

Written evidence submitted by Professor Jacqui Gabb [MRS0509]

Families and couple relationships: underpinning research

The evidence presented here derives from ESRC-funded research (RES-062-23-3056) that examines how couples experience, understand and sustain their long-term partnerships. The original mixed methods project, [Enduring Love?](#), comprised an online survey with a UK convenience sample (n=4494) and qualitative multiple methods with couples (n=50). Data from the Enduring Love? study have been supplemented by surveys completed in July/August 2020, by YouGov in the UK (n=1,348) and Ipsos Mori in the US by (n=1,488) and which focused on relationships during the pandemic.

Findings from the original study evidenced that small everyday gestures were foundational to positive relationship maintenance behaviours. Far reaching global media coverage shifted public debate on the ordinary practices that are valued and help to sustain a partnership over the life-course. Findings have informed relationship educational materials and relationship support services. Research tools have been taken up and applied in clinical practice and assessment contexts. PI Gabb is now seconded (part-time) to a start-up tech company who are developing an app that can deliver relationship education. [Paired](#) is a unique app that draws upon the Enduring Love? study findings.

It is estimated that 20-25% of the British population are in poor quality relationships, with the annual cost of family breakdown of £44 billionⁱ, and lasting adverse impacts of on the health and well-being of men, women and childrenⁱⁱ. Studies have documented the 'stressors' that contribute to relationship breakdownⁱⁱⁱ, but how the Covid-19 lockdown will affect couple relationships is not yet known. Solicitors term the post-Christmas Monday morning return to work as 'Divorce day', with similar peaks in divorce also occurring after family holidays. Time spent together can bring to a head underlying tensions and ONS figures show that unreasonable behaviour is cited as the most common reason for divorce, heterosexual and same-sex alike.^{iv}

The immediate impact of lockdown may bring some couples closer together and strengthen family ties. For others, lockdown may well have lasting adverse impact on family interactions and how couples relate to one another. Emotional support and relationship resources are required to support couples and families during lockdown and for when lockdown is lifted.

Rethinking couple quality time

There is an assertion in therapeutic discourses that time spent watching TV detracts from couple 'quality time'. This is important, because couples ordinarily spend only about 150 minutes together per day, while awake; 50 minutes of this time is spent watching TV.^v Research evidence from the Enduring Love? study contradicts this assertion. By focusing on everyday activities and listening to couples talk about the everyday things that they do and enjoy, and which help to sustain their relationship, a very different picture emerges. Watching television together can be seen as a positive relationship practice.^{vi} Over spring and summer, the Stay at Home message meant that couples spent, and continue to spend, far more time together than they ever expected or perhaps wanted to. Further research is needed to assess the immediate and long-term impacts of the lockdown on families and couple relationships.

The significance of companion species (pets)

Animals can have profound benefits for health and wellbeing, something that is especially important for older people^{vii} and the non-judgmental attachment of human-animal bonds can help to combat the

feelings of loneliness and isolation which routinely experienced by LGBTQ people^{viii}. In this way, it is the non-humanness – or otherness – which makes animals perfect companions for humans^{ix}. In the UK, 45% of the population now own a pet, an increase of 5% since 2016. 26% of UK households now include a dog – this equates to nine million dogs^x. While it is ‘family’ households which has seen the steepest increase in dog ownership^{xi}, there is also a notable increase in the number of pets within child free. The decision to bring a dog into a relationship is perceived as a sign of couple stability, testing out the human bond and bestowing futurity to the relationship project^{xii}.

One of the few exceptions to the Stay at Home guidance is exercise and dog walking. This regular exercise and the natural environment may have lasting benefits for the mind, body and soul. Further research is needed on how people are relating to animals and the natural world around during lockdown and the extent to which this has a lasting impact on their attachments, mental health and wellbeing.

Couple relationship support

About a quarter (26%) of people in our survey told us their relationship had improved since the coronavirus pandemic began, while for one-in-ten (11%) it had got worse. Most people’s relationships with their partners had stayed about the same (63%). These results mirror other studies completed over the same time period^{xiii}. However, the ‘post-lockdown relationship reckoning’ that is being highlighted by divorce lawyers indicates that the couple honeymoon period may yet generate a peak in relationship dissolutions. This is in addition to those couples who already report that their relationships are in trouble or over.

Where couples turn to for mediation, support and advice is crucial, especially when face-to-face contact remains restricted. In our survey, over six in ten (62%) of UK adults admitted they do not speak to anyone for relationship advice. This includes their friends, family or even turning to the internet for advice; showing a worrying trend of ‘suffering in silence’ or not addressing issues when they are still small. The figures also confirm the stereotype that men struggle to talk about relationship matters, with 70% not turning to anyone for advice, not even Google. The generational divide between those who open up about their relationship and those who do not is clear. 8 in 10 of those over 55 wouldn’t go to anyone for relationship advice, compared with two-thirds of those between 45-54, and only 3 in 10 of 18-24 year-olds. Only 1% would seek relationship therapy or counselling for problems within their relationship. The survey showed little fluctuation in this figure in relation to earnings and social class.

Digital solutions

The majority of relationship support and mental health services are concentrated in major metropolitan regions and academic hubs which means that a sizable proportion of the population do not have access to family or relationship interventions (Smith, 2017). The current lack of availability of one-to-one professional services due to social distancing means that digital solutions are arguably vital.

Asynchronous ‘behavioral intervention technologies’ (BITs) such as apps and web-based programs can engage with the opportunities of ‘quantified relationship’ (QR) technologies^{xiv} and help couples to overcome the common barriers to treatment seeking and the cost effectiveness of support services. BITs are proving to be a highly effective method for reaching people in the context of their daily lives due to their portability, convenience, just-in-time content delivery, tailoring, increased sense of privacy, and reduced stigma.^{xv} Self-directed mobile approaches encourage participants to actively engage in the change process, while developing healthy habits, a form of automated behavior prompted by contextual cues and reinforced with powerful feedback loops.^{xvi} Published results from BIT relationship interventions show that mobile delivery can assist users in successfully implementing health behavior changes,^{xvii} psychological interventions and prevention strategies.^{xviii}

Our survey findings report that whilst only 1% of couples in the UK would seek professional help for relationship problems, 30% of couples said they would consider using an app to help their relationship. Those in same sex relationships would be more likely (51%) than those in heterosexual relationships (30%). Apps can help to expand the extent to which couples look outside their relationship and/or immediate family and friends, in their search for expert advice and couple support. They are fast becoming part of the health profession toolkit, providing immediate advice and interactive activities as and when individuals need them.

[Paired](#) is a unique app that draws upon the Enduring Love? study findings. It is designed to improve communication and deepen intimacy through daily interactions. The app has been trailed in Australia over the summer. It has received overwhelmingly positive feedback from users. It is being launched worldwide at the end of September. Paired combines audio courses from clinical psychotherapists and academics with fun daily questions and quizzes, underpinned by longer in-depth courses. A robust evaluation of its effectiveness will be completed in the New Year, 2021. The inclusion of the app as part of wider mHealth mental health and wellbeing services would ensure that couples and families can access the support and relationship education that they all need when in crisis, and more generally, **before** issues arise.

ⁱ CSJ (2014) <http://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/policy/pathways-to-poverty/family-breakdown>

ⁱⁱ Markham, H. J., & Halford, W. K. (2005). International perspectives on couple relationship education. *Family Process*, 44(2), 139–146.

ⁱⁱⁱ Walker, J., Barrett, H., Wilson, G., & Chang, Y-S. (2010). Understanding the Needs of Adults (particularly parents) Regarding Relationship Support. Research Brief DCSF-RBX-10-01. London: DCFS.

^{iv} <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/divorce/bulletins/divorcesinenglandandwales/2017>

^v Relationships Alliance. (2013). The Relationships Alliance. Priorities for Policy. Retrieved September 8, 2014, from <http://www.relate.org.uk/files/relate/publication-relationships-alliance-priorities-2013.pdf>

^{vi} Gabb J and Fink J. (2015) *Couple Relationships in the 21st Century*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.

^{vii} Gee NR and Mueller MK. (2019) A Systematic Review of Research on Pet Ownership and Animal Interactions among Older Adults. *Anthrozoos* 32: 183-207.

^{viii} Muraco A, Putney J, Shiu C, et al. (2018) Lifesaving in Every Way: The Role of Companion Animals in the Lives of Older Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Adults Age 50 and Over. *Research on Aging* 40: 859-882.

^{ix} Gabb J. (2011) Family lives and relational living: taking account of otherness *Sociological Research Online* 16: <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/16/4/10.html>

^x Statista. (2018) <https://www.statista.com/statistics/308218/leading-ten-pets-ranked-by-household-ownership-in-the-united-kingdom-uk/>.

^{xi} King S. (2018) <http://www.overthecounter.news/news/pet-ownership-in-the-uk-on-the-rise.html>.

^{xii} Gabb J. (2018) Unsettling lesbian motherhood: Critical reflections over a generation (1990-2015). *Sexualities* 21: 1002–1020.

^{xiii} Relate, <https://www.relate.org.uk/about-us/media-centre/press-releases/2020/7/20/nation-divided-new-statistics-show-uks-lockdown-relationship-realisation>

^{xiv} Doss, B. D., Cicila, L. N., Georgia, E. J., Roddy, M. K., Nowlan, K. M., Benson, L. A., & Christensen, A. (2016). A randomized controlled trial of the web-based OurRelationship program: Effects on relationship and individual functioning. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 84, 285–296.

^{xv} Ehrenreich, B., Richter, B., Rocke, D. A., Dixon, L., & Himelhoch, S. (2011). Are mobile phones and handheld computers being used to enhance delivery of psychiatric treatment? A systematic review. *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 199(11), 886–891; Heron, K. E., & Smyth, J. M. (2010). Ecological momentary interventions: Incorporating mobile technology into psychosocial and health behaviour treatments. *British Journal of Health Psychology*, 15(1), 1–39.

^{xvi} Lucier-Greer, M., Birney, A., Gutierrez, T., & Adler-Baeder, F. (2018). Enhancing relationship skills and couple functioning with mobile technology: An evaluation of the Love Every Day mobile intervention. *Journal of Family*

Social Work, 21, 152-171. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10522158.2017.1410267>

^{xvii} Cugelman, B., Thelwall, M., & Dawes, P. (2011). Online interventions for social marketing health behavior change campaigns: A meta-analysis of psychological architectures and adherence factors. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 13(1), 88–112.

^{xviii} Webb, T. L., Joseph, J., Yardley, L., & Michie, S. (2010). Using the internet to promote health behavior change: A systematic review and meta-analysis of the impact of theoretical basis, use of behavior change techniques, and mode of delivery on efficacy. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 12(1), 97–114.

September 2020