responding to what they liked *best* about their relationship, was wide-ranging. Responses included being 'my best friend', 'good company' and 'my soul mate'. This relationship was akin to 'being a team', providing support and 'having each other's back'. Companionship and friendship featured very strongly and the idea of being 'best friends' with your partner was ranked very highly amongst all women and men, although men's answers rated it slightly higher than women's (2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> respectively). Friendship was used to signify an emotional closeness which enabled participants not only to share concerns and discuss problems but also receive support, advice and understanding.

My husband is my best friend, I can tell him anything

Having a friend who knows me inside out. Having a friend to share things with

Friendship connoted a sense of togetherness and 'being there' for each other (McCarthy, 2012), hence the importance placed on ideas of respect, encouragement and kindness as particularly valued features of relationships between partners. An understanding that friendship between couples could provide a safe arena in which personal traits and shortcomings were not adversely judged also ran through responses. Participants' cherished and rated highly the capacity to be themselves in the relationship.

I can be myself with him

I like that he never makes me feel less than who I am

Everyday notions of friendship generally understand it to be a non-sexual relationship and that sexual relationships have a different basis from friendship (Jamieson 1998). Responses in our survey suggest, however, that this categorical distinction may not readily hold for contemporary couples as sex and friendship were regularly intertwined in participants' descriptions of what they liked *best* in their relationship.

### *We are best friends as well as lovers*

#### Friendship and intimacy

It is also possible that this particular constitution of friendship may go some way to explain the relatively low rankings afforded to sexual intimacy, discussed above, by mothers and childless women. In future analysis, we will focus upon these issues in much closer detail.

There are few gendered differences to be identified around the issue of friendship and the absence–presence of children does not emerge as having a potential effect. The responses of childless women ranked being 'best friends' with their partner as 4<sup>th</sup> in their list of *best* liked issues compared to the answers of childless men and fathers which rated it 2<sup>nd</sup>. This trend is supported by men's higher ranking of 'sharing a close relationship' with their partner compared to women (3<sup>rd</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> respectively). As previously mentioned, it is possible that women are better able to establish good friendship networks outside the couple relationship than men, and so they are therefore less inclined to look inside their couple relationship for such relationship qualities. However further analysis, particularly into the significance of demographic characteristics, is needed before this difference can be systematically compared.

A second strand that featured highly in participants' answers on their partner and relationship qualities was that of trust, which closely followed friendship in the rankings of what participants liked *best*. Mothers, childless women and fathers rated this more highly than childless men, with their responses all ranking it in 6<sup>th</sup> place while for childless men it was ranked 10<sup>th</sup>. Trust, like friendship, was used

to embrace a number of practices, feelings and emotions, which enabled participants to describe the security and support experienced in their relationship.

The mutual trust and respect that we have for each other

I love the intimacy and trust we have built

Issues of infidelity were also woven into answers about trust, occasionally through an explicit reference but predominantly through phrasing which implied that participants were using the idea of trust to convey a belief that their partner would not to be unfaithful.

Knowing that I can always trust my partner

Completely trusting someone and sharing our lives together

There were many similarities in all participants' answers that invoked ideas of trust. Descriptions focused on feeling cared for and supported through 'tough times' and more generally in everyday life. Participants valued the different emotional, physical and practical dimensions which these forms of care and support manifest. What these answers indicated are the ways that participants appreciated what a partner does to provide a 'safe haven' from which the trials, pressures and temptations of the wider world could be kept at bay. 'Feeling safe and secure' was of particular importance in mothers' answers, where it was placed it more highly than in those of other participants. The explanation for this might lie in our sample, wherein fathers were more likely to financially support their partners than childless men and women. Feeling safe and secure, therefore, might be an expression by mothers of an appreciation of this support in times of child rearing and financial vulnerability.

It is perhaps predictable, then, that an absence of this sense of security was located under a 'lack of closeness' in what participants liked *least* about their relationship. Here answers illustrated the uncertainties which many participants experienced in their couple relationships when there was little trust, where care and support was lacking and when one partner felt over-burdened or unhappy by



the demands upon them. Nevertheless this lack of closeness did not feature highly in the ranking of *least* liked items, with women's answers rating it in 10<sup>th</sup> position and men's rating it 13<sup>th</sup>. This arguably indicates that other issues – such as arguments – were experienced as much more problematic for the ways in which partners relate to one another.

The final strand in participants' responses about how they related to their partner clustered together around ideas and understandings of love. Expressions of love were slippery in their meanings while their practices were predominantly focused on regularly saying 'I love you' to each other. However when such practices disappeared from a relationship, participants struggled to understand and accommodate the change.

*We don't express our love to each other anymore, it feels weird*

The feeling of being loved was much more clearly articulated in answers and suggested its very positive impact upon a participant's sense of self.

*I feel loved for exactly who I am*

*Nice to have someone who loves you. She makes me feel worthwhile*

Alongside the personal dimension of being loved as an individual, responses also indicated the shared dynamics of love and the ways in which these were interwoven with other practices and feelings as testimony of the depth and breadth of the participants' relationship with their partner.

*We love and support each other in all aspects of life*

*We love and respect each other equally*

Yet 'Being in love and/or being loved' was not highly rated in what participants liked *best* about their relationship, with the answers of women and men placing it only 10<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> on the ranking list. But, as with other issues coded in the survey there are interesting differences around gender and the absence–presence of children to be pulled out from these rankings. Mothers' responses positioned love

most highly (ranking it 8<sup>th</sup>), but they also often made connections in their responses between their children and the feelings of love they shared with their partner.

Love and our little boy

We love our children

For childless women and men, love was needless to say described through quite different terms of reference and its significance was also afforded a different value. The responses of childless women rated Being in love and/or being loved 11<sup>th</sup> in what they liked *best* about their relationship. This raises questions about how love might be differently experienced by our groups of participants and the extent to these are embedded in and articulated through discourses of love, romance and coupledness, and the experience of couple or family relationships more generally.

## 12. Concluding Remarks

### Romance is Dead. Long Live Relationships!

Couple relationships in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are undoubtedly characterised by and indeed drive the increasingly fluid forms, experience and expectations of long-term personal and sexual commitments. The boundaries around meanings of friendship and the experience and expressions of love seem to be malleable. However, our survey findings do not indicate that couples perceive their relationships as time-limited but rather that they continue to be cherished and nurtured by women and men. Long-term relationships appear to endure through a blend of practical and emotional labour. Domestic roles and responsibilities rest alongside a sense of being in this together, for the long haul or however long the relationship sustains. There is, then, an acknowledgement and valuing of the everyday mundanities and heartfelt emotions that go into 'relationship work' and that are required to make a relationship work.

Much has 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’. That is to say, 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 these same stressors can actually serve to consolidate the relationship. Pulling together and being there for each other through such difficulties and heartache were identified by female and male participants alike as some of the things which made their relationships stronger. There are evident differences in the gendered ‘relationship work’ that women and men do to stay together, through the extraordinary and ordinary ups and downs of life. In the qualitative study we will be able to hone in on how these factors feature in and shape relationship experience; to focus on the ways in which biography, identity and circumstance are incorporated into the couple relationship narrative, how age and generation impact on couple experience and what lies behind the shifts in relationship satisfaction which appear to ebb and flow across the life course.

Survey findings clearly point to significant differences in the lives of parents and childless women and men. Other factors, such as religious belief or sexuality, do not appear to inform relationship practice *per se*. 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. In the qualitative study we are exploring how living with and without children shapes the everyday couple relationship experience of women and men.

Survey findings also indicate that good communication is crucial in sustaining a long-term relationship. In-depth conversations and casual chats were equally valued as a way of both divesting stresses and strains routinely encountered and

consolidating a sense of closeness through disclosing intimacies and deep knowing. Shared histories and embeddedness were not, however, reliant on couple dependency. Responses from survey participants show that interdependency and independence were also highly valued. It was instead the time and mutuality of talking and listening that were appreciated, a means through which couples came to understand, reassure and comfort each other. The methods deployed in the qualitative research will allow us to interrogate couples' wide ranging communication repertoires. The rich palette of qualitative methods is enabling us to draw upon a broad spectrum of research senses, encouraging opportunities to listen and hear, to look and see. This is crucial in the study of relationship experience because communication is not always verbalised; as the survey data indicate it is often 'a look', 'shared understanding' or 'chemistry' which are important.

The intangibility of feelings and the ways that love and intimacy are experienced, understood and deployed in couple relationships is something which emerges strongly through the survey data. Sexual intimacy was typically embedded within emotional dimensions of the relationship rather than seen as a simply physical encounter, *sex per se*. Here gendered divisions clearly emerge, cutting across parenthood: the in/significance of sex remains contested. This does not suggest that women did not value sex and/or that they were any less inclined to seek sexual pleasure. However survey findings indicate that there are significant differences between women and men around sexual frequency and the importance afforded to sex. Closer analysis of the survey data alongside the in-depth insights afforded through the qualitative research, will allow us to explore love and sexual intimacy in more detail, including how factors such as gender, age, sexual orientation, and religion inform perception and lived experience.

Love remains a slippery concept. In the survey data it was readily invoked, but its articulation and meanings are hard to pin down. The act of saying 'I love you' was identified as important by women and men alike, however a loving gesture appeared to be far more highly valued. Thoughtful gifts and generous acts of

kindness were framed as expressions of love. They were not dependent on money and appeared independent of external significant dates (such as a birthday or Valentine's Day). It was what the gift signified which was important, that is to say, the selflessness of the gesture and/or the touching and intimate knowledge that it demonstrated. Romantic gestures, such as grand bouquets of flowers and boxes of chocolates, were seen as less important than the thoughtfulness behind the gesture. A rose picked from the garden was more treasured than a delivery from Interflora. The smallest of acts, such as being brought a daily 'cup of tea', spoke volumes. Innovative and combined qualitative methods will enable us to dig deeper into these everyday experiences; to interrogate the minutiae and mundanities that often go unseen in the lives and loves of enduring couple relationships.

## 13. Appendices

**Table 1. Composition of sample**

		%	Numbers
Gender	Male	19.0	856
	Female	80.4	3613
	Other/missing	0.6	25
Sexual orientation	Heterosexual	86.5	3886
	Gay/Lesbian	6.0	268
	Bisexual	5.5	246
	Other/not disclosed	2.0	94
Relationship status	Married	59.7	2685
	Civil Partnership	2.8	124
	Living together	24.3	1090
	Living Apart Together (LAT)	11.1	501
	Going out with someone	1.6	70
	Other/not disclosed	0.5	24
Age	16-24; 25-34 years (younger)	36.1	1621
	35-44; 45-54 years (middle)	44.6	2004
	55-64; 65+years (older)	19.1	858
	Not disclosed	0.2	11
Educational qualifications	A' Levels, voc. quals and below	26.7	1199
	UG, PG and prof. quals	70.6	3174
	Other/not disclosed	2.7	121
Religion	Religion: Yes	44.3	1991
	Religion: No	50.3	2259
	Other/not disclosed	5.4	244
Children	Parents (children living with/left home)	60.4	2715
	Childless	37.8	1696
	Not disclosed	1.8	83
Ethnicity	White	91.1	4095
	BME/mixed-race	5.7	253
	Not disclosed	3.2	146
TOTAL		100	4494

## Tables 2-5: Relationship Satisfaction and Happiness measures

**Table 2. Relationship Quality**

Cronbach's Alpha = .83 UK only: Mean = 4.09, SD = 0.64 UK only: Minimum = 1, Maximum = 5
1. We enjoy each other's company
2. Our relationship is mainly about practicalities such as domestic chores and money (REVERSED)
3. We are both equally affectionate
4. I am totally committed to making this relationship work
5. This is the relationship I always dreamed of
6. We have shared values
7. Sex is an important part of our relationship
8. I am content in our relationship

**Table 3. Relationship with Partner**

Cronbach's Alpha = .79 UK only: Mean = 3.92, SD = 0.71 UK only: Min = 1, Max = 5
My partner is usually aware of my needs
My partner makes me laugh
I think of my partner as my soul mate
I sometimes feel lonely even when I am with my partner (REVERSED)
Being with my partner broadens my horizons
We have grown apart over time (REVERSED)

**Table 4. Relationship Maintenance**

Cronbach's Alpha = .75 UK only: Mean = 3.97, SD = 0.68 UK only: Min = 1, Max = 5
We make time to be together, on our own
We say 'I love you' to each other
We are there for each other
We talk to each other about everything
We pursue shared interests

**Table 5. Happiness Measures**

1. Happiness with life overall
i. UK only: Mean = 4.08, SD = 0.80
ii. UK only: Min = 1, Max = 5
a. How happy are you with your life overall?
2. Relationship Satisfaction (Cronbach's Alpha = .95):
i. UK only: Mean = 4.34, SD = 0.83
ii. UK only: Min = 1, Max = 5
b. How happy are you with your relationship overall?
c. How happy are you with your partner overall?

### Tables 6-13: Means and Standard Deviations for five relationship measures

**Table 6. Means and Standard Deviations for all five relationship measures by religion/no religion**

Measures	No Religion		Religion	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Relationship Quality	4.10	0.63	4.08	0.64
Relationship with Partner	3.94	0.68	3.92	0.73
Relationship Maintenance	3.99	0.64	3.94	0.71
Happiness with Relationship/partner	4.36	0.80	4.33	0.85
Happiness with Life	4.04	0.78	4.13	0.79

**Table 7. Means and Standard Deviations for five relationship measures by educational qualifications**

Measures	A levels and below		Vocational/ Prof quals		UG degree		PG degree	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Relationship Quality	4.09	0.66	4.07	0.67	4.09	0.62	4.11	0.61
Relationship with Partner	3.95	0.75	3.92	0.73	3.92	0.69	3.91	0.67
Relationship Maintenance	3.98	0.72	3.94	0.72	3.97	0.66	3.97	0.64
Happiness with relationship/partner	4.31	0.89	4.33	0.88	4.35	0.79	4.35	0.78
Happiness with Life	4.03	0.87	4.09	0.80	4.09	0.77	4.10	0.76

**Table 8. Means and Standard Deviations for five relationship measures by previous long-term relationships**

Measures	Yes		No	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Relationship Quality	4.10	0.63	4.07	0.64
Relationship with Partner	3.94	0.70	3.91	0.71
Relationship Maintenance	3.99	0.67	3.93	0.69
Happiness with Relationship/partner	4.33	0.82	4.34	0.84
Happiness with Life	4.06	0.80	4.09	0.80

**Table 9. Means and Standard Deviations for all five relationship measures by sexual orientation**

Measures	Heterosexual		Non-Heterosexual	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Relationship Quality	4.08	0.64	4.22	0.55
Relationship with Partner	3.91	0.72	4.05	0.61
Relationship Maintenance	3.94	0.69	4.16	0.52
Happiness with Relationship/partner	4.32	0.84	4.48	0.68
Happiness with Life	4.07	0.81	4.09	0.74



**Table 10. Means and Standard Deviations for all five relationship measures by relationship status**

Measures	Unmarried		Married or Civil Partnership	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Relationship Quality	4.13	0.61	4.07	0.65
Relationship with Partner	3.98	0.67	3.89	0.73
Relationship Maintenance	4.05	0.64	3.92	0.70
Happiness with Relationship/partner	4.31	0.82	4.35	0.84
Happiness with Life	3.98	0.80	4.13	0.80

**Table 11. Means and Standard Deviations for all five relationship measures by relationship and parenting status**

Measures		Unmarried		Married/Civil Partnership	
		Children: No	Children: Yes	Children: No	Children: Yes
Relationship Quality	M	4.19	4.01	4.25	4.01
	SD	0.55	0.70	0.53	0.67
Relationship with Partner	M	4.04	3.85	4.13	3.83
	SD	0.61	0.76	0.59	0.74
Relationship Maintenance	M	4.16	3.85	4.22	3.83
	SD	0.57	0.72	0.55	0.71
Happiness with Relationship/Partner	M	4.40	4.14	4.54	4.29
	SD	0.71	0.96	0.70	0.86
Happiness with Life	M	3.98	3.98	4.13	4.14
	SD	0.79	0.81	0.82	0.79

**Table 12. Means and Standard Deviations for all five relationship measures by gender and parenting status**

	Childless women		Mothers		Childless Men		Fathers	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Relationship Quality	4.22	0.54	4.01	0.68	4.20	0.53	4.03	0.67
Relationship with Partner	4.08	0.61	3.82	0.75	4.06	0.60	3.89	0.73
Relationship Maintenance	4.19	0.56	3.83	0.71	4.16	0.52	3.84	0.71
Happiness with relationship/partner	4.45	0.72	4.24	0.89	4.47	0.66	4.36	0.82
Happiness with Life	4.03	0.79	4.12	0.79	4.05	0.77	4.04	0.81

**Table 13. Means and Standard Deviations for all five relationship measures by gender and age**

Age	Women						Men					
	16-34		35-55		55+		16-34		35-55		55+	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Relationship Quality	4.19	0.58	4.03	0.69	4.02	0.60	4.16	0.62	4.04	0.63	4.11	0.61
Relationship with Partner	4.03	0.65	3.85	0.77	3.85	0.66	4.00	0.67	3.90	0.71	4.00	0.65
Relationship Maintenance	4.13	0.61	3.85	0.72	3.89	0.68	4.09	0.62	3.85	0.68	4.01	0.63
Happiness with relationship/partner	4.40	0.75	4.26	0.93	4.31	0.78	4.41	0.78	4.33	0.79	4.51	0.73
Happiness with life	4.05	0.76	4.07	0.83	4.19	0.74	4.02	0.83	3.92	0.83	4.23	0.79

**Table 14. 'Who is the most important person in your life?' Gender and parenthood by age of youngest child**

	Child under 5 Years %	Child 5-9 Years old %	Child 10-17 Years old %	Child aged 18 and over %
Mothers selecting Child/ren	74.80	78.00	64.40	39.90
Fathers selecting Child/ren	59.10	46.80	34.60	9.10
Mothers selecting Partner	20.90	19.40	30.40	54.90
Fathers selecting Partner	38.20	51.60	56.80	89.10

## Tables 15-18: Things that make you feel appreciated

**Table 15. Identify two things that your partner does for you that makes you feel appreciated. All participants (UK)**

	Women % & rank		Mothers % & rank		Childless Women % & rank		Men % & rank		Fathers % & rank		Childless Men % & rank	
	%	rank	%	rank	%	rank	%	rank	%	rank	%	rank
Says thank you and/or gives me compliments	13.7	1	14.3	1	12.7	1	11.1	1	10.5	1	12	1
Gives me cards, gift, flowers etc.	8.5	2	9	3	7.7	6	6.4	8	6	9	6.8	8
Does/shares the household chores and/or childcare	8	3	9.6	2	5.7	9	4.5	10	6.1	8	2.1	14
Talks with me and listens to me	7.8	4	6.5	5	9.9	2	7.8	5	7.5	5	8.1	4
Is physically affectionate	7.7	5	6.5	6	9.4	3	7.7	6	7.3	6	9.9	2
Says and/or shows s/he loves me	7.3	6	6.6	7	8.2	5	7.7	7	7.3	7	7	6
Cooks some/all of our meals	7.3	7	6.2	8	8.4	4	8.1	4	9.4	3	6.2	9
Makes kind and thoughtful gestures	6.4	8	5.6	9	7.7	7	6.3	9	5.7	10	7	7
Makes me tea/coffee and/or breakfast in bed	6.2	9	7.4	4	4.3	11	1.2	15	1.3	15	1	15
Supports and looks after me	5.7	10	5.4	10	6.1	8	9.1	2	9.9	2	7.9	5
Is always there for me	4.2	11	3.8	11	4.8	10	8.5	3	7.9	4	9.5	3
Values me and respects my opinions	3	12	3.2	12	2.7	12	3.8	11	4.1	11	3.1	12
Makes time to be together, as a couple	2.1	13	1.7	14	2.6	13	2.6	13	1.6	14	3.5	10
Supports my personal interests/career	2.1	14	2.5	13	1.4	14	3.4	12	3.4	12	3.3	11
Sexual intimacy	0.7	15	0.7	15	0.8	15	2.6	14	2.4	13	2.9	13
Others (see Table 18, below)	9.3		11		7.6		9.2		9.6		9.7	

**Table 16. Identify two things that your partner does for you that makes you feel appreciated. All Women, Mothers and Childless Women (UK)**

	All Women % & rank		Mothers % & rank		Childless Women % & rank	
	%	rank	%	rank	%	rank
Says thank you and/or gives me compliments	13.7	1	14.3	1	12.7	1
Gives me cards, gift, flowers etc.	8.5	2	9	3	7.7	6
Does/shares the household chores and/or childcare	8	3	9.6	2	5.7	9
Talks with me and listens to me	7.8	4	6.5	5	9.9	2
Is physically affectionate	7.7	5	6.5	6	9.4	3
Says and/or shows s/he loves me	7.3	6	6.6	7	8.2	5
Cooks some/all of our meals	7.3	7	6.2	8	8.4	4
Makes kind and thoughtful gestures	6.4	8	5.6	9	7.7	7
Makes me tea/coffee and/or breakfast in bed	6.2	9	7.4	4	4.3	11
Supports and looks after me	5.7	10	5.4	10	6.1	8
Is always there for me	4.2	11	3.8	11	4.8	10
Values me and respects my opinions	3	12	3.2	12	2.7	12
Makes time to be together, as a couple	2.1	13	1.7	14	2.6	13
Supports my personal interests/career	2.1	14	2.5	13	1.4	14
Sexual intimacy	0.7	15	0.7	15	0.8	15
Others (see Table 18, below)	9.3		11		7.6	

**Table 17. Identify two things that your partner does for you that makes you feel appreciated. All Men, Fathers and Childless Men (UK)**

	Men % & rank		Fathers % & rank		Childless Men % & rank	
Says thank you and/or gives me compliments	11.1	1	10.5	1	12	1
Supports and looks after me	9.1	2	9.9	2	7.9	5
Is always there for me	8.5	3	7.9	4	9.5	3
Cooks some/all of our meals	8.1	4	9.4	3	6.2	9
Talks with me and listens to me	7.8	5	7.5	5	8.1	4
Is physically affectionate	7.7	6	7.3	6	9.9	2
Says and/or shows s/he loves me	7.7	7	7.3	7	7	6
Gives me cards, gift, flowers etc.	6.4	8	6	9	6.8	8
Makes kind and thoughtful gestures	6.3	9	5.7	10	7	7
Does/shares the household chores and/or childcare	4.5	10	6.1	8	2.1	14
Values me and respects my opinions	3.8	11	4.1	11	3.1	12
Supports my personal interests/career	3.4	12	3.4	12	3.3	11
Makes time to be together, as a couple	2.6	13	1.6	14	3.5	10
Sexual intimacy	2.6	14	2.4	13	2.9	13
Makes me tea/coffee and/or breakfast in bed	1.2	15	1.3	15	1	15
Others (see Table 18, below)	9.2		9.6		9.7	

**Table 18. Identify two things that your partner does for you that makes you feel appreciated. All Participants, All Answers (UK)**

	All %
Says thank you and/or gives me compliments	13.3
Gives me cards, gift, flowers etc.	8.2
Talks with me and listens to me	7.8
Is physically affectionate	7.7
Does/shares the household chores and/or childcare	7.4
Says and/or shows s/he loves me	7.3
Cooks some/all of our meals	7.3
Makes kind and thoughtful gestures	6.3
Supports and looks after me	6.3
Makes me tea/coffee and/or breakfast in bed	5.3
Is always there for me	4.9
Values me and respects my opinions	3.1
Supports my personal interests/career	2.3
Makes time to be together, as a couple	2.2
Negative comments, do not feel appreciated	2.0
Puts me first	1.8
Gives me time for myself	1.8
Provides for me/our family	1.3
Sexual intimacy	1.1
Going out (dinner, leisure activities etc)	1.0
Sees and supports my family and friendships	0.8
Misses me when we are apart	0.6
Reliable and trustworthy	0.3

## Tables 19 – 24: Things you like best/least about your relationship

**Table 19: Identify two things that you like best about your relationship. All Participants (UK)**

Items coded	Women % & rank		Mothers % & rank		Childless women % & rank		Men % & rank		Fathers % & rank		Childless men % & rank	
	%	rank	%	rank	%	rank	%	rank	%	rank	%	rank
Laughing together	12.1	1	11.8	1	12.7	1	7.0	6	5.6	8	9.0	4
Sharing values and interests	10.9	2	11.5	2	10.0	2	12.2	1	12.7	1	11.5	1
Being best friends	8.5	3	9.0	3	7.7	4	10.0	2	9.8	2	10.5	2
Being cared for and feeling supported	7.8	4	7.9	5	7.4	5	7.2	5	6.6	5	8.0	5
Feeling safe and secure	7.3	5	8.2	4	5.7	9	5.8	8	5.2	9	6.5	7
Being happy	6.7	7	5.5	7	8.7	3	7.7	4	6.7	4	9.2	3
Trust	6.7	6	6.9	6	6.3	6	5.9	7	6.5	6	5.0	10
Sharing a close relationship	5.3	8	4.9	9	6.0	8	8.0	3	8.1	3	7.8	6
Talking and listening	5.1	9	4.4	10	6.3	7	3.8	11	3.2	13	4.8	11
Being in love and/or being loved	5.0	10	5.2	8	4.6	11	5.2	9	5.1	10	5.3	9
Physical affection	4.3	11	3.4	12	5.7	10	3.8	12	2.7	15	5.5	8
Spending time together	3.8	12	3.2	13	4.6	12	3.7	13	4.4	12	2.9	13
Being a family and/or having children	2.8	13	4.5	11	0.1	15	3.7	14	6.2	7	0.0	15
We support each other	2.4	14	2.3	14	2.7	14	2.8	15	3.2	14	2.1	14
Sexual Intimacy	2.4	15	2.2	15	2.8	13	4.8	10	5.0	11	4.6	12
Others	8.9		8.9		8.9		8.4		9.0		8.4	

**Table 20: Identify two things that you like best about your relationship. All Women, Mothers and Childless Women (UK)**

Items coded	Women % & rank		Mothers % & rank		Childless women % & rank	
	%	rank	%	rank	%	rank
Laughing together	12.1	1	11.8	1	12.7	1
Sharing values and interests	10.9	2	11.5	2	10.0	2
Being best friends	8.5	3	9.0	3	7.7	4
Being cared for and feeling supported	7.8	4	7.9	5	7.4	5
Feeling safe and secure	7.3	5	8.2	4	5.7	9
Being happy	6.7	6	5.5	7	8.7	3
Trust	6.7	7	6.9	6	6.3	6
Sharing a close relationship	5.3	8	4.9	9	6.0	8
Talking and listening	5.1	9	4.4	10	6.3	7
Being in love and/or being loved	5.0	10	5.2	8	4.6	11
Physical affection	4.3	11	3.4	12	5.7	10
Spending time together	3.8	12	3.2	13	4.6	12
Being a family and/or having children	2.8	13	4.5	11	0.1	15
We support each other	2.4	14	2.3	14	2.7	14
Sexual intimacy	2.4	15	2.2	15	2.8	13
others	8.9		8.9		8.9	



**Table 21: Identify two things that you like best about your relationship. All Men, Fathers and Childless Men (UK)**

Items coded	Men % & rank		Fathers % & rank		Childless men % & rank	
	%	rank	%	rank	%	rank
Sharing values and interests	12.2	1	12.7	1	11.5	1
Being best friends	10.0	2	9.8	2	10.5	2
Sharing a close relationship	8.0	3	8.1	3	7.8	6
Being happy	7.7	4	6.7	4	9.2	3
Being cared for and feeling supported	7.2	5	6.6	5	8.0	5
Laughing together	7.0	6	5.6	8	9.0	4
Trust	5.9	7	6.5	6	5.0	10
Feeling safe and secure	5.8	8	5.2	9	6.5	7
Being in love and/or being loved	5.2	9	5.1	10	5.3	9
sexual intimacy	4.8	10	5.0	11	4.6	12
Talking and listening	3.8	11	3.2	13	4.8	11
Physical affection	3.8	12	2.7	15	5.5	8
Spending time together	3.7	13	4.4	12	2.9	13
Being a family and/or having children	3.7	14	6.2	7	0.0	15
We support each other	2.8	15	3.2	14	2.1	14
others	8.4		9.0		8.4	

**Table 22. Identify two things that you like least about your relationship. All Participants (UK)**

	All Women % & rank		Mothers % & rank		Childless Women % & rank		All Men % & rank		Fathers % & rank		Childless Men % & rank	
Poor communication	8.9	1	9	1	8.7	1	6.6	4	5	8	8.8	3
Arguments and/or conflicts	8.3	2	8.2	2	8.4	2	11.1	1	11.7	1	10.1	1
Housework and/or childcare are not shared fairly	7.5	3	7	5	8.3	3	5	8	5.2	7	4.7	10
Issues with balancing work and home life	7	4	7.1	4	7	4	6.4	6	6.6	4	5.8	7
Few shared values and/or interests	6.7	5	6.9	6	6.5	6	7.1	3	5.8	5	9.2	2
Not enough couple time	6.7	6	7.4	3	5.5	8	6.5	5	7.4	3	5.4	8
Money issues	6.4	7	6.4	7	6.5	7	5.3	7	4.9	9	6.1	6
Living apart and/or housing issues	5	8	3.7	12	7	5	4.7	10	3.5	10	6.3	4
Different needs/expectations around sexual intimacy	4.2	9	3.8	11	5	9	8.1	2	9.3	2	6.3	5
Lack of closeness	4.1	10	4.4	8	3.7	10	3.4	13	3.4	11	3.4	13
Partner's undesirable personality traits	3.9	11	4	10	3.4	12	3.6	12	3.1	12	4.5	11
Annoying habits	3.6	12	4.1	9	2.8	15	2.2	14	2.4	14	2	14
Issues with partner's friends or family	3.4	13	3.4	13	3.5	11	3.7	11	2.8	13	5.2	9
Nothing	3.1	14	3.1	14	3.2	14	4.9	9	5.8	6	3.6	12
Trust issues	2.8	15	2.4	15	3.4	13	1.8	15	1.9	15	1.6	15
Others	18.4		19.1		17.1		19.6		21.2		17	

**Table 23. Identify two things that you like least about your relationship. All Women, Mothers and Childless Women (UK)**

	All Women % & rank		Mothers % & rank		Childless Women % & rank	
	%	rank	%	rank	%	rank
Poor communication	8.9	1	9	1	8.7	1
Arguments and/or conflicts	8.3	2	8.2	2	8.4	2
Housework and/or childcare are not shared fairly	7.5	3	7	5	8.3	3
Issues with balancing work and home life	7	4	7.1	4	7	4
Few shared values and/or interests	6.7	5	6.9	6	6.5	6
Not enough couple time	6.7	6	7.4	3	5.5	8
Money issues	6.4	7	6.4	7	6.5	7
Living apart and/or housing issues	5	8	3.7	12	7	5
Different needs/expectations around sexual intimacy	4.2	9	3.8	11	5	9
Lack of closeness	4.1	10	4.4	8	3.7	10
Partner's undesirable personality traits	3.9	11	4	10	3.4	12
Annoying habits	3.6	12	4.1	9	2.8	15
Issues with partner's friends or family	3.4	13	3.4	13	3.5	11
Nothing	3.1	14	3.1	14	3.2	14
Trust issues	2.8	15	2.4	15	3.4	13
Others	18.4		19.1		17.1	

**Table 24: Identify two things that you like least about your relationship. All Men, Fathers and Childless Men (UK)**

	All Men % & rank		Fathers % & rank		Childless Men % & rank	
	%	rank	%	rank	%	rank
Arguments and/or conflicts	11.1	1	11.7	1	10.1	1
Different needs/expectations around sexual intimacy	8.1	2	9.3	2	6.3	5
Few shared values and/or interests	7.1	3	5.8	5	9.2	2
Poor communication	6.6	4	5	8	8.8	3
Not enough couple time	6.5	5	7.4	3	5.4	8
Issues with balancing work and home life	6.4	6	6.6	4	5.8	7
Money issues	5.3	7	4.9	9	6.1	6
Housework and/or childcare are not shared fairly	5	8	5.2	7	4.7	10
Nothing	4.9	9	5.8	6	3.6	12
Living apart and/or housing issues	4.7	10	3.5	10	6.3	4
Issues with partner's friends or family	3.7	11	2.8	13	5.2	9
Partner's undesirable personality traits	3.6	12	3.1	12	4.5	11
Lack of closeness	3.4	13	3.4	11	3.4	13
Health issues	2.3	14	2.5	14	1.8	15
Partner's annoying habits	2.2	15	2.4	15	2	14
Other	19.1		20.6		16.8	

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