

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

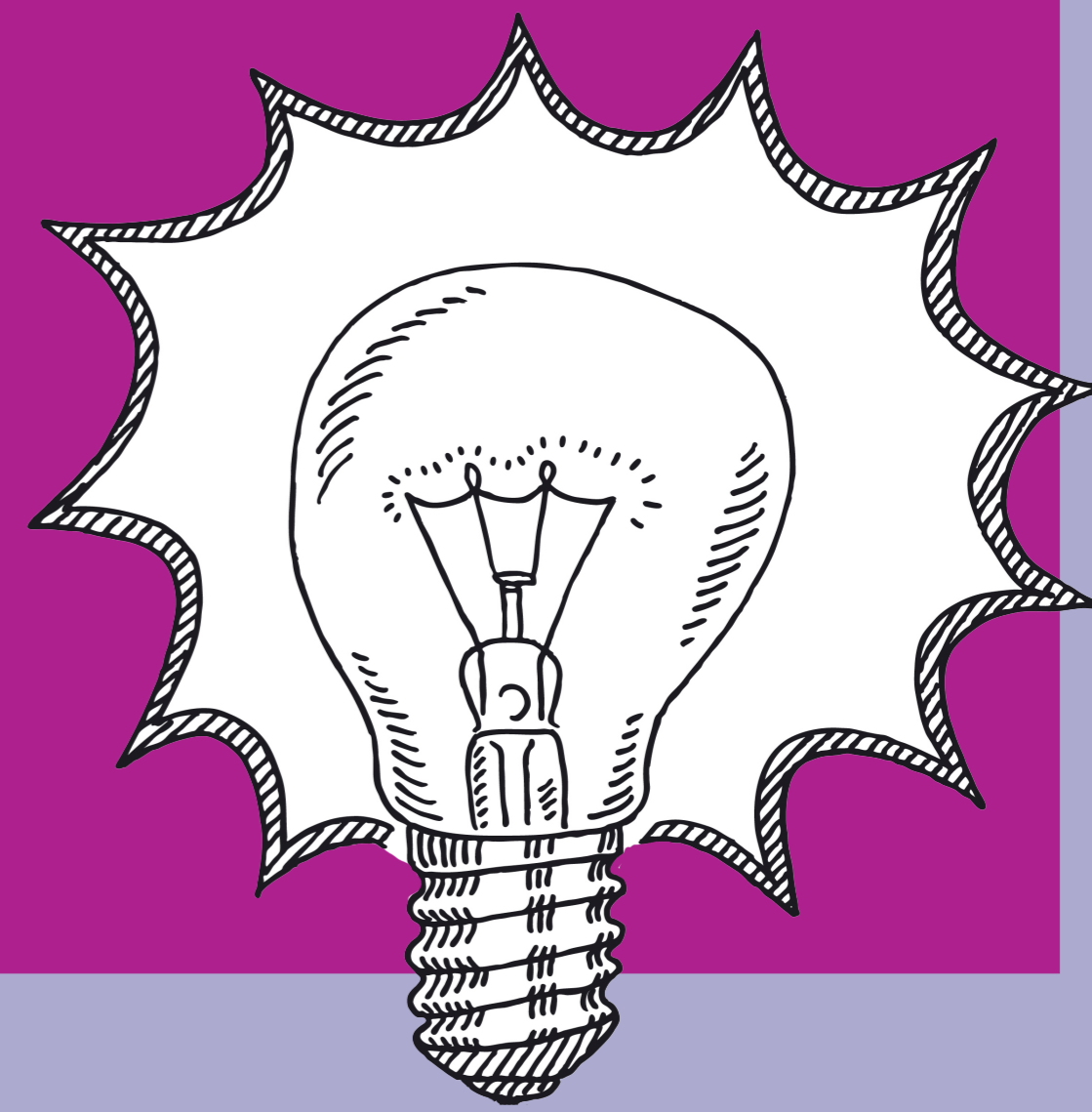
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effectively use research to improve the situation for children or families or to address issues in personal relationships

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centre for research on families and relationships

## What research was used? Why was it appropriate?

Enduring Love? Couple relationships in the 21st century was funded by the ESRC.

[www.enduringlove.co.uk](http://www.enduringlove.co.uk)

The study provides unique research evidence on the ways in which couples sustain their long-term relationships. Data were generated through qualitative multiple methods (n=50) and an online survey (n=5445).

Existing research has examined the 'stressors' that can contribute to relationship and family breakdown. Our research refocused the analytical lens onto the everyday, often mundane, relationship work that helps to sustain a relationship, over time.

It is estimated that 20-25% of the British population are in relationships of poor quality and 42% of marriages end in divorce. The economic annual cost of 'family breakdown' is estimated at £44bn. Knowing what 'works' in this context is, therefore, crucial because poor relationship quality has been identified as a major cause of family breakdown with an adverse effect on adults' mental and physical health and children's behaviour. Whilst relationship longevity cannot be simply associated with relationship quality, a positive correlation between relationship quality and relationship stability has been shown to exist.

The Enduring Love? study significantly advanced understandings of the meanings, practices and imaginings of quality and stability in long-term relationships and thus enabled policy makers and practitioners to speak to the diverse experience and needs of couples.

## How did you get people interested in the research?

In collaboration with key stakeholders, a range of outputs and activities have been designed to engage with different audiences. Most notably, these include:

- **Podcasts**  
A series of podcasts feature couples' reflections on love, parenthood, and everyday 'relationship work'. These offer an accessible portal into our conceptual themes and received more than 24,000 hits in the first three months alone.
- **Relationship education materials**  
Brook reaches over 275,000 young people every year. In collaboration with Brook, findings have been 'translated' into freely accessible online materials. Brook also currently delivers sex and relationships education in 10% of UK schools. An eLearning pack has been developed to equip teachers to deliver SRE (sex and relationships education) lessons in schools.
- **Relationship handbook**  
A self-help handbook has been published. The Secrets of Enduring Love (2016) is aimed at general readership. It was serialised by the Daily Mail, reaching a readership of 4 million, with a further 100 million website unique visitors.
- **Clinical practice tools**  
Findings have been disseminated to frontline relationship support staff through conference and workshop presentations. In collaboration with family systemic psychotherapists, the emotion map technique has been adapted for use in clinical practice as part of the clinical assessment toolkit.
- **The Art of Relationships**  
A series of evidence-based films have been produced and presented in multiple formats. These are designed to provoke the audience to reflect on their personal relationship experience.
- **Website**  
The study website widely disseminates information on events, findings and methods - [www.enduring.co.uk](http://www.enduring.co.uk)
- **Briefings/Newsletters**  
Research Briefing papers present key findings for academic and non-academic audiences. Bi-annual project newsletters have targeted academic and practitioner communities and the general public more widely. Their circulation of over 3,500 indicates their success and scope.

## What did the team learn from the project?

The 'Enduring Love?' study was designed and implemented as a dialogic study, through interviews and ongoing conversations with policy-makers, practitioners, and researchers in the field.

We remain indebted to key third sector organisations – including Relate, One Plus One, Tavistock Centre, Asian Family Counselling Service, Pace, CoSRT, and Brook. The impact, scale and scope of the post-project spin-offs demonstrate the value of this approach. What has become more evident over time is the need to support and resource post-project impact work. The OU has provided outstanding support for these impact activities and without this internal resourcing many would not have been possible.

Another lesson has been the need to be open to interest from all quarters. For example, it was not the intention of the project to publish a self-help book. However, in response to the high level of media interest, Vermillion Random House approached us to write such a book which also featured in The Daily Mail and Saga magazine. The skillset to produce this lay outside the immediate project team; similarly so with developing the emotion map method for use in clinical practice and assessment, and more recently the digital arts project. These examples demonstrate the need to build collaborations that stretch inter/disciplinary interests and the expertise of a research project team, and to work outside our comfort zones to reach wide and unanticipated audiences.

## Who benefitted from the research?

At the 'Enduring Love?' project launch, Annabel Burns (DFE) asked "how can we mainstream relationship education?". This provocation inspired and informed impact and public engagement activities thereafter with a wide range of different audiences:

- **Policy-makers**  
Research evidence has been presented to government departments (DFE, DWP and The Treasury) and parliamentary policy making groups (Centre for Social Justice and Labour Policy Review), enabling them to refine their understandings of family and relationship support.
- **Practitioners**  
Advanced understandings of the ordinary 'couple practices' that sustain long-term relationships have informed the work of professionals in associated fields. Emotion maps are being used in clinical practice and assessment.
- **Schools and young people**  
In collaboration with Brook, online relationship information resources for young people have been developed. eLearning teaching materials have been produced for inclusion in PSHE curriculum.
- **General Public**  
Extensive media coverage of findings has shaped debate on couple diversity and enduring relationships. A self-help book has 'translated' academic findings for a general readership.

## How did you evaluate the impact?

Findings have received significant recognition from key relationship organisations and practitioners, referring to the immediate and lasting impact of study findings. For example:

*"This evidence and research could really raise the national consciousness of [relationship] issues and put them firmly in the debate... this is a milestone."*

Ruth Sutherland, Relate CEO (14/01/2014)

- The extensive and on-going national and international media coverage of the study has moved beyond dissemination of findings, provoking policy and public debate. In 2014 the Open University commissioned a Media Impact Report to map the scope and scale of initial coverage. This evidenced audience reach of 72.2m people (£802,517 EAV, equivalent advertising value).
- The research team has been invited to participate in democratic debate on couple relationships through contributions to all-party parliamentary briefings, receptions and consultation events, including House of Commons and the 'Relationship Summit' (College of General Practitioners). Written evidence has been presented to government departments, including the DWP, DfE and parliamentary policy making groups, the Centre for Social Justice and Labour Policy Review.
- The emotion map method is now being used in clinical practice and assessment. The impact of the tool was published in a leading clinical practice journal and wider feedback on its effectiveness is being collated.
- Relationship education resources developed with Brook are proving to be highly successful with regional youth groups. Data on unique visitors and usage of the online resources are being retrieved monthly. The eLearning teachers' pack includes big data capture and full online evaluation. An OU-funded studentship will work with Brook to complete evaluation of these resources (2016-19).
- The Art of Relationships films facilitate exploration of the value of art in representing research. They were presented at an event (RSA, London) and are hosted online.
- Statistics are being collected to evaluate reach and impact of the artwork, including an online questionnaire. For the public event, qualitative audience interviews have provided further opportunity to assess impact.