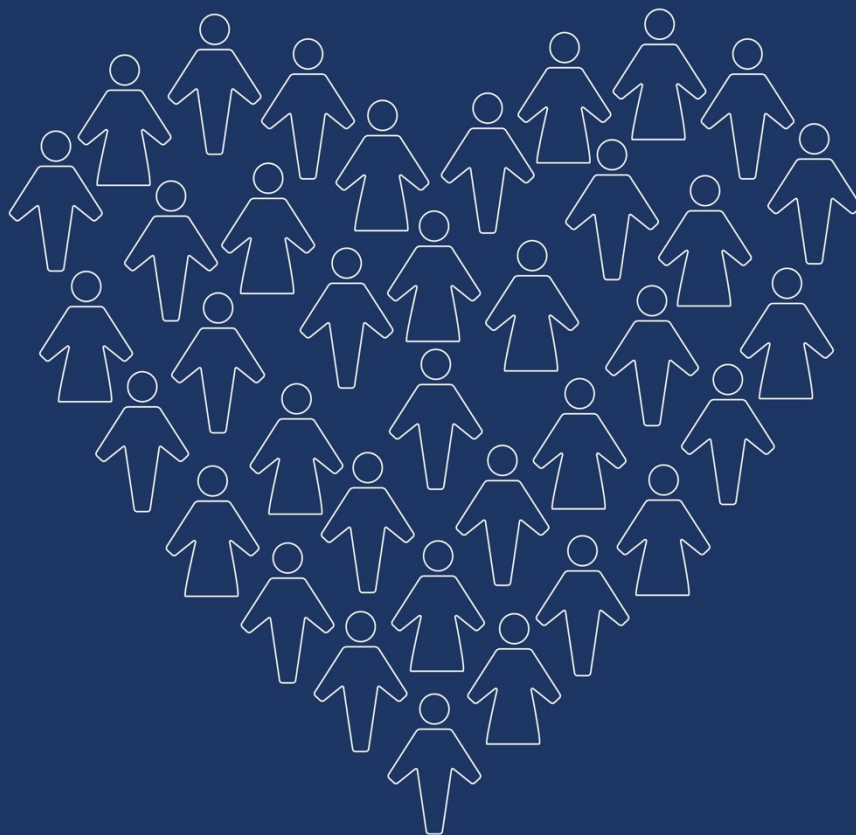


# THE SHACKLETON RELATIONSHIPS PROJECT SUMMARY REPORT



The authors would like to thank the couples and practitioners who contributed to the project without whom the study would not have been possible as well as the organisations that supported our recruitment of the couples interviewed in Phase 2 of the project.

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### **About this study**

The interdisciplinary study was conducted by the authors, led by Professor Anne Barlow, at the University of Exeter and funded by Baroness Shackleton of Belgravia LVO.

This report and the project's Summary Report are available to download from:

<http://socialsciences.exeter.ac.uk/law/research/groups/frs/projects/shackletonrelationshipsproject>

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## Introduction

Adult family relationships are generally viewed as private matters in the UK, with the right to respect for private and family life protected in national and international law. Nonetheless, the importance of such relationships to wider society is also clear, particularly when relationships break down and children – the next generation - as well as adults, are affected. However, navigating coupledness in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is undeniably complicated and for those embarking on relationships they hope will last, there is no rule book. For young people, what should they be drawing on? Classic fairy tales with ‘happy ever after’ endings? The (un)edited glimpses and experiences from their own parents’ relationship(s)? Romantic fiction and drama? The photoshopped lives of celebrities? Or should they just concentrate on the sex? Society has changed from the days when expectations were clear, and normative thinking was that that love and marriage, in the words of the old song, had to ‘go together like a horse and carriage’. Couple relationships are now far more diverse (Rauer et al. 2013). People increasingly cohabit as a prelude to or instead of marrying (ONS, 2017a) and both same-sex civil partnership and same-sex marriage are now recognised in law. In society at large, there is greater gender equality and less religious adherence (NatCen, BSA survey 2017), trends which have also challenged traditional relationship expectations. Whilst most adults (61 per cent) are still choosing coupledness (ONS, 2017a), the terms of a couple relationship now have to be negotiated between the partners, rather than fixed by ascribed traditional marital roles. Separation and divorce are both accessible to all and largely no longer stigmatised. Statistically at least, such social change has not of itself led to evidence of more happy, healthy and enduring relationships. Indeed, according to the latest national statistics, 42 per cent of marriages end in divorce (ONS, 2017b). Cohabitation breakdown rates are more difficult to track but are known to be higher. Cohabiting parents are three times more likely to separate than their married counterparts by the time their child is five (Goodman and Greaves, 2010). Furthermore, some eight per cent of married/cohabiting couples who are still living together state that they are in extremely unhappy relationships (Marjoribanks and Darnell Bradley, 2017).

Given this state of affairs, it is unsurprising that much of both recent policy discussion and academic research in the UK and elsewhere has focused on the reasons for relationship breakdown and on managing its impact on families (see e.g. Amato, 2010; Coleman and Glenn, 2009; Gravingen et al. 2017; Marjoribanks, 2015). The effects of parental conflict and of parental separation on children have been evidenced and highlighted (Coleman and Glenn, 2009; 2010; Rodgers and Prior, 1998). Recent legislative policy has aimed at reducing parental alienation after separation (s1(2A) Children Act 1989) and criminalising a wider range of abusive behaviours. Yet, this means that whilst we know a great deal about why and how relationships come to an end and the support needed by those going through relationship breakdown to deal with the consequences, we know far less, in research terms, about what helps sustain couple commitment and what skills enable couples to navigate their relationship successfully over the life course.

Against this background, the Shackleton Relationships project was an 18 month qualitative study inspired and sponsored by Baroness Shackleton of Belgravia LVO, herself a prominent family lawyer, which commenced in September 2016. It was designed to help redress this research gap by looking at the issues through the other end of the telescope – that is, switching the focus away from relationship breakdown issues onto what can be learned from a range of happy, healthy enduring couple relationships. Whilst Gabb and Fink’s study of couple relationships in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Gabb and Fink, 2015; 2018) had been a large cross-sectional study of relationship practices in long-term relationships as had Reibstein’s study before that (Reibstein, 2007), the Shackleton project has provided both deep qualitative insights and a unique longitudinal perspective into what drives happy and enduring relationships. It has also specifically involved young people, as representatives of the next generation, in the final phase of research in order to understand their perspectives on obtaining the skills that lead to happy and healthy relationships. The hope is that together with their input, the research can ultimately go on to equip them with critical questions, learning tools, confidence and relationship

skills. The timeliness of this approach is underlined by recent legislative reform (see s 34 Children and Social Work Act 2017) where in response to findings by Ofsted (2013) that in secondary schools, too much emphasis was placed on ‘the mechanics’ of reproduction and too little on relationships, the curriculum is under review. Its new name - Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) - reflects the desired change of emphasis and the advised content requires learning to focus on safety in forming and maintaining relationships; the characteristics of healthy relationships; and how relationships may affect physical and mental health and well-being (s 34 (3)(a)). It is therefore anticipated this study, alongside others focused on recognising dangerous relationships, will be able to make a key contribution in informing these curriculum developments in England.

Before setting out its findings, this report will now go on to detail the aims and methods adopted by the Shackleton Relationships project.

## Background and Aims

The overall aim of the research was to undertake an in-depth study to explore the nature of happy and enduring relationships and identify attributes and relationship skills critical to both developing and sustaining them and to avoiding relationship breakdown. In particular, we wanted to know:

- What are the most common or predictable reasons for relationship breakdown?
- What critical questions should be asked prior to entering a relationship intended to be permanent to help to increase the chances of it thriving?
- What critical relationship skills might be developed to avert the causes of breakdown? and
- How might knowledge of these feed into relationship education for young people?

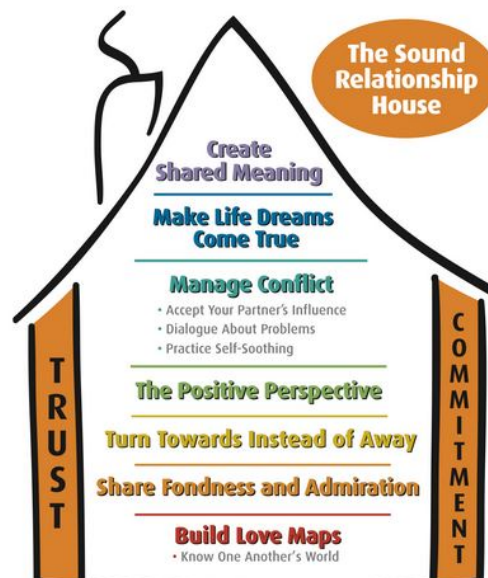
In order to address these research questions in the English context, the qualitative study was designed in three interlinking phases, using the methods detailed in the next section to collect data from practitioners and couples and complementary work with groups of young people.

In outline, the first phase drew together a sample of experienced family law practitioners and judges who regularly interviewed separating parties and reviewed divorce petitions whilst also having experience of cohabitation breakdown cases. The purpose of the interviews was to confirm or challenge the narratives coming from the academic literature around the triggers of relationship breakdown (e.g. Ayles, 2004; Amato, 2010).

The focus was switched in Phase 2 to the question of what makes relationships thrive and endure. Using Ewing’s longitudinal sample of 10-year-married couples who had previously been interviewed three times over the first four years of marriage (Ewing, 2014), and a complementary cross-sectional sample of civil partner and cohabiting same-sex couples, opposite-sex cohabiting couples and married couples all of whom had been together for over 15 years, we have investigated systematically what makes a healthy, thriving and enduring relationship.

In terms of our approach to understanding from our data which relationship attributes put couples at most or least risk of breakdown and which skills could be used to avoid or reverse relationship problems in times of difficulties, an analysis framework or lens was developed based on the interplay between two leading but divergent theoretical standpoints. These were the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation (VSA) model (Karney and Bradbury, 1995) and the Sound Relationships House theory (Gottman et al. 2002; Gottman and Gottman, 2017). The building blocks needed according to Gottman’s theory to create a solid foundation and a predicted secure relationship future is illustrated below (Figure 1).

Figure 1



In the VSA model, enduring vulnerabilities are 'the stable demographic, historical, personality, and experiential factors that individuals bring to marriage'; stressful events are 'the developmental transitions, situations, incidents, and chronic or acute circumstances that spouses and couples encounter' and adaptive processes are 'the ways individuals and couples contend with differences of opinion and individual or marital difficulties and transitions.' (Karney and Bradbury, 1995:22).

The VSA model suggests that:

couples with effective adaptive processes who encounter relatively few stressful events and have few enduring vulnerabilities will experience a satisfying and stable marriage, whereas couples with ineffective adaptive processes who must cope with many stressful events and have many enduring vulnerabilities will experience declining marital quality, separation, or divorce. Couples at other points along these three dimensions are expected to fall between these two extreme outcomes. (Karney and Bradbury, 1995:25)

Both are theories emanating from the USA but were found to be reliable predictors based on our own assessment of relationship structural integrity within our sample. Applying the VSA model to our data, this was confirmed to be a good predictor of which relationships **will endure**, despite encountering relationship pressure points, such as an affair, financial difficulties or bereavement. This was based on the couple's ability to adapt to **manage stress effectively** (Karney and Bradbury, 1995) although here, such adaptation might involve longer term negative effects, perhaps for one party, particularly if that party had enduring vulnerabilities. Gottman's Sound Relationship House theory, on the other hand, also reliably determined **ability to adapt** at times of difficulty but here where the relationship had been built on a solid foundation, such as friendship, the adaptation was typically followed by moving forward together in a positive mode, often despite some enduring vulnerabilities and facing significant stress. Indeed, far from falling somewhere along the continuum of satisfaction and separation as the VSA model predicts, many couples who had gone through some incredibly stressful times emerged much stronger and much more satisfied provided they had the foundations of the 'Sound Relationships House' in place. Using an approach which applied and tested the two theories in

tandem, we concluded that the vulnerability-stress-adaptation model predicts which relationships survive, whereas the 'Sound Relationships House' theory predicts which thrive.

From our findings using this approach, we aimed to identify a set of critical questions, attributes and skills which could assist people - and particularly younger people – in reflecting on how to make good relationship choices and develop appropriate relationship skills if and when they seek a happy, healthy relationship which they intend to be life-long. The appropriateness, utility and communication of these for the younger generation were then explored in Phase 3, the final phase of the study, with the involvement of groups of young people whose insights and views were captured to develop our findings and final analysis. Part of the aim of our engagement with young people and teachers in this phase was, having undertaken a systematic review of existing interventions, to gather views on the design for a future intervention and co-produce with them the foundations of a relationship toolkit to help young people make healthy relationship choices.

## Research Design and Methods

This is an interdisciplinary study where the methods employed in Phases 1 and 2 follow accepted approaches to empirical socio-legal and sociological studies, whereas those in Phase 3 are those commonly adopted in education and health science studies. This report on our findings reflects to some extent the different requirements of these disciplines. The findings from Phase 1 partially informed the approach to analysis in Phase 2 and the findings from Phase 2 were used to inform the approach to the content material for the workshops undertaken in Phase 3. The study was undertaken in England and was considered against the context of family and education law and policy in England. Over its first two phases, the study took a qualitative empirical approach using in-depth semi-structured interviews with family law practitioners and couples in England. The Phase 1 practitioner interviews were undertaken to identify and confirm common causes of relationship breakdown. In Phase 2, a unique longitudinal picture of married couple relationships at the 10 year point was facilitated by accessing Ewing's earlier sample of married couples (Ewing, 2014). They had been previously interviewed on three occasions, as newly-weds, during their first 18 months of marriage and again at the four year point. A complementary cross-sectional sample was additionally recruited to explore any differences in relationships of longer duration (15 years plus) and including same-sex and cohabiting relationships. The interview schedule was amended to reflect this diversity. In particular, family law assumes same-sex couples broadly follow heteronormative approaches to relationship practice but are there key differences as some suggest (e.g. Auchmuty, 2015; Heaphy, 2018; Rolfe and Peel, 2011)? At the same time, US academic literature has drawn a controversial distinction between prospects for those who are 'sliding versus deciding' entry into relationships (Stanley et al. 2006; 2010), whilst others may be making conscious choices about a preference for private individually shaped commitment (Duncan et al. 2012). These were therefore thought to be of relevance to cohabiting couple interviews in exploring their approach to commitment. From the research findings in these phases, we worked with schools and community groups in Phase 3 to assess students' willingness to engage with relationship educational programmes to help them to form healthy, enduring relationships.

Research Ethics approval was successfully sought through the University of Exeter Research Ethics procedures in 2016 for Phases 1 & 2 and 2017 for Phase 3. All participants provided informed consent and were given an information sheet explaining the purpose of the project. Their true identities have been anonymised in this report and names used to refer to their data are all pseudonyms. Codes have been added to the participant quotes in complementary cross-sectional couple sample (Couple Sample 2), so the reader can see if the example is from a cohabitant (CB), civil partner (CP), married (M) individual in a same-sex (SS) or opposite-sex (OS) relationship. The number is provided for the reader to link which individuals are in a relationship together. If the code is underlined, then the quote is taken from the joint couple interview, if the code is not underlined it is taken from the individual interview.

For example: 04-CB-OS indicates Individual Interview from Couple Number 4, cohabitant in opposite-sex relationship. The interview schedules and other data collection instruments are available on the project website at:

<http://socialsciences.exeter.ac.uk/law/research/groups/frs/projects/shackletonrelationshipsproject> .

## Phase 1

To explore the most common reasons for breakdown of relationships intended to be permanent, having reviewed key and recent existing literature on the causes of relationship breakdown, we designed an interview schedule and undertook semi-structured interviews (telephone or face-to-face) with a sample of solicitors, mediators and judges purposively recruited for their wealth of experience in family law cases (**'the Practitioner Sample'**). There are no significant differences found between telephone and face to face interview data (Sturges and Hanrahan, 2004). The practitioner sample comprised 10 family dispute resolution practitioners (five men and five women) and two judges (a District Judge and a Circuit Judge, both male). All of the family dispute resolution practitioners were practising mediators; seven were also solicitors and collaborative lawyers, two were lawyer-mediators and one was a non-lawyer mediator.

## Phase 2

To identify what drives thriving relationships across the life course, we conducted follow up interviews with Ewing's longitudinal sample of couples married for the first time in 2006/7 (**'Couple Sample 1'**). Most of this sample had originally been approached from announcements of intended marriages posted at a local Register Office in the South East (Ewing, 2014), although their places of residence were more geographically spread across the country. These couples had been interviewed separately but consecutively three times over the first four years of the marriage (at three-six months (time 1), 12-18 months (time 2) and three-four years into the marriage (time 3)). Ewing's study had interviewed 53 couples at time 1, 52 couples at time 2 and 49 couples at time 3. Two couples withdrew from the process before time 3 (one after time 1 and one after time 2) and two had separated by time 2. Both the separated couples agreed to be interviewed (separately) post-separation using a revised interview guide, although one couple subsequently withdrew. At time 4 in 2016/17, 10 years after the parties had married, we interviewed 43 couples, including the four couples known to have separated since time 3 as part of the Shackleton study. The geographical spread of the sample had also increased over time.

Unless otherwise indicated, analyses below on Couple Sample 1 use data from 45 couples: the 39 intact couples interviewed at time 4, and the six separated couples.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face or by Skype for two couples who now live abroad. Telephone interviews were undertaken at the request of a further two couples and the four separated husbands. At the end of each interview, the participants completed two written questions without conferring with their spouse or the interviewer (the questions were read to those interviewed by Skype or telephone and responses noted accordingly). The questions (listed in Appendix A in the online version of the report ('the online report')) available on the project website were inspired by the final two questions in Spanier's (1976) Dyadic Adjustment Scale. The first question, which Spanier (1979) suggested was sufficient to give a general indication of the overall quality of the marital relationship, asked the participants to assess their global marital happiness on a scale of zero (extremely unhappy) to six (perfect). The second sought to measure commitment to the marriage by asking the participants to choose from four options outlining the lengths to which they would go to ensure that the marriage would succeed. Of the 39 intact couples who completed the fourth interview, the marriage was rated at least 'very happy' at every interview by both spouses in 27 cases (although two couples were still recovering from a very testing year, so were excluded from the group we classified as 'thriving'). At time 4, six individuals in five couples had self-rated the marriage 'happy' at best at a previous interview but by time 4 had rated the marriage as at least 'very happy' once again and we classified these



marriages as 'thriving'. Seven spouses, at time 4, self-rated the marriage as 'happy' although two men seemed to have taken a quite pragmatic approach to the written question (which indicated that the mid-point 'happy' represents the degree of happiness of most relationships). Analysis of their interview data showed them to be in vibrant relationships that both spouses indicated were deeply fulfilling and we therefore included them in the 'thriving couples'. The remaining five spouses (from four marriages) self-rated the marriage as 'happy' but (along with the one individual who self-rated their marriage 'fairly unhappy') disclosed a level of distress in interview that precluded them from the thriving couples group. At time 4 we therefore classified 32 of the 39 intact couples as 'thriving'.

Age at marriage ranged from 20 to 48 (mean age 29). Save for one voluntary childless couple and one couple who were expecting their first child at time 4, all the intact couples and three separated couples had children living at home at time 4. One participant identified as Black British, six as Asian British and the remaining 83 as White British. Just over two thirds (62) were educated to university degree level or above at time 1 and at least a further two obtained degrees during the process. Fourteen individuals had parents who were separated or divorced at time 1 and a further two's parents separated before time 4. Nine individuals (in five couples) had strongly practised religious beliefs, 53 had a religious/faith background (which they may or may not have rejected as an adult) and 28 had neither current religious beliefs nor a background/ upbringing involving religious beliefs.

In order to obtain data on couples across a wider demographic (married and unmarried couples in opposite-sex or same-sex relationships) and over a longer time span, we purposively recruited and then conducted face-to-face interviews with 10 couples in relationships of at least 15 years' duration based in South West England (**'Couple Sample 2'**). This cross-sectional sample comprised four married couples (three opposite-sex, one same-sex female), two civil partnerships (both male same-sex), four cohabiting couples (three opposite-sex, one same-sex female). Recruitment was undertaken incrementally over a nine-month period. Adverts were placed in staff newsletters and on staff intranets of large organisations in the sampling frame area to reach a broad population. Targeted recruitment was also undertaken by attending 'LGBTQ+' events, visiting community centres in economically deprived areas and contacting social groups for members of 'BME' and 'LGBTQ+' communities who then advertised the opportunity to take part. Whilst smaller than Couple Sample 1, the range of views expressed added nuance to our understanding of thriving relationships.

In Couple Sample 2, the age at interview ranged from 37 to 73 (mean average 57). The average number of years the couples had lived together was 26 (range 15 to 50 years). Six of the couples were parents, with three couples still with children living at home at the time of the interview. All but one participant identified as White British, one Roma/White British. Fourteen were educated to university degree level or above, one had no qualification and for five this data was not collected. Five had parents who were separated or divorced. Seven had strongly practised religious/spirituality beliefs, one had a religious background and 12 had no religious beliefs. All individual partners completed the same two questions from the Spanier Dyadic Adjustment Scale that the individuals in Couple Sample 1 had completed. All rated their relationship as 'very happy' or 'extremely happy' and were classified as 'thriving' on this basis.

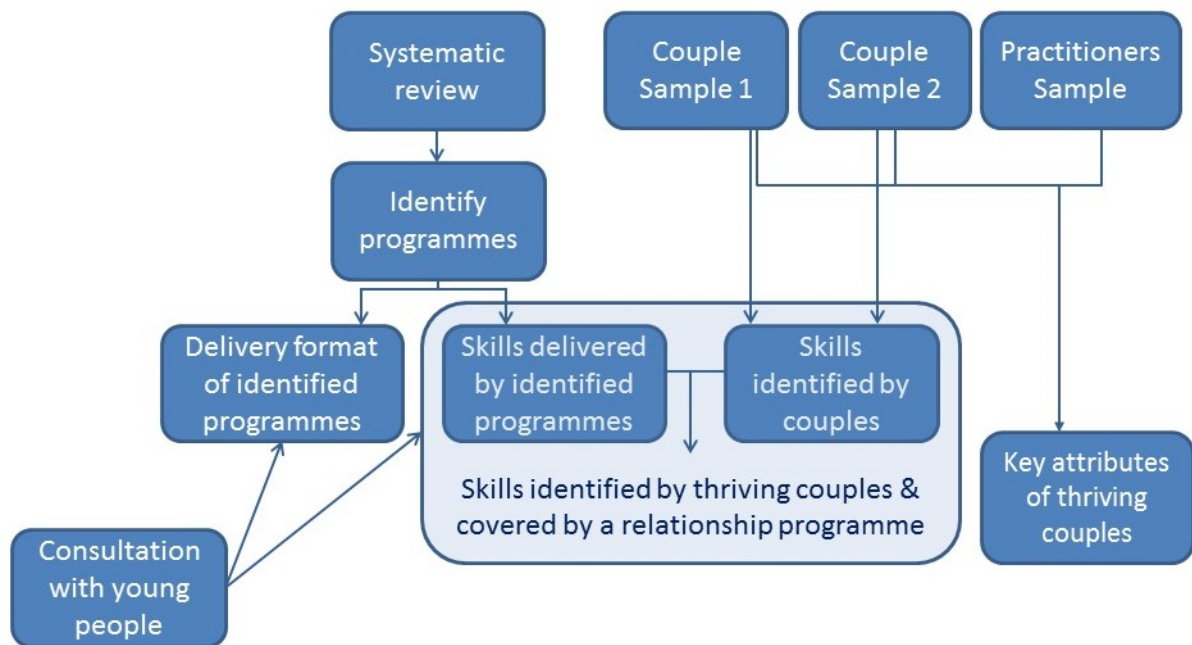
**In summary, our two Phase 2 samples comprised 55 couples of whom six were separated, 42 we classified as 'thriving' and seven who were not.** From analysis of our interviews in this phase we drew out the key attributes and relationships skills which presented as key drivers of 'thriving' relationships.

### Phase 3

An overview of the design of Phase 3 is set out in Figure 2 below. In this phase we began by comparing the skills identified as essential to the thriving relationships we observed in Phase 2 to skills identified following a systematic review of existing relationship programmes aimed at young people aged 11-18, identifying 18 skills. The systematic review was conducted following the general principles published

by the UK National Health Service Centre for Reviews and Dissemination (Centre for Reviews and Dissemination 2008). Broadly, 10 electronic databases were searched followed by a google internet search. The search strategy was designed to identify programmes published in English after 1997 that aim to teach skills and attributes considered necessary for a healthy, long-term relationship to young people aged 11-18. Citations within these were also followed up where necessary and appropriate. Finally, experts in the field were consulted to identify any missing programmes meeting the inclusion criteria. Next, based on accepted co-development methods (Hopkins et al. 2017), we ran workshops in five schools and two community groups, engaging with young people and teachers to co-design the building blocks of a potential future intervention: appropriate age-range, key skills to teach, educational tool (vehicle to deliver the message), duration, and whether and how this could be included in the school's curriculum. Each workshop consisted of two main exercises. In Task 1, students ranked the identified relationship skills from most important to least important in groups split by gender and subsequently in mixed groups to identify the key skills that they regarded as important to develop healthy intimate relationships. In Task 2, in pairs or threes, students brainstormed on delivery methods for learning about relationship skills. During a final workshop at the University of Exeter, eight students from four of the schools worked with experts in game design, website/app design, and drama/role play to further develop ideas for teaching relationship skills to young adults through these platforms.

Figure 2: Study design Phase 3



As the approach taken to cross-comparison and then to the co-design workshops is based on the findings in Phase 2 and from the systematic review, further details of the Phase 3 methods are set out before the discussion of the Phase 3 results and findings.

## Phase 1: Our Findings

### Common causes of relationship breakdown

Overall, there was much unanimity among the practitioner participants in Phase 1 about the common causes of relationship breakdown and this in turn broadly fits with the academic literature. Whilst all the practitioners recognised that a divorce petition was a constructed narrative of the causes of breakdown, as a group they were confident that their wider experience in taking instructions from husbands, wives and cohabitants gave them valuable insight into the common causes which lead to separation and divorce. They did have less collective experience of cohabitant and same-sex relationship breakdown than of heterosexual divorce. However, this is reflective of the fewer numbers of such cases within the population and the relatively recent ability to formalise same-sex unions. Obvious relationship stress points were often recounted as issues which prompted relationship breakdown, with violence or adultery being the key major triggers identified here. However, it was also recognised that it is often how people cope with life pressures which can make or break relationships. The most commonly cited were transition into parenthood (as different parenting styles were often not resolved) and different attitudes to financial issues. In the experience of these practitioners, couples who did not manage these transitions well often reported loss of communication as a couple.

When asked to identify any themes which, based on their experience, seemed to be likely predictors of relationship failure, two – incompatibility and unrealistic expectations - related to things which could and arguably should have been discovered prior to marrying:

Nobody is doing that deep dive in terms of do we have enough here to sustain us. (Joanna Braithwaite)

Everybody, to some extent, falls for the living happily ever after but I think women are more prone to losing the thread, particularly about expectations of what emotionally they are going to get out of it. (Camilla Grey)

A further two – failure to deal with issues and failure to nurture the relationship – exposed a lack of relationship skills which could in many cases be addressed:

## KEY MESSAGES

- Divorce petitions commonly construct a narrative around unreasonable behaviour or adultery by one spouse, although these may be symptoms not causes of relationship breakdown.
- Two common triggers for marriage breakdown identified by the Phase 1 sample - incompatibility and unrealistic expectations - related to things which could have been discovered prior to marrying.
- A further two common features leading to divorce in practitioner experience were – failure to deal with issues and failure to nurture the relationship. These exposed a lack of relationship skills which could in many cases be addressed.
- Practitioners and judges in this sample had not observed any clear patterns of distinction between married or cohabiting couples or between opposite-sex and same-sex couples with regard to relationship breakdown triggers.
- The Phase 1 Shackleton findings coincide with those from the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles, 2017. This, included data about both married and cohabiting couples and indicated overall that communication problems and growing apart were given as the most common reasons for relationships to break down, followed closely by arguments and unfaithfulness.

Typically, what would be said in mediation is, 'You never told me that there was a problem,' and the other person would say, 'I tried time and time again to tell you there was a problem but every time I tried to say you shut me up.' (Thomas Ellington)

[Relationship breakdown results from] a lack of effort on both sides probably as a consequence of initial incompatibility anyway, not wanting to share the same interests, not wanting to spend time with each other... (Alex Bailey)

These practitioner insights chime with existing research on divorce (e.g. Amato 2010) and the most recent research by Gravningen et al. (2017) reported as part of the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles. This, unlike earlier surveys, included data about both married and cohabiting couples. This indicated overall that communication problems and growing apart were given as the most common reasons for relationships to break down, followed closely by arguments and unfaithfulness which were the next most frequent reasons given by both men and women. It also resonates with the opinions expressed by the Phase 2 participants for common causes of relationship breakdown. Here, communication issues were cited by participants most often as reasons why relationships break down. Unrealistic expectations, failure to adapt to change and failure to nurture the relationship leading to affairs or drifting apart were also mentioned.

Finally, no clear patterns of distinction had been observed by our Phase 1 participants as between married or cohabiting couples or between opposite-sex and same-sex couples with regard to relationship breakdown triggers. Having confirmed the common triggers for relationship breakdown in practice coincide with those in the academic literature, the next section considers the attributes and skills identified in our two couple samples which combine to predict relationships most likely to thrive and endure.

## Phase 2: Our Findings

### The thriving couple relationships

In the discussion that follows we set out what, from our Phase 2 analysis, seem to be the key attributes and relationship skills which drive thriving relationships. We describe these collectively as 'the key attributes'. We found that what underpins healthy, thriving relationships is largely consistent across family forms. Partners in thriving relationships have usually assessed that they are a 'good fit' before formal commitment. Thriving couples had realistic expectations of the relationship and of their partner. They were mostly 'developmental' in outlook; they expected to have to 'work at' the relationship, with professional help if needed, but this was not 'hard work'. The relationships were deeply personal and meaningful to the couple. There was no 'right' relationship, and it was in the small, daily gestures that communicated commitment and care that the couples wove their lives together. Married opposite-sex couples predominantly viewed the relationship as life-long while cohabiting opposite-sex couples thought more in terms of being 'committed while the relationship was healthy'. Views of same-sex couples varied with some viewing their commitment as permanent and others rejecting the idea of permanence. Friendship was at the heart of opposite-sex thriving relationships after ten years of marriage. This chimes with other large scale recent research based on the British Household Panel Survey which indicates that there is least life satisfaction dip across age groups for those whose spouse is also their best friend (Grover and Helliwell, 2017). Compassionate love and adapting to change was at the heart of the more diverse sample of longer-term thriving relationships, although qualities of friendship (respect, shared interest and humour) were important too. All in thriving relationships worked at maintaining a good connection by talking regularly, nipping conflict in the bud. Those in thriving relationships were aware of the other's faults but viewed their partner as an intrinsically good person, which helped them to view negative acts as momentary or circumstantial.

They anticipated change and pulled together during stressful seasons. Most had built networks of family and friends to support them on their journey.

From our analysis we extracted the ten key attributes outlined in Table 1 below. These are a mix of observed characteristics and relationship skills. As our analysis progressed it became clear that an ability to adapt to change was critical and that ‘loving compassionately’ was closely associated with seeing the best in your partner. We therefore combined the latter two attributes and added adapting to change. Since Phase 3 was underway by this stage this proceeded using the original ten attributes.

**Table 1: The key attributes of thriving relationships**

Choosing carefully	Friendship
Being realistic	Seeing the best
Working at it	Being committed
Keep talking	Building the relationship that suits you both
Adapting to change	Building a support network

In addition, from the literature there were certain distinct mindsets with which individuals approached their intimate relationships which we found helpful to explore in our analysis. These are:

**‘Deliberatives’:** Individuals in a ‘deliberative mindset’ impartially compare positive and negative aspects of a relationship when deciding whether to pursue relationship goals.

**‘Implementals’:** Individuals in an ‘implemental mindset’ have chosen a specific goal to pursue so are concerned with how, when, and where to achieve the goal.

**‘Developmentals’:** Individuals in a ‘developmental mindset’ expect to have to work at their relationship and are open to professional help where needed.

In the sections that follow we discuss each of the ten attributes and skills identified as key to thriving relationships, considering first the effect of the presence (or absence) of these on the relationship trajectories of the couples followed over the first ten years of marriage (Couple Sample 1). We then outline the similarities and differences between the two couple samples with respect to each attribute or skill. We also highlight, where relevant, the interplay between the attributes and skills as well as and how they are affected by the mindsets.

## The key attributes of thriving relationships

### Choosing carefully

Good marriages require good-hearted people with secure attachment styles (Huston and Meltz, 2004). In the thriving relationships we therefore expected that before committing both parties will have adjudged their partner to be a fundamentally 'good person' with whom they are 'a good fit'.

Interestingly, many of the thriving married couples in Sample 1 were 'friends first' with intimate relationships developing slowly after a period of testing the 'goodness of fit' as friends. In contrast, few of the more diverse couples in Sample 2 had transitioned slowly into relationships. Physical attraction was the initial approach but followed by careful thought about formalising their relationship.

Loving 'compassionately'; grounding feelings on accurate perceptions of a partner's strengths and weakness, provides a solid foundation to relationships (Neff and Karney, 2008; see also Fletcher and Kerr, 2010). Gagné and colleagues propose that individuals in a 'deliberative mindset' impartially compare positive and negative aspects of a relationship when deciding whether to pursue relationship goals whereas individuals in an 'implemental mindset' have chosen a specific goal to pursue so are concerned with how, when, and where to achieve the goal. People in an implemental mindset are more likely to base predictions of relationship survival on aspiration and therefore lack the required accurate perception of their partner's strengths and weaknesses (Gagné and Lydon, 2001:86). Gagné et al. (2003) report that deliberatives' relationship appraisals were only positive if their relationships were on a successful trajectory whereas implementals' relationship appraisals were positive, whether the relationship remained intact or dissolved. We therefore expected those who separated in Couple Sample 1 would have mostly implemental mindsets and indeed this is what we found. Several separated participants, spoke of asymmetry in desire to progress the relationship, with one person often keener to cohabit than the other. The majority of those in thriving relationships in Sample 1 had 'deliberative mindsets' whereas those in thriving relationships in Sample 2 were mixed.

It should also be acknowledged that Ewing first interviewed Couple Sample 1 shortly after marrying, whereas the cross-sectional Sample 2 were at least 15 years into the relationship. As people tend to reframe the

## KEY MESSAGES

- Many of the thriving married couples in Sample 1 were 'friends first' with intimate relationships developing slowly after a period of testing the 'goodness of fit' as friends.
- Few more diverse couples in Sample 2 transitioned slowly into relationships. Participants described physical attraction and a fate to their matching but careful thought about formalising their relationship.
- The majority of those in thriving relationships in Sample 1 had 'deliberative mindsets' whereas those in thriving relationships in Sample 2 were mixed.
- Several separated participants, spoke of asymmetry in desire to progress the relationship, with one person often keener to cohabit than the other.
- When commitment is asymmetric when couples cohabit or when they marry, relationship breakdown is more likely than when there is a clear and mutual commitment to the relationship before progressing it.

relationship's history from the vantage point of the present, positively in intact couples (Murray and Holmes, 1993) and negatively post-separation (Day Sclater, 1999) there were likely to be elements of this in our participants' accounts.

What was clear from Couple Sample 1 was that if commitment is asymmetric when couples cohabit or when they marry, relationship breakdown is more likely than when there is a clear and mutual commitment to the relationship before progressing it.

Because speed of relationship development increases the likelihood of entering 'risky pathways' (Stanley and Rhoades, 2009) we anticipated that those who moved slowly into committed intimate relationships, either transitioning from friendships or through a mutual reflection process, were likely to have better outcomes.

### Choosing carefully and Couple Sample 1

#### *Take your time?*

Since sliding through transitions may provide less support for sustained commitment than intentionally deciding to become committed as part of the transition process (Stanley et al. 2010) we analysed the data to ascertain whether the timing of the transitions into an intimate relationship, into cohabitation, engagement and then marriage affected the trajectory of the relationship thereafter. As speed of relationship development increases the likelihood of entering risky pathways (Stanley and Rhoades, 2009) we compared the timing of these transitions between the intact, thriving and separated couples in Sample 1.

Table 2: Average time in months from when couples met to transitions

<b>Transition</b>	<b>All intact couples</b>	<b>Thriving couples</b>	<b>Separated couples</b>
into intimate relationship	10.8	10.3	3.2
into cohabitation	26	25	21
into engagement	45	48	32
into marriage	66	67	49

As shown in Table 2, while couples in thriving relationships took longer to cohabit, become engaged or marry than the couples who separated, couples in each group had taken their time, on average, before cohabiting. However, the differences in timing of becoming intimate partners is noteworthy. Couples in thriving relationships had known each other on average of 10.3 months before becoming intimate partners. The six separated couples had known each other for a much shorter period (on average of 3.2 months) prior to commencing an intimate relationship. Our analysis of the interview data suggested that the reason for the difference was because a larger percentage of those in thriving relationships had been 'friends first'. By first getting to know each other well as friends, couples in thriving relationships ensured that they went into their relationships with their 'eyes open' before romantic involvement clouded their judgement, potentially:

On our first date we already knew each other's stories and we'd seen each other's bad sides even before we'd started going out, so we knew... [we] could deal with that even before that arose in the relationship. Milly Upton (time 1)

Individuals in thriving relationships frequently stressed that they and their partner are a 'good fit'. Couples may 'land in situations by sliding that are comparable or identical to what they would have obtained by deciding' (Stanley and Rhoades, 2009:38). Some in thriving relationships had formed an intimate relationship on or shortly after meeting and this did not negatively affect their trajectories. However, the 'friends first' model ensured that partners had tested the 'goodness of fit' before the first flush of romance compromised their capacity to make clear-headed judgements. It also ensured that friendship, foundational to thriving relationships (Gottman and Gottman, 2017), underpinned

these relationships. At time 1, Sam Doyle was able to joke about the speed at which his relationship with Claire progressed ('we went out for a date...and then she came back and... she just never left really... she never left. She's still upstairs!') However, having failed to assess the 'goodness of fit' before progressing the relationship, the couple struggled to maintain it. The couple's friendship was adequate, and they were one of only three couples struggling significantly to manage conflict at time 1. Negative affect in the early years of marriage is predictive of early divorce (Gottman and Levenson, 2000) so it was unsurprising that all three couples with problematic conflict resolution separated; the Doyles by time 4 and the other couples by time 2. Reflecting post-separation, Sam Doyle indicated:

There were always problems [in the relationship] but... purposefully I gloss[ed] over it... I think if I had the courage... I would have just left years ago or not even got married [but]... it's so easy to get caught up in these things and, you know, it's hard to leave... it's really difficult.

Had this couple taken time to test the 'goodness of fit' of the relationship before sliding into cohabiting, heartache may have been avoided. Graham Maxwell also disclosed a degree of sliding through transitions:

We got carried away with being together in the first serious relationship and buying a house together... and the next step was to get married.

As Stanley and Rhoades (2009:38) note, the position may have been the same had this couple not got 'carried away' but his experience led Graham to caution others who may be thinking of committing to a long-term relationship to:

Just take your time about things and don't necessarily get so swept off in the ideal of meeting someone and don't take the logical steps, you know, it has to feel right more than anything.

Cohabiting before mutual commitment to a future together rather than pre-marital cohabitation *per se* predicts an increased risk of divorce for heterosexual couples (Kline et al. 2004; Rhoades et al. 2009). Previous studies also highlight varying levels of commitment *within* partnerships as well as *between* partnerships (Mansfield, 1997) so we considered whether there was evidence of asymmetry in timing or degree of commitment within dyads. Our interview data would suggest that mutuality of commitment is critical. In the separated couples, asymmetry in desire to progress the relationship was prevalent. Joanna Thompson, who separated between time 1 and time 2 said of her husband Stuart, 'I kind of feel like it was him pushing our relationship all the time.' Ginny Walters also reported that her husband had been keen to move in quickly, but she had not. It was not always the husband driving early progression of the relationship. Another of the wives whose relationship broke down indicated that she and her husband had had counselling pre-marriage as 'we had a kind of weekend relationship and I wanted to know where that was going because I wanted to kind of move on.'

Whilst there may have been an element of attempting to 'correct fortune by remaking history' (Berger, 1963:61) for some, there was a degree of asymmetry between spouses in terms of wanting to be married as indicated in James Isaac's account post-separation. He considered that he had been less enthusiastic about marrying. He felt no need for 'a bit of paper to... confirm... a relationship.' Two women spoke of accepting proposals of marriage but feeling ambivalent at the time of accepting, and of having palpably negative reactions, physically and emotionally, at the time of the proposal but accepting nevertheless. Marriages tend to breakdown asymmetrically (Vaughan, 1990). The evidence from the longitudinal data is that when commitment is reached asymmetrically, and that when couples then transition into cohabitation or even marriage when at different stages of commitment, relationship breakdown is more likely than when there is a clear and mutual commitment to the relationship before progressing it.



### *Choose wisely*

The resounding advice from the Couple Sample 1 participants as epitomised by John Kaderra at time 4 was the need to choose one's life partner carefully:

Choose the right person, that's it. You can't really control anything else. You choose the person that you marry... you can't choose if you get made redundant and you can't choose if your parents die or if your kids die so choose the right person and try to keep them.

Those in thriving relationships were strongly attracted to one another but attributes such as kindness, thoughtfulness and respect were prized more highly. As Sophie Carmichael at time 4 phrased it, 'when you are sick in bed you need someone who brings you a cup of tea and piece of toast.'

Most participants in thriving relationships had 'deliberative mindsets' (Gagné and Lydon, 2001). Some in thriving marriages, particularly those with a strong Christian faith, advocated marriage preparation to test the relationship's viability. Those in thriving relationships chose their partner because they felt that the relationship was sustainable long term. Neil Joseph was able to commit to his wife Melanie as he recognised that she was someone who he could 'have fun with and grow old with'. Piers Monroe urged others to consider whether they shared interests, values, dreams and ambitions with their partner otherwise they risked committing to someone who is 'not the right match and there is not much you can do then, no matter how hard you work at it.' Chris Smith, as discussed later, struggled with the early years of parenting but was significantly happier in his marriage at time 4 than time 3. He described being able to envisage a long-term relationship with his wife Jessica but not with previous girlfriends concluding, 'I was always particular because you have got to look to the future.'

In most of the intact couples with persistent minor (or major) issues internal to the relationship and in the couples who separated, at least one spouse would be categorised as 'implemental' in mindset. The careful weighing of the strengths (and weaknesses) of the relationship before committing noted in the thriving couples is conspicuously absent in both these groups. In the former group, Craig and Gemma Edwards spoke in terms of feeling fated to be together. Yvonne Xavier decided, immediately upon meeting her husband, that she wanted him to be the father of her children. At time 4, Cathy Logan reflected that her husband had 'chased [the relationship] along a bit' and that, she had not given much 'conscious' thought to the decisions to cohabit, get engaged or get married ('I didn't give it really any headspace... [or] thought about what I wanted from my life or my relationship.')

In the couples who separated, Sally Maxwell believed, with hindsight, that she and her husband were probably never suited. She cautioned that to make an informed choice about goodness of fit you need to 'know yourself in the first place and allow yourself to become you.' Sally's views reflect comments made at time 4 by Caroline Turner who cautioned others to:

Know yourself... [work out] what sort of partner... you want to be... and then find somebody who helps you be the best you and that you help be the best them.

At time 3, when her marriage was in trouble, Catherine Isaac said that she had always had concerns over how much she could be herself around her husband James but had hoped that these 'would just go away over time.' Even when extremely happy at time 2, she reflected:

I wish I'd thought a bit more about the difference between the picture I had of myself growing up... and the picture I've got now... James is a very different person to the kind of people I dated before him... so I wish I'd thought more about the difference... sometimes... I think how did I get to be here, you know it's not what I had on my life plan.

Had Catherine reflected on the life she hoped for and how compatible she and James were, she may have addressed the doubts that she chose to ignore and avoided a painful separation.

As mentioned above Graham Maxwell thought that he and Sally got swept along, with marriage being the next or even expected step. Similarly, James Isaac spoke of the 'weight and expectation' that comes with being in your mid-30s and feeling you need to settle down.

Stanley et al. (2010) suggest that people slide into having sex, into having children or into dangerous relationships as well as into cohabitation. The present study extends our knowledge by suggesting that, ten years into marriage, couples who had resisted sliding into relationships, instead taking time to establish firm friendships and those who had carefully considered the strengths and weaknesses of the relationship before mutually committing had better outcomes.

### Choosing carefully and Couple Sample 2

Most couples interviewed in Sample 2 were lovers soon after meeting and living together within the first two years (average two months knowing each other before becoming intimate partners). Two individuals put forward a view in line with the sentiment from Sample 1 that you should look for 'someone nice'. However, most described the formation of their relationship as a subconscious process with physical attraction and luck key elements. Macy (02-M-SS) acknowledged that she and her wife Robyn were sexually compatible but not in other areas of their life at the start. Five couples described a fate to their matching. Lance (05-CP-SS) explained that it was 'pure chance' that he was buying a house in the same area as Aaron lived when they met and Elenna (01-M-OS) described meeting her husband as 'love at first sight.'

While not necessarily conscious of it at the time their relationship formed, couples described assessing compatibility against previous relationships and, as found in Sample 1, the extent to which their outlook on the world (values, manners) overlapped. Macy (02-M-SS) found her wife Robyn's willingness to help 'such a relief... it was just really refreshing' compared to her experience with her previous partner. For Ron, having similar world views was important:

It's coming from the same place... your attitude to what's happening in the world, how people should behave towards each other, what are the important things in life. (Ron-10-CP-SS)

The couple's shared outlook was reflected in how they met, with most meeting initially at an event both were interested in (for example, a walking group, a political meeting). However, the couples also described having complementary differences in their personalities and skills which meant that they could learn from each other and work effectively as a team:

I suppose personality wise... I am quite laid back and I tend to just go with the flow, I don't like confrontation, he is a bit more fiery and slightly confrontational but actually we both; he's come down and I've come up I suppose... we have rubbed off each other. (Elenna-01-M-OS)

The couples emphasised that realising their compatibility only came with hindsight. At the time of their relationship formation they may not have known what they wanted from life or how they would change or even had the language to have talked confidently about life goals or relationship expectations. For example, one couple described the evolving of spiritual beliefs that they could not have known in the first five years of their relationship. Most of the couples assumed that they were on the same page about issues such as monogamy and having children without having discussed it early in their relationship. For obvious reasons, same sex couples were less likely to have discussed having children:

It was never going to accidentally happen in the relationship (laughs). So, it wasn't something that we had to talk about as a just in case.... I think those sorts of cultural expectations of growing up, I never pictured myself married with kids because I knew I was gay and that's not what being gay meant. (Macy-02-M-SS)

One of the same-sex couples and one of the opposite-sex couples interviewed went on to have children when at first, they thought they would not, showing the importance of adopting a developmental, flexible approach rather than fixed expectations taken early in the relationship:

As we kind of went past 30, it was a bit of a case of... not try and say it in a way that made her think I want kids, you know, because you can miscommunicate things... we've talked about that, we've talked about how like, you know, I've said if you have changed your mind then don't think it's dead, it's not a closed off conversation, we can go back and talk about it. (Max-06-M-OS)

The Sample 2 interviews show that developmental pathways to committed relationships are varied. Several couples interviewed in Couple Sample 2 'slid' into cohabitation due to circumstances. For example, one now married opposite-sex couple began living together soon into their relationship as one partner's home was burgled and he didn't want to carry on living there. Another same-sex couple were living together shortly after meeting due to the privacy they needed to have a relationship in a society that at the time denoted it illegal. Reflecting an implemental mindset and the age when they met, two opposite-sex cohabiting couples were expecting a child within the first year from when they met. For one of these couples, this was three months into their relationship:

We didn't really have a long period of being together before I was pregnant really, it was very quick.... I kind of figured out that I wanted a child and that Merlin was a great guy and that if things didn't work out with me and Merlin then I'd still have a lovely baby... it might not work out between us, cos we hadn't known each other for that long so I wasn't really expecting it to last this long, at that point. I was hoping it would, but I didn't really have that expectation. (Ava-04-CB-OS)

This variety suggests that rather than the path to commitment predicting relational outcomes, it may be that individuals who go on to have thriving relationships have higher levels of emotional intelligence, that includes the skills found in this research (regulate emotions, communicate effectively, adapt to change, positive mindset) and whether conscious of it or not at the time, an ability to critically reflect and thus make careful decisions including about partner choice. The participants in Sample 2 emphasised the importance of being yourself so partner choice is based on accurate perceptions and they displayed pragmatic solution-focused approaches to resolving inevitable conflicts (see 'Keep talking'). These skills were not always there from the start, but the relationship provided the space and emotional security for individual growth. Robyn (02-M-SS) observed 'I think that understanding and depth of understanding continues to grow about what each other needs and how we support each other.' Lance (04-CP-SS) described learning how an argument didn't mean the end of the relationship and a need for patience in the early days of the relationship while both adjust to each other. Terry (01-M-OS) expressed gratitude to his wife Elenna for the 'practical... and imaginative way' she dealt with his insecurity at the beginning of the relationship.

This is not to say that it is always a lack of these skills and low emotional intelligence that leads to relationship breakdown. The identified elements herein help maintain thriving relationships, but the couples interviewed in Couple Sample 2 returned to describe a meta-physical element; a luck not only in their meeting a good match, but also in the sense that nothing 'too bad' had come along to disrupt their relationship (e.g. aggressive personality change or a third party who was too tempting) and in the sense that they had grown together simultaneously in the same direction:

In the mix of things that makes your relationship last there is luck actually. (Aaron-05-CP-SS)

I think we have been fortunate... we have kind of evolved in similar ways and, you know, developed and we didn't know that, we couldn't have known that, I mean maybe we did subconsciously. (Robyn-02-M-SS)

## Friendship

It is suggested that friendship within intimate relationships has become more salient than in previous eras as modern intimate relationships are expected to fulfil esteem and self-realisation needs not just financial needs (VanderDrift et al. 2016:117). Friendship is foundational to the 'Sound Relationship House' and affects the relationship's overall positivity. The ability to manage conflict flows from the foundation of friendship. Friendship is forged when partners are intimate with the other's world, when they show affection, respect and appreciation to the other and when they respond supportively to the other's bids for connection thereby underscoring their commitment to the relationship (Gottman and Gottman, 2017:15). Provided spouses devote energy to ensuring the marriage remain vital, spouses in marriages based on the 'best friends' model report high levels of satisfaction (McCarthy et al. 2008).

Friendship in intimate relationships is robustly and uniquely associated with positive outcomes (VanderDrift et al. 2016:117; see also Gottman, 1994 and Hendrick and Hendrick, 1997). As such therapeutic interventions strengthening partner friendship are 'probably the treatment of choice' (Gottman et al. 2002:298). Without friendship, people typically find a way of overcoming barriers to eventually leave unhappy marriages (Prevetti and Amato, 2003).

Veroff et al. (1993) reported that third year marital happiness was positively associated with courtships in which love evolved out of friendship. We anticipated that many of the thriving relationships would have similarly evolved, with friendship the bedrock of these relationships and that for at least some of the marriages that end in separation, the structural integrity of these unions will have been compromised from the outset because friendship was not at their heart.

### Friendship and Couple Sample 1

#### *The glue that sticks everything together*

The flourishing Couple Sample 1 relationships were built on solid foundations of friendship, shared humour and fun that sustained couples through life's difficulties:

Oh, I think fundamentally it's friendship, isn't it, that keeps you going, lots of fun. Martin has got a good sense of humour, which makes me laugh... I think just the friendship piece is there always underneath... We get on really well together, I think because when we first got together we were friends before we were girlfriend and boyfriend...

## KEY MESSAGES

- Friendship was the hallmark of thriving Sample 1 relationships.
- The components of friendship in the 'Sound Relationship House' theory (intimacy with the other's world; affection, respect and appreciation and responding positively to bids for connection) were evident in thriving Sample 1 couples.
- Only a few Sample 2 couples described themselves as friends explicitly but elements of friendship: respect, shared interest and humour (having fun) were important to all.
- Many Sample 1 couples in thriving relationships (and 30% of Sample 2 couples) tested compatibility as friends before romantic involvement with friendship deepening over time.
- In Sample 2, for most, rather than a 'friends first, love second' trajectory, companionship grew over time, often replacing passionate love.
- Instead of dependability, couples in Sample 2 described the importance of not taking each other for granted and an underlying sense of equality.
- In Couple Sample 1, friendship was instrumental in getting couples through harrowing life events (e.g. bereavement) or breaches of trust (e.g. an affair).
- The structural integrity of separated couples' 'relationship houses' was compromised as these relationships were not built on a firm foundation of mutual friendship.

probably for me [friendship] is the glue that sticks everything together. So irrespective of whatever's going on, you know, that is always there. (Lesley Egan, time 4)

In most of the thriving marriages, a mutually fulfilling sex-life was integral to couple identity but participants most frequently cite friendship as the essence of their relationship. Sex helped partners to feel connected and attractive to each other but for most 'it's part and parcel of the relationship but... not the be all and end all' (Tom Newsome, time 4). Friendship rather than sex is 'the glue'.

### *Friends first*

For most in thriving relationships, friendship with their spouse is their primary friendship in life:

[Sara] is my best friend as well as my wife. We do have other friends, but I am more than happy to sit in the lounge with Sara and a cup of tea... than anything else. (Matthew Jenkins, time 4)

[Tom is] the person that I most enjoy being with always. I love being with my friends, I am happy with my friends, but I most enjoy being with him. (Maria Newsome, time 4)

Most thriving spouses were, as Sukhjinder Gayal at time 1 put it, 'friends first and foremost.' Strong friendship is the abiding, foremost characteristic of thriving relationships. As Milly Upton said at time 4, 'We are friends and that's the thing, we are friends first before anything.' Couples were also often 'friends first' chronologically and friendship remains at the heart of the relationship. At time 4, Mike Potter attributes the longevity of his marriage to the fact that he and Alice were friends before becoming romantically involved and are still friends which he believes gives them, 'such a solid foundation underneath that nothing really shakes it.' Duncan Henderson said likewise at time 4:

Before we even started any kind of romantic relationship we were friends... those things that originally attracted me to her were based on friendship and then kind of love and everything blossomed out of that... [so] that friendship stuff is all the way through and then the love has kind of built on top of that. (Duncan Henderson, time 4)

Many of the participants in thriving relationships had taken considerable time to get to know each other before commencing relationships. They had tested their compatibility within the bounds of friendship before progressing into intimate relationships. Couples in thriving relationships spoke frequently about how they had almost immediately felt comfortable in each other's company. As Sarah Henderson put it at time 1 'the friends bit was easy.' These couples 'rub along... together' well (Madeleine Underwood, time 4). Ease of friendship distinguished these relationships from previous ones with individuals feeling accepted by their partner:

He just took me for who I am... I don't ever feel that he has wanted me to be anything other than the person I am. (Grace Barnes, time 4)

We seemed to click together, there was that level of comfort, obviously attraction as well, but I don't know it was just an ease of being with him. (Sara Jenkins, time 4)

### *Friendship is foundational*

Several participants who had faced major challenges outside of their control (bereavement, fertility issues etc.) cited friendship as pivotal to getting them through these periods of heartbreak. At time 3, following a close, sudden bereavement, Maria Newsome ascribed her husband Tom's ability to sense what she needed and to be 'there for' her to how well he knows her which 'comes from having a real friendship, I think, rather than just being in love.' As the 'Sound Relationship House' theory predicts, knowing one's partner's 'love maps', knowing what is going on in your partner's world is foundational to friendship in intimate relationships, as illustrated by Tahir Zehan at time 3:

We are each other's half and everything we share, everything... she's not just my wife but she's my best friend. So, everything; I'm intimate with, every issue, every area [in which] I've had a bit of hassle or anything like that I've shared with her.

A second element of friendship in the 'Sound Relationship House', sharing fondness and admiration, was evident in abundance in the thriving relationships. This, as the theory predicts, helped couples to foster a third essential component, 'shared meaning' that is 'a life together, a life that has a sense of shared purpose and meaning' (Gottman and Gottman, 2017:19):

People fall in love all the time, but I don't think the respect thing is there. So, I would never... put Sophie down... it's like we are; instead of being in opposing castles we are in the same castle together, we built the walls around us. (Ben Carmichael, time 4)

Participants described their friendship with their spouse in terms of reliance and support, frequently. The certainty of knowing that the other person is 'there for you' and is 'rooting for you' as Sarah Henderson put it at time 4, is deeply meaningful. Confidence that your partner will be both physically and emotionally available to you when needed is a great comfort. One participant who was having counselling when she first met her husband described how:

He has always been there for me 100% from day one ... he was just there waiting in the waiting room and that's how he's stayed.

This confidence bolstered a belief that future potential issues could be overcome. Alistair Vickers, at time 4, thought that if his marriage hit big problems he would stay because:

I would not be better anywhere else, you know, I really, really believe that there is nobody who could support me any better than Emily does.

Dependability is often described using concrete, solid or permanent metaphors. Following a close family bereavement Tahir Zehan, at time 4, disclosed, 'my wife has been a rock beside me.' Individuals in thriving relationships are confident that their partner will respond positively to 'bids for connection' (Gottman and Gottman, 2017:15). This confidence provides a springboard for life in general:

Because all my needs are met through marriage and stuff I think that probably makes life easier... it's a great foundation, a great rock [from which] to do... the rest of your life as well, even the stuff away from your partner. (Mark Naylor, time 4)

John Kaderra cautioned that individuals should 'choose the right person [because] you can't really control anything else' in life. One couple had endured six harrowing years since time 3 involving miscarriages, the wife's loss of both fallopian tubes following ectopic pregnancies and bereavement although thankfully the couple had achieved their dream of parenthood. This couple's relationship was built on a firm foundation of friendship which remained at its heart. The wife described her husband as 'amazing, absolutely amazing' at supporting her during this 'dark place' and the husband said that his wife was 'always there' for him. Pulling together and being 'there' for each other ensured that their 'relationship house' had withstood the storms that had assailed them.

### ***Friendship sustains***

For relationships to thrive, couples' 'emotional bank accounts' must remain topped up. The state of a relationship's 'emotional bank account' is determined by the quality of the couple's friendship (Gottman et al. 2002:191). It seemed plausible therefore that couples who survive a significant 'withdrawal' from the 'emotional bank account' following a major breach of trust such as an affair would have built their relationship on a foundation of friendship. Their 'emotional bank account' would be sufficiently in 'credit' for them to survive a subsequent substantial 'withdrawal' One wife admitted having an affair between time 1 and time 2. It was short-lived and, in the husband's view

entirely out of character occurring at a time when he was struggling with an issue that he accepted made him less fun to be around. The couple are a 'good fit', the husband, even in the immediate aftermath of the admission of the affair, described their shared sense of humour, ethos and outlook. Following his wife's admission, he outlined the pivotal role that friendship had played in his recovery:

I think initially... we fell back on... our solid friendship because we were friends for... a pretty long time before we got together. We fell back on our solid friendship and our solid relationship... in the short term [and]... I wanted to get back what I had.

At time 4, both spouses self-rated the marriage as extremely happy. The husband reflected that it had been 'absolutely' the right decision to work through the difficulties. Rather than strengthening the relationship the husband thought that the affair had 'tested it and showed how strong it was in the first place.' He chose not to leave following his wife's disclosure because he 'knew there was a good foundation that was great to go back to.' That foundation was friendship.

All but eight participants displayed strong friendship at time 1. Six of the eight (across four marriages) had separated from their spouse before time 4 and the other two were in marriages in which separation had been a real possibility because of internally-caused challenges. By time 2, in all of the couples who separated, Ewing had flagged concerns over the depth of the couples' mutual friendship for at least one spouse. Lack of a strong bond of friendship reliably predicted marital dysfunction or breakdown. When friendship is not strong there is nothing to fall back on if the relationship is significantly challenged. Of those who separated, Sally Maxwell thought that the relationship broke down in part because her husband did not like her, and that her upfront personality 'did not sit well with him.' Joanna Thompson realised the marriage was beyond repair when she was enjoying time with friends more than time with her husband Stuart. Ginny Walters thought that her marriage broke down because her husband Tim had kept secrets from her, had not shown her respect and had failed to support her – the three vital components of friendship in the 'Sound Relationship House' model. Tim Walters reflected that the relationship broke down because he and Ginny did not nurture their friendship:

We certainly didn't give each other enough attention, or we didn't really make time for one another to do, you know, just kind of couple stuff.

At time 3, Catherine Isaac was acutely aware that the friendship had broken down:

I do feel supported in a kind of transactional way... [but] the whole you and your friend should have a good laugh about something, it's not really there anymore.

James Isaac disclosed at time 4 that the decision to separate was reached when, on balance, he and Catherine were 'fighting, sparring verbally more than we were enjoying each other's company.' Without a foundation of friendship, there appeared to be little to 'fight for' when couples hit difficulties and the relationships inevitably foundered.

## Friendship and Couple Sample 2

In line with Sample 1, three of the couples interviewed in Sample 2 who also described friendship as the foundation of their relationship described their relationship transitioning from a period of friendship:

I think that [friendship] underpinned everything. Like what we've gone through and, you know, when things are tough, or hard it's not like you are two different people who got together. It's two people who were already friends and so that helps. (Max-06-M-OS)

As noted in the 'Choosing carefully' section, most of the couples interviewed in this sample emphasised physical attraction rather than friendship at the start of their relationship. For one female same-sex married couple, it was important to them not to describe their relationship as a friendship

We've never had a friendship, like it wouldn't work as a friendship, I mean it wouldn't not, but it wouldn't because like what would be the point? (Robyn-02-M-SS)

Well what can happen in lesbian relationships is sort of starting off as lovers and then just losing the sex and becoming friends and we both kind of, half-jokingly, but also with some sincerity said from the start, "I don't want to be your friend, you know, I don't want to just be your friend, sex is important." (Macy-02-M-SS)

While only a few describe themselves explicitly as friends, as per Sample 1, elements of friendship (respect, shared interests, shared humour) were important across all of the couples interviewed in this sample. Several described using shared humour to defuse conflict. Lia (06-M-OS) for example, described how she and her husband Max 'spend a lot of time laughing' which ensured that 'bickers' did not escalate.

Rather than the friends first, love second trajectory described in Sample 1, many of the elements of friendship in the Sample 2 relationships developed over time, with participants describing an importance placed on companionship as the relationship progressed; often replacing the romantic passionate love experienced at the start:

It was very romantic but now we tend to, just being together is more important, so it's much more of a company thing, rather than a physical thing. I think we both miss each other if we are not there. (Lance-05-CP-SS)

We have more joint interests now as well, So, we do a lot of walking together... I would have said that was Macy's thing. Now I come along too... whereas before I would have said it was hers or mine, her thing or my thing (Macy-02-M-SS)

As will be discussed in 'Being realistic' and 'Adapting to change' below, couples in Sample 2 did not expect their partner to meet their needs. The couples often described receiving from and providing support for their partner for which they were very thankful. However, rather than metaphors of dependability as per Sample 1, across the different union types in Sample 2 the importance of not feeling taken for granted, or taking their partner for granted and an underlying sense of equality was emphasised:

We've both had periods where we have needed [care] from the other one, so it's never just all been in one direction. It has kind of balanced itself out over the years. So that's important to me because I wouldn't want to feel like, I was always the weak one (laughs) and she was always the strong one, or vice versa. (Macy-02-M-SS)

We both do have quite different ways of wanting to do things sometimes. We both have to quite often just step down, which is fine, as long as it's not one person stepping down all the time. (Merlin-04-CB-OS)



## Being realistic

Modern marriage has become a 'repository of powerful utopian desires' (Gillis, 2004: 989). False notions about romantic love and expecting to be 'happy ever after' are common 'mirages' that cause partners disappointment (Clulow and Mattison, 1995:12). To counteract this, spouses can lower their expectations or increase/improve their relationship maintenance behaviours (Finkel et al. 2014). High standards lead to better marital wellbeing provided people can meet those standards but not otherwise (McNulty, 2016). The ability to meet high expectations will be constrained when parties face chronic stress such as economic deprivation leaving little time or resources to invest in relationship maintenance (Neff and Morgan, 2014) or if they lack the skills to make expectations a reality (McNulty and Karney, 2004; Neff and Geers, 2013).

Individuals with a 'developmental mindset' (Coleman, 2011; Ramm et al. 2010) expect to have to work at their relationship and are open to professional help where needed. We anticipated that the couples with thriving relationships would be predominantly developmentally-minded and would avoid the disappointment of unmet, excessively positive expectations.

Conflicting relationship priorities and hopes between spouses are also likely to contribute to disappointment (Beck and Beck Gernsheim, 1995: 83). Couples tend not to discuss whether their expectations are shared (Walker et al. 2010:26). If parties' expectations are not aligned or if one partner lacks skills in an area that is a priority to the other, then this is likely to result in unmet expectations.

Mansfield and Collard (1988:179), in a study of newlyweds, report a wide 'gender gap of expectations': wives desired a 'common life' with an empathic partner and most men sought a 'life in common' with their wives, a physical and psychological base. Men seemed unaware of the gap or unable to accept it. Women acknowledged the gap and hoped to bridge it. A generation on, we were interested to see whether couples are any nearer to bridging the gap.

## Expectations and Couple Sample 1

### Family norms

Consistent with Walker et al. (2010), parents and other close family members had shaped individuals' expectations of their intimate relationships in Couple Sample 1. In the thriving couples, witnessing their parents navigate difficult periods made individuals determined to

## KEY MESSAGES

- Couples in thriving relationships in both samples had realistic expectations and were developmental in mindset; they expected to have to work at their relationships and were open to professional help if needed.
- Couples in thriving relationships in both samples had aligned values, hopes, dreams and expectations of the other and of the relationship.
- While high expectations of permanence or a long-term perspective were not fundamental to the thriving relationships in Sample 2, alignment of expectations regarding relationship commitment between partners was important. This shared alignment may not be there from the start but can develop over time.
- Across the couple samples, expectations of intimate relationships had been shaped by what parents and other significant family members had modelled. Separated women reported poor parental modelling.
- Across the couple samples, both men and women described not expecting their partner to meet all their needs, with men's lack of expectation stemming from having little perceived need for emotional support in general.

work through the issues they believed they would face inevitably in their own relationships. As Sarah Henderson at time 4 disclosed:

My parents did it well and they went through some serious stuff and I was like, if they can do it then I just need to make sure I pick the right person and do it to my own abilities.

For some in thriving relationships, their own experiences exceeded expectations based on their parents' marriage as illustrated by Zoe Armstrong at time 4:

I think the level to which Andy will just help out and do stuff and not complain probably is far beyond what I saw my parents modelling.

For some who had faced substantial challenges, parental (or grandparental) role models shaped their belief that difficulties are inevitable, and relationships require work. Simone O'Neil normalised the issues she faced in the early years of her marriage since her grandmother (her role model for relationships) had a fulfilling marriage following a volatile first year. Chris Small struggled to adapt to fatherhood. When much happier at time 4 he reflected:

I don't think you can walk away from situations you have created yourself. You have just got to muddle through but then maybe that's just my way I have been brought up... I'm not a quitter.

Experiencing parental divorce made several women determined to work hard to avoid repeating their parents' mistakes. Walker et al. (2010:24) also observed this tendency. Nevertheless, all the women who divorced in the first ten years of marriage described poor role modelling of relationships from their parents (one had divorced parents). Prior to marriage Joanna Thompson had normalised arguments with her then fiancé Stuart because her parents modelled this pattern. Once unhappy in her marriage, Joanna left to avoid being 'thirty years down the line and still making excuses for my husband' as she perceived her mother did. Claire Doyle attributed her inability to recognise unacceptable behaviour by her husband Sam to her mother's narcissism that had taught Claire that 'love... is all about them.' Reflecting on her parents' marriage, at time 4 Catherine Isaac felt:

I hadn't really been taught what a good relationship looks like... you have images in your mind of your mum and dad and what their relationship is like so you kind of expect that. So, because I expected that I would be treated in that way and I was treated in that way by James, you know, I had chosen somebody that would reinforce my expectations of what a relationship would be.

### ***'It was never going to be plain sailing'***

The participants in stable and happy marriages had realistic expectations and proactively maintained their relationship as summed up neatly by Christopher Turner at time 4:

I come from an old school of thought where you work at things and if things aren't perfect you stick by it... marriage is never going to be perfect and people that think marriage is going to be perfect are kidding themselves... So, I think you set realistic expectations about what marriage is... and then secondly you work at anything that potentially is difficult in your marriage.

Sample 1 participants in thriving marriages had high but realistic expectations. They were committed to maintaining their relationships, with professional support if needed, recognising that 'it was never going to be plain sailing' (Tom Newsome, time 4). This attitude is strongly redolent of the developmentalist perspective suggested by Ramm et al. (2010). Long-term perspectives motivated these individuals to work together through what they viewed as inevitable tough periods. Cameron Young's assertion at time 1 that neither he nor his wife Lucy 'has enormous illusions about... being

able to get by on love... just coasting through' typified remarks by several participants in thriving relationships as exemplified by Emily Vickers summation of her marriage at time 4:

There are highs and lows and fun and tears, but I feel like that's what it should be like, you know, and I think it's unrealistic if people think it's going to be all plain sailing and, you know, that's not life is it?

Coleman (2011) found that a developmentalist approach was not entirely associated with differences in satisfaction. However, without exception, individuals in thriving relationships in Couple Sample 1, had a developmentalist perspective. They did not expect their relationship to be perfect. Duncan Henderson at time 4 typified the frustration with the idealised relationships peddled in the media:

I think, particularly in younger girls, there's a Disney type romance: Fairy Princess gets married to Prince Charming and people grow up with that... the media thing of a perfect marriage... two people living in the same house are going to have their differences, but there's a distortion that that never happens and therefore when people experience it they think it's the end.

Nowhere was this Disney ideal more explicit than when at time 1, comparing herself to Snow White and Cinderella, Donna Xia gushed about her marriage to Jack:

I'm living that fairy-tale I had the fairy-tale Prince Charming, I had the fairy-tale wedding, so I suppose it's what they say, they lived happily ever after... It's like somebody waved a magic wand and we've got the perfect marriage.

By time 3, the couple had faced several major external and internally caused challenges and Donna's self-rating happiness score had plummeted. Her assessment of Jack was that he was 'the husband from hell... it's like being married to a freezer.' It may be that Jack's behaviour had changed or that the magnitude of the issues that assailed them had taken their toll on the previously 'perfect' marriage. More plausibly, Donna's fairy-tale marriage was just that; a romanticised illusion, and that once the dream of the fairy-tale was shattered it became a nightmare for Donna. Unfortunately, we were unable to contact the Xias at time 4 so have no information on whether the relationship is intact.

McNulty and Karney (2004) found that partners with low skills, but low expectations have more stable relationships than those with low skills and high expectations. As expected, their satisfaction was lower than that of couples with more positive skills. There was evidence of this in Couple Sample 1. Craig Edwards, at time 4 was defeatist. He thought there had been little mutual support in his marriage for years ('it's just how the relationship is and so we just go along with it'), reflecting similar sentiments from Gemma. Neither seemed able to bring about an improvement. Both had low expectations. Gemma disclosed at time 1 that Craig was the only man from whom, she had been prepared to 'put up with crap.' From time 2 onwards her self-rated happiness score was never above three (happy) but she couldn't envisage leaving Craig. They appeared stable, albeit only just satisfied.

### ***Aligned expectations***

Since 'shared meaning' is integral to the 'Sound Relationship House' (Gottman and Gottman, 2017), as expected we found that couples in thriving relationships were aligned in terms of values, hopes, dreams, attitudes and expectations of the other and of the relationship. Expectations were high but realistic and spouses put in the relationship work required to ensure that expectations were met.

Differing approaches, for example, regarding housework in couples who were otherwise happy caused frustration but were not marriage threatening. As Richard Atkins succinctly put it at time 2, 'I've always felt close to Dawn... I like everything about her... just wish she'd bloody tidy up!'

Will Xavier's frustrations articulated at times 1 and 2 stemmed from different views on certain moral issues. His view below at time 2 echoes similar sentiments at time 1:

There are always... things... in her that will never change... because she never sees them as wrong and I never see them as totally right.

These frustrations dampened Will's self-rated satisfaction scores but since they were not 'fundamental issues [or] fundamental flaws in particular characters' he was resigned to them. However, by time 4 the differences in what they deemed to be acceptable behaviour had become far more pressing, pushing their marriage to its limits for reasons we have chosen not to disclose to protect anonymity. Non-alignment of the couple's expectations caused ongoing frustrations:

Yvonne doesn't have the same line in the sand... and we have never resolved where Yvonne draws that line and that's, yeah that's frustrating. (Will Xavier, time 4)

The Doyles' trajectory demonstrates what can happen when expectations are not aligned and the component parts of the 'The Sound Relationship House' are not in place when the parties choose to commit. As outlined above, the Doyles' friendship was not strong at the outset of the interview process and they struggled to resolve conflict. At time 2 both spouses' self-rated marital happiness scores had dropped precipitously. Sam had made unilateral financial decisions with dire consequences when the credit crunch hit. These decisions would potentially affect most marriages negatively but the Doyles' 'relationship house' was already structurally compromised. At time 2, Sam's action had transgressed Claire's expectation of a partnership of equals and the parties had separated by time 4:

I've said to him that I can't give him what he needs because he doesn't give me what I need psychologically and emotionally... by him [not] acknowledging me, giving me that small bit of respect... it affects how I feel about him... It's stuff that he doesn't understand is important, but I can't tell him anymore.

Attitudes and expectations around children may have a 'sleeper effect'. They may not be salient when dating but assume greater importance following marriage (Hill and Peplau, 1998). There was evidence of this in the Isaacs marriage. The Isaacs struggled to make their relationship work due, in James' view, to their 'different expectations around things' which they became 'more acutely aware of' after the birth of their first child. They were unable to bridge these expectations and the relationship broke down between times 3 and 4.

### *Gendered expectations*

Resonating with the findings of Mansfield and Collard (1988:176) and of Gabb and Fink (2015) a generation later, for many men in Couple Sample 1 'the home' symbolised a place of refuge and comfort. 'Coming home', though routine, was deeply meaningful:

I like coming home and I like the boring stuff like the kiss in the morning that happens every morning for 10 years, I like coming in and [the children] are bundling me at the door. (Alfie Pickering, time 4)

It sounds daft, it sounds really clichéd to be fair, but I can't imagine not coming home to her every night and not going again in the morning and waving her off and [Alice and the children] always stand at the window as I leave and it's just, that's life. (Mike Potter, time 4)

Women in thriving relationships do not expect their spouse to meet all their emotional needs:

I have learned as well that my partner can't provide me all my emotional needs. I am better at understanding my emotional needs and where I am best to get topped up for each of those needs. (Sarah Henderson, time 4)

Men did not expect their wives to meet all of their emotional needs, but this was largely because they claimed not to have any/many or not to understand what they might be. Alfie Pickering's bemused response about emotional needs at time 4 ('I am a bloke aren't I, I don't even know what emotional needs I have') typified this mindset.

Catherine Isaac, who separated from her husband, James, between time 3 and 4 recognised that her expectations of him had been unrealistic:

With James... I was constantly looking up waiting for him to meet my needs and to fulfil me and, you know, basically I put him on a pedestal which is impossible for the poor guy to do.

Couples in thriving relationships know each other intimately. Their understanding of how the other 'ticks' has deepened over time enabling them to anticipate their spouses' needs:

I feel like I know her much better and I think I just feel like intuitively I just kind of know what she needs and what she likes much better. (Alistair Vickers, time 4)

I think we've got a lot better at sort of understanding where the other person is coming from and how it looks to them and feels to them. (Reshma Ram, time 4)

Thriving couples in Sample 1 were 'intimate confidantes' rather than 'intimate' strangers' and, since their expectations are aligned, mostly, the 'gender gap' in expectations around emotional intimacy observed by Mansfield and Collard (1988:230) had been narrowed, if not wholly bridged. At different times across the interviews some couples were more like 'intimate strangers', experienced dissonance in expectations around emotional fulfilment. However, these spouses formed only a small minority and wives were as likely to be unaware of husbands' unmet emotional needs as the reverse.

## Being realistic and Couple Sample 2

Like Sample 1, couples in Sample 2 described having realistic expectations of the 'ups and downs' of relationships, the 'work' required to sustain relationships and the notion that no 'one person' can meet another person's emotional needs:

We didn't have that expectation of this kind of person who is going to fulfil all our needs or be a kind of solution... you read fairy stories when you are a girl... the ending is the woman going off with the man and getting married and... [living] happily ever after... but it isn't like that, that's like the beginning of the story in a relationship and that's when the work starts. (Ava-04-CB-OS)

People expect their relationships to be skipping down the street all the time and, you know, desperately in love and relationships are not like that at all they require huge amounts of hard work.... they require a lot of work and a lot of input... any relationship does. (Charlie-08-CB-OS)

Clara disclosed that her faith informed her expectations; 'emotional needs are often met spiritually, and I don't expect to be everything that he needs and I'm certainly not everything that he needs' (Clara-03-M-OS). As per in Sample 1, male participants described having a lack of expectation for emotional support in general (or at least the emotional support recognised by females):

I don't think having long deep discussions is how we resolve these things particularly, I mean that might be a man thing I don't know.... with women there is much more, a tendency to [say] 'how do you feel about that then' and that's a question I doubt we would ever ask each other... it's not that we can't do it, it's just that somehow, I rather feel that that's for the other bloke to sort out. (Ron-10-CP-SS)

I mean obviously I do have emotional needs, but they are quite easily filled and generally speaking I can find ways of filling them for myself (laughs).... I do know that Sofia is there and ready to provide that support or space, as and when I need it and actually just that alone, 99

times out of 100 is enough for me to quite happily deal with whatever my emotional needs might be. (Sawyer-07-CB-OS)

This gendered difference in expectations had to be accepted and adapted to, as Violet describes:

He's very quick to pick up if you're trying to show support and he'll say "look, you know, it's alright I don't need you to do that". So, it's like, if he is ill, if I show sympathy, it's like he just doesn't want to know, he'd rather shut himself away in a room and come out when he is better. (Violet-08-CB-OP)

Three quarters of the individuals interviewed in this sample had parents who had had intact relationships during their lifetimes and, as per Sample 1, social learning from parents and other significant family members' relationships was reported, with expectations being shaped by role-models to uphold or to be different from:

I think my parents obviously they were together all the time that my mum was alive, I mean their relationship was a bit up and down, but I did see that model of being together and loyalty. (Robyn-02-M-SS)

Having seen both of my parents... making an almighty effing mess out of relationships... [I learnt] what I saw as being positive things in a relationship and the things that I saw as being damaging and [I] made a very clear decision that... I would make a concerted and conscious effort to avoid the kind of scenarios... that were liable to damage the relationship. (Sawyer-07-CB-OS)

Most of those who went on to formalise their relationship described expectations of permanence:

I think my expectations were that this was it, I mean I had different girlfriends and things like that before, but I knew that by going out with Lia that was going to be it. So, my expectations were probably quite high... we'll be together forever. (Max-06-M-OS)

Conversely, long-term cohabitants and two couples who formalised their relationships instead described hopes of relationship continuation rather than expectations, based on views rejecting the notions of 'the one' and 'for life' (see also 'Commitment' section):

I think most relationships have a finite kind of course. If you're lucky... that finite course is greater than your life span. But yeah, I mean I think if we were immortal... I don't think any relationship would ever last forever... I just don't think it's kind of practical to kind of make that assumption, so I think just being happy with the fact that enjoying what you have while you have it, but not being afraid to recognise when it has run its course. (Sawyer-07-CB-OS)

In Sample 2, rather than whether expectations were high in terms of permanence, what appeared to matter most was a symmetry in each partner's expectations; an aligned shared perspective:

When you go into it with feelings of this romantic thought that there is one person for you, then you are going to come a cropper. You know, there are billions of people out there for one person it's just, you know... (Merlin-04-CB-OS)

I entirely agree with him. That's probably partly why we are together, as we totally agree... Neither of us believes in the myth of, you know, of 'the one'. (Ava-04-CB-OS)

As will be discussed in 'Build a Life to Suit You' a shared perspective of commitment may not be there at the start of a relationship but can develop over time. For example, Macy (02-M-SS) described herself as 'a bit commitment phobic' who questioned what she was doing in the early years of her relationship. Her partner, Robyn was aware early on that they were in different places:

Whilst I would probably have been happy to have perhaps been a bit more expressing that sort of commitment in whatever way at an earlier stage... I knew that wasn't right and that wouldn't have been right for Macy and therefore wouldn't have been right for us. (Robyn-02-M-SS)

## Seeing the best

Positive global perceptions of one's partner are a vital component of thriving intimate relationships (Gottman et al. 2002; Neff and Karney, 2008). Globally satisfied partners 'see the best' in the other and are more likely to invoke positive sentiment override; viewing a negative act by their partner as out of character and circumstantial whilst attributing positive acts to stable, internal characteristics of the partner (Gottman et al. 2002). Attributing a partner's negative behaviour to external factors, makes it easier to forgive the behaviour (Rusbult et al. 2002). Conversely, if a partner is not generally dependable, negative sentiment override is invoked whereby negative acts are attributed by partners to stable and internal characteristics of the other ("that's what they're always like") whilst positive acts are seen as fleeting and situationally determined (Gottman et al. 2002).

Whilst positive global perceptions of one's partner are a pre-requisite, Neff and Karney (2008:203) suggest that such perceptions must be grounded in an accurate perception of the partner's specific traits. Loving one's partner compassionately; grounding global adoration in an accurate perception of a partner's strengths and weakness leads partners to align their expectations more closely to reality, preventing disappointment and providing a deeper, more solid foundation to intimate relationships.

In the early years of a relationship, partners develop habitual patterns of meaning-making to explain partner behaviour (e.g., he does that because he loves me, or she does that because she doesn't care) (Durtschi et al. 2011). The former response is likely to build trust. In thriving couples, we therefore expected that sentiment override would start positively and grow over time.

Since negative affect triumphs over positive affect (Gottman et al. 2002:22) we expected that negative sentiment override would only be noted in ailing marriages and that separation would likely be preceded by a period of one or both partners attributing negative motives to the behaviour of the other.

## Seeing the best and Couple Sample 1

Positive sentiment override, the ability to 'see the best' in their partners was a given in all but the unhappiest relationships in Couple Sample 1. The spouses in thriving marriages viewed their partner as intrinsically good and supportive people as typified by Grace Barnes at time 4:

## KEY MESSAGES

- An ability to see the best in their partners was a given in all but the unhappiest relationships.
- Globally satisfied partners view their partner as intrinsically good and dependable and attribute negative behaviour to circumstance.
- Partners in thriving relationships love compassionately; they communicate acceptance by being aware of but making allowances for the other's shortcomings.
- Experiencing compassionate love blunts the salience of prior frustrations.
- Compassionate love can grow and mature over time and this (more than friendship) underpinned the thriving relationships in Sample 2.
- Positive sentiment override can help prevent intractable problems corroding satisfaction.
- Those who recovered from major breaches of trust e.g. an affair had an ability to disassociate the negative behaviour from the partner's intrinsic nature.
- Significant stress can make retaining a positive perspective about the relationship difficult. An ability to overview the relationship and to look to the 'relationship horizon' aids re-establishment of positivity.
- Negative triumphs over positive – once persistently negative, relationship breakdown is difficult to avoid.

Dominic's super supportive... he is amazing... I am very lucky, he is brilliantly supportive... he has never made me feel anything other than lovely. So yeah, he is probably the best person.

Positive sentiment override was almost universal in Couple Sample 1. Only six individuals displayed negative sentiment override at any time point. One did not complete the fourth interview but was very unhappily married at time 3. When their sentiment override dipped temporarily into negative two individuals were facing severe financial difficulties that had so overwhelmed them that they struggled to retain positivity in any area of life, including their relationship. The temporary loss of positivity should be viewed within this context (Berscheid, 1998; Neff and Karney, 2009). When the financial pressures abated, sentiment override recovered. Of the other three individuals, one had separated by time 4 and the other two were in the unhappiest intact marriages in Sample 1 at time 4.

### ***Compassionate love***

As outlined above, it is essential to love one's spouse compassionately, to be aware of but make allowances for the other's shortcomings. Strong friendship appeared to drive the ability to love compassionately. Maria Newsome had encountered major traumas throughout which she received 'amazing' support from her husband Tom which enabled her to accept Tom's poor communication:

I have always wished that he would communicate better... but he's a boy and he does tend to... ride over stuff and he has always been like that, so I have accepted that... you have to love people to some extent for who they are, you can't change everything about everyone.

Sarah Henderson, at time 4, recognised that the dysfunctional way money was dealt with in his home growing up caused her husband Duncan to stress over it and she modified her responses accordingly. Duncan, in turn, loved her compassionately and believed that it was important to recognise that:

... you are two individuals in a partnership, you each bring your own set of benefits and baggage along into the relationship and you have got to forgive the baggagy bits or learn to live with them and learn to manage with them and... enjoy all the benefits that each other brings.

Learning to 'forgive the baggagy bits' leads to fewer disappointments. Those who fared well chose to 'see the best', focusing on the positives in the relationship such as deep friendship, shared humour and support rather than on irritations. Strikingly, when the couple friendship was strong throughout, these couples were as happy or happier in their marriages at the end of the process as at the start.

Adapting oneself helped participants to manage the 'baggagy bits'. Frustrations disclosed by Jenny Osgood over affection and communication were absent from later interviews as she had accepted:

Gary's not a very touchy-feely person and I've just got to stop pushing him to be something maybe he's not... I have just learned that you can't really change someone... If that's the way he has always been then maybe I have got to change, and I think I have done a lot of that in the last year when I have realised that I can't change him. I've got to adapt maybe the way I am; the way I communicate to him. (Jenny Osgood, time 3)

Loving compassionately led to acceptance. Equally, being loved compassionately, blunted the frustration felt by a spouse when expectations did not align. Jimmy Zanna's frustrations over his wife Debbie's perceived messiness at times 1-3 had diminished at time 4. Debbie responded compassionately and was 'ridiculously' supportive in helping Jimmy to manage a mental health condition that he had developed, and his previous frustrations were less salient as a result.

### ***Seeing the best and building to suit you***

As Gottman and Gottman (2017:19) predict, positive sentiment override helps create shared meaning; 'a life together, a life that has a sense of shared purpose and meaning.' When partners view each other



as intrinsically good people shared meaning becomes easier to create. Two husbands had orchestrated altruistic lifestyles far removed from the career progressions of their peers. Both wives felt that their lives were the richer for it. One wife was grateful to her husband for having 'really opened my eyes to politics and global injustice' and the other was 'brought to tears' by her 'big hearted' husband's treatment of others.

Some couples struggled to agree a vision for their lives leading to frustration for both. Alfie Pickering disclosed at time 4 that his wife's frustrations over his all-consuming work life had led them to question briefly, 'are we still heading in a similar direction?' It was, in part, Alfie's strong positive sentiment override that got him through this 'rough patch':

Molly is just not bothered about status or cash or anything, she is not fussed, she really genuinely is not bothered... and it's such a beautiful thing about her... I kind of really respect that and that really helps me... we are in a marriage and she just wants me around and actually there's nothing wrong with that.

### ***Major internal challenges and sentiment override***

Major internally-caused challenges can devastate relationships. Having the 'Sound Relationship House' components in place at the outset of the marriage enabled some partners to reframe marriage threatening behaviours. One wife responded compassionately to her husband's failure to disclose substantial debt at the outset of the marriage. For others, where the breaches of trust involved infidelity, a profusion of positive sentiment override and a strong basis of friendship to fall back on in the immediate aftermath of the breach meant that these marriages had sufficient integrity to withstand the trauma. One wife had a short-lived affair between times 1 and 2. The husband's comments at time 4, when both had put the affair behind them, that 'it was very out of character' echo sentiments expressed by him in the two previous interviews. At time 2 he said, 'It's almost like it wasn't her... she is so honest with me in all other ways' and at time 3 he described his wife as 'essentially a committed and faithful person... she has got strong principles.' Disassociating his wife's behaviour from her intrinsic nature was key to his recovery. A second couple chose not to take part at time 4 but this ability to divorce hurtful behaviour from their spouse's intrinsically good nature was demonstrated powerfully by the wife at time 2:

The person that lived here between [dates] last year was not [husband]. It wasn't the [husband] that I knew that had done this... You can put it down to a one-off period of time where he wasn't himself cos he'd got so disheartened and he lost all his confidence because of [lists extenuating circumstances] ... I would put it down to some sort of psychotic episode... the bit that I've forgiven is the bit that wasn't [husband].

Choosing to 'see the best' in her husband enabled the wife to regain positivity at time 3 to assert that '[husband] is just the [husband] that I knew at the beginning now.'

### ***The triumph of negative over positive***

Gottman et al. (2002) suggest that negative affect will triumph over positive affect. Once a relationship reaches a tipping point whereby partner behaviour is interpreted negatively recreating positivity is hard (Gottman et al. 2002:298). At time 2, following separation Joanna Thompson said, 'I genuinely wanted it to work... [but] I'd stopped loving him... and it's very hard to change that emotion.' The Maxwell's exemplify the triumph of negative over positive. Once in a negative stable state, separation, as was the case here, becomes likely:

...in my mind, having a negative view on him at the time was, "Oh you can't be bothered to [do that]" but it might be that he didn't get around to it but that's how your mind works doesn't it? ... what you tend to do is always look towards the worst don't you... I would automatically look

towards the negative... you don't make allowances for each of that or maybe you do make allowances but not enough.

Sally had some insight into her shift from positive to negative sentiment override:

I always used to say, and I still do, "Oh he works so hard... he's doing it all for us" [but then I'd put a] negative spin on it... And I started to resent him... you are not thinking about the reason that they are doing it, they are doing it for the good of us and you think they are off living it up.

### Seeing the best and Couple Sample 2

As per Sample 1, couples in Sample 2 compassionately loved each other. They accepted each other's weaknesses, with measures of overall happiness outweighing any dissonance. For example, three participants would have liked more affection from a partner but accepted their partner as they were:

I mean of course there are huge amounts you enjoy and with any relationship there are compromises and I think you just have to be a) aware of those and b) ... it's a sort of percentages game isn't it really? If the good outweighs the bits that get to you, then you just weather those bits, don't you? Or you have to... find a way for you to feel okay about those I think.... You would sometimes like your head stroked a bit but, you know, he's great. (Violet-08-CB-OS)

Couples described a profound respect for their partner and despite facing challenges, often described themselves as fortunate and thankful:

I think for me it's because I know that Merlin is a solid five-star golden person, a solid gold man and I am very lucky to have him and yeah, I know it works for me and yeah, I appreciate him. (Ava-04-CB-OS)

I think she gave me actually the freedom to break out and to become, whatever it is I have become, but I do think, so much of it is down to her. (Bill-03-M-OS)

Couples in Sample 2 described a realistic but positive future orientation in line with the idea of looking to a positive 'relationship horizon' (Gabb and Fink, 2015:21). Terry (01-M-OS) described going forward meant more 'shared memories, shared reflections, shared activities'. Ava felt that being together for a long time gave her:

the benefit of an overview, and like I know that sometimes you have ups and downs and it's probably a transitory thing, you know, if we're like having a bad patch... I can see that's not necessarily going to last forever [or]... destroy the entire relationship just because like I am unhappy at a certain point in time. It doesn't mean that I won't be happy at a future point in time. (Ava-04-CB-OS)

This idea of benefitting from an overview suggests that passionate love is something that grows with secure attachment. Individuals acknowledged that their understanding and expectations of themselves and their relationship have changed over time:

There have been periods where I have been unhappy, but it hasn't been about the relationship, I just thought it was, because I didn't have clarity, so I kind of accept that there may be times when everything is not rosy, but it doesn't mean that the relationship is over. (Macy-02-M-SS)

As per Couple Sample 1, the passage of time deepens the dyadic bond with couples describing getting to a place of emotional security or as Charlie-08-CB-OS puts it, '*not looking over your shoulder*.' Seeing the best in your partner and your relationship is interlinked with being committed:

What would I be going to, you know, suppose I decided that I wanted to, you know, I can't imagine what it would be that I would be going to, that could possibly be better than what I have. I feel like I've won the jackpot. (Ava-04-CB-OS)

## Working at it

Understanding how couples regulate, manage or sustain their relationships, requires consideration not only of how couples solve problems but also of how they support each other (Bradbury et al. 1998; Karney and Bradbury, 1995). Love and affection rather than the absence of strife forge stable relationships, perhaps because conflict, when it does occur, become less consequential in nurturing relationships (Bradbury and Karney, 2004; Huston and Meltz, 2004). Gottman et al. (2002) liken spouses' investment of time and effort into their marriage to deposits into the couple's 'emotional bank account'. Using the same metaphor, Gabb and Fink (2015:30) suggest that 'deposits in the relationship bank may be small, but... their emotional compound interest is substantial' and that, over time, this investment provides a 'buffer' against unexpected life events and challenges.

The participants in the *Enduring Love?* study accepted that relationships require work, but they did not view this work as onerous. It is typically undertaken as small, thoughtful yet often mundane rituals and gestures that could be enjoyed and even treasured (Gabb and Fink, 2015; see also Fincham et al. 2007 and Walker et al. 2010). We therefore expected to find that relationship work; investing time and effort into sustaining a vibrant, meaningful relationship would be a central component of the thriving relationships across both samples.

### Relationship Work and Couple Sample 1

#### *Work at it forever*

Popular culture's emphasis on the need for 'working at the relationship' (Gabb and Fink, 2015:7) was evident in Couple Sample 1. Participants in thriving relationships accepted the need to 'work at it forever' (Maria Newsome, time 4), and that that good marriages don't 'happen by accident... you have to work really hard at it' (Rosie Kaderra, time 4), a sentiment echoed by others:

We both work really hard to make it work and that's the important thing, we don't take it for granted and we don't just expect that our marriage will be ok because we have to work at it to make it work like you have to work at anything to make it work and we do, every day. (Andy Armstrong, time 4)

Several participants in thriving relationships expressed frustration that some people do not look beyond the wedding day and realise that relationships require 'hard work and graft and... you don't just give up' (Sarah Henderson, time 4).

## KEY MESSAGES

- Overwhelmingly, couples in thriving relationships are 'developmentalist' in attitude. They accepted the need to 'work at' their relationships.
- Relationship work is not 'hard work' provided couples are a 'good fit'.
- Couples in thriving relationships are creative and intentional at carving out time as a couple to maintain their connection.
- The outworking of relationship work is in the daily rituals and small regular acts of thoughtfulness that communicate appreciation to the partner.
- Relationship work is reciprocal in thriving relationships. In couples who separated, mutual blaming was commonplace with each partner feeling that their efforts were not reciprocated.
- Relationship work encompasses carving out time to spend pursuing friendships and interests without the other partner.
- Couples in thriving relationships had worked out how to express love and appreciation in a way that was meaningful to their partner.
- Effective relationship work entailed working on oneself, where needed, as well as on the relationship.

Joanna Thompson separated from her husband Stuart after 20 months of marriage. She reflected at time 1 that she had been thinking about 'the lovely pretty dress and everything else' about her wedding day from the age of ten but not about what followed, leaving her ill-equipped to deal with the issues she faced early in the marriage.

### *It's not hard work*

Reflecting the findings of Gabb and Fink (2015:37), for participants in thriving relationships relationship work is not hard work. All participants in thriving relationships at time 4 had developmentalist attitudes. Whereas 'non-developmentalists' tend to consider the need to work at relationships as a sign that the relationship may not be worth saving, 'developmentalists' accept that relationships require work (Ramm et al. 2010). The 'hard' part is finding time to devote to the relationship:

I suppose it's just hard work isn't it? Very fun and very enjoyable, very rewarding but it is hard, you know, to keep a family and to keep it alive between the two [of you] but it's not hard work in that we have to really try at it but it's just life isn't it really? (Wendy Stonebridge, time 4)

Having chosen carefully, thriving couples are 'a good fit' so the relationship was not 'hard work':

It has never felt like we have got to work at this... [in previous partners] perhaps you had to try harder or you had to compromise more [but] I have never felt like I have had to change who I am or change who [Mark] is as it's always just been quite easy. (Rebecca Naylor, time 4)

For some who separated, fundamental personality differences made the start of the relationship testing. Reflecting similar sentiments expressed by Catherine, James Isaac at time 1 reported:

[Catherine] and I are so completely different in terms of character and style and approach and everything, so it was quite a rocky initial twelve months... just working out how we both would be in a relationship together... not your typical blossoming romance, early days type stuff.

Unlike thriving couples, the Isaacs' found making their relationship 'work' difficult. Effort was required to make the relationship 'fit' initially and they found the transition to parenthood hugely challenging. Indeed tellingly, at time 4 James disclosed that the tipping point for him came when time spent arguing outstripped enjoying each other's company and trying to work on the relationship.

### *Make time*

Couples in thriving relationships make time for each other. Creating space for time together becomes habitual, yet deeply meaningful:

We do make time for our marriage, so we do see it as something that we have to work at, but I think... if you work at it at the start then those things become a habit and then when you get to eleven years, you don't feel like you are working at it because there are certain things you do... to make time... and that's then normal. (Zoe Armstrong, time 4)

The wife in the only voluntarily childless couple prized having more time with her husband than her friends with children. All the other couples became parents before or during the study (one wife was pregnant with their first child at time 4) and in all but a few households both parents worked. Couples were therefore time-poor and generally realistic about the amount of couple time available. Thriving couples carved out couple time creatively and intentionally. They tried 'to make that time purposeful' (Neil Joseph, time 4). A number had regular date nights. One couple had rearranging diaries so that they could eat a leisurely weekly breakfast together. Where lack of childcare made this infeasible,

several couples set aside regular evenings at home to chat, listen to music, watch TV, eat a special meal or play board games, often over a glass of wine. The Queensburys had taken up some of the other's hobbies. The Osgoods synchronised their schedules to ensure that both or neither of them worked from home on given evenings. Several couples had negotiated day (instead of night) shifts, compressed hours or declined work opportunities abroad to protect couple time. Conversely, Tim Walters cited failure to prioritise time together post-parenthood as instrumental in the breakdown of his marriage:

It's easy to look back at things with hindsight isn't it, but we certainly didn't give each other enough attention, or we didn't really make time for one another... [for] couple stuff... we very much focused on being parents and... forgot about one another and we weren't having any time as a couple. (Tim Walters, time 4)

Making time, when time is at a premium, is a potent symbol of commitment. It provides space to communicate hopes and dreams (thereby creating shared meaning) and acts as a lubricant, oiling the machinery of the relationship and reaffirming the couple's friendship. Time together creates a bank of happy memories. Christopher Turner, at time 4, advised that before having children couples should:

Go and have fun first because when you are going through the rougher times later on you will think back to that early fun that you had and then you will try and maybe recapture that... a glorious past if you like which you try and chase.

Extended periods of time together, particularly snatched weekends away without children, was relished. 'Time out' from the daily grind helped thriving couples to stay connected or, where needed, to reconnect. Will and Yvonne Xavier's marriage had been severely tested between time 3 and time 4. Time together enjoying a shared interest helped Will to remember why they had married:

Sometimes you forget why you married somebody and it's important to go back and remember. When you are free of kids... and you are listening to live music that you haven't done in seven or eight years, you remember that you like the same music... and humour comes out that doesn't necessarily show itself just in the, "I've got back love, what's for dinner?" kind of conversations.

Alfie and Molly Pickering, as outlined above, struggled to agree on the life they wanted. At time 4, Alfie reflected on a recent break without the children:

[We] had an amazing time right from the outset. The minute we left the house it was like, you know, the couple that got together again but to be honest [when] you throw in all the other [responsibilities]... It's not easy trying to get it all right; to be the guy at work, the husband, you know, the mate to people around here.

### ***Technology is taking over***

Several participants used technology (texts and WhatsApp) to stay connected during the working day. However, some expressed frustration that work calls or excessive time spent online encroached on couple time. Phil Stonebridge's comments at time 4 that 'technology is taking over a little bit... we should just put the phones down and start talking a bit more' echoed similar sentiments by others.

### ***The weave that holds everything together***

Reflecting the findings of Gabb and Fink (2015), it was the small daily thoughtful gestures that sustained thriving relationships. A text during the working day, a coffee to take as one leaves for work or a well-timed hug as Alice Potter described at time 4:

[Mike will] flounce into the kitchen in the most ridiculous manner possible and give me a hug and say, "love you, you're brilliant" and then go back upstairs and sometimes that's all I need.

Small, regular acts of kindness helped couples stay connected and feel appreciated producing, as Gabb and Fink (2015:30) note, significant 'compound interest' in the relationship's emotional bank account:

Little things like the cup of tea in bed ... I think it's really important to do... regular little things rather than grand flashy gestures, be mindful of each other probably. (Grace Barnes, time 4)

It's just the simple things: to come home, sit down, have a chat about what's gone on during the day, watch a bit of telly, have a cup of tea and go to bed. I mean just the simple things become very important and that's just kind of the weave that holds everything together. (Geoff Illingworth, time 4)

A 'cup of tea' symbolised the small kindnesses and rituals that are deeply meaningful to couples in thriving relationships. It stood for thoughtfulness: Sophie Carmichael advised committing to someone only if they are the type to bring you tea in bed when you are ill. It was used by Caroline Turner as a proxy for an apology after an argument. Poignantly, when Andy Armstrong was suffering from a potentially terminal illness he reflected:

I didn't want to imagine someone else doing my hard bit... I didn't want to imagine someone else giving [Zoe] a kiss in the morning or making her a cup of tea or tucking her in at night.

### *We both put the same into it*

Reciprocal effort was a hallmark of the relationships thriving at time 4. Matthew Jenkins reflected, 'I don't think either takes advantage and we both put the same into it, and we put a lot into it.' This reciprocation was unspoken and unmonitored as neatly summarised by Martin Egan:

We are just a team and we just get on with it and to think, "Oh I supported you today so therefore I should have this tomorrow" isn't really how we work. We just sort of crack on with it really. (Martin Egan, time 3)

In ailing couples, this reciprocation is conspicuously absent, and effort is monitored. As noted in 'Being realistic' above, at time 2 Claire Doyle felt, 'I can't give [Sam] what he needs because he doesn't give me what I need psychologically and emotionally.'

The narratives of separated participants were peppered with accounts of perceived unreciprocated efforts to salvage the relationship. Sally Maxwell felt that she was the 'driving force' behind attempts to rescue the relationship and that whilst she 'threw everything into it' Graham 'was just disinterested in everything' causing her to then withdraw. Graham's version was, 'I felt like I was the one who was trying to change and improve and do things, but I didn't see any change from Sally's side.' The practitioners we interviewed, particularly practising mediators, indicated that different narratives around relationship breakdown and mutual blaming are commonplace:

[I hear different narratives] all of the time. And it's very much a self-justification that this is happening because of the other person, because of the way they behaved, it is their fault. Which is an understandable internal communication, internal dialogue, because who wants to be the person who is at fault? (Tim Kingston, solicitor, mediator and collaborative lawyer)

### ***Allow the other person to be their own person***

Consistent with the findings of Gabb and Fink (2015:36), couples in thriving relationships viewed time apart as a critical and highly prized dimension of relationship work. Retaining 'a sense of the individual whilst also being a partnership' as Lisa Fisher (time 4) put it was viewed as healthy and cited by many as central to why their relationship worked. Reciprocity was stressed as was ensuring a balance between time together and time apart, as typified by Lesley Eagan at time 4:

I think we just make time to allow the other person to be their own person... we don't have to do things together all the time... we are both quite flexible in terms of our independence of one another and then together time as well.

Several men appreciated the 'freedom' they enjoyed compared to their friends. Others were mindful that their demanding careers meant significant time away from home and struggled to give themselves permission for personal downtime. For some, their lives were the poorer for it, but it did not diminish their marital satisfaction, since the lack of permission did not emanate from their spouse.

Resentment with time spent apart was only evident in marriages that had been severely tested. For example, Rachel Leyton was saddened that her husband chose to spend time with friends rather than her. Time apart could also be symptomatic of underlying relationship tensions. Pete Logan suggested that Cathy's encouragement to him to pursue interests was because 'she prefers me out of the house... because I am madly annoying at home.'

For the couples who separated, a sense of lost identity was prevalent in their separation narratives. At time 3, when the relationship was in difficulty, Catherine Isaac said that prior to marriage she 'had concerns around how much I could be me' in the relationship and 'thought that would just go away over time.' Ginny Walters, post-separation reflected 'I had lost so much of me' in the relationship. At time 4, Graham Maxwell said that he 'didn't really do anything for myself' in the marriage. Poignantly, Claire Doyle reflected post-separation that 'basically it just got to the point where my life was nothing to do with me, there was no room for me in my own life.'

### ***Inner work***

Lastly, an essential part of relationship work undertaken where needed by individuals in thriving relationships was work on themselves. As outlined above, Jenny Osgood's satisfaction with her relationship improved once she realised that she couldn't change her husband and that she should therefore adapt the way that she communicated with him. Geoff Illingworth was substantially happier at time 4 than time 3 which he thought resulted from him having 'grown up'; 'a bit of self-awareness... and a bit of reflection' had helped him to 'move forward and be in a far better place.' Reflecting on her 'triggers' around money issues Selina Monroe disclosed at interview 4 that:

I took responsibility for how I was feeling, and I worked to changing me, you know, instead of blaming [Piers] and I think a lot of couples will blame each other for things rather than do the inner work and I have done a lot of inner work.

Participants with sufficient self-awareness to undertake 'inner work' when needed reported substantial benefits for their relationship.

### ***Working at it and Couple Sample 2***

In keeping with Sample 1, the need for effort to maintain the relationship came up in all interviews in Sample 2. This effort or 'give and take' was not hard work but was reciprocal and included prioritising fun time together and time apart. Couples with children similarly acknowledged the challenge of finding time alone as a couple with views reflecting different approaches to parenting, specifically the prioritisation of children over the couple or vice versa:

The best way to express it is that we still spend I think as much time together as we can as a family so it's not just me and Elenna together, it's the whole family together.... We are happy I think, the kids are happy, the kids are loving it and I think as long as the kids are happy, we're happy, we are happy with each other yeah. (Terry-01-M-OS)

[Talking about his wife] she would put me first, she would say, "the crux of the relationship is us two together" and so it's possible the children felt second class citizens. She never treated them like that and she always did everything she could. (Bill-03-M-OS)

Retired couples described a growing ease of being together without being together:

I think when we are together we are less focused on each other as an individual, you know, or each other and our relationship... I will be reading the newspaper, Harry will be doing something on his [points at computer] ... and that's fine... So, I would say one is less conscious of us being with... each other, in that sort of relationship sense as time goes on. (Ron-10-CP-SS)

As per Sample 1, couples talked about gestures of love and affection but also emphasised the importance of knowing your partner well and expressing gestures in a way that could be heard and understood:

Bill is the person who likes the words, so I tell him. In our family, you show that you love people by doing things. So that was something that I had to learn because Bill actually needed to hear the words, I needed to actually articulate for him to appreciate. Because you know that some people like gifts, some people like touch, people like all different things. So yes, just a case of finding out which is the one that makes your husband or wife happiest. (Clara-03-M-OS)

The more insight you can get the better and it does help to understand for me why it's particularly important that Macy likes me to run around and do things for her because, you know, just occasionally I can think 'hmmph' .... (Robyn-02-M-SS)

Robyn goes on to explain why as a same-sex couple, they had to be mindful about the gestures they use to acknowledge their partner and relationship:

I will be quite affectionate in public. Obviously, there is a caveat of being mindful of where we are, so unfortunately there is an awful lot of places even in the UK, even in England, where I wouldn't stand in, you know, in [name of town] like at 8 'o' clock on a Saturday night and hold hands or be affectionate in public. (Robyn-02-M-SS)

As per Sample 1, relationship work involved work on yourself. Most individuals interviewed described learning better ways to regulate their emotions and deal with stress which in turn benefitted the relationship:

I always used exercise as a way of getting rid of a lot of frustration... I cycle to [work] so that allows me to get rid of a lot of negativity or the things that build up during the day. So, when I get home I don't bring it home, it stays at work. (Terry-01-M-OS)

Nowadays I can see the long build up to any kind of trigger point and it serves as a warning to me to stop, take a break, work out what is causing that build-up of anger and deal with that before I get to the point that anything is going to trigger me into an explosion. And the way that I do that generally now is I will sit down, and I will talk, and talk and talk and talk and talk and talk to Sawyer. (Sofia-07-CB-OS)



## Being committed

In the 'Sound Relationship House' theory, commitment is one of the load bearing walls. Commitment, Gottman and Gottman (2017:23) suggest, is about 'cherishing what one has and nurturing gratitude.'

Whilst theorists have used different terms to explain commitment one model of commitment easily translates to another and there is notable consistency across theories and empirical findings (Stanley et al. 2010). We found it helpful to consider commitment through the lens of Johnson et al.'s (1999) framework of marital commitment: personal commitment (wanting to stay married); moral commitment (feeling morally obligated to stay married) and structural commitment (feeling constrained to stay). Personal commitment is a function primarily of love, relationship satisfaction, and couple identity. Moral commitment is primarily a function of divorce attitudes (a feeling that marriage should be honoured and upheld), partner contract (feeling morally obliged to honour the promises made to one's partner), and general consistency values (e.g. a belief that one should finish what one has started). Structural commitment pertains to barriers to leaving, regardless of the level of personal or moral commitment (Johnson et al. 1999:161).

Ultimately structural barriers to divorce tend not to deter those determined to end their marriages (Knoester and Booth, 2000). However, there is likely to be a secondary, restraint element to commitment, which may be sufficient to get parties through temporary seasons of dissatisfaction. Following couples longitudinally gave us the opportunity to examine which component(s) of commitment came to the fore when commitment is tested.

Johnson et al.'s respondents were in the 13th year of marriage in 1994. We were interested in how the framework for commitment might apply to a later cohort of married couples and to a more diverse sample.

### Being committed and Couple Sample 1

#### *Thriving couples and commitment to the institution of marriage*

The shift from an institutionalised to a more individualised view of marriage, in which decisions to stay married are based more on individual choice than on adherence to tradition, is well documented (Cherlin, 2004; Kaa, 2002). There was evidence of this shift in our

## KEY MESSAGES

- Commitment to the relationship is a prerequisite of thriving relationships but commitment to the institution of marriage is not.
- Couples who were parents described a moral commitment to staying in a committed relationship to provide stability and role-modelling for their children. This was seen as positive by happy couples and a constraint by unhappy couples.
- Whilst personal happiness was important to the couples in Sample 1, most saw the relationship as lifelong. Several Sample 2 couples rejected measuring their relationship in terms of personal happiness and the notion of 'the one for life', instead being committed for as long as the relationship was healthy for both partners.
- In Sample 1 being married deterred separation in difficult times. In Sample 2 couples emphasised adapting to change and compassionate love to get through testing times.
- Cohabiting couples describe formalising their relationships as unnecessary to prove their commitment.
- While not a feature for thriving couples in Sample 1, structural commitment featured for couples in relationships of longer duration who emphasised practical difficulties of leaving as well as a moral obligation to stay as your partner ages, suggesting that commitment type may change over time.
- In Sample 2, prevalence of divorce in social networks impacted attitudes to formalising relationships.

data. Commitment to one's own marriage rather than to the institution of marriage predicted positive outcomes in Couple Sample 1. Eekelaar (2012:75) argues that individualistic values have gained ground recently, but at the expense of the power of institutions not of moral values. Several participants were fiercely committed to their marriage but not to the institution. Reflecting this view Mike Potter, at time 4 considered marriage to be a 'paperwork exercise... The bit of paper is a bit of a paper' yet his commitment to his own relationship was unquestionable:

It really is the 'death do us part' option and that's about it. There is nothing that can't be worked through... [separation is] not an option, it isn't an option.

### ***Commitment to the institution and religious beliefs***

The minority of couples with strongly held religious beliefs expressed strong support for the institution of marriage. The promises they had made to God gave them a 'sense of moral responsibility or religious responsibility' to stay married (Zoe Armstrong, time 4). Their relationships might more accurately be described as 'triadic' rather than 'dyadic' (Gabb and Fink (2015:95). They viewed their marriage as sanctified by God and their faith provided a template for marriage. Neil Joseph's comment at time 4 that we 'don't believe that our marriage is just the two of us, we believe that God is in the middle of our marriage' typified this view causing these couples to view marriage as life-long:

I am staying 'til the job is done I think, you know, the way I view it is that we have made promises and so, you know, those promises are good as long as I am alive. (Neil Joseph, time 4)

Those with a faith who do not view themselves as 'deeply religious' were often ardent in their support for the institution of marriage:

I got married in the eyes of God, I made a commitment and fully intend to stick to that commitment... People... say that marriage is only a bit of paper, but I so, so disagree with them. I wanted to share my life with somebody whereby you are giving them 100% commitment and they are giving 100% commitment back and marriage is that. (Christopher Turner, time 4).

Furthermore, some with religious upbringings that they had ostensibly rejected had taken from their upbringing a commitment to life-long marriage. At time 3, Paul Queensbury concluded that his view that marriage is for life was 'a legacy of having religious parents.' Alex Rogers and Mike Potter also acknowledged that their views had been shaped by Christian values from their upbringings.

### ***Why marry?***

If commitment to the institution of marriage has weakened, as it had for most of the participants in thriving relationships in Sample 1 save for the strongly religious, then why do people choose marriage over cohabitation? All but the Asian couples and those couples in which one or both spouses had strongly held religious beliefs had cohabited pre-maritally. For many, cohabitation and marriage were 'natural next steps' in a thriving relationship. Several, as Giddens (1992:192) observed, thought that marriage was a 'public signifier' of their commitment to one another. Tom Newsome (time 4) saw it as 'symbolic', a 'definite affirmation' of wishing to be together for life. Others echoed this sentiment:

[We married] to make it a permanent promise to each other... Living together was always a bit more transient and, so it was... this is for keeps, this is for life, this is our long-term commitment that living together just didn't quite bring... these are the promises we have made to each other and we have done this in front of our friends and family who can support and witness that. Just a strengthening of the foundation of the relationship I guess. (Lucy Young, time 4)

For the very happily married couples at time 4, marriage was perceived to be 'an extra barrier' to separation (Sarah Henderson) which several thought would make them 'dig deeper and work at it harder because of the promises that we have made to each other to do that' (Lucy Young).

### ***Thriving couples and personal commitment***

The couples in thriving relationships, as outlined in 'Working at It' above, worked hard to maintain and nurture their relationships. Amato (2007) argues that personal commitment confounds commitment and relationship satisfaction. This criticism overlooks the work that thriving couples undertook to ensure that their relationship remains deeply satisfying. These marriages were not thriving by chance. These couples had what Duncan Henderson described at time 1 as an 'in it for everything' mentality. They viewed the commitment to their spouse as life-long. As Gottman and Gottman (2017:23) note, they cherished and nurtured the relationship.

As Johnson et al. (1999:161) predict, 'couple identity', the sense of meaning that is derived from being part of a couple and working together through challenges is integral to the personal commitment of the Sample 1 thriving couples:

It's not all rosy and you have to make your marriage work... you will have ups and downs but if you're a team you can get through it. (Sukhjinder Gayal, time 3)

For many, love and commitment drove their desire to work to nurture the relationship. The three are inextricably linked as neatly summed up by Phil Stonebridge at time 4:

We are both very committed and we will work on things and obviously the love is there as well and if you have all them three qualities then you always do your best to make it work.

Most participants would not remain long-term in persistently unhappy marriages. They would try hard to reconcile differences and the happiness of their children (in addition to their own happiness) was key, but their commitment is to their own relationship not to the institution of marriage:

I made a commitment to him to be happy. I... didn't make any commitment to the institution of marriage and I don't feel like I owe it to anyone to stay together. (Rebecca Naylor, time 2)

### ***Thriving couples and moral commitment***

Within Johnson and colleagues' framework of commitment, moral commitment is primarily a function of divorce attitudes, partner contract, and general consistency values (Johnson et al. 1999:164). In Couple Sample 1, strong 'internal morality' (Eekelaar, 2012:94) led many to set higher standards of themselves than they would ask of others. Some were aware of the discrepancy which appeared to be driven by personal consistency values (the third component of moral commitment):

I am certainly not anti-divorce... when it comes to other people but when it comes to me I... have made that commitment and that counts for something. So, I wouldn't say just because you are no longer happy bang, off you go even though I would say that's fine for other people... For me I think there is some kind of inherent value to that commitment you made. (Paul Queensbury, time 4)

The second element of moral commitment; the commitment made to the other person, was articulated well by Alice Potter, at time 4:

We would work through [problems] as I've made a commitment to Mike and he has made a commitment to me and as far as I am concerned I will stick with Mike through thick and thin.

Responses appeared to be gendered. Colin Hunter, Cameron Young, Richard Atkins and Mark Naylor all spoke at time 4 about preferencing their wife's happiness above their own:

I think if we were splitting because I was really unhappy, but Dawn was fine, and I felt like she would really struggle on her own then I think I would probably stay. (Richard Atkins, time 4)

Children, within Johnson et al.'s framework of commitment are viewed as a structural barrier to leaving. However, in Sample 1, when couples are happy, children were a moral rather than a structural barrier to leaving. Children were a positive signifier of investment. A desire to provide their children with a stable base drove couples to work to sustain their marriage. The commitment participants made to their children was as great, sometimes greater, than the commitment to their partner:

I have made a commitment... made a commitment to Cameron but I also feel that I made a commitment to the [children] so I can't, you know, it's not an opt in/opt out kind of a situation, it's for keeps. (Lucy Young, time 4)

Some women's moral commitment to their children sprang from a desire to protect their children from what they had experienced:

I came from a broken home and I would never want to put... my [children] through that at all (Sue Quinn, time 4)

Stanley et al. (2010:245) suggest that it is only when dissatisfied that constraints become more salient. In Sample 1, children became a structural constraint only once the couple's marriage was in difficulty.

The third component of moral commitment in Johnson et al.'s framework is consistency values. A belief that, in life, one should finish what one starts was evident in the thriving couples' narratives:

[Phil's] like me he's a sticker he doesn't give up on me and I think that's why our relationship has worked ... we are sort of stickers, we are fighters, we don't give up on things easily. (Wendy Stonebridge, time 4)

Johnson et al. (1999:173) report that husbands' moral commitment was most highly correlated with consistency values. There was evidence of this in the husbands in the thriving couples and, critically, in the husbands whose satisfaction scores rebounded between times 3 and 4 (see below). Simon Underwood's assertion at time 4: 'I would never give up on a commitment' reflects the sentiments of several men. At time 4 John Kaderra discloses eloquently:

We have got kids and I think it is important to set an example that if you make a promise you honour it and life is hard sometimes and you work through it... It's a commitment that I have made, and I will stick with it... The way I see it is that I've told [Rosie] that I will stay with her forever and I am a man of my word, so I will.

### ***Thriving couples and structural commitment***

Ordinarily, structural commitment (feeling constrained to stay in a relationship) will only come into play once a person is unhappy in the relationship (Johnson et al. 1999:161) so, as expected, structural commitment did not feature highly in the accounts of the individuals in thriving relationships.

Social pressures to stay together is a facet of structural commitment. As there may be greater pressure from within Asian communities to stay married we were interested in whether this featured in the narratives of the Asian couples in Couple Sample 1. All the Asian couples had stable, deeply fulfilling marriages. They had chosen partners carefully and all worked hard to ensure that their partnerships remained intensely satisfying. None of the Asian participants thought that community disapproval of

divorce would be a consideration if their marriage became so difficult that they were considering leaving although the women were more explicit in their rejection of cultural pressures. At time 2, Sukhjinder Gayal said of potential pressure not to divorce from within her community:

Oh, I don't care. I mean my parents... because they're from a different generation they would think about all that but... I don't care about such things so if I had to leave, I would leave.

At time 4, Nazia Zehan disclosed that she would only stay if she was happy 'regardless of how other people think.' Reshma Ram felt that it was the commitment that she and Dinesh had made to each other (moral commitment) rather than family disapproval that would make her stay if the marriage became problematic. Her experience of positive family values had influenced her own orientation towards working at her marriage:

I think the influence of say family isn't necessarily what they would think...[it's] perhaps because of... [my family's] approach to marriage that I would be thinking that and judging myself that way... [I wouldn't be] worrying so much about what other people would say, you know, family members or whatever... [it is more about] the values that I have come from; [family] influence.

The Asian husbands tended to have less liberal attitudes towards divorce than their wives. Deepak Gayal's view in relation to divorce generally (rather than for himself) at time 3 was 'you'd really have to go some to convince me that divorce is the answer.' Dinesh Ram, at time 4, thought that divorce is justified in cases of 'chronic infidelity'. Tahir Zehan spoke passionately at time 4 about his belief in the 'sanctity of marriage':

When I got married and when I understood the concept of marriage and the vows of marriage I totally believed in the sanctity of marriage and what it offers.

### *Testing times and thriving couples*

Amato (2007:308) suggests that commitment, like bravery, cannot be properly measured until it is tested so we were interested in how different couples responded when commitment is severely tested. For the couples whose marriages remained intact at time 4, what facets of commitment might be driving outcomes? Many of the thriving couples had faced significant external challenges including major illnesses, death of a parent, severe depression, and significant financial issues. It was the way that they tackled these issues, that distinguished them from other couples. As the vulnerability-stress-adaptation model predicts, and as outlined in 'Keep talking' below, these couples approached difficulties as a team. They had the component parts of the 'Sound Relationship House' in place which enabled them to weather storms. Their 'in it for everything' mentality (Duncan Henderson, time 1) ensured that they 'hunkered down' (Sarah Henderson, time 4), pulling together in difficult seasons. As Ramm et al. (2010), Reibstein (2007) and Walker et al. (2010) report, pulling together during difficult periods when issues exogenous to the relationship assailed them, helped thriving couples to retain the structural integrity of their 'relationship houses' to emerge stronger:

I realised [the issue] was a true test of us. We survived, and I think it shows the strength of our relationship... I think it's helped us to bond closer as well. (Tahir Zehan, time 3)

This willingness to pull together seemed to be driven by the couples' long-term 'us with a future' perspective (Stanley et al. 2010:244). These couples had a strong 'couple identity', a critical element of 'personal commitment' (Johnson et al. 1999:161). They had, as Tom Newsome described it at time 4, 'decided to take the world on together' and this attitude applied equally to the good times and the difficult times. For these couples, testing times reinforced the already strong commitment that each person had to the relationship. Testing times had proved rather than tested commitment.

### *Tested commitment in intact couples*

Clements et al. (2004:615) report that couples distressed at isolated points who return to the satisfied range are more similar to couples who remain satisfied than to constantly distressed couples. This was true of the three husbands who were significantly distressed at one interview but returned to the very or extremely happy range by the following interview.

As outlined below two husbands (Chris Small and Geoff Illingworth) were struggling at time 3 to adapt to changes in their relationships with the relentless responsibility of parenting and work. Both men chose not to discuss their feelings with their wives. Most participants' commitment to the institution lessened over time. Not so these husbands. Chris Small for example, at time 2, dismissed marriage as 'just a bit of paper.' He didn't 'hold much value on a bit of paper' and 'a bit of paper doesn't stop [him] walking away if [he] was unhappy.' By time 3 however, when struggling, his position had shifted:

I got married for the long haul not a short haul. I'm sure a lot of people get married for the moment but not me.

Chris's standpoint that he would not stay in an unhappy marriage (personal commitment) shifted once his commitment was tested at time 3. He responded by 'manning up' (see 'Adapting to change' below). His commitment would fall squarely into the 'moral commitment' camp:

You have got to stick to it, you know, through thick and thin you get married for better and for worse and, you know, those vows should mean something.

Geoff Illingworth at time 2 indicated that he feels that the public commitment of marriage has strengthened the relationship:

It feels much more secure, being married. I feel like we have made a commitment, even if it isn't in the eyes of God, but we have made a commitment to each other and it's a visible commitment, people see that... it feels like it has made us stronger somehow.

Predominantly however and consistent with Johnson et al (1999:173), the third component of moral commitment (general consistency values) seemed to be driving Chris and Geoff's worldviews:

You can't just quit, you know, you can't be selfish you have got to get on with it... I don't think you can walk away from situations you have created yourself... you have just got to muddle through, but then maybe that's just my way I have been brought up I don't know, I'm not a quitter. (Chris Small, time 4)

I guess in some ways I am quite loyal, I mean as a trait in that, you know, if you have made a commitment then you have got to stick to it and that's in all sorts of things. So, I kind of feel like that's quite important. (Geoff Illingworth, time 4)

Corroborating findings that committed individuals evoke positive sentiment override more often than the less committed (Rusbult et al.1998; 2002; Stanley et al. 2010), at time 4, Geoff recast how he had felt, viewing prior difficulties as situational and mutualising responsibility:

I think there was a lot going on [at time 3]... when the children are born you kind of forget because it was such a stressful time... I think it's just everyone has just grown up a bit really.

The third marriage that returned to very happy was tested by the wife's brief affair. The couple's 'relationship house' had a strong foundation of friendship which the husband fell back on in the aftermath of the affair. He had huge respect for his wife and viewed the behaviour as situational and

out of character. Following Amato's (2007:308) analogy with bravery, it was not until tested that the husband realised, at time 2, just how committed he is:

If you'd have asked me when we met at the first [interview], "if [wife] had an affair then what would you do?" I'd say well I would leave her, no question. But when it came to it, I couldn't do it... the thought... of us not being together was worse than what she'd done.

The husband 'didn't undertake marriage lightly' (time 3). His approach is redolent of the 'in it for everything' life-long commitment displayed by those whose relationships thrived at every time point and this was key to his recovery:

I would say you have got to be prepared to commit, you can't go in it with, "I will give it a go."

Nevertheless, at time 4, he thought that, 'if you can't see a route back to happiness... I don't think you should stay.' The serious testing of his marriage had proved its strength:

I don't think it has necessarily strengthened it, I think it has certainly tested it and showed how strong it was in the first place... [it is] stronger despite it, rather than stronger because of it.

Two couples, the O'Neils and the Edwards, faced persistent ongoing minor internally-caused challenges that had stretching their commitment to capacity. Perhaps because of this, these couples relied heavily on commitment to the institution of marriage to get them through difficult periods. Simone O'Neil's categorical support at time 1 ('I believe in the institution of marriage and what it stands for') reflected support for the institution expressed by both spouses at time 4:

I just really do believe in the institution of marriage and I know that a lot of people... don't but I do believe in it. (Simone O'Neil)

Too many people give up [on marriage] too easy... definitely in today's society. (David O'Neil)

Tellingly, Craig Edwards' commitment to the institution of marriage strengthened over time:

I'll give it my best shot and see what marriage is about and if it doesn't work for any reason I've tried. (Time 1)

This marriage thing, I never believed in it for years but once you have got it, it's a powerful thing. (Time 4)

When the relationships were strained, both fathers fell back on structural commitment, most notably a fear of losing daily contact with their children. By time 4, when both marriages were in a calmer phase, there was a marked difference in how both men described their commitment:

So, you know, the children are probably the main thing and obviously Gemma and the vows I made... the more I get older the more it is, you know, you make a commitment and you have a wife and you love your wife. So yeah, you know, I just wouldn't give it up lightly, you know, it would have to be extreme. (Craig Edwards)

I 100% do want it to work out, you know what I mean, so yeah, I want it to work out. I want to grow old with my Mrs and I want to be with her 'til the day I die. (David O'Neil)

Both women's divorce attitudes and consistency values reflect moral commitment to their marriages:

I think because you make vows to each other don't you, I mean I'm not like a religious person or anything like that, but we chose to be with each other and we, you know, you have just got to stick with it and try and work things out. I think it would have been easier to walk away than to stay in that situation. (Gemma Edwards, time 4)

I am stubborn, and I don't like giving in. (Simone O'Neil, time 4)

David O'Neil also exemplified the positive sentiment override which is the hallmark of committed couples falling squarely within the Gottman and Gottman (2017:23) definition of commitment given his appreciation for what he had. At time 3 he described his wife as, 'a decent... girl that has... a lovely big heart... I appreciate her' and at time 4 concluded, 'She has made me a better man, she has definitely made me a better man.'

### *Tested commitment in separated couples*

Whatever the individuals' commitment levels, ultimately this had been unable to prevent six marriages from ending in separation. We were interested in whether being married had strengthened resolve (at least for a time) not to leave. Claire Doyle, at time 4, concluded that a desire to avoid being divorced had led her, 'to stick at [the marriage] for ages which was the wrong thing to do.' One wife said that she had viewed marriage as 'a Holy Sacrament'. Both James and Catherine Isaac also emphasised the seriousness with which they took their vows, although for James, the fact that they had a child was of greater significance:

I think [being married] gives you more impetus to keep on going and keep on trying... you have made a really strong and clear commitment to each other, it's not something to be fritted away or handled lightly. It becomes much more serious I think because you have made that declaration and not only a declaration to each other but a declaration in front of, you know, hundreds of other people but I think it was having a child actually for me made it far more important to fight hard. (James Isaac, time 4)

So, to me when you say your vows and you get married that's something incredibly serious and you don't go back on them unless there is something terrible. (Catherine Isaac, time 4)

Graham and Sally Maxwell said that the fact that they had children weighed heavier than the fact that they were married on their deliberations over whether to leave. Graham tried to convince himself for a time that, 'as long as I was with the kids and everything I would be happy.' Only the very unhappy and those who went on to separate gave structural reasons to stay in a relationship. Corroborating (Knoester and Booth, 2000), ultimately structural barriers to divorce tend not to deter those determined to end their marriages.

What distinguished those who had withstood substantial challenges from those who went on to separate seemed to be the ability to 'see a route back to happiness' as one participant put it. Once this was lost the relationships reached a tipping point beyond which recovery was unfeasible:

You don't go into a relationship and get married and have a child thinking that [separation is] ever going to happen but all I knew was that I had lost so much of me, I was miserable, and I knew that nothing would ever change... all I knew was that in order to have a chance of happiness I needed not to be in that relationship anymore. (Ginny Walters, time 4)

Amato (2007:307) suggests that committed couples stay together through hard times because they have hope for the future, view problems as solvable and they love each other. The evidence from Couple Sample 1 is that those who have strong foundations to their 'relationship houses' coupled with strong personal and/or moral commitment using Johnson et al's framework, withstood external



pressures by pulling together during challenging times. When the issue went to the heart of the marriage, the strength of the foundations to the 'relationship house' meant that it was worth working to recover what they once enjoyed. Once individuals could not 'see a route back to happiness', separation became likely following severe testing of the commitment. The structural integrity of the 'relationship house' is dependent on the strength of both the foundations (friendship and sentiment override) and the load bearing walls of commitment and trust. Load bearing walls can only bear substantial loads when foundations are strong.

### Being committed and Couple Sample 2

In Couple Sample 2, six of the ten couples had formalised their relationship via civil partnership or marriage. Reflecting the lack of option to do so (whether they would have wanted to do it earlier or not), the two couples who currently have a Civil Partnership were together for over 25 years before they formalised their relationship. The couples who married, did so on average five years into their relationship. For one of these couples, marriage was also a religious bond. As per Couple Sample 1, the five other couples who had formalised their relationship described their wedding or civil partnership as a celebration rather than an institutional commitment:

I saw us being together, you know, forever anyway, so it wasn't really like about having something to affirm that. So, it wasn't really a big deal to me, but it was actually the best day of our lives [having] ... all your family and friends all in one place. (Max-06-M-OS)

Only one same-sex couple described formalising their relationship as a public signifier of their commitment. This couple had prior personal experience of having to prove their relationship status when they moved to live overseas earlier in their relationship and so for them, formalising their relationship brought with it an important visibility and increased acceptance:

On a more practical perhaps even political sense, there was suddenly the opportunity to do it, which hadn't been there, and I think, you know, in terms of equality and being able to have that visibility and to take advantage that it was very important, I mean obviously it was a heartfelt thing but there was that narrative in it, as well. (Robyn-02-M-SS)

My mum had a bit of a hard time with the civil partnership, so it was quite a significant event for us... She kind of finally twigged that our relationship was the same as anyone... maybe somehow subconsciously there was something about... "look we are here, we are staying together... we are out and proud... and all these other people support us." (Macy-02-M-SS)

However, on converting their civil partnership to a marriage the same couple described a loss of visibility they had not anticipated:

Now if somebody who doesn't know you says, "are you married?" and I say "yes", generally people still assume that means that I'm with a man and therefore I now have to say something like "yes, I am married to a woman" which I shouldn't really have to. [Marriage] wasn't an option and now it is, it's important that we take up the opportunity because it is important to us as a couple but... it makes us invisible. (Macy-02-M-SS)

Same-sex couples described careful thought over whether marriage or civil partnership is right for them. The idea that formalising their relationship 'tidied up the paperwork' (Charlie-08-CB-OS) and provided important legal rights, particularly next-of-kin recognition, came up as a reason to marry amongst the opposite-sex cohabitants interviewed too. Both same-sex and opposite-sex couples articulated a wish for civil partnerships to be made available for opposite-sex couples:

I strongly want there to be heterosexual civil partnerships, so everything is symmetrical, everything is equal because what would horrify me is trying to phase out civil partnership and

force marriage which would be utterly unacceptable, utterly unacceptable and there are lots of heterosexual couples who want to commit but they don't want all the historical baggage which marriage brings, and they should be allowed to... and stupid politicians say it undermines marriage, of course it doesn't. It doesn't do anything of the sort. (Harry-10-CP-SS)

In Couple Sample 2, strong views were expressed by cohabitants that 'It doesn't change the commitment... having a piece of paper' (Bessie-09-CB-SS). However, the same 'piece of paper' could change how relationships are perceived:

Where you have committed to a 25-year mortgage together... What we have stood by each other through... I think we have demonstrated time and time again a commitment that if anything, is more significant and more binding than a marriage certificate... We could hate each other, not live together but have a marriage certificate... it seems a bit absurd that we shouldn't as a couple be afforded the same. (Sawyer-07-CB-OS)

I think being married is not just about a piece of paper... there is just so much else within society tied up around it. Assumptions that are made and legal niceties that are given or rights that are taken away etc... if we were married I would be a Mrs and potentially would have to change my surname... it wouldn't change my identity, but to the rest of the world it would... I mean if... sitting down with the solicitor and signing a piece of paper [could give us]... rights that would recognise the strength and commitment and longevity of our relationship with each other... And protect what we have built of our lives together but without having to have all of the external opinions... then I would be very happy with that. (Sofia-07-CB-OS)

In line with the potential influence of social learning discussed above in 'Being realistic', personal experience and social networks may impact attitudes to formalising relationships. In Sample 2, one married couple remarked that all their friends were married, whereas couples with a civil partnership or who were cohabiting described more occurrence of divorce in their social networks:

Seeing so many people get married and go through divorce and many get married again... these people are standing up there and swearing... that they are going to be together for all this time.... And I'm not sure I see that public commitment as any great bond really... You can be as committed to someone out of it without having to stand out there or maybe it's something about not ever wanting to go back on my word as it were. (Violet-08-CB-OS)

All the lesbian gay couples I know that have gone for civil partnership or marriage, it has ended in tears... and I do slightly wonder... if it's got a bit of the kiss of death about it?... if it's rather pressurising... to go legal and the relationship doesn't always stand up. (Jo-09-CB-SS)

As touched on in 'Being realistic', expectations relating to commitment appeared to differ for couples in thriving relationships interviewed in Couple Sample 2. While in keeping with Couple Sample 1, most of those who formalised their relationship expressed a life-long commitment, other couples (all cohabitants, one married couple and one civil partnership) instead described a reluctance to overpromise but a hope for a long-lasting relationship and a commitment 'for as long as it was a healthy relationship.' Macy (02-M-SS):

I can't imagine anything separating us other than death, but I just think that whole notion of till death do us part... it's unrealistic and it just places so much pressure and so much kind of inappropriate expectation... people need to... accept that relationships can be great while they're happening... but yeah nothing is set in stone, everything changes and hopefully through those changes you will... compromise and... stay together. (Sawyer-07-CB-OS)

We've always been quite clear that, you know, we have to be good to each other in order to stay together... it's not taken for granted, or it's not a given... it's not even a given thing now, we've been together so long, that we will continue to be together, I don't know if we will. I hope we do. (Ava-04-CB-OS)

Couples who described a commitment for life were more likely to describe a single event or specific point in time when they decided to commit, whereas couples who rejected an expectation of permanence appeared more likely to describe commitment as a gradual process:

For me life's not about that, it's about having a fulfilling job, having a great, you know, set of relationships with your family, having a dog, you know, going out for walks, like the whole package. That's what life is about. Not just having a dress for one day, you know, that's not the goal, or marrying is not the goal. So yeah, I see [commitment] as a process... and thinking about it like that, has helped. (Ava-04-CB-OS)

I think romance is a fantasy... I think you see it a lot in heterosexual relationships these days, particularly around the whole wedding thing, you know, they want this perfect fairy tale day... and everything is downhill after that in the relationship, you know, the great highlight is at the beginning rather than having a series of highlights through the relationship. (Harry-10-CP-SS)

While some of the couples in Couple Sample 2 rejected an unconditional or unquestioned long-term focus, like Couple Sample 1, many participants described personal and moral commitment with consistency values of loyalty and faithfulness often depicted as deeply embedded in the individual's self-image and personality. As per Couple Sample 1, participants stressed that they expected bad patches and would only leave if, after making considerable efforts to get through these, they still felt a profoundly deep level of ongoing unhappiness. However, rather than seeking a 'route back to happiness' and recovering what was once enjoyed as described in Couple Sample 1, the couples in Sample 2 emphasised accepting and adapting to inevitable change; adopting a new 'route forward to happiness' (see 'Adapting to change').

Like Couple Sample 1, couples often placed their partner's happiness above their own and if parents, a desire was often expressed to stay together and work at things to provide stability for their children and a role-model of a committed healthy relationship:

It's almost in our make-up... We definitely wouldn't give up at the first hurdle at any rate and would fight it. As we have done in the past, seeing a counsellor, but we wouldn't just go, "oh made the promise have to stick with it", we would be proactive and make sure that, you know, we resolved it and if it's unresolvable then that's it, isn't it? (Merlin-04-CB-OS)

I would still want the children to have that stable relationship that I think we have had from our parents. (Terry-01-M-OS)

While structural commitment did not feature in the accounts of thriving relationships in Couple Sample 1, they did in Couple Sample 2 suggesting that age or longer duration of relationship, as well as satisfaction in the relationship may influence the level of constraints felt. As per Couple Sample 1, although the importance of working through bad patches and having 'a bit of stick-ability' was noted by younger couples, they rejected the idea of staying in a relationship due to investments made:

I think at your core you've got to be happy and you've got to know that it feels right... if you knew it didn't feel right on a long-term basis, I don't think you'd stay for the sake of it and even if you put stuff in, it doesn't mean that it's not changed and now it's rubbish. (Lia-06-M-OS)

However, couples who had been together longer and were now retired or close to retirement emphasised that the practical difficulties of disentangling physical and emotional investments into the relationships acted as a disincentive to leave the relationship, reinforced as each individual aged, by a moral obligation to stay:

I mean we've invested and I don't mean financially... so much in this relationship over the years that I would find it very difficult to walk away. I suppose if either of us found somebody else, it might just happen, but yeah... I can't imagine leaving Lance behind, especially the age he is now, it would be a terrible thing to do. So, it would just be too difficult to stop. (Aaron-05-CP-SS)

## Keep talking

Karney and Bradbury (1995:22) suggest that, as a minimal requirement, a complete theory of marital development should address the ways that spouses treat and respond to each other. In the vulnerability-stress-adaptation model, adaptation refers to how spouses regulate, manage or sustain their marriages and considers both problem-solving and support-giving behaviour (Bradbury et al. 1998:289). For many couples, communication is the primary mode of relationship work they undertake and couples have often worked at establishing effective communication practices (Gabb and Fink, 2015:14). By prioritising couple time and time to talk, people in intact relationships tend to argue less and, when they do argue, resolve difficulties fairly quickly without resentment taking root (Walker et al. 2010:53). For marriages that remain intact over 20 years, there is evidence that communication improves and discord diminishes (Amato and James, 2018). However, when partners are unable to talk about important issues and do not make time to foster their couple relationship, communication often deteriorates, arguments become repetitive and relationships deteriorate to the point when separation became inevitable (Walker et al. 2010:54).

Gottman et al. (2002: 302) suggest that couples who share a deep friendship and have a shared vision for their relationship, engage in 'dialogue' to resolve issues. Having the component parts of the 'Sound Relationship House' in place enables couples to deal constructively with conflict when it does arise, communicating acceptance to their partner, so that issues do not become 'gridlocked'. In the absence of positive affect, issues become gridlocked, and two patterns emerge, either the 'four horsemen of the apocalypse' (criticism, defensiveness, contempt and 'stonewalling' or listener withdrawal) which predicted early divorce (in the first seven years) or emotional disengagement, which predicted later divorce (around 16 years into the marriage).

Where stresses are low, couples with relatively negative communication may be able to rationalise or compartmentalise negative interactions with their spouse and it may be only when additional stress emerges that negative communication renders such relationships vulnerable to dissolution (Lavner and Bradbury, 2012).

## KEY MESSAGES

- Thriving couples carved out time to talk about the minutiae of the day or deeper level issues as needed and this open communication fuelled intimacy.
- Thriving couples expressed dissatisfaction promptly, dealt constructively with issues and once resolved, did not revisit them thereby insuring that they 'nipped issues in the bud'.
- When potential conflict arises couples in thriving relationships are pragmatic and solution focused. They choose which battles to fight and are willing to compromise where needed.
- Over time, partners understand the other's natural approach to communication and conflict resolution better and adapt their own responses accordingly. Couples in thriving relationships often disclose a pattern of communication improving over time.
- In Sample 1, unhappy husbands withdrew, internalising their distress. Unhappy wives vocalised their discontent initially but felt unheard leading them to stop seeking desired changes.
- Relationships broke down asymmetrically; one party had often given up on the relationship and emotionally disengaged some time before separating, making attempts

### **Keep talking and Couple Sample 1**

Gottman et al. (2002: 301) argue persuasively that attempts to build enduring relationships should focus on promoting intimacy rather than on resolving conflict. We term this 'keep talking' as when partners maintained open relationship-focused dialogue then conflict, when it occurred, did not compromise the structural integrity of relationships. Sample 1 participants described that what set this relationship apart as 'special' was that they felt at ease in their partner's company from the outset:

I just felt I could talk to him and felt like he understood me completely and I felt like I understood him completely... it was that initial kind of click and understanding that I could talk about anything with him no matter what it was. (Elizabeth Fenton, time 4)

An ability to talk openly seemed to spring from a strong foundation of friendship:

We have always been able to talk really openly which I really value, and I think it's probably... [as] we are really, really good friends and we can talk about stuff. (Andy Armstrong, time 4)

Communication builds intimacy. This intimacy, as Gabb and Fink (2015:112) observe, is often built within the security of the home. Daily routines and gestures, the cup of tea in bed and the kiss before leaving the house communicate shared love. Sample 1 thriving couples carved out time to talk about the minutiae of the day or deeper level issues as needed within the fabric of the home, often in bed or snuggled on the sofa. They also relished opportunities during concentrated periods away from home on long car trips or on holidays to discuss hopes and dreams.

### ***Thriving couples' pragmatic approach***

As noted in 'Adapting to change' couples in thriving relationships face issues as a team. They are pragmatic and focus on finding a solution rather than on being 'right' or 'winning':

[We say] "Right so ok we know there's an issue, how we going to solve it?" ... I think we are both very good at listening to the other person and saying, "Well you feel like that and I feel like this so how do we get past that and solve it?" (Sarah Henderson, time 4)

Those in thriving relationships tend to let go of minor slights or choose not to make an issue over things on which they have no strong opinion. The time 4 narratives are peppered with recognitions of the need for compromise, to 'meet half way' (Jonathan Upton), to find a 'middle way' (Tahir Zehan) or 'middle ground' (Tom Newsome).

Couples in thriving relationships had what one husband described as 'short accounts with each other', that is they expressed dissatisfaction promptly, dealt constructively with issues and once resolved, did not revisit them. These couples, as Lisa Carter at time 4 succinctly put it, 'iron out the issues as [they] go along rather than letting them become an issue.' As a result, few disclosed any minor challenges internal to the marriage and none divulged such challenges in more than one interview. They acknowledged the others' natural approach to resolving issues and modified their own responses where necessary so that problems did not become entrenched. They had what Gottman et al. (2002:177) term a 'low negativity threshold'. Such couples display strong positive sentiment override and respond quickly to negativity, believing it indicates an important issue to their partner:

We are normally pretty good about recognising there is an issue and talking about it first before it becomes a big thing. (Duncan Henderson, time 4)

### ***Deep knowing***

Gabb and Fink (2015:37) suggest that 'the significance of time-both its quotidian demands and its cumulative effect, over decades-cannot be overstated.' Consistent with the findings of Amato and James (2018), many individuals in thriving relationships disclosed that communication had improved

over time. At time 4, Joshua Fenton thought that there was greater honesty in his marriage and his wife Elizabeth thought that she understood her husband better. Marcus Carter said of his wife Lisa, 'I think emotionally she has worked me out.' Emily Vickers said that her husband Alistair was better at understanding when she need to offload without him trying to 'fix things'. Several participants, including Sarah Henderson, concluded that they were also better at understanding their own my emotional needs. Grace Barnes' summation that over time, she has grown to know her husband 'deeply' resonates with the 'deep knowing', the intimate knowledge of one's partner accumulated over time reported by Gabb and Fink (2015:37):

I do feel like I really know him... He is not the easiest person to read but I feel like I can generally sense when something is not quite right in his world ... I know him kind of just quite deeply... and I guess some of that is just time isn't it? (Grace Barnes, time 4)

'Deep knowing' helped to pre-empt potential difficulties. As Andy Armstrong put it, he and Zoe 'know little things that annoy each other and then we try not to do those things.' It also enabled spouses to understand better how their partner processes issues and to modify responses accordingly leading to more productive communication. Both parties could then say what they needed to in a way that is 'very easy to accept and hear' (Sarah Henderson, time 4). Sukhjinder Gayal (time 3) commented that she now 'gets' that Deepak needed time out to process things and Jenny Osgood (time 4) thought that 'we just kind of know each other and how each other works' illustrating the greater harmony that developed over time. Approaches were not always divided along gender lines, but men tended to need space to process thoughts and women tended to externalise:

I have got to the point where I guess we have refined our communication method and I know that he just needs a bit of time to think about it and that if I try and push him to acknowledge it or respond or that sort of thing, it just doesn't really work. (Zoe Armstrong, time 4)

I do a lot of listening because... (unlike me who internalises stuff) Lesley externalises stuff and sometimes I just need to be there and listen. (Martin Eagan, time 4)

Several participants reported reaping the rewards of working on their communication in earlier years. At time 1, Dinesh Ram reported that he and his wife Reshma had worked hard to improve communication, so they resolved disagreements more calmly than previously. By time 4, Reshma reported that she and Dinesh are 'on the same page more and more' and that:

We've got a lot better at sort of understanding where the other person is coming from and how it looks to them and feels to them.

Strong friendship, positive sentiment override and a willingness to love compassionately focused participants on their partner's good traits. As Gottman et al. (2002: 302) note, this approach 'communicates acceptance to the other' thereby avoiding gridlock:

[Dominic] is who he is, and I have learned to read him in different ways... we accept each other for who we are and don't expect each other to be people we are not. (Grace Barnes, time 4)

Plentiful positive sentiment override ensures that partners do not escalate issues by responding negatively to negativity thereby blunting the impact of conflict when it does arise (Gottman et al. 2002). Beverley Hunter, at time 4, said that it would be easy to shout back when her husband got stressed if their baby cried but she chooses not to because his behaviour is a response to their child bring distressed so it 'comes from a nice place.'

### ***Communication issues in intact couples***

For some couples, fundamental differences in worldviews meant that reaching the 'middle ground' that the thriving couples strove for is difficult. This seemed to be at the heart of the issues that the Xaviers faced (see 'Realistic expectations' above). Katie Anderton disclosed that because she and Dexter had different outlooks, certain topics of conversation were avoided thereby causing 'some distance' between them.

For some, asymmetries in approaches to conflict led to dysfunction. At time 4, Cathy Logan thought that conflict remained unresolved because her husband Pete liked to deal with conflict head on whereas she preferred to avoid it. Issues were left to 'fester' and each would 'call up old stuff and throw it back' at the other in subsequent arguments.

Consistent with previous research on how men respond to distress in relationships (Stanley et al. 2004; Walker et al. 2010), at time 3, two husbands (Geoff Illingworth and Chris Small) had dealt with their unhappiness by withdrawing. Their distress was largely situational (the demands of raising a family) and when these pressures eased they regained an equilibrium. The tendency to withdraw carries risks of asymmetrical uncoupling but strong friendship and sentiment override had helped these men through a testing life-stage and, hopefully, it will do likewise for another father of young children at time 4 who also responded by internalising how he was feeling:

I am internalising to an extent because I don't really want to find things to complain about... the [children] are the priority really and, so I am not really looking to give [Wife] more things to worry about at this point.

If unhappy husbands withdrew, unhappy wives vocalised their discontent but felt unheard leading them to stop seeking desired changes ('I just don't bother', Gemma Edwards, time 3). This pattern reflected the uncoupling process noted by Vaughan (1990) and was observed in the separation narratives of the women outlined below.

Two couples had experienced difficult seasons between time 3 and 4 in which, as Alfie Pickering described it, 'It just felt like the lines of communication between us were just beginning to break down a little.' For the Pickerings, Alfie making efforts to listen rather than 'fix' had helped Molly to feel 'heard' and 'understood' and she had reciprocated, understanding Alfie's struggles better. For the second couple a breakthrough towards better communication came about for the wife when she realised that 'it's not about winning or losing' but about the higher goal of keeping her family together.

### ***Communication and separated couples***

There was evidence of 'the four horsemen of the apocalypse' (criticism, defensiveness, contempt or stonewalling) (Gottman et al. 2002:22) in the two marriages that had broken down by time 2. Joanna Thompson complained that her husband called her 'fat and ugly'. Tracey Williams acknowledged significant anger issues. Gottman et al. (2002: 177) note the tendency of spouses to try to ignore negativity in ailing marriages. This tendency was evident in the four marriages that broke down between time 3 and 4. Tim Walter disclosed that both he and Ginny had been unhappy for some time, but he had 'tried to ignore' it, '[you] almost bury your head in the sand a little.' James Isaac thought that he and Catherine 'had just stopped listening.' Sam Doyle said that by not talking with Claire about their problems, issues had 'snowballed' until they were 'blindly walking over the cliff without realising that there's even a cliff there.' Graham Maxwell had not told his wife Sally that he was unhappy but 'that gets to the point where eventually you snap as you've had enough but you are beyond the point of recovery then.'

Separated wives at time 4 disclosed withdrawing and becoming resentful when they felt unheard. Ginny Walters disclosure that 'I was unhappy but silently unhappy for a long time' and that... I just went more and more... inside myself' typified this response:

I would kind of go in on myself... fundamentally underneath I was like a pressure cooker and it was all building up... I just got more and more frustrated at not being heard... I would feel like I was dealing with a brick wall. (Catherine Isaac)

I used to say things to him and I think he used to pretend I hadn't said it... [He would say] it will be alright... but actually in a marriage it is not going to be alright unless you... do something about it otherwise it just lays dormant... and peeks its head two years later. (Sally Maxwell)

As Gottman et al. (2002) and Vaughan (1990) predict, failure to address unhappiness eventually leads to partners focusing on the other's negative traits. As outlined in 'Seeing the best' above partners tend to then 'look towards the worse' and 'don't make allowances' for each other (Sally Maxwell, time 4).

### **Asymmetrical breakdown**

Marriages tend to break down asymmetrically (Vaughan, 1990). They often end suddenly after a period of gradual drift (Gottman et al. 2002:141). Walker et al. (2010: 57) report that requests to separate often shocked unsuspecting spouses. One respondent felt as if he had 'just been ran over by...a truck.' We found evidence of asymmetrical uncoupling in Sample 1. Tim Walters described trying desperately to understand Ginny's decision to separate but as Ginny had been 'silently unhappy' for some time reconciliation was not possible. Stuart Thompson's admission that, by the time he realised the extent of Joanna's unhappiness 'it was already too late, and she'd already mentally signed out of the marriage' echoed the words of one of the respondents in Vaughan (1990:137) who described how he been 'mentally divorced' long before the physical separation. Stuart attempts to 'be really nice' to Joanna, for her simply 'amplified just how many times he hadn't' been kind:

I just couldn't do it anymore. I'd stopped loving him... I genuinely wanted it to work... [but] I'd stopped loving him and it's very hard to change that emotion... I think the problem was I really had gone through all of the... "Oh God what am I doing?" before I actually did it. And afterwards it was just relief... It felt right. (Joanna Thompson, time 2)

The inability of unhappy partners to adequately convey their unhappiness in such a way that they felt heard and which elicited the desired change seemed to be behind asymmetrical breakdown.

### **Keep talking and Couple Sample 2**

While individuals differed in their need to share with each other, all couples in Sample 2 described the importance of talking to each other and a foundation of trust in the relationship where each partner can talk openly and freely about any issues as they arose:

There could have been points where, one of us was sort of evolving in a different way and you were like "right well that's not what I want" and it could have gone different but again because we're honest... we will talk about it. (Max-06-M-OS)

Negotiating all the time, I mean that's what keeps it strong. Soon as you stop talking I think, well I think if you don't say about something that is bothering you, it becomes huge. The moment you've said something about it, it just sort of deflates the balloon really, you know, so the imagined conversation is always much worse than the real thing. (Bessie-09-CB-SS)

Reflecting findings on relationships that remain intact over 20 years (Amato and James, 2018), couples in Sample 2 struggled to recall disagreements, reporting that if they disagreed, they would actively seek 'early repair' and make sure they 'never go to bed on an argument.' As per the thriving couples



in Sample 1, couples in Sample 2 displayed a pragmatic, solution focused and developmental attitude in response to stressful events and to resolving conflict. The couples emphasised compromise, not holding grudges, agreeing to disagree and the abilities to put issues into a wider perspective and adapt to change. This was necessarily coupled with an ongoing respect for their partner, plus realistic expectations and acceptance of difference (compassionate love):

So, it was more a question of not like getting into a massive big, you know, it must be this way, like it's got to be this way that I wanted, it's more about just compromising for whatever reason, thinking ok well let's be pragmatic. (Ava-04-CB-OS)

Respect for one another's differences when there are differences, I think that's important... respecting the other's opinion. (Aaron-05-CP-SS)

As described below in 'Adapting to change', open communication helped couples through testing times. Elenna (01-M-OS) explains how she and her husband mutually and sensitively supported each other by being available to each other and 'talking it through' when either of them 'wasn't having a good day' following a close bereavement.

Reflecting a deep knowing of each other that grows over time and as discussed in 'Being realistic' above, couples in Sample 2 described a mindfulness as to whether, when and how to raise issues with their partner:

I pick my moments.... about when you talk about difficult issues... Yeah so, I think we are both very sensitive to how the other one is feeling and whether this is a good time or not and so things will be deferred, until either there is a good time or it's obvious there is never going to be a good time, but it has to come out. (Macy-02-M-SS)

I think you learn to pick your battles ... when you have somebody else's happiness in your hand and you know that you have the power to really hurt somebody if you're not careful, you don't shout about the breadcrumbs. (Sofia-07-CB-OS)

For the participants whose parents had divorced, communicating with their partner could be a challenge and something they had had to learn. For example, Macy described learning that it is 'safe to be vulnerable' and she can trust sharing her vulnerabilities with Robyn:

Robyn has been a really good role-model for that... I can see from her that each time she's been vulnerable with me I really admire and respect that in her... whereas I would bottle everything up and not talk about it (Macy-02-M-SS)

I tended to see discussion as argument and argument as bad and even sitting down having a rational conversation about something was beginning to border on 'you don't go there, you've had a disagreement and that's a bad thing' whereas [for] Sawyer... it is about putting forward a point and counter point and arguing your way to a better understanding and I've had to learn a lot of that. (Sofia 07-CB-OS)

As discussed in 'Friendship', for many of the participants, sex had become less important over the length of their relationship. While different sex drives could be a source of conflict, reflecting perhaps the couples' shared views and/or British cultural reservations, many of the couples in Sample 2 did not discuss sex, instead making assumptions about how the other feels about it:

I don't think we have ever discussed [sex]... I mean I think we have kind of tentatively said, you know, are you ok with it, like and that's about as far as it's gone, but we're both quite embarrassed about that. (Ava-04-CB-OS)

I don't think we discuss our sexual relationship very much, or at all really, because I mean our sexual activities diminish to nothing over the last 10 years or whatever it is. But it's not something we have discussed. (Ron-10-CP-SS)

## Building the relationship that suits you both

The culture that each couple creates within their relationship is unique (Gottman et al. 2002:302) but whatever the culture, couples whose relationships thrive are 'rooted in a common purpose' (Walker et al. 2010:53). This sharing of a life together and investment in a joint venture enables couples to weather the ebb and flow of, for example, sexual intimacy over the long-term (Gabb and Fink, 2015:82). Problems can become gridlocked leading to estrangement when couples struggle to agree a shared purpose (Gottman et al. 2002:302).

Individuals often preference fulfilment of some needs over others, and the constellation of needs preferred and a partner's ability to meet preferred needs is likely to account, in part, for the variation in outcomes of different romantic relationships (VanderDrift et al. 2016:113). There is no uniform, 'right' successful relationship, what is important is that couples agree a common course and build a relationship that is deeply meaningful to them (Gottman et al. 2002:302).

### Building the relationship that suits you both: Couple Sample 1

#### *Agree a shared plan*

Couples in thriving relationships were, as Walker et al. (2010:53) note, 'rooted in a common purpose'. Neil Joseph, at time 4, sums up this approach:

Everything we do comes out of a joint decision and I think actually everything flows out of that, you know, we have common dreams, we have common aspirations, we have common hopes.

Having a shared plan for their relationship helped thriving couples to avoid intractable issues. They attributed this, in part, to having chosen their partner carefully, including discussing hopes and dreams prior to marriage to ensure that they are aligned. Mark Naylor, at time 4, typified this view, attributing the endurance of his marriage to:

Knowing exactly what we were getting into in the first place, you know, we were quite good at future planning and stuff and sorting out hopes and dreams and future plans.

The essence of shared meaning in thriving relationships in Couple Sample 1 is exclusive to the

## KEY MESSAGES

- Couples in thriving relationships built the relationship that suited them, often defying cultural or societal norms to do so.
- There is no one 'right' thriving relationship. What matters is that the relationship that the couple co-create has meaning for them.
- Sharing a common purpose strengthened the team perspective in thriving couples with many declaring an 'us against the world' outlook.
- In Sample 1, thriving couples stressed the need to have a shared plan. Dissonance occurred when couples struggled to agree a shared plan and for some this led to estrangement and eventual relationship breakdown.
- Instead of a long-term perspective from the start, couples in Sample 2 described a flexible responsive approach and the development of a common purpose over time.
- Sample 2 couples who formalised their relationship attached importance to having a service to suit them.
- Without prevalent normative relationship trajectories, same-sex couples may have found it easier to develop a relationship to suit themselves and to make reflective, rational decisions about formal commitment.

couple and subjectively constructed. It is sufficient that what the couple co-create has meaning for them. What creates meaning for one couple may fall short for another. At time 4, the Queensburys had embraced a life of 'constant change' that Paul Queensbury believed 'keeps things very fresh and new and interesting and exciting.' In contrast, Alex Rogers thought his relationship worked because 'we are quite sort of homely' and Lucy Young relished the dependability of her relationship with her husband Cameron:

I think both of us have chosen something that is steady and dependable, and we feel secure in and we are able to be ourselves but also to thrive in that relationship and feel supported... Perhaps other people might see it as boring but for us it's steady, it's stable, it's a good foundation to raise children, it doesn't bring the emotional baggage of kind of highs and lows.

Couples in thriving relationships followed a common, mutually agreed course. Individuals had had sufficient self-awareness to understand the type of person to whom they were suited and had chosen a partner accordingly. At time 4, Sophie Carmichael advised:

Pick someone who fundamentally sort of has hopes and dreams in the same ballpark as yours. You are going to struggle if you are a homebody and you are having a relationship with someone who is a wanderer.

Cathy Logan's frustrations vented at time 4 stemming from the couple's jarring goals and approaches to life. She lamented that she had given insufficient 'headspace' prior to engagement to whether she and her husband Pete were compatible: 'it's not really that I had sat down and thought about what I wanted from my life or my relationship.' The Logans lacked shared purpose so the successful meshing of life goals that is central to thriving relationships was difficult for them to achieve or sustain.

There were significant variations in the family life created by couples in thriving relationships. One couple were voluntarily childless, relishing the work opportunities and travel that this allowed. Another chose to have a large family. The wife in the latter couple expressed frustration at other people's incorrect assumptions:

[People] say "you don't get any time to yourself and you never get a chance to just go and sit down for a couple of hours in the afternoon" and you think no, I don't, but don't try and tell me I'm not happy because I am happy, you know, and I think you have to be careful not to listen to other people too much.

The way in which couples organised their work/family life once parents was immaterial provided both were satisfied with arrangements. The salience of work varied across the sample. Some declined work opportunities that would encroach on family life. For others, careers were deeply meaningful:

We have both got a joined-up kind of sense of... where we see ourselves going... we are both very, very ambitious and we are both very, very supportive of each other's careers and... our relationship is stronger for that. (Deepak Gayal, time 4)

Dissonance in attitudes towards home/work life balance caused strain. For example, Alfie and Molly Pickering, struggled to agree on what Alfie described as a future 'shared plan'. But for the encroachment of Alfie's work on family life, both were mostly very happy in their marriage. As outlined in 'Seeing the best' Alfie's strong positive sentiment override helped to blunt the impact of this issue. The Pickerings openly and frequently discussed their future 'shared plan'. However, when disaffection with work/life balance led to deep resentment that was not addressed (as with the Maxwells) or when one forged ahead with their own agenda, knowing it was not shared, then the consequences were

dire. Sam Doyle made several substantial decisions against his wife Claire's wishes which contributed to the relationship's breakdown:

I had made the decision on my own... she said, "We won't make it Sam, we can do it, but we won't make it" and I was like, "Of course we will, we will be fine" ... I think there was potential for happiness [in our relationship] if I had not just been bullish and insisted.

Some couples' lives revolved predominantly around the other ('We don't need anybody really, it's just us', Eddie Quinn, time 4). For others, a degree of autonomy was 'what works for us' (Jimmy Zanna, time 4). It was only when approaches conflicted that problems arose. Will Xavier complained that his wife Yvonne had different views in prioritising work, family, friends and acquaintances. Catherine Isaac thought that opposing views on time spent socialising and at home had been insurmountable in her marriage, because what was enriching for one was draining for the other.

### *We do it our way*

There may not have been one 'right' way to build a thriving relationship but many couples had challenged social or family pressures to building the relationship that suited them:

'If [conforming to social expectations] doesn't make you happy then why should you do it? ... We want to live the life we want to live.' (Louisa Queensbury, 4)

Martin Eagan disclosed resisting family pressure to get married before he felt ready. One couple resisted pressure to have a baby earlier than they chose and the voluntarily childless couple resisted 'unspoken pressure' from wider family to have children. Colin Hunter spoke of external interference in parenting decisions that he and his wife, Beverley, had experienced:

People were butting in and saying you should do this, you should do that, but I said, "Beverley, we do it our way."

### *Us against the world*

Couples in thriving relationships, as outlined below, are embedded in strong networks of family and friends. Nevertheless, their primary relationship and source of support is the dyadic relationship. Various metaphors are used to describe this joint enterprise. Ben Carmichael explained that he and his wife Sophie were 'filling in parts of the same jigsaw' and that 'instead of being in opposing castles we are in the same castle together, we built the walls around us.' This fortress imagery reflected similar imagery from others in thriving relationships. As Lucy Young (time 1) put it, their relationship was the 'first defence against the world.' Tom Newsome's view at time 4 that he and his wife Maria 'decided to take the world on together' reflected a similar comment from Maria at time 3:

We have become this little unit...Tom and I always say that it's us; it's just us against the world and that's a really nice feeling. I feel very grounded actually, more than I ever have done in my whole life.

Using imagery that is more delicate than the 'fortress' imagery above, at time 4 Christopher Turner captures the intimacy that this mindset creates:

We live in our own bubble, and every, I suppose, family is guilty of it sometimes, but it's just the way it is, but in that bubble that we live in we have actually become very, very close.

Gottman et al. (2002:302) argue that it is the culture couples create; the blending of meaning, narratives philosophies and dreams, that fuels intimacy. The culture created by this 'us against the world' mentality, as Gottman and colleagues predict, fuelled greater marital intimacy. As outlined

above in 'Keep talking', an 'us against the world' outlook also ensured that these couples pulled together in times of significant stress, emerging stronger as a result. Unsurprisingly, participants with this mindset worked well as a team in contrast to those who struggled to agree a common purpose. The Edwards, from time 2, disclosed frustrations that could easily lead to separation. At time 2, Craig disclosed:

I'm a single player so I take things on board myself and deal with things myself, but [Gemma] is there as a team player.

In contrast, couples 'rooted in a common purpose' (Walker et al. 2010:53) had two on their team.

Reflecting the findings of Gabb and Fink (2015:111), for many couples the home became a powerful repository where plans are made and hopes discussed. Weaving together a joint life involved creating a home which helped to engender the long-term perspective needed to carry couples through the ebb and flow of a relationship (see 'Commitment' above):

I like lots of things about being married: having him there, planning for the future, working together with the kids and the family and creating a little home... [We have] a shared journey like a shared vision of where we are going in terms of as a family and plans for the future and imagining being old. (Rosie Kaderra, time 4)

In thriving relationships, the couple's bond and sense of shared purpose deepened over time:

I think over the 10 years we have been married we have got a lot of history together... [which] gives me a lot more confidence in us together... we have got this really nice long shared history... to look back on... It feels with time it becomes more permanent and more entwined and all the memories and everything is all cemented together much more. (Duncan Henderson, time 4)

The three couples who separated after having children disclosed that what each partner wanted from life diverged over time. At time 4, the thriving couples acknowledged that they had changed, but they changed together. Melanie Joseph thought that she and her husband Neil had 'converging dreams'. Richard Fisher summed up the sentiment expressed by many:

Our outlooks have changed but I think they have changed together in the same direction, so we haven't grown apart or anything like that... We both share the same ideas of where we are going and what we want out of life and our future.

Alistair Vickers referred to his marriage as a 'joint journey' in which he and his wife were 'running exactly the same race.' He distinguished his relationship with his wife, Emily, from that of previous girlfriends by invoking a boating adventure metaphor:

I thought actually I need somebody who is going to go on an adventure with me and once we are in the boat and we have cast off and it's all going very, very, very wrong and we are in a storm isn't going to say, "I made the wrong choice here" but is going, "right how on earth do we keep this boat going?" And, you know, of all people, Emily would be up there to do that.

This sense of going on a joint adventure pervades the narratives of many of the participants in thriving marriages in stark contrast to those whose marriages had not endured:

I just really noticed that we were two trains heading on two very different tracks and here I was going along, and James had sort of stopped and taken a turn off here and I hadn't noticed. (Catherine Isaac, time 4)

I just felt like he was disinterested in our relationship and our future... We were just kind of like both living individual lives with the odd coming together and you are living for those moments, but they are not often enough or deep enough. (Sally Maxwell, time 4)

Strong friendship, in Couple Sample 1, seemed to drive shared meaning. Critically, this strong friendship and sense of common purpose was observed at time 1 (three to six months into marriage) almost universally in the marriages thriving at time 4. Conversely, at time 1, all of those who separated and the seven marriages that had intractable issues or a level of disengagement that was causing one or both parties to articulate a degree of frustration with their spouse, had at least one partner for whom Ewing had flagged concerns over their shared meaning. Concerns over shared meaning were flagged for only six other participants at time 1. All displayed strong friendship throughout the process and their relationship, and sense of shared meaning and purpose, strengthened with the passage of time thereby ensuring that their 'relationship houses' remained structurally sound.

### **Building the relationship that suits you both and Couple Sample 2**

As per the discussion in 'Choosing carefully', unlike Couple Sample 1, most couples in Sample 2 did not describe having a shared plan or a mutually agreed course for their relationship. Several participants explicitly rejected the idea of long-term planning as you could not anticipate future events or how individual needs will change, instead stressing the importance of living in the present:

I have had a friend or two and they have got like a 5-year, 10-year plan, a life plan... and I would say we're the opposite of that... yes [we] think about the future but just trying to live very much now and be now and do it. (Robyn-02-M-SS)

Instead of a joint common purpose from the start, couples in Sample 2 described a flexible responsive approach and the development of a common purpose over time. For example, an individual love of something, such as dogs, becomes a joint love; a desire to move from city living, to live by the sea became a joint aspiration, or ideas around work converged. For example, one couple who started off with very different ideas around work are now thinking about developing a vocational opportunity where they will work together. While meshed life goals were not described as existing early on in their relationship, as per the 'Choosing carefully' discussion, couples in this sample emphasised the importance of a shared world view. Being on the same page on areas that can be a common source of conflict in relationships (e.g. work, money, sex, parenting, domestic chores, use of leisure time, relationships with families/in-laws) and being flexible reduced relationship conflict:

I can remember my parents having rows all the time about money, but we've never had a row about money...It's not because we had a lot of it, it's just because we sorted it out really. (Charlie-08-CB-OS)

It doesn't bother him whether [the house is] dusty or not. I suppose we both have the same things that are important and the same things that then aren't so important. I think we would drive each other mad if I was cleaning obsessed and he wasn't or vice versa. (Elenna-01-M-OS)

As per Couples Sample 1, teamwork was important for all the couples in Sample 2 with them often describing a sense of 'being in it together', particularly when facing life challenges. Aaron (05-CP-SS) reflected that 'the focus on doing something together was bound to bring us together' following a significant trial. Max thought that a converging of approaches over time had reduced possible contention:

Well I guess there's less grounds for contention... I was sort of more spontaneous and Lia was more planned, we've kind of levelled out a little bit, so now I am more planned, certainly with things like money and stuff... Lia has become a bit more spontaneous...so there's less sort of areas that we might be, you know, contesting over. (Max-06-M-OS)

A deep knowing of each other and complementary skills and interests helped couples to work as a partnership. For example, most couples did not discuss division of domestic chores but fell into a mutually satisfactory pattern:

There's also an element of how each of us knowing how the other would think and each of us knowing how the other or what decision the other one would make anyway. (Terry-01-M-OS)

Sometimes I do a bit more, sometimes she does a bit less or she does a bit more. Again, it depends on what jobs each of us are doing and how much time we have... I don't think we've ever had to, kind of had a discussion, about somebody not pulling their weight or something like that, we both just kind of muck in and do what we have to do. (Macy-02-M-SS)

Like Couple Sample 1, couples in Sample 2 developed the relationship to suit them with some building their lives to predominantly revolve around each other, while others preferred more autonomy in their relationship. Some saw all assets as joint while for others financial independence was very important. A lack of shared meaning in an area of the relationship needed to be managed to reduce any impact. As per the uniqueness of each relationship built to suit each distinctive pairing, different tensions affected different couples. In these interviews, tensions were described around inequity in financial provision, different needs for socialising and different parenting styles. In line with their realistic expectations, couples in Sample 2 didn't expect to always agree and they described managing such tensions through open communication, putting differences into perspective, agreeing to disagree and seeing the best in their partner and their relationship. Clara, for example, decided not to make an issue of the differing parenting styles she and Bill adopted:

I thought well I'm not going to countermand him in front of the children. Because I might not agree with what he says but I am not going to row about it because if they see we're divided that would be worse than if one of us does it wrong. (Clara-03-M-OS)

Others described accommodating differences and being empathetic towards what was driving these differences:

I suppose the most difficult one is, I don't suppose it's that difficult, but I like having a lot of people around and just sort of generally feeding them and, you know, wittering on and Violet likes her space. So, I suppose that's the main ongoing thing, you know, coming from a big family and the sort of background that I had and, you know, the background that we both came from, you know, Violet's parents, rarely had anyone around. (Charlie-08-CB-OS)

I'm perfectly happy to be dependent on Sofia... I think she clings quite fiercely still to that notion of being financially, not only financially independent, but also able to make an equal contribution. (Sawyer-07-CB-OS)

The latter quote suggests external social pressures can impact a relationship and couples in Sample 2 described societal and cultural expectations as an influence on relationships:

I think society puts an awful lot of pressure on relationships. I think society does have this very Mills and Boons view of relationships that, you know, you fall in love, it lasts forever and if it stops being love then there's guilt and blame. (Sofia-07-CB-OS)

There's quite a lot of stereotypes within lesbian relationship, you know, the second date you move in with your suitcase and your cat and that kind of thing and I had played along with that in my previous relationships and, you know, sort of like exchange rings after six months and all that kind of thing and never really felt my heart was in it but, you know, done it because the other person expected it. So, it was actually really lovely that there wasn't any pressure from Robyn about, you know, why aren't we doing this? (Macy-02-M-SS)

Couples who formalised their relationship described an importance attached to having a service to suit them, with one opposite-sex couple waiting until the law was changed so they could marry outside

of a religious building or registry office, with the husband indicating in the joint interview that they would probably not have married otherwise. Two of the same-sex couples who formalised their relationships were intent on ensuring that the ceremony was personalised to their tastes:

We didn't have a traditional marriage with traditional wedding vows either and we had our own vows for our civil partnership so there wasn't any of those traditional you know, 'to death do you part', that kind of thing, but they were written in I think, you know, the intention was to be there and support each other in our life together but we didn't want to have those, as they're not our vows. (Robyn-02-M-SS)

I remember having a look on this website researching civil partnerships and saw all these horseshoes and ribbons. I didn't want anything of that, and we didn't have any of that and we had our civil partnership in [venue]. We dressed up for it, we had a limousine to take us... 2 friends who were our witnesses, so just the 4 of us for the ceremony, the Registrar was lovely and said really nice things and it was a very nice day. (Harry-10-CP-SS)

The interviews in this sample suggest that without prevalent normative relationship trajectories, same-sex couples may have found it easier to develop a relationship to suit themselves and to make reflective, rational decisions about formal commitment. Opposite sex couples who married, described the decision to marry as a next step ('a natural thing to do at that stage', Elenna-01-M-OS). Two female cohabitants described typical conversations with relatives and others in their social networks:

"So, we've heard a lot about you... we know that you two have been together for a long time and obviously there will be the pitter patter of little feet very shortly and you'll have to get married before that"... it wasn't even an expectation... it wasn't really pressure they applied, it was just how reality was going to go, because how could it possibly be any different? (Sofia-07-CB-OS)

My mum a bit later said, "well you know they are going to call [child of unmarried parents] names in the playground." (Violet-08-CB-OS)

These normative expectations around marriage and parenting were not described by couples in same-sex relationships:

It's funny in a way... I guess, there wasn't any other external pressure/expectation from anyone saying, "when are you getting married, when are you doing this" it was like we are just doing, we are being, and we are seeing how we get on. (Robyn-02-M-SS)

If gay people were portrayed publicly it was always in a negative stereotypical way and so there weren't any role models.... there are role models now but there weren't then, so you had to make it all up yourselves. (Harry-10-CP-SS)

Indeed, one same-sex couple lived apart for the first eleven years without feeling any pressure to live together or even discussing it. Another same-sex couple have always had separate bedrooms and all three of the same-sex couples interviewed who formalised their relationship via marriage or civil partnership described a considered approach to making that decision:

As soon as [civil partnerships] became an option one thought, "oh isn't that good" ... Now then, we thought is it the right thing to do and so we researched all that and I think emotionally we wanted to do it, but we did want to check that it wasn't making a lot of nonsense financially, I mean obviously it makes sense in terms of wills and so on but in terms of pensions and those sorts of things, and tax liability and so forth could have an effect. (Ron-10-CP-SS)



## Adapting to change

Some relationships will face greater stresses than others and the severity, inherent resolvability, duration and frequency of stresses faced will impact on a relationship's trajectory (Berscheid, 1998; Bradbury et al. 1998). The vulnerability-stress-adaptation model proposes that poor outcomes are expected when levels of enduring vulnerabilities and stressful events are high, and good outcomes are expected when enduring vulnerabilities and stressful events are low (Karney and Bradbury, 1995). However, outcomes are expected to be moderated by the quality of couples' adaptive processes. Couples skilled in adapting to difficulties and change are likely to have better outcomes than couples less skilful in their adaptive processes (Bradbury et al. 1998:294).

Anticipating change (Ramm et al. 2010) and imagining an easier or better time ahead on the 'relationship horizon' (Gabb and Fink, 2015:73) helps couples to navigate change across the life-course.

### Adapting to change and Couple Sample 1

#### *Change and a team mentality*

Since change is inevitable, the ability to anticipate and adapt to change is likely to be critical. As expected, those with developmentalist perspectives (Ramm et al. 2010) managed change best. They anticipated change and were unfazed by it. Reflecting the sentiments of others, at time 4 Tom Newsome thought 'you would be pretty naive if you didn't expect' your relationship to change. Several expressed the sentiment that it is therefore vital to choose someone who is likely to 'evolve' with you:

We will change [but]... hopefully we'll... change together... we'll evolve at different speeds and it might be hard for us, because one person goes through something. But that's why I've chosen someone that I think we can resolve whatever we face hopefully. (Sarah Henderson, time 1)

Melanie Joseph identified an inability to 'change or be flexible' as a contributor to relationship breakdown. As predicted, participants who flexibly adapted to change had good outcomes (Bradbury et al. 1998; Karney and Bradbury, 1995):

Our family is constantly changing... so then you have to kind of work [out] what works now and then, so it's kind of like adjusting the whole time really. I just think you can't be rigid as we just live a life where we have to be flexible the whole time. (Elizabeth Fenton, time 4)

## KEY MESSAGES

- An ability to adapt to change seemed to stem from a strong team mentality and was essential to thriving relationships.
- When couples pulled together during periods of adversity, they often report a strengthening of the relationship as a result.
- Participants in thriving relationships had structurally sound relationships prior to becoming parents. Where relationships were structurally unsound prior to parenthood because of a lack of shared vision or because friendship was adequate only, often parenthood polarised couples suggesting that efforts to strengthen couples' friendship and sense of shared vision and purpose prior to the transition to parenthood, are likely to optimise parents' chances of managing the transition successfully.
- A developmental attitude was critical to thriving relationships across both samples. However, whilst friendship was the hallmark of Sample 1 thriving relationships, for thriving relationships in Sample 2 (perhaps because they had experienced more change in their longer time together) a developmental attitude; openness to change and an ability to adapt to it, along with compassionate love, were the foremost characteristics.

Caroline Turner relished change ('I love change, I thrive on change... I look for it and I embrace it'). Perhaps because of his wife's approach, Christopher Turner stressed the importance of flexibility in marriage and thought that without change life can get stagnant. At time 4, Ben Carmichael advocated 'testing' the relationship to see whether the couple would 'pull together' in a crisis before making a long-term commitment. Rachel Leyton's relationship continued as there had been no problems that might have caused her and Joseph to break up. She did not recall it being 'a conscious decision' to progress the relationship. By time 4, Joseph had experienced trauma that Rachel thought had fundamentally changed him causing her to question their compatibility. The couple had not encountered trauma until recently and Rachel was now struggling to love her husband compassionately due to his changed nature.

A long-term perspective and a team mentality helped orient thriving couples' responses to change and challenges. Change was anticipated, had to be adapted to and be accommodated. It was essential, as Lucy Young notes at time 4 to 'keep talking' and to accept that 'you are in it for the long run.'

The participants who viewed change as inevitable and who were 'rooted in a common purpose' (Walker et al. 2010:53) fared best. As outlined in 'Seeing the best', some had chosen radically different paths to that intended initially as part of their 'joint journey' (Alistair Vickers, time 4). For others, devastating changes including life-threatening illnesses, significant financial issues or close bereavements had been forced upon them. Facing these challenges early in their marriages had provided them with a 'training ground in which to hone their coping responses' (Neff and Broady, 2011:1065). As Marias Newsome put it at time 4 'every little bump in the road... really has just made us stronger.' Few had sought professional help but a developmental approach to seeking help where needed was universal in the thriving couples. Like Reibstein's (2007) participants, pulling together during difficult periods of change strengthened relationships:

No doubt going through [major trauma] made our relationship stronger. I suppose when you go through things like that it kind of you either go through it and it makes you stronger or you are unable to go through it and it doesn't, but it did make us stronger. (Andy Armstrong, time 4)

Couples who separated did not cope with change well; dissonance in expectations and lack of team focus at times of change caused fissures in the relationship leading to breakdown because of:

Changes in the both of us over the years which I suppose is to be expected but it's how you deal with those changes I think, maybe sort of like resentment towards each other and also going in different directions of who we sort of became. (Sally Maxwell, time 4)

Four of the six couples who separated had relationship counselling. James Isaac thought that it had been 'phenomenally expensive' and it felt like they were trying to put a 'sticking plaster' over the cracks in the relationship. Ginny Walters reported that Tim had refused counselling when she thought they needed it some years before separation. They subsequently had some counselling, but this did not bring about lasting change. Tim then begged Ginny to attend again when she disclosed that she wanted a separation by which time for her 'to pick the scab and let it bleed' would have been too difficult. Counselling came too late in the uncoupling process to restore these marriages.

### ***The relationship horizon***

Couples in thriving relationships normalised difficulties balancing couple time with young children ('I think I am fairly pragmatic about it in terms of life stage, this is kind of where we are... I think it's fairly normal.' Lesley Egan, time 4). As Gabb and Fink (2015:73) report they looked to an imagined 'relationship horizon' confident that time as a couple, as Richard Atkins put it, 'will come again in time':

We talk about [lack of time together] so... it doesn't get held inside as an issue that could cause resentment or lead us to feel further apart... it's a temporary thing and an external thing... the external factor of very young children and not much support around. (Piers Monroe, time 4)

At time 3, the father of a teenager asked us to pass on to new fathers that when they have their first child, 'it is hard... because you do lose your wife' and that 'obviously the baby takes preference' and the father takes a 'back seat' but he wanted to encourage new fathers to 'just ride it, just go with it.'

### ***Adapting to change and the transition to parenthood***

The stresses accompanying the transition to parenthood are well documented (Cowan and Cowan, 1995; Houlston et al. 2013; Twenge et al. 2003; Walker et al. 2010). One couple were voluntarily childless, and another were expecting their first child at time 4. All the other Sample 1 couples were parents by time 4. Those with developmentalist perspectives (Ramm et al. 2010) managed the changes wrought by parenthood best. They anticipated change and pulled together to support each other. They carved out couple time proactively where possible but moderated their expectations to avoid disappointment. They were, as Caroline Turner said at time 4, 'realistic about what's achievable.'

The 'relationship houses' of participants in thriving relationships were sound prior to becoming parents. Where 'relationship houses' were structurally unsound prior to parenthood because of a lack of a shared vision or because friendship was adequate only, parenthood often polarised couples. At time 1, the fact that James and Catherine Isaac, as James put it, 'look[ed] at the world through two completely different lenses' had been refreshing for both spouses. By time 3 however, James reflected that they had 'become more acutely aware' of their differences since becoming parents which had fed a growing sense of incompatibility. For Catherine, parenthood had crystallised the differences:

I think me having [child] has made it clearer for me about what I want... He just has a completely different view to me... and I think when we first met that was really refreshing... but in some ways being a mum, it has really re-affirmed for me my identity and who I am and what's important to me. (Catherine Isaac, time 3)

Following separation, James reflected before becoming parents they had been able to 'just paper over' the potential for their different approaches and temperaments to cause problems. Attempts by partners to 'paper over' fault lines will compromise the structural integrity of their 'relationship house' and it is likely that some will be unable to adapt to future significant change or challenges. For the other two couples who separated after having children, parenting issues; either in parenting styles (the Maxwells) or perceived lack of support from the other parent (the Walters) were cited as instrumental in the breakdown. For the parents who separated, at either the interview prior to or immediately after becoming parents (or both) Ewing –had noted that the depth of friendship and shared meaning disclosed by at least one spouse were less than at the outset of the interview process. The transition to parenthood provides a critical opportunity to strengthen couple relationships (Schulz et al. 2006; Mansfield, 2009). The present study showed that, whilst this may be so, efforts to strengthen couples' friendship and sense of shared vision and purpose prior to the transition, are likely to optimise parents' chances of managing the transition successfully.

Two husbands with young families disclosed feeling unappreciated at time 3. Both chose not to disclose their feelings to their respective wives leading to them feeling 'on my own' and 'an outsider'. Their disenchantment stemmed from difficulties adjusting to the change of focus within the relationship and the ensuing loss of personal freedom when they became parents. Geoff Illingworth felt that the relationship was, 'all centred around [the children].' Chris Small professed that he 'would be disgusted [if it was] otherwise' but nevertheless he was saddened that 'all of a sudden it has become Jessica and [child] and not Jessica and me, so her focus is on [child].' Both men coped by normalising the issues at this life-stage. Geoff said that conversations with male friends made him realise that what he was experiencing is 'par for the course.' Chris Small accepted that:

It's part and parcel of having children I think. I just accept it, I knew it was coming. I have not walked into it with my eyes shut and I knew these things would happen and it will be tough, so you have just got to grin and bear it... I would say you have got to go in with your eyes open. I mean nothing's a fairy tale; life's hard at the end of the day.

At time 3 Chris Small indicated that he 'got married for the long haul not a short haul.' Looking to the 'relationship horizon' (Gabb and Fink, 2015: 73) helped him to get through the challenges of parenting young children. By time 4, both men were far happier. Life had become easier as their children were older and their self-reported happiness scores had recovered. Both put the recovery down to having modified their expectations, 'manned-up' or 'grown up' as they respectively put it:

I struggled to accept it in the beginning, but I accept it now, I accept that that period in life, if you decide to have children, you have got to almost just put your own life sort of second... It was my decision to get married and my decision to have kids... so I have got to man up and just get on with it. (Chris Small, time 4)

I [realised]... I am not 21 anymore... still going out with all the mates doing that stuff... So probably a lot [was] in my own mind... I think it's just everyone has just grown up a bit really... and we are here now and [with] a bit of self-awareness later and a bit of reflection you can potentially move forward and be in a far better place. (Geoff Illingworth, time 4)

In the Practitioner sample, Will Cameron, an experienced lawyer, mediator and collaborative lawyer lamented the refusal, as he saw it, of some men to 'grow up' and to face their responsibilities as fathers. At time 4, both Chris and Geoff men felt that they had faced their responsibilities. They viewed previous frustrations as circumstantial. Whilst their decision not to open up to their wives at time 3 had meant that they had faced these issues alone, their 'relationship houses' prior to becoming parents had been structurally sound and they had therefore been able to regain an equilibrium.

Cameron Young and his wife had had two children between times 3 and 4. Cameron disclosed having struggled to adapt to parenthood first time round and this had put a strain on his relationship with his wife Lucy. The Youngs' 'relationship house' was sound prior to parenthood. They lacked enduring vulnerabilities and had good adaptive processes (Karney and Bradbury, 1995). Lucy had loved Cameron compassionately through this period and whilst at times the challenge put a strain on their relationship, like many others, at time 4 Lucy thought that ultimately working through the challenges and supporting each other had strengthened their relationship:

... having the children has probably stretched and challenged us in a way that I couldn't have imagined before, but I think it has made us stronger as a couple and brought us together more.

### **Adapting to change and Couple Sample 2**

While for Sample 1, strong friendship was found to be the foremost characteristic, for Sample 2, it was this attribute; a developmental attitude which meant that individuals were open to change and able to adapt to it, along with compassionate love, that strongly came through all of the interviews. Several participants explicitly described a love of learning, as evidenced by a number having returned to education in later life. As per Sample 1, couples had realistic expectations of the inevitability of change, the challenge of adapting to change and the importance of creating a space for each partner and the relationship to grow. Bill (03-M-OS) thought it 'lovely' that his relationship with his wife Clara is 'still growing.' Macy appreciated the 'space' for change that her wife Robyn gave her:

When we first met I really didn't know what I wanted to do with my life... And so, Robyn probably had to put up with quite a lot of kind of chopping and changing from me and that sort of lack of stability within our relationship as well as within my individual decision making. So, I think there has always been space for that individuality for both of us. (Macy-02-M-SS)

In keeping with Sample 1, adversity tended to bring the couples together. However, as specific change couldn't be anticipated, rather than emphasise a 'testing' period at the start of the relationship where individuals reflected on how they responded to stresses, the participants described more of a compassionate love where acceptance of difference was key, and effort was made to adapt to new circumstances. For example, following the bereavement of a parent, individuals in one couple had different ideas about the support needed (one wanted space and to get drunk, the other wanted to provide comfort and get back to normal routines) but they got through it by accepting that one's partner cannot be everything you need and positively reframing the experience as providing an opportunity to learn about each other. As Lance (05-CP-SS) explains 'I think it made me understand things a bit better. I realised perhaps his approach to things might not be quite the same as mine.'

Another couple described a complete change of dynamics in their relationship following illness. Bessie explained that she had to fight her natural instincts to step in and do things for Jo during a long period of ill-health, as Jo found it disempowering. She also adapted to take on the social aspects of life which Jo had previously led on but now found difficult. Jo acknowledged that she had 'become a bit more inward and a bit more solitary' over the course of the relationship but that the relationship had accommodated the change:

it's almost like an interesting reversal for me but I think what's kind of good is the relationship has accommodated it... I think sometimes it's hard that the person you first got involved with is not the same. (Jo-09-CB-SS)

For this couple and for others, talking about difficult issues with their partner in a timely fashion so that they didn't build (see 'Keep talking') and adopting strategies such as agreeing to disagree meant that stresses didn't impact the relationship. As per Sample 1, couples who described transitioning to parenthood smoothly emphasised team work and respecting the contribution made by each partner. Elenna acknowledged that it must have been hard for her husband to come home to her on the occasions she was desperate for help with a young child, when he would have liked to 'just chill... but it was never an issue... I think because we like to share things anyway and we were definitely in this together'. (Elenna-01-M-OS)

Reflecting a developmental attitude, two fathers reported seeking professional help via counselling to help them adjust to parenthood. As Merlin (04-CB-OS) describes 'I was doing my best, but I was just slowly becoming bitter under the surface'. Most of the participants in Sample 2 reported that they would seek professional help for their relationship if needed, although they recognised that judging the right time to seek help was a challenge. Some thought that by the time you think about seeking professional help it is too late and that going to Relate was something people who are about to 'break up' do. Two couples had received relationship counselling. One felt the decision to go was enough while the other couple described it as helpful:

We went along for a couple of sessions and yeah it was interesting, but I think by the time we got there and sat down it had settled down and it all seemed a bit pointless (Charlie-08-CB-OP)

It was a really good way to talk to each other because I actually changed the way that I related to him... I realised... he wasn't the site of the problem... it was the relationship, the interrelationship between us and both of our behaviours were contributing to problems. So that was really good, that was a rain check. (Ava-04-CB-OS)

Two male participants said that they wouldn't consider seeking professional help. Bill (03-M-OS) said that he would prefer and would respond to the counsel of trusted friends but not a professional as it would take too long to build a relationship with a professional. Two participants in same-sex relationships described not knowing where they would have accessed professional support in the early days of their relationship.

## Building a support network

Couple relationships do not take place in a vacuum, but are embedded within wider, relational networks (Widmer, 2004). These networks can involve highly complex sets of relationships within and between generations with increasingly a 'blurring of boundaries' between family and friends (Pahl and Spencer, 2004:203). Women's mothers are often significant confidants, advisers and sources of relationship and other support (Walker et al. 2010). Peer support across the life-course is also prized by both men and women (Ramm et al. 2010; Walker et al. 2010) and networks may extend to peer support online. Low satisfaction with support systems predicts marital instability and low marital quality (Kurdek, 1991 and 1998). Gabb and Fink (2015:85) report that without the support and friendship of significant others, 'couple relationships appear to be experienced as qualitatively poorer and less able to weather the stressors' which couples ordinarily encounter.

Parents are often the mainstay of support to couples and may be role models during the early years of parenting (Glade et al. 2005). Parents may provide the couple with help raising grandchildren, financial help and domestic help (Widmer, 2004). Level of social support received often accounts for variances in adaptation to parenthood (Cowan and Cowan, 1995). Weekly group peer support during late pregnancy/ initial months of parenthood has been shown to reduce declines in marital satisfaction (Schulz et al. 2006).

Successful blending of partners' networks can enhance the quality of the relationship (Sprecher et al. 2002). Joint friendship networks can act as a form of 'marital capital', with the risk of lost friendships increasing 'exit-costs' (Kalmijn, 2003). Meaningful friendships can enrich couple relationships and provide emotional and practical sustenance that a partner may be unable to provide at times of crisis (Gabb and Fink, 2015:99).

Religious affiliation, where relevant, serves to support the couple relationship by providing accessible support systems that positively influence family processes and functioning (Chatters and Taylor, 2005).

Support networks, though mostly beneficial to the couple, may prove problematic. When networks are too involved they may interfere in the couple's functioning (Mansfield and Collard, 1988:96; Widmer, 2004:366). When intimate relationships are in difficulty, network members may 'increase the likelihood of a breakup simply by being good alternative sources of companionship and intimacy' (Sprecher et al. 2002:266).

## KEY MESSAGES

- Close, supportive networks of family and friends enriched the lives of couples across the spectrum of family forms.
- Where family support networks were not readily available, couples in thriving relationships built alternative networks based on friendship rather than kinship.
- Couples draw support from the many communities in which they are a member e.g. work, school, church, LGBTQ+ groups
- Women drew substantial support from their mothers, sisters and/or girlfriends. Many men relied primarily on their wives for emotional support, but for most this was not problematic. The minority of men who had friendships beyond the dyad that met deep emotional needs found these friendships helpful and meaningful.
- When family or other support is unavailable it becomes difficult for parents of young children to prioritise and nurture the couple relationship: this places additional pressures on thriving relationships and may contribute to the breakdown of relationships in difficulty.

## Building a support network and Couple Sample 1

### *Family support networks*

Couples in Sample 1 cited the importance of a supportive network of family and friends frequently. There was, as Pahl and Spencer (2004) suggest, often a blurring of boundaries with close 'friendship' with both kin and friends as summed up by Wendy Stonebridge at time 4:

We have got very close family on both sides and that they are around, and we socialise with them a lot as well and a lot of our friends are still, you know, they are still in very good relationships. I just think we have just got a very good network and upbringing.

Parents gave practical support with daily childcare and to allow couples time together. Some parents had provided financial support enabling couples to purchase a home or to pay for fertility treatment. In the thriving couples, parents respected boundaries and their support was much appreciated:

Sarah's mother ... is a big part of this family, a big part of our kids' lives and, you know, the stuff she does for us and the love she shows us is amazing ... I really recognise what she does and what she gives to us as a family. (Duncan Henderson, time 4)

Notably, several women who separated cited negative family influences playing a part in their own relationship breakdown. For others, geographical distance made it difficult to access family support:

[It was] difficult for me and Graham to dedicate time to each other because we didn't have babysitters on tap, we didn't have family members down the road that we could rely on. We rarely got time to ourselves as a couple, so I guess that got neglected. (Sally Maxwell, time 4)

### *Friendship support networks*

Geography, estrangement, bereavement or other caring responsibilities may constrain the availability of family support. This potential enduring vulnerability requires effective adaptive processes (Karney and Bradbury, 1995). In thriving Sample 1 couples, those without available family support purposively built an alternative support networks of friends. The Newsomes lacked available family support but were 'very well supported' by 'wonderful friends' who had 'come to the fore' and had been 'there... through everything' in a difficult season (Maria Newsome, time 4). When family or alternative support was not readily available, work and childcare pressures left little time for the couple relationship, dampening satisfaction. Provided the relationship was otherwise fulfilling, participants rationalised this as 'a short-term thing... [due to] where we are I think in our lives' (Marcus Carter, time 4).

As Gabb and Fink (2015:85) report, thriving couples drew support from their friendship groups:

Going back to one of your questions about like what makes a good marriage... what has helped that along the way as well is friends... sharing the trials and tribulations [of parenting] ... having that sort of wider unit... chatting and realising like my mate... has had the same sort of issue [as me] at times and you think well it's not all glowy happy stuff all the time. So, I think that's quite important it's like a realism check. (Mark Naylor, time 4)

Several participants described meaningful relationships with members of their National Childbirth Trust groups. Others drew support from peer groups for new parents at work and work mentors and colleagues more generally. One wife described how a work colleague's advice had helped her enormously during a difficult phase in her marriage:

That conversation kind of helped me think well actually my aim here is to keep my family here, you know, it's not about winning or losing it's about that ultimate aim.

Church communities, for the minority of couples with strongly held Christian beliefs, were important sources of support. At time 4, Melanie Joseph, reported that it was 'really helpful' having 'people that we know and love... proactive people checking in' from their church community. Andy Armstrong said that he and Zoe met regularly with a church group to 'just share life with.'

### ***Gender and support networks***

Reflecting the findings of Widmer (2004:358), women in Sample 1 tended to be responsible for organising contact with family and friends. Many women had deeply meaningful bonds with their mothers, sisters or friends and, as outlined in 'Being realistic' above did not expect their spouse to meet all their emotional needs.

For some of the women who separated or who had encountered significant marital problems, children helped to fulfil emotional needs unmet by their husbands. For wives with self-rated scores of 'happy' or below, friends and family 'filled the gap' as illustrated by Cathy Logan at time 4:

I speak to my sister like all the time and my mum and that sort of fills that gap really. Maybe I don't require Pete to be first support... I think my emotional needs are met but... I probably rely on Pete to a certain extent but [also] friends and family to fully meet my emotional needs.

Men mostly relied on their wives to meet their emotional needs, but few viewed this as an issue. Whereas Jenny Osgood drew support from her mother and friends, her husband Gary at time 4 said that there was 'no one for me really apart from Jenny so if I don't tell her, I don't really tell anyone.'

### ***Networks causing division***

Intact couples in Sample 1 described largely positive networks of families and friends. For the minority who had faced difficulties with in-laws, backing from the other spouse was valued. One wife described her husband's 'amazing' support following her in-laws disparaging and untruthful remarks about her.

For one couple who had experienced major challenges which they were beginning to put behind them, the husband viewed family support at that time as critical whereas his wife felt that her husband discussing matters with family and friends had exacerbated the problem.

The salience of families-of-origin changed over time. For one husband, his wife's close relationship with her family only became problematic after the death of one of his parents. Attending some family engagements became too painful for him, leading, on occasions, to tension with his wife.

As Sprecher et al. (2002:266) predict, for Joanna Thompson, the realisation that she preferred the company of her friends to her husband signalled the end of her marriage.

### ***Building a support network and Couple Sample 2***

As per Sample 1, couples in Sample 2 described the importance of a supportive network of family and friends. Most of the participants lived at a geographical distance from their families-of-origin but developed local networks for socialising (together or separately) and to step in with help (particularly around child care) if needed. The salience of a locally supportive network was graphically illustrated by one couple, who returned one day to find their home being ravaged by fire. Their social network rallied around including providing a temporary home:

I mean that was such a traumatic event that the only thing was to pull together really and because of the support that we had from friends and neighbours, that helped really... everyone gathering around, thinking gosh these people really do care about us.



Reflecting a developmental approach through which individuals are confident to admit struggles and ask for help, this same couple who fostered adolescents, acknowledged that at times parenting could be divisive but found that:

The monthly meeting of all the foster carers on that scheme in the borough was very important. We couldn't have done without that really, just as a reminder that we weren't the only ones suffering these terrible traumas. That was a very important support mechanism.

Two couples described the importance of a faith community to 'give you a focus beyond yourself and outside yourself and it also, hopefully draws you into a good community' (Bill-03-M-OS). All the same-sex couples described being linked in with other same-sex couples and/or an LGBTQ community. Although keen to express that this was not in an exclusionary way and social systems were not limited to same-sex networks, with social attitudes and the law far from supporting their relationships in the early years, gay social groups offered an opportunity to meet others and for understanding. Jo (09-CB-SS) reflected she would have been 'in the closet forever' without the support of her then local lesbian community. For Harry:

I helped found one of the first gay societies at my university and so at least I had... there were other gay people around and so that is sort of, even though I wouldn't go as far as say support, but you do, as it's a sort of mutual support in a way, but no there were no role models, but I think younger gay men are lucky in that sense that there are nowadays. (Harry-10-CP-SS)

Like in Sample 1 and reflecting the potential different gendered expectations for emotional support as discussed in 'Being realistic', three women described discussing minor relationship irritations with their mother or close friends to gain perspective and stop negativity from minor issues affecting the relationship:

I don't think you always share everything with friends, but I have got a couple of close friends that I tell most things to, to be honest and they do to me as well. So, we kind of share and you let off a bit of steam and they tell you to stop being silly and it's all fine. (Lia-06-M-OS)

In Sample 2, often one partner tended to take the lead on arranging social activities. For example, Harry (10-CP-SS) described himself as 'the social organiser' in his relationship. Reflecting the complementary differences discussed in 'Choosing carefully', the partner who took the lead was often naturally more socially inclined and/or the one who enjoyed organisational/planning tasks:

As a general rule I just dictate everything, and he just nods and goes along with what I tell him (laughs). I think. But then I try and plan things that he'd like to do, so I'm often when I am planning things I think 'what would Max like to do' and work around him. (Lia-06-M-OS)

Several couples described the challenge at the start of their relationship of balancing time spent with their new partner and their friends, or friend's opinions on their partner/relationship:

After about a year she said, "maybe we should split up".... and that was really because of the influence of one of her friends who felt that Macy shouldn't be getting settled down with anybody and she should just be having a fling with me and then moving on. (Robyn-02-M-SS)

Some couples also described distant or challenging relationships with their families. Reflecting an ability to keep talking and focus on seeing the best, boundaries were often agreed between the parties to manage these challenges so that minimal negativity would be brought back into the relationship. For example, one participant struggled with the impact on the couple relationship of the dementia suffered by her partner's mother. She described enlisting the support of her partner's brother to relieve the pressure.

## Different findings between the two couple samples

### *Implemental v determinative mindsets*

Our analysis revealed some apparent differences between Couple Samples 1 and 2 as noted. However, this may reflect elements of sample bias. The couples in Sample 2 are all in intact, long-term, stable yet diverse relationships and the sample size is small. Sample 2 are closer to the couples who separated in Sample 1 in terms of how quickly they transitioned into an intimate relationship. The thriving couples in Sample 1 were predominantly determinative in mindset whereas Sample 2 couples were a mix of deliberative and implemental in mindsets. Some Sample 2 couples may be in the group of people who land in the same position by sliding that they would have done by deciding (Stanley and Rhoades, 2009:38). For the Sample 2 couples, if one of the partners had a secure attachment style/emotional intelligence at the start of the relationship, then how they got together and whether they were implemental or determinative in mindset seemed less of an issue.

### *Friendship v compassionate love and developmental outlooks*

Friendship was the hallmark of thriving relationships in Sample 1, but compassionate love and a developmental approach were the mark of thriving relationships in Sample 2. Since friendship within intimate relationships has become more salient in recent times (VanderDrift et al. 2016:117), we may have been observing a shift in what drives thriving relationships in the more recently formed relationships in the longitudinal sample. However more plausibly, apparent differences may simply be differences of emphasis in the participants' narratives. In both samples participants in thriving relationships overwhelmingly described a deep friendship with their partner, loved their partner compassionately and were developmental in outlook. In the longer-term relationships, it may simply have been that friendship was such a given that participants felt no need to discuss it explicitly. Fehr et al. (2014) found that friendship-based love within intimate relationships was significantly associated with compassionate love. They also suggest that the true test of compassionate love arises when support and sacrifices are required over a sustained period. The disparities may therefore be attributable to differences in the length of the relationships of participants in the two samples. The fact that participants in Sample 1 emphasised compassionate love more frequently in later interviews seems to support this. Similarly, since a developmental mindset is critical to managing change, then the emphasis on a developmental approach in the sample of longer lasting relationships (where couples are likely to have encountered more change) is as expected. We also cannot rule out the possibility that friendship-based love is a feature of heteronormative relationships. Research from the USA indicates that the processes that regulate relationship functioning are the same across same-sex and opposite-sex couples (Gottman et al. 2003; Kurdek, 2004) and the Gottman Method Couple Therapy has been found to be highly effective in male same-sex couples over time (Garanzini et al. 2017). However, as friendship was not as observed as foundational in the same way across the range of relationship forms in Sample 2 more research is needed with cohabitants and same-sex couples to explore this question, particularly in the UK context.

### *Expectations and commitment*

The differences between the samples outlined above, as discussed, appear to stem from the length of relationship of the respective samples. However, while tentative due to small participating numbers of cohabiting and same-sex couples, the differences we noted in terms of expectations of permanence and of commitment were observed between different relationship forms. Across both samples, save for those with deeply held religious beliefs, commitment to the institution of marriage was far weaker than commitment to one's own relationship. Predominantly, participants' were not prepared to stay in persistently unhappy relationships, but this caused them to work hard to ensure that their relationships remained deeply satisfying. However, across both samples the married opposite-sex participants' were more likely to view their commitment to their spouse as life-long. For many married opposite-sex participants the promises made to their spouse would cause them (they believed) to work harder to save their relationship should it run into difficulties. The commitment of the

cohabitants and two of the same sex couples who had formalised their relationship was more contingent on the relationship remaining healthy for both, with a realistic pragmatic outlook reflected in a reluctance to overpromise when you cannot know what life will bring. While the commitment was semantically different, in practice, all were personally committed to their partner, looked to a future where they were together, healthy and happy, and put in the work to make that their reality. Interestingly, the private commitment within the long cohabitation relationships was passionately perceived as stronger than the commitment within many marriages, where there was no public promise to get them through the challenging times and fewer rights and benefits provided by the State, mirroring findings in other UK studies (Barlow et al. 2005; Barlow and Smithson, 2010). As the opportunity to formalise their relationship didn't arise until the same-sex couples interviewed had been together for a number of years, understandably same-sex couples were more equivocal about the significance of public commitment for their relationship success.

Overall, whilst there were interesting different perspectives which emerged between the two samples which it is important to note and explore further, there were also key commonalities.

Having analysed what the most significant drivers of thriving couple relationship were and using the identified relationship attributes and skills, we turned in Phase 3 to discussing these issues with young people in Phase 3 of the study.

## Discovering Young People's Perspectives – Phase 3 Co-development of an Educational Toolkit

Mental health in childhood and adolescence is defined by the achievement of expected developmental cognitive, social and emotional milestones and by secure attachments, satisfying social relationships and effective coping skills (Hoagwood et al. 1996; Jensen et al. 1996). For this, children and young people are largely dependent on their environment. While social influences are important for children of all ages, their nature and form change over the course of childhood. Family and education are the two most prominent environments to support and encourage children and adolescents in their development. Most programmes targeting young people's mental and physical health or social skills use school or the home environment as their vehicle to reach young people.

### Aims and objectives

Phase 3 of the Shackleton project undertook involvement work with young people aimed at co-producing the foundations of a new relationship toolkit as we wanted young people to be part of the design process as they would be the end users. The co-development largely follows the process as outlined in Hopkins et al. (2017) and aimed to generate: 1) content in terms of which relationship skills young people want to learn and 2) a tool or vehicle to teach these skills.

This strand of the study aimed to answer the following questions:

- a) Which skills do young people aged 14 to 18 years old consider important to learn to increase their chances of having a healthy and happy (long-term) relationship?
- b) How would they want to learn about these skills?

We wanted to discuss with young people what existing programmes for young people teach about relationships skills as well as what they consider key elements to a healthy and happy relationship.

We used the data from the Phase 2 qualitative work with couples to feed into the discussion. In addition, we conducted a systematic review to identify generic relationship programmes aimed at 14 to 18 year olds to understand current (evidence-based) practices.

We have involved young people throughout the whole process: sharing the results of the systematic review and qualitative study; identifying the most and least important skills; collecting ideas on delivery or teaching method and collaborating with experts to build an idea for a relationship skills educational tool. Including young people in the design and development process empowers them and might improve future implementation and uptake of the intervention (Denning and Verschelden 1993).

For ease of the reader, we will report separately on the systematic review and consultation work.

## SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

### Systematic review

The purpose of the systematic review is to identify generic and or skill specific relationship education tools aimed at young people in secondary schools (aged 11-18).

### Methods

The systematic review was conducted following the general principles published by the UK National Health Service Centre for Reviews and Dissemination (2008).

We searched 10 electronic databases<sup>1</sup>. A search strategy was designed to identify 1) programmes 2) that aim to teach skills and attributes considered necessary for a healthy, long-term relationship to 3) young people aged 11-18. Search terms are grouped as follows:

- Group 1: generic names for programmes;
- Group 2: skills related to building and or having stable and healthy intimate relationships;
- Group 3: terms to describe young people.

The search was limited to studies published from 1997 to the present and to those written in the English language only.

An internet search via the Google search engine was also undertaken independently by two researchers (SB, AJ) using the following terms relationship AND skills AND school OR 'young people' OR child\*. Citations were followed where records referred to relationship education programmes but did not describe the programmes therein. Finally, experts in the field were consulted to identify any missing programmes meeting the inclusion criteria.

### *Inclusion and exclusion criteria*

Tables 3 and 4 present the inclusion and exclusion criteria used to select the programmes.

- We searched 10 electronic databases for programmes that teach skills and attributes of healthy long-term relationships to young people aged 12–18. We identified 76 potentially eligible programmes; 10 met the inclusion criteria following review through web searches and citation chasing. Eight programmes were retained from a grey literature search. In total 18 programmes were included.

- We excluded three gender specific programmes. All but two programmes were aimed at young adults aged 11 – 18, and two provided different versions depending on participant age.

- Twelve of the 18 programmes originated in the USA, the rest were from the UK, Australia and Austria, with one other an international collaboration.

- Most programmes were built around 50-60-minute sessions; only one had sessions lasting 25–30 minutes. Programmes ranged from one to 18 sessions. Four programmes' duration depended on participant progression.

- Programmes focus more on group than individual work. Most are delivered in a school setting with some in community groups and others include homework with parents; one programme is delivered solely online.

- Just under half the programmes promote general healthy relationship characteristics, some focussing more on sexual violence prevention. One programme focuses on post-marital relationships.

<sup>1</sup> ASSIA (ProQuest), Australian Education Index, WebofScience, Medline (OvidSP), PsycINFO (OvidSP), The Cochrane Library, CINAHL (EBSCO), ERIC: Educational Resource Information Centre (EBSCO), Education Research Complete, British Education Index

**Table 3: Inclusion criteria for the systematic review**

Criteria	Specification
Population	Age: 11-18 years old. Sub-groups of children within this age-group are eligible. The programmes' targeted population should include young people < 18 years old. Lower age boundary needs to include 11 and 12. Upper age boundary needs to include 17 and 18.
Programmes	Generic and or skill-specific intimate relationship skill programmes used in the English language; group and individual programmes are eligible, school-based programmes and or programmes using another setting/method for delivery. Programmes aimed at one gender are included.
Study design	Any type of study design
Date	1996 onwards
Language	English language

**Table 4: Exclusion criteria for the systematic review**

Criteria	Specification
Exclusion criteria	Any programme that has not been developed to be used in a general population of young people (<18 years) e.g. autism/learning disabilities/refugees. Any programme where the aim is to prevent HIV or pregnancy (a specific aim which does not refer to relationship skills). Any programme where the aim does not mention romantic/intimate relationship skills. Any programme for which an English language version has not been developed.

The results of the searches were screened to identify records in which potentially eligible programmes were cited. Where a record mentioned a programme that met the inclusion criteria, or it was unclear from title and abstract whether the programme met inclusion criteria, the full text was retrieved. These full texts were then screened against the inclusion/exclusion criteria.

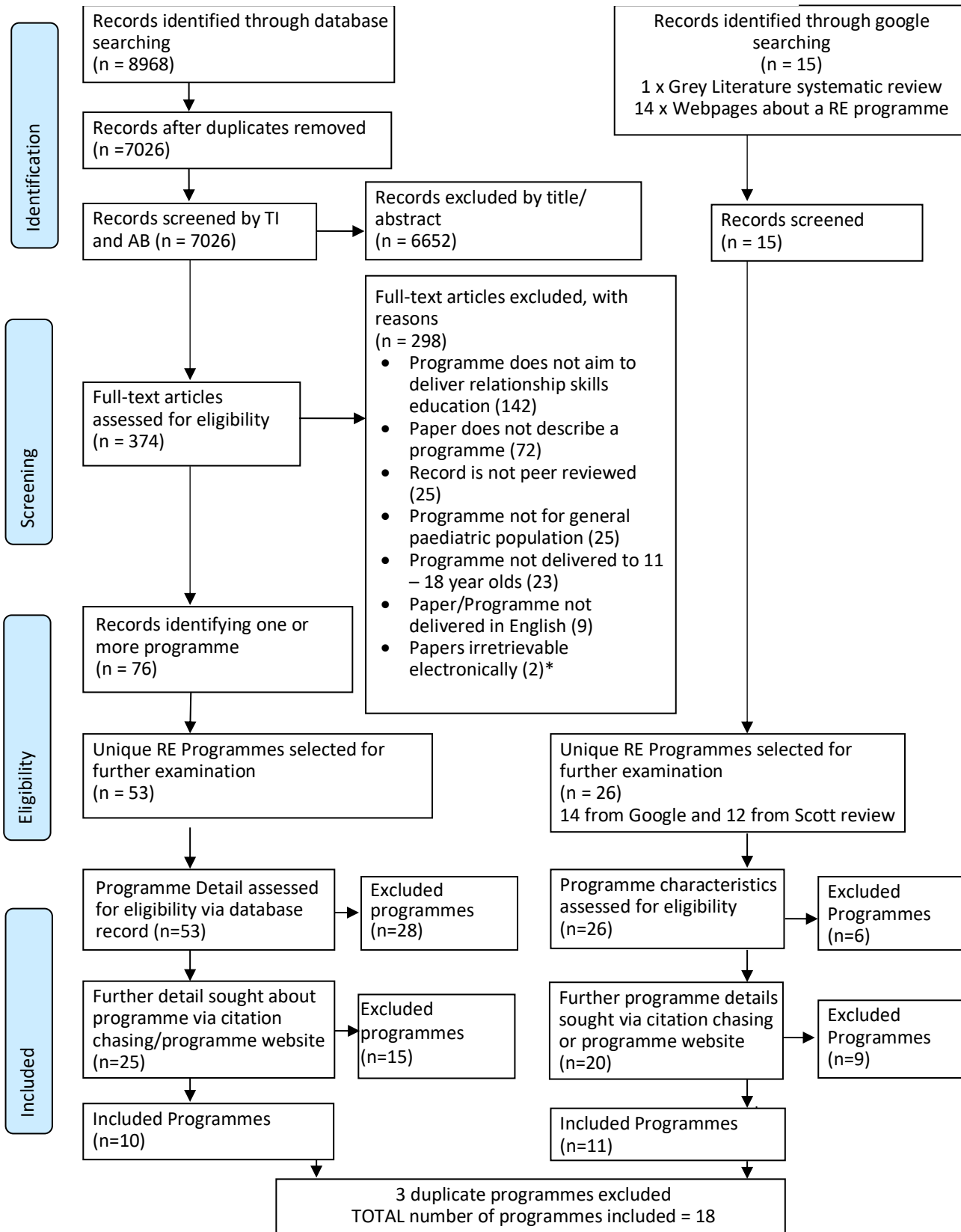
The result of this work was a list of eligible candidate programmes. For each included programme the following were extracted: names and acronyms name of programme, purpose of programme, types of skills/relationship domains targeted, target population (age range, gender), delivery method / format, delivery requirements (time, costs, staff ...).

## Results

The electronic database search yielded 7026 unique results. This resulted in 76 programmes being identified as potentially eligible. Further review of these programmes through web searches or citation chasing resulted in the identification of 10 programmes meeting the inclusion criteria (see Figure 3 for an overview of the selection process).

The grey literature search, including a google and citation check of non-peer reviewed reports or publications, resulted in 14 webpages covering a relationship skill education programme and a systematic review (Scott et al. 2012); which was screened for programmes. Eleven programmes were retained from the grey literature search of which three had also been identified via the electronic database search.

**Figure 3: PRISMA Flowchart of relationship education (RE) programmes selection**



\*It was decided not to pursue these papers as the programmes they each referred to in their abstracts were discussed in other included records.

Figure 3 shows the PRISMA flowchart of search results and selection processes of both the 10 database searches and the grey literature search. A total of 18 programmes were included; some programmes have different versions for different age groups or have changed name over the years, these were counted as single programmes (see the online report Appendix B, Table 1 for an overview of all programmes).

### **Target Audience/Age Range**

Sixteen of the eighteen included programmes are designed to be delivered to young adults within the ages of 11 and 18 (Secondary school years). Two programmes target a slightly older age-group: 'Connections: Relationships and Marriage' (ages 16 to 21) and 'What's Real' (ages 13 to 21) (Gardner et al. 2016). Almost all programmes are taught generically to all young people within this age bracket, with the exception of 'Love Notes' being specifically aimed towards older teens and young adults who might be at risk of unplanned pregnancy, troubled relationships, or who are already pregnant or parenting (Pearson). Two programmes (n=18) were found to provide different versions dependent on participant age: 'Growing Respect', with versions for 10 to 13 and 15 to 16 year-olds and 'Choosing the Best', with versions for 14 to 16 and 16 to 18 year-olds.

From the 53 unique programmes identified via the electronic database search, three were found to be gender specific, with two aimed only at young women ('Choosing, Noticing, Responding, Ending and Bouncing Back' (Murphy 2011) and 'Girl Time' (Brunk et al. 2008) and one aimed at only boys and young men ('Male Advocates for Responsible Sexuality' (MARS), Rink et al. 2006). Their gender-specific focus made these programmes ineligible for this review.

### **Country of development**

Twelve of the 18 included programmes were developed and initially delivered in the United States. Two programmes from the UK and two from Australia were found, along with 'Love House', the only programme to originate from Austria. 'It's All One Curriculum' was the result of an international collaboration and has been translated into Spanish, French, Bangla, and Chinese, and is being adapted and translated into Arabic (Haberland et al. 2009). Requests for the programme have come from more than 150 countries and every state in the United States (Haberland et al. 2009).

### **Duration**

Thirteen of the programmes were built of 50 minute to one hour sessions presumably designed to be delivered within the time of a standard school lesson. The duration of each programme varies largely across those included, from one 55 minute session (Friend Flips; Szucs et al. 2015) to 18 one hour sessions (Connections: Relationships and Marriage). Four of the programmes do not have a specific time frame, with duration depending on how quickly participants are able to progress through the programme contents, 'Positive choices' for example, can last anywhere between one and two years. 'Teen Choices', developed in the United States, is the only programme to consist of shorter, 25 to 30 minute sessions.

### **Materials**

The majority of identified programmes provide an instructor handbook that outlines each lesson's content, activities and required materials, allowing them to be delivered by various facilitators in different settings. Teachers are most commonly named as the facilitator. Instructor handbooks are sometimes by a training DVD or CD, which are also sometimes used within the sessions themselves as visual aids in case studies or electronic versions of required participant materials. Some of these also come with student/participant journals they are able to work out of in each session. 'Love U2: Communication Smarts' includes take-home handouts for participants to further develop skills taught in each session before the next. Almost all programmes require the use of standard classroom materials such as poster sheets, coloured pens, whiteboards, and in some cases, interactive whiteboards. Most additionally provide programme specific materials such as flip cards, games and case studies such as videos and in one case song lyrics (Relationship Building Blocks) to stimulate class



discussions. The 'Teen Choices' programme is the only web-based multimedia learning platform including text, images, audio and videos and is solely completed on computers.

All programmes incorporate both individual and group exercises, with more emphasis on group work that allows sharing of opinions and whole class discussions whereas participant journals are completed individually.

### ***Delivery and Setting***

All identified programmes are able to be delivered by a teacher in school to a class, normally in lessons similar to UK Personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education, with the aid of an instructor's handbook. Some programmes, including 'PICK', provide training and certification via DVD or online courses prior to facilitating the course to a group. The PICK programme also includes an overview of the course for parents and how to discuss the material with them at home. 'Choosing the Best' is the only programme to provide a parent handbook as well as an instructor's that allows them to deliver the course to their children away from school. Programme handbooks can also be utilised by leaders in youth and community groups, college tutors, and in one case (PICK) to support officers in prisons to deliver the programme. 'Teen Choices', the only programme carried out solely online, can be delivered anywhere with internet access. However, like all other programmes, it is primarily implemented in schools.

### ***Skills or relationship domains targeted***

Eight of the 18 programmes aim to generally promote healthy relationship characteristics, patterns and progression. 'Teen Choices', 'positive choices', 'Love Notes v2.1' and 'It's All One Curriculum' are centred around sexual education and making healthy sexual choices whilst also outlining other aspects and skills of healthy relationships. Of these three programmes, 'Teen Choices' applies itself more towards reducing sexual violence in relationships, whilst 'positive choices' is aimed further at reducing the risk of unintended pregnancy. 'It's All One Curriculum' is the only programme identified to cover aspects of HIV and human rights. While a few programmes state they teach healthy pre-marital relationship skills, 'Connections: Relationships and Marriage' is the only course that also gives healthy post-marital relationship education.

Having spoken with experts in the field, we have identified the following programmes, which did not show up in any of our systematic searches.

- Brook's Enduring Love? This was a two year Open University research study which interviewed over 5,000 couples in long-term relationships. The researchers asked the couples about various aspects of their relationships and what made them endure. Brook teamed up with Professor Jacqui Gabb, who headed up the study, to create the relationships section of the Brook site covering all aspects of relationships, based on the findings of the research. Organisation: Brook – [www.brook.org.uk](http://www.brook.org.uk) (Registered as Limited Company and Charity) Programme: online information about relationships, topics such as: kindness, communication, breaking up, spending time together...and apart, abuse in relationships etc.
- Explore, the operating arm of the Students Exploring Marriage Trust, employs 'Learning by experience' methodologies, developed by the Grubb Institute of Behavioural Studies, through Workshops, Half Day Conferences and Class Sessions to empower young people in making relationship decisions. Organisation: The Students Exploring Marriage Trust – an education charity that works with schools – <http://www.theexplorexperience.co.uk/> (Registered Charity)

Table 5 shows an overview of all skills or relationship domains identified from the 18 included programmes and how many programmes cover the skills identified. Communication and recognising healthy relationship patterns top the list; other big life skill such as problem solving and decision making are not frequently covered by these programmes.

**Table 5: Skills identified from the included programmes**

Skill	Programmes that cover the skill
Communication	10
Recognising healthy relationship patterns	9
Recognising unhealthy relationship patterns	6
Partner selection	6
Understanding of own personal values	6
Conflict resolution	6
Understanding the effect of the media on relationship expectations	5
Respect	5
Empathy	5
Knowledge of appropriate relationship progression	5
Understanding love	4
Conflict reduction	4
Setting sexual limits	4
Decision making	4
Problem Solving	4
Ending relationships	3
Knowing when to end a relationship	3
Refusal skills	3
Understanding the effects of gender stereotypes on behaviour	3
Dealing with differences in personal expectations	2
Goal setting	2
Commitment	2
Noticing predecessors to abusive behaviour	1

The school environment plays an important role in the development of children and young people, and curriculum-based sexuality education programmes have become popular in many regions of the world. While there is some evidence that these programmes improve knowledge and reduce self-reported risk taking (Mason-Jones et al. 2016), this review focused on programmes that would allow young people aged 12 to 18 to develop and sustain a healthy intimate relationship. This review highlights the scarcity of programmes available.

## WORKSHOP DESIGN

### Consultation work with young people: Key stage in developing an educational toolkit

#### Public Involvement: the young person as an active partner in research

The involvement work with young people is a key stage in the choice of or the development of a potential intervention aimed at teaching young people skills that will aid them in having a healthy and happy long-term intimate relationship. Public and patient involvement (PPI) has a relatively long history in health research (Oliver et al. 2015); this is not the case for other disciplines such as educational research (Gillett-Swan and Sargeant 2018). As this research is situated at the sweet spot where educational, juridical and health research meet, we will explore the concept of public or user involvement and its benefits in more detail.

#### *What's in a name...?*

Many terms have been used for describing involvement of members of the public in research; patient and public involvement (PPI) (INVOLVE), service user involvement (Omeni et al. 2014), end-user involvement (Coon et al. 2016), (child-centred) participatory research (Gillett-Swan and Sargeant 2018), are just some of the terms used in different disciplines. The essence of the concept is that it describes an activity that is done 'with' or 'by' patients or members of the public rather than 'to', 'about' or 'for' them (Buck et al. 2014). The involvement process has increasingly come to be seen as a process of partnership:

...the active participation of patients, carers, community representatives, community groups and the public in how services are planned, delivered and evaluated. It is broader and deeper than traditional consultation. It involves the ongoing process of developing and sustaining constructive relationships, building strong, active partnerships and holding a meaningful dialogue with stakeholders (Department of Health and Social Care 2005).

#### *A policy requirement*

The importance of involving patients, service users, carers and the public in the UK in health and social care and research has grown significantly in recent decades. In the UK, PPI is now firmly enshrined in key legislation. The UK Government has placed increased emphasis on service user involvement and its role in the planning and delivery of healthcare services. This covers the Health and Social Care Act, the NHS Constitution and the duty by NHS England (National Health Service Act 2006, s 13Q, as

- The aim of this phase is to identify key skills, that are regarded as important by young people to develop healthy intimate relationships and consider pragmatic approaches which might motivate young people to want, and be able, to engage with an educational relationship programme.
- The involvement work allowed us to engage with young people and teachers to co-design the building blocks of a potential future intervention: appropriate age-range, key skills to teach, educational tool (vehicle to deliver the message), duration, and whether and how this could be included in the school's curriculum.
- Schools were sampled using a database from a recent study on self-harm in schools. To ensure variation schools were stratified according to certain criteria resulting in eight schools being purposively selected to be approached. Five schools and two community groups agreed to participate in the workshops.
- The same workshop was run in all schools and community groups and consisted of two main exercises. Task 1: students rank relationship skills from most important to least important in groups split by gender and consequently in mixed groups. Task 2: in pairs or threes, students brainstorm on delivery methods for learning about relationship skills.

amended by the Health and Social Care Act 2012) to properly involve patients and the public in its commissioning processes and decisions. Service user involvement is increasingly required by many public research funding, governance and support bodies (Ocloo et al. 2017).

Currently, there are now increasing demands in educational sciences for research contextualised directly to the setting where the majority of childhood is spent: school. Within this setting, as social and educational issues evolve, so does the need for valid research that includes children to provide new and effective methods that meet the needs of the contemporary learner (Fielding 2011).

### ***Why do PPI?***

The UK Government promotes the involvement of service users as a means of increasing the acceptability and quality of interventions (Burnell et al. 2015). A number of studies have highlighted the benefits of user involvement. It has been credited for improving the information and accessibility of services and in the coordination of care and the relationships between clinicians and those receiving the treatment (Omeni et al. 2014). It is also effective in reducing health and social care research waste (Minogue et al. 2018). Meaningful involvement enhances the relevance of the research study and findings for practice; research has shown that uptake of interventions is higher when key stakeholders are involved in the design and development (Nilsen et al. 2006). Public involvement is empowering (Brett et al. 2004).

### **Aim of the involvement**

The aim of this phase is to:

- Identify key skills that are regarded as important by young people to develop healthy intimate relationships.
- Consider pragmatic approaches which might motivate young people to want, and be able, to engage with an educational relationship programme.

Young people are experts by experience. Therefore, we decided to do some preliminary feasibility work to assess students' willingness to engage with an educational relationship skills toolkit. We wanted to engage with young people to decide on essential characteristics of an intervention: appropriate age-range, key skills to teach, delivery format, duration, and whether and how this could be included in the school's curriculum.

### **Methods**

#### ***Format for involvement work with young people***

The involvement largely followed the process as outlined in Hopkins et al. (2017). Below is the general outline of the engagement work with young people:

Workshops in schools / community groups:

- a. Introduction of the Shackleton research project: what we want to achieve with the project, what has been done up until now and explain the aim of the visit.  
We explained how we will use the work produced during the workshop and how we will keep them involved in research process after the workshop.
- b. Generate material on relationship skills and delivery methods for educational tools using short interactive sessions that are participatory and facilitative in nature focused on key issues: what skills should be included in a relationship educational toolkit, how to deliver this toolkit, and by whom?
  - i. Workshop 1: students rank relationship skills using a Q-method technique (see Q-method; see Figure 4) in groups split by gender and consequently in mixed groups.
  - ii. Workshop 2: in pairs or threes, students brainstorm on delivery methods for learning about relationship skills using post-it notes, flipchart paper, felt pens, magic whiteboard and stickers.

- c. Feedback process: The researchers explained what would happen next and how they would use the data obtained during the workshop. Young people completed the contact summary form.

Following this, the researchers collated all information and made a final ranking of the skills based on the different rankings of the students. We mapped the information about skills and delivery methods and searched for a match in the programmes as identified in our systematic review.

The final stage of creating a framework of what the ideal relationship toolkit should look like, involved a visit to the University of Exeter for a selection of students: each group we previously ran a workshop selected one or two students to attend the meeting. The visit included a meet and greet with some researchers of the Child Mental Health group and Head of the Institute of Health Research, and a design session supported by a specialist or expert in the chosen delivery method. The students worked in small groups with the expert focussing on style and content of the toolkit or intervention. The experts answered their questions relating to the chosen delivery method, helped them in making decisions and provided them with information to ensure feasibility (both financially and practically) of their intervention.

The sessions were run by three members of staff: two researchers (AJ/SB and TR) moderated the workshops and one observed and took notes (EC/SB).

A detailed overview of the school and community group workshops and the University of Exeter based workshop can be found on the project website (Appendix G). The course of the workshop was altered slightly after the first workshop to achieve a better match with the limitations of the setting. The school environment created a certain atmosphere that interfered with the anticipated flow of the workshop; for example: students were very chatty after their return from the break; discussing relationships and skills in a school setting is not always taken seriously; some students had not volunteered and therefore behaved poorly (and had an “I can’t be bothered” attitude) and did not engage with the tasks on hand; because of existing friend groups, splitting up the groups (for the ranking exercise) did not always go well and we had to intervene more than anticipated.

*Changes to the workshop:* We changed the introduction to tasks one: we asked them to think about a couple that they thought were a really happy couple and had the kind of relationship they would aspire to have one day. Keeping this couple in mind, they were to complete the ranking exercise and ask themselves which skills would help them to have such a relationship. We noticed the changes had the hoped-for result in later workshops.

### ***Selection of schools and community groups***

Schools were sampled using a database from a recent study on self-harm in schools. To ensure variation in young people participating in the workshops, a sample frame of respondents was constructed, with schools being stratified according to: students’ emotional health and wellbeing as reported by the school (lower or higher than national average), level of free school meal provision (high or low compared to regional/national average), and region (urban vs rural areas). We purposively selected eight schools; they were approached for participation in May 2017.

The research team searched for local established community groups who ran regular meetings with young people (up to 20 years old). The team identified and approached five community groups.

One member of staff at each school or community group acted as a point of contact for the research team and was responsible for advertising the workshop, recruiting young people as well as arranging a convenient time and place. The named contact person provided selected young people with written information about the aim of the study and procedures followed to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Five schools and two community groups agreed to participate in the workshops.

### ***Ethics and rules and guidelines for the workshops***

Ethical approval was obtained from The University of Exeter ethics committee (Ref n°: CA196).

Once a school or community group had agreed for us to run a workshop at their school or at their community events, a research agreement between the school and / or community group and the University of Exeter was signed. The agreement described commitments of both school / community group and the University of Exeter: the most important one being the discussion of the school's or community group's disclosure policy. We were conscious that young people taking part in the workshops might have different perspectives and different personal experiences with intimate relationships and that their interactions might reveal sensitive or potentially upsetting information. We discussed the running of the workshop with the named person of each school: how to deal with disclosure of adverse experiences as well as how to stop inappropriate discussions. It was agreed that a teacher and or representative of the community group would attend the sessions or be available in an office nearby.

Participant and parent consent forms were sent to schools prior to the activity; consent forms included a section around the use of camera and audio recorders during the session to increase the quality of data collection. The students involved in the workshops were aged 14 to 18 years old. We had decided that they should, in addition to their parents' consent, consent to participate in the workshop themselves. During our preparatory talks with the named person for schools, it became clear that schools anticipated the odd parent consent form missing on the day of the workshop. The named persons for the community groups mentioned that parental consent would require the young person to reveal the "nature" of the meetings which would affect the "confidentiality" and protective nature of the meetings.

As researchers it is our duty to constantly balance the 'concern to prevent and reduce harm in research, and concern about the risks and harms of silencing and excluding children from research about their views, experiences and participation' (Alderson and Morrow 2004). We concluded that the opportunities this research project created for young people to inform our practices via co-creation of the educational tool and promote their interest in such work, outweighed the chances of potential harm and risk associated with taking part in this research project. We decided not to video record or photograph these groups (although written consent was obtained to photograph the final workshop at the University). We assessed the risk of harm in taking part as very small. Therefore, we considered these young people to be competent to give valid consent to take part in the research project (Sammons et al. 2016).

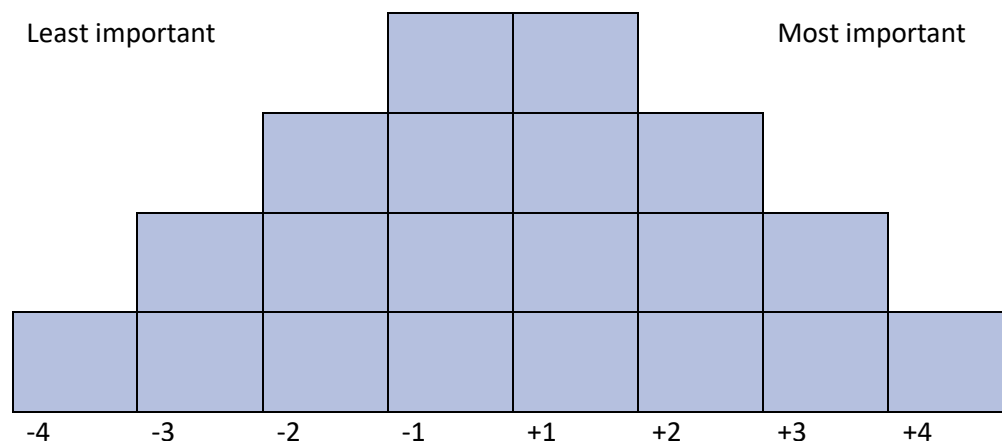
At the start of each workshop (school and community ran workshops), the researchers explained the project, the workshop structure and how we would use contributions they made during the session. We asked them to consent to participate to the workshop and made it clear they did not have to participate and could leave the session at any time. Parents of young people in schools were informed about the workshop via a letter and asked for their consent; yet, the young people's consent given at the start of the session would suffice (and be decisive) to partake. The young people attending the community events were not asked for parental consent.

### ***Q-method Prioritisation exercise***

Participants in schools and community groups were asked to prioritise the 18 skills, each skill represented by an individual card (see the online report, Appendix C), by placing the cards onto a Q-sorts grid. The grid used in Q-methodology follows the shape of a normal distribution; we used a version with the x-axis ranging from -4 (least important) to +4 (most important). This results in pyramid with increasing numbers of cards to be placed with decreasing ranking: one cell to place a skill card on either end (-4 and +4), two cells for -3 and +3, three cells for -2 and +2 and four cells for -1 and +1 (grid depicted in Figure 4). Having 18 skill cards meant there would be two unused grid squares, which gave

participants the opportunity to add any skills they thought could be missing from the 18 that had been selected and presented by the research team.

**Figure 4: Q-method grid used for ranking exercise**



Participants first completed the exercise in groups divided by gender, with the exception of both community groups due to numbers and topic sensitivity. Then groups were mixed by the facilitators and asked to complete the Q-grid a second time. The participants were provided a document with two definitions per concept; the concept was defined by a researcher and a second time by a 15 year old (see online report, Appendix D: Skills and Definitions). The aim was to start a discussion about each skill within the group and aid the participants to place the cards on the grid thoughtfully and confidently. Before taking pictures of the grids for later data input and analysis, participants were given the opportunity to review and make any final adjustments they felt appropriate.

### ***Selection and definition of skills used in prioritisation task***

Data collected from Phase 2 and the systematic review was synthesised and used as input for consultation with young people.

A systematic review was conducted to identify existing educational tools and programmes about healthy intimate relationships. Relationship ‘skills’ that the identified programmes aimed to teach were extracted and the frequency of use across programmes determined. In total, 39 skills or skill domains were extracted from identified programmes (see online report, Appendix E: Programme skills). Table 6 provides an overview of all skills or skill domains targeted by at least four or more programmes. These skills and the number of programmes that cover these skills might differ from the final results of the systematic review. We worked with the 53 programmes identified at stage “Eligibility” (see PRISMA flowchart, Figure 3); the main difference being that programmes included at that stage could be targeted at a specific group (gender specific or lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender oriented) or focused on identifying patterns of violent or abusive relationships.

### **SKILL SELECTION**

A systematic review of relationship programmes found 39 skills or skill domains to be taught across all. Simultaneously, qualitative research was undertaken to identify the skills leading to successful long-term relationships through interviewing couples in relationships lasting over 10 years. Through cross comparison of these two data sets, 18 skills were selected to be used in the ranking exercise in the workshops.

Simultaneously, qualitative research was undertaken to identify the skills leading to successful long-term relationships through interviewing couples in relationships lasting over 10 years. Table 7 contains the key elements for a thriving relationship according to work completed in Phase 2.

Through cross comparison of these two data sets, 18 skills were selected to be used in the Q-method ranking exercise in the workshops (see Table 6).

**Table 6: Skills extracted from programmes identified via the systematic review, ranked by frequency of being targeted in programmes**

Communication	15
Recognising unhealthy relationship patterns	13
Recognising healthy relationship patterns	12
Partner selection	9
Understanding of own personal values	9
Conflict resolution	8
Decision making	7
Understanding love	7
Understanding the effect of the media on relationship expectations	7
Commitment	6
Respect	6
Conflict reduction	5
Dealing with differences in personal expectations	5
Empathy	5
Goal setting	5
Knowledge of appropriate relationship progression	5
Noticing predecessors to abusive behaviour	5
Setting sexual limits	5
Ending relationships	4
Knowing when to end a relationship	4
Problem solving	4
Refusal skills	4
Understanding the effects of gender stereotypes on behaviour	4

**Table 7: Key attributes of thriving relationships that was fed in from the qualitative work**

Choose carefully
Choose a friend
Be realistic
See the best
Love compassionately
Show you care (later: work at it)
Be committed
Repair early (later: keep talking)
Build the relationship that suits you both
Build a support network



**Table 8: Skills used in workshop for Q-method ranking**

Empathy – Putting yourself in their shoes
Open communication
How to say no to sex (how to say what you don't want)
Expect and accept good and bad times - and get on with it
Figuring out what YOU want from life
Show you care
Respect
Commitment
Identifying signs of abusive relationships
Making decisions
Don't be pink or blue, be YOU!
Self-confidence
Create safety
Learn to identify photo shopped lives - real life is different
Who is my type? Who do I fancy?
Learn to deal with differences / disagreements
Looking after yourself – have something that takes away stress and makes you happy
Making sure your voice is heard

**Q-Analysis and factor interpretation**

Q-methodology serves as an analytical technique for grouping participants based on their subjective opinions of a certain topic (Akhtar-Danesh et al. 2011). Q analysis performs a by-person correlation and factor analytic procedure to identify perspectives or viewpoints subscribed to by a number of participants. We have completed the Q-ranking task in groups and thus performed a by-group factor analysis to look for any shared perspectives over the different groups.

The initial correlation matrix reflects the relationship of each Q-sort configuration (done by one group) with each other configuration; it does not reflect the relationship of each item (skill) with every other item (skill). The factor analysis groups together participants, groups in this case, who have sorted the Q sample similarly.

Completed grids were collated with factors extracted according to the centroid method and then rotated using PCQ for Windows (Stricklin and Almeida 2001).

**Q-METHODOLOGY**

- Q-methodology serves as an analytical technique for grouping participants based on their subjective opinions of a certain topic, grouping together participants, or groups in this case, who have sorted the Q sample similarly.
- Completed grids were collated with factors extracted according to the centroid method and then rotated using PCQ for Windows.
- Each factor represented a different skill configuration which is shared by all groups who load onto that factor, and a varimax rotation maximised the amount of variation explained by the factors.

Each factor represents a different skill configuration which is shared by all groups who load onto that factor. PCQ for Windows offers an infinite number of rotated solutions; we decided to use the varimax rotation which maximises the amount of variation explained by the extracted factors. The next step is to select the number of factors to take forward for interpretation. We applied the rule of thumb that factors with an eigenvalue in excess of 1.00 would be taken forward. The best conceptual fit for this study of the perspectives of young people regarding relationship skills that might help them having a healthy and happy long-term relationship was a three-factor solution.

Factor interpretation was based upon a thematic reading of the skills and their relation to all other skills in the final factor arrays. In generating meaning of each factor, qualitative data collected during the prioritisation task and factor exemplar socio-demographic profiles of each group were used. This factor interpretation process was completed independently by TR and AJ and then discussed amongst the researchers to come up with a shared meaning of the factor.

### ***Workshop at University of Exeter (12/12/2017)***

The final workshop set out to develop three toolkits using the most popular delivery methods as a vehicle. The aim of the session was to come up with a framework for an educational toolkit (for each delivery method) in collaboration with an expert in the field of each chosen delivery method.

Schools and community groups were contacted via phone, email and flyers inviting them to select and send two participants present in the first workshop to attend the University of Exeter Medical School for a second session that would aim to further develop their ideas for skill delivery methods. Following the workshops carried out in schools and community groups, the three most frequently suggested delivery methods from the second activity were identified and extracted: computer or console game, website or app, and role play or drama. We invited an expert in each of these identified fields to assist a small group working on a specific format in creating a feasible framework for further development.

Of the seven schools and community groups that had participated in the first round of workshops, four were able and agreed to send two participants for the University workshop, resulting in eight participants and three experts attending the session.

## **THE FINAL WORKSHOP**

- Schools and community groups that participated in the first round of workshops were invited to select two young adults to attend the University of Exeter Medical School for a final workshop, lunch and campus tour. Four schools responded; 8 participants were present.
- Researchers from various areas of the medical school met with the participants before the workshop to speak to the students about their career paths into research and answer any questions they had about the profession.
- During the workshop students worked with experts in game design, website/app design, and drama/role play to further develop ideas for teaching relationship skills to young adults through these platforms, the session was recorded, and ideas were written down on A3 sheets with a facilitator also taking notes. Students presented their ideas to the rest of the group which was followed by questioning.

The day began with students (as only schools had agreed to send participants) arriving and indicating which delivery method and expert they would preferably work with in the session to follow. Once both students and experts had all arrived and students had completed a consent form, several researchers based at the University came to briefly describe their career paths and answer any questions the students had about their profession.

Participants were then asked to sit at the table with the expert they had chosen, two of which had three participants and one had two (see Figure 5). Students and experts, accompanied by a facilitator taking notes, then worked for one hour to produce ideas for teaching and delivering relationship skills through the expert’s area of expertise. Ideas were recorded by participants onto an A3 piece of paper as well as notes taken by facilitators. To finish the session each of the three groups presented their ideas to the wider group of attendees and answered any questions that followed. This gave students the opportunity to critique each other’s work constructively and discuss further necessary developments to their ideas. Discussions were also recorded for later analysis.

Participants were then given a tour of the St Luke’s University campus by a current third year student who was able to inform them about university life and answer any questions. A lunch was provided before the students left the campus. Photos of their A3 working sheets were taken for analysis and students later received a certificate in the post congratulating them for their valuable contributions to the session.

## Results

### *Workshops in schools and community groups*

We conducted seven workshops between October 2017 and November 2017: five in schools and two in pre-defined community groups (see Table 9).

**Table 9: Overview of workshops**

School / Community Group	County	Student Year	Number of Participants	Urban or Rural
School 1	Devon	Year 10	19	Rural
School 2	Devon	Year 12/13	12	Urban
School 3	Devon	Year 13	12	Rural
School 4	Devon	Year 12	8	Rural
School 5	Cornwall	Year 10	13	Rural
Community Group 1	Devon	14 -18 year old	6	Urban
Community Group 2	Devon	15 -18 year old	9	Urban

### **Prioritisation task**

There was variation in the ordering of the relationship skills between groups, but ‘respect’ and ‘open communication’ were both ranked highest skills in all groups (see Table 10). Also ranked highly amongst all groups were ‘Identifying signs of an abusive relationship’ and ‘commitment’.

When groups were split by gender, there were some differences in the prioritisation to be noted. All boys groups’ grids showed greater similarities between the groups, compared to the all-girl-groups; this is reflected in high mean scores of the top-scoring skills (respect, open communication and showing you care). Scores averaged over the all-girl groups showed lower scores overall; there is more diversity in the prioritisation of the skills over the different groups with highest scores for ‘respect’, ‘open communication’ and ‘identifying signs of an abusive relationship’. ‘Creating a safety net’ did not make it in the boys’ top-10, whilst ‘showing you care’ did not end in the top-10 of the all-girls groups.

## **SUMMARY OF RESULTS OF PRIORITISATION TASK**

- There was variation in the ordering of the relationship skills between groups, but ‘respect’ and ‘open communication’ were both ranked highest skills in all groups.
- Top scoring skills for all-boy groups were: respect, open communication and showing you care.
- Highest scoring skills in the all-girl groups were: ‘respect’, ‘open communication’ and ‘Identifying signs of an abusive relationship’.

**Figure 5: Workshop at University- Setting (Sharing ideas with the wider group)**



**Table 10: Total score obtained for each skill, after seven workshops (25 data inputs)**

Skills (All groups)	Total Score
Respect	76
Open communication	55
Commitment	41
Identifying signs of an abusive relationship	39
How to say no to sex	27
Empathy	25
Showing you care	21
Self confidence	15
Looking after yourself	4
Learning to deal with differences/disagreements	-1
Make sure your voice is heard	-2
Create a safety net	-5
Making decisions	-19
Figuring out what YOU want from life	-24
Don't be pink or blue be YOU	-24
Expect and accept good and bad times	-31
Who is my type? Who do I fancy?	-42
Learn to identify photo shopped lives	-63

**Table 11: Prioritisation task – Boys groups: Mean skill rating score for 10 highest scoring skills (max: 4)**

	Skills (Boys)	Mean for Boys
1	Respect	3.4
2	Open communication	2.4
3	Showing you care	2.4
4	Identifying signs of an abusive relationship	1.8
5	Commitment	1.4
6	Empathy	1
7	How to say no to sex	0.8
8	Make sure your voice is heard	0.2
9	Looking after yourself	0
10	Self confidence	-0.2

**Table 12: Prioritisation task – Girls groups: Mean skill rating score for 10 highest scoring skills (max: 4)**

	Skills	Mean for girls
1	Respect	2.6
2	Open Communication	2.4
3	Identifying signs of an abusive relationship	2.2
4	Commitment	1.8
5	Create a safety net	1.6
6	Empathy	1.4
7	How to say no to sex	1
8	Self confidence	0.8
9	Learning to deal with differences/disagreements	0.6
10	Looking after yourself	0.4

**Figure 6: Ranking skills using Q-method Pyramid (School: 3)**



## Q-analysis results

Centroid analysis produced seven factors accounting for 88% of total variance. Table 13 shows the results of the factor analysis after centroid varimax rotation analysis using three factors (see online report, Appendix F, Table 4 for an overview of conceptual best fit after factor extraction).

Respect was clearly regarded by participants as the most important skill/attribute for a healthy and happy long-term relationship – this is seen across all groups (scored highest in all three factor groups and highest when simply adding up Q scores). At the other end: ‘learn to identify photo shopped lives’ scored lowest across all three factor groups and after adding raw Q scores. This proved interesting as workshop recordings showed students describing this skill and the effect of SM very well, yet it still scored lowest.

- Factor 1: Defensive skills focused around sexual boundaries in a budding / adolescent relationship

Factor 1 accounted for 48% of total variance with the Q sorts of seven groups defining this factor. Of those factor exemplars (groups) three were all girl-groups, one LGBT group (two girls) and three mixed groups in schools with girls with a strong voice who dominated the mixed groups. Three factor exemplars (groups) are from the same school, where we worked with years 10/11. Skills loading high on this factor are oriented around sexual aspects of a relationship and predominantly around identifying and defending sexual boundaries in a relationship. The type of skills loaded high on Factor 1 in combination with the groups whose grids define this factor reflect some sort of ‘female empowerment’, a factor focused on the early stage of a relationship, perhaps the dating-stage.

- Factor 2: Be good to each other whilst making sure the other does not take advantage of you

Factor 2 had seven defining groups and accounted for 11% of total variance. Only two schools loaded significantly on this factor. This factor is less distinctive and defining groups were less out-spoken about relationships and the things that could help to have a good (or a bad) relationship. This factor is all about respect: respect the other and yourself. Be good to each other (show respect, be committed) whilst making sure the other does not take advantage of you or abuses you.

## SUMMARY OF Q-ANALYSIS RESULTS

- Q-Grid patterns were analysed using PQMethod software, which produced a three factor model that accounted for 67% of the total variance: factor 1 (48%), factor 2 (11%) and factor 3 (8%).

- Skills that loaded high on factor 1 were oriented around sexual aspects of a relationship and preventing abuse. Groups that loaded onto this factor were either entirely female, or female dominant when mixed. It was also younger participant groups that loaded onto this factor.

- Factor 2 is less distinctive and defining groups were less out-spoken about relationships. The factor seems to be based around respect and not letting others take advantage of you.

- Groups loading on factor 3 formed a distinct group. Participants in these groups were 6<sup>th</sup> formers from academy or grammar schools and older aged participants from a community group. Their discussions were not so much dominated by defensive attitudes towards sexual relationships and showed a more mature reflection on how to achieve a settled and stable relationship. This factor is oriented around more positive, engaging and caring skills, reflecting a more mature attitude towards relationships.

**Table 13: Q-Factor characteristics (sorts = groups)**

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
Number of defining sorts	7	7	8
Eigenvalue	11.5	2.5	1.8
% of explained variance	48	11	8

**Table 14: Factor scores for each statement on the selected factors**

Statement	Factor 1 Score	Factor 1 Rank	Factor 2 Score	Factor 2 Rank	Factor 3 Score	Factor 3 Rank
Expect and accept good and bad times	-0.74	16	-1.25	18	-0.19	13
Respect	1.44	3	1.80	1	1.97	1
Making decisions	-0.50	15	-0.01	10	-0.36	15
Figuring out what YOU want from life	-0.37	14	-0.89	17	-0.31	14
Learning to deal with differences/disagreements	0.57	5	-0.57	14	0.20	10
Showing you care	-0.21	13	0.72	6	0.70	5
Identify signs of an abusive relationship	1.68	1	1.46	2	-0.16	12
Don't be pink or blue	0.15	11	-0.76	16	-0.72	16
Learn how to identify photo shopped lives	-1.61	19	-1.61	20	-1.34	18
Who is my type? Who do I fancy?	-1.60	18	-1.51	19	0.42	7
How to say no to sex	1.46	2	0.03	9	0.24	8
Empathy	0.24	9	0.70	7	0.81	4
Self-confidence	0.27	8	0.36	8	-0.16	11
Make sure your voice is heard	0.30	7	-0.61	15	0.21	9
Create a safety net	0.55	6	-0.34	12	-0.86	17
Commitment	0.18	10	1.25	3	1.03	3
Looking after yourself	0.13	12	-0.48	13	0.56	6
Open communication	0.91	4	1.06	4	1.54	2
Blank space 1	-1.62	20	-0.29	11	-2.08	20
Blank space 2	-1.22	17	0.94	5	-1.49	19

➤ **Factor 3: A mature vision on relationships dominated by positive and constructive skills**

Factor 3 accounted for 8% of the study variance with the Q sorts of eight groups defining this factor. Factor 3 defining groups' formed a distinct group: they were sorts from Academy or Grammar schools where we worked with 6<sup>th</sup> formers, the older-aged community group (No. 2) and community group no. 1 (age range: 14-17 year). Young people in these groups completed the prioritisation task more thoughtfully and considerately compared to other groups. They had an open discussion about relationships and what defines or makes a good relationship where everyone could have their say. Their discussions were not so much dominated by defensive attitudes towards sexual relationships and showed a more mature reflection on how to achieve a settled and stable relationship. Defining groups strongly endorsed respect and open communication as the building blocks of a healthy relationship. The Factor 3 position is oriented around more positive, engaging and caring skills



(commitment, empathy and showing you care); this factor reflects a more *mature* perspective on relationships. Another skill that scores amongst the lowest loading skills on both Factor 1 and Factor 2, but does have a positive loading on Factor 3 is 'Who is my type? Who do I fancy?'

### Synthesis of findings (Prioritisation task)

Relationship skills selected by young people as shared priorities were respect, open communication, commitment, identifying signs of an abusive relationship, how to say no to sex, empathy, showing you care, self-confidence, looking after yourself (coping strategies).

The qualitative work revealed that these are the key attributes of thriving couples: choose carefully, choose a friend, be realistic, see the best, love compassionately, show you care (later 'work at it'), be committed, repair early (later 'keep talking'), build the relationship that suits you both, build a support network.

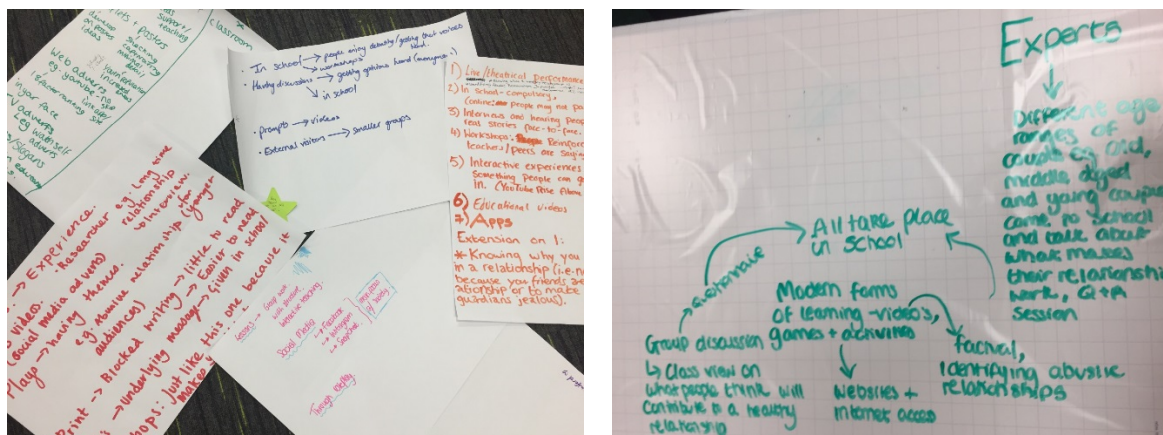
The findings of the qualitative study and the work with young people both support 'open communication', 'commitment', 'empathy' (love compassionately), and 'show you care' as skills that are important for young people and also identified as key factors to a successful relationship according to people in long-term relationships. Thus, we propose these as a suite set of important relationship skills that should be covered by a programme for young people.

We examined whether existing generic programmes identified in our systematic review (see above) teach these skills. Whilst available programmes cover many skills, no single programme captures all the relationship domains prioritised as key skills to master for young people up to 18 years old. Three programmes cover three out four skills: PICK (misses open communication), Connections: Dating and Emotions (misses commitment), and Connections: Relationships and Marriages (misses commitment and empathy).

### Delivery format

Table 15 gives an overview of the different delivery methods suggested by young people. The majority of these formats use 'school' as the setting for the delivery. Young people mentioned that in the school setting there would be less stigmatisation: all students get the follow the programme (when it's part of PSHE or RSE), it is not optional, you cannot get bullied for choosing to attend a workshop outside school or have an app on your phone. Another advantage of a universal approach is that you reach even those not interested in such a programme and whilst they follow the programme they might pick up something. When you do something outside of school you might be 'preaching to the converted', as you would have to deliberately attend something where they talk about relationships. Those who actually might benefit from this most, will not identify themselves as in need of these kind of programmes.

Figure 7: Delivery method workshop (Four pictures from different schools)



**Table 15: Delivery methods suggested by young people during task 2 of the workshop**

Delivery Method	Frequency
Interactive videos	21
Taught in school	17
Games and activities	15
Actors/role play with interactive audience	13
Website	13
Specialist talks/external speakers	11
Class debates/discussions	9
Quizzes and online questionnaires	7
Interactive workshops	6
Books, leaflets and posters	6
App	6
TV programme/adverts	3
Weekly course	3
Speed dating scenario	2
Film/documentary	1
Weekend seminar	1
Web adverts	1
Parents	1

## THREE CHOSEN TOOLKITS

### *Developing three chosen toolkits: work on content and style in collaboration with an expert*

This workshop was delivered at University of Exeter, with a selection of students from the schools visited throughout the project. Three delivery methods were selected to be developed in further detail: website or app, interactive play or drama (at school), game. The following is a written account of what has been discussed by the young people and the expert during the sessions on 'Drama and play', 'Website or app', and 'Computer and console games'. The observer used the young people's words to give an accurate account of the idea, format, and content of the programme.

### *Drama and Play*

The general idea is to have a day focused on intimate relationships as a topic within school. Some schools already have enrichment days where the usual lessons are stopped for one day while year groups have focused activities learning one aspect of Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education (such as drug and alcohol awareness). This idea involves creating a school day's worth of activities based around applied drama to open discussion and reflection on intimate relationship skills.

The reason why young people chose this method in this setting is because it does not require any action by young people. Unlike apps or games which have to be marketed and downloaded, this method will reach more young people. While not all young people may enjoy drama, a one-off event gets people talking.

*Content of the drama or interactive play:* The overall emphasis would be on teaching respect as this helps build and maintain all relationships. Other skills can be linked and taught at the same time such as self-confidence and the importance of knowing yourself, looking after yourself, saying no to sex and open communication to talk about all of these things. This method was thought to be particularly useful to reveal the reality of relationships rather than the imagined celebrity or 'Facebooked' versions of relationships.

While this emphasis would go across any activities developed, it is important that year groups do not have the same content each year. The specific content would need to be relevant to each age group as each have different needs. For example, those in year 12 and 13 may be starting to consider long-term relationships. Year 11 were thought to be a particularly self-conscious age who may not be willing to speak in front of their peers.

- Young people worked on three delivery methods: drama/role play, website/smartphone-based application and a game.
- The students working on the drama/role play suggested a school day's worth of applied drama activities to open discussion on intimate relationship skills. This would require no outside action from students e.g. downloading an app and would be taught around the idea of respect, linked to the other relationship skills. The content would change yearly to avoid repetition and to ensure it is age appropriate. Content would need to be sensitive to different genders and sexualities.
- The website/app group focused on an app for reasons of accessibility, privacy, and it being a more current information platform. The app would contain discussion forums, information and advice pages, and video interviews of couples or 'experts' in the field. The app would have to look professional and should have an authentic and welcoming feel.
- The game group suggested the game would not primarily focus on learning skills, users would play for fun with skills incorporated. They suggested an online game using a player room where you can interact with others. You play as an avatar and complete missions related to intimate relationships which increase your 'skills'. Players can do solo missions or be paired to promote working with a partner.

Therefore, possible additional elements to add in for the different year groups include:

- Year 9 and 10 – awareness of damaging impact of rumours and sharing of intimate pictures and how to handle these issues.
- Year 12 – how to maintain relationships, how to identify and deal with abusive relationships whether as the person in them or as a friend.

Also, it is really important that the content is relevant for both genders and different sexualities. Females tend to support each other with relationships and female victim stories are everywhere. There is a need to ensure the male perspective is captured as well.

### **Website or App**

The format of an app (smartphone or tablet application) was chosen over a website for reasons of accessibility (such as offline capabilities), privacy, usefulness and it being a current information platform.

*Content and operation of the app:* When you open the app, you would be asked to sign up and answer some generic questions e.g. your age, gender, sexuality and topics of interest (abuse, respect and other skills/attributes). Providing personal information would be optional; users would not need to provide any personal data if they did not want to, but they would have a less personalised experience as a result:

- Main page after sign up to contain links to suggested skills/attributes pages based on answers to sign-up questions;
- More general information and links underneath suggested section;
- Each skill section to contain different sections, such as online discussion forums, information and advice pages, video interviews with couples. Potential for others e.g. games

Three key elements of the app would be: an online discussion forum, information pages and video interviews. The app has to be catchy and up-to-date, but not childish; look professional and be taken as a serious information provider; has to allow sharing of articles on social media platforms to spread message of advice as well as the App itself; should not contain comic avatars or cartoon characters. Key words regarding branding were: frank, authentic, undisguised, honest, and adult.

In conversation with the group, it became clear that the focus would have to be on creating and sourcing good content with which to populate the app (articles, interviews etc.). Without that content, the app would essentially just be a reference sheet for informational content which the group were adamant was too dull.

### **Computer or console game**

*General idea behind a game:* The game would not be focused on or advertised as a game to learn skills; the primary aim of the game should be to have fun. The game has to be entertaining, catchy and you have to want to play it. The second aim would be to learn new skills by playing the game and going on missions (see content of the game); you would need to apply / use your own skills (selected from the workshops) to complete the missions. If you don't, your mission will most probably fail.

A few general characteristics of the game:

- Target age: 14-20
- How the game will be played: you can either play 'god', this means you can manipulate all other characters in the story, or you play yourself and the game is shown through your own eyes. You should play the game as yourself: you as a player are behind the main character.

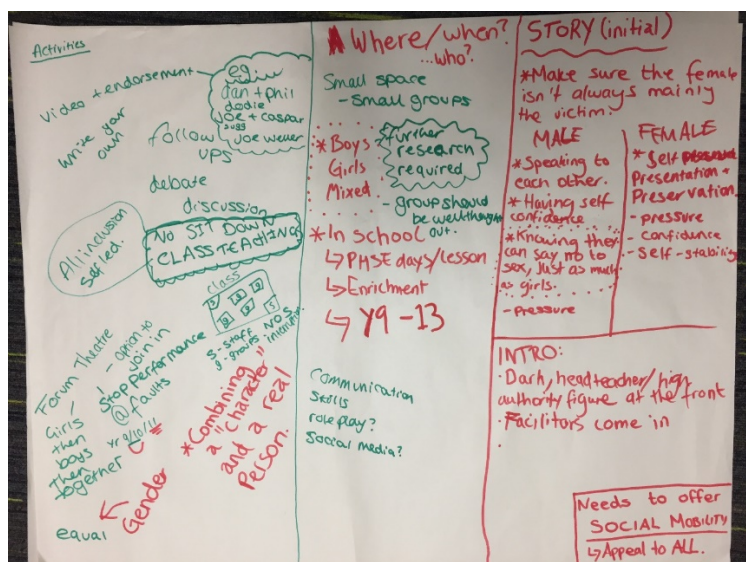
- The game should be played online, using a player room (where you can interact with others), so you can play with others.
- There are risks involved with playing online, people might pretend to be someone they are not (age, gender, ...).
- Format: x-box, pc, PlayStation 4
- Game to be played online, with others – everyone plays themselves.

Format of the game:

- You login and you create an avatar – who will represent you in the game – you have to complete a few questions about yourself which will guide your choice of avatar. In your stats, only gender, your skills and the level of your skills will be shown. So, once you completed the questions about yourself, you will be shown a selection of avatars based on the information you provided: you can still change things about the avatar; hair colour, length of hair, clothes, and a few other esthetical things.
- Next you will be allowed to pick three skills from the total set of skills (used in the workshops); you will be given the “average” level on each of these skills.
- You are set to go!
- Missions: there are two types of missions: individual missions, and duo-missions (in a pair). The missions are handed out by the NPCs (non-player character); they will select people to go on a mission and you will have a task to complete. You can gain new skills, depending on the task, or lose (levels of) your skills or increase the level of your current skills. Once you have gained a pre-defined number and type of skills you can be selected to go on paired missions, where you will have to collaborate with another person to complete the task. You can also challenge a friend to go on a mission and see who completes it first; you could win their skills.
- There is a chat room attached where you can invite people for a conversation or join an ongoing discussion etc.

*Suggestions from the wider group when the game was presented:* You need to advertise the game, because not many people will want to play it, if they don't know it; you can use YouTube vloggers who play your game and record that and post it on YouTube.

Figure 8: 1212Workshop - Drama / Play



## Phase 3: Discussion and analysis

### *Skills for a relationship programme*

Agreement emerged regarding a core set of skills important for young people to master if one aims to have a healthy and happy long-term relationship: Respect, Open Communication, Commitment, identifying signs of an abusive relationship, how to say no to sex, Empathy, showing you care, Self-confidence, and Looking after yourself (coping strategies).

Key attributes identified by people in long-term relationships (see Phase 2) missing from the young people's list are: choose carefully and building the relationship that suits you both. Choose carefully (translated to 'Who is my type? Who do I fancy?' for the workshops with young people) ended second to last in the prioritisation task. We learned from the discussions that accompanied the task that they did not see this as a conscious decision or choice: you do not pick, you just end up with whom you like. Although not rated an important attribute by young people, as this has been such a main topic of conversation in the qualitative work, it is worth considering including this in a programme and explaining extensively how and why this is or could be of importance. The why and how this could end up being a crucial factor to having a long-term relationship should prevail over the how you choose and which type suits you best. Given the fact that they rate this so low, this element of the programme should stress that it is about choosing carefully who you commit to, that it should be a choice, and is worth reflecting on, rather than focussing on figuring out what type of partner would be a good match. One element of 'choose carefully' as explained by people in a long-term relationships is 'mutual trust and respect'. Taking into account that young people rate respect as the most important skill or attribute of a thriving relationship, we should focus on this and use it as an entry to start the conversation about choosing your partner.

A second key element missing from the priority list of young people compared to key attributes derived from the qualitative work is 'identifying photo shopped lives' and 'don't be pink or blue, be you', both skills referring to what people in long-term relations identified as 'building the relationship that suits you both' without it being affected or restricted by social expectations and social patterns ('what is the norm?'). Young people explained in the discussion around these skills that they know life as depicted on Facebook and other social media accounts is not always a true reflection of real life. Hence, they did not think it was important to learn how to live the life you want and have the relationship you want without being influenced by other people (be that friends and family or celebrities). We appreciate that young people feel like they are in control of what they do with and how they incorporate information they retain from social media and society in general, however, studies have shown that young people's mental health and wellbeing can be negatively affected by social media. The Education Policy Institute reports that 95% of UK 15 year olds use social media before or after school, and half of 9–16 year olds used smart-phones on a daily basis (Frith 2017). The Children's Commissioner has found that children aged eight to twelve find it hard to manage the impact of social media. A review of the literature on the impact of social media on the health of children and young people reported that the health impact of social media on children and young people was greatest on mental health and specifically in the areas of self-esteem and well-being, with related issues around cyberbullying and 'Facebook Depression', with an association between the use of social media and self-esteem and body image (Richards et al. 2015). It merits further exploration in to whether this is an element to be included in a relationship skills programme for young people.

The findings of the qualitative study (Phase 2) and the work with young people both support 'open communication', 'commitment', 'empathy' (love compassionately), and 'show you care' as skills that are important for young people and also identified as key factors to a successful relationship according to people in long-term relationships. Thus, we propose these as a suite of important relationship skills that should be covered by a relationship skills programme for young people.

The Q-analysis revealed that skills can be differentiated on three factors: one factor oriented around female empowerment and making sure you do not end up in an abusive relationship, a second factor focused on respect and making sure you are respected and treated well in return and a third factor oriented around more mature perspective on relationships. The Q-analysis showed that a programme might need different versions or a specific focus according to age or emotional development / maturation. Another factor interfering with the 'age'-factor is gender: younger or less mature secondary school children might benefit from a gender-specific approach. Young girls have different needs compared to boys and strong opinions about relationships. The gender-effect decreases when working with older secondary school students. This is echoed in discussions during workshop two where participants advocate for specific content relevant to each age group as they each have different needs.

### *How to learn about and master the new skills*

School is a good place to run interventions targeting young people. Young people involved in this project have highlighted several benefits related to the universal reach of a school-based approach: less stigmatising, those who need it and might not choose to attend of one's own free will will pick up something, and opportunity to deliver the programme with age-appropriate accents/content.

A universal intervention would seem to offer a more effective approach at reaching the broad spectrum of young people. It is unsurprising that most childhood prevention programmes to date have been situated within the school. Schools' existing organisational, social and communication structures provide opportunities for regular health education and the possibility of a health-promoting environment (Lloyd and Wyatt 2015). In addition, they have the potential to reach children and their families across the social spectrum (Weare and Nind 2011). A systematic review of effectiveness studies of universal school-based interventions for children and young people aimed to enhance social and emotional skills showed controversial yet promising outcomes that are relatively far-reaching for children's wellbeing and therefore are important in the real world (Sancassiani et al. 2015).

Although, school was the preferred setting for many of the programme formats, young people mentioned a broad variety of delivery methods. Three different formats were discussed in more detail in the second workshop. This workshop revealed that we might need more than one method to reach all young people. When it comes to relationships, there is not a one-size fits all model and the same goes for how you learn skills or want to engage with relationship skill programmes. What works for one person might not work for another. A programme around relationship skills will need to be delivered using different formats for everyone to engage with the programme.

### *Implications for practice and further research*

There was agreement between the young people and people in long-term relationships around skills that could be key to a healthy and happy intimate relationship. However, there are some big differences. Some of the skills not endorsed by young people are 'identifying photo shopped lives' and 'don't be pink or blue, be you'. Skills focused on defining your relationship based on what you want from social desirable patterns or expectations. Young people claim they unravel the fake and mythical lives of social media, yet, there is evidence that shows that young people do get negatively affected by these information platforms. Do we impose a skill because evidence points out that lack of this skill could have a negative effect on young people's lives and intimate relationships or do we follow young people's advice?

We have achieved good relationships with schools and young people. All visited schools wanted to participate in the closing workshop and had requested for more students to attend. Building relationships with schools and young people is very important. The most promising school-based interventions follow the WHO's Health Promoting School (HPS) framework which advocates a holistic, settings-based approach, consisting of a cycle of steps to guide and implement change in a flexible manner with a focus on action in three areas; the curriculum; the school ethos/environment and links

with families/communities (Langford et al. 2014; 2015). Therefore, we feel we have built a good base for further work with schools and communities to follow-up on this work and continue to work on designing and producing a fitting relationship programme.

## Conclusions and Policy Implications

This study has been conducted at a time when policy makers are looking at ways of enhancing RSE - Relationship and Sex Education - in schools. However, the relevance of its findings reach beyond those of school age to all adults who are navigating relationship decisions in the modern world. Most of us – younger and older - still seem to prefer coupledness and want and expect our relationships to be mutually happy, healthy and enduring, despite statistically high rates of relationship breakdown. In our conclusion, therefore, we draw together our key findings on our initial research questions and make some recommendations, both for those embarking on relationships and for those involved in designing the new curriculum. We also reflect on some wider policy considerations on relationship support.

Whilst we have not looked at abusive relationships, we would underline that understanding the wide spectrum of abuse and identifying how it manifests in different ways within relationships, must be a focus of any RSE programme. The young people, particularly the girls, involved in our study were clear that this was a matter of concern to them and this alone confirms how important it is to embed this in any relationship-focused educational programme. Other agencies, such as (Stop Abuse For Everyone or (SAFE)) do tackle this head on see <https://www.safe-services.org.uk/am-i-in-an-abusive-relationship> and provide a good source of help. We would suggest elements of these programmes are incorporated when developing an RSE package.

However, the overall aim of our project was to explore the nature of happy, healthy and enduring relationships and consider how to sustain them and avoid predictable causes of relationship breakdown. To assist this process, we developed critical questions which should be asked prior to entering a relationship intended to be permanent. These were based on the identified relationship attributes and skills which are important to have for a relationship to thrive and which may become more or less important over time as a relationship progresses, depending on what challenges are faced in life. Whilst we found some differences as to what had worked for couples in our married and more diverse sample which should be appreciated, there were mainly key elements of commonality.

From a policy perspective, it is important that the valuable insights gained from this research can, alongside other evidence, be used first to feed in appropriately to relationship education for young people in the new RSE curriculum, and second be drawn on by those at an older age, making relationship decisions about marriage, cohabitation and whether or not to have children with their partner. One policy challenge is how to encourage a culture where people are willing to nurture their relationships and are willing to develop relationship skills. Another is encouragement of seeking support and advice when or even before issues arise. A third is where best to place and how to provide access to relationship information and education for those beyond school age. Normalising such help-seeking behaviour through the RSE platform delivered in innovative ways which engage with young people would be an important starting point. Similarly, consideration of what role other educational institutions – universities and FE Colleges - might be able to play in this sphere is also important. This is a key phase of life where relationship learning by young adults is often taking place outside of the formal curriculum.

Last but not least, we would recommend that further thought is given by policy makers to ways of reaching out to couples about strengthening their relationship skills at key points of transition or 'magic moments' (OnePlusOne, 2006) such as when moving in together/buying a home, on the point of marriage or when having a baby when couples are most receptive to information. Doing this at the point of relationship breakdown is typically too late. Civil services offer an opportunity to reflect with



registrars but only religious weddings build in marriage preparation classes and the state's direct role in this private matter is controversial. However, dissemination in an engaging way of what is known about sustaining relationships through important transitions could be more actively attempted. Agencies such as GP surgeries, ante-natal classes, law firms undertaking conveyancing, wills or pre-nuptial or cohabitation agreement work, Register Offices and reputable internet communities such as MumsNet could be engaged to assist in advertising and accessing relationship skill-building and support targeted at those going through transitional events before any relationship difficulty is encountered. The format of these would need to be fully considered but could build on the ideas for an app.

## Key findings and recommendations

- **More relationship education in school was seen positively by young people and they wanted to be involved in the future programme design.** We anticipate a top-down approach in such a personal area of educational activity is unlikely to succeed. Furthermore, according to the young people who worked with us on our study, this would go against the strong wish of students to contribute to further curriculum development in this important field. In order to ensure that optimum positive student engagement is achieved with the new curriculum, we therefore first suggest a co-development approach is taken. Any programme within the curriculum must be age-appropriate and cover the spectrum of relationships. Our findings also showed that it might be beneficial to have some sections of the programme delivered and discussed in single sex groups. Furthermore, in terms of how the curriculum is delivered, we recommend the programme should also be available in a range of delivery formats and settings from which schools can select in consultation with students.
- **Young people saw *open communication, mutual respect, showing you care and identifying signs of an abusive relationship* as most important, but agreed discussion of commitment and empathy should also be included in relationship education.** Social media (and its effect on how you perceive or reflect on relationships) as well as figuring out who your 'matching partner' could be were seen as less important elements to cover in RSE. The divergence between the young people's dismissal of these elements and current best evidence on impact of social media as well as our couple findings prioritising 'choosing your partner carefully' would need to be addressed constructively when developing a programme.
- **Two of the most common or predictable reasons for relationship failure– incompatibility and unrealistic expectations - could and arguably should be discovered before a couple agrees to commit to each other.** Often, people may not reflect hard enough on what they individually want from the relationship and from life before considering whether their partner is the right person from their own perspective with whom to make a shared life. How that compares with their partner's perspective and whether their individual or joint expectations are realistic for their couple relationship over time are just as vital to consider. Avoiding asymmetry of expectations, levels of commitment and power relations between partners at the outset have been identified by this study as key to relationship success. Building the relationship in which you are both invested, which is resilient and which is right for you both is the best way forward.
- **A further two identified common causes of relationship breakdown – failure to deal with issues and failure to nurture the relationship – exposed a lack of relationship skills which could in many cases be addressed.** These may be called into play at different times within relationships, such as transitions into and out of parenthood and bereavement. At the outset an understanding of what

skills each partner has and how you will work as a team in the face of bad times as well as good is vital to reflect on and then call on over the course of the relationship.

- **Ten relationship attributes and skills were identified from our married and more diverse couple samples as being key to driving and sustaining a thriving relationship.** These are fully discussed within the report and also broadly reflected the matters expressed as important by young people at our workshops. They were also used to inform the critical questions which should be asked before committing to a relationship intended to be permanent. We summarise them here as follows: –

*Choosing carefully; friendship; realistic expectations; seeing the best in each other; communication; being committed; building a relationship that suits you both; willingness to work at relationship; adapting to change; building a support network.*

- **Friendship had a central role in sustaining relationships in the longitudinal sample of opposite-sex couples married for ten years, which also revealed two important areas negatively affected by asymmetry: the first as at the point of commitment and the second around decisions to end the relationship.** The couples who had separated had lacked a solid, mutual basis of friendship from the outset. This had made it difficult for the couple to navigate an agreed course for the relationship and had given them little to fall back on when they encountered challenging circumstances. In marriages that broke down, we also noted asymmetry in the initial desire to progress the relationship, with one person often keener than the other to cohabit or get married. This was later reflected in asymmetry around decisions to separate, a phenomenon also noted by practitioners. Unhappy husbands tended to internalise their distress. Unhappy wives vocalised their discontent but felt unheard. This led to unhappy spouses emotionally disengaging some time before separating, making attempts at reconciliation mostly doomed to failure.
- **From this study, we conclude that the combination of mindsets, attributes and skills are likely to determine how well or otherwise a couple are able to deal with the stresses and strains of life through transitions and periods of difficulty.** The identified attributes and skills interact with existing typologies of mindsets within a couple –which may be *deliberative* or *implemental* at the time of commitment, combining then with either a *developmental* or *non-developmental* approach to nurturing the ongoing relationship itself. There were differences in the mindsets within and across the two couple samples and our development of the critical questions aimed to take aspects of these attitudes and perspectives into account. There will always be differences in the way and times these attributes and skills come into play. Facets of them may also combine differently when considered in the context of different styles of relationship. However, we concluded that there are two overlapping groups of relationship attributes and skills. First there are those which are critical for all to identify and address at the outset of the relationship to ensure compatibility or acceptance of areas of incompatibility between partners. These are *choosing carefully; underpinning friendship; realistic expectations; seeing the best in each other; open communication; being equally committed.* Second there are those attributes and skills which need to be understood by each partner as things which must be maintained throughout the relationship and through which a relationship will be happier, healthier and more resilient over the long term. These are *friendship; realistic expectations; seeing the best in each other; open communication; being committed; building a relationship that suits you both; willingness to work at relationship; adapting to change and building a support network.*
- **From these, we proposed ten critical questions for each partner to reflect on individually and then use as a basis for discussion with their partner before committing to a relationship intended to be permanent.** Some of these are principally aimed at avoiding incompatibility at the outset. Others are aimed at identifying the skills and mindsets of partners which can be developed over time to avoid relationship breakdown.

## The critical questions

- **Are my partner and I a 'good fit'?**  
(Can we work well as a team? Do we have similar values and outlook on life?)
- **Do we have a strong basis of friendship?**  
(Do we have fun together? Share interests and humour? Appreciate each other?)
- **Do we want the same things in our relationship and out of life?**  
(Do we each feel that we can jointly agree a plan for our lives together? Can we negotiate?)
- **Are our expectations realistic?**  
(Do we accept there will be ups and downs? Understand the need to make effort?)
- **Do we generally see the best in each other?**  
(Can we accept each other's flaws? Respect our differences?)
- **Do we both work at keeping our relationship vibrant?**  
(Do we make time to spend together and time apart? Each show the other that we care?)
- **Do we both feel we can discuss things freely and raise issues with each other?**  
(Do we deal with issues promptly & constructively? Enjoy talking & listening to each other?)
- **Are we both committed to working through hard times?**  
(Do we both 'give and take'? Work on ourselves? Look to a positive future together?)
- **When we face stressful circumstances would we pull together to get through it?**  
(Can we each adapt well to change? Would we seek professional help if needed?)
- **Do we each have supportive others around us?**  
(Do we each have a good support network we can turn to or call on for help if needed?)

Whilst we recommend that all these questions are critical to reflect on and discuss prior to committing to each other at the outset, as couple situations develop and change, the balance between individual and couple perspectives can also shift. We would also suggest that these questions are kept in mind and discussed from time to time as a way of reviewing the relationship dynamics from all perspectives – making sure both partners are still a good team and pulling in the same direction. They are also a basis on which to consider ways of building better relationship skills and support if and when issues and life challenges arise.

Whilst people have come to accept much more that their physical health is enhanced by physical activity, it is hoped that this sort of exercise will in future be viewed as a good way of keeping relationships healthy and on track.

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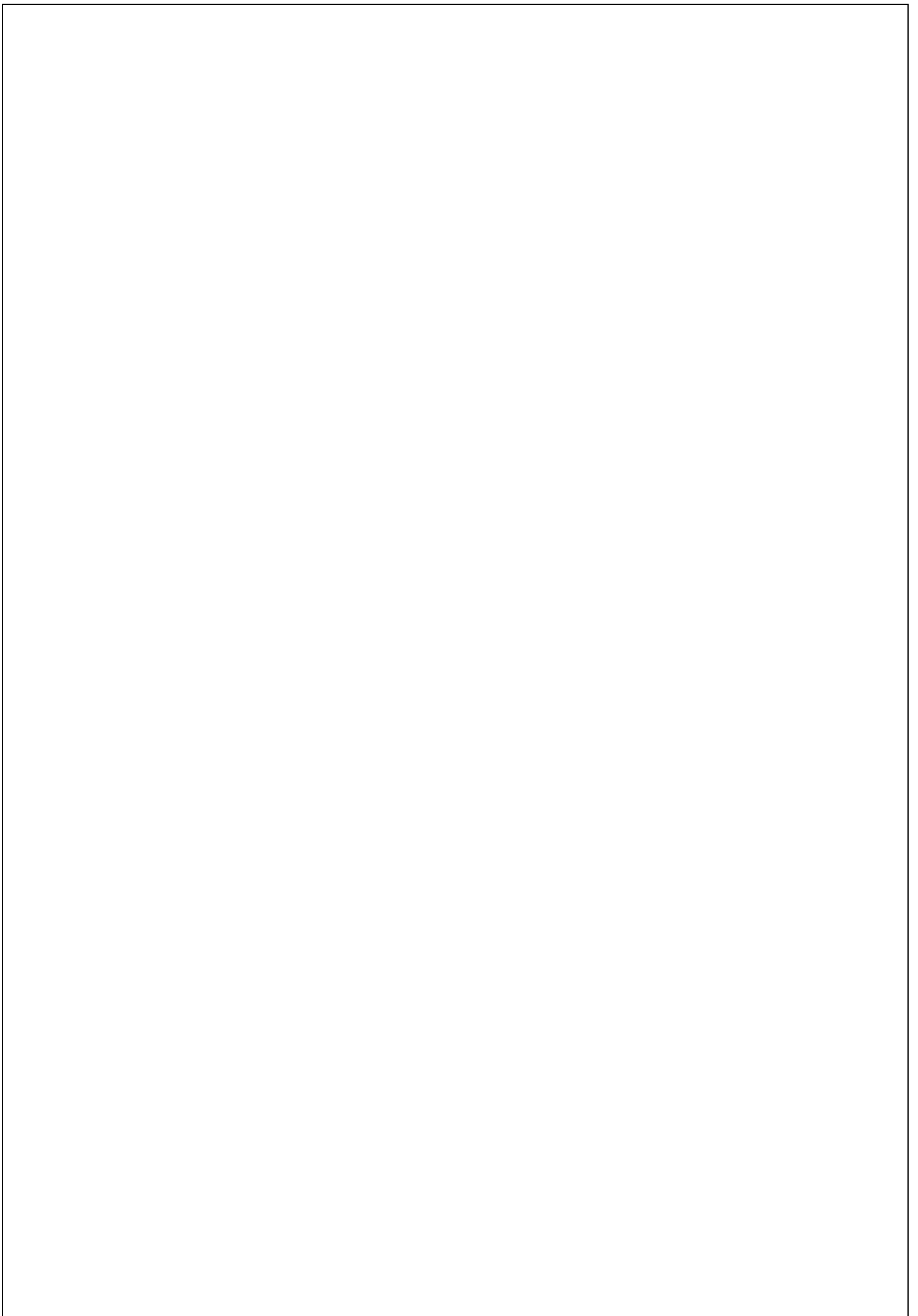
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