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Tracing the diverse narratives of self in relationship research: insights from a multiple methods approach

Constructing and Deconstructing Selfhood
ESRC Wales DTC Workshops
Cardiff University
30 May 2015

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Overview

- Relationship stories
- Stories, individuals and the social world
- *Enduring Love: Couple Relationships in the 21st Century* (ESRC RES-062-23-3056)
www.enduringlove.co.uk
- Case studies
 - Zak
 - Cheryl and Kevin
- Commitment to hearing and listening

Relationship stories

- One relationship, different accounts
 - 'his and hers'
(Duncombe & Marsden, 1993)
- Couple scripts and relationship scripting
(Eldén, 2012; Heaphy & Einarsdottir, 2012)
- Interviewing couples together and/or apart
(Duncombe & Marsden, 1996; Gabb & Fink, 2015;
Heaphy, Smart & Einarsdottir, 2013)

Stories, individuals and the social world

We are constantly writing the story of the world around us: its periods and places, its purposes and programmes, its people and plots. We invent identities for ourselves and others and locate ourselves in these imagined maps. We create communities of concern and arenas of activity where we can make our religions, tend to our 'families', practise our politics, get on with our work. We experience our bodies and our feelings, as well as our behaviours and talk. And everywhere we go, we are charged with telling stories and making meaning – giving sense to ourselves and the world around us.

Plummer, K. (1995) *Telling Sexual Stories*, Routledge: p.12

Enduring Love: Couple Relationships in the 21st Century

Generate robust research evidence on how couples experience, understand and sustain long-term relationships.

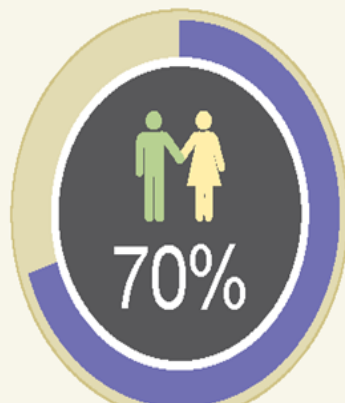
Focusing on the impact of relationship contexts, including:

- Gender and gendered 'relationship work'
- Generation and generational differences
- Parenthood and parenting culture
- Biography and couple diversity

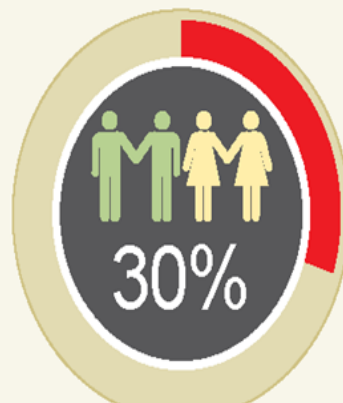


Research sample

The qualitative sample comprises 50 couples aged between 18–65



70% of the couples are heterosexual



30% of the couples are lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer (LGBQ)



50% of the sample are couples with children



50% of the sample are couples without children

Survey sample comprised:

5445 participants worldwide, UK sample (n=4494)

Survey questionnaire

- 5 relationship measures:
 - Relationship quality
 - Relationship with partner
 - Relationship maintenance
 - Happiness with relationship/partner
 - Happiness with life
- Individual questions
- Open questions (free-text)

Enduring Love? Couple relationships in the 21st century

Questionnaire

We are studying long-term adult couple relationships and what these relationships mean for people today. Please complete this questionnaire and tell us about your relationship experience.

Filling out this questionnaire should take about 10-15 minutes. We appreciate your time and your thoughts.

All answers will be treated as strictly confidential and data will be anonymised. No personal information will be shared with any third party. This research operates within the 'Statement of Ethical Practice' issued by the British Sociological Association (BSA).

You are also not obliged to answer every question should you choose not to.

1 Are you currently in a long-term couple relationship?		
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No (we will be unable to use your data)	<input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify)

2 Approximately, how long have you been in this current relationship?		
<input type="checkbox"/> Under 1 year	<input type="checkbox"/> 1-5 years	<input type="checkbox"/> 6-10 years
<input type="checkbox"/> 11-15 years	<input type="checkbox"/> 16-20 years	<input type="checkbox"/> More than 20 years

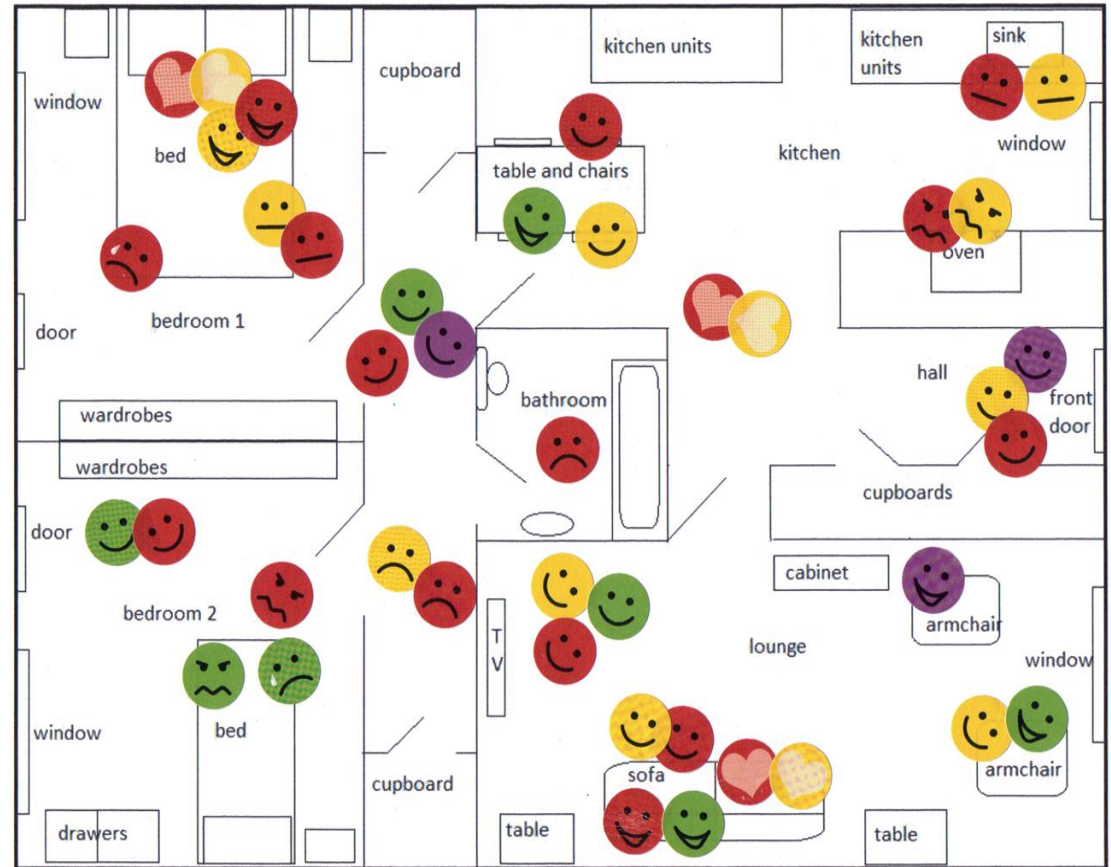
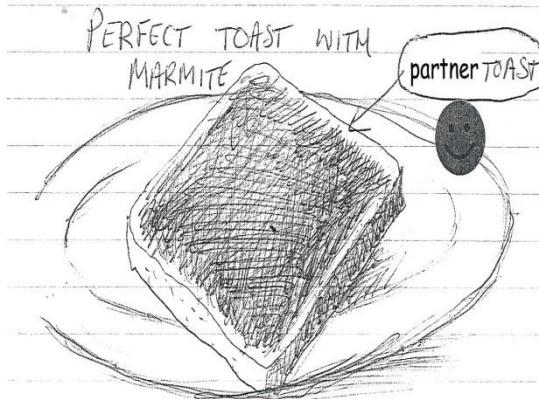
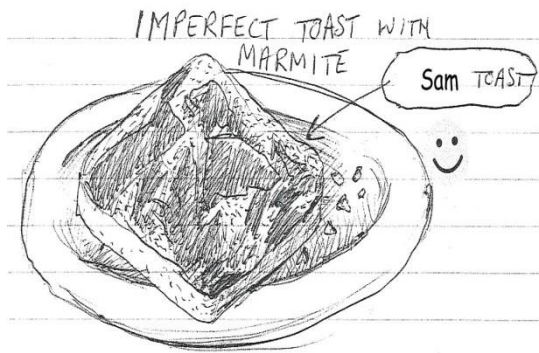
3 How would you best describe your relationship?		
<input type="checkbox"/> Married	<input type="checkbox"/> Civil Partnership	<input type="checkbox"/> Living together
<input type="checkbox"/> Couple-not living together	<input type="checkbox"/> Going out with someone	<input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify)

4 What is your Gender?		
<input type="checkbox"/> Female	<input type="checkbox"/> Male	<input type="checkbox"/> Other (please state)

5 How old are you?		
<input type="checkbox"/> 16-24	<input type="checkbox"/> 25-34 years	<input type="checkbox"/> 35-44 years
<input type="checkbox"/> 45-54 years	<input type="checkbox"/> 55-64 years	<input type="checkbox"/> 65+

6 Sexual orientation		
<input type="checkbox"/> Heterosexual	<input type="checkbox"/> Gay/Lesbian	<input type="checkbox"/> Bisexual
<input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify)		

Diaries and emotion maps



Individual interviews

MOIRA (45-55)

The relationship and how it works. I suppose because we've been together for so long it feels kind of automatic in that we don't have to work too hard at it now, because we've been married over 30 years, we knew each other a couple of years before we got married, two three years, and we met at university in our final year, so we've kind of grown up together really.

KRIS (25-35)

How does it work? I wish I could answer that, to be honest. Um, I've been with [partner] now for about five years. Um, when I first got with her, she had [child], who's now ten, going on 19. Um, we've had [child] two years back. And how it works is sometimes a mystery, to be honest.

ROSEMARY (55-65)

How does it work? Ah, very difficult, I suppose it's strange. We don't share a bedroom, most people think they should, you should share bedrooms and things. We do our own thing and we do things together, and that's how we do it.

DUNCAN (55-65)

Well, um, first of all, I think because we're both, sort of, second time around, we are very aware of the pitfalls, and things that didn't work in the past etc., certainly from my point of view. I've learnt a lot since my first marriage, which was quite a few years ago. And got married far too young, really. I was 26, but I was a very young, naïve 26, so yeah. Um, and I think the biggest thing for me is that [partner] lets me be me.

Couple (collage) interviews



Couple (collage) interviews



Participatory method with 'hard to reach' couples



Multiple methods approach



- A multiple methods (MM) approach to access accounts of emotional life and everyday relationship practices.
- Broad spectrum of research senses, encouraging opportunities to listen and hear, to look and see.
- An MM ‘moments approach’ to analysis of datasets

Case study: Zak

- Late 20s
- Bisexual
- Married
- Open relationship
- No children
- Rented housing
- Working class
- University education
- Full time employment

Diary: protective, caring partner

[Partner] was off work sick today, I worried at work. I'm a big worrier, I wish I could be with her always so I know she is safe. Which is mad, as some days I want to be alone. I came home and she was up and about so I sat her down and made her tea and hot water bottles. She was a little freaked by having to deal with door knockers and daytime phone calls in her pjs with strangers. She can be very tough at times, but events like this remind me why I worry so much.

Individual interview: strong companion

Because we'd go shopping, [partner] would do the wandering and pick everything out and I'd go with her and we'd talk and banter as we do, but when we come to bringing everything home I'd do this massive burden that I would load up with virtually everything and carry it all myself. That's ... that would be the self-worth. I'm strong, strong, I'm useful, I'm carrying everything so you don't have to.

Individual interview: grateful son

[My parents are] the reason I'm the person I am. You know it's one of the things that used to annoy me when I was unemployed, is that when you meet, especially down here, someone meets someone like me unemployed, before you know it, people believe that my parents are unemployed. You know because there's this idea that poverty is a cultural thing. It's purely economic you know. And it used to annoy me because my parents put a lot into me and did well for me and sacrificed heavily to pay for me through university. And it used to annoy me that people would not even think that had happened.

Individual interview: working class man

I have my working classness which I can ramp up *deliberately* to undermine or make people uncomfortable, make people even just *fear* me, you know, to get my own way. Where I do it constantly, you know, it's a great way to get through the day, if people are in your way, especially since I'm down here I've got this accent that sounds strange which I'd ramp up to make it virtually guttural [...] I can dial it straight back I can speak perfect civil servant, where I can just use nothing but several syllable long words in a sentence deliberately to obviate. Because to me they're all just aspects and tools that people use anyway but I think of them as like particular faces I put on, this particular self and fire at someone.

Case study: Cheryl and Kevin

- Late 40s
- Heterosexual
- Married, 20+ years
- Cheryl, working-class background
- Kevin, middle-class background
- Two children
- Own home
- University educated
- In full-time employment

Couple interview: team performances

KEVIN: The man emptying the dishwasher, that's what I do.

CHERYL: With my help.

KEVIN: (Laughing) You do help.

CHERYL: I often help if I'm around, yeah.

KEVIN: Yeah.

CHERYL: But it is your job, as it were.

KEVIN: Yeah.

CHERYL: And whoever walks the dog gets brownie points. We like walking him together at weekends but I walked him today.

KEVIN: And cooking teas, you quite often do that.

CHERYL: Yeah. I don't think it counts as Kevin cooking if I've cooked it, and Kevin puts it in the microwave .

Couple interview: coaxing and coaching

KEVIN: Well I was just thinking, you know, a photo like that, I sort of immediately identify with the smallest because I was the youngest of three, um, and I looked a bit like that. Um, so yeah, being the youngest I sort of think I was always not picked on but, you know, I was always the one that couldn't defend themselves as well as the others, so, you know, I was always shown up to be the ... not the idiot, but you know. They've just played games on me I think and I lost out, so that wasn't so nice, but I think, you know, I was alright at school and things.

CHERYL: You were all very bright boys, weren't you?

KEVIN: Yeah. Yeah. And ...

CHERYL: And education was really important in your family.

KEVIN: Yeah. Yeah. And I was certainly, you know, helped by my, both my parents, you know, were very supportive and encouraging and everything, so.

Couple interview: refusing to be coaxed and coached

CHERYL: Well, I come from a very traditional, working-class family. I think my mum worked really hard actually, because ...

KEVIN: You were the second child.

CHERYL: I was the oldest girl. I was the second child but the oldest girl so I helped my mum a great deal but she worked full-time and did, you know, looked after all the house and my dad was on nights, so she helped the children in the evenings as well. I've kind of come from a ... you can paint it different ways really but there was a fair bit of chaos in my family I would say and quite **dysfunctional** relating [...] I kind of gravitated to school to get a safe place and, you know, a bit of order.

KEVIN: You were always very organised, weren't you?

CHERYL: Yeah. When I was five, I had all the bus fares and the dinner monies.

KEVIN: And you used to look after your older brother's money.

CHERYL: Yeah, I did, yeah, that's true. Yeah. I think it's amazing to think of a five-year-old, you know, having to go to school, cross the main road, get the bus to school [...]

KEVIN: Didn't your mum have to go on the bus to the hospital to give birth to one of them?

CHERYL: When she went into labour, you know, my dad wasn't there so she just had to get on the bus and go to hospital.

KEVIN: (Laughing)

Hearing and listening

Sociological listening is not simply a matter of transcription, or just emptying people of their expertise and wisdom [...] It involves artfulness precisely because it isn't self-evident but a form of openness to others that needs to be crafted, a listening for the background and the half muted [...]

It can be exhausting and sometimes the sociological ear is simply full and the listener needs time to reflect for a while [...] Its sense of purpose is best summed up as an attempt to remark upon the unremarkable, evidence the self-evident and relate the troubles contained in the smallest story to a larger, more wordly scale.

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