

Relationship difficulties and help-seeking behaviour

Secondary analysis of an existing data-set

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FINAL REPORT

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One Plus One

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This research report was written before the new UK Government took office on 11 May 2010. As a result the content may not reflect current Government policy and may make reference to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) which has now been replaced by the Department for Education (DFE).

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.

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Executive summary

Couple relationship breakdown is prevalent in today's society. To illustrate, it is currently estimated that 45% of marriages will end in divorce¹. Other relationships, including cohabiting unions are more fragile². Research has shown that couple relationship breakdown is associated with detrimental impacts on both the individuals in a relationship as well as any children present³. This impact upon individuals has not declined, despite the increasing occurrence of relationship breakdown⁴⁻⁶. Preventing relationship breakdown by strengthening a couple's relationship has profound benefits for adult and child well-being, and the parenting ability of the couple⁷⁻¹². As such, understanding how to support and strengthen families is an important area for research, policy and practice. It is important to note that there is convincing evidence to suggest that damaged relationships can be repaired, improved and prevented from breaking down¹³⁻¹⁶.

This report outlines findings from the secondary analysis of a dataset derived from interviews with individuals who were in long-term relationships. The data were generated from 112 individual interviews and eight focus group discussions (comprising 64 individuals). Given the nature of the purposively selected sample (with selection criteria including gender, age, relationship status, relationship duration, children, socio-economic group, education, ethnicity and area of residence) there is no reason to suspect the sample are atypical of the wider population of individuals within couple relationships.

The chapters of the report outline findings in a number of areas including relationship difficulties; factors which help a relationship endure; attitudes and beliefs about relationships; and relationship improvement and help-seeking behaviour. Although the data were generated some seven to eight years ago, comparisons with both older and more contemporary studies suggest that the difficulties encountered by couples have remained relatively stable over the previous generation^{3,17-19}.

The report focuses on learning about the best ways to prevent relationship problems, overcome relationship difficulties and reduce the likelihood of relationship breakdown. The findings from this study make a valuable contribution towards our understanding of relationship difficulties and how relationships can be strengthened.

Research questions

The four main research questions, as represented through the four main findings chapters, are as follows:

- When do relationship difficulties occur and what are the consequences?
- What do people think helps their relationships to endure?
- What attitudes and beliefs do people hold about their relationships?
- How do people try and improve their relationships?

A key strength of the research is that it is based on a large and demographically representative dataset, which explores the experiences of participants in ongoing relationships in rich detail, and offers the opportunity for an ecologically valid insight into the processes which occur in relationships. The qualitative nature of the study is particularly important, as people are speaking from their everyday reality and meanings. Any strategies

for improvement in, or strengthening of, relationships are more likely to succeed if they can address or are rooted in these real-life accounts.

Key findings

Relationship Difficulties

1. The main difficulties reported by interviewees were in relation to the transition to parenthood and the challenges of raising children; finance; health and well-being; the influences of in-laws, family and friends; and infidelity. Relationship difficulties were most frequently reported during the transition to parenthood. Problems during this transition included difficulties associated with conception through to dealing with older children.
2. Two key underlying issues were evident in many of the participants' accounts of their relationship difficulties. These issues were the unequal balance of control in a relationship and poor communication.
3. An increase in emotional distance between a couple was sometimes the consequence of relationship difficulties. Some participants reported that they had experienced periods of doubt about remaining in their relationship. Some of the reported consequences illustrate the process of relationship breakdown²¹. In contrast, some reported that by working through their relationship problems they had become closer to their partner.

Factors that help relationships endure

1. The most frequently reported factors that participants considered would help *any* relationship to work were being in a relationship with the 'right person', putting work into a relationship, communicating well, and having trust in a partner.
2. The most valued aspects of the *participants'* relationships were closeness, independence, having children, and support. Feeling close to a partner involved understanding a partner and being understood, sharing a sense of humour and laughing together, and having a friendship with a partner. Having independence from a partner was valued by many participants. Independence allowed people to maintain personal friendships, spend time away from their partner and further their own interests. It also included respecting a partner's individuality. Participants found that it was important to balance independent activities with time spent as a couple and as part of a family.
3. The participants believed that their relationships had been strengthened by good communication, living through and sharing difficult life events, spending time together, having compatible personalities, and learning about and understanding their partner.
4. People observed that over time there were changes in themselves, their partner and their relationship. Some participants recalled that they had a greater understanding of their partner, had become more mature over time, and that their attitude to their relationship had changed. These factors had sometimes altered their attitude and behaviour towards a partner in a positive way.

Relationship attitudes and beliefs

1. Participants perceived their relationships in many different ways. Five groups emerged from the analysis, representing the range of perceptions: '*...it's not right*'; '*...it's probably just average*'; '*We're completely happy*'; '*...we will get through it*'; and '*...solid, but it's one which we've worked at*'.
2. Each group was associated, to differing extents, with a variety of different themes which emerged through the data analysis. The themes concerned factors such as relationship satisfaction, conflict, the development of their relationship over time, closeness, communication, and emotional engagement.
3. The attitudes and beliefs about relationship development underpinned many of the themes which emerged within the groups. Two distinct groups emerged - those with a 'developmental' or 'non-developmental' relationship perspective.
4. A 'developmental' perspective involved beliefs that relationships were fluid and changed through time. These views were associated with participants who conveyed that they were active agents with control over the course of their relationship. They described change in their relationship; overcame difficult times and doubts in their relationship; reported learning about themselves, their partner, and their relationship; and put their knowledge to use by investing in relationship 'work'. Those with a 'developmental' perspective considered their relationship in the future as well as in the present. There is a clear link here to the longer-term outlook of 'mutual' rather than 'contingent' commitment identified among cohabiting relationships²¹.
5. Some of the participants suggested a 'non-developmental' perspective in which a relationship was viewed as an inflexible entity. These views were evident where participants conveyed a low sense of agency or control over the course of their relationship and, in some instances, people indicated that they were 'lucky' to have a good relationship. Common expressions were that they had 'found' the right partner rather than worked to create a good partnership; that they did not perceive a great deal of conflict or change within their relationship; that they did not invest heavily in relationship 'work'; and that they felt unable to improve their relationship.
6. 'Developmental' and 'non-developmental' relationship beliefs occurred across a variety of differently perceived relationships. 'Non-developmental' relationship beliefs were not confined to those reporting dissatisfying relationships. To illustrate, some of the '*We're completely happy group*' were 'non-developmental' in their beliefs, although they had not yet reported any relationship strain.
7. Based on women's greater willingness to engage in discussion about their relationship and to seek out relationship support, they were also more likely than men to hold such 'developmental' beliefs.

Relationship improvement

1. The primary method of resolving relationship difficulties reported by the participants was by talking through issues. Talking could prevent arguments and serious relationship problems from developing. Although some participants found discussing issues was sometimes uncomfortable, the majority reported that it was important to talk through issues in order to maintain the long-term health of the relationship.
2. Arguments and conflict were viewed as a natural part of a relationship by most of the

participants. The data suggest that arguments could be used productively to foster relationship improvement, or they could be destructive in nature and lead to relationship erosion. Many of the participants reported that arguing was a skilful process. Unwillingness or an inability to engage effectively in an argument could be frustrating to a partner and result in increased tension. Failure to fully resolve an argument was dangerous because it could lead to a cycle of repeated arguments and damage to the relationship.

3. The most frequently used source of relationship support was through informal routes such as close social contacts. The participants reported that having someone to listen to their relationship problems was beneficial, and helped them to understand their situation and get through difficult times. The participants also valued receiving unbiased advice from their family and friends. Many reported that because their friends and family knew the individuals in the relationship, they could offer new insights and this sometimes helped them to understand their issues more deeply and how they could work to resolve them.
4. Many of the participants felt that a couple should be able to deal with their relationship problems privately within the dyad, without having to rely on external relationship support. Support from friends and family was more acceptable than formal support such as relationship counselling. A few of the participants suggested that if a couple required formal or professional relationship support to solve a relationship difficulty, then the relationship was not worth saving and unlikely to be successful. Most of the participants reported that they would not use a relationship counselling service.
5. Many of the participants reported that using formal relationship support was intrinsically linked with feelings of failure and defeat. The need for relationship counselling was associated with weaknesses or deficit in an individual. Being a strong and resilient person was viewed as incompatible with the use of counselling services. Some participants reported that by the time a couple decide to attend relationship counselling it was often too late to repair the relationship.
6. The participants reported a range of factors which made a source of relationship support more or less acceptable, such as availability and accessibility, degree of informality, and being non-judgmental. Some of these themes were not compatible, for example, the desire for anonymity alongside a preference for support from someone familiar who could empathise with their situation.
7. The influence of people's 'developmental' or 'non-developmental' relationship perspective was apparent in the accounts of relationship improvement behaviour and attitudes to relationship support. A 'developmental' perspective was evident in behaviours such as initiating discussion about issues even if it was uncomfortable to do so, learning from difficult experiences, expressing dissatisfaction, and engaging in constructive conflict. Those with a 'developmental' perspective were aware of what made their own relationship endure, through closeness and time together, independence, providing support for each other, and communicating effectively.
8. A 'non-developmental' perspective was apparent where people frequently avoided confrontation with their partner, by subjugating their own needs and resigning themselves to continuing their dissatisfying relationship and failing to resolve arguments. They commonly held a belief that a couple could not learn to improve their relationship, and considered relationship support to be ineffective.
9. Observing, adapting to, and actively accepting change in a relationship was

associated with a 'developmental' perspective. In contrast, a 'non-developmental' perspective was associated with a lack of awareness of change, or a belief that change indicated deterioration in a relationship which they appeared to be resigned to.

10. A person who has a 'developmental' view of their relationship held a belief that they had control over the outcome of their relationship. This made it more likely that they engaged in relationship improving behaviour and sought out relationship support if they experienced difficulties. This could increase their resilience to future relationship difficulties.

Implications for policy and practice

The research provides a wealth of detail about the experiences of people in couple relationships and the findings have clear implications for policy-makers and practitioners aiming to find ways to strengthen couple relationships. This section presents some of the key implications.

A 'developmental' perspective

There was great variation in the accounts of relationships provided by the participants. Some people viewed their relationships as deeply satisfying and well developed, whilst others felt that their relationship with their partner was deteriorating and unsatisfactory. Through investigating the processes within these different relationships, the research provides us with an opportunity to learn from people with satisfying and successful relationships, and develop support based on their experiences.

A key feature of this research was the investigation into the relationship beliefs of participants. These were considered to be either 'developmental' or 'non-developmental' in nature. A belief that relationships were flexible, controllable and changed over time underpinned a 'developmental' perspective. Based on the assumption that people who hold 'developmental' beliefs are likely to be motivated to maintain and improve their relationship, the findings can be used to develop interventions which aim to modify people's attitudes and behaviour towards this perspective.

Those who have a 'developmental' stance are likely to be those primed to be able to learn adaptive skills early on. They are also already equipped with some wisdom about relationship trajectories and the ability to make improvements through the accumulation of knowledge and skills. These are both key to robustness in relationships and can be bolstered in couples such as those reporting relationship distress. Those not 'developmental' in their perspective, however, can be potentially reached through a prior step: one that would educate them about the benefits of such a stance.

A number of key points associated with this finding are presented below:

Universal early intervention

The results suggest the potential benefit of adopting a universal early intervention approach to relationship support. There are two groups of participants who may particularly benefit from early intervention. Firstly, those who are in the early stages of their relationships may benefit from increased awareness of relationship stages and likely changes (i.e. the decrease in passion), to inform people that it is normal for this to occur. Secondly,

participants who perceive their relationship as 'good' but hold 'non-developmental' relationship beliefs may be ill-equipped to deal with relationship difficulties should they occur. Using universal preventative interventions could provide, therefore, crucial learning to *all* couples, including those currently in satisfying relationships, even if they are yet to experience relationship difficulties.

Knowledge about relationships

Based on the research evidence, key pieces of information which relate to preventative interventions designed to encourage a 'developmental' relationship perspective may include:

- **Relationships change over time** - Being aware of this process can help people to interpret events in their own relationship. As an example, providing information which raises people's awareness that it is normal for affection and attentiveness to decline in the early stages of a relationship may prevent people in new relationships from misinterpreting this process as deterioration. People's relationships go through many different stages and these are associated with different levels of relationship satisfaction.
- **It is normal to experience periods of low relationship satisfaction** - In relation to the point above, people do experience periods of low satisfaction in their relationship and they sometimes have doubts about staying in their relationship. Often, given time, people's relationship satisfaction improves and these doubts are overcome. Low relationship satisfaction is not necessarily a predictor of future happiness and people can learn to improve their relationships.
- **Certain circumstances are frequently associated with relationship difficulties** - Relationship difficulties often occur during the transition to parenthood. For most people the period before the birth of a child is a period of excitement and anticipation. However, it is important to be aware that the impact of a new child can be detrimental to a couple's relationship. Specific issues include a lack of sleep, which can cause partners to be irritable with one another; the emergence of gender roles associated with childcare which can cause dissonance; and males feeling rejected by their partner after the birth of a child. Faced with these difficulties, people can get caught up into a vicious cycle, whereby a father's dissatisfaction with his relationship with the child's mother can reduce his involvement with the child, leaving the mother feeling less supported and, in turn, being more critical of the father, and so on²². As a child grows older, further differences in the couple's parenting style may emerge and this is an area which often causes conflict. There are also many other circumstances when difficulties are likely to emerge including financial problems, illness, and the influence of friends and in-laws.
- **People have the ability to control the outcome of their relationship** - Relationships are flexible and can respond to change. Empowering people to recognise that they can have control over their relationship may have a significant effect on their relationship improvement behaviour, such as understanding a partner's behaviour and feelings, investing in relationship 'work', or using support.
- **The way a couple communicate has a bearing on many aspects of their relationship** - A couple's relationship can be developed through their use of communication. Being open with a partner can help a couple to increase their sense of closeness or 'togetherness' and facilitates the development of a trusting and supportive relationship.

- **It is useful to understand a partner's behaviour** - The way people think about their partner's behaviour has an impact on their thoughts and feelings towards them. It is useful to consider the circumstances which have caused undesirable behaviour, for example, a partner's irritability might be due to their illness. It is also important to consider the partner's life experiences and how these have influenced their behaviour. Understanding the reasons behind a behaviour may help reduce relationship tension.
- **Conflict and confrontation is normal in a relationship** - Whilst it may be difficult to raise relationship issues with a partner that may result in short-term confrontation, it is likely to be beneficial for the long-term health of the relationship. By being open about feelings a couple can address a relationship issue before it develops into a serious difficulty. Failing to raise and deal with issues may be a sign that people are subjugating their own needs and this can lead to the erosion of relationship satisfaction. A lack of conflict in a relationship does not necessarily indicate a healthy relationship.
- **The way people deal with conflict in their relationship is more important than the conflict itself** - It is important to deal with conflict in a constructive manner. The problems couples face are usually much less important than the way they deal with them. The findings from this study suggest some people are more adept than others at resolving conflict constructively. Important considerations during conflict were to take a break if a situation became too heated, to fully resolve all the issues that were raised during the argument, and to learn from the conflict.

This kind of knowledge described above can encourage a 'developmental' perspective. There is clear potential for relationships education in schools to promote knowledge that underpins a 'developmental' perspective. This will be necessary to foster current policy committed to promoting 'strong and positive relationships'²³ through school-based sex and relationship education.

Providing acceptable sources of support

One challenge for policy and practice is to find ways to increase the uptake of relationship support services. Another is to develop services which are acceptable to couples, in terms of the ways in which they experience difficulties and the type of support they find acceptable when they do. This is especially important at an early stage, when the prospect for improving relationship quality is greatest. The research identified factors which make sources of support acceptable to people. These have implications for the development of interventions. As an example, the vast majority of people preferred support to come from somebody familiar and who had been through similar experiences to themselves. This suggests that training peer mentors to develop their listening skills and ability to empathise might be an effective way of offering acceptable support.

Research shows that an effective time for support is when a couple are becoming parents for the first time and motivation to get things right is high²⁴. During this time a couple are in routine contact with various professionals, such as Health Visitors, who are in a strong position to offer support. Broadening the purview of these professionals by training them to understand relationships, and be able to offer support and signposting could provide long-lasting benefits for the couple and for the baby they are going to raise.

A significant finding in this area was that participants often found it difficult to seek out formal relationship support. This has implications for making services better marketed and packaged. However, many of the participants also reported that they were unwilling to use

services such as relationship counselling and that by the time they decided to do so it would probably be too late to save their relationship. It is clearly important that relationship support services are not portrayed as a means of trying to resolve an already failed relationship, rather as a means of improving the quality of the relationship. In addition, incompatible concerns such as the preferences for anonymity and informal support from friends and family suggest the need for a menu of support provision. A menu of support options would also be appropriate to meet the needs of people at different stages of their relationship. Moreover, a careful consideration for those with a 'developmental' perspective is to provide advice and support which does not undermine their own sense of agency and control. Indeed, those with a 'non-developmental' perspective may be more receptive to learning what will be new information and skills.

A central component of relationship support was to 'off-load' problems, be listened to, and accept neutral advice that people could feasibly enact. However, these were matched by concerns over burdening friends and family with problems and wanting to keep relationship difficulties private. Additionally, evidence from this research suggests that issues over availability, accessibility and acceptability prevent the uptake of more formal types of support. Innovative solutions such as internet technology may be a means of overcoming such barriers. Recent research into the preferences of an innovative relationships support website suggests that the main attractions are that it is immediate, confidential, not face-to-face, and informative. It also provides a medium to express relationship difficulties and gather advice from people in similar situations as well as from experienced health professionals²⁵. Innovative and evidence-based internet support services provide a way of bypassing some of these significant barriers that people face when seeking relationship support.

Future research and development

As a final note, this study has also identified a number of areas that require further investigation. Firstly, the distinction between the 'developmental' and 'non-developmental' beliefs and their ability to improve and strengthen relationships is a finding central to this study. However, these data do not enable us to grasp an understanding about the antecedents of these perspectives, and essentially improve our understanding of why some people hold 'developmental' beliefs whilst others do not. Furthermore, is this 'developmental' capability an individual attribute or something developed from the relationship, does it change through time and, if so, how can this best be achieved? Additionally, a recognition of whether those with particular relationship beliefs share common characteristics (e.g. by gender, age, relationship duration, relationship type, etc.) would be of obvious interest.

Secondly, and arguably the greatest challenge is to build on what this study has shown about improving relationship support. With contemporary policy interest over reducing relationship erosion and preserving relationship stability, a greater understanding is required about what interventions are likely to be more acceptable and effective. How can those with a 'non-developmental' perspective become more motivated to work on and understand their relationship? Whilst a menu of relationship support options is preferred, actually implementing and assessing the effectiveness of support to strengthen relationships is the ultimate challenge when applying these findings to developments in policy and practice.

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Chapter 1. Introduction & methodology

1.1 Introduction

Couple relationship breakdown is prevalent in our society today. To illustrate, it is currently estimated that 45% of marriages will end in divorce with similar, if not greater proportions of cohabiting unions experiencing relationship breakdown (ONS, 2008). Relationship breakdown is associated with detrimental impacts on both the individuals in a relationship and also the children who experience this event (see Coleman and Glenn, 2009 for a review). These impacts are not declining despite the increasing prevalence of couple relationship breakdown in our society (Ely et al., 1999; Gruber, 2004; Sigle-Rushton et al., 2005).

The research presented in this report is underpinned by a recognition that preventing relationship breakdown by strengthening a couple's relationship has profound benefits for adult and child well-being, and the parenting ability of the couple. Research shows that people who view their relationship as unhappy can experience an increase in relationship satisfaction over time (Waite et al., 2002) and that relationships can be strengthened and prevented from breaking down (Hart, 1999; Schulz et al. 2006; Halford et al., 2008; Hawkins et al., 2008). In addition to this, there is good evidence to suggest that the quality of a couple's relationship has a great impact upon their parenting ability (Hetherington, 2003; Feinberg and Kan, 2008). As such, improving the capability of people to strengthen and improve the quality of their relationship is an important area for research, policy and practice. This report focuses on learning about the best ways to develop early intervention relationship support to prevent the development of serious relationship difficulties and reduce the likelihood of relationship breakdown.

The report outlines the findings from secondary analysis of an existing data set derived from interviews with individuals who were in long term relationships. The chapters of the report outline qualitative findings in a number of areas including relationship difficulties; factors which help a relationship endure; attitudes and beliefs about relationships; and relationship improvement and help seeking behaviour. By increasing our knowledge in these areas the research makes a valuable contribution to the current body of relationship literature and provides insight into effective ways to enhance policy and practice.

The data upon which this research is based were gathered through face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions undertaken between 2002 and 2003 for research commissioned by the Lord Chancellor's Department (LCD). The aim of this research (Ayles and Panades 2005) was to investigate people's experiences of relationship distress and breakdown, and attitudes towards seeking relationship support. It was envisaged that the findings from this research would inform a national survey of couples' attitudes towards relationship problems and that the data from this survey would be used to help shape policy and practice development. However, due to changes in the political climate policy emphasis moved away from relationships and the national survey was not conducted.

In 2009 the Department for Children Schools and Families commissioned One Plus One to undertake a more detailed and focused secondary analysis of this comprehensive data set. Support for this research reflects a renewed government focus on the importance of couple relationships and an emerging emphasis on the development of policy and practice which supports parents at times when their relationships come under strain (DCSF, 2008). This policy emphasis has been further emphasised through the recent 'Support For All: The Families and Relationships Green Paper' (DCSF, 2010) and 'The Centre for Social Justice Green Paper on the Family' (The Centre for Social Justice, 2010).

1.2 Research questions

The aim of the original study was to investigate people's experiences of relationship distress and breakdown and their attitudes towards seeking relationship support. The secondary analysis of the data-set adds to the findings by focusing on the following research questions:

- When do relationship difficulties occur and what are the consequences?
- What do people think helps their relationships to endure?
- What attitudes and beliefs do people hold about their relationships?
- How do people try and improve their relationships?

Essentially, the original report presented a brief description of the relationship difficulties recalled by individuals in a couple relationship. The secondary analysis was able to extend this descriptive evidence by providing a deeper understanding of these issues and by exploring ways in which people did/did not attempt to overcome them. The latter provided meaningful insights into people's perceptions, attitudes and capabilities regarding relationship support.

A key strength of this research is that it is based on data from a group of participants who were all in long-term relationships at the time of interview and only considers the participants' experiences in their current relationship. Research shows that when a relationship breaks down individuals go through a process where they reframe their experiences in the relationship to ensure psychological health (see Mansfield and Collard, 1988 and other related literature such as cognitive dissonance theory [Festinger, 1957]). This means that it is difficult to gain a fully valid understanding of the processes in a relationship by examining it after it has broken down. Therefore, the results presented in this report provide a valuable insight into relationships and provides a foundation from which to identify how early intervention may be most effective.

1.3 Sampling and methods

A total of 112 in-depth interviews and eight focus groups (comprising 64 individuals) were undertaken. All fieldwork was conducted by an external team of four interviewers under the direction of One Plus One research staff, and was undertaken in London, Bristol and York. Interviews and focus groups were recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

A short screening questionnaire was used to determine eligibility for interview (Appendix 1) and to purposively select participants. This ensured that the selected participants were demographically representative of the general population. Factors which were considered included gender; age; relationship status; relationship duration; number of children; socio-economic group; education; ethnicity; and area of residence. Additionally the questionnaire identified any step-children, people whose children had left home and previous significant relationships (e.g. marriage). The frequencies achieved for each criterion can be found in Appendix 2a, with Appendix 2b showing equivalent data for focus group participants.

Further details of the methodology, including piloting for the original research, data collection and data analysis can be viewed in Appendix 3. This appendix also includes methods used specifically in relation to each chapter (see next). Further appendices present a relationship satisfaction questionnaire used to trigger responses (Appendix 4), interview topic guide (Appendix 5), focus group topic guide (Appendix 6), and the coding framework (Appendix 7).

Note that the focus group findings are presented outside of the main text as the data generated were generally in contrast to the way the interview data arose. Whereas in an individual interview setting people were freely able to disclose personal experiences and opinions, the dynamics in a focus group made this less likely. Consequently, the findings generated from the focus groups were more indicative of a consensus towards relationship values and beliefs rather than personal experiences. Whereas interview data commonly expressed personal findings such as “My relationship...”, the focus group participants commonly expressed more generic views such as “I think relationships...”. This impersonal approach to the focus groups was typified by the facilitator choosing not to record the relationship status and precise age of the members (unlike the interviewees). It is for this reason that the focus group findings are not subsumed within the main text.

1.4 Research findings

The chapters are presented in an order which represents how the analysis builds towards the development of key implications for practice development.

Chapter 2 provides the participants’ observations about when difficulties have arisen during their relationship, the consequences of these difficulties and some of the underlying causes.

Chapter 3 presents some of the positive and strengthening factors of relationships which participants felt helped relationships endure through difficult times.

Chapter 4 presents the findings of a deeper analysis of participants’ perceptions about their relationships and the different attitudes and beliefs which occur.

Chapter 5 provides descriptions of the participants’ perceptions of relationship improvement and help seeking behaviours, and their attitudes to support. The chapter also integrates the findings from Chapter 4 into the analysis to show how people’s beliefs and attitudes relate to their relationship improvement behaviour.

Chapter 6 draws together the findings from each of the chapters and considers the implications they have for policy and practice.

1.5 Research limitations

Prior to the presentation of the results it is important to consider the limitations of the research and how this affects the interpretation of the results.

Whilst one of the key strengths of the data is that it is based on participants in ongoing relationships this also provides a reason to be cautious about generalising from the data. For example, one of the findings of the analysis was that threats to leave a partner (both threats to provoke a response and actual threats) had often prompted relationship improvement. This finding is based on the experience of someone who has remained in their relationship despite the threat, whereas it is possible that for other samples a threat to end a relationship may have led to its dissolution. Likewise, we must also recognise that the relationship difficulties presented by these individuals did not lead to separation which may indicate that the most salient problems between couples are less well represented in this study.

The interviews were conducted with only one member of the relationship. As such the responses are based only upon the interpretation of one partner. This means that the research can provide us with an understanding of a person’s interpretation of their relationship but this cannot be considered to be an objective picture of it.

General cautions concerning the nature of qualitative interview research include:

- The participants' accounts may be biased by social desirability effects which cause them to over report behaviours or attitudes which they deem to be acceptable. Social desirability effects are particularly significant due to the sensitive nature of some of the areas of investigation and lack of anonymity during the data collection process.
- The participants may have been unable to recall accurate information or lack self-awareness and insight into their relationships.
- The data collection may have been subject to investigator effects including poor interview technique or the interviewer's own biases.

Finally, it is important to recognise that a researcher is an integral part of the qualitative research process. The analysis is influenced by a researcher's values and theoretical positions and it is important to view the interpretation of data in these terms.

Chapter 2. Relationship difficulties

2.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the participants' perceptions of the causes of difficulties within their relationships. The findings are largely descriptive and topic based but some analysis of underlying issues is presented. In addition to this some of the key consequences of relationship difficulties are reported. The conclusion provides a summary of the findings and integrates the findings with key literature in the area.

2.2 Results

The findings are presented as follows:

- Types of difficulties
- Underlying causes
- Consequences of difficulties

Each section contains a summary of the main findings.

2.2.1 Types of difficulties raised by participants

There were a wide range of relationship difficulties mentioned by participants. The results present the most frequently reported themes which were the transition to parenthood and parenting; financial difficulties; health and well-being; friends, family and in-laws; and infidelity. Additional difficulties less widely reported included: addiction, sexual difficulties, housework and housing, and lack of time together.

- **Transition to parenthood and parenting**

Issues around parenthood and raising children were the most frequently mentioned difficulty. The nature of these difficulties followed a time course perspective, and were frequently depicted in this manner through the timeline trigger noted in the methods (Appendix 3)². Issues emerged around the decision to have children, difficulties with conception, miscarriage, abortion, pregnancy, post-natal depression, and the transition to parenthood. Transition to parenthood presented couples with a number of difficulties including the salience of gender roles, changes in sexual activity and partners feeling left out or rejected. The participants also identified a number of other issues unrelated to transition which could have consequences for relationships. These included: stress due to a child's illness or disability, differences in parenting style, exhaustion and the behaviour of a child.

Becoming pregnant

Decisions about having children were a particularly important issue for some couples. Differences in opinions were the main cause of problems however the opinions and influence of other people from broader social networks was also significant. The following quote describes how one participant felt he had a lack of influence and control when deciding to have children with his current partner.

² This was essentially a graph representing changes in relationship satisfaction since the relationship had commenced.

'... but then when [interviewee's stepson] was 14 [partner] started wanting kids by me, and I said, 'No, no I don't want to', you know, 'I'm getting on', anyway I said, 'I don't really want to go down that path', anyway women always win don't they? So she won and we got [Child], and then 18 months later...she needed another one for [Child], you know, so we ended up with [Child 2] as well'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 50)

The decision to have children was a process of negotiation for some couples where a compromise was reached, for example, the decision to have only one child rather than several. However for others there appeared to be a power-struggle where one partner ultimately 'won'. This may be an example of one partner's dominance in control over the course of the relationship or more specifically in relation to the number of children they wanted. Control is discussed in section 2.3.2 'Underlying causes'.

A few couples reported that an **unexpected pregnancy** had resulted in relationship issues.

'Dreadful, in fact that did put ... That was probably the very first time I think that we really... He didn't realise what effect it was having on my life, and I felt very... it was a dreadful time. And in fact, I did have counselling at the hospital for that, with one of the midwives. Because I just didn't want to be pregnant. He didn't want me to be pregnant. We didn't want another child'. (Female, married, aged 40)

A number of couples experienced relationship difficulties as a consequence of issues around **infertility**. For one couple this arose through the discovery that the female was not infertile as previously believed.

'I was told I might not be able to have children... and [then] they told me that my fertility is fine. I had all the tests, and then he turned round and said, well he'd got used to the idea of not having children, and he doesn't think he wants any. And that was a big conflict with us, and we have counselling for that'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 33)

Difficulty with **conception** was associated with relationship difficulties for some couples. A few participants reported that they had felt pressured and exhausted by their efforts to conceive. One participant discussed the stress that he had experienced which he attributed to pressure from his wider social network to have children.

'Another month goes by and you think, 'Christ, another month has gone by', you know. Another month you have got to try harder and whatever... In those days my mum said, 'Come down Saturday night and have a meal here'. And we couldn't say no because everybody else was going... and [we] would come [home] at 10'clock in the morning. We would have to like try to try for a baby like that, and that was a strain. Because she didn't want to at that time of night... and you were doing it for the sake of doing it type of thing. It was important to do it sort of thing ... It was the culture thing, you know. Everyone else, my mum was saying you know, 'Why hasn't she had children by now', you know'. (Male, married, aged 44)

The experience of **miscarriage** had a great impact on individuals and this was sometimes associated with relationship difficulties. For one couple an unplanned pregnancy which ended in miscarriage had caused great distress and a feeling of helplessness in the male partner.

'We had both you know come completely round to it you know... and we'd decided to go through and we'd convinced ourselves. And we were quite excited by it, yeah which you know was a complete change, reversal ... you know there's only so much asking you can do and if she's not ready to talk then that's it, but, you know'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 36)

One participant reported severe relationship difficulties as a consequence of two miscarriages which had occurred 20 years before. This participant described periods of disengagement with her partner after one miscarriage occurred, and the difficulties the couple experienced in sharing their grief.

'Like I say, when you go on the down side after a miscarriage, you just don't want to know. Everybody is to blame, you know what I mean, like you know, and the person you are with gets it the worst. But I think the only factor that kept us together at times like that, is the fact that we had a son. So we were both quite committed to him. So you get through those bad times ... I'd often go and sleep on my own, and make the excuse that my son ... that he was waking up at night and like make the excuse about it, and I suppose by clamping up and not talking, and then he would be the same ... and I mean after the second miscarriage, I went to [interviewee's home country] for about three months and I took our son with me, and he actually said to a good friend of mine who is a friend of his, that he didn't know if I was coming back'. (Female, married, aged 51)

However, it was more commonly reported that as a result of miscarriage a relationship had become closer. A few participants described miscarriage as an experience in which they could both share and support equally and one that was different from other issues, such as the death of a parent, where typically one partner is being supported and one is providing support.

'It's just got more at ease. She can come over and tell me things which she can't tell anybody else. None of our friends knew about the miscarriage and stuff like that, because we didn't want them to know. Because until she was ready to cope with it in her own mind, when we told them, she could cope with it then'. (Male, married, aged 33)

Becoming a parent

First time parenthood was identified as placing particular stress on a couple's relationship. The difficulties covered a broad range, from specific issues, to a more undefined sense of change for the worse in the relationship. The extract below shows how one participant perceived deterioration in his relationship during the transition to parenthood. During this interview a narrative developed which indicated that the participant had disengaged from his partner and felt that there was no hope for relationship improvement.

'I wasn't prepared for the change in the relationship after parenthood. Parenthood has been as good as I wanted it to be. It hasn't thrown up any major surprises. I had a pretty good idea of parenthood and life... My idea of real life had been pretty close, but the relationship after parenthood was a big shock. I didn't expect that. So yeah, that was a turning point in my own personal relationship, that is the one piece of advice that I wish I had been aware of I suppose'. (Male, married, aged 30)

Important factors which appeared to affect couples' relationships after the birth of a child were the quality of a relationship before parenthood, the interviewees' attitudes towards children and commitment to the relationship. In the few cases where interviewees indicated that they had low relationship commitment before having a child the relationship had deteriorated since the onset of parenthood. Nonetheless, children were also seen to sharpen the commitment to a relationship in some instances (see Most valued aspects of relationships in Chapter 3).

The transition to parenthood was acknowledged as a period of great adjustment by both men and women. Most of the participants reported that they understood that having a child would cause additional stress and were able to put relationship difficulties during transition into this context. Participants reported that during transition there were a number of specific

issues that emerged. **Lack of sleep** was a frequently mentioned consequence of having a new baby and participants reported that they had become irritable with their partner as a consequence.

'... it makes you quite, you're snappier and things that, you don't realise why you're being snappier but ... Yeah these two have been very bad sleepers both of them so we've ... we haven't had any proper night's sleep for sort of five years'. (Male, married, aged 42)

In several cases this lack of sleep was perceived to have been particularly damaging for the relationship.

'... a couple of years after we were married, when my daughter was born... She woke up every three hours through the night for three years non-stop. And it nearly drove me absolutely mad. I have never been so... everybody said, 'Oh you'll forget it over time'. I have never forgotten that time, it was an absolute nightmare. I mean we'd get up in the middle of the night at 3 o'clock in the morning, knowing you have got to be at work at say 7, and over a period of time, you get snappy, irritable, tired. You know, you wake up. It's your turn. No it's your turn. That was hard. That was a hard time'. (Male, married, aged 50)

Gender roles for individuals often became salient upon the birth of a child. Some female participants reported that they felt their partner was not handling their baby correctly, and in parallel, some male participants described feeling un-trusted, and finding it hard to support the mother in practical care giving. When one parent took more responsibility for the parenting role a feeling of being overburdened by the care involved could develop. This was also associated with the other parent feeling excluded or 'pushed out'. One female participant described her awareness that she had rejected her partner upon the birth of their first child.

'Yes, I think the first sort of down actually was after the first child was born and I almost shut [partner] out in a way really. I think I sort of felt I had to do everything myself and really he wanted to help. And I think I did put the shutters up and push him away actually. I lasted for probably about two or three months, and I did wonder for a while what we did actually have in common'. (Female, married, aged 31)

This above example also ties in with the erosion of a relationship through a 'vicious cycle', whereby feelings of being unsupported lead some women to be more critical of their partners which in turn leads to men being less satisfied with their relationships and then disengaging from the child and family life (One Plus One, 2006).

One male participant with a young child at the time of interview acknowledged that there were currently significant challenges in his relationship which he attributed to the challenge of being a new father and **feeling left out** of the relationship.

'It was a very big change yes, it was a very big change indeed, it was like, I don't know at first I felt, I suppose it's probably selfish me saying left out, a little bit left out, it was like mummy and her daughter, I was going out to work and coming home sort of like alright, hardly a cuddle for me or whatever, but it's quite a change, it is a very big change'. (Male, married, aged 26)

Feeling 'pushed out' could become a long term issue, not limited to the time around transition to parenthood. One male partner noted how parenting their teenage daughter was hard for him because he had less of a parenting role than his wife and felt he had less of a say in how his child should be raised, this participant had become unhappy with his situation and experienced relationship problems as a consequence. Although this impact of the parenting

role on the partner role can first emerge at the transition to parenthood, it can also arise at later times in parenting.

For women particularly, the gender roles which frequently emerged during this period were often surprising or difficult to manage. Many female participants indicated that they had felt isolated by their caring role or that their efforts were not valued by their partner. A few participants reported how this had caused significant strain on their relationship.

'At one time, not drastic, no splitting up problems or anything like that. It was just a very, very big strain, because [partner] was obviously working and working as many hours as he could and I was at home with the baby and being a housewife and cooking and cleaning and looking after the children. It got to the stage when I just resented him'. (Female, married, aged 32)

In general the transition to parenthood appeared to be a difficult time for many of the interviewees. The severity and range of these difficulties varied from participants feeling that they had been pushed out or burdened by new responsibilities to feelings of being underappreciated in their role. Lack of sleep compounded these issues by causing additional tension and irritability. However, regardless of the severity of the relationship issues most of the participants reported that they had been, or were, able to put their problems into context and view them as transient issues due to a time of significant change.

Focus group findings

The focus group findings reflected those of the main analysis. The groups frequently mentioned the impact that children had on a relationship during the transition to parenthood.

'You're going to get irritable with each other because you have this baby crying at night and you know you're both going to be tired and neither of you are going to get any sleep and you'll be biting each others heads off'. (Female, aged over 40)

'It just slows down a bit, you can't just go out on a drop of a hat sort of thing you have to sort it out. Obviously when you start having a relationship you normally are like rabbits everywhere sort of thing, kids come along...'. (Male, aged under 40)

The participants also found it difficult to understand the impact of children until they had been born.

'You don't realise until you have them that things will change'. (Female, aged under 40)

'Before having children, I don't think you realise how big a shock children are going to be and how big an effect and it is, luckily you can't back, you can't go well how you know how it was before children, even after they've gone up and left you'll never go back to how it was when you didn't have children'. (Female, aged over 40)

Bringing up children together

Although most viewed that bringing up children was clearly a positive experience on the whole (see Chapter 3), some interviewees described how their children's 'wayward', demanding, or otherwise unacceptable behaviour had impacted upon their relationship. Many participants indicated that it was a challenge to maintain consistency in parenting and that relationship difficulties arose where differences in parenting style were apparent.

'I would say that over the last 19 years, the biggest cause of tension between us has not been anything that we've done between each other; it's been our son that's created the most tension ... We come at my son sometimes from different angles, I'm a bit more authoritarian and she's a bit more liberal with him. We just try and mediate between the two, but I know on occasion she has won the battle, the more liberal approach has won and I've thought that isn't the way, and similarly the other way when I think I've done the right thing'. (Male, married, aged 52)

On occasion relationship issues were perceived to be due to an imbalance in parenting responsibility. The extract below shows how one participant felt that a **lack of consistency in parenting style** and responsibility for discipline had caused friction within her relationship.

'... I mean we back each other up, but there's times when I could scream and I sort of said, 'For god's sake!'. He's absolutely ruined by my husband that one, and he gets away with murder with him, you know, and I'm saying, 'Just tell him, don't let him do it', and I feel like the wicked witch of the north at times, because its only me doing the chastising and he sort of like, giving in to him, but then he'll back me up with other things with him, you know what I mean, so, I do [think] that sometimes when the kids are older you just, it does cause arguments between you'. (Female, married, aged 46)

Tensions around discipline were often heightened when **step-children** were present in a couple's relationship. Participants who were step-parents frequently reported a lack of clarity about how involved they should be in discipline and this resulted in a lack of authority. The data suggested that commitment to a relationship had an impact upon parenting of step children, with those who were deeply committed taking on a more equal role in parenting. In relation to the factors protecting couples through the transition to parenthood noted earlier in this chapter, the quality of the relationship clearly affects the ability to stem the impact of potential difficulties.

Lastly, participants with step children occasionally reported difficulties associated with an awareness that their partner's commitment to their biological child was their primary concern and that the couple's relationship was secondary to this – as reported elsewhere (Pryor, 2001).

'Right well let's say to answer your question, let's say 100% of our arguments that we have, which they're not, but are about her oldest daughter ... Now her eldest daughter is her eldest child which is something that is extremely precious to her and the way she sees it is that if I can't live contentedly with her eldest daughter then you know. It's the biggest disaster in her life you know'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 58)

Focus group findings

The focus group findings reflected those of the main analysis with the participants recognising the importance of compatibility and consistency in parenting style.

'Yes and differences of opinion when you tell them off or..... Any sort of upbringing issues really'. (Female, aged under 40)

- Financial difficulties

The data showed that couples frequently experienced relationship difficulties which they attributed to financial concerns.

'Because if you have got enough money in the bank and everything is paid, it is a lot easier on the relationship. We've really struggled in the past. And it's a lot better now because we've got money. It's just peace of mind'. (Male, married, aged 33)

Some participants reported that significant **shortages of funds**, and difficulties in budgeting had caused severe and ongoing relationship problems while others reported that arguments about finance had been temporary and occurred as a process of negotiating priorities and establishing solutions.

'I mean, like all marriages, especially in those days, I mean, we didn't have any money, so that caused tension because you then have to argue or discuss about what is the best way forward with money'. (Male, married, aged 53)

A few participants experienced difficulties which they attributed to **differences in handling** their finance. These arose when a partner was perceived as too frugal or too extravagant in their spending habits. Some participants reported an insight into the origins of their partner's financial style and on occasions these reflected deeper differences between the couple.

'I think listening to what he's told me in the past, his mother was very thrifty. Well, I've no background to be thrifty with, I mean... I'll go and book something and think nothing about it, and we would just go. He would never do that without planning it all. I mean I am very spontaneous ... He would never do that; he would never think to do that. He never goes and splash out on something, he always looks to see if he could get it a bit cheaper... I try to bite my tongue, I try to bite my tongue... it would be nice to have some surprises'. (Female, married, aged 53)

Control of finance emerged as an issue which had impact upon a relationship. An imbalance of power or control in financial matters occasionally caused relationship dissonance. These issues were sometimes related to gender role expectations, where men were expected to provide a certain level of funding to women, and women were responsible for the management of household bills.

'It's just hard work because if he can't give me [money] some weeks it mucks it all up for me and I'm like, 'Oh my god', I start worrying, I'm a bit of a worrier, big worrier and he doesn't worry about it. 'I give you the money you should sort it out''. (Female, cohabiting, aged 28)

A few of the participants reported the destructive consequences of a partner's compulsion, for example through gambling or perceived pathological spending. Whilst the cause of a compulsion is psychological rather than related to finance, the participants attributed relationship difficulties to the financial implications of their partner's habit. The quote below shows how one couple were working to resolve issues related to excessive spending and the additional tension this had caused through one partner retaining sole control of the finances.

'We go through a time of being fine and then I think things annoy [partner] you know like with money. We've got a very funny relationship, I have no money. I don't have a penny. All my wages go straight to [partner]... It's my account but he's got all the cards and everything... He's kind of held back and that's caused a bit of frustration for me because I'm like, 'Oh everybody has got everything and I don't want to go out if I haven't got nice' –

although my wardrobe is full but you think you haven't got anything and that causes friction with us'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 24)

- **Health and Well-being**

Many participants described how throughout the length of their relationship they and their partner had faced a number of health and well-being concerns. The difficulties were attributed to a number of issues, including physical and mental health and the emotional impacts of illness. These issues were often perceived to have had a considerable impact upon the participants' relationships especially where a condition was severe or chronic and resulted in a need for increased support from a partner.

A key finding was of the impact illness had on people's **emotions and temper**. Interviewees reported that pain made them more irritable and less tolerant of their partner's behaviour. Participants often reported an awareness of the impact of their behaviour and felt guilty and some reported being apologetic to their partner for the changes that illness had produced. Participants were conscious of the detrimental impact on their relationship caused by this change in their behaviour.

'Well obviously it affected it slightly, to the fact that we were bickering, but it wasn't any major rift or row or... it was just a constant chipping away'. (Male, married, aged 50)

Some participants suffering from ill health reported that their partner showed an understanding of the cause of their undesirable behaviour and offered support as a consequence.

'I get moods if I'm in a lot of pain, I know I'm moody... she realises it's the pain and I get a lot of support. I don't think I got so much from my first wife because I don't think she realised how much pain I was in but I mean I'm on 16 painkillers a day most days'. (Male, married, aged 57)

Fear and anxiety around health concerns were common, for partners as well as the individual with the health complaint. Some participants reported that they felt a need to be strong for their partner and others reported that they felt that they did not have sufficient resources to provide support. The extract below shows how a participant's partner responded to the threat of serious illness.

'I went into the hospital to have these ops with my sister and my best friend's support and I just could not get my head around the fact that he could not deal with it. He got so frightened because he lost both his parents through cancer, and I was angry with him that he was not there, very angry... We eventually got talking and he came round and he said he could not handle it'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 44)

Focus group findings

One participant reported how concern for her partner's health had caused arguments.

'He'd got a cyst on his brain and he had to have an operation, and it went on for weeks and weeks before they actually diagnosed him, and we rowed all the time because he wouldn't go to the doctor. That was awful because I kept falling out with him and saying there could be something wrong with you and he'd say don't be stupid and we just seemed to row for like a month... I think he didn't want all the fuss, he was a bit frightened inside and didn't want to let anybody know'. (Female, aged under 40)

- Friends, family and in-laws

Friends, family and in-laws were often viewed as having a significant impact on a couple's relationship. Problems emerged when there were deliberate attempts to disrupt the couple relationship, or more subtle disagreements between friends, family and in-laws and partners where different values emerged.

Controlling or intrusive in-laws were often viewed as being disruptive to a couple's relationship as were financial or time demands made by the family of origin. The literature in this area highlights how the development of a married or cohabiting relationship marks the beginning of the move from family confidantes to the spouse (as in a companionate relationship). Whereas the mother is often viewed as the most enduring of confidantes, the continued use of the mother may also prevent the development of psychological intimacy within the couple relationship (Mansfield and Collard, 1988).

In relation to the above, there was an expectation that partners would gradually relinquish these family confidantes as a relationship developed. One participant, however, reported how the close bond with her family of origin meant that she was less likely to share her thoughts about relationship problems with her partner and that this had caused him to feel jealous and resentful.

'I think for me, I didn't want to talk about it [with partner], because I have this thing about my family, I have this bond. I've got a brother who lives here, and there's five years between us and I am so close to him, that I think sometimes, I won't say [partner] resents him, he likes him, but sometimes he doesn't understand it and that is what I am saying, like, whenever I have ever spoken to my brother, you know, he would hate it'. (Female, married, aged 54)

In some cases there were indications that people outside of a relationship had attempted to cause disruption by making a partner jealous and causing division. One participant reported that his friends had attempted to disrupt his relationship by implying that his partner was having an affair. The participant believed that his friends had acted in this way because they were jealous of his relationship.

'We have had people deliberately trying to split us up. Blatantly...[Partner] does not go out with them anymore... Jealousy that I don't go out with my friends. Jealousy, that their relationship is splitting up and we have got a baby'. (Male, married, aged 25)

Ongoing and close ties with ex-partners, friends and family of origin could result in feelings of jealousy.

'One of the low points I suppose was when the girl I was seeing before her, we were just friends... we remained friends..... [Partner] didn't like the fact that we were still friends, because all of her ex-boyfriends basically once she had finished with them they evaporated, she never saw them again. They were exes, they were history'. (Male, married, aged 30)

Ongoing relationships with friends sometimes caused difficulties because of the frequency a partner socialised alone and because of concern about who a partner might meet whilst out.

'Now, after a while, I was at the stage where I was worried about telling him that I was going out because he used to, 'Where are you going?' His ex went off with somebody else before they split up and I think he related that with me going out doing that'. (Female, cohabiting, age unknown)

Jealousy was also apparent where a partner developed a close relationship with a member of the opposite sex.

'That was quite a bad time for us really because then he met this lady friend but it weren't nothing I even went and seen the girl and she used to phone him and she says, 'He just like talks to me about all his problems' and that was really hard ... I've asked him and I asked her as well, he said it was nothing like an affair it was just somebody he could talk to'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 30)

There was strong evidence that managing ex partners' parenting and contact with biological children could cause difficulties. The extent to which this was understood, and managed by a partner had important implications for the relationship.

'It does cause argument in the one way that as I said if she thinks I ... showed that little bit more loyalty, respect for [former partner] as oppose to her ... My son is an issue... he's made an issue sometimes. Because... when I stay at [former partner's home]... it will be a case of 'Oh'... I say, 'I stayed because my son is there'... and he'll ask me if I'm coming round and I'll say yes... and that causes problems'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 29)

'He [ex-partner's current partner] didn't speak to me at all and I took that in my stride to start with but after a time it became very awkward because he would come to the house and they'd all be closeted together and I'd come home from work and I'd find that they were still there after about an hour, and after a while it grinds you down, it's a very clever way of getting to somebody ... there was this kind of freezing situation in the house'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 58)

• Infidelity

Infidelity, and the fear of a partner's infidelity, were associated with relationship difficulties. Participants whose current relationships had begun as a result of infidelity, or who had previously experienced infidelity were particularly concerned about infidelity. Deeper issues concerning a lack of trust, honesty and communication within a relationship were evident in some of the accounts concerning fear of infidelity.

'... the period when I foolishly thought she was having an affair, but that was just... I don't know where that came from. I think that was the dawning of the realisation that I was backing out of the family environment and concentrating on work'. (Male, married, aged 48)

Infidelity had occurred in a number of the participants' relationships. Explanations for infidelity tended to reflect the suggestion that a long term affair was not the cause of relationship difficulties but a product of a pre existing relationship difficulties. The following example shows how one interviewee explained his infidelity and how the couple were currently working towards repairing and improving their relationship.

'I had an affair and [partner] found out about it and it was crazy really, I don't know why I even had the affair, but it had a massive impact on our relationship, massive, but now we talk if something's bothering us or whatever and we've become a lot more open... Instead of just... saying I really don't like what you've done, but I'll just have to be upset about it and I would have forgotten about it by the morning, if she's done something that upsets me I'll tell her and vice versa, we've agreed to do the same'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 42)

However, another participant reported that his single event infidelity had occurred at a time

when his relationship was strong, *'we were solid, very solid'* and attributed his behaviour purely to intoxication.

'I went to see my brother, I was in a good mood... he had a case of Kronenberg, I drunk it all, plus spirits, whiskeys and all that, so I was like all over the place, and my brother had a word, he did tell me, 'Do you want to do it, don't drink' ... I don't remember after, I just remember whether I was in [her] bed, and she [partner] caught us I know that, and I was shocked you know, I was like shocked you know, I didn't expect she was coming over and I didn't expect myself to be in that position'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 32)

Summary of types of difficulties

Participants presented evidence to suggest that having children could have a significant impact upon a relationship, especially in the initial transition to becoming parents.

Participants were aware of these effects from difficulties experienced during the decision to have children, to difficulties which arose through parenting older children. The severity of the difficulties experienced due to parenting ranged widely. Many participants were able to attribute their relationship difficulties to the added pressures that children brought to a relationship, this was especially apparent during the transition to parenthood. However some problems reflected more significant issues that were intrinsic to the individuals in a relationship, such as different attitudes towards raising children.

Financial issues were associated with relationship difficulties. The reasons for these difficulties varied according to the couple and their financial situation, however the lack of adequate finance was the most frequent cause of relationship difficulties. Arguments about finance quite frequently reflected broader issues between individuals, for example different attitudes, equality and control in the relationship.

Many of the participants reported that the stress of living with illness had a negative impact upon their relationship. Health complaints were observed to affect a person's mood by making them more irritable and less tolerant. These changes were frequently attributed to pain and lack of sleep. An inability to reconcile an individual's need for care or support with personal needs could result in relationship difficulties. Fear about the extent and duration of a health complaint could exacerbate these issues by making a partner feel that they did not have sufficient resource to offer support and that they were unable to cope as a consequence.

Other people's influences on relationships were wide ranging and could result in a considerable pressure on couples by dividing opinions, and loyalties. Families of origin retained a long term influence over some relationships, often impacting on the psychological intimacy between couples. Close relationships with friends and ex-partners were sometimes associated with jealousy in partners and relationship difficulties. A prevalent issue was the difficulty of managing ex-partners' relationships with children when participants had formed new relationships.

Finally, infidelity and the fear of infidelity were associated with underlying issues in a relationship including a lack of trust, honesty and communication. Single episodes of infidelity were viewed separately as different to long-term affairs. Some evidence suggested that infidelity was as a result of pre existing relationship issues rather than the cause of a problem. Actual cases of infidelity caused significant relationship issues but the participants had been able to overcome them.

Focus group findings

The accounts from the focus groups reflected the findings from the analysis, however, in addition to these findings one participant spoke about the long term impact that children could have on a relationship and the importance of maintaining a relationship despite the conflicting demands children place on a couple.

'But if it doesn't evolve, then I think you have a big problem, because I find a lot of my friends, there's very few of us in our age group that remain married... as the children move on, you suddenly realise well who's this person that's been around in the background and what does he do sort of thing and how is he going to fit in... A couple of my brothers are having problems with their relationships, basically because you know their children are now growing up they've led these separate lives and now all of a sudden there's these two individuals that like don't really know each other'. (Female, aged over 40)

2.2.2 Underlying issues

The results so far show how participants frequently associated their relationship difficulties with specific issues or circumstances, for example, their partner's spending habits. Whilst it is important to understand the circumstances in which people experience relationship difficulties it is also important to consider underlying issues which may play a significant role in the development of difficulties. Gutteridge (2003) describes how the 'causes' of relationship difficulties such as those identified in the previous section may not be the real reasons for a couple's relationship problems and merely act as a 'smoke-screen' hiding more fundamental issues within a relationship. The following section presents the two most prevalent underlying themes which emerged: 'control' and 'communication' (others less commonly reported included: threats to values and identity, respect, and insecure start to relationship).

- **Control – finding a balance**

Control in a relationship emerged as a theme across interviews and the instances of difficulties which were identified in 2.3.1.

'A lot of men wouldn't put up with what I'm like... Well the domineering, I organise everything, holidays, when we're going to do stuff in the house. I mean I'll tell him but apart from that I take control of most things and he just sort of goes with the flow. He doesn't very often object. He'll go 'we can't afford it' and I'll go 'yes we can' and he goes 'I thought you said we weren't going to do it this year', I said 'I've changed me mind'. But now he doesn't get angry about it'. (Female, married, aged 41)

Control could be also be used constructively in a relationship whereby an imbalance was not necessarily seen as a cause of relationship problems. For example, people being more aware and accepting of the imbalance of control at the outset of a relationship and regarding this as a positive attribute. Indeed, some participants reported how they negotiated with and used control to maintain and improve their relationship and, when an individual presented a particular strength or weakness, control could be used to assist the couple's relationship. However, when an individual was unhappy with a perceived imbalance of control problems could emerge. Some participants reported their willingness to submit to occasional requests from their partners in order to avoid or resolve conflict.

'I think how naïve I was. How I didn't see things. And perhaps I make the same mistake

now. I don't see things perhaps. In some things I can stand up for myself, in what I want, and then in other things, I mean we are having our kitchen done and I can say I want this and this, but [current partner] can be quite strong and says 'Oh no that wouldn't look good there', and sometimes I just think, 'Oh I can't be bothered'. But like I am strong in some ways, and then very weak in other ways. Giving in for a quiet life I suppose'. (Female, married, aged 51)

'No as I said earlier, we haven't really had any big arguments. I think we had one and it was, I think someone asked me out for a beer and she didn't want me to, one of those big slanging matches and she went out, slammed the door, picked the kids up from school and it was sorted out ten minutes after she came home. I stayed in and did as I was told'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 38)

The data suggest that issues arose when an individual's established role was challenged. For example, one female reported that she was dominant and controlling in her relationship and that her husband was happy with this situation. However, when this participant's husband had tried to place restrictions on one of her friendships she found this unacceptable and the couple had separated for six months. Alternatively one participant reported how he found his partner to be too submissive and wanted her to stand up for herself more frequently.

Case study 1 shows how one participant recognised and explained his need to exert a significant degree of control within his relationship.

Case study 1

Adam is a married man in his late 20s. Neither he or his partner have any children. Adam and his wife met through mutual friends, though they had known of each other when they were at school. Prior to his current relationship with his wife Adam had a couple of relationships that he felt were serious. Adam's wife hadn't had any other serious relationships.

According to Adam, his parents separated when he was young because his mother was having an affair. Adam found out about his mother's infidelity and told his father at which point Adam's mother left the marital home. He felt rejected by his mother and describes this time as 'traumatic'.

Adam described how he 'tests' his partner to make sure that she is loyal and loves him, and how he seeks to control how decisions are made in the relationship. Adam believes that he does this because of the lack of security and control he had in his earlier life.

Adam highly valued the knowledge that his partner had not had any other serious relationships because he felt that this meant she could not compare him with anybody else. He felt that this gives him the security to be able to make mistakes.

'I know that if we have an argument and again it's a nasty thing to say, she feels that that we must be normal because that's how relationships are. We get on well and we have a good relationship, we very rarely argue but in my job it gets sometimes stressful and I do take it out on her, but I know that she forgives me all the time because she accepts that, and no matter how many arguments we have or no matter how much trouble I get into, she's always there for me whereas like I say my mum and dad just aren't... Again, it's a nasty thing to say and I know that in a way I probably play mind games with her, in the fact that I'm testing her to make sure that she is there. Sometimes I'll go out looking for an argument and I know that there's no reason for us to argue, I know there's a totally reasonable explanation for things or whatever, we'll argue and I'll probably bring up that argument ... I think that's where my thing comes from, that I was never a centre of attention with my parents and that's why I want to be the centre of attention in life, and with her'.

- ## Communication

Communication emerged as the second main underlying theme throughout the interviews. Within the data there was a theme concerning the destructive nature of a lack of communication or 'silence' within a relationship. Some participants reported a low level of communication on a day-to-day basis.

'I mean we can sit here, perhaps we'll sit here in the evening when he's in sort of thing, because he works at this pub and he's working tonight you see, he's there until they close so he's not home 'til late, and we'll watch the telly or we'll read or something, sometimes we talk if something has happened in the day, but a lot of times we'll just watch the telly and then we'll say 'well what do you think of that', 'well not much' or whatever'. (Female, married, aged 66)

A few of the participants reported a wish to know more about their partner's day-to-day life and that they found it very important that their partner told them what they would be doing in advance, for example that their partner should make sure to let them know what time they would be back in the evening. These issues were generally viewed as minor, however a long term lack of communication was the cause of more severe problems. Case study 2 shows one participant's experience of poor communication in a relationship.

Case study 2

Jane is a married female in her mid fifties. She and her husband have one son together and neither have any children with previous partners. Jane reported that the couple had frequent arguments which had started before they got married. Jane described a cycle of arguments and withdrawal in her relationship and described how she would sometimes return to her former home when things were too difficult.

Jane reported that she and her partner had experienced relationship difficulties when she had suffered from a miscarriage. Jane felt unable to share this experience with her partner.

'I think like I became quite cold, insular'.

Jane feels that she has always been the one to initiate conversations about relationship difficulties and she is frustrated by this.

'I would always have to approach the subject to say that things are really low. I tend to bring it round to saying like, 'we don't do many things together any more' type of thing. And he'd always feel the same way. It's not like he'd turn around and say I don't know what you are talking about, he would know'.

Recently Jane was hurt when she discovered her husband had discussed their sex life with her sister. Since this Jane has been unwilling to make the repair attempts which she previously initiated. The couple have not communicated constructively about this issue and their sexual relationship has suffered.

'I suppose you let it slip and the longer it slips the harder it is. And I am not saying he doesn't want to, but he doesn't say anything, and I don't either, and I have got like now that there are times when I have thought I'd like just to go to bed, but I just won't make that move. I just won't... I just... I feel let down. I was really angry. And I often feel like... he is afraid to make a move, in case I am not interested... because we have drifted so far apart'.

Lack of communication was associated with a build-up of resentment and dissatisfaction and this sometimes resulted in confrontation. The extract below describes a participant's frustration at her husbands' inability to argue.

'I do get angry at times, I go quiet, I go off and do something. I know it's not going to happen. There's not going to be a row, there's not going to be a discussion. I have to wait, I've learnt now you wait, if you bring it up again later on, you try again different approach, and at the end if it doesn't work, then I will say [partner] I need to talk about this. We need to clear the air on this one, and then we'll start the discussion'. (Female, married, aged 44)

A chronic lack of communication was observed to cause significant relationship damage. The following quote illustrates some of the consequences of poor communication, where the couple became less close and trust and security were eroded.

'Lack of talking I think, communication. I shut down... I must admit we went through a phase of each doing our own thing. [Partner] and the girls left me very much to it ... I got so engrossed of what was going on at work because there was a load of redundancies going on... We were growing closer as a family at work and less at home ... I was convinced at one stage that [partner] was having an affair... It was this one guy's name kept cropping up... I think it was jealousy more than anything else. This guy had got time to talk to [partner] whereas I hadn't'. (Male, married, aged 48)

A pattern of confrontation and withdrawal was apparent in some of the participants' narratives. This cycle of behaviour was damaging and was incompatible with the resolution of relationship problems. The quote below shows how one participant describes this process occurring in her relationship when attempting to discuss marriage.

'... he will try and ... ignore the conversation, change the subject and I thought 'forget it'... He wouldn't say 'absolutely not'. He doesn't want to yet ... He just thinks it is funny, he just starts laughing ... He just annoys me sometimes. He won't even talk about it but yet he will sit there, and my sister is going on about her fiancé and all their arrangements, and have all in depth conversations with them. So I just think ... I can't be bothered ... He ignores me ... sometimes he does wind me up, it is like he doesn't take any notice at all'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 26)

Other patterns of unhelpful or even disdainful communication were evident within some of the accounts. One interviewee reported how he believed his partner manipulated discussions to fuel his anger.

'She just says, 'Oh shut up'... and she just carries on, it's water off a duck's back with her and she's got, I'll tell you what she has got a knack of but she really gets to me, she winds me up by, if I say something – you see, some people are loud, some people are timid, some people have got all different things, I'm very positive what I say and the biggest thing [partner's] got critical of me is that I'm a perfectionist, and when you don't do what I want you to do, I lose my rag, she goes 'you want them to be perfect like you and they're not'.' (Male, cohabiting, aged 51)

Focus group findings

Findings from the focus groups reflected the importance participants placed on communicating well in a relationship and the detrimental impacts that poor communication could have. The extract below shows how one focus group member felt that if communication had broken down in a relationship there was no reason for the relationship to continue.

'It's when communication breaks down, whether it is silence or shouting. It's when communication totally breaks down and you think there's no point, there is no point in continuing it after that'. (Female, aged over 40)

Summary of underlying issues

Control and communication emerged as the two main themes underlying the relationship difficulties reported by participants.

Control could be used constructively in a relationship. Some participants reported how they negotiated with and used control to maintain and improve their relationships when, for example, a greater competency was required in certain situations. Some also reported their willingness to submit to occasional controlling behaviour from their partners in order to avoid or resolve conflict. However, tensions arose when an individual was unhappy with a perceived imbalance of control. A few of the participants reported how their attitudes towards the balance of control in their relationship had changed over time and that relationship problems had emerged when an individual's established role was challenged.

Poor communication was an important and pervasive factor which could both cause relationship problems and exacerbate pre-existing issues. Participants reported that poor communication meant that relationship issues were not resolved and could escalate in severity. This in turn could cause a couple to lose a sense of closeness and trust with their partner and was indicative of relationship erosion. Poor communication (in terms of frequency or quality) could be contributing to a poor understanding of the partner's life/issues and concerns and misattributions about their motives as a result. This echoes pan-European data (Eurostat, 1995) whereby, aside to domestic violence, the main reason reported for divorce was there being 'no longer any communication between the partners'. Interestingly, relative to the 11 other European nations surveyed, the UK response of 68% citing this breakdown in communication was second only to that reported in France.

2.2.3 Consequences of relationship difficulties

The difficulties described in the previous two sections had consequences for the participants' relationships. Some couples reported negative impacts such as increased emotional distance and separation whilst others reported positive impacts through learning about their relationship. The key consequences of relationship difficulties reported by participants are detailed in the following section.

- **Increasing emotional distance**

Relationship difficulties frequently led to participants feeling further apart from their partner and being generally less satisfied with their relationship.

'... as soon as he got back into that bedroom, he just closed down. I could see it and I used to think, 'He was a different person out there''. (Female, married, aged 51)

A reduction in closeness was frequently associated with coping with particularly stressful situations like the death of a parent, problems at work or health issues.

'I suppose when [partner's father] died, I mean I did feel a bit distant because he was just so upset really... He didn't want me to handle it, he just wanted to be left alone and things like that you know ... Well your barriers come up a bit don't they?'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 45)

Issues such as spending less time together, poor communication and a loss of romance were also associated with increased emotional distance.

'About two months ago me and him went through a rocky patch just the fact that we just

getting on with life, I started a job, he was working constantly... We just weren't really seeing each other and it come to a big argument, a big blow, where he's like, 'Do you love me?', we just seemed to be drifting apart, and it was quite a sad sort of time for us'.
(Female, cohabiting, aged 28)

- **Thoughts of leaving and separation**

Many of the participants reported that they had at times thought about ending their relationship.

'And I was getting to the point where I was so frustrated and so was he and we were saying quite horrible things to each other, like I am going to leave you and you know, and all of a sudden he was sitting down and he just burst into tears and he was like, I can't do it anymore'. (Female, married, aged 23)

Most of the participants who reported thoughts of separation revealed that this had been a transient feeling and quite frequently it had been in response to a stressful life situation rather than the relationship itself.

'It was after my dad died. And I was taking it out on him, and I asked him to leave because I didn't want him here ... No, I think it was just me and the fact that I was throwing myself into going out all the time and everything. And I suppose the less time I spent with [partner] the more I thought I could do without him, and I asked him to leave and said I just wanted to be on my own with my children. But I didn't really mean it. I didn't mean it deep down. It was just my anger'. (Female, married, aged 25)

Some participants reported that threats to leave were often unconsidered and made in the heat of an argument to emphasise the level of distress they were experiencing and were an attempt to initiate reconciliation. This illustrates the importance of distinguishing between threats as momentary provocation in order to get a reaction from the partner, or an actual display of disengagement.

'We had a big argument, and I left. Expecting him to come after me, and he didn't'.
(Female, married, aged 36)

The following example illustrates how a threat to end a relationship provoked discussion and an opportunity to make changes and improve things.

'It was something so trivial, I think it was the vacuuming I asked him to do something and he [said], 'I'll leave it 'til later' well his, 'Leave it 'til later' don't get done at all so I said, 'Right I've had enough' started crying, ran upstairs, got the suitcase out and he come up and he apologised, just said um he's been having hard times at work and he's really tired and this and that, but he will start helping me. And he did and he's never stopped'.
(Female, married, aged 38)

Some of the participants' accounts exposed more serious threats to their relationship including emotional detachment from a partner. These participants felt that they were no longer close to their partner and had no desire to be so. This was reflected through behaviours reported by the participants from spending more time without their partner to complete separation. Participants who had emotionally detached from their partners indicated that their relationship difficulties were not resolvable and that they had become self sufficient.

'I don't want to be hurt again. I don't feel I need her affection. I am now quite self-

sufficient. I don't feel I need to be with her.' (Male, married, aged 30)

Finally, one participant reported that he was in a very unhappy relationship which he felt should be terminated but revealed a continuing sense of duty or care towards his partner.

'I want to see her happy but, if she's not happy I'm not happy, but I can't see how either of us can make each other happy because our worlds are like that you know, totally separate ways, so it would be better if she met someone'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 50)

- **Becoming closer**

Many of the participants reported that their relationship had become stronger as a result of working through relationship difficulties. Participants reported increased depth and commitment in their relationship as a result of overcoming difficulties.

'I don't think that anything else could come close to what I done to our relationship, because it is what I done to our relationship when my dad died. It was me that pushed him away and took it out on him and that ... I couldn't see our relationship getting any worse than it had done. We are actually brilliant. I am really happy with my life and my relationship and the home and the children'. (Female, married, aged 25)

A further example shows how the difficulties associated with raising a child with physical disabilities had caused a couple's relationship to strengthen.

'Its pulled us definitely together, because you've got so much history with each other that you just... you know, there's no... There would be no benefit in splitting up. You hear couples saying, 'Oh this is boring' or whatever, we think, 'Wow, we've got four kids and they are all alive and we've got each other'. We are happy and why spoil that'. (Female, married, aged 37)

Whilst it is important to note that these findings are based on a data set which does not take into account those for whom relationship difficulties may have contributed to the end of their relationship it is apparent that for some, the process of working through a relationship problem can result in a stronger relationship.

Summary of consequences of relationship difficulties

A proportion of the participants reported that at some point during their relationship they had considered leaving their partner. Threats to leave a relationship were most frequently used to indicate dissatisfaction and to provoke a response and were rarely fully formed intentions. However it is important to avoid generalisations upon this finding through remembering that this research is based upon only those who have remained in their relationship and cannot consider those for whom threats to leave may have precipitated the end of a relationship.

A more serious threat to relationship endurance was the emotional detachment of a partner as a response to relationship difficulties. In these cases difficulties had been left unaddressed, partners had begun to spend less time together and had disengaged. Participants who had disengaged felt that their relationship could not be repaired.

In contrast to these negative findings, the data suggested that some participants had strengthened their relationship with their partner through successfully overcoming their difficulties.

2.2.4 Variation by gender

During the analysis any significant trends in the data which related to gender were recorded. Key variations included:

- Female participants disclosed more detail about their life with their partner during the interview.
- Females reported that they had a higher awareness of the difficulties in their relationship than their partner did.

'Yes. I find that so frustrating. I know there's a problem because I can instinctively feel there's a problem and he'll say no, there's nothing wrong'. (Focus Group Female, aged over 40)

- Females spoke more frequently about the cause of difficulty within their relationship.
- Females were more likely to report concerns over the level of their partner's independent social activity.
- Females reported that they talked more openly about the couple's relationship issues than their partner did, both to their partner and others outside the relationship.
- Females were more likely to report that they had sometimes doubted the future of their relationship.
- Males often felt rejected after the birth of a child.

'I agree with what he has just said but the woman tends to spend more time looking after the child and doesn't seem to spend much time with you and that can strain a relationship'. (Focus Group Male, aged over 40)

- Females were more likely to feel undervalued in their role in the partnership after the birth of a child and more conflict due to the division of household labour in the relationship. This relates to the earlier described 'vicious cycle', whereby feelings of being unsupported lead some women to be more critical of their partners which in turn leads to men being less satisfied with their relationships and then disengaging from child and family life (One Plus One, 2006).

'And its sort of like a half hearted it's not really you know if I was to send him to Sainsbury's oh God my food bill would be like'. (Focus Group Female, aged over 40)

'I think they do it on purpose really'. (Focus Group Female, aged over 40)

- Males were more likely to report that issues relating to finance and sex had caused conflict within their relationship.
- Males were more likely to report worries and uncertainty about making a commitment and losing their freedom.

'... you bump into someone who is young free and single and you go out for a beer and it is like I am missing this but then you think are you missing it? That sometimes goes against the grain'. (Focus Group Male, aged under 40)

2.3 Discussion

Interviewees reported a wide range of life events which had caused relationship strain and discussed the impacts of these difficulties. These tensions were attributed to the process of becoming parents and raising children together; financial concerns; the influence of friends and family; and health and well-being issues. The extent to which these issues impacted on a couple's relationship was moderated by two underlying issues which emerged from the data – control and communication within the relationship. Difficulties were shown to impact on a relationship in a number of ways from a reduced emotional attachment and thoughts of separation to increased relationship satisfaction as a result of working through problems together.

Note here that these perceptions of relationship change, for better or worse, were derived from individuals rather than both members of the couple. Also, it is important to remember that this research is based upon evidence from people's current relationships and this introduces a bias into the research – the participants who reported actual problems through the transition to parenthood, financial concerns, infidelity, etc. are also those for whom the difficulties had not resulted in the termination of the relationship.

Although the results are presented as distinct themes it is important to recognise that there was a high level of interaction between the issues reported. For example, the transition to parenthood was often a time of financial strain. The following quote provides an example of the interaction between finance, the transition to parenthood and time spent together.

'No it was just the, I was getting more tired. I was doing overtime, but I was doing overtime because of the baby, I had to so I had more money. To afford a, to rent a flat in [place] which was seven hundred and fifty pound a month and then on top you have got the baby and her, and you think she was at home all day so the cupboards were getting emptier and emptier because she was eating more. The cupboards were getting empty quicker. So she was accusing me, or suspecting me of seeing other people. That was hard but we got over that'. (Male, married, aged 25)

Whilst the findings of the chapter are important in their own respect it is imperative to recognise that many of the findings are supported by established knowledge in the field. As an example, longitudinal research conducted in the USA (Lawrence et al., 2008) has shown that high pre pregnancy relationship satisfaction, and a planned rather than an unplanned pregnancy, affects the extent of relationship strain during the transition to parenthood. Similarly findings from this chapter concerning communication between couples reflect Gottman and Silver's (1999) description of the 'four horsemen of the apocalypse', an analogy of a destructive pattern of communication which includes criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling and can lead to a lack of closeness.

The interviews provide a valuable insight into currently functioning relationships. However, it is important to remember that this is a 'snap shot' of a moment in time. To fully understand how relationships work it is important to view them as a process. Karney and Bradbury (1995) highlight the merits of longitudinal research in studying relationships to assess how relationship quality and stability changes over time. To do this they performed a meta-analysis of theoretical perspectives of relationships and evaluated the results from 115 longitudinal relationship studies which represented over 45,000 marriages. Through this analysis they developed the 'Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation Model of Marriage' which represents how they consider marriages to develop and change through time. This model provides a framework which can be used to consider the findings from the chapter.

The 'Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation Model of Marriage' (Karney and Bradbury, 1995) identifies the interaction between 'stressful events', 'enduring vulnerabilities' and 'adaptive

processes' in affecting marital quality and, ultimately, marital stability. 'Stressful events' concerned events such as those identified by this chapter. The model explains how couples are able to adapt to these events by showing how the link between stressors and marital outcomes are mediated. The model shows how the difficulties which a couple face are only one of the factors which play a part in the outcome of a relationship and the way that couples deal with conflict is more important than the conflict itself (Markman et al., 1994).

Karney and Bradbury (1995) summarise their model as follows:

'.....a model of marital development was outlined that integrates three broad classes of variables that emerged from our review of the data and seem essential for understanding marital development: the stressful events that couples encounter, the enduring vulnerabilities that spouses bring to the marriage, and the adaptive processes through which couples contend with difficult circumstances. Briefly the model holds that married couples must adapt to a variety of stressful events and circumstances that they encounter over the course of their lives. The capacity of a couple to adapt depends on the degree of stress they experience and the enduring vulnerabilities that each spouse brings to the marriage. Couples' accumulated experiences with adaptive processes gradually influence their perceptions of their marital quality, which ultimately contribute to the stability of the marriage'. (Karney and Bradbury, 1995, p.26)

These findings are also supported through more recent work from Bradbury and Karney (2004) who define marital outcomes as governed by '*interactional processes, individual strengths and vulnerabilities, and stressful events and contexts*' (p. 876). Further reference to the important work of Bradbury and Karney is cited in Chapter 4.

Of particular importance to this chapter is a recognition that the way in which a person understands or attributes a partner's behaviour or a relationship difficulty has a bearing on the conflict in their relationship. Robust evidence suggests that the way a person makes attributions is associated with relationship satisfaction (Fincham et al. 2000). For example, if a partner arrives home late different attributions are possible from external ('he must be stuck in traffic') to internal ('he just doesn't care'). The second of these two interpretations apportions blame on the partner whilst the first avoids doing so and could in this case lead to less resentment and a decreased likelihood of conflict as a result of tardiness.

To illustrate the relevance of attribution theory to the understanding of relationship outcomes, Fincham et al. (2000) studied 130 US couples who had wed in the previous 15-20 months. Participants indicated the quality of their relationship using the Quality of Marriage Index (Norton, 1983); the attributions they would make for a series of negative behaviours common to almost all marriages (using the Relationship Attribution Measure - Fincham and Bradbury, 1992); and the extent to which they felt it was possible to resolve conflicts with their partner (using an unpublished scale developed by Bradbury, 1989). The results of the study showed that causal attributions (the way in which a person understood and explained their partner's negative behaviour) were related to marital satisfaction over time and that this relationship was bi-directional. The results also showed that efficacy expectations (the extent to which a person felt that it was possible for them to resolve relationship conflict) mediated the relationship between attributions and satisfaction.

In summary, the chapter provides a useful insight into the nature of conflicts which occur in relationships and the times at which they are most likely to occur. However, the way a couple deals with these conflicts and difficulties is recognised as being more important than the difficulty itself (Reynolds et al., 2001; Cummings et al., 2008). In addition, the way in which people understand their partner's behaviour and the extent to which they feel able to resolve conflict have a significant bearing on the development of relationship problems and its long-term stability. Communication plays a key role here as it helps people understand

their partner and so when communication breaks down the capacity for understanding also declines.

Chapter 3. Factors that help relationships to endure

3.1 Introduction

Relationships are fluid, changeable and may go through many different stages (Kovacs, 1988). These stages have been associated with different levels of relationship satisfaction from the highs of a new romance to the difficulties associated with establishing independence within a relationship. This chapter explores the factors which participants valued in their relationships and felt helped their relationship to endure. All of the participants were in long-term relationships at the time of interview (a minimum of three years) and therefore the data set provides a valuable opportunity to explore ongoing relationships, many of which had endured through periods of significant relationship strain.

3.2 Results

Participants' responses to questions about what made relationships endure were connected with satisfaction within a relationship. Several participants indicated that where satisfaction with a relationship was very low the relationship should cease. However, as noted previously these participants were all in long-term relationships and many of these relationships had endured through very difficult times with their partner.

Because of the close link between relationship satisfaction and the perceptions of enduring relationships, the majority of the findings were in relation to the positive aspects of relationships (e.g. being close) rather than the underlying factors that were seen to maintain perhaps less satisfactory relationships (e.g. structural barriers relating to financial dependence, moral obligation, etc. – see 3.3.2 Discussion section for further detail).

The results are organised in two sections as follows:

What makes a relationship endure?

The first section covers the general principles which participants reported would make any relationship 'work' or endure.

What makes *my* relationship endure?

This second section includes the participants' data about the positive or strengthening aspects of their own relationships and includes:

1. Most valued aspects of relationships
2. Relationship strengtheners
3. Positive changes over time

Each section includes a summary of the key findings.

It is important to remember that there is a great deal of crossover between the sections and the themes presented. However, the structure of the results is designed to convey a sense of the different ways in which participants discussed what made their relationship endure.

3.2.1 What makes a relationship endure?

Compatibility - 'the right person'

'Human nature is human nature, you're either meant to be with somebody or you're not. No matter how much help those individuals are given if they're the wrong X and Y they're not going to get along'. (Male, married, aged 42)

A theme concerning the choice of 'the right partner' emerged from the data. Participants believed that for a relationship to be a success the people involved had to be a good 'match'.

'They're just not meant for each other I don't think'. (Male, married, aged 57)

The compatibility of two people was perceived to be due to personality and shared expectations. Where the 'right' person had been found, partners would share similar aims and values.

'Yeah I mean because of, if the personalities hadn't have matched it would have been a waste of time... it's no good at all if you don't, not on the same sort of wavelength so'. (Male, married, aged 42)

'... if you want different things then things are not going to work'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 38)

Being incompatible with a partner was viewed as an insurmountable problem. Participants believed that relationship support would not be able to improve or sustain a relationship if the couple were not right for each other.

'I think you've got to have some sort of common ground otherwise you're literally on a losing battle and I think they just kept trying to work at it and it just wasn't happening, so, yes I do think you've got to have some sort of bonding to start with...I think that they probably weren't right together to start with'. (Female, married, aged 30)

However, and in direct relation to the following section, being compatible with a partner was not viewed as the sole criterion for a successful relationship. Participants reported that being with the right person was not enough and that efforts to maintain and develop a relationship were required in order for it to endure.

'I think it comes down to being with the right person and the right ... and working at things ... if you've got the sort of the raw material as it were, I think then you're fine but it's you know, I know that a couple of my, especially the friends that got divorced, I think it's almost, it was inevitable that it wasn't going to work from the start...'. (Female, married, aged 30)

Relationship work

'You've got to make sure there's a bond, you know, try and work at it yourself, with children or without, you know, make the effort, a lot of effort needs to be made and it is hard work, it is quite a full time job to keep your relationship going, I just think you've got to make the effort'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 28)

Despite placing importance on being in a relationship with 'the right person' the participants

reported that it was necessary to put work into a relationship. Willingness to make an effort to maintain and improve a relationship was identified by interviewees as an important influence on the outcome of a relationship.

'I don't think it's like true love from start to finish why it does work, because they [interviewee's parents] have a principle and they believe in it and stick at it and work at it. That's why I think that one has worked'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 29)

'You've got to go in and do your best and hope everything comes out right'. (Male, married, aged 57)

'...to make them work, there has got to be a compromise...You have just got to work at it'. (Male, married, aged 50)

Some of the participants reported that in order for a relationship to endure people needed to successfully manage the changes which occurred in it over time (both in terms of individuals and circumstances). Participants were particularly aware of this need in the early stages of a relationship.

'...There's always that initial burst of passion and romance and all that but that soon fades. You could not sustain that for fifteen/twenty years, you just couldn't do it, it would physically wear you out for a start. As long as it's replaced with genuine love, affection and togetherness'. (Male, married, aged 42)

Participants reported that relationship problems needed to be identified and addressed in their early stages in order to avoid significant damage or erosion within a relationship. Some participants acknowledged that this process was sometimes difficult and could cause friction in a relationship but that it prevented more serious long term problems from developing.

'... Whether it's something that's negative and it's not going to be received very well, you've still got to go ahead and do it, because a little bit of stress at the beginning which you can sit down and sort out is better than saying nothing, which ends up with more stress at the end of it, which can be more long term damaging really'. (Male, married, aged 38)

Some participants reported that it was important for people to retain an awareness of their personal needs within a relationship and to avoid compromising themselves in the context of relationship work.

'You have to give and take but you also have to stand firmly for what you believe in and make allowances for changes and you have to consider other people's feelings and their beliefs in whatever decisions you make and ... and that's my main thing. I'm not going to do anything that I'm terribly unhappy with but at the same time it's a two-way thing'. (Female, married, aged 36)

One participant revealed a loss of respect for her partner who had attempted to suppress his own needs in order to become more compatible with her.

'... we're very, very different people and I, he's changed an awful lot of his, the way he is. It's ridiculous but the kind of food he eats, everything. He's changed an awful lot of his life to be more in keeping with me, but I don't think you can sustain it for that long'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 37)

Focus group findings

Some members of the focus groups focused on the need to compromise and think about the needs of the other person in the relationship.

'There has got to be give and take hasn't there. You can't say I am going to marry you but I am going to stay the same as I am, do what I want and that is then destined to fail straight away'. (Male, aged over 40)

Some of the members of the over 40s focus groups discussed how they felt attitudes towards relationships had changed over the last few decades.

'I think relationships now... I think people fall in and out of a relationship, they see it as very disposable'. (Male, aged over 40)

Communication

'If you haven't got the communication there, I don't think you've got much'.
(Female, married, aged 32)

Communication was frequently mentioned by participants as an important factor which could both improve a relationship or lead to its deterioration. This finding is reflected in both Chapters 2 and 4 (also see Eurostat, 1995, in Chapter 2).

'Just breakdown in communication I suppose, can be very harmful'. (Female, married, aged 30)

Participants reported that good communication was a vital component for a good relationship and had a significant bearing on other factors which contributed to the quality of a relationship. Participants believed that it was important for individuals to convey the trust, love and care they felt towards their partners.

'As I say, communication between the two people, that there is the love there, the understanding there, the commitment there, the sharing of mundane things as well, I think that's very important in a relationship'. (Female, married, age unknown)

Participants believed that the development of trust between two people was intrinsically linked with the ability to communicate well.

'Well if they communicate, if the communication is right the trust will be there, the trust will follow but if you don't communicate with each other...' (Female, married, aged 53)

Strong communication between a couple was viewed as an effective means of addressing relationship difficulties. As shown in the previous section, *'Relationship Work'*, participants felt that addressing relationship problems in their earliest stages was a very important factor which helped relationships endure.

'If something's bothering one of you it could cause a problem between the two of you so you've got to be open, so if there is a problem then the other person knows, rather than bubbling it up inside'. (Female, married, aged 25)

Focus group findings

The focus groups felt that communication was vital for an enduring relationship.

One focus group member stressed the importance of communicating well from an early stage in the relationship to ensure that the partners had similar attitudes and expectations.

*'The only thing, if you go into a relationship and leave it a long time before you discuss things, I think that can sometimes cause problems, if you are not going to want the same things'.
(Female, aged under 40)*

Trust

'You can't build anything on a relationship that has no trust, that's definitely the foundation of anything. You can't both grow as individuals without trust, you can't grow as a unit. Nothing can be done without trust'. (Male, married, aged 29)

Trust, honesty and fidelity were frequently mentioned as vital components within an enduring relationship. Having trust with a partner allowed people to feel 'safe' within a relationship and facilitated the sharing of lives, and the development of a couple's commitment to each other.

*'It's trust, I put it all down to trust I think you've got to know the person and trust them'.
(Female, cohabiting, aged 45)*

Participants reported that trust was developed through good communication within a relationship and emphasised the importance of being open and honest with a partner.

*'I think our relationship is honest and ... for a long time we went through the stage, both of us were we didn't feel that we were both being honest with each other and we weren't trusting each other or anything ... trust and honesty and just being open with each other'.
(Female, cohabiting, age unknown)*

For most of the interviewees fidelity was reported as being closely aligned with trust. A partner's infidelity would cause trust to be lost. Many of the participants reported that infidelity would be such a breach of trust that the relationship damage it caused would be irreparable and the relationship would not survive.

'I can't imagine anything that would make me want to leave it. Erm ... Unless it was infidelity on his part, which I can't imagine, but if it was, I would find that very hard to cope with ... I mean by very nature of the fact that if it happened, it would involve lying and lots of other things as well, and that would ... you couldn't ever regain what we have now, so, I think that is the only thing that I can think of'. (Female, married, aged 55)

Despite the prevalence of this belief a few of the participants who had experienced infidelity in their current relationship reported how they had managed to recover trust and repair the damaged relationship.

Some of the participants felt that infidelity was a symptom of a problem in a relationship rather than a cause and one participant reported that an incidence of infidelity would expose relationship issues and provide an opportunity to address them and develop the relationship.

'To be honest with you, if [partner] went off and had an affair, it wouldn't bother me one jot because, maybe it would, I think I love her more than that would matter. I'd know that there was a reason for having done that and I'd like to discuss the reason'. (Male, married, aged 48)

Focus group findings

The focus group findings reflected those of the main analysis. Participants emphasised the importance of trust and working with a partner to develop this over time.

'Yeah I think trust is something that you have to work on. It is there at the beginning and then the level increases as time goes on'. (Male, aged over 40)

Summary of what makes a relationship endure

The participants discussed the general principles which they felt were important to make any relationship work. Whilst the participants discussed numerous principles the most frequently reported factors were; being in a relationship with the 'right person', putting work into a relationship, communicating well and having trust in a partner.

Participants conveyed the understanding that a relationship would only work where, 'the right person' had been found as a partner. Being with the 'right person' conveyed compatibility of personality, shared expectations and similar aims and values. Some of the participants talked about how it was inevitable that some people's relationships would fail because they *'weren't right together to start with'*. The participants reported that no amount of relationship work could keep two incompatible people together.

Being in a relationship with a compatible partner was not enough to sustain a relationship, putting work into a relationship was viewed as essential. This was especially true in the early stages of a relationship when the excitement and romance associated with a new relationship was observed to decline. Participants reported that it was important for individuals to retain an awareness of their personal needs within a relationship and to avoid compromising these during relationship work. The participants felt that it was important for couples to address relationship problems at an early stage and emphasised the need for good communication to help this happen.

Good communication was viewed as essential in a relationship, and not solely because it facilitated the resolution of issues. Good communication between a couple facilitated the expression of positive regard and could convey feelings of love, trust and care. Poor communication in a relationship was viewed as very damaging to a relationship.

Finally, having trust in a partner was viewed as an vital factor which helped relationships endure. Trust was intrinsically linked with the ability to communicate well with a partner by being open and honest. Trust in a partner was related to a sense of security in the relationship. Participants frequently associated trust with fidelity. Infidelity was often viewed as a huge breach of trust in a relationship which would cause irreparable relationship damage.

3.2.2 What makes *my* relationship endure?

This section presents findings concerned with why participants felt their relationships worked and endured. The results are presented in three sections which are:

1. Most valued aspects of my relationship
2. Relationship strengtheners
3. Positive changes over time

Each section concludes with a summary of the key findings.

1. Most valued aspects of my relationship

Closeness

‘All my friends say they’ve never ever met two people that are so close in a relationship, and who get on so well, because we constantly laugh and make each other laugh, you know the sex life’s good, he’s my good friend, I trust him with all my heart, everything’. (Female, married, aged 28)

People highly valued feeling close with their partner.

‘When you know you’ve got a great relationship with somebody, you think the same ... she said to me last night, ‘Do you know, I’ve got a headache’, I said ‘Do you know, I was just going to get some Anadin’, we do that quite a lot’. (Male, cohabiting, aged 51)

A part of being close with a partner involved ‘knowing’ or ‘understanding’ them deeply and being similarly known and understood.

‘... they know everything about you, and you know everything about them, and it is just an honest, open, it’s a lovely way to be’. (Female, married, aged 55)

‘He’s more of a partner than anybody has ever been to me. He knows far more about me than anybody else has ever known’. (Female, cohabiting, aged 56)

Sharing a friendship with a partner was also reported as an aspect of closeness. Friendship was not necessarily part of a couple’s relationship but viewed as beneficial to its endurance.

‘We are like friends as well. He’s my best friend and I am his. Which is really nice’. (Female, married, aged 25)

Participants frequently talked about the importance of sharing a sense of humour with their partner. Being able to laugh together at the same things was viewed as a shared connection and demonstrated a strong bond within a couple.

‘To have good sense of humours. I like a girl that I can have a good laugh with. I’m not a looks person, I’ve never looked at somebody physically and said ‘I’ll ask her out because she’s really good looking’ but if I speak to them and I can connect and they make me laugh and they laugh at my jokes, which can be terrible, then it all helps’. (Male, married, aged 42)

‘He has got a real dry sense of humour as well which I find funny, just things like that. You have got to have a laugh, I would die of boredom if I just had someone straight laced sitting there’. (Female, cohabiting, aged 26)

Participants also reported that closeness to their partner was facilitated by shared interests and spending time together. Similar interests gave participants a feeling of ‘common ground’

with their partner. A few participants reported feeling valued more as a result, by being not only a partner but someone who enjoys the same things as they do.

'Absolutely magic. We share all the same interests. We laugh and joke about the same things. We have a delightful time'. (Male, married, aged 56)

'... he will make a lot of effort to make sure that he does spend time with us. He doesn't have to be doing anything particularly exciting, but he makes sure that we don't feel that we are being forgotten'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 44)

Finding activities which both partners enjoyed equally was important to some participants and provided an enjoyable shared experience. The quote below shows how one couple negotiated a solution to different interests.

'Yeah I mean [partner] likes walking but I like walking and looking at things as we walk... anything to do with wildlife in general... whereas [partner] would rather just march on. I like to stop a bit, but yeah I mean we just like getting out there and doing it... walking the coastal footpaths and things, and there's not so much to stop and look at apart from the view, which we both do like'. (Male, married, aged 45)

Participants valued holidays with their partners and appreciated sharing leisure time together but also reported the need to enjoy their everyday lives with their partner.

'That's another thing people can't understand, I love going shopping with her, we make a day of it, a full day, we'll plan it where we'll go shopping and we'll have a lunch and if we leave the car we'll go for a drink in town, and people can't comprehend it, I love it'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 51)

'Laughter, that's the one. You've got to laugh together, and enjoy the same things. And just be happy, relaxed together, because you can't be out socialising all the time. So you've got to be just at ease with each other, sat on the settee...'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 53)

Independence

'We both accept one another and what we do'. (Female, married, aged 51)

Many of the interviewees valued having independence from their partner. Independence was understood in both practical terms, for example through spending time apart from a partner but also entailed respect for a partner's individual identity and their entitlement to disagree with their partner's views and maintain their own opinions.

'We appreciate each opinion, I might disagree with [partner's] opinion on something but she's a person in her right and has views as much as I have'. (Male, married, aged 38)

The capacity to maintain personal friendships and have independent hobbies was particularly valued by some participants. Participants felt that it was important for an individual to maintain a sense of their own individuality outside of their identity as a partner within a relationship.

'Yes because I think you can't lose your individuality I don't think. Personally I think a lot of people when they get married they're like that and they lose their independence and their individuality. Now to me I would find that too claustrophobic so I do what I want. I mean we still do things together obviously but if I want to do something on my own I do and

[partner] does the same'. (Female, married, aged 51)

Some participants reported that they appreciated the feeling that their partner was not restricting them and, equally, that they were allowing their partner some independence.

'My husband would spend every hour of every day with me if he could, and I wouldn't spend every hour of every day with him [laughs], I like spending time with him but, I think you need time apart from each other, you need to do your own thing at times, and it, I mean he's real good yes, he never says to me, 'Oh, you know, I don't want you to go out with lasses''. (Female, married, aged 48)

Some of the participants reported that by having different interests and experiences to their partner their relationship was enriched. The quote below shows how one participant enjoyed frequently learning new things about his partner as a result of the couple maintaining their individual identities.

'I think it is possible to spend too much time together as a couple and people we know who are in that situation, seem very dull people, they are not bringing anything new or interesting to their relationship. They can't even have a conversation about, 'What did you do today?' because they know exactly what each other has done all day. We are not like that. We are constantly surprised and amazed about what each other has to say about things ... but it's interesting because you feel like you are getting to know someone that you know really well'. (Male, married, aged 42)

Making time for yourself was viewed as particularly important for some female participants who felt it was important to find some time away from their identity as a mother and partner. This was especially the case where a participant was raising young children and had little time outside of the family environment.

'And at that point, I felt as if every, if I cut myself into four and they could have all just had a bit, you know the kids could have had a quarter each, he could have had a quarter and my mother could have had a quarter, and I didn't have time for me either, and it was sort of ... I got to the stage where I thought right, I've got to make space for me, and I did, and I still do now..., and then we have time together as well, you know when I come home'. (Female, married, age unknown)

Many of the participants reported the importance of maintaining independent friendships outside of the relationship but also cautioned about the need to balance this independence with shared time as a couple and as a family.

'So you know we do our own thing. But we also do things together and as a family, it's hard to juggle all of it. You know some people only ever do things with their partner and never go out with their friends, well I couldn't do that 'cause my friends are important to me'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 33)

Independence was also valued for its capacity to provide routes for relationship support when times were difficult. Participants reported that by maintaining friendships or having independent activities they had people to turn to for support and a route to spending some time apart from their partner. For one interviewee in a relationship where both partners had step-children and children of their own, the independence created by both partners maintaining their separate homes provided vital relief from periods of intense stress.

'When things are not going particularly well we tend to go, separate for a little while... we did not want to feel that we were all pushed together and it has worked really. And I think that has helped us get through some really tough times. It is not easy when you are

dealing with wives and ex-husbands'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 44)

Focus group findings

The focus group members felt that independence within a relationship was very important and could benefit a relationship

'It can be healthy to have an outside interest to bring into the relationship and it gives you something to work from'. (Male, aged over 40)

However, the members stressed the importance of balancing time together with independence to avoid relationship deterioration

'I think its good to have your interests and your friends and not always to do everything together but I think there are boundaries'. (Female, aged over 40)

I think long term it would be growing apart and having to watch that you don't get too independent'. (Female, aged under 40)

One participant felt that independence was associated with freedom and lack of restriction.

'You have to have freedom, I mean, you don't want pinning down'. (Female, aged under 40)

Children

***'I think you know funnily enough even though once my daughter came along it changed a lot of things I think these last five years have been the best'.
(Female, married, aged 36)***

Children were frequently reported to be a highly valued aspect of a couple's relationship. Many of the participants reported that having children had changed their relationship with their partner.

'It changes your relationship... Now you've got somebody else to consider and he comes first now. Like in both of our eyes, although we still love each other, we've got him to look after as well. (Female, married, aged 21)

In contrast to the findings of Chapter 2 which showed how children could impact negatively on a couple's relationship some of the participants reported that having children together had positive impacts. This was most frequently through an increased understanding of their partner and a closer bond as a result of parenthood.

'I think that's when it started to go up you know, feel good, a family already you know, we had kids together and planning things, and that's when you see the real truth of your partner really'. (Male, married, aged 30)

'I suppose [son] being born, because he was my first, yes that was a big thing... it brought us together, well we were together anyway, but it was just a bonding relationship and it was quite nice, there was [son] there and he was mine'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 38)

One participant identified that having children had caused the couple to change their behaviour towards one another when attempting to deal with their relationship problems and

that these attempts were now more constructive.

In keeping with the findings of Chapter 2 some participants warned that whilst children were such an important and valued aspect of a relationship the investment and time required by children could cause a couple's relationship to be neglected. Some participants also reported that having children together would not strengthen a fragile relationship and could be a source of additional stress. One participant who felt that her relationship was very unsatisfactory reported that she had not wanted to become pregnant by her partner but had initially been hopeful that their relationship would improve as the result of their child together.

'Yeah I would say just after she was born I was quite optimistic... Because he seemed so keen on her... And I loved her instantly, and I thought, 'well maybe it will work then'.
(Female, cohabiting, aged 37)

Finally, many of the participants reported that having children together provided them with a reason to remain in a relationship and endure through difficult times.

Focus group findings

Some of the focus group participants reported that having a child had resulted in a stronger bond with their partner.

'I found it strengthened it. It created something'. (Male, aged over 40)

One focus group conversation about the consequences of having children showed how some participants had initially thought that having children would impact upon their relationship and had been wrong in their assumptions.

'They don't bring you together as a lovey dovey sort of couple'. (Female, aged under 40)

'You think they will'. (Female, aged under 40)

'Yes, but you haven't got the time to go there'. (Female, aged under 40)

'No, you are so tired for the first few years'. (Female, aged under 40)

One focus group member reported that the focus the couple had on their young child had resulted in the couple's relationship being neglected leaving them with little to talk about.

'We went out and we weren't allowed to talk about our baby, we weren't allowed to talk about her. But it was like what do we talk about'. (Female, aged under 40)

Support

Participants spoke frequently about the value they placed on the support they received from their partner. Through analysis of the data it became apparent that many of the highpoints that participants reported in their relationships were at times when they were experiencing significant life difficulties.

'His other family disowned him, it was a terrible time for us really, we had to really pull together... he had nobody'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 30)

Some participants reported that providing support to a partner was an important aspect in a relationship and helped a couple to bond.

'She reckons she has got the world on her shoulders but that is what I am there for. I try and make life as easy as possible for her and I don't know what else I can give'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 42)

Participants valued the knowledge that their partner was concerned for their personal well-being.

'Well, then [partner] was working, and actually when I got to the hospital my mum was waiting for me and she didn't leave until I got into bed, she wouldn't leave me, she said, 'I can't [partner's] told me not to leave you in case you do a runner". (Female, married, aged 51)

Some of the participants reported how their partner provided them with support by directly responding to their physical and emotional needs in an attempt to reduce the impact of stressful situations.

'He'll go off and potter around in the kitchen and go upstairs. He'll come down and he'll bring a cup of coffee in, 'You alright?', 'Yes, fine' and he'll just let me calm down. Or he'll take [Son], 'Come on, come in the kitchen with me, leave your mum alone for a bit' ... or he'll say like, 'Get his wheelchair, I'll take him for a walk' and he takes him off, and lets me calm down'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 35)

Other participants reported how they were aware of their partner's support in other ways, for example, they appreciated it when their partners supported them in disagreements with other parties.

'[partner] turned round to his Dad and said, 'Don't you bloody blame it on [participant], I know for a fact Dad that you said what was supposed to be said, so don't you!' and it's the first time that [partner] had ever, ever stuck up for me'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 33)

Some participants reported that they tried to protect their partner from stressful situations or were aware that their partner was doing the same thing by masking their concerns about difficult situations in order to prevent putting them under additional stress.

'I'm the one that will probably stay up, lie awake at night thinking about things rather than getting on with it ... I felt a bit inadequate, as I say, when I was unemployed and if there was any strain I suppose that was the strain then... [she] tried to make me feel better about things. She might have been worried about it, she never said'. (Male, married, aged 56)

Summary of most valued aspects of relationships

The most valued aspects of the participants' relationships were closeness, independence, having children and support.

Being close with a partner involved understanding a partner and being understood, sharing a sense of humour and sharing friendship with a partner. Closeness with a partner was fostered by good communication, having shared interests and spending time together. Participants particularly valued holidays with their partners but emphasised that it was important to enjoy their everyday lives with each other.

Having independence in a relationship was also important and involved maintaining personal friendships, spending time away from a partner, having individual interests and respect for a partner's individuality. Some participants felt that maintaining independence enriched their relationship by providing opportunities to share and talk about experiences. Maintaining independence also provided routes for relationship support, including people to talk about the relationship and opportunities for time away from a partner. Making time for yourself was viewed as particularly important by some female participants with young children who found it was important to have some time away from their role as mother and partner. Participants reported that it was important to balance independent activities with time spent as a couple and as part of a family.

Children were frequently viewed as a highly valued aspect of a couple's relationship. Having children was reported to change a couple's relationship. Some participants found that having children together had increased their bond with their partner, however the participants felt that it was important to have a strong relationship before considering having children. The participants did not feel that having a child could improve a damaged relationship but that they did provide a reason for a couple to endure through difficult times. Some participants found that the investment children required meant that their relationship could be neglected (see Chapter 2).

Support from a partner was a highly valued aspect of a relationship. Many of the participants' accounts revealed that highpoints in their relationship had occurred during difficult life events. Giving and receiving support could increase the bond between a couple. Support could involve physical or emotional support during difficult times and protecting a partner from a stressful situation.

2. Relationship Strengtheners

Communication

'If you talk things through often a lot of things come out of it ... by talking I find out what goes on in his day, and he finds out what goes on in my day... and then by talking you just trust somebody and, I don't know, you love their company then. Things go from there really. I think talking is really quite good'. (Female, married, aged 39)

Given that good communication was viewed by participants as important for any relationship to work it was unsurprising that many participants reported that communication was an important strengthening tool within their own relationship. This section presents the participants' reports about the positive effects that good communication had upon their relationships. John Gottman from the USA emphasises that a predictor of relationship endurance is his 5:1 ratio. For a relationship to survive, he shows that a couple needs to have five positive interactions for every one negative interaction (Gottman and Silver, 1999).

In relation to this 5:1 ratio, participants reported that good communication strengthened their relationships by conveying the positive feelings they had towards their partner. Communication was viewed as a mediator through which other valued aspects of a relationship could develop including, trust, closeness and friendship.

'It's total and utter honesty and trust, whatever is said or done we talk about it'. (Female, married, aged 38)

Frequent communication allowed participants to demonstrate care for their partners on a

daily basis and receive this in return. Some participants believed that this had strengthened their bond with their partner.

'Yeah, and like I'll be at work, or I'll be at college and I'll get a phone call off [partner] and they'll say, 'Oh what does [partner] want?' and I'll say, 'He's just calling to say hello', you know, and that he's thinking about me... and I do the same to him when I'm thinking of him, I think, oh I'll give him a call, see how he's getting on'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 33)

Good communication had helped participants to address their relationship issues before they developed into more serious problems.

'I can't think of an occasion within a relationship, after 24 years, that cannot be discussed. If there is a problem and it can't be discussed, then the marriage really does have problem'. (Male, married, aged 48)

Communication was linked with support in the participants' relationships, which in turn was associated with the development of closeness. Participants reported how by sharing their problems with their partners they were able to unburden themselves. This also ensured that their partner was aware of issues and could offer their support.

'If you communicate things... the bad things don't seem so bad if they are shared and talked about ... and the good things are always better if they are shared... he makes me laugh, which makes me feel better instantly'. (Female, married, aged 39)

'... you can gain strength from each other, and there's no point in thinking, if I show that I am worried about it, it will affect ... because you become like mirrors after a while. She knows when I am worried... [then] they think, 'Oh perhaps this is serious'. (Male, married, aged 53)

Sharing and being open with a partner allowed people to develop a deeper understanding of each other. Some participants reported that through learning about their partner's life they were able to understand why they behaved in a certain way and this helped them to be more tolerant of behaviour which they disliked. Other participants reported that by learning about their partner they found they had more in common and their bond was strengthened.

'In fact he hadn't talked a lot about his past until I started talking about mine, and then I realised that his childhood hadn't been as rosy and cosy as what I had thought either. We do have a lot in common when it comes to why we grew up with a family, that has actually brought us a lot closer together, as well. We understand each other more now and we have a lot more in common than we thought we had'. (Female, married, aged 25)

Difficult life events

'We've been through an awful lot of stuff that most couples never ever have to deal with and because of that we have something very, very special'. (Male, married, aged 48)

Some participants reported that the experience of living through difficult life events with their partner had strengthened their relationship.

'It's certainly as strong, maybe stronger. I don't know in some ways. I think the traumas of life probably do pull you together and she's had more than her fair share'. (Male, married, aged 56)

'Yes, it was horrendous. We couldn't sell the flat, we had a bridging loan, two mortgages, the builder went bust on us, it was just horrendous... it was horrendous from the point of view of the money, but it made our relationship stronger I suppose'. (Female, married, aged 39)

This was particularly the case where a couple had experienced a traumatic event together and could share equally in the event.

'It's been made a lot stronger more recently... yeah [partner] had, did have a miscarriage quite recently. (Male, cohabiting, aged 36)

Providing support for a partner during stressful times had brought some couples closer together and was viewed as an important and strengthening process.

'I could organise a lot to stop him from having to organise it in, you know after, when he was just coming back in the evening and was absolutely exhausted 'cause he was travelling even longer... Um it, it brought us even, it knitted us together in our beliefs even more'. (Female, married, aged 39)

Focus group findings

The focus groups discussed how dealing with relationship difficulties could make a couple stronger or damage the relationship.

'Yes, but I think it's how you handle it. And whether it brings you together or whether it tears you apart. But things are going to happen throughout'. (Female, aged under 40)

'It makes you a lot stronger, it brings you closer together or it pulls you apart. At the end of any trauma in a relationship you're either together or you're drifting'. (Female, aged over 40)

One group member reported that experiencing difficult times with a partner provided an opportunity to learn about a partner and develop a stronger relationship.

'That is what makes you stronger, it makes the relationship work. You have got to go through those problems to find like who each other is really you know. That is when you find out what kind of person you are with'. (Male, aged under 40)

Spending time together

'I think that is so important ... the more time we've spent with each other, the stronger we've got, as a couple'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 44)

Participants reported that spending time alone with their partner strengthened their relationship, both through the enjoyable times they were able to share and also because of the natural opportunity it provided to discuss issues which arose during daily life.

'I can't say we ever sit down for an evening and talk about the pro and cons of anything, the best time we talk is if we go out for a meal, we'll talk about different things...'. (Female, married, age unknown)

In contrast, a few of the participants' accounts demonstrated how a lack of time together

could damage a relationship.

'We [would] just see each other for an hour here and there, I think that started to put a strain on us, but it seemed to be just going on and on and after a while we just did our own thing and one of us will be coming in and going straight to the shower and ... I don't know if it was me, but one of us suddenly said one night, 'We never know where the other one ever is. You know, we're doing our own thing'.'. (Female, cohabiting, age unknown)

Consequently some of the participants were conscious of the importance of making time for their relationship despite conflicting demands.

'... we always sort of have the same view, that they have their baths, they've had their stories and unless one of them's not very well... that, you know, they've had me ... they've usually seen him... that's it. If they can't go to sleep they're in their rooms reading or pootling around... and it's our time then. And that's something we've always, from a baby, we've always done that, so it means that we always see each other and sit down and talk to each other'. (Female, married, aged 39)

Ensuring that the time spent with a partner was good quality was important to the participants. Some of the participants reported how too much time together could damage a relationship rather than strengthen it. The quote below shows how a relationship improved when a partner started work and the couple spent less low quality time together.

'It did make things easier because we weren't spending so much time together, money wasn't so tight so the time that we did spend together was good quality time that we were able to enjoy each other's company more... I could spend time with the child on my... own and then when he got home from work we could spend time together as a family and then later on in the evening we could spend time together on our own'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 21)

The participants' accounts generally concerned the need to make time for relationships during everyday life and how this had strengthened their own relationships. However for a few of the participants spending a specific and planned time apart had also been an important way of strengthening their relationship after serious difficulties.

'So, I think then when he booked to go to ... it was just to get away for two weeks, no phones, no nothing. I think that was when we really did get back together because that was quite a big thing'. (Female, cohabiting, age unknown)

Focus group findings

The focus groups felt it was very important for couples to spend good quality time together and that this had strengthened their relationships.

'We've been together for six years and we actually are more like still like a courting couple, so we do make plans next week we'll go to the cinema and for a meal and we'll be planning in advance for two weeks...'. (Female, aged over 40)

'What we do now that we never used to do is at least two or three times a week we go and sit in the dining room and we have dinner all together. No radio and no telly, nothing. We sit down and have a meal together and we all talk. That is why this relationship seems to be working so much better'. (Male, aged over 40)

'It is literally listening, taking time out and doing things together, otherwise you do you just literally grow apart'. (Female, aged over 40)

'I think it's really important to remember that you're lovers and to enjoy each other. I don't just mean sexually but I mean to go to a meal forget, not forget you've got children but to remember that you do deserve time for each other, that you're supposed to love each other. You know there's nothing wrong with walking along hand in hand and going to the pictures and going out for meals'. (Female, aged over 40)

Personality

'... we're both so different ... everybody says, 'You're so different but you're so right'.'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 33)

Participants talked about how having a partner with a personality which complemented their own had strengthened their relationship.

'... we complement each other because I give him a bit of spontaneity and encourage him to do things he wouldn't think of doing... and he grounds me'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 33)

The participants felt that it was beneficial for a couple to have different personality traits rather than to be too similar.

'There were no ups and downs, no major rows, and I think that's what ended the first one in that we were too much like an old married couple'. (Male, married, aged 44)

The participants' data suggested that the different personality traits of individuals in a relationship were exploited to benefit the partnership. Participants reported that they were able to offset their partner's weaknesses and strengthen a relationship by providing support in both practical and emotional issues.

'She just knew if I had £10 in my pocket, I'd spend £10... If we go to a pub the amount of guys that take the mick out of me, 'Who wears the trousers in your house?', 'She does', I'm quite happy for that, it's part of the relationship'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 32)

'I think he certainly calms me down, quietens me down quite a lot. I am quite manic and on the go all the time and if I'd have married someone like that we'd have killed each other by now, if I'm really honest'. (Female, married, aged 32)

The participants also reported that having different temperaments to their partners had helped them to work through relationship issues effectively.

'She's completely different to me ... She's more headstrong. And I'm more placid. So we don't clash really, so I give way and talk her round just gently instead of getting into a full blown row'. (Male, married, aged 33)

Understanding

'If you say, 'Oh yeah go on then, all right then' he'll go, 'Oh maybe I won't then' but if you go, 'Oh God do you have to do that ... I really wish you wouldn't' then he'll do it, but I know now that that's what he's like so, I've sussed him out'!
(Female, cohabiting, aged 33)

Having a good understanding of yourself and your partner was viewed as a relationship strengthener. The participants felt that it was important that people understood and demonstrated their own needs within the relationship and that this helped partners to understand and get on well with each other.

'I am just me, and I think that's... why me and [partner] get on, because I know who I am. He's very self aware as well, and then that makes us aware of each other in a way'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 33)

By knowing what an individual required in a relationship a partner could attempt to meet their needs and through doing this the bond between a couple could be increased.

'We know each other's wants and needs. I mean, we like to think that there's somebody out there thinking about us, so we like to let that other person know, oh we talk about it quite often actually, about the way our relationship is and the way we feel about each other'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 33)

By understanding their partner's behaviour and motivations, the participants reported that they were able to communicate effectively and deal with difficulties in a productive manner.

'I am learning now that [partner] doesn't react unless I have done something wrong, and I have got to realise, you know, that ... [partner] kind of wears his heart on his sleeve, he gets hurt very easily, so if I say something a bit sharp, that can be what will cause a problem'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 44)

'When he gets angry or agitated, his hands go, I've noticed that in him, and I know I've upset him, and I can then say I'm sorry'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 45)

Understanding why their partner behaved in a certain way also helped the participants to put their behaviour into context. This had the potential to diffuse negative feelings towards the partner and facilitate relationship improvement.

'I think that's what his parents used to do, so whether it's something that he thinks, 'This is what you do', I don't know. But now we're out of that part, maybe he thinks now there's another way to do it. Listening to him, he's always done it, if he's argued with his ex, his first wife, he used to walk away and not talk for days and days and days'. (Female,

cohabiting, age unknown)

'I think we both realised that we were under stress and we both realised a lot of what was being said was purely venting stress. I think we were both pretty clued in to what was going on'. (Male, married, aged 41)

Participants reported that by having a deep understanding of each other and the way they behaved a couple could develop trust and become secure and relaxed in their relationship.

'It's just that we know each other so well now and we're relaxed in each others company. We don't feel the need to put on airs and graces for each other which I think some couples do'. (Male, married, aged 42)

This trust and understanding allowed partners the freedom to fulfil their individual needs within the context of their relationship.

'He enjoys having a little bit of a flirt with the girls and I quite enjoy having a flirt with the boys... we understand each other'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 44)

Summary of relationship strengtheners

The participants reported that their relationships were strengthened by good communication, the experience of difficult life events, spending time together, having compatible personalities and learning about and understanding their partner.

Good communication was a key strengthener and facilitated the development of a number of valued aspects of relationships including trust, closeness and friendship. Open and frequent communication allowed a couple to demonstrate their positive regard for each other and helped individuals to address relationship problems in their early stages. Being open and sharing problems allowed individuals to unburden themselves and made partners aware of issues so they were able to offer support. Through being open with each other people could learn why their partner behaved in a certain way and this helped them tolerate and explain undesirable behaviour.

Many participants found that going through difficult life experiences with their partner strengthened their relationship. This was particularly the case where a couple could share equally in a problem, for example the experience of miscarriage. Being able to help a partner through such difficult times could strengthen a couple's bond.

Spending time with a partner was viewed as an important relationship strengthener. Time together allowed a couple to share enjoyable experiences and provided an opportunity to discuss issues that arose in their daily lives. Participants thought that it was important to make time together despite conflicting demands. The quality of time spent together was equally important, and some participants reported that spending too little time or too much time together could damage a relationship. A few of the participants reported how time together could help a couple to work through serious relationship difficulties.

Participants reported that having a partner with a complementary personality to their own had strengthened their relationship. Having different strengths and weaknesses to a partner meant that a couple could exploit their strengths to improve the relationship. Participants also reported that having different temperaments could help couples work through disagreements in a constructive manner.

Understanding a partner strengthened a relationship. By being aware of their partner's needs an individual could offer support and this could increase the bond between the couple.

Understanding a partner's behaviour and motivations helped people to communicate in an effective manner and deal with difficulties productively. Understanding why a partner behaved in a certain way helped people to put undesirable behaviour into context and could help to diffuse hostile feelings. By understanding a partner deeply trust could develop and this helped people feel secure and relaxed in their relationship.

3. Positive changes over time

Change

'Well I think, well we've still got the romance but you haven't got the mad passionate romance, I think any couple will tell you that, that you had when you were youngsters ... but you get more understanding, more loving in many ways, more companion, I think you've got to be friends as well as lovers'.
(Female, married, aged 66)

A theme concerning change over time emerged from the data set. This included observations of change in self, partners and relationships.

'Yes I think everyone does as they grow up. You have more respect for somebody don't you I think. You live and you learn don't you'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 26)

'He has changed now. He knows how to stop me from being upset and you know, stressed about something. He says, 'Calm down', you know, we talk about it'. (Female, married, aged 36)

Participants reported that some of the changes they observed within themselves and their partners were due to becoming older and having matured.

'We're adults more so, even though I was an adult at 22, I'm a different adult now. I'm a more responsible and mature adult I think'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 33)

'... we are both a lot more mature now and grown up and we think about family more'.
(Female, married, aged 21)

Participants reported that becoming 'mature' had sometimes altered their behaviour towards their partner (likely to be affected by the varying duration of the relationships in the study).

'He is really sensitive really and I suppose I used to play on that ... now, I know I could but I wouldn't'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 26)

'I have grown up now, and I won't pick a fight. I used to pick a fight. I think I just used to enjoy a good bust up and an argument, and if I was stressed out about something'.
(Female, married, aged 36)

Participants observed specific changes in their personality and their behaviour towards their partner.

'I used to have my little stubborn streak but I've found over the years with having children, that's gone, I'm quite laid back now'. (Male, married, aged 38)

Some of the participants reported how their partners had changed and developed during the time that the couple had been in a relationship together.

'As she's grown older she's more confident, she's more outgoing and basically she can stand on her own two feet now... I think as we've got older I find the relationship more rewarding now than I did when we first met'. (Male, married, aged 42)

'We weren't to start with. She was quite a ... well not highly strung but got stressed quite easily... I mean if they came and said they are repossessing the house, she at one time, she'd be suicidal. Now she'll just go, 'Suppose we had better go down to the council and see what they can give us''. (Male, married, aged 50)

Participants were sometimes aware of how they had influenced their partner's change or had been influenced to change themselves.

'He said, 'Well you've made me be like you', I said, 'What?', he went, 'Nicer to people because I feel sorry for everybody, I feel hurt for people, you've made me start feeling sorry for people'. (Female, married, age unknown)

Focus group findings

The quote below reflects the findings of the main analysis through one focus group member's report of how she had matured and her relationship had changed over time.

'... we married very young and the early part of our marriage was incredibly volatile because we were as a couple, we used to throw stuff all the time. But as time goes on, you're tolerant as long as you can get through those bits'. (Female, aged over 40)

Decreasing passion

'When you start it is all exciting and you were ringing each other up every five minutes and all that sort of ... that goes and that goes with anybody doesn't it. You can have that again with someone new but you will be back where you are for sure'. (Male, married, aged 30)

Participants talked about a decline in passion in their relationships. Frequency of sexual activity was noted to reduce over time.

'I mean, things are not quite the same as they were when we were first married, I mean that was, as I say, most young married couples, yes, well fairly active and it has come down a little bit now'. (Male, married, aged 53)

'I said, 'Look I love you to bits but it can't be the same as it was, I'm not the same person, I'm almost 50, it changes', and it's changed'. (Female, married, aged 48)

This reduction in sexual activity was not viewed negatively in most cases but understood to have been replaced by a 'deeper' relationship.

'There's a high degree of probably sexual attraction initially and that's important at the time but in my situation that tends to wane a little bit in favour of a more fulfilling relationship shall I say'. (Male, married, aged 56)

Participants described how a 'deeper' relationship involved factors including closeness, friendship and increased communication.

'Initially I probably thought sex was the most important thing, love and sex were the most important things. As I have got older it still does play a part but I now think communication and talking with each other about all the issues that you have is most important really'.

(Female, married, age unknown)

Despite the participant's reports that a reduction in the importance of sexual activity in their relationships had occurred the participants accounts suggested that it was important to maintain a level of sexual intimacy which was satisfactory to each member of the couple, and to compromise where partners had different expectations.

Increasing closeness

'We're close now. We understand one another, know one another'. (Male, cohabiting, age unknown)

Many of the participants described how over time they had become increasingly close to their partner. This was likely to be supported through effective communication (see next section) increasing the understanding and empathy towards a partner.

'I think obviously we're getting sort of closer and deeper as time goes on'. (Male, married, aged 45)

'I suppose it has [changed] we know each other better, and we seem to get along better. I suppose it's better, you can be more honest with each other, feeling more comfortable'.

(Male, cohabiting, aged 26)

Some of the participants described how the transition into a close partnership with shared identity was a long process which involved some negotiation with an individual's personal identity.

'I think at first you're used to doing things as an individual and it takes years to actually start including people in those decisions [and] eventually what I liked mattered and it wasn't his car (because I don't drive), it wasn't his car, it was ours you know, even though I'm not driving, it's ours'. (Female, married, aged 36)

Developing a close bond was also related to acceptance of a partner.

'... and a certain amount of tolerance, understanding and accepting that this person is not a hundred percent perfect and you're not a hundred percent perfect, that you've got to take the bad with the good'. (Male, married, aged 57)

Participants reported that through time together a couple grew to understand each other more.

'I think after being together for some time you tend to understand each other, know each other sometimes without having to say anything you know you just know your partner's moods without having to say anything then you don't'. (Female, married, aged 36)

'...she knows me better than I do myself maybe'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 32)

A number of the participants remarked affectionately on the intimate understanding of each other they shared with their partner.

'I mean I do spook her out sometimes. We'll be sitting watching the TV or something and she'll just turn and I'll come up with a subject she was just coming out with anyway. And she says, 'How did you know I was going to say that?' And we do it, not once in a blue moon but on a regular basis'. (Male, married, aged 50)

'You know there seems to be like a telepathy that we seem to know what the other's thinking'. (Male, married, aged 57)

Focus group findings

One of the focus group members recalled how her relationship had taken time to develop into a strong and balanced partnership.

'Because when our relationship first started I was young and starry eyed and whatever and I think that my husband could solve all my problems. I don't think that way now, our problems are our problems not it's for him to solve'. (Female, aged over 40)

Communication

'But I think lately we have talked a lot more ... I think as we are getting older we are tending to talk'. (Female, married, aged 39)

Participants reported that over time the communication within their relationship had become more effective.

'Probably up until about the last two or three years ago I expect, I would get so angry about whatever he'd done or hadn't done that I just wouldn't talk to him for days, but now we discuss it and if I'm annoyed with him I'll say... and then ... he'll either agree or disagree and it's sorted out'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 33)

'It just festers. The row is still there, if you're not talking it's still there... [now] if she's done something that upsets me I'll tell her'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 42)

Similarly, some of the participants found that as they got older they were addressing their relationship difficulties more proactively.

'Good, I've got to say it's great. I mean we sorted out a lot of differences as we are getting older we are talking about it more'. (Male, married, aged 44)

'I think it's being able to work through it by getting to the bottom of the problem eventually. Certainly at the beginning we never resolved them, but now they get resolved'. (Female, cohabiting, age unknown)

Summary of positive changes over time

People observed that over time there were changes in themselves, their partner and their relationship. Participants recalled that they had become more mature and that this had altered their behaviour towards their partner. Changes in personality were observed by the participants and they were sometimes aware of how they had influenced these.

The participants observed that over time the passion in their relationship decreased. This was viewed as a natural process rather than a decline in relationship quality and the participants reported that passion was replaced by a deeper relationship involving increased

closeness, friendship and communication. However the participants reported that it was important to maintain a level of sexual intimacy which both partners were happy with and that partners should compromise to accommodate each other's needs.

Closeness between a couple was observed to increase over time. Some participants described how developing a shared identity as a couple was a long process. Developing a close bond was associated with accepting everything about yourself and your partner. Participants valued the intimate understanding they had of their partner.

Participants reported that over time communication with their partner had become more effective and that they addressed their relationship problems more proactively.

3.2.3 Variations by gender

During the analysis any significant trends in the data which related to gender were recorded. Key variations included:

- Females more frequently stressed the importance of getting communication right in a relationship
- Females who were parents to young children were most likely to report the need for some independence in their relationship.
- Females were more likely to report that the value they placed on support from their partner.
- Females were more likely to report that they were aware of the need for time spent together and provided more examples of how they had instigated this within their relationship.
- Females spoke more frequently about the insight and understanding they had of their partner's behaviour.
- Females were more likely to observe change in themselves over time.
- Males believed that women were better at discussing relationship issues.
- Females believed that they were better at talking about relationship issues

'The thing is, women tend to be better than men at talking don't they. I find it's very difficult. If my husband has got a problem he'll go very quiet. I'm beaver away trying to get it out of him, whatever the problem is and he'll just go quieter and quieter. Whereas if it was a woman, you'd just ask her and it would come out wouldn't it'. (Focus Group Female, aged over 40)

- Males reported that their partners wanted to talk more on a day-to-day basis than they did.

'My wife will say well talk to me and I say what about? It's not that I haven't anything to talk about. It's just that natural expectation that we will talk and I think why should there be that expectation. If you have something to say you say it but you know its talk to me'. (Focus Group Male, aged over 40)

'Woman have this need to deadline 6000 words a day where men have 2000'. (Focus Group Male, aged over 40)

- Males and females reported that females were more likely to think about the future of the relationship and make plans for it.

'They are the great schemers'. (Focus Group Male, aged over 40)

'They need to structure not just for today or tomorrow but next week'. (Focus Group Male, aged over 40)

3.3 Conclusion

3.3.1 Summary of findings

The participants responses to questions about what made a relationship endure were predominantly concerned with satisfaction with a relationship and the results reflect this. The results present a number of positive factors which the participants believed made their relationship satisfactory.

The general principles which participants felt made relationships work included being in a relationship with the 'right person', being able to effectively work on a relationship, communicating well and having trust in a partner.

The participants talked about their own relationships and what they felt made them endure. The most valued aspects of the participants' relationships were: closeness, independence, having children and support. The participants' accounts showed that their relationships had been strengthened by good communication, living through (and coming through) difficult life events with their partner, spending time together, having compatible personalities and learning about and understanding their partner. The participants found that over time they observed change in themselves, their partners and their relationship. People became more mature, passion in the relationship declined, and a deeper relationship developed which involved increased communication, closeness and friendship.

3.3.2 Discussion

Johnson (1991) identified three facets of a person's commitment to a relationship; 'structural commitment' describes a feeling that one has to continue a relationship due to the constraint from external pressure and censure from others; 'moral commitment' is the feeling one ought to continue a relationship in terms of one's own value system; and 'personal commitment' is a feeling that one wants to continue a relationship because it is satisfying and pleasurable. The findings in this chapter were dominated by 'personal commitment', that is, the participants were describing factors which they felt made them satisfied and want to continue in their relationship.

As an example, children were viewed by the participants as a 'valued aspect' of a couple's relationship but Becker (1974; 1977) demonstrates that children can be viewed as a 'marital-specific investment' which boosts the value of a relationship, and the value of staying in this relationship. A few of the participants reflected this in their account where they reported that having children together had provided them with a reason to stay with their partner when relationship satisfaction was low.

Robinson and Parker (2008), adapting work by Anderson et al. (2004) and Parker (2002), report that the following components are evident within a good relationship:

Commitment: a long-term view of relationship and perseverance in the face of difficulties.

Balancing couple and individual needs: a sense of 'we-ness' in a relationship, connection through friendship, and shared values and history.

Communication: communication which in the main is positive and respectful. Individuals compromise and use humour in the face of difficulty.

Conflict resolution: conflict is understood as inevitable, but individuals fight fairly and pick battles carefully.

Interaction and time together: quality and quantity are both critical as well as the balance of couple and individual pursuits. Individuals enjoy their time together.

Intimacy and emotional support: individuals share physical and psychological intimacy with their partner and this is strengthened through overcoming difficulties.

Many of these components are similar to those reported by Gottman and Silver (1999) in their exploration of positive relationship attributes termed a 'sound marital house'. These include marital friendship, more 'positivity' than 'negativity' in a relationship, regulation of conflict through problem solving, supporting one another's dreams, and a 'top floor' of shared meaning.

The factors reported by Robinson and Parker (2008) and Gottman and Silver (1999) are strongly reflected in the themes which arose from the analysis. Knowing what helps people maintain lasting and high quality relationships generates useful information for the development of relationship support.

Participants in the study directly referred to a number of factors which had strengthened their relationship. Some of the key themes which are amenable to intervention include:

- Communication
- Sharing time together
- Maintaining an independent identity
- Working on the relationship
- Support

The participants felt that communication was the key to the development of many of the valued and strengthening factors of a relationship, such as trust and closeness. The importance of communication should not be understated, with Bradbury and Karney (2004) noting how this includes '*... expressing positive emotions during problem solving, the importance of constructive engagement in the marriage, and the need for empathic listening and responding*' (p.868).

Closeness was the most frequently reported valued aspect of a relationship. Closeness involved many features, such as sense of humour, trust, understanding, having fun together and positive interactions outstripping negative interactions. Interestingly, one of the aspects of closeness that the participants reported was sharing a friendship with a partner. However, friendship was viewed as something which was not necessarily intrinsic to a couple's relationship, but rather as something which was beneficial to a relationship if it existed. Gottman and Silver (1999) suggest that 'marital friendship' is a vital component of what they refer to as a 'sound marital house' and provides the foundation for an enduring relationship. Bradbury and Karney (2004) describe how positive interaction and engagement between partners envelops the couple in a 'Teflon' coating that does not let negative emotions and expressions stick to the couple and create or further any distress.

The participants observed the positive changes that occurred in their relationship over time. Research shows that people who view their relationship satisfaction as very low but remain in their relationship often experience an increase in relationship satisfaction over time (Waite et al., 2002). This is reflected in the report of one focus group member.

'If I look back, there's probably two or three occasions - well we've been married twelve years, but together thirteen and a half. There's probably been two if not three occasions where we could have split up. Then maybe six months after the event you think, am I glad that we persevered with it because it's all got back to normal. But you can understand how marriages fail'. (Focus Group Female, aged under 40)

Some of the participants reflected on their awareness that their relationship had passed through a number of stages over time. The most frequently observed change was the decline of passion and a 'deeper' relationship developing over time. Kovacs (1988) described the various stages that a relationship progresses through as 'romance', 'reality', 'power struggle', 'finding oneself', 'reconciliation', and 'mutual respect and love'. Some of the participants reported that it was important for people to recognise that relationships change over time. This attitude is explored in greater depth in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4. Exploration of relationship attitudes and beliefs

4.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to develop an understanding of how participants perceived their relationship at the time of interview, and to explore and understand the attitudes and beliefs within these relationships. The results section provides the main descriptive themes which emerged from the data presented by grouping together data from participants who perceived their relationships similarly. The discussion section furthers this analysis by examining an important concept which emerged as underlying many of the themes: 'developmental' or 'non-developmental' relationship beliefs.

The aim of the research was, however, not to replicate the large body of work which has attempted to classify marriages and couple relationships (e.g. Fitzpatrick, 1988; Olson, 1993; Gottman, 1994; Johnson et al., 1999). The interview data collected for this research does not provide a suitable base for work of this nature in that the interviews were not designed to establish an objective understanding of a participant's relationship, were conducted with only one partner from a relationship, and were not designed for this purpose. This makes an attempt to classify relationships post-hoc in nature and unreliable.

The key strength of this research is that it is based on data from a group of participants who were all in a long-term relationship at the time of interview. Research shows that when a relationship breaks down individuals go through a process where their experiences in the relationship are reframed to ensure psychological health (see Mansfield and Collard, 1988 and other related literature such as cognitive dissonance theory [Festinger, 1957]). This means that it is difficult to gain a valid understanding of a relationship attitudes and beliefs by basing research on those which have broken down. Therefore the results presented in this chapter provide a valuable insight into ongoing relationships. Through exploring the processes occurring within these relationships we may be able to identify key attitudes and beliefs which provide insight into the ways in which to develop effective early intervention relationship support.

4.2 Results

The results are presented within the five groups which emerged during the analysis and are represented as follows:

- **'... it's not right'**
- **'... it's probably just average'**
- **'We're completely happy'**
- **'... we will get through it'**
- **'... solid, but it's one which we've worked at'**

The groups are presented in an arbitrary order which does not represent any theoretical assumption about the quality of the relationships under study.

The most salient themes which emerged from each group are presented. They are not a comprehensive list of all the themes which emerged from the data but those which typify the groups. Due to the nature of the area under study there is some crossover between the groups; whilst a case has been categorised on the strength of the data it presents, it is quite possible that a single case could sit in more than one group.

Within each group a case study is used to illustrate some of the key themes which emerged. Case studies do not necessarily contain all of the themes which emerged within a group but were selected for the salience of the themes which they present.

The summary of findings were presented separately at the end of each section depicting the groups.

4.2.1 ‘... it’s not right’

‘I’m not saying we are very unhappy people, but it’s not right’.

The participants within this group perceived their relationships to be unsatisfactory. Some of these participants felt that their relationship would not endure and were taking steps to leave while others wanted to make their relationship work but were unsure how to do so.

‘We have just got to get on, at the moment we don’t get on’. (Male, cohabiting, aged 40)

A number of themes were evident within the perception of relationship data that the participants provided and are presented below.

Lack of closeness or ‘togetherness’

Participants’ data showed a lack of both emotional closeness and physical ‘togetherness’. Some participants observed that emotional closeness had previously existed in their relationship but had declined.

‘...what I’ll say, that deep sense of togetherness has dwindled, the closeness, you know? Like I couldn’t remember the last time he put his arms round me ... and that used to be there’. (Female, married, aged 51)

‘In my current relationship there has been a steady decline in happiness’. (Female, cohabiting, age unknown)

‘It’s not as if we are at each other’s throats all the time, we are just not close at the moment, not at all’. (Male, cohabiting, aged 40)

A few participants attributed the current lack of emotional closeness to changes in their partner’s behaviour. For one participant this had been a significant cause of dissatisfaction.

‘We could never walk past each other without touching, or a little kiss or something. That has all gone out of the window, and it was stuff like that that she stopped doing. But I like those silly little things’. (Male, married, aged 30)

Another participant reported that whilst he believed his relationship had been unsatisfactory, recent changes in his partner had caused it to deteriorate rapidly. The partner in this relationship had recently given up drinking alcohol after a 20 year dependency and had developed new interests which the participant was not involved in.

In general, the participants reported low levels of interaction and togetherness. One participant identified this as a cause for relationship deterioration.

‘We are more like flatmates. We don’t do much together ... Well she has started doing her own thing, and I have felt cut out of her life ... I had to go out and have my own life. So it

was just a case of us growing apart I suppose'. (Male, married, aged 30)

Limited Communication

The participants' data suggested that communication within their relationships was lacking in quantity and quality.

'I can talk, she finds it hard to talk, she finds it hard to open up, she bottles it all inside her...We talk about other things but not about the relationship. When it comes to me and [partner] there is a barrier, most of the time, change the subject or whatever'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 40)

'We don't communicate well, we argue a lot. He is very volatile and we do not find it easy to talk to each other'. (Female, cohabiting, age unknown)

Detachment/disengagement

Some of the participants reported that they were unsure whether their relationship would endure.

'Things are said, like, on both parts you know, that he doesn't think we'll stay together and I say I don't think it'll work'. (Female, married, aged 37)

Some of these participants appeared to be emotionally indifferent to this outcome. This revealed the extent of their detachment from their partner and how they were preparing themselves to leave the relationship.

'I don't know what will happen, I mean ideally in a, what I really would like is I would like [partner] to meet somebody else'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 50)

'I don't want to be hurt again, I don't feel I need her affection. I am now quite self sufficient, I don't feel I need to be with her'. (Male, married, aged 30)

Whilst a criterion for inclusion in this research was that a participant was in a relationship some talked about their relationship as if it had ended despite still living together. This suggested that their emotional involvement in the relationship had ceased and their relationship was only functioning on a structural level, that is, that they were still connected to their partner through factors such as shared living arrangements and financial concerns.

'... she said that we haven't got a relationship, I say it, so I don't think we've got one'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 50)

Commitment

Many of the participants who reported detachment from their partners provided reasons for remaining in the relationship for the short or long-term. The main reasons given were children and finance.

'I suppose the only reason I am still here is ... two reasons, I don't want to leave [daughter] behind and two, I can't afford to buy anywhere anyway'. (Male, married, aged 30)

'In two or three years he'll [step son] either be at work or college or whatever and by that time I think we'll have totally separate lives'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 50)

'I'm not fearful of being on my own, although I didn't want to be on my own with two children, but um, financially it would be devastating for both of us'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 37)

However, some of the participants reported that despite their dissatisfaction with the relationship they still had positive feelings about their partner and were personally committed to the relationship.

'It's not great but then I wouldn't want to be without him, like do you know what I mean, I still wouldn't think it is bad enough that I walk out of the door... it's not like he gets drunk or he beats me ... there are a lot of good things between us ... a lot of caring passes between us'. (Female, married, aged 54)

Improving the relationship

Some of the participants felt that their relationship was over and could not be improved, however there was other evidence to suggest that some participants were taking active steps to improve their relationship and were hopeful for its future.

'We have got respect for each other, I am always praising her up but there is, not, but every now and again we lose that respect for each other'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 40)

This same participant attributed the low quality of his relationship to the transition to parenthood and was hopeful that the relationship would improve.

'The equation is that I am putting it down to the baby and the ... and the stress. Once that is all out of the window, if our relationship still did not work then I really don't know... I don't know whether I could, would want to live without the two boys'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 40)

A few of the participants reported that they had previously made effort to improve the relationship but had been frustrated in their attempts.

'If someone comes to me with a problem I like to solve it, you know, work it out, but I can't work this one out, if that's anxiety then that's what it is, but it's frustration I think'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 50)

Some participants reported that the effort that would be required to improve their relationship was high and that because of this they did not have the resources to do so.

'It doesn't seem to be very natural, it all seems to be, 'Well if we can make this work, and if we can, if we can learn to respect each other again' and it all seems a big effort'. (Female, married, aged 37)

Confusion about how they could go about improving their relationship meant that some participants were avoiding addressing their problems. Case study 3 shows a further example of this.

'I am the one who is burying my head in the sand'. (Female, married, aged 54)

Of the participants who felt that their relationship could not be improved and were not making efforts, one implied that he believed that the initial success of his relationship had been due to finding the right partner rather than creating the right partnership. This participant's relationship satisfaction had declined sharply when his partner's affection and attentiveness reduced, to the point where he considered that their relationship would end in divorce.

'Yeah, it's definitely at its lowest ... I knew what I wanted and when I found [partner] and it matched then that was it. I didn't have to worry about anything because we get together and we do this'. (Male, married, aged 30)

Similarly some of the other accounts showed that participants believed the responsibility for the deterioration of the relationship was with their partner and that to improve their relationship the partner needed to change.

'I suppose she could change [to improve the relationship], but she's already changing you see, she's now set in her thing'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 50)

Case study 3. '... it's not right'

Sarah is a married woman in her mid fifties. She has been in her current relationship for around thirty years and she and her husband have one child together who has grown up and left home. The couple both work part-time. Sarah was married previously and when she met her current partner shortly after her divorce she was intending their relationship to be a friendship. However the relationship grew deeper and the couple moved in together. After Sarah had moved in with her partner she decided she wanted to get married and two years later they had their wedding.

Sarah reported that she and her husband had experienced a lot of problems in their relationship, particularly concerning Sarah's miscarriages, her husband's illness and their son leaving home. Sarah says the couple do not communicate very well and they lack empathy with each other. Sarah feels that their relationship is not satisfactory.

'I'm not saying that we are very unhappy people, but it's not right'.

Sarah gives the impression that she and her husband's relationship has eroded over time. She feels that their problems have caused them to lose closeness or, *'togetherness'*, for instance the times when she suffered her miscarriages. Sarah described her miscarriage as a very personal tragedy and one in which her husband could not share.

'... it was kind of something else going wrong in my life and I think he just couldn't understand it, and I think, I suppose like I blamed him because he couldn't understand how I felt'.

Despite her unhappiness in the relationship Sarah does not feel that she wants her relationship to end.

'... it's not great but then I wouldn't want to be without him'.

However Sarah reports that she is currently unwilling to work at the relationship and is *'burying [her] head in the sand'*.

'It's on hold. You know I just haven't got the energy'.

Sarah doesn't really know how she could go about improving her relationship but she is open to suggestions and would like advice.

'If somebody could advise me and say look you should take a direction on this, I am in limbo and just living the day, but don't want to actually make a step in any direction'.

Summary of ‘... It’s not right’

Varying levels of disaffection and dissatisfaction (Kayser and Rao, 2006) were shown by the participants in the group. Many of the participants in this group showed disaffection – where the emotional attachment to a partner had been so eroded that they no longer felt love for their partner and were indifferent towards them. However some of the participants experienced low levels of relationship satisfaction whilst retaining positive feelings towards their partner, referred to by Kayser and Rao as dissatisfaction.

Some of the participants who showed disaffection towards their partner were still committed to their relationship. This finding concurs with research by Johnson et al. (1999) about the nature of commitment within relationships. Participants who showed disaffection frequently reported what Johnson et al. would term ‘structural commitment’ to their relationship, for example that they would remain in their relationship because of their children or due to financial considerations (see also Booth and Amato, 2001).

The participants in the group were split between those who wanted to, or were attempting to improve their relationship and those who did not wish to do so or felt that it was impossible. Some of those who wanted to improve their relationship reported that they found it difficult to achieve. Where attempts were made they were confounded by the effort required, the quality of communication within the relationship and the lack of a clear understanding of how to go about improving the relationship.

The data suggest that some of the relationships within this group shared features of what Gottman (1993) refers to as ‘hostile/detached’ marriages. These marriages are defined through detachment, lack of emotional involvement and periods of attack and defence. The ‘hostile/detached’ marriage is classified as one of two types of unstable relationships in which couples are more likely to experience lower marital satisfaction and consider dissolution and separation. In the later stages of separation Gottman (1994) suggests that couples see marital problems as severe, fail to talk things over, resolve problems separately, lead parallel lives and feel lonely in the relationship.

Huston and Houts (1998) found that affection and attentiveness decline during the early years of marriage. Whilst unrepresentative, some of the quotes from participants evidently showed the consequence of maladaptation to this normal stage of a relationship.

4.2.2 ‘... it’s probably just average’

‘I’d just probably, it’s probably just average you know, it’s probably just an average relationship you’d have with two children, you know?’

The participants in this group perceived their relationship as ‘average’ or ‘ordinary’ with a moderate relationship satisfaction. Case study 4 provides an example of one of the cases within this group.

‘It is all right’. (Male, cohabiting, aged 55)

‘I mean obviously you have the odd blip but nothing sort of major so as far as I’m concerned, just normal’. (Female, married, aged 52)

The themes which were evident within the group are presented below.

Difficult life experiences

There were frequent reports of difficult life experiences within this group. These included, difficult upbringing, problems with previous relationships including a violent ex-partner, insecurity in a partner attributed to his adoption and the inability to have children.

There were also many reports of the problems within the relationships including communication problems, a lack of support, jealousy and a lack of intimacy.

'I would say it's a good relationship, we have certain times where to be honest with you... sometimes it's like being a brother and sister sometimes'. (Male, married, aged 37)

The data suggest that some of the participants had not resolved their relationship problems fully and found it difficult to communicate with their partner about sensitive issues.

Satisfaction with family life rather than relationship

The participants in this group expressed moderate levels of relationship satisfaction. Sources of satisfaction were often attributed to factors which were not explicitly intrinsic to the couple relationship, for example, satisfaction came through being provided with money when required or being in a 'proper family'.

'He's not perfect but you know he does look after us and make us a proper family and he tries hard'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 30)

'I get well looked after, I go out when I want and you know, have money when I want it and stuff like that'. (Male, married, aged 37)

Security

Participants suggested that their relationship provided them with a source of security.

'I think we've got a really good, sturdy relationship. Apart from I would like to get married at some point'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 21)

One participant whose previous partner was violent reported a sense of security through the freedom from violence within her current relationship.

'I know I could push and push and push and push him and he's not going to slap me in the face or things like that'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 30)

Participants recalled a sense of commitment, assurance and guarantee within their relationships. The participants were committed to their relationships and felt that they would endure.

'I mean, if I look forward to ten years I can still see [name] and I together'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 33)

Stability matters most

The strongest theme which emerged from this group was that of stability. Many of the relationships within this group were described in terms of their stability over time, their routine and by a lack of emotional highs or lows.

'It has been [stable] from the start there is no change... it is okay... it is fine, it is just the same as... really nothing has changed... I can't say that it has changed really... Well there are no problems'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 55)

Stability was evident in the structure of the relationship; in time spent together, routine within the relationship and clearly defined roles for the partners.

'You settle down you do get into your own routine which suits me down to the ground and it suits [partner]'. (Female, married, aged 52)

Stability was also evident in the participants' reports of their emotional relationship with their partner. Many of the participants reported stability in their relationship throughout its course and an absence of emotional low and highpoints.

'We're on an even keel, that's the way I look at it'. (Female, married, aged 48)

In certain cases the data suggest a low level of emotional involvement investment in the relationship.

'We don't have any disagreements over anything. She goes her way, I go my way, there is not dispute over anything'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 55)

One participant reported that the routine of day-to-day life had caused the couple to lose closeness with each other but that her husband became aware of this and had rectified the issue.

'You just get used to living together and you know, you don't perhaps have to make so much of an effort and I think we sort of separated and the, I was thinking how am I going to cope on my own and all that and I suppose he realised that he didn't want to lose me or [son]'. (Female, married, aged 41)

Case study 4. '... it's probably just average'

Rosie is a 33 year old woman who is currently cohabiting with her partner. She and her partner have been in an on-and-off relationship for ten years. The couple got engaged six years ago but do not have any firm plans to marry. Rosie and her partner have two children together. Rosie had a serious relationship prior to the current one and refers to her previous partner as the 'love of her life'. This relationship ended when her partner unexpectedly broke off their engagement.

'... the week after that the factory that I was working in burnt down so, I was homeless because we hadn't moved into our house... boyfriendless and jobless and as I say if I'd been of an unsteady character I probably would have killed myself to be honest'.

Rosie and her current partner had a fragile start to their relationship, they broke up several times, tried living together but found it too difficult 'an absolute nightmare' and had only been back together with each other for two months when Rosie found out she was pregnant with their first child, 'I was like, 'Oh my God, can anything else go wrong', you know'. Rosie had been planning to go and work abroad as an au pair at this point but chose to have her daughter and settle down with her partner, 'that was that'. Rosie regrets becoming pregnant but does not regret having her child.

'Yeah, it seemed different. I don't know why, it seemed. Maybe we'd both seem more settled in our relationship because we were gonna have a child together... Some sort of commitment rather than flitting about'.

Rosie thinks the relationship will endure and values feeling financially secure and settled.

'Well we've got a nice new house, we're having an extension on the side in a couple of years time and having a dining room and a spare room and a utility and... We've done... well. It's all about money innit? I think it is'.

Rosie does not feel that the relationship would have endured if they had not had children together and feels that having them has caused them to argue in a more constructive way and solve problems for the sake of their children. Rosie thinks that her relationship is 'probably just average' and uses words like 'okay' and 'alright' to describe it but hopes that improved circumstances in the future will make it better.

'Hopefully fingers crossed it should get better because you know, our wages will go up once the, both the children are at school ... so, we'll, hopefully it'll get better ... it should get better ... I can honestly believe it will get better because the kids will get older and they'll get easier'.

Rosie was really hurt by her previous relationship and does not want to get hurt again so she has tried to avoid getting 'sucked in' to her current relationship. Rosie still has feelings for her ex, and does not know who she would choose given the chance again.

Rosie felt that her relationship deteriorated at one stage because she and her partner were not communicating. Rosie mentioned the possibility of going to Relate to her partner and felt that when she did this their relationship improved. She thinks that her partner must have taken her suggestion on board and improved as a result.

'He must have [taken Rosie's suggestion of counselling on board] because he's been, he's been fine ever since. He just must have, yeah. He did, yeah... I can't see that anything else can... be worse than that. I honestly can't... I can't, so finger's crossed'.

In retrospect Rosie does not think that things were bad enough for them to have actually gone to Relate and that his poor communication was just down to him 'being a man'.

Summary of ‘... it’s probably just average’

Some of the themes which emerged from this group were similar to those found within relationships referred to as ‘traditional’ by Fitzpatrick (1988) or ‘institutional’ by Cherlin (2004). Key characteristics of ‘traditional’ relationships are interdependence – a high degree of companionship and sharing reinforced by use of time and space, and a regular schedule. Fitzpatrick observed that within relationships of this type there is a greater emphasis on stability than on satisfaction and that ‘traditionals’ hold conventional values on relationships. Similarly, Cherlin (2004), reported that ‘institutional’ marriages are defined by a shared single identity to which personal interests were subordinated, and a relatively strict division of labour according to gender.

‘It’s quite a steady relationship, he goes out to work, I stay at home’. (Female, cohabiting, aged 21)

The participants’ accounts showed that satisfaction within the relationship was often related to factors which were external to the relationship. Waite et al. (2002) studied satisfaction within marriage and reported that satisfaction does not depend solely on the quality of interactions with the spouse but how a person views marriage in general – as a social status and shared ideal. Waite and colleagues suggested if marriage is highly prized a person will get more satisfaction from it, *‘The happiness anyone gets from any role in life ... depends in part on how satisfying one finds the day-to-day interactions ... but it also depends on whether one sees the role itself as important and valuable’* (p.32).

‘... he does look after us and make us a proper family’. (Female, cohabiting, aged 30)

Gottman’s relationship research (1993) described different types of relationships. As mentioned by the summary of ‘it’s not right’ two of these groups were understood to be unstable, however Gottman also described three stable relationship types. The participants within this group shared some similarities with those described as ‘conflict avoiders’ who were defined by Gottman as individuals who suppress or minimise the importance of difficulties within a relationship to avoid conflict in interaction. Some of the data from the participants in the group suggested that there were unresolved issues within the relationships and that a few individuals found it difficult to communicate about sensitive issues with their partner. There were also some reports of a lack of emotional involvement which on occasion had caused dissonance in a relationship. These accounts are reflected in Gottman and Krokoff’s finding (cited in Wilson and Gottman 1995) that, *‘the continued use of this pattern over the long-term course of marriage may lead to feelings of separateness, interpersonal distance and low levels of companionship and sharing’* (p.47).

4.2.3 ‘We’re completely happy’

‘We’re completely happy you know, we really are, we get on fine’.

This group was characterised by high relationship satisfaction. This was the most prevalent relationship perception amongst the participants.

‘... we’re just sort of, quite quite happy. Well we’re very, we’re very happy’. (Female, married, aged 25)

‘It’s great, I mean I couldn’t be happier. I mean we have a nice life together and like I say, we don’t argue, it’s just that we get on’. (Male, cohabiting, aged 38)

The themes which emerged from this group are presented below.

Few difficulties

In general this group reported relatively few relationship difficulties and reported a low level of conflict with their partner.

'Virtually everybody has got some problem or other with their relationships ... and we don't really seem to have so, I think we're in the minority'. (Male, married, aged 42)

'There wasn't any, we haven't had any conflicts it's been, It's been too good really! It has, it's been erbut I think ... I don't know whether it's our age difference, I mean'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 52)

'I'll be honest, I think most of the time it's been pretty good, I don't think either of us have any regrets or anything like that at all, it's been pretty good'. (Male, married, aged 42)

On the whole, participants made a clear distinction between external stressors and their relationship and viewed their relationship as providing resilience against such factors.

'In fact none of the things we've ever done have [unclear] has caused problems with our relationship, you know, you support each other'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 36)

'Really strong, um, partnership, you know, we always have been there'. (Female, married, aged 33)

Closeness

Participants' data revealed a strong theme related to 'closeness' and 'togetherness' within the relationship. Many of the participants discussed their initial attraction to their partner and ongoing love for each other.

'I would just like us to stay together and be like we are ... I mean, as in communicating with each other, caring about each other and loving each other'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 44)

The data showed that participants' communication was a significant factor in their level of intimacy.

'Yeah, I think you've gotta. If you don't talk to each other, then the other one doesn't know what you want. You don't automatically want the same thing all the time. We have different opinions, but if you talk to each other then you know what the other one is thinking so you are on the same wave length'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 21)

Balancing needs

Many of the participants' accounts contained a theme of balance. This was shown in the participants' discussion of time spent as a couple and time by themselves.

'I would probably describe that we have got the balance right in the way that we can talk to each other, we can socialise together, we can socialise with friends and we can socialise separately. If he wants to go out, he can. If I want to go out, I can, there's not issues of him getting jealous if I go out or vice versa or any of that, I think we have this trust between us and I think we have probably developed that trust over a number of years really, so yes'. (Female, married, age unknown)

'I don't, I don't know we just seem to, to get on with our own lives and, and just fit in to each other that sort, and just snuggly fit in if you like'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 52)

'We don't place any restrictions on each other'. (Male, married, aged 33)

The participants' accounts showed that this balance was facilitated by the level of trust which the couple shared with each other.

'... we've got, we've got a totally open relationship where there's no jealousy or anything like that... She goes away for a bit, I go golfing for a week... and, 'Yeah carry on' you know'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 52)

'It's horribly sort of equitable'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 36)

Identity – a sense of belonging

Some of the participants' data concerned their shared identity within the couple.

'I mean we have a nice life together and like I say, we don't argue it's just that we get on... an old married couple. It's fine. It's difficult to describe really. We're the best of friends, we've got a couple of brilliant kids running about and it's great, I mean I couldn't be happier'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 38)

These participants' identities were often very closely aligned with their role as partner or parent and their accounts often emphasised the importance of the continuance of the relationship.

'It's just that we are a family unit now and it's more secure I suppose'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 21)

'All our friends are all married for 20-30 years. It is quite important that it lasts now. I think it would be a horrifying thing if it didn't last now'. (Male, married, aged 44)

Agency within the relationship

The participants described their relationships positively. The success of their relationship was sometimes attributed to factors which were outside of the control of the partners. Participants described how they had *'found'* their relationship rather than created it, how it had been *'designed for someone like me'* and how they felt *'fortunate'* to have such a relationship.

'My first marriage was a bit intense at times... passionate is probably the word. But this is a more peaceful relationship, designed ideally for someone like me'. (Male, married, aged 56)

'I think we have a very good relationship actually, we are very fortunate'. (Female, married, age unknown)

Reports of active investment in relationship work was not frequent the participants' accounts and some suggested that their relationships were *'easy'*, had developed naturally and did not require intensive work to maintain. Case study 5 provides an illustration of this finding.

'We both know that we've found what we want, and there's no problem'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 52)

'It's just an easy life between us'. (Male, married, aged 33)

A few of the participants described how any relationship problems were not actively addressed but were resolved passively.

'Just sort of resolve themselves I think, I don't think we, we um necessarily do anything about it, just sort of resolves itself'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 52)

Case study 5. 'We're completely happy'

James is a 41 year old man who's currently in higher education training, he has been married to his wife for eight years but has been in the relationship for 11 years. The couple do not have any children but his wife is currently pregnant. James had a few relationships before he met his wife but none of them lasted much more than a year and he does not view them as significant. James reported that he and his wife were instantly attracted to each other when they met and their relationship developed quickly.

'It was pretty much love at first sight with us. Yeah, instant, instant attraction... I think to be realistic, after knowing each other for a few weeks, there wasn't any doubt that we weren't going to be together... It was one of those things'.

James and his wife moved in together quite quickly and he did not recall any difficulties during this transition.

'I think we just were swept along with the whole love of each other really and there wasn't any obvious adjustments we were both just swept along with it, so there was nothing conscious'.

James did not really recall a time when their relationship became more committed, *'Not really I mean it was almost just assumed'*. He found the decision to get married really easy and did not find that anything really changed after marriage.

James recalled that during their relationship they had had a few stressful patches and *'Niggles'*. James did not feel that the arguments were ever serious or that they ever caused the couple to question their relationship. James believed that the arguments were a reaction to the stress of jobs they did not like and money the couple spent on socialising and that they both contributed to them equally.

'I think we both realised that we were under stress and we both realised a lot of what was being said was purely venting stress. I think we were both pretty clued in to what was going on'.

James and his wife are open with each other and communicate well. James feels that he and his wife are very close and that this has increased over time.

'We're the sort of people that can spend every second of every day together quite happily and did so for a year travelling. And people said to us, 'Oh well you know spending so much time together, you'll hate her, you'll end up apart' and it just makes us stronger'.

James is really confident in his relationship and can not really conceive of a way in which it could be damaged.

'Erm, I can't really see a situation where it would happen. Maybe I've got rosy spectacles on but I just... total confidence yeah, I mean the only biggy would be the infidelity and that's just not going to happen'.

James feels that the attraction he and his wife feel towards each other is really important and doesn't really understand couples who don't experience this intensity at the start of their relationship. James felt a strong need to be with his wife from the early stages of their relationship but by waiting a few years before getting married he feels sure of his decision.

Summary of 'We're completely happy'

Most of the participants held this perception about their relationship and clearly tie in with the findings from the previous chapter on enduring relationships. Whilst the participants in the group all reported a high level of relationship satisfaction there was a great deal of variation in the accounts. Some of the relationships which were described appeared to be very established and developed whilst others appeared to have been relatively untested by difficult times.

Some of the participants reported how they felt fortunate to be in a good relationship and that they had not invested in their relationship to make it work. The accounts of these participants suggested that they lacked a sense of 'agency' or control over the course of the relationship. This clearly has implications regarding their ability to improve their relationship should any difficulties arise in the future. A perceived lack of agency within relationships is discussed in Section 4.4.2. In relation, Karney and Bradbury (1995) reported that couples with poor coping and communication skills might remain happy in their relationship if they do not face many stressful life events. These findings suggest that it is important not to focus support only on those who perceive their relationship to be in distress.

4.2.4 '... we will get through it'.

'If we get...we will get through it, but once we get through it then I'll be looking back and think, 'Christ, we can get through anything!'.

The participants in this group were characterised by their view that their relationship was 'up and down' but that they were committed to working and improving it. The participants perceived their relationships to be in a transitional stage.

'... 'cause we are going through a very, very stressful patch at the moment and it's really putting strain on our relationship'. (Female, married, aged 23)

'At the beginning, more downs than ups, definitely. But now there's more ups than downs'. (Female, cohabiting, age unknown)

Some of the participants' data suggested that there was emotional volatility within their relationships.

'Very stressful, very happy'. (Male, married, aged 41)

'I think it's on a high at the moment'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 40)

Difficulties

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given that the participants were defined by their perception of 'ups and downs' within their relationship the participants were conscious of the difficulties they had, or continued to face.

'... for a long time we went through the stage, both of us, where we didn't feel that we were both being honest with each other and we weren't trusting each other or anything'. (Female, cohabiting, age unknown)

The participants also recalled some of the adverse situations which had triggered their

relationship difficulties. These included financial concerns, ill health and problems with children. The participants reported the consequences of these difficulties.

'It felt like you were on a constant battle with your best friend that is how it felt'. (Male, married, age unknown)

'There are a few strains on it but it is bearing under the strain as it were'. (Male, married, aged 25)

The participants' accounts suggested that the couples were working to resolve their difficulties with their partner.

Commitment

The participants remained committed to their relationships despite the relationship difficulties they faced.

'We knew we'd get through it, because I mean we'd been through the miscarriage before, and, well experiences from my first marriage and her first marriage'. (Male, married, aged 50)

Participants recalled that they had experienced moments of dissonance between their expectations and experiences within their relationship but that they had overcome these doubts.

'I think for quite a while it was like, I don't want to be with him and then, when I wanted him I was thinking, 'Oh god'. I suppose at that time it was like, 'I can't live without you, I can't live with you''. (Female, cohabiting, age unknown)

'It felt like she was not... she turned into something else and I did think at one point this is probably going to be the end of the relationship'. (Male, married, aged 25)

Developing the relationship

The participants' commitment to their relationship was shown through their awareness of the need for active relationship work to get them through their difficult times with their partner.

'A lot, you commit yourself to something and you see it through, and [partner has] even said that herself, since this all blew up, she made a promise at the altar... She has said she made a commitment at the altar to stay with me, and she's going to see it through so ... it seems strange I know'. (Male, married, aged 49)

A perception of what made their relationship work was very salient within the data. Participants were conscious of what they needed to do to improve their relationships and were actively putting this knowledge into use.

'... actually we're getting on really well in the last month or so, we've made time'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 26)

The participants were aware that their relationships were developing and going through transitions and reported how they were actively involved in this process.

'I'd say it was happy, not mind blowing, 'this is the greatest thing that ever happened to me'. Still on a big and upward slope'. (Male, married, age 50)

'I wouldn't say it's the happiest ever, but then I think to myself, what is totally happy? If you're totally happy then there's nothing left to build on'. (Female, cohabiting, age unknown)

Case study 6. '... we will get through it'

George is in his early 40s, has been in a relationship with his partner for ten years and is getting married soon. George was married before but broke up with his wife after having had an affair with his current partner who was his wife's best friend. George was unfaithful to his ex wife several times. George has a child from his previous marriage and his partner has two children with her previous husband.

George and his partner have been through quite a few problems in their relationship. At one point George gave up work and went back to university which resulted in the couple having less money and time together. This caused stress on the couple's relationship. George's ex wife has also caused problems through her continued visits to the house to see his partner.

George has recently had an affair which he attributes to his fear of the upcoming marriage, his partner found out and they have since been working on their communication together.

'I do think it's on a high because you know, I think I've got through to [partner] how much I care about her, and how much I regret what's happened and how much I really want our relationship to work'.

George feels that he has learnt about himself and the relationship recently.

'Perhaps everything I've been reluctant to give her, I don't know why, I'm willing to give to the relationship so you know. That is all she's ever wanted from me and why I've been so reluctant, I don't know'.

George is worried about getting married to his partner because he fears that his ex wife might react badly to this development and disrupt his relationship with his child from this relationship.

Summary of '... we will get through it'.

This group was defined by the 'ups' and 'downs' they perceived in their relationship. The participants reported that there was often conflict within their relationships but that they were committed to working through problems with their partner. Some of the participants reported very difficult times in their relationship and had experienced dissonance between their relationship expectations and the realities of life with their partner. However, these participants had remained committed to their relationships during these times and endured through the difficulties they faced.

The illustrations above show examples of how some participants reported the couple's commitment to dealing with a significant relationship problem and reflects the different types of commitment which were investigated by Johnson (1991). This research proposes that commitment to a relationship is not a unitary phenomenon but involved three distinct aspects; 'personal', 'moral' and 'structural' commitment.

Relationship research has explored the stages that relationships go through and demonstrated that it is normal for relationship satisfaction to vary as the relationship

develops and partners strive to find a balance between their individual identity and their shared identity with a partner. For example, Reynolds (2008, citing the work of Kovacs 1988) observes that, *'It is often during the transition from one stage to another that conflict occurs, for example, as partners realise how unrealistic their expectations of one another were and start to revise them'* (p.37). Accounts of volatility within the group coupled with the participants' reports that they were committed to working through their relationship problems suggest that these participants were engaging in conflict as a process of negotiation towards the improvement and progression in a relationship. This finding is in contrast to participants in other groups who reported little conflict in their relationship, and which in some cases suggested a lack of emotional involvement with a partner.

4.2.5 '... solid, but it's one which we've worked at'.

'... solid but it's one which we've worked at. I think many couples today fail at the first hurdle, I mean many friends of ours have failed at the first hurdle, the second hurdle, they're not willing to work at a marriage'.

This group was characterised by high levels of relationship satisfaction attributed to investment in, and development of, the relationship. Data from this group suggested that participants were aware of what made their relationship work, had worked through difficult times in their relationship and were currently working to maintain the stability they had established.

'It's different because when we first got married, it's a bit like a football team in the fourth division, sorry to get into... you're struggling but you're learning, and now I think we're a premiership team where we work very well together'. (Male, married, aged 38)

'I knew we would get through it and the way I see it is he loves me and he would sort himself out if he's got the problem and I love him that much then I'd sort it out'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 28)

Relationship work

This group showed a great awareness of the need for working on their relationship. Through the experience of being in their relationship the participants had learned what they felt made a relationship work, were aware of the need to put this into action in their relationship and had done so.

'You've got to remain committed, I mean ... if you can work through the hard times, the easy times are so easy'. (Male, married, aged 38)

A theme of learning was strong within the relationships in the group. This concerned learning about the self, partner and relationship.

'... the period when I foolishly thought she was having an affair, but that was just... I don't know where that came from. I think that was the dawning of the realisation that I was backing out of the family environment and concentrating on work'. (Male, married, aged 48)

'I think learned from that experience, that the grass is not greener on the other side, that we've got a good marriage, and we have had for many years and I put that in jeopardy'. (Male, married, aged 52)

Some of the participants reported that they had learnt how to make their relationship work

through both experiences with their current partner and also with their previous partners.

'I came in and then I suddenly went bong, and he went dong in his direction, and we never did come back together, but with [current partner] I think we're working together, what's the word...[it] has come good, we are working towards a goal at the end'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 45)

Observing other couples with relationship difficulties had also helped some of the participants understand what they needed to do to ensure stability within their own. One participant reported that through observing the breakdown of her partner's parents' relationship the couple had become aware of the need to invest in their own.

'We just felt it was so important that we stopped, all the time, to talk to each other... it brought us very much together in terms of, it was quite, very grown up'. (Female, married, aged 39)

The participants' data showed that they felt they were active agents in their relationship and had control over its progression. This was shown in the way that they employed their learning to improve the relationship.

'We do know how each other works, I know what I could say to upset [Partner] and I don't say it ... I know what things can make things run right'. (Male, married, aged 38)

Change

A theme of change or development within relationships was strong in the data from this group.

'We've had our ups and downs and we've seen them through and we've had our tentative moments, but the relationship and we are strong enough to see it through'. (Male, married, aged 48)

Many of the participants felt that the difficult experiences which they had shared with their partner had improved their capacity to cope and strengthened the couple's bond.

'We have had difficult times, you know, but that's where your strength comes from isn't it'. (Male, married, aged 38)

'Our relationship has been tested and I don't think that anything else could come close'. (Female, married, aged 25)

One participant reported how his partner's miscarriage had been a totally shared experience with the couple and had brought the couple closer together as a result.

'I guess you're both involved and it's happening to both of you. Whereas when my father died ... she's looking in from the outside ... I mean with the miscarriage we're both there. Whereas before yeah it always had been one person supporting the other'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 36)

The participants' data suggested that their relationships were in a period of stability or resolution.

'Yes, it's much more settled, it seems more right, it seems more happier, it seems more guaranteed, can I use the word guaranteed, it seems more, oh, April he asked me to marry

him, that's another one up there'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 45)

Maintenance

The participants were conscious that they had invested in their relationship to make it work and to attain their current level of relationship satisfaction. The accounts also showed that the participants remained aware of the need to monitor and maintain their relationship to ensure its quality was sustained.

'That as well yeah, we've clicked into each other, we know what works, we can see the situation that's coming and know how to deal with it'. (Male, married, aged 38)

The participants were aware of the value of their relationship and cherished what they had created with their partners.

'It's a permanent high, even though we've got all the problems. I wouldn't swap her having the best of health if it meant losing this thing we've got'. (Male, married, aged 48)

Case study 7. '... solid, but it's one which we've worked at'

David is 52 and has been married for 26 years, he and his wife have one son together. David cohabited with his partner before marriage. David was happy with this situation because he felt he had the best of both worlds by being in the relationship but still being able to go out alone to enjoy himself however David's partner wanted more security than cohabitation provided her with and so they got married. David felt that it was quite hard for him to settle down.

'I found it very difficult to adopt a married lifestyle of staying in and just going out as a couple, and it took me ten years I guess to get round to that fact'.

About 20 years ago David had a six month affair. David does not think that he was looking for an affair but it just happened.

'Maybe it was at a time when we were just, how shall I put it, coasting along as it were in the relationship'.

David's wife found out about his affair and he moved out of the marital home but continued the affair. During this period he kept in regular contact with his wife and after about six months David ended his affair. David didn't expect that his wife would take him back but worked really hard to re establish the relationship even though David admits it would probably have been easier for him to start a new relationship with somebody else.

'... gradually over months we got back together again ... I think people give up too easily and I think that they don't work hard enough at it, as I said before they accept it and they don't try to talk to each other and get back'.

David feels that it took years of work to restore the trust which he had broken and that it was two or three years before their sexual relationship had recovered and ten years before his wife trusted him again. David thinks that their relationship is stronger now as a result of the affair.

'Life is all about these things, a learning process, I don't think I would have changed anything and I think I learned from that experience'.

David feels that he and his wife have different strengths which complement each other and that they now work well as a team.

'... she's a foil for some of my weaknesses if you like and we seem to gel together quite well, some of her strengths, some of my strengths and weaknesses and work together as a team'.

David reports that the couple is still aware that they need to invest in their relationship after 30 years to make sure that it is maintained.

'We have a lot of time together but we do point out sometimes that, for example going out for years, we said last year, we definitely every two weeks are going to go out because ... after 30 years, do you go out enough? And we decided that we didn't socialise enough, particularly [partner] ... I think by resurrecting it, it helps the relationship ... we make a conscious effort now to go to a restaurant every other week'.

Summary of ‘... solid, but it’s one which we’ve worked at’

Some of the themes that emerged within this group were similar to those described in the group termed ‘... we will get through it’. For example, the participants were aware of the need to invest in their relationship and were actively doing so. This group was distinguished by their reports of high relationship satisfaction and less volatility or, ‘ups and downs’.

The data from this group suggest that the participants’ relationships had developed. The accounts from this group conveyed a sense of a relationship story from earlier difficulties and conflict through to a satisfactory conclusion which was apparent in the participants’ descriptions of resolution and stability in their relationship at the time of interview.

Karney and Bradbury (1995) report that if a couple is able to adapt successfully to the pressures they face they will strengthen or maintain their relationship and reduce the chances of relationship breakdown. Their stress adaptation model (Karney and Bradbury 1995) goes on to show how personal strengths and weaknesses (influenced by previous experiences and mental health) interact with stressful life events and shape an individual’s capacity to cope with life events. Participants in this group frequently spoke about how the experience of difficulties with their partner had strengthened their relationship.

An interesting contrast to this finding is that some participants who perceived their relationship as unsatisfactory reported that difficult life events had caused damage in their relationships. The following quotes show how two participants reported their different experiences of a similar event. These quotes highlight how the way a couple adapts to a difficulty may have more bearing on the course of the relationship than the actual occurrence of a difficult life event.

‘With the miscarriage we’re both there, whereas before yeah it always had been one person supporting the other... I mean we were both gutted, so yeah. And I think it did pull us together... I think I understand love more [than I] did in the past’. (Male, cohabiting, aged 36)

‘Everybody is to blame, you know what I mean, like you know, and the person you are with gets it the worst. But I think the only factor that kept us together at times like that, is the fact that we had a son ... and I mean after the second miscarriage, I went to [interviewee’s home country] for about three months and I took our son with me, and he actually said to a good friend of mine who is a friend of his, that he didn’t know if I was coming back’. (Female, married, aged 51)

The first quote describes an event in which the partners could share equally and provide support for each other which resulted in a closer bond - clearly illustrating the importance of understanding self and partner. The second quote describes a very personal and individual experience which was not shared and resulted in a reduction in closeness between the couple.

The accounts from participants in this group suggested that they perceived themselves as active agents in their relationships with control over the course of their relationship. The participants perceived change within their relationship and how they had been involved in this change, for example by learning about their partner and putting this into action. They also discussed the processes and difficulties they had gone through to establish their current level of relationship satisfaction. Whilst many of the participants reported a level of stability or resolution within their relationship attributed to previous relationship work, the data also showed that they remained aware of what made their relationship work and ensured that they monitored and maintained their relationship. This finding is in contrast to some of the

themes which developed in other groups which suggested that some participants felt less control over the course of their relationship and were less engaged in relationship work.

4.3 Conclusion

4.3.1 Discussion: ‘developmental’ and ‘non-developmental’ relationship beliefs

Research shows that relationship breakdown is associated with detrimental impacts on both the individuals in a relationship and also the children who experience this event (see Coleman and Glenn, 2009 for a review). There is also increasing evidence to suggest that the quality of a couple’s relationship has a significant impact on the quality of their parenting (Reynolds, 2001; Strohschein, 2005; Feinberg and Kan, 2008; Reynolds, 2008). As such, effective early intervention relationship support may have the potential to prevent relationship deterioration *and* improve parenting.

The attitudes and beliefs people hold about their relationship have an impact on the quality of the relationship and its long-term stability (Bradbury and Karney, 2004). A key strength of this research is that it is based on data from participants in ongoing long-term relationships which has not been biased by relationship breakdown. As such the results provide an ecologically valid insight into some of the attitudes and beliefs which occur in relationships. Examining these processes can provide insight into the ways to support and strengthen couple relationships. As an example, the results indicated that the participants’ perception of control over the course of their relationship varied and by encouraging a sense of agency in people we could help them to strengthen their relationship.

Up to this point the themes which emerged during analysis have been presented within the groups in which they were most prevalent. These groups were defined by the way in which a participant viewed their relationship and the themes which emerged within the group were used to illustrate the attitudes and beliefs of people who perceived their relationship in a similar way.

However, themes presented in one group could also be apparent in another. One striking finding was seeing the importance of relationship work, which was strong in two groups (*‘...we will get through it’* and *‘...solid, but it’s one which we’ve worked at’*). Seeing the importance of relationship work underpinned many of the themes which emerged during analysis. This concept concerned the nature of the attitudes and beliefs about relationships and these were defined as either ‘developmental’ or ‘non-developmental’. A ‘developmental’ perspective conveyed the belief that relationships were dynamic and went through changes over time. A ‘non-developmental’ perspective was associated with the belief that a relationship was a solid and inflexible entity.

Consider the following quotes, the first from a female who describes her relationship as ‘very happy’ and the second from a participant who believes his relationship is beyond repair:

‘I suppose we have a deeper understanding of each other, I mean when we first met it was a fairy tale romance. It has been a fairy tale romance... and we couldn’t keep our hands off each other... whereas now... he can sit in one chair and I can sit in another chair, and I don’t feel the need to sort of cuddle him all the time...’ (Female, married, aged 25)

‘We could never walk past each other without touching, or a little kiss or something. That

has all gone out of the window, and it was stuff like that that she stopped doing. But I like those silly little things... I don't want to be hurt again, I don't feel I need her affection. I am now quite self sufficient, I don't feel I need to be with her'. (Male, married, aged 30)

Both accounts describe a similar process of reduction of affection and attentiveness which Kovacs (1988) describes as a normal stage of relationship change. However the accounts describe a very different understanding of this process and different reactions to it. The first participant describes learning about her partner and attributes a reduction in affection as part of development within her relationship, whilst the second participant reports that the reduction of affection in his relationship signified deterioration, that he had felt rejected by his partner, and ultimately that he had responded by disengaging from the relationship.

This illustration highlights how different relationship beliefs may influence the course of a relationship and provide examples of 'developmental' and 'non-developmental' relationship beliefs. While this study has demonstrated beliefs dichotomously, Rusbult et al. (1993) extend this understanding by suggesting that relationship beliefs vary on at least two dimensions – 'relationships fixed' versus 'relationships grow' (similar to the 'developmental' and 'non-developmental' beliefs') alongside 'romance and passion' versus 'practical concerns'.

'Developmental' views about a relationship were evident in themes where participants conveyed that they perceived themselves as active agents with control over the course of their relationship and described learning about themselves their partner and their relationship and employing this knowledge by investing in relationship work. Other themes which conveyed this perspective included recognising and responding positively to relationship change, overcoming doubts and dissonance, and successfully dealing with difficult times in relationships. These themes were most prevalent in (but not limited to) the groups labelled '*... we will get through it*' and '*... solid but it's one we've worked at*' and are presented in the results section. For further illustration, the following extracts provide examples of those holding 'developmental' beliefs about their relationship.

'We do know how each other works, I know what I could say to upset [Partner] and I don't say it ... I know what things can make things run right'. (Male, married, aged 38)

'We knew we'd get through it, because I mean we'd been through the miscarriage before, and, well experiences from my first marriage and her first marriage'. (Male, married, aged 50)

'Yeah, I think you've gotta. If you don't talk to each other, then the other one doesn't know what you want. You don't automatically want the same thing all the time. We have different opinions, but if you talk to each other then you know what the other one is thinking so you are on the same wave length'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 21)

'... we were vying for positions within the relationship, and I think it has taken some time to establish that there isn't a dominant partner in the relationship'. (Male, married, aged 42)

In contrast, some of the themes presented in the results section suggested 'non-developmental' relationship beliefs where participants conveyed a sense that they had low agency or control over the course of their relationship. Some of the themes in which these beliefs were apparent included participants' perceptions that they were lucky to have a good relationship, that they had 'found' the right partner rather than worked to create a good partnership, that they did not perceive a great deal of conflict or change within their relationship, that they did not invest heavily in relationship work, and in some cases that they felt unable to improve their relationship. These themes were most salient in the groups categorised as '*we're completely happy*' and '*it's probably just average*'.

The following quotes are from participants whose data suggested they held 'non-developmental' beliefs about their relationships.

'I think we have a very good relationship actually, we are very fortunate'. (Female, married, age unknown)

'Yeah, it's definitely at its lowest ... I knew what I wanted and when I found [partner] and it matched, then that was it. I didn't have to worry about anything because we get together and we do this'. (Male, married, aged 30)

'It has been [stable] from the start there is no change... it is okay... it is fine, it is just the same as... really nothing has changed... I can't say that it has changed really... Well there are no problems'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 55)

It is intuitive to suggest that people who hold 'developmental' beliefs may be more likely to experience enduring and relatively satisfying relationships. Holding such a belief provides a narrative framework for managing dissatisfaction and a perception that things can improve or that difficult times will pass. The 'developmental' belief signifies an awareness of change, being less threatened by change, and an ability to make changes or seek out resources to help.

This section has illustrated the difference between 'developmental' and 'non-developmental' relationship beliefs and how they can occur across a variety of differently perceived relationships. Based upon the assumption (not assessed in the analysis) that people who hold 'developmental' beliefs are likely to have more successful relationships (in that they are more motivated to maintain and improve their relationship), the findings from this chapter can be used to develop interventions derived from these beliefs. For example, one suggestion could be to provide early intervention which lets people know that it is normal for affection and attentiveness to decline in the early stages of a relationship and the reasons for this process.

The results also highlight the potential benefits of universal early intervention relationship support, for example, by making sure that people are aware that it is normal for relationships to go through different stages associated with varying levels of relationship satisfaction and that this does not indicate deterioration in a relationship. Providing this type of information universally, for example in an education setting, has the potential to increase people's understanding of relationships and prevent serious relationship difficulties from developing. The case for universal early intervention is also backed up by the finding that some people who reported high relationship satisfaction (and assumed would be unlikely to be actively seeking relationship support), held 'non-developmental' relationship beliefs which may have negative consequences for the long-term prospects of their relationship. This suggestion is backed up by Huston (2009) who reported the finding that couples who divorced later were often the, *'...blissful newlyweds of popular imagination'* (p319).

These *individual* 'developmental' and 'non-developmental' beliefs and perceived capabilities about relationship work also tie in with the *'individual strengths, vulnerabilities and propensities'* (Bradbury and Karney, 2004, p.871) that act as powerful influences on the developmental course of a relationship. Bradbury and Karney (2004) argue that these individual attributes act alongside interactional and stressful events and circumstances to affect relationship satisfaction. Within stressful events and circumstances, Bradbury and Karney (2004) also describe developmental transitions which, based on the attributes of those with a 'developmental' belief, would be more easily negotiated compared to those with a 'non-developmental' belief. The work of Bradbury and Karney (2004) concludes that focusing solely on interactional processes, without an appreciation of the individual and

stressful contexts, will reduce the effectiveness of relationship interventions. This final point implies that the ways in which people perceive their relationship state, and the external sources of relationship difficulty (such as unemployment, illness, etc.), are essential to appreciate when providing relationship support alongside the interactional processes.

Focus group findings

Data from the focus groups were explored to provide further illustration of 'developmental' and 'non-developmental' relationship beliefs. The results are presented below according to the themes which were most prevalent in the data.

Understanding relationship change

'Well that develops. You find that out as you go along don't you? Initially it's the two of you and you don't want anybody else, then gradually things sort of change and gradually friends and things that sort of thing stretches out. Eventually when you've got children and things, you tend to give each other space, and you tend to socialise separately. I think it just evolves differently. There are different stages. The problem is not becoming too separate, I think still trying to keep a common interest'. (Female, aged under 40)

Interpretation relationship difficulties

'At the beginning it's all so perfect, but it can't be perfect forever can it. It would get boring'. (Female, aged under 40)

Overcoming dissonance between expectations and reality

'At one time I literally made plans to leave when our daughter was born...I did make plans to go, and then situations changed and say, six months after it was a hundred times better than it had been before'. (Female, aged under 40)

Agency

'You have the control you want to put into it'. (Male, aged over 40)

'You have to be in the right place at the right time you know'. (Male, aged under 40)

Understanding conflict as a process

'I don't think people can go through a relationship and never expect to argue. I...have a feeling that if you never argue with someone you never really get to the depths of what they are thinking about...And when someone splits up people say but you never argued, well if they never argue what are they doing'. (Male, aged over 40)

Learning about a relationship

'I think you go into a marriage and think everything is rosy and obviously things aren't rosy all the time and I think you have just got to learn. You are growing up together sort of thing, you are learning all the time. Every day could be a different experience. I think you have got to take from it what you can and learn from it'. (Male, aged over 40)

Chapter 5. Relationship improvement behaviour

5.1 Introduction

Relationship breakdown is associated with detrimental impacts on the people in the relationship (see Coleman and Glenn, 2009 for a review). In addition to this, the association between couple relationships and the outcome for the family is of sufficient strength for Harold (2001) to describe as the, 'Conductor of the family orchestra'. The recent 'Support For All: The Families and Relationships Green Paper' (DCSF, 2010) and 'The Centre for Social Justice Green Paper on the Family' (The Centre for Social Justice, 2010) emphasise the importance of supporting people when their relationships come under strain.

This chapter provides an overview of the behaviour that participants engaged in with their partner to resolve relationship issues, the support they sought from outside of their relationship, and an analysis of people's attitudes and beliefs concerning relationship support. Understanding people's attitudes to relationship improvement is of great relevance when considering the ways in which intervention designed to strengthen couple's relationships can be most effective. Developing effective support for couple's relationships is likely to provide benefits for both the people in a relationship and their children.

The conclusion provides a summary of the main findings and also incorporates learning from Chapter 4 concerning 'developmental' and 'non-developmental' relationship beliefs with the findings to highlight how these beliefs impact upon relationship improvement and help-seeking behaviour.

5.2 Results

The results are presented as follows:

Relationship improvement and help-seeking behaviour

This section includes the participants' reports of how they resolved relationship difficulties and how they used external relationship support.

Attitudes to relationship improvement and support

The second section concerns the participants' attitudes to relationship improvement and support and the factors which made a support source acceptable.

5.2.1 Relationship improvement and help-seeking behaviour

This section is presented in two sections as follows:

1. Relationship improvement behaviour
2. Help-seeking behaviour

1. Relationship improvement behaviour

Talking

As shown by the findings in Chapters 2 and 3 the participants placed great importance upon the need for good communication within a relationship. The primary method of resolving relationship difficulties reported by the participants was by talking through issues.

'There's nothing in our relationship over that period of time that I would say that we've had a significant falling out. We've had disagreements many times but we get over it, we try to talk it through'. (Male, married, aged 56)

'... sometimes I'll say about it and sometimes he'll say about it. I mean we talk to each other. If we've got a problem then we talk to each other about it, so it's good really'. (Female, married, aged 20)

Many of the participants reported that ensuring they had good communication with their partner prevented serious relationship problems from developing.

'I can't think of an occasion within a relationship, after twenty-four years, that can not be discussed. If there is a problem and it can't be discussed, then the marriage really does have problem'. (Male, married, aged 48)

'We go to bed every night, and we cuddle every night. But as for anything sexual, sometimes, it can be once every six weeks, sometimes it can be four nights on the trot in one week, whereas then it might not be for another six weeks that we do anything. But it's... it's being able to, like you say, being able to talk about it ... You know, we can talk about it, we can joke about it.' (Female, cohabiting, aged 35)

Some of the participants reported that talking openly with their partner prevented tension and resentment from developing and prevented arguments.

'We were both amazed how people argue, and the fact that we don't argue, we talk about it. Sort it out. I have never had a row. Never slammed doors or walked off'. (Male, married, aged 51)

'Well me and [partner] we've never argued... cause we're both, we've both been through it before, and it doesn't achieve anything. So you just calm down and then start talking about it'. (Male, married, aged 50)

The participants reported that if an issue did develop in a relationship, then open verbal communication about the problem was vital for its resolution.

'I think it was like a conversation, 'You're always out and I don't know where you are and you're always out and I'm not going to sit here on my own'. I think that's how it's started ... and then I think we started to think, well, you know, we've got to make time'. (Female, cohabiting, age unknown)

Focus group findings

The focus group members' data reflected the findings of the analysis.

'And it brought up us a bit close together as well... Yeah I know we did we sat down and we talked and it worked and I thought it is important to talk'. (Female, aged over 40)

'I think if you want to get it off your chest, you'll feel a whole lot better once you've said what you've got to say'. (Female, aged under 40)

Some of the participants' data showed that the responsibility for raising discussion about issues was not equal within their relationship.

'Well we always have done. Always have done. We've talked about... even though my wife is reluctant... I mean we sit down nearly virtually every day and we talk about what we are going to do and how we are going to do it'. (Male, married, age 50)

'I am the one that will make him talk about problems. I am like a dog with a bone. I can't go to bed... I can't no.... I just think everyday should be a fresh start, and whatever was a problem yesterday... don't bring to the next day. So over the years, I have forced him, and in fact he has actually said in conversation, that is probably the best things that I do, that I don't fester on things'. (Female, married, age 40)

Some of these participants suggested that they were happy with this balance of responsibility, however for others there appeared to be some frustration that their partner did not actively raise issues.

'Yeah, he's quite happy to have a quite mundane, really ordinary life. I don't think he really talks about anything much, if I think there's something the matter and I want him to talk, I have to sort of probe him and question him, and then he ... he'll either do one of two things, he will talk or won't'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 26)

Some of the participants talked about how it was sometimes difficult to raise issues with their partner knowing that this would result in an uncomfortable conversation.

'We didn't discuss it, I was frightened to bring it up'. (Female, married, age 38)

However, many of the participants also recognised that whilst it may be difficult to initiate these conversations they were important for the long-term health of the relationship.

'I wouldn't be prepared to let a relationship be spoiled for want of saying something. I'm much more, what's the word, for talking a lot ... nowadays I would just come out and say it'. (Female, married, age 53)

'... if I'm wrong I like someone to tell me off, so I think it will be better the next time ... get it right the next time'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 32)

Some of the participants reported that this was something that they had learned through their experiences with their partner.

'I'll say, 'What's wrong?', and he'll say, 'Nothing' and I have ... we have to say, 'Look don't do this, if there is something wrong, say there's something wrong' and then we sit down and we do talk it out, but we're both rather non-confrontational. We would do anything rather than have an argument. And we do talk our way around it now. We are quite good at it now. It's just recognising the irritability factor, and once you can see that you are irritating somebody or you've upset, or I have to sort it'. (Female, married, age 55)

Focus group findings

The focus group findings reflected those of the main analysis

*'...You need to smoke a small problem out before it gets to a big problem'.
(Male, aged under 40)*

Finally, some participants found that by talking about relationship problems they had experienced with their partner they had been able to develop their relationship and increase their resistance to future difficulties.

'The resolution: [partner] is aware of my feelings and will work towards not overstepping the mark on those, and I will work towards letting her know when I am not happy, before it builds up again'. (Male, married, aged 42)

Avoiding confrontation

Some of the participants reported that they did not like confrontation and took defensive measures to avoid engaging in it with their partner. This was qualitatively different from the positive steps taken to develop good communication in a relationship as a means to avoid conflict and was a defensive response to perceived tension. Some participants reported that they would not engage in arguments with their partner and suppressed their opinions to do so.

'If we do have a disagreement, erm, I suppose I wouldn't bother to argue really'. (Male, married, aged 37)

'You put up with and shut up, rather than have conflict again. I can't face it again, so I just shut up, and just, just take it'. (Female, married, aged 55)

'And, I will go for the quiet life at the end of the day, I think, you know, I'm quite submissive like that I think'. (Male, married, aged 44)

Focus group findings

'You don't want to upset the apple cart do you, you just want to keep things on an even keel, let them run smoothly. As soon as someone says the wrong thing, you know it is up in the air; you don't want to go through that. It is not nice when it is happening, rowing and whatever'. (Male, aged under 40)

Some of the participants reported that they chose to avoid discussing relationship issues with their partner because this could lead to confrontation.

'Because as soon as you talk about it... it's going to heighten up again so the thing to do perhaps is to forget about it and then on the basis that it's going to go away. If you talk about it there is no resolution to it'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 58)

The accounts of some of the participants who reported avoiding confrontation indicated a level of emotional withdrawal from a relationship.

'Because I was doing what I do now I suppose, I was just cutting off, you know, I just shut off and that's it you know I just shut off'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 50)

The following quote shows how one participant avoided discussing her husband's affair, which had caused her significant distress, because it was too painful for her to address and she felt that she was not strong enough to do so

'Yes I just didn't want to talk about it. I think this is when I vaguely remember coming back to this planet and like as I say two years had near enough gone by then that I was really ill

but it only seemed like yesterday again but because my mind was coming back and I remembered the affair again it was just a case of no I don't want to talk about it because it upsets me and I'm going to get angry you know by now I'd got over the trauma of it all. You know I'd got over the nervous breakdowns'. (Female, married, aged 36)

Many of the participants reported that avoiding an issue was not a helpful long-term strategy for a relationship because it could result in a loss of closeness and feelings of resentment towards a partner. Some of the participants reported that these negative feelings resulted in eventual confrontation between partners and that tackling an issue in its early stages was important to prevent this.

Some of the accounts suggested that the participants were aware that having too many arguments with their partner could be damaging to their relationship and were selective about the conflicts they engaged in. Some participants reported that in certain circumstances they would ignore their partner's undesirable behaviour to avoid confrontation.

'He would start moaning and then I just sort of let it go over the top of my head. I let him have his moan because I think, 'Well if I start then it will end up with a big argument' so I just let it go over the top and then it's all forgotten then'. (Female, married, aged 52)

'I can shrug it off instantly to be honest you know something because I'm accused sometimes of having a bit of a flippant attitude to things but nothing is that disastrous, you know, unless you find something an affair or something ... even if somebody says they hate your guts or something you know my feeling is that it's in the heat of the moment because it's a defensive thing to say'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 58)

Explaining a partner's undesirable behaviour as a result of difficult life events made it easier for people to ignore negative behaviour and address issues more productively when a situation had calmed.

'When we went up the hospital and we found that she was pregnant, we just looked at each other... no... we just didn't want this, and then she just threw abuse at me and I never said a word I just took it and thought for a couple of days, before I said anything'. (Male, married, age 50)

'After his mum died he took it out on me, you know he was very angry with me. Yes I did, I sort of let it, I sort of just ignored it and let him get on with it. Oh yes I knew it was because of his mum because of the things he would say'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 28)

The participants also reported that they sometimes avoided conflict by withholding their opinion about a partner's behaviour or decisions that they disagreed with.

'Or if he comes home and says something is happening, I'm very tempted to say why didn't you do this, or that, but I don't because he doesn't like me doing that'. (Female, married, aged 39)

In similar fashion, some of the participants reported that they had learned to accept their partner's undesirable behaviour or aspects of their partner's life that they did not agree with to avoid conflict and maintain their relationship.

'... but now, now I just let, instead of worrying every, or falling out I just let it go over my head and people, my friends say to me, 'Oh you're just too soft!' '. (Female, cohabiting, aged 33)

'But I did realise that his faith has made him, his faith and his home and what's in it has

made him very, very happy and extremely comfortable with himself and I love that. So it must, its something that I've just learned to accept'. (Female, married, aged 38)

For many of the participants this was a constructive process in which partners were learning about themselves and accepting their partner's needs in order to develop their relationship. These participants described how they were satisfied with their resolution to accept a situation. In contrast to this some of the data from participants who reported that they had accepted a behaviour or situation which they found undesirable suggested that they were subjugating their own needs and were unhappy with the situation despite making no attempts to change it.

'I just stopped bothering. I just stopped trying. I have no intention of walking out of the door or anything like that. But we are definitely not as close, we are here and we do things for each other, but we have drifted further apart. Sex wise, since May, we haven't. And neither of us will make that step'. (Female, married, aged 54)

'But I didn't do it because I'm not one, I don't like changing things probably, and that's true of me, I don't like change very much. And, I think I probably stuck with it where I should, clearly should have gone'. (Female, married, aged 53)

Arguments

Despite the evidence to suggest that participants' sometimes avoided confrontation with their partner most viewed arguments as a natural part of their relationship. The data suggested that arguments could be used productively to foster relationship improvement or they could be destructive in nature and lead to relationship erosion.

The participants suggested that there was a 'normal' or acceptable frequency of arguments within their relationships and an increase in this level was usually related to a significant relationship issue and in turn this could be damaging to a relationship.

'We argue but we don't argue so much that you have to worry when you argue'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 45)

Many of the participants reported that resolution of relationship conflict often came through the process of arguing and reaching a compromise with their partner. This represented a constructive use of conflict.

'It's a compromise, its not, ideally what, I would initially have just said, 'That's what I want' ... but it is a compromise, and so I am happy to have achieved some of my aims and to have got my point across'. (Male, married, aged 42)

Some of the participants reported that arguments sometimes helped them to convey to their partner how strong their feelings about a particular issue were and by raising their partner's awareness of this they had instigated positive relationship change.

'So I shot down the road, and he came hurtling down after me, but suddenly realised that he was only sitting in his underpants. So he was hurtling down the street, shouting at me, 'Come back!' I said, 'No!'. So I went and got my hair done, and when I got back, he was sitting there. Not very happy. But I think from then on he actually realised that I wasn't going to do everything that he told me to do'. (Female, married, aged 57)

Focus group findings

In keeping with the findings from the main analysis, some of the participants reported how arguments provided a chance to express the depths of their feeling about a particular issue.

'It is mainly the rows that will sort things out, when you actually talk about how you are feeling. Most of the time you tend to float along in the relationship. When something goes wrong and you have an argument that is when you are actually telling the person how you feel'. (Male, aged under 40)

'Yeah because you are actually telling the truth and you do the same, you hold it all back you don't realise you are doing it most of the time. When it is a row suddenly it is all at the back of the mind and it flies you know'. (Male, aged under 40)

Many of the participants reported that arguing was a skilful process and one which people could be good or bad at.

'We are both very argumentative and we are very good at it so sometimes it is like a pair of barristers cross-examining each other'. (Male, married, aged 41)

'I hate arguing, I've not been a great arguing person, and I'm one of these people that argue and I walk out into the kitchen and about ten minutes later I pop my head round and ask him if he wants a cup of tea, and then he's sulking, well I've had my tantrum so it's all over as far as I'm concerned'. (Female, married, aged 51)

Some of the participants reported that they were aware of the difficulty they had engaging in confrontation and were making attempts to argue with their partner in a more productive manner.

'I've been so used, to leave me alone, go away, I'm like that, pushing him away always, and I know I'm doing and I shouldn't do it ... and I try my best to keep my hands down, but I'm always, 'Leave me alone', and I slam the doors, I then go quiet, he's learnt now to let me have my ten minutes blowing off head, and then he'll come up and say what's wrong, and he'll sit with me, I think if could just get past that angry bit for a few minutes, and not do any of that, I would be so pleased'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 45)

However, some of the data suggested that unwillingness or an inability to engage effectively in an argument and resolve the situation successfully could be frustrating to a partner and result in increasing tension.

'Yes she can still have a temper on her, she is a red head, of course she has got a temper. She can be a nightmare with her temper ... I just deal with it the same way I have always dealt with it; I just poke fun at her ... No it makes her worse because it winds her up. Sometimes it helps because sometimes she breaks out in laughter'. (Male, married, aged 25)

'I don't like arguments. My mum and dad used to row and I would just go and sit in my bedroom or whatever, and I have never been one to get involved in rows. I just clam up keep quiet. My wife has often said, I am a cold fish, but it's just that I can't get into rows'. (Male, married, age 50)

Focus group findings

One conversation with a focus group member illustrated how an unwillingness to engage in arguments had caused frustration for his partner.

'I won't argue, I have never argued in my life. She has, we fall out. I think I am right, she must think she is right but I don't say anything, she will talk to me but it will be three days before I talk about it'.

GROUP MODERATOR: *'Does that resolve it, the fact that you leave it for three days?'*

'It does for me, it annoys her but I just, I have never argued with anybody, that is the way I cope with it'. (Male, aged over 40)

Whilst arguments were most frequently understood by the participants as a productive process, some of the accounts showed that frequent arguments were associated with severe erosion of relationship satisfaction. A few of the participants suggested that arguments had become the couple's primary method of communication. These participants reported very low relationship satisfaction and doubts about the future of their relationship.

'You know I don't really discuss anything with her now so I can't really say, you know the last couple or three years we've not really, we've only rowed, we've not really discussed much'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 50)

Some participants used the terms 'bickering' or 'sniping' to describe a type of engagement which was viewed as qualitatively different from arguing. Bickering and sniping were forms of unproductive behaviour which served to reinforce the dissonance in the relationship by restating and reinforcing conflict without making attempts to resolve issues.

'We would annoyingly bicker rather than argue, so nothing quite got sorted out when it should have at that point, it could go on for a couple of days, when it really could have just been nipped in the bud. Because we both didn't want to argue, because we both just had a days work, collected the kids ... so you sort of bicker and snipe because you don't want to argue, it just festers for a day or two and then you have an argument and it's all out of proportion to the original problem, that went on for a little while'. (Male, married, aged 29)

A few of the participants reported that the outcome of an argument within their relationship was frequently that one member of the couple would 'win' and the other would give in. This type of interaction could occasionally cause conflict within a relationship to be left unresolved.

'It's usually me that gives in to be honest with you'. (Female, married, aged 54)

'We just argue until I win. No, well it can last a couple of days, and if I feel that strongly about it, then I win. And if he feels that strongly about what he is arguing about, then he wins. So it is about ... its not a case of.... 'cause he has done things in the past that I can't win over. Because he feels that strongly about it, I can't say to him no, or yes I want you to do it this way. He will stand his ground and he will win'. (Female, married, aged 23)

Sulking

Many of the participants reported that they or their partner sometimes sulked or temporarily withdrew from their partner to express their displeasure about a situation and to prompt change or discussion.

'Say for instance if we didn't agree, say if I wanted to spend a fiver and he wanted to spend a tenner. I would have a go, I would sulk and then he would say sorry'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 30)

'Oh no, he doesn't shout, he just ... maybe he doesn't speak or he goes in a mood and then we obviously know there's something wrong. We address the situation, we just talk about it or I have my, I think about it for a bit and I have a few views I want to put across, he's not happy'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 26)

Having a break

Some of the participants reported that if an argument with their partner became too intense they would take a break as a way to reduce their anger and frustration with the situation.

'No, if I sit down and it doesn't end... I say I'm going for a walk, I'll be back in a minute, she knows where I'm going, I go for a walk to cool off'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 32)

For some participants this meant physically removing themselves from the situation for a number of hours, or more rarely a number of days.

'Yes he always had a runaway point ... he does always, if we have a row one weekend or one day and ... he'll run away but he's always got someone to run away to. Whereas me, I run away, but I've got armful of kids to take with me'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 29)

'Well I'll just storm off and disappear, and then come back again the day after and it's all forgotten, but we do have quite strong views on things'. (Male, married, aged 52)

The participants reported that after having taken a break from an emotionally heightened confrontation with their partner they would return and attempt to resolve the issues that had been raised.

'We have to go away, and leave it for a couple of days, and then she'll come back with what she has been thinking about and I know that's happening and I know the process is going on. If she hasn't come back in a couple of days, I will probably bring it up again. Because, I need a result and I need to know what she is thinking, and it's ... normally as long as there is a reasonable thought, we agree ... you know you have to bend with each other'. (Male, married, aged 44)

'... or I will leave it a couple of days and I will say, 'You know the other day when we were having that little bit of an argument, I do think you could have done' blah, blah, blah. I tell him'. (Female, married, aged 25)

Focus group findings

One of the focus group member's thoughts about having a break exemplified the findings of the main analysis.

'I think trying to talk you know through bad times when it's in the heat of the moment is the worst thing that you can do. Just stop there, leave it, walk away and then deal with it later when things have calmed down'. (Female, aged over 40)

Threats to leave

A significant number of participants reported how at some point during their relationship they had threatened to leave their partner. This threat was often made during the intensity of an argument.

'Ranting and raving I was. I went and got a carrier bag to pack my bag for work the next day - I'd got work the next day. I put my dress and cardigan and shoes in and when I went back in he was asleep. I just felt, 'How dare you? I'm leaving you'. I got the bag and I hit him round the head, the shoe cut his eye open. He's not a violent person but he shouted, he left, walked out. I think he took his car keys and his wallet and left. I was like, 'Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 27)

Many of these participants reported that the threat was not fully considered and that it was a frustrated attempt to demonstrate just how upset or strongly an individual felt and was used as an attempt to end hostile interaction and prompt reconciliation.

'I was just in the bedroom, got the case out. I wouldn't have gone through the door, but um I just got the case'. (Female, married, aged 38)

Some of the participants had followed up their threat to end the relationship by staying at a friend or relative's house for a short period of time and temporarily ceasing contact with their partner before returning to engage in reconciliation. The quote below shows the consequence of one participant's threat to end the couple's relationship.

'Well he was devastated because he didn't know whether I meant it or not. Normally I will only say things if I mean them. He was devastated. He stayed at his mum's for a couple of days and then I rang him up and told him I didn't mean it and that I wanted him to come back. I couldn't live without him. And I couldn't apologise enough and he was very forgiving'. (Female, married, aged 25)

2. Help-seeking behaviour

- Friends and family

The most frequently used source of relationship support was close social contacts. These included parents, in-laws and friends. Some participants reported that they regularly talked to their friends about day-to-day issues in their relationship. This provided the participants with a chance to offload and share their experiences in a casual and non-threatening situation.

'It's like yes, you know, we need to bitch about the wives occasionally ... we all do it, we all

know, the great thing about ...h I think if you didn't, you know, I mean you would drive yourself nuts, you know'. (Male, married, aged 44)

'It's just listening to their experiences and kind of comparing them to your own, and there are a lot of people a darned sight worse off. And it kind of puts it into perspective doesn't it, and you just get on with it'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 44)

Participants also reported that they looked to their friends and family for more explicit support during times when they were experiencing significant relationship problems, but it was important that the support was impartial.

'I'd go sobbing and wailing, she didn't live very far away, saying I couldn't stand it and she used to say quite categorically, 'Well, you know, you can never come home'... but then she'd sort of divert me and say, 'Come on, let's go and make a nice steak and kidney pie... She never, ever, ever, said anything against [partner] ever in her life. So, very fair, very, very fair ... I realise in retrospect what a stoic job she did, and in actual fact, I believe she firmly shaped me, moulded me into quite a strong woman ... I could tell her anything I wanted to. But she would listen, but never judge'. (Female, married, aged 57)

The participants reported that on occasion their friends and family members would instigate support by perceiving that the participant was under strain and initiating discussion.

'Sometimes when you are low and ... they notice, you can't hide. Sometimes when you are that low and tired and depressed or whatever ... and they understand'. (Female, married, aged 48)

The participants reported that just having someone to listen to their relationship problems was beneficial and helped them understand their situation and get them through difficult times with their partner.

'I found I was saying the same thing to several of my friends at different times, and it was coming out, and I think that was helpful. The fact that you've got friends that were happy to sit and listen to you rambling on'. (Female, married, aged 53)

'I see him maybe once every two weeks or whatever, once a week sometimes, but he gets a blast of what's happened that he's always, he waffles on and he's always got some stupid comments, you know like that are totally worthless and useless and all that, so he as I say just listen and I'll blast your ear for a minute and just clear the air you know, I'll do that sometimes, but I haven't seen him lately'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 50)

The participants reported that because friends and family knew and understood the individuals in a relationship they were in a strong position to provide a different perspective on their behaviour and that of their partner. This sometimes helped the participants to understand their issues more deeply and how they could work to resolve them.

'Now if me and [partner] have a row, albeit something silly, or if I think it is serious at the time, I do have a tendency to over-react sometimes. I talk to my mum and my mum says to me, 'Oh grow up'. And she actually makes me realise that I am just being stupid'. (Female, married, aged 25)

'Oh just ... 'You know, he's only trying to be nice you know' it was just, then it was sort of learning to relax with myself that's what it was, it was me you know sort of, well like I say barriers, and then as time went on the barriers were knocked down'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 45)

In addition to the emotional support that family and friends provided the participants found that the practical support they offered was beneficial to a couple's relationship. This was often through the provision of child care which ensured that the couple had time alone to address their issues.

'No hardly any [time together] we're gonna be, we're gradually trying to change that now we, it's difficult because my parents were living just around, not far away. I mean I know you shouldn't use your parents for baby sitters but...' (Male, married, aged 42)

'He offered me time off, because he's my... team leader, he offered me time off, he says, 'You've been married 27 years, it's worth fighting for', which is true'. (Male, married, aged 49)

A few of the participants reported that on occasion they had used their family and friends as a means of escaping a stressful situation and finding respite from difficult times at home. This behaviour had helped some participants cope with difficult times with their partner and remain in the relationship.

'And I remember being in bed for days at a time and my mum bringing me lunch or, but it's like going back to your childhood, like I wanted to be looked after. I just knew I could go there, like any time. Like I'd always think, 'Go home'. Always, I've always been like that. I've never let go... I just wanted my mother. I just wanted my mother and my family'. (Female, married, aged 54)

In contrast to reported benefits of support from friends and family a few participants had found that using this support had caused further issues between the couple. The following extract shows how the partner of one of the participants was concerned about her seeking support from friends.

'He sort of said, 'I suppose you've been telling all your friends' and he had this attitude that they'd all be telling me to leave him for some reason, you know, because, oh 'its always the man's fault' and this that and the other... but I said, 'No all my friends hold you in high regard as you know, 'cause you know them' and you know, not one of them have said that'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 33)

Nevertheless a few of the participants reported that they found it easier to talk to people who were not close social contacts because they were less emotionally involved with the couple and this made it easier for them to discuss their problems openly.

'You find yourself saying things to people that you wouldn't normally say. Or you perhaps wouldn't tell friends. I think you find that you can tell ... talk to slightly further outsiders more easily'. (Female, married, aged 55)

Focus group finding

'... you don't know that person but the time was right, because you're upset and you're offloading and you just talk about it, I never saw that woman again, but that's the best thing'. (Female, aged over 40)

Finally, one participant reported that she found it helpful to talk to her young children when she was experiencing relationship difficulties. Whilst these conversations were not explicitly about the problems the couple were going through she felt that through doing this she was able to contextualise her difficulties and remind herself of the positive aspects of her relationship and the value she placed upon it.

'Who do I talk to? [laughs]. I know it sounds stupid, but I do actually talk to my kids... We talk about things. Obviously not what I'm going through ... because she wouldn't be able to cope with that. But I feel talking to her makes me forget everything anyway. So I just look at my kids now and think, well it can't be that bad'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 29)

- **Relationship support services**

Relationship counselling

A minority of the participants had used relationship counselling services with their current partner. Most of the participants' descriptions of counselling services concerned formal support from organisations such as Relate but there were a few accounts of other sources, such as religious institutions.

'Yes, yes. I mean we are very lucky because our local priest... is lovely, I mean I've known him, and he has been a great help, and he helped us through. He certainly helped [partner] through when we had the bad patches'. (Female, married, aged 44)

Where counselling services had been engaged it was in response to severe relationship problems and often at a crisis point that threatened to end the couple's relationship.

'We couldn't speak to each other because there was nothing, he wouldn't believe anything, he wouldn't listen to anything I had to say and, and I was probably the same with him and there'd be just no, there'd be days of silence and it was awful'. (Female, cohabiting, age unknown)

These relationship problems were often related to a specific issue, such as fertility or alcohol dependence, which had caused severe conflict and dissonance within a relationship.

'Well he'd got used to the idea of not having children, and he doesn't think he wants any and that was a big conflict with us, and we have counselling for that'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 33)

Some of the participants indicated that whilst they had raised the suggestion of attending relationship counselling their partner had strongly objected to the use of this support.

'And I did suggest that we go to counselling, but he wouldn't have none of that, he wouldn't have none of it. It's a man thing I think. So we didn't. 'Oh I don't need any bloody body telling me what to do in my relationship, I wanna work it out on my own!' that's his exact words'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 33)

Focus group findings

One group member discussed the difficulties that could be associated with a couple agreeing to attend relationship counselling.

'And you're back to communication again, if the lines have broken down irretrievably, to persuade somebody else to come along and air all your problems, that maybe you've not aired to each other, in front of a third party then that can be very difficult'. (Female, aged over 40)

The example below shows how a participant's partner had been reluctant to take part in

relationship counselling and had only agreed to participate when she had resorted to threats to end the relationship.

'At first no, 'cause he was like, 'I don't want to bring strangers into our problems', and he didn't want people to know, but I just said, 'Well, we're not going anywhere' and I came to the point where I was thinking of leaving ... I think I honestly said that just to scare him into having the counselling, and it worked thank God. I don't know what I'd have done if he'd said, 'Oh alright then, see you' but, he wasn't keen at all, 'cause he's very private ... he said he thought it had been beneficial, but he wouldn't do it again'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 34)

However, for a few participants, the act of suggesting to their partner that they should attend relationship counselling had been enough to trigger relationship improvement without the use of external support.

'He said, 'Why don't' we go and speak to someone that can maybe help us?' but, the waiting list was crazy. So, after about three months, I was at my mum's and we started going out for a drink again and talking, like we used to before ... so, it did get better'. (Female, cohabiting, age unknown)

Focus group findings

'I think if people are considering going to Relate they are on the first steps to resolving it anyway'. (Male, aged over 40)

Even when both partners were in agreement about their need for relationship counselling there were often problems with access to services due to long waiting lists. This was a particular cause for concern to the participants because, as noted previously, they typically raised the suggestion of relationship counselling when their relationship was in crisis and required immediate intervention.

'I mean we were going to, I mean I was suggesting Relate, but there's such a waiting list, we might have broke up, divorced and married somebody else by the time!'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 33)

'I'm sure she said six months, but she rang up and she did get me in a bit earlier, a bit quicker...The relationship can terminate in that time'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 56)

Finally, this following example provides an account of the positive impact of relationship counselling.

'I don't think we realised that having [son] was going to change our life so much ... But when we had [son], it got difficult. Someone always had to be at home with the baby. And we really hit rock bottom then. We were in counselling for six weeks... And we literally went from the first week of sitting in there. He'd sit that side. I'd sit this side. Like this, to the last week we were in there, we couldn't sit close enough to each other and we were literally holding hands as we walked through the door, you know, and I honestly believe to this day, had we not gone counselling, we wouldn't be together now. And he says that. He admits that as well, that you know'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 35)

Focus group findings

The focus group findings reflected the results of the main analysis. The group members' attitudes towards relationship counselling were revealed in their accounts. The participants' attitudes towards this type of support are examined in section 5.3.2.

'I felt ashamed'. (Female, aged over 40)

'I really think that by the time it has got to that point it's too late. With my first marriage I went to one appointment with Relate, or was it two. But my husband wouldn't go. I said if you won't go you are not bothered at making the marriage work'. (Female, aged under 40)

'It's like the last resort, sort of thing, so you sort of tend to think, oh gosh this is more serious than initially I can't talk to my friends, you know this is like the next step the [unclear] step sort of thing'. (Female, aged over 40)

• Health services

Some of the participants had received relationship support through their use of general health services. This support was most frequently offered by General Practitioners and Health Visitors.

'I personally thought it was brilliant, the counselling... the counselling from the nurse was immediate, she just said, 'Okay come in I'll have you both in''. (Female, cohabiting, aged 33)

Where support was received from health services it was based on an established relationship of trust and friendship.

'Oh, yes, I mean, you know, I have said to my doctor, on a few occasions, and he is a really, really spot on guy ... Well, he has said to me a couple of times, he said, 'Oh you don't look too good'. I said, 'Well I am having a bit of a rough time', 'Oh, what's the problem?', 'Oh she's driving me'... all this, all the other, blah, blah, blah. 'Yeah', he said, 'it happens to us all you know.' We get collared, and this is what happens. And he eases the pressure with just a few light words ... And he only knows 'cause I know that it's private and confidential and it'll never go anywhere else, so that's fine'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 34)

However, as shown by the following quote the dual role of health practitioner and trusted friend offering support could result in some ambiguity as to the boundaries of the relationship and the support available.

'... had quite a close relationship with the Health Visitor anyway and she used to just come and see me even if ... but I used to look at her just as more like another friend. Maybe at the time what she was doing was just really her job and she was helping because she said I'm here for you and there were times when I thought right I'll give her a ring but then I thought 'Oh no' I just didn't want to be a burden'. (Female, married, aged 36)

Focus group findings

One of the group members described how they believed relationship support from a health professional would only be acceptable when there was a well established relationship with an individual.

'If I phone our surgery for an appointment, you just see anybody you know. So over the five visits you've had in a year, you might not have seen the same doctor twice. So unless you've got a relationship with your doctor, where you are on a friendly term basis as well...'. (Female, aged under 40)

A few of the participants reported that their doctor had been the first person to suggest that they attend relationship counselling with their partner and had signposted them to services. The quote below shows how, within the context of an established and trusting relationship, one doctor's simple enquiry had allowed the participant to express her concerns and resulted in the doctor being able to signpost her to relationship support services.

'I went to the doctor one day to get the pill I think, and he'd always been my family doctor as well, you see, and he just happened to say to me one day, you look a bit tired, 'What's the matter?'... and I burst out crying in his surgery. Course, it all came out that me and [partner] was having a terrible time in the relationship, and things weren't going as I thought. And he said, why don't you try counselling, and I thought. I was shocked at first'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 35)

5.2.2 Attitudes to relationship improvement and support

- General

Most of the participants felt that a couple should be able to deal with their relationship problems privately within the dyad without having to rely on external relationship support.

'And for a relationship to work it's got to be between the two people that are having the problems without the outside help'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 21)

'I'm not the sort of person who's gonna sort of like air their laundry in public, basically, I don't know, I just keep it to myself. I think [partner] would as well'. (Male, married, aged 36)

Focus group findings

'If you can't talk about it between yourselves is it going to help to turn to someone, if you haven't got the ability to talk...'. (Male, aged over 40)

A few of the participants reported that they found it very difficult and uncomfortable to open up to people and talk about themselves. These participants strongly believed that they should resolve their issues independently of any support.

'Because of my background I've learnt to do it myself. Sort things out myself... Yes. I've always felt like that works for me. Because I've never had someone, or I have had someone sit me down and say, this is the way to do it. And then you get someone else to sit there who'd say, this is the way to do it'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 29)

'No not for me, I can't, I find it very difficult to talk about me to people, I'll talk about anything else but I won't, I find it very difficult to do that'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 50)

When relationship support was required the participants reported that informal support, most frequently coming from friends and family, was more acceptable than formal support. The most frequently discussed formal support was relationship counselling. This was generally viewed quite negatively.

'There's got to be some people out there who think professional advice would help them but I don't think, I don't know. That's a hard one, it's a very personal subject isn't it so if you go to a stranger in an office, well where not an office but I don't know. It would be very official you would think. I don't know what these things are like so'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 31)

Focus group findings

The focus group findings reflected those of the participants. Most of the focus group members viewed relationship counselling negatively and felt that informal support from friends and family was more acceptable.

'I think it's English reserve too, the fact that do I really want to go and talk to someone, I mean okay, it's different when you're sitting on the bus next to the person or whatever and it just naturally comes out ... you know it's light-hearted and then you might get a bit more and you might chat...'. (Female, aged over 40)

'I think to work together, talk some more, and take time out. See what life throws at you and hope you can cope with it. I think I would be embarrassed to talk to a counsellor to be honest. I don't know why, but I wouldn't have the guts to just go into a room and talk to a stranger'. (Male, aged over 40)

'It's got a stigma to it'. (Female, aged under 40)

A few of the participants suggested that if a couple required formal relationship support to solve a relationship difficulty, rather than being able to resolve it themselves, then the relationship was not worth saving and unlikely to be successful.

'I just think that if people have got problems they have got to be able to sort them out themselves and I don't, if they have got to go out for someone to sort them out for them what hope do you stand'? (Female, cohabiting, aged 26)

Focus group findings

One focus group member suggested that if a couple took part in relationship education their relationship was not viable.

'It depends how far you are. If you've only just started your relationship and you go in for relationship courses, you shouldn't really be together'. (Female, aged under 40)

Similarly, a minority of the participants' accounts suggested that a severely damaged relationship could not be improved and that support, such as relationship counselling, could

not help in this respect.

'...but I mean, if it has crashed, it has crashed'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 55)

'I don't agree with it, I don't see how you can tell someone your problems and they can say why you are doing it, I think it is a load of crap to be honest. People who go and see marriage counsellors and all that, they can't do anything I don't think'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 26)

Nevertheless, some participants reported that they thought relationship counselling had the potential to be beneficial in certain circumstances.

'It will be good to have some outside intervention but people have to learn to work things out and you know do things as a couple, as two people. I mean I can't actually see what outside intervention can do for two people that are going absolutely nowhere in a relationship, do you understand what I'm saying? ... But outside intervention could be quite useful if these two people desperately want to stay together but need some kind of intervention'. (Female, married, aged 36)

Despite reporting that relationship counselling could be beneficial where certain conditions were met, the overwhelming majority of participants reported that they would not consider it as an option for themselves. The data revealed a clear distinction between the participants' views of 'usefulness to others' and 'usefulness to self'.

'Yes I think probably. I think probably it would yeah. If the couple wanting to do it, if they ... if the help is there and they go to it, yes it would help. But like myself, if it is there, I still wouldn't go to it. But, it depends on one's intellect, doesn't it, depends on the individual'. (Male, married, aged 74)

A minority of participants reported that, despite their reluctance, they would consider using formal support services if they felt their relationship had deteriorated to an extent that it was necessary. These participants reported a strong commitment to their relationship and that they would be willing to do whatever they could to maintain it.

'Well we're both the type of people who wouldn't just give up on something at all. Just in life it's that thing of having commitment and being honourable and you know having a sort of like ethic of hard work and knowing that sometimes you'd have to work at things, so I'd like to think that yes we would'. (Female, married, aged 35)

Focus group findings

In addition to the findings which reflected the participants' data some focus group members reported that they felt relationship counselling was not be useful because by the time a couple considered it their relationship was irreparably damaged.

'In a relationship you can go to these counsellors or whatever but I think you have got to be really down in the dumps to turn to that I don't know'. (Male, aged over 40)

'To me, Relate is too late'. (Female, aged under 40)

'You are just going through the motions, pretending that well we'll go and see them and talk it through'. (Female, aged under 40)

- Failure

Underlying the negative attitudes towards relationship counselling was a feeling that seeking relationship support was intrinsically linked with feelings of failure, blame and defeat.

'You don't want to consider it because it's a defeat. You know if somebody mentions, if I was to mention to ... knows we're going to family therapy, it's an admission that you've failed or ... gossip could be going round their marriage is bad'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 58)

'They sent us all to a counsellor to find out whose fault it was... and, I found it fantastic. I went on my own, went to, sorry went as a pair, and I just found it really good... I doubt if she found it quite as good, she certainly didn't, she doesn't like people prying... It was nice to get it out, and it was nice to have someone else's opinion and, if I was in the fault then fine. I think [partner] didn't want to think she was at fault, which she wasn't, but it was this threat of, whereas myself I thought fine, if it's my fault then I'll just go, it's no problem'. (Male, married, aged 44)

The quote below shows how one participant described the necessity of acknowledging that something is wrong or that a relationship is failing as a barrier to the uptake of relationship support.

'Because it would have been admitting that there was something wrong. He just wouldn't contemplate the fact that things were not right. He just ... that's the way we are, and that's all there is to it'. (Female, married, aged 55)

Whilst this research does not generally take into account data which concerns previous couple relationships it is interesting to note that some of the participants had been to relationship counselling with their ex-partners and that quite frequently this step had been taken when the participant had already resolved to end their relationship. This reinforces the finding of an association between relationship counselling and feelings of failure. This also illustrates that early intervention approaches may be more effective in the prevention of relationship breakdown because by the time a couple seek support their relationship may be beyond repair.

'I said well I'm sorry I think this is definitely over, I don't want to be married to this person any more, you know I was... it didn't make any difference to us when we met that person, I thought, you know, at the time, I remember sitting in the room thinking no, I want something different'. (Male, married, aged 57)

Some of the accounts also suggested that the need for relationship counselling was associated with weaknesses or deficit in an individual. Being a strong and resilient person was viewed as incompatible with the use of counselling services.

'She is a very strong person, a very strong person. Very strong personality. She wouldn't. I know she wouldn't go to a counsellor'. (Male, married, aged 50)

'I think we're both quite resilient people anyway and part of both our jobs I suppose is to be problem solvers and come up with solutions so I think you do tend to try and work it out yourself as opposed to bring other people in'. (Female, married, aged 30)

Focus group findings

'I have got to be honest and say I very much doubt if there were problems in the relationship that I would turn to anyone because I personally think it is a sign of failure, that I wasn't able to cope with it myself or resolve myself'. (Male, aged over 40)

Finally, some of the participants reported that they felt it was important that their friends and family believed that their relationship was successful and strong even when there were difficulties.

'You just want everybody to think that you've got a hunky dory relationship don't you, nobody wants to be there moaning about. 'Cause I've got a friend that moans about her husband all the time and it just gets on my nerves'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 33)

• Burdening

Some of the participants felt that by talking about their problems with friends and family they would be placing an undue burden on them.

'My parents, I wouldn't do it because then they worry'. (Female, married, aged 39)

The participants were more frequently concerned that their family would be burdened by their issues rather than their friends. This was because they considered family to be closer and more highly invested in the relationship than their friends and more likely to be worried by the difficulties they were experiencing.

'I think your family worries about you ... so, I keep the worry away from them, if you talk to your mates, they don't worry. It's just a problem that ... when you're not there, the problem, is there when you phone them and they help you. Your family's always there'. (Male, married, aged 33)

Whilst some of the participants reported that they felt it was inappropriate to burden other people with their relationship problems they were also aware that they may be denying themselves of a beneficial source of support.

'I think that if somebody's got a problem it probably does help some people to talk it through and maybe get other people's opinions but I don't really want to be that. I'm not really the father confessor type character, I don't particularly want to hear it and I don't particularly want to burden anyone else with my problems so I'd rather not. I'm a bit of a private person on that sort of, only on that, just personal things I think'. (Male, married, aged 56)

'I bottle things up and try and deal with it ourselves ... I don't think I like to bother other people with my problems, they've got enough problems of their own, the world has ... even family... Families are there to be enjoyed'. (Male, married, aged 57)

• Familiarity

In general, familiar sources of support were perceived as less threatening, more easily accessible and more acceptable than formal sources such as relationship counsellors.

'I personally I don't like involving people that I don't know'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 38)

'I would rather her turn to someone that knows me to discuss the way our relationship is going than someone who does not know me'. (Male, married, aged 30)

Some of the participants felt that if a supporter knew the couple they would be in a better position to offer relationship advice.

'I generally deal with things in house... I mean between [partner] and me, or my family or my friends. It's all... no outsiders really, and the people who know me or know [partner], or who know us both, if anything, they are the ones who would know how to help us best, or advise us or whatever'. (Female, married, aged 32)

Some of the participants reported that it was helpful to share relationship difficulties with someone who had similar experiences. This was because they felt it was important that a supporter could empathise with their situation. Through seeking support from friends and family the participants were assured of this.

'I suppose it's because I know that I am not alone. It does happen to other people, and rather than me bottling it up and go mad, I'd rather just talk it out calmly with someone I've got a friend who I talk with quite a lot actually, because she herself is in a relationship that's fairly similar in so much that she loves him awfully, but he can be a pain in the bum at times, so yes, common ground'. (Female, married, aged 30)

Focus group findings

'I think to speak to someone who has been in the same situation as you and see how they deal with it rather than go to the counsellor'. (Male, aged over 40)

'I don't think Relate or anything like that [unclear] I would rather talk to my best friend or someone who was going through the same'. (Male, aged over 40)

However, in contrast, some participants believed that it was better to use an unfamiliar source of support because it was easier to be open with someone who was not socially involved with the couple and because this would prevent the possibility that their conversation became public.

'And sometimes of course, it is easier to talk to a complete stranger who doesn't know the people you are talking about. Isn't going to go around thinking, 'Oh well what an awful thing that person is ... fancy saying that about so and so''. (Female, cohabiting, aged 44)

Focus group findings

One group member reported another potential cost associated with seeking support from people she was close to. This group member reported that she avoided discussing her relationship with her family because she felt this would have a long-term impact on their relationship with her partner.

'I would always feel they would have a lower opinion of him because they'd stick up for me... and then I'd know a week after I'd confided the problem, everything would be fine between me and him, but she would bear a grudge. So I very rarely confide in my Mum'. (Female, aged under 40)

- **Neutrality**

Some of the participants reported that it was important for the advice they received through relationship support to be unbiased. Some of the participants valued the unbiased advice they had received from family and friends but a few reported that the high level of

involvement friends and family had in the couple's life made them a less suitable source of support.

'That it's somebody that's not involved in the relationship, it's not my mother, it's not his mother, it's not his brother, it's not my sister in law, it's not a friend who knows us both, it's a total individual person that will sit and listen'. (Female, married, aged 48)

'Sometimes they give me advice. I know why they do it because they love me. They sometimes give me advice to suit me... And I end up telling them to shut up and not tell me what I want to hear but tell me what I am asking you'. (Female, married, aged 30)

A few participants reported that a relationship counselling service would provide neutral advice and that they would consider using this support.

'I think now I'd probably be in a position where I'd pay for counselling, to have someone that, not necessarily tells you what to do, but just listens to what you're; saying and can advise you. If I speak to my mum, it would be all one sided'. (Female, cohabiting, age unknown)

'I suppose if you've got to the point of not being able to talk, then you would have somebody else that perhaps you could look from the outside in and see what's going on, so I can see that would be a benefit. Because if you've got to a stalemate and you are not talking, then you would need somebody'. (Female, married, aged 39)

Focus group findings

One group member described the benefit of advice from a neutral source.

'Your friends always say what you want them to hear as well sometimes, you know, but this person [counsellor] on there says things, 'Oh my God bloody cheek', you know, you come out thinking, 'Bloody cheek'. But, you know, when you look at it you think, oh my God she's right why didn't so and so say that to me, you know, months ago. So I think there is a really big difference between the friends and the counsellor'. (Female, aged over 40)

• Confidentiality

Some of the participants emphasised the importance of confidentiality when seeking support. Factors which were important to these participants included being able to access a source of support anonymously and also being sure that anything they spoke about remained private. For some participants this had created a barrier to accessing support.

'I think the only person you can trust with your inner most secrets is yourself. I really believe that because I always think that if there's an opportunity for someone to gain out of something that you've told them, they'll take that opportunity, human nature'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 42)

Some of the participants thought that being able to access information and support anonymously, for example through websites or telephone helplines, was beneficial because it provided a means of accessing support without experiencing the feelings of embarrassment and inadequacy which were associated with relationship counselling. Being able to access support anonymously also provided a possible source of support for people who felt that it was important not to burden their family and friends with problems or that it

was important that their family and friends did not know that they were experiencing relationship difficulties.

'Oh yes, yes because again you're not on the one-to-one thing, you've got the information there without feeling the embarrassment because some people feel embarrassed talking face to face. If it's more impersonal on the internet they can log in that might be a help'. (Female, married, aged 52)

'... 'cause they don't see you do they? It would be more confidential if you needed to talk to them, it would be a lot more confidential'. (Female, married, aged 21)

Nevertheless, some of the participants felt that the benefits associated with face-to-face relationship support, which included being able to develop better rapport and being understood more easily, outweighed the potential costs.

'I would say, you're able to understand a person more if you're talking to them face-to-face, 'cause with, you can tell, you can read body language and facial expressions. If it was over the phone you wouldn't really know what that person, whether that person was just in it for the, you know for the wages or whether they really did, you know want to genuinely help you'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 21)

5.2.3 Variation by gender

During the analysis any significant trends in the data which related to gender were recorded. Key variations included:

- Both males and females believed that men found it more difficult to talk and express their emotions than women did.

'I think men find it very difficult to talk, a woman can get on a bus and talk to a stranger and the lot can come out you know you can I actually went on a train journey from London to Wales and I sat chatting to this woman, I knew her whole life story, her family everything. Now a man could not do that, there's no way a man could do that'. (Focus Group Female, aged over 40)

'I think a lot of blokes bottle things up, they don't like to express themselves [unclear] it is the male thing, not to express any feelings whereas women tend to talk to their mates quite a bit about problems...'. (Focus Group Male, aged under 40)

- Male participants were less open about their relationship problems during interview.
- Females felt that they often had to encourage their partner to talk about a relationship issue.

'Well it's like the saying, a problem shared is a problem halved. So they've got the full problem but they are not sharing it, not halving it'. (Focus Group Female, aged over 40)

'I still badger away. I'll say if you can't tell me what the problem is I can't help you sort it out. Then you get cross'. (Focus Group Female, aged over 40)

- Males were more likely than females to deal with their problems privately.

'I'm not a great person for over ... talking to people with my problems. People have got problems of their own and I feel enough ... We've all got our problems, and I think ... But

there are people, yes, I know there are. I know there are'. (Male, married, aged 74)

'That's what I do, I don't tell anybody'. (Focus Group Male, aged over 40)

- Females talked more frequently about the support they had received from their friends and family.
- Males were more likely to find it difficult to discuss their problems with friends.

'Suppose because I can't really see myself, I sort of keep things to myself, I don't even, I might come out with a few things in jest that I am probably a little bit more serious'. (Male, married, aged 30)

'...a woman can do that but a bloke, he wouldn't talk to his mates, it just bottles up inside'. (Focus Group Male, aged under 40)

- Men were more likely to report that arguments were times when they could convey their real feelings about an issue.

'It is mainly the rows that will sort things out, when you actually talk about how you are feeling. Most of the time you tend to float along in the relationship. When something goes wrong and you have an argument that is when you are actually telling the person how you feel'. (Focus Group Male, aged under 40)

- Female participants were more likely to make threats to leave a relationship.
- Males more frequently spoke about the value they placed on practical support from friends and family, such as time off from childcare, which provided them with the resources to be able to improve their relationship with their partner.
- Male participants were more reluctant to use an unfamiliar support service such as relationship counselling.
- Females were more likely to report the potential benefits of relationship counselling.

'But I mean someone sitting there as a counsellor, they are, I think they're worth their weight in gold'. (Focus Group Female, aged over 40)

- Females believed that men would be more likely to find telephone helplines and websites to be effective routes for support.

'I don't think they'd do a one to one, a face-to-face with someone, but they'd pick up a phone'. (Focus Group Female, aged under 40)

5.3 Conclusion

The conclusion presents an overview of the key findings and also considers how 'developmental' and 'non-developmental' relationship beliefs (see Chapter 4) may impact upon a person's relationship improvement behaviour.

Ghate and Hazel (cited in Quinton, 2004) distinguished the *sources* of support into three different categories: informal; semi formal; and formal. Informal support is support which is provided by close social contacts. Semi-formal support includes sources such as community-based organisations like baby and toddler groups and more focused support

organisations such as those targeting lone parents or people with mental health needs. Formal support was that which came through paths such as health care, social services, and education. Ghate and Hazel also divided the *type* of support people received into subcategories. These included emotional support or comfort; advice; practical help; resources; and specialist services. The different categories of sources and types of support provide a framework from which the participants' reports can be considered. For example, the most frequently discussed sources of support were informal (such as friends and family) and formal (such as Relate). Due to the emphasis of the topic guide (Appendix 5) discussion about semi-formal support is not prevalent.

5.3.1 Summary of findings

Relationship improvement behaviour

The participants reported that the primary method they used to resolve relationship difficulties was talking through issues. Communicating well with a partner could prevent arguments and serious relationship problems from developing. Some participants reported that one member of their relationship was more likely to raise discussion of relationship issues and for some participants this had been the source of some tension. Participants sometimes found it difficult to raise issues because doing so would cause an uncomfortable conversation. However, the majority of the participants reported that they were aware that it was important to have these conversations in order to maintain the long-term health of the relationship. Participants reported that talking about relationship problems they had experienced with their partner had increased their resilience to future difficulties.

The way that participants dealt with conflict in their relationship varied. Some of the participants reported that they did not like conflict or confrontation within their relationship and took active measures to avoid it. Many of the participants reported that avoiding an issue was not a helpful long-term strategy because it could result in a loss of closeness and feelings of resentment developing towards a partner. Some of the accounts suggested that participants were selective about confrontation within their relationship and that they occasionally avoided conflict by ignoring their partner's undesirable behaviour.

Arguments were viewed as a natural part of a relationship. The data suggested that arguments could be used productively to foster relationship improvement or they could be destructive in nature and lead to relationship erosion. Many of the participants reported that arguing was a skilful process and some suggested that they were attempting to cope with confrontation with their partner in a more productive manner. Unwillingness or an inability to engage effectively in an argument could be frustrating to a partner and result in increasing tension. The participants thought that it was very important that arguments were fully resolved because a cycle of repeated arguments could occur if they were not and this could cause erosion in the relationship. Some participants talked about 'bickering' or 'sniping' at their partner. Bickering was viewed as unproductive engagement which served to reinforce the dissonance in the relationship without making attempts to resolve issues.

Some of the participants reported that if an argument with their partner became too intense they would take a break as a way to reduce their anger and frustration with the situation. The participants reported that after they had taken a break they would attempt to calmly resolve the issues that had been raised. Some of the participants had threatened to leave their partner at some stage during their relationship. A threat was often a frustrated attempt to demonstrate how upset or strongly an individual felt about an issue and used to prompt reconciliation.

Participants reported that they had learned to accept some of their partner's undesirable behaviour or aspects of their partner's life that they did not agree with. For many of the

participants this was a constructive process in which partners were learning about themselves and their partner's needs in order to develop their relationship. However, some of the participants who reported accepting a behaviour or situation which they found undesirable suggested that they were subjugating their own needs and remained unhappy with the situation despite making no attempts to change it.

Help-seeking behaviour

The most frequently used source of relationship support was close social contacts. These included parents, in-laws and friends. The participants regularly talked to their friends about day-to-day issues they had with their partner and this provided them with a chance to offload and share their experiences in a casual and non-threatening situation. Participants also reported that they went to their friends and family for more explicit support during times of significant relationship strain. The participants valued having people who were willing to listen to them and also receiving neutral advice. The participants reported that because their friends and family knew and understood the individuals in the relationship they were able to offer new insights into their relationship problems.

A few of the participants had used relationship counselling services with their current partner. These had been engaged in response to severe relationship problems which had threatened to end the couple's relationship. Some participants reported that their partner had been resistant to engaging with relationship counselling. Some also said that they had problems of accessing services because of long waiting lists. This was a cause for concern to the participants because the decision to use relationship counselling was usually at a crisis point in a relationship when immediate intervention was required.

Attitudes to relationship support

Most of the participants felt that a couple should be able to deal with their relationship problems without having to rely on external support. A few of the participants reported that they found it very difficult and uncomfortable to open up to people and talk about themselves. These participants strongly believed that they should resolve their issues independently of any support.

If relationship support was required the participants reported that informal support, most frequently coming from friends and family, was more acceptable than formal support. A few of the participants suggested that if a couple required formal or professional relationship support to solve a relationship difficulty then the relationship was not worth saving and unlikely to be successful. Despite reporting that relationship counselling could be beneficial in certain circumstances the overwhelming majority of participants reported that they would not consider it as an option for themselves.

Many of the participants reported that seeking formal relationship support was intrinsically linked with feelings of failure, blame and defeat. The necessity of acknowledging that something was wrong or failing in a relationship was a barrier to the use of this support. Some of the accounts suggested that relationship counselling was associated with weaknesses or deficit in an individual.

The participants reported a range of factors which made a source of relationship support more or less acceptable. Some of these themes were not compatible, for example the desire for anonymity and a preference for support from someone familiar who could empathise with their situation. The quote below shows how one participant valued different aspects of support services such as learning from other people's experiences, putting her experiences into perspective through sharing with other people, but also the anonymity of using a telephone helpline.

'If I go in and other people have similar problems to me, it's probably like alcoholics, you can learn from other people's experiences. You don't feel it's just you. But again, the phone call thing is something I could do secretly, but I think if I decided to go some place to a group of people, [partner] wouldn't like it'. (Female, married, aged 54)

This finding illustrates the difficulties associated with the creation of suitable support services and suggests the need for variety in provision.

5.3.2 The influence of 'Developmental' and 'Non-Developmental' relationship beliefs upon support seeking and relationship improvement behaviour

Chapter 4 explored the attitudes and beliefs that participants held about their relationships and described two core concepts which could be used to differentiate between them. These were either 'developmental' or 'non-developmental' relationship beliefs.

'Developmental' beliefs about a relationship were evident where participants conveyed that they perceived themselves as active agents with control over the course of their relationship. They also described learning about themselves, their partner and their relationship and employed this knowledge by investing in relationship work. Moreover, they recognised and responded positively to relationship change, overcame doubts and dissonance, and successfully dealt with difficult times in relationships. Based on the assumption that people who hold 'developmental' beliefs are likely to be more motivated to maintain and improve their relationship, they may be more likely to report satisfying relationships relative to those who are resigned to a dissatisfying relationship.

In contrast, 'non-developmental' relationship beliefs were apparent where participants indicated that they had low agency or control over the course of their relationship, were 'lucky' to have a good relationship, had 'found' the right partner rather than worked to create a good partnership, did not perceive a great deal of conflict or change within their relationship and did not invest heavily in relationship work.

The following two sections provide some key examples of how 'developmental' and 'non-developmental' relationship beliefs were apparent in the participant's accounts of relationship improvement and help-seeking behaviour. These examples demonstrate how a person's perspective of their relationship influences their behaviour, and ultimately, the ability to overcome relationship difficulties.

'Developmental beliefs'

These participants made sure that they addressed their relationship difficulties by expressing any dissatisfaction they felt, even if it was difficult to do so and resulted in an uncomfortable situation. Expressing concerns and tackling issues was understood to be vital for relationship development.

'I think it was like a conversation, 'You're always out and I don't know where you are and you're always out and I'm not going to sit here on my own'. I think that's how it's started ... and then I think we started to think, well, you know, we've got to make time'. (Female, cohabiting, age unknown)

Participants with a 'developmental' perspective made active attempts to understand and contextualise their partner's behaviour.

'I sort of just ignored it and let him get on with it. Oh yes I knew it was because of his mum

because of the things he would say'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 28)

Participants reported that they talked about their relationship problems with their partner and that this helped them to develop their relationship by increasing their resilience to future difficulties.

'...if I'm wrong I like someone to tell me off, so I think it will be better the next time ... get it right the next time'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 32)

Arguments were viewed as a normal process and a method through which learning and relationship development could occur. The participants felt it was very important to discuss and fully resolve any issues which were raised during an argument.

'Both quite argumentative and lots of bickering over the most trivial things ... I suppose looking back on it, we were vying for positions within the relationship, and I think it has taken some time to establish that there isn't a dominant partner in the relationship'. (Male, married, aged 42)

When they felt it was necessary, some of the participants sought external, professional support to improve their relationship.

'And we really hit rock bottom then ... I honestly believe to this day, had we not gone counselling, we wouldn't be together now. And he says that. He admits that as well, that you know'. (Female, cohabiting, aged 35)

'Non-Developmental' beliefs

A 'non-developmental' perspective was conveyed by participants who reported that they frequently tried to avoid confrontation in their relationship by avoiding discussions concerning relationship issues. Avoiding discussions about relationship issues may cause problems to be left unaddressed, and to become entrenched, leading to relationship erosion.

'And, I will go for the quiet life at the end of the day, I think, you know, I'm quite submissive like that I think'. (Male, married, aged 44)

A few participants subjugated their own needs by resolving to live with situations which they found unsatisfactory and make no attempt to change them.

'I have no intention of walking out of the door or anything like that. But we are definitely not as close, we are here and we do things for each other, but we have drifted further apart. Sex wise, since May, we haven't. And neither of us will make that step'. (Female, married, aged 54)

'Non-developmental' beliefs were apparent in the data of participants who reported that a damaged relationship could not be improved. This fatalistic attitude suggested a perceived lack agency over the outcome of a relationship and could mean that attempts at relationship improvement or the use of relationship support was unlikely.

'I mean, if it has crashed, it has crashed'. (Male, cohabiting, aged 55)

Rather than viewing relationship support and counselling as a way to improve a relationship, a few participants believed that if a couple required relationship counselling to solve a relationship issue then the relationship was not worth saving and was unlikely to be successful. This sentiment conveyed a belief that it is not possible for people in a relationship to learn how make their relationship work more effectively in the future.

'I just think that if people have got problems they have got to be able to sort them out themselves and I don't, if they have got to go out for someone to sort them out for them what hope do you stand?' (Female, cohabiting, aged 26)

Focus group findings

Two focus group members revealed their thoughts about relationship support. The accounts reflected the different attitudes towards relationships.

'... relationship is something that you've got to learn and work through, so why not take advantages of things that are there?' (Female, aged under 40)

'Do we need this, why do we need it? At the end of the day, you don't fix what's not broken do you'. (Female, aged under 40)

The examples provided above illustrate how holding 'developmental' or 'non-developmental' views about a relationship may have a significant bearing on its outcome. This is because the perceived usefulness of a course of action is determined by the nature of the beliefs that are held. For example, a person who has a 'developmental' view of their relationship may hold a belief that they have control over the outcome of their relationship and make it more likely that they will engage in relationship improvement behaviour and seek out relationship support if they experience difficulties. In contrast, if a person felt that they had little control over the course of their relationship they might believe that it is futile to invest in relationship work and that relationship support would be ineffective. This shows how, when faced with relationship difficulties, such as those which frequently occur during the transition to parenthood or because of financial concerns (see Chapter 1), people who hold 'developmental' and 'non-developmental' beliefs may display very different behaviour which has a significant bearing over the outcome of their relationship.

From an early intervention perspective, encouraging people to adopt a 'developmental' view of their relationship, which is associated with positive behaviours reported in this chapter such as discussing difficult issues, engaging in constructive confrontation, and resolving conflict, has the potential to strengthen a couple's relationship and improve their resilience to future relationship difficulties.

Chapter 6. Conclusions and implications for policy and practice

6.1 Introduction

The research presented by this report contains numerous findings that are relevant to the work of researchers, policy-makers and practitioners who are seeking to understand how to effectively support and strengthen couples' relationships.

A key strength of the research is that it is based on a large and demographically representative data set which explores the experiences of participants in ongoing long-term relationships in rich detail and offers the opportunity for an ecologically valid insight into the processes which occur in relationships.

The results presented in the report provide a valuable account of people's experiences including the circumstances in which relationship difficulties are likely to emerge; the factors which help relationships to strengthen and endure; the attitudes and beliefs people hold about their relationships; and the ways in which people work to overcome relationship difficulties.

The data provides an opportunity to learn from the successful strategies people employed in order to manage difficult times in their relationship; resolve conflict; and maintain and develop their relationship. Ultimately, the knowledge the research provides can be shared with others so that their relationships can be strengthened and endure in the same way.

This chapter presents a summary of the findings from the chapters and then draws them together to present the key implications for practice.

6.2 Summary of findings

This section provides a summary of the key findings from each of the four result chapters presented in the report.

6.2.1 Chapter 2. Relationship difficulties

1. The main difficulties reported by interviewees were in relation to the transition to parenthood and the challenges of raising children; finance; health and wellbeing; the influences of in-laws, family and friends; and infidelity. Relationship issues were reported most frequently during the transition to parenthood.
2. There was a high level of interaction between the themes reported. For example, the transition to parenthood was often a time of financial strain for a couple.
3. The nature of the difficulties which emerged during the transition to parenthood followed a time course perspective as follows: issues emerged around the decision to have children; difficulties with conception; miscarriage; pregnancy; the demands of a new baby; and parenting.
4. The transition to parenthood, and indeed many of the additional relationship difficulties expressed, were more difficult for people whose relationship was less

stable and committed.

5. Key sources of conflict associated with having children included irritability caused by a lack of sleep; the emergence of gender roles associated with raising children; men feeling rejected by their partner after the birth of their child; inconsistency in parenting styles; and the challenges of parenting step children.
6. A lack of adequate financial resource was frequently associated with relationship conflict as was incongruence in a couple's spending habits.
7. Health and well-being had considerable impact upon participants' relationships. Illness caused people to be irritable and intolerant of their partner's behaviour. Fear and anxiety about health concerns sometimes caused relationship conflict.
8. Friends, family and in-laws often had a significant impact on a couple's relationship. Problems emerged when deliberate attempts were made to disrupt the relationship; incompatible beliefs and values were evident; and close relationships with friends, ex-partners and family of origin caused jealousy.
9. The fear of a partner's infidelity caused conflict in some relationships. This was most likely when poor communication and a low level of trust was apparent. Actual cases of infidelity caused severe relationship conflict.
10. Two key issues were evident in many of the participants' accounts of the causes of difficulties within their relationship. These issues were the balance of control in a relationship and poor communication.
11. An increase in emotional distance between a couple was sometimes the consequence of relationship conflict. Some participants reported that they had experienced periods of doubt about remaining in their relationship. In contrast, some participants reported that by working through their relationship problems the couple had become closer.
12. How couples adapt and cope with stressful events (as borne out in later chapters) may have more bearing on the outcome of the relationship than the type of difficulties they face.

6.2.2 Chapter 3. Factors that help a relationship to endure

1. The most frequently reported factors that participants felt would help *any* relationship to work were being in a relationship with the 'right person'; putting work into a relationship; communicating well; and having trust in a partner.
2. Participants felt that a relationship would only work when the couple were 'right' for each other. Being the 'right person' involved having compatible personalities and sharing similar aims and values.
3. Working at a relationship was viewed as essential for an enduring relationship. This was especially important during the early transitional stages of a relationship.
4. Participants reported that good communication was a vital component of a good relationship. Participants believed that it was important for individuals to convey the trust, love and care they felt towards their partners. Open communication helped

individuals to address relationship problems in their early stages and facilitated support provision within the relationship.

5. Trust in a partner was believed to be an important factor for an enduring relationship. Trust was intrinsically linked with the ability to communicate well with a partner by being open and honest. Infidelity was viewed as a huge breach of trust and something which could cause irreparable relationship damage.
6. The most valued aspects of the participants' relationships were closeness; independence; having children; and support.
7. The participants believed that their relationships had been strengthened by good communication; living through difficult life events with their partner; spending time together; having compatible personalities; and learning about and understanding their partner.
8. Good communication facilitated the development of a number of the valued aspects of relationships including trust, closeness and friendship.
9. Time together allowed a couple to share enjoyable experiences and provided an opportunity to discuss issues in their daily lives. Participants thought that it was important that they shared time together as a couple despite the conflicting demands placed on them and that the quality of the time spent was very important.
10. Participants reported that having a partner with a complementary personality to their own had strengthened their relationship. Having different strengths and weaknesses to a partner meant that a couple could exploit these strengths to the benefit of their relationship.
11. Understanding a partner's behaviour and motivations helped a couple to communicate in an effective manner and deal with difficulties productively. Understanding why a partner behaved in a certain way helped people to put undesirable behaviour into context and could diffuse relationship tension.
12. People observed that over time there were changes in themselves, their partner and their relationship. Some participants recalled that they had learnt about their partner; become more mature over time; and that their personality had changed. These factors had sometimes altered their behaviour towards a partner in a positive way.
13. The participants observed that the passion in a relationship declines over time but that this was replaced by a deeper relationship involving increased closeness; friendship; and communication.
14. Participants reported that over time their communication with their partner had become more effective and they addressed their relationship problems more proactively. Alongside this, participants developed an intimate understanding of their partner and valued this highly.

6.2.3 Chapter 4. Relationship attitudes and beliefs

1. Participants perceived their relationships, at the time of interview, in many different ways. Five groups emerged from the analysis, representing the range of perceptions; *'... it's not right'*; *'... it's probably just average'*; *'We're completely happy'*; *'... we will get through it'*; and *'... solid, but it's one which we've worked at'*.

2. In the, '*... it's not right*' group, there was a lack of closeness, poor communication, and a level of erosion in the emotional attachment to a partner. Nevertheless, many of the participants cited their ongoing commitment to the relationship. There were differing views over whether a relationship could be improved, and some participants indicated that they wanted to improve their relationship but were unsure about how to do so.
3. The '*... it's probably just average*' group were defined by their reports of moderate relationship satisfaction and a lack 'highs and lows' during the relationship. Satisfaction in the relationship often came through factors such as the security and stability that the relationship provided. The relationships in this group were viewed as stable and enduring with few accounts of emotional volatility. In certain cases the data suggested a low level of emotional involvement in the relationship.
4. The, '*We're completely happy*' group were diverse and defined by their high level of relationship satisfaction. The group reported few relationship difficulties; their closeness with their partner; the balance within their relationship; and their shared identity as a couple. Interestingly, some of the participants' accounts indicated a perceived lack of agency in their relationship through reports of how they had 'found' the right relationship; were 'fortunate' and 'lucky' that their relationship had been good from the start; and had involved very little conflict.
5. The '*... we will get through it*' group was characterised by the 'ups and downs' they experienced in their relationship but also by their determination to resolve their relationship issues. The participants' commitment to improving their relationship was shown in their awareness of what made their relationship work; their perception that their relationship was developing over time; and the importance they placed on relationship investment.
6. The accounts in the '*... solid, but it's one that we've worked at*' group were characterised by high levels of relationship satisfaction which was perceived to be as a result of investment in the relationship. The accounts from these participants shared similarities with the '*... we will get through it*' group, but were distinguished by the consistent high levels of satisfaction, and stability within the relationship. Data from this group suggested that participants had a high sense of agency within their relationship and had invested in it to make it work. This was evident through the participants' awareness of what made their relationship work; learning about the relationship; overcoming difficulties and doubts; and the need for relationship investment.
7. An important concept underpinned many of the themes which emerged during analysis. This concept concerned the nature of the attitudes and beliefs underlying the themes. Two groups were defined; 'developmental' or 'non-developmental' relationship beliefs.
8. A 'developmental' attitude involved beliefs that relationships were fluid and went through changes over time. These views were associated with participants who conveyed that they were active agents with control over the course of their relationship; described change in their relationship; overcame difficult times and doubts in their relationship; reported learning about themselves their partner and their relationship; and put their knowledge to use by investing in relationship work.
9. 'Developmental' themes were most prevalent in (but not limited to) the groups labelled '*... we will get through it*' and '*... solid but it's one we've worked at*'.

10. Some of the themes suggested 'non-developmental' beliefs where a relationship was viewed as an inflexible unit. These views were evident where participants conveyed a sense that they had low agency or control over the course of their relationship; indicating that they were lucky to have a good relationship; that they had 'found' the right partner rather than worked to create a good partnership; that they did not perceive a great deal of conflict or change within their relationship; that they did not invest heavily in relationship work, and that they felt unable to improve their relationship.
11. 'Non-developmental' themes were most salient in the groups categorised as, '*We're completely happy*', '*... it's probably just average*' and '*... it's not right*'.
12. 'Developmental' and 'non-developmental' relationship beliefs can occur across a variety of differently perceived relationships. People who perceive their relationship to be good may hold 'non-developmental' views.
13. The type of perspective a person holds about relationships has an influence over the way they behave. As an example, someone who believes that a relationship is flexible may be more inclined to invest in relationship work to change its course than someone who believes a relationship is a fixed entity.
14. Based upon the assumption that people who hold 'developmental' beliefs are likely to have more successful relationships (in that they are motivated to improve their relationship), the findings can be used to develop interventions derived from these beliefs. The results suggested the potential benefit of a universal early intervention approach. As an example, providing information which raises people's awareness that it is normal for affection and attentiveness to decline in the early stages of a relationship may prevent people in new relationships from misinterpreting this process as deterioration.
15. The case for universal early intervention is backed up by the finding that people who are happy in their relationship may hold beliefs which are detrimental to the long-term stability of their relationship. People who are happy in their relationship, and people who hold 'non-developmental' beliefs about a relationship are unlikely to access relationship support. Providing universal early intervention allows access to these people, and through attempts to modify their attitudes and beliefs we may be able to decrease the likelihood that they will experience relationship breakdown and reduce the stigma for seeking help if required.

6.2.4 Chapter 5. Relationship improvement behaviour

1. The primary method of resolving relationship difficulties reported by the participants was by talking through issues. Talking could prevent arguments and serious relationship problems from developing. Although some participants found discussing issues was sometimes uncomfortable the majority reported that it was important to talk through issues in order to maintain the long-term health of the relationship.
2. A few of the participants reported that they did not like confrontation within their relationship and took active measures to avoid it. This was qualitatively different from positive steps taken to develop good communication in a relationship as a means to avoid conflict and was a defensive response to perceived tension. Some participants reported that they would not engage in arguments with their partner and suppressed their opinions to do so.

3. Arguments and conflict were viewed as a natural part of a relationship by most of the participants. The data suggested that arguments could be used productively to foster relationship improvement or they could be destructive in nature and lead to relationship erosion. Many of the participants reported that arguing was a skilful process. Unwillingness or an inability to engage effectively in an argument could be frustrating to a partner and result in increased tension. Failure to fully resolve an argument was dangerous because it could lead to a cycle of repeated arguments and this could damage a relationship.
4. Some of the participants reported that if an argument with their partner became too intense they would take a break as a way to reduce their anger and frustration with the situation. The participants believed that after having taking a break it was important to resolve the issues that had been raised.
5. Some of the participants reported that they had compromised and learned to accept aspects of their partner's behaviour that they did not agree with to maintain their relationship. This was often a constructive process in which partners learnt about themselves and their partner's needs and developed their relationship. In contrast, some of the participants who reported that they had accepted a behaviour which they found undesirable suggested that they were subjugating their feelings and needs and were unhappy with the situation despite making no attempts to change it.
6. The most frequently used source of relationship support was close social contacts. The participants reported that having someone to listen to their relationship problems was beneficial and helped them to understand their situation and get through difficult times. The participants also valued receiving unbiased advice from their family and friends. The participants reported that because their friends and family knew the individuals in the relationship they could offer new insights into their relationships and this sometimes helped them to understand their issues more deeply and how they could work to resolve them. In addition to the emotional support that family and friends provided the participants found that the practical support (e.g. childcare) they offered could be beneficial to a couple's relationship.
7. A minority of the participants had used formal relationship support services such as Relate. Counselling services had been engaged in response to severe relationship problems and usually at a crisis point in the relationship. Some of the participants indicated that whilst they had raised the suggestion of attending relationship counselling their partner had strongly objected to the use of this support.
8. Most of the participants felt that a couple should be able to deal with their relationship problems privately within the dyad without having to rely on external relationship support. Support from friends and family, was more acceptable than formal support such as relationship counselling. A few of the participants suggested that if a couple required formal or professional relationship support to solve a relationship difficulty then the relationship was not worth saving and unlikely to be successful. Most of the participants reported that they would not use a relationship counselling service.
9. Many of the participants reported that using formal relationship support was intrinsically linked with feelings of failure and defeat. The need for relationship counselling was associated with weaknesses or deficit in an individual. Being a strong and resilient person was viewed as incompatible with the use of counselling services. Some participants reported that by the time a couple decided to attend relationship counselling it was often too late to repair the relationship.

10. Despite a general preference for support from familiar sources, such as family and friends, the participants raised some issues with the use of their support. Some participants were concerned about placing an undue burden on family and a few felt that it was important to keep their relationship problems hidden. Some of the participants reported that the high level of involvement friends and family had in the couple's life made them a less suitable source of support because the advice they provided would be biased.
11. Some of the participants emphasised the importance of confidentiality when seeking support. Factors which were important to these participants included being able to access a source anonymously and also being sure that anything they spoke about remained private. For some participants this had created a barrier to accessing support. Being able to access information and support through websites or telephone helplines, was viewed as a potential solution to this problem.
12. The participants reported a range of factors which made a source of relationship support more or less acceptable. Some of these themes were not compatible, for example the desire for anonymity and a preference for support from someone familiar who could empathise with their situation. This finding illustrates the difficulties associated with the creation of suitable support services and suggests the need for variety in provision.
13. The influence of people's 'developmental' or 'non-developmental' relationship perspective (see Chapter 4) was apparent in the accounts of relationship improvement behaviour and attitudes to relationship support.
14. A 'developmental' perspective was evident in behaviours such as initiating discussion about issues even if it was uncomfortable to do so; learning from difficult experiences; expressing dissatisfaction; and engaging in constructive confrontation.
15. A 'non-developmental' perspective was apparent in accounts where people reported frequently avoiding confrontation with their partner; subjugating their own needs and resolving to put up with low relationship satisfaction; failing to fully resolve arguments; holding a belief that a couple could not learn to improve their relationship; and considering that relationship support was ineffective.
16. A person who has a 'developmental' view of their relationship holds a belief that they have control over the outcome of their relationship and this makes it more likely that they will engage in relationship improvement behaviour and seek out relationship support if they experience difficulties. This could increase their resilience to future relationship difficulties.
17. From an early intervention perspective, the results provide a valuable insight into successful strategies for relationship improvement which can be considered in the development of interventions.

6.3 Implications for policy and practice

The research provides a wealth of detail about the experiences of people in couple relationships and the findings have clear implications for policy-makers and practitioners aiming to find ways to strengthen couple relationships. This section presents some of the key implications.

A 'developmental' perspective

There was great variation in the accounts of relationships provided by the participants. Some people viewed their relationships as deeply satisfying and well developed whilst others felt that their relationship with their partner was deteriorating and unsatisfactory. Through investigating the processes within these different relationships the research provides us with an opportunity to learn from people with satisfying and successful relationships and develop support based on their experiences.

A key feature of this research was the investigation into the relationship beliefs of participants. These were considered to be either 'developmental' or 'non-developmental' in nature. A belief that relationships were flexible, controllable and changed over time underpinned a 'developmental' perspective. Based on the assumption that people who hold 'developmental' beliefs are likely to be motivated to maintain and improve their relationship, the findings can be used to develop interventions which aim to modify people's attitudes and behaviour towards this perspective.

Those who have a 'developmental' stance are those primed to be able to learn adaptive skills early on. They are also already equipped with some wisdom about relationship trajectories and the ability to make improvements through the accumulation of knowledge and skills. These are both key to robustness in relationships and can be bolstered in couples such as those reporting relationship distress. Those not 'developmental' in their perspective, however, can be potentially reached through a prior step: one that would educate them about the benefits of such a stance.

A number of key points associated with this finding are presented below:

Universal early intervention

The results suggest the potential benefit of adopting a universal early intervention approach to relationship support. There are two groups of participants who may particularly benefit from early intervention. Firstly those who are in the early stages of their relationships, may benefit from increased awareness of relationship stages and likely changes (i.e. the decrease in passion) to inform people that it is normal for this to occur, and this may prevent people from misinterpreting the process as relationship deterioration. Secondly, participants who perceive their relationship as 'good' but hold 'non-developmental' relationship beliefs may be ill-equipped to deal with relationship difficulties should they occur. Using universal preventative interventions could provide, therefore, crucial learning to all couples including those currently in satisfying relationships, even if they are yet to experience relationship difficulties.

Knowledge about relationships

Based on the research evidence, key pieces of information which relate to preventative interventions designed to encourage a 'developmental' relationship perspective may include:

- **Relationships change over time** - Being aware of this process can help people to interpret events in their own relationship. As an example, providing information which raises people's awareness that it is normal for affection and attentiveness to decline in the early stages of a relationship may prevent people in new relationships from misinterpreting this process as deterioration. People's relationships go through many different stages and these are associated with different levels of relationship

satisfaction.

It is normal to experience periods of low relationship satisfaction - In relation to the point above, people do experience periods of low satisfaction in their relationship and they sometimes have doubts about staying in their relationship. Often, given time, people's relationship satisfaction improves and these doubts are overcome. Low relationship satisfaction is not necessarily a predictor of future happiness and people can learn to improve their relationships.

- **Certain circumstances are frequently associated with relationship difficulties** - Relationship difficulties often occur during the transition to parenthood. For most people the period before the birth of a child is a period of excitement and anticipation. However, it is important to be aware that the impact of a new child can be detrimental to a couple's relationship. Specific issues include a lack of sleep which can cause partners to be irritable with one another, the emergence of gender roles associated with child care which can cause dissonance, and males feeling rejected by their partner after the birth of a child. Faced with these difficulties people can get caught up into a vicious cycle whereby a father's dissatisfaction with his relationship with the child's mother can reduce his involvement with the child, leaving the mother feeling less supported and, in turn, being more critical of the father, and so on (One Plus One, 2006). As a child grows older, further differences in the couple's parenting style may emerge and this is an area which often causes conflict. There are also many other circumstances when difficulties are likely to emerge including financial problems, illness, and the influence of friends and in-laws.
- **People have the ability to control the outcome of their relationship** - Relationships are flexible and can respond to change. Empowering people to recognise that they can have control over their relationship may have a significant effect on their relationship improvement behaviour, such as understanding a partner's behaviour and feelings, investing in relationship 'work' or using support.
- **The way a couple communicate has a bearing on many aspects of their relationship** - A couple's relationship can be developed through their use of communication. Being open with a partner can help a couple to increase their sense of closeness or 'togetherness' and facilitates the development of a trusting and supportive relationship.
- **It is useful to understand a partner's behaviour** - The way people think about their partner's behaviour has an impact on their thoughts and feelings towards them. It is useful to consider the circumstances which have caused undesirable behaviour, for example, a partner's irritability might be due to their illness. It is also important to consider the partner's life experiences and how these have influenced their behaviour. Understanding the reasons behind a behaviour may help reduce relationship tension.
- **Conflict and confrontation is normal in a relationship** - Whilst it may be difficult to raise relationship issues with a partner that may result in short-term confrontation, it is likely to be beneficial for the long-term health of the relationship. By being open about feelings a couple can address a relationship issue before it develops into a serious difficulty. Failing to raise and deal with issues may be a sign that people are subjugating their own needs and this can lead to the erosion of relationship satisfaction. A lack of conflict in a relationship does not necessarily indicate a healthy relationship.

- **The way people deal with conflict in their relationship is more important than the conflict itself** - It is important to deal with conflict in a constructive manner. The problems couples face are usually much less important than the way they deal with them. The findings from this study suggest some people are more adept than others at resolving conflict constructively. Important considerations during conflict were to take a break if a situation became too heated, to fully resolve all the issues that were raised during the argument, and to learn from the conflict.

This kind of knowledge described above can encourage a 'developmental' perspective. There is clear potential for relationships education in schools to promote knowledge that underpins a 'developmental' perspective. This will be necessary to foster current policy committed to promoting 'strong and positive relationships' (DCSF, 2010) through school-based sex and relationships education.

Providing acceptable sources of support

One challenge for policy and practice is to find ways to increase the uptake of relationship support services. Another is to develop services which are acceptable to couples, in terms of the ways in which they experience difficulties and the type of support they find acceptable when they do. This is especially important at an early stage when the prospect for improving relationship quality is greatest. In addition to the findings presented above, the research identified factors which make sources of support acceptable to people. These have implications for the development of interventions. As an example, the vast majority of people preferred support to come from somebody familiar and who had been through similar experiences to them. This suggests that training peer mentors to develop their listening skills and ability to empathise might be an effective way of offering acceptable support.

Research shows that an effective time for support is when a couple are becoming parents for the first time and motivation to get things right is high (Schulz et al., 2006). During this time a couple are in routine contact with various professionals, such as Health Visitors, who are in a strong position to offer support. Broadening the purview of these professionals by training them to understand relationships and be able to offer support and signposting could provide long lasting benefits for the couple and for the baby they are going to raise.

A significant finding in this area was that participants often found it difficult to seek out formal relationship support. This has implications for making services better marketed and packaged. However, many of the participants also reported that they were unwilling to use services such as relationship counselling and that by the time they decided to do so it would probably be too late to save their relationship. It is clearly important that relationship support services are not portrayed as a means of trying to resolve an already failed relationship, rather as a means of improving the quality of the relationship. In addition, incompatible concerns such as the preferences for anonymity and informal support from friends and family suggest the need for a menu of support provision. A menu of support options would also be appropriate to meet the needs of people at different stages of their relationship. Moreover, a careful consideration for those with a 'developmental' perspective is to provide advice and support which does not undermine their own sense of agency and control. Indeed, those with a 'non-developmental' perspective may be more receptive to learning what will be new information and skills.

A central component of relationship support was to 'off-load' problems, be listened to, and accept neutral advice that people could feasibly enact. However, these were matched by concerns over burdening friends and family with problems and wanting to keep relationship difficulties private. Additionally, evidence from this research suggests that issues over availability, accessibility and acceptability prevent the uptake of more formal types of support.

Innovative solutions such as internet technology may be a means of overcoming such barriers. Recent research into the preferences of an innovative relationships support website suggests that the main attractions are that it is immediate, confidential, not face-to-face, and informative. It also provides a medium to express relationship difficulties and gather advice from people in similar situations as well as from experienced health professionals (Coleman and Glenn, 2010). Innovative and evidence-based internet support services provide a way of bypassing some of these significant barriers that people face when seeking relationship support.

Future research and development

As a final note, this study has also identified a number of areas that require further investigation. Firstly, the distinction between the 'developmental' and 'non-developmental' beliefs and their ability to improve and strengthen relationships is a finding central to this study. However, these data do not enable us to grasp an understanding about the antecedents of these perspectives and essentially improve our understanding of why some people hold 'developmental' beliefs whilst others do not. Furthermore, is this 'developmental' capability an individual attribute or something developed from the relationship, does it change through time and, if so, how can this best be achieved? Additionally, a recognition of whether those with particular relationship beliefs share common characteristics (e.g. by gender, age, relationship duration, relationship type, etc.) would be of obvious interest.

Secondly, and arguably the greatest challenge is to build on what this study has shown about improving relationship support. With contemporary policy interest over reducing relationship erosion and preserving relationship stability, a greater understanding is required about what interventions are likely to be more acceptable and effective. How can those with a 'non-developmental' perspective become more motivated to work on and understand their relationship? Whilst a menu of relationship support options is preferred, actually implementing and assessing the effectiveness of support to strengthen relationships is the ultimate challenge when applying these findings to developments in policy and practice.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 - Recruitment screening questionnaire

Appendix 2a and 2b - Recruitment quotas achieved for interviews and focus groups

Appendix 3 - Research methods

Appendix 4 - Relationship questionnaire

Appendix 5 - Interview topic guide

Appendix 6 - Focus group topic guide

Appendix 7 - Coding framework

Appendix 1: Recruitment screening questionnaire

This form is the confidential property of:

Daphne Cotton Qualitative Research
29 A The Avenue
St Margarets
Twickenham
TW1 1QU

Job Number	OP21
Job Name	One Plus One Relationship Research
Date	September 2002

PLEASE WRITE IN BLOCK CAPITALS

Title: _____ Initials: _____ Surname: _____

First Name: _____

Address: _____

Postcode: _____ Telephone: _____

Interview details:

Date

Time.....

Interview Number

Quotas:

- married
 - co-habiting

 - child(ren)
 - no children
 - stepchild(ren)
 - children left home

 - male
 - female

 - ABC1
 - C2DE

 - GCSE's or less
 - A-levels or above

 - 30 and under
 - 31 – 40
 - 41 – 50
 - over 50
- } age
-
- 5 – 10 years
- 11 – 20 years
- over 20 years
- } relationship duration
-
- living with 2nd or subsequent partner
-
- ethnic minority

Checklist: (circle as appropriate)

- **Gave interview details by hand**
- **Sent letter of confirmation**
- **Rang to confirm attendance (day before)**

RECRUITER'S DECLARATION:

The person above has been recruited by me in accordance with the instructions and within the Market Research Society Code of Conduct.

Print name: _____ Signed: _____ Date: _____

Recruiter introduces herself and shows MRS identity card.

Hello, I am working for Daphne Cotton Qualitative Research, an independent research consultancy. We are looking for members of the public who would be willing to take part in a study on relationships. This is a study to obtain information about people's experiences of relationships, what they think about relationships generally and how they deal with the ups and downs of a long-term relationship.

May I ask you a few questions to see if you would be eligible to take part?

(Circle all answer codes as appropriate)

Preliminary questions:

A. Have you ever taken part in a research interview or focus group discussion?

YES

GO TO **QB**

NO

GO TO **Q1**

B. How many have you done, say, over the past 3 years?

1

GO TO **Q1**

more than 1

CLOSE

Q1 Are you at present living with a partner?
(meaning heterosexual relationship)

YES 1

GO TO **Q2**

NO 2

CLOSE

Q2 How long have you been living with him / her? 0 – 2 years 1

CLOSE

3 – 4 years 2

IF OVER 30 CLOSE;
IF 30 OR UNDER GO TO
Q2b

5 – 10 years 3

11 – 20 years 4

over 20 years 5

RECRUIT ACCORDING
TO RELATIONSHIP
DURATION AND GO
TO **Q3**

Q2b How long have you been in a relationship with your partner (even if not living with him / her)	0 – 4 years	1	IF LESS THAN 5 YEARS CLOSE; IF 5 YEARS OR MORE GO TO Q3
	5 years or more	2	
Q3 Have you lived in a married or cohabiting relationship before that lasted for 5 years or more	YES	2	RECRUIT AS 'LIVING WITH 2 ND OR SUBSEQUENT PARTNER' AND GO TO Q4
	NO	1	GO TO Q4
Q4 Have you any children* *(Do not include step-children under YES but ask question for quota purposes. Adopted children can be included under YES)	YES	1	GO TO Q5
	NO	2	GO TO Q7
	step-children	3	RECRUIT AS HAVING STEP-CHILDREN
Q5 Are the children	living with you	1	} GO TO Q6
	living with other parent or carer	2	
	living independently (= left home)	3	RECRUIT AS 'CHILDREN LEFT HOME' AND GO TO Q6
Q6 Are you married	YES	1	RECRUIT AS MARRIED WITH CHILDREN and GO TO Q8
	NO	2	RECRUIT AS COHABITING WITH CHILDREN and GO TO Q8

Q7 Are you married

YES

1

RECRUIT AS MARRIED
NO CHILDREN AND GO
TO **Q8**

NO

2

RECRUIT AS
COHABITING NO
CHILDREN AND GO TO
Q8

Q8 Do you have any of the following qualifications:

CSE's or GCSE's

1

O LEVELS

2

NVQ level 1 or 2

3

No qualifications

4

RECRUIT AS LOWER
EDUCATIONAL
LEVEL AND GO TO
CLASSIFICATION
SECTION

A LEVELS or AS levels

5

HND

6

NVQ level 3 or higher

7

University degree

8

RECRUIT AS HIGHER
EDUCATIONAL LEVEL
AND GO TO
CLASSIFICATION
SECTION

CLASSIFICATION SECTION (Ask all)

RECRUIT TO QUOTAS FOR C1 – C4

C1 SEX

Male

1

Female

2

C2 AGE LAST BIRTHDAY
(write in and code)

30 and under

1

31 – 40

2

41 – 50

3

over 50

4

C3 USUAL OCCUPATION
(write in and code)

A	1	}	ABC1
B	2		
C1	3		
C2	4	}	C2DE
D	5		
E	6		

C4 ETHNIC ORIGIN.....
(write in self classification and code)

WHITE	1	}	RECRUIT AS ETHNIC MINORITY
BLACK	2		
ASIAN	3		
OTHER	4		

RECRUIT TO QUOTA

We would very much like you to take part in this study.

Would you be willing to talk to a researcher about your experience of relationships?

You will need to allow up to 2 hours for the interview.

You will be paid £ 30 as a thank you for giving up your time to take part.

You will receive a call the day before to remind you of the interview time.

ON FRONT PAGE

FILL IN INTERVIEW DATE and TIME

CHECK NAME and CONTACT DETAILS

GIVE RECRUITMENT LETTER TO RESPONDENT WITH DETAILS FILLED IN

THANK AND CLOSE.

Appendix 2a: Recruitment quotas achieved for interviews

		Married with children	Married no children	Cohabiting with children	Cohabiting no children	Total (n=112)
Gender	Male	26	7	16	6	55
	Female	27	9	15	6	57
Age	Up to 30	10	5	9	3	27
	31-40	15	4	8	5	32
	41-50	15	3	6	3	27
	Over 50	13	4	8	1	26
Relationship duration	5-10 yrs	15	10	20	8	53
	11-20 yrs	19	5	7	3	34
	Over 20 yrs	19	1	4	1	25
Socio-economic group	ABC1	32	8	14	6	60
	C2DE	21	8	17	6	52
Education level	GCSEs or lower	25	7	16	9	57
	A levels or higher	28	9	15	3	55
Living with 2nd partner	Yes	14	3	14	3	34
	No	39	13	17	9	78
Children left home?	Yes	10	–	6	–	16
	No	43	–	25	–	68
Step-children	Yes	6	2	11	2	21
	No	47	14	20	10	91
Ethnic minority	Yes	6	0	4	2	2
	No	47	16	27	10	100
Relationship problems score	No problems	35	10	17	8	70
	Problems	10	5	8	2	25
	Severe problems	1	0	5	0	6
	No Q	7	1	1	2	11
Total		53	16	31	12	112

Appendix 2b: Recruitment quotas achieved for focus groups

		Married with children	Married no children	Cohabiting with children	Cohabiting no children	Total (n=64)
Gender	Male	17	2	9	4	32
	Female	18	3	6	5	32
Age	Up to 30	1	3	4	5	13
	31-40	16	0	3	1	20
	41-50	8	2	7	3	20
	Over 50	10	0	1	0	11
Relationship duration	5-10 yrs	7	5	11	6	29
	11-20 yrs	14	0	4	3	21
	Over 20 yrs	14	0	0	0	14
Socio-economic group	ABC1	20	5	7	5	37
	C2DE	15	0	8	4	27
Education level	GCSEs or lower	18	2	10	3	33
	A levels or higher	17	3	5	6	31
Living with 2nd partner	Yes	2	1	7	3	13
	No	33	4	8	6	51
Children left home?	Yes	9	0	1	0	10
	No	26	5	14	9	54
Step-children	Yes	2	1	5	1	9
	No	33	4	10	8	55
Ethnic minority	Yes	3	0	1	0	4
	No	23	5	14	9	60
Total		35	5	15	9	64

Appendix 3: Research methods

This appendix provides details of the data collection carried out for the initial investigation conducted in 2002-2003. It also provides information which relates to the current secondary analysis. Specific methods for each subsequent chapter are also added.

Original Research

Consultation

A number of key organisations were consulted during the development of the original research. The consultation involved representatives (names at the time of consultation) of the Family Welfare Association, Home Office, Jewish Marriage Council, London Marriage Guidance, Lord Chancellor's Department, Marriage Care, National Family and Parenting Institute, Parentline Plus, Relate and the then Tavistock Marital Studies Institute. In addition to this consultation a thorough literature review was carried out concerning the origins of couple relationship difficulty and help-seeking attitudes and behaviour.

The findings of the consultation and literature review influenced the design of the research to ensure that the project would generate useful findings which could contribute towards the development of policy and practice.

Sampling and recruitment

Participants were recruited to take part in an in-depth interview or a focus group by a team of specially trained freelance qualitative recruiters. A free find method was used where potential participants were approached in a public space and invited to take part in the research at a future date.

The primary inclusion criterion was that a participant had been in a cohabiting (inclusive of marriage) relationship with their current partner for at least five years. This was later reduced to three years of cohabitation for people aged under 30 in order to obtain suitable representation of this age group.

A short screening questionnaire was used to determine eligibility for interview (Appendix 1) and to purposively select participants. This ensured that the selected participants were demographically representative of the general population. Factors which were considered included gender; age; relationship status; relationship duration; number of children; socio-economic group; education; ethnicity; and area of residence. Additionally the questionnaire identified any step-children, people whose children had left home and previous significant relationships (e.g. marriage). The frequencies achieved for each criterion can be found in Appendix 2a, with Appendix 2b showing equivalent data for the focus group participants.

Pilot study

A pilot of 23 in-depth interviews was conducted in order to ensure that the procedures and materials that had been developed were relevant and effective. The suitability of the interview topic guide was evaluated through consultation with the interviewers. The acceptability of a brief eight-item partnership survey (Stanley and Markman, 1997) which was used during the interview was also assessed and approved for use (Appendix 4).

The pilot included five pairs of partner interviews. This approach was trialled to examine the feasibility and usefulness of interviewing both individuals in a relationship but was not used in the main data collection because it significantly increased the difficulty of recruiting participants. The research team felt that interviewing more participants and obtaining a broader variety of accounts was a more effective use of resources.

Data collection

A total of 112 in-depth interviews and eight focus groups (comprising 64 individuals) were conducted. All fieldwork was conducted by an external team of four interviewers under the direction of One Plus One research staff, and was undertaken in London, Bristol and York. Interviews and focus groups were recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

The interviews lasted up to two hours and took place in the participant's home. The interviews were semi-structured, to ensure that key topics were covered whilst permitting the interviewer to follow up unanticipated areas of interest as befitted the exploratory, inductive nature of the study. Interviewers were provided with a list of support numbers to be made available to participants if they became distressed as a result of the interview or requested further information. Key topics covered during the interview included:

- Background socio-demographic information.
- Current relationship story including areas of difficulty and how they were expressed. This was the main part of the interview and participants were invited to draw a timeline of their relationship satisfaction depicting significant 'highs' and 'lows' that were then used to create discussion.
- Awareness and views of support services and policy issues.

An eight point partnership questionnaire (Stanley and Markman, 1997) was also conducted during the interview. The full interview topic guide can be found in Appendix 5.

The eight focus groups were conducted with the following groups: males under 40 years of age, males over 40 years of age, females under 40 years of age, females over 40 years of age, couples under 40 years of age, couples over 40 years of age, mixed gender aged over 40 and mixed gender aged under 40. Each focus group had eight participants. The focus group discussions lasted approximately one and a half hours and were carried out in the recruiter's home. The focus group topic guide can be found in Appendix 6.

The data from the eight focus group discussions were used to check the validity of the analysis conducted on the interview data. The group discussions were read iteratively to create a familiarity with the data and identify any themes which emerged. These themes were compared with the findings of the main analysis to provide further insight into the data. Key quotes which reflected the themes in the focus group data are presented in the relevant results section. The precise age of the participants in the focus groups was not recorded. Participants were grouped as either under or over 40, and this is reflected in the quote attributions.

Secondary analysis

Essentially, the original report presented a brief description of the relationship difficulties recalled by individuals in a couple relationship. The secondary analysis was able to extend this descriptive evidence by providing a deeper understanding of these issues and by exploring ways in which people did/did not attempt to overcome them. The latter provided meaningful insights into people's perceptions, attitudes and capabilities regarding relationship support.

This was reflected in the coding strategy which was carried out using Nvivo 8 software created by QSR International. Coding took approximately two to three hours per transcript. Two researchers were involved in the coding process. Where ambiguous data presented, the researchers worked together to establish a shared understanding of the data. Researchers with extensive experience in the field of relationship research were consulted where necessary.

The coding framework can be found in Appendix 7. Any relevant data in a transcript was assigned to a node and became part of the dataset relating to a specific research question.

Appendix 7 also contains further information including the number of sources (interviews or cases) which contain information for a particular node and the number of references (occasions where the node has been employed) within a node. The appendix illustrates the level and depth of the coding process which was essential to support the detailed secondary analysis of the data.

During the coding process a 'memo' was created for each participant. Each memo recorded details about the participant and included (where evident within the data) gender; age; duration of relationship; status of relationship; (married or cohabiting); work status; number and age of any biological children; and number and age of any step children. The memo also recorded the researcher's initial analysis of the data through the inclusion of any features of the interview or relationship which they felt were notable. This included, but was not limited to, information about participant background and upbringing; previous relationships; onset of current relationship; relationship difficulties; attribution of relationship difficulties; significant life events; future intentions; and an overview of the interview (e.g. style, content, range).

Data trends

During the secondary analysis any trends in the data which were attributable to a person's gender were recorded and these are presented throughout the report. The analysis also considered any differences in the data according to the socio-economic group (SES) of the participants, however, these are not presented in the report. Whilst evidence for gender differences were salient within the data, trends according to SES did not emerge through the in-depth analysis. Whilst these differences may exist, further research focusing specifically on this topic of investigation would be required for their identification.

Focus group discussions which included only males, or only females, were also reviewed for any gender patterns which emerged. It is important to note that exploring these differences was not a primary objective of the research and as such only the most salient trends are reported.

Methods specific to chapters reporting findings

Chapter 2 – relationship difficulties

Participants were asked a direct question about the causes of difficulties within their relationship (see Appendix 5). This question followed on from the creation of a timeline of relationship 'highs' and 'lows' and, as such, participants' thoughts and feelings concerning relationship difficulties were salient. Any data relevant to the causes or consequences of relationship were coded according to the framework (see Appendix 7).

When all of the transcripts had been coded for relationship difficulties the researcher conducted thematic analysis to identify and developed key themes which emerged from the data. Quotes were selected to illustrate the findings and any particularly relevant interviews were identified for use as case studies.

The themes in Chapter 2 are presented according to the frequency with which they were reported. Another method of presentation could involve the categorisation of issues according to theoretical assumptions, for example, transitions (e.g. parenthood, cohabitation), external influences (e.g. the influence of friends), and individual influences (e.g. mental health, personality). However, ordering the results by the frequency with which they were reported is in keeping with the inductive nature of this research and provides a basic illustration of the circumstances which are most likely to be associated with relationship issues.

Chapter 3 – What factors help a relationship endure?

During the interviews participants were asked a number of questions to elicit their general beliefs about why relationships endured. These questions included:

‘Why do some relationships work and others don’t?’

‘What is most likely to weaken or damage a relationship?’

‘What makes one relationship break up and another, in similar circumstances, survive?’

The responses to these questions provided a data set which concerned general beliefs about what made relationships work and were coded as such.

In addition to this, data was coded which concerned a participant’s beliefs about their relationship. This included data concerning the aspects of their relationship that they valued most highly, factors which strengthened their relationship and any positive changes that participants observed in their relationship over time (through the ‘Timeline’ approach detailed in Chapter 2). The coding framework can be found in Appendix 7.

Chapter 4 – Exploration of relationship attitudes and beliefs

An individual’s relationship perspective was established through a review of the data which elicited their thoughts and feelings about their relationship. These were elicited in the interviews through direct questioning, for example, ‘How would you describe your relationship at present?’. Researchers coded the response to this question, and any other relevant data which arose during interview, under a node entitled ‘perception of relationship’. The coding framework can be found in Appendix 7.

The collated phrases were then reviewed to identify any communalities within the data and grouped with similar phrases. Through this process five distinct groups emerged which represented the different ways in which people perceived their relationship at the time of interview. Whilst the groups show us how participants perceived their relationships at the time of interview they do not tell us about their relationships, for example, the processes that are occurring in a relationship which is perceived as, ‘On an upward slope’. To explore these underlying attitudes and beliefs the data from the groups were analysed for any significant features or themes.

The interview was designed to elicit a comprehensive understanding of a participant’s perception of their relationship. As such the data set provides a sound base upon which to identify and explore people’s perspectives of their relationship and their attitudes and beliefs. Throughout the chapter it is important to remember that the participants’ views represent only their experience within a relationship and that it is quite possible a participant’s partner has a very different understanding of the relationship and may have very different attitudes and beliefs. The chapter is concerned with how individuals understand their relationship, not with establishing an objective description of it.

It is also important to note that relationships are a fluid dynamic and that a relationship, and a person’s perception of it, may be changed by a huge number of variables, arising both from within the dyad and external to it. People with very different relationships may describe them in a similar way. As such, the analysis explores people’s perceptions of their relationships and any general themes occurring within similarly viewed relationships, but does not attempt to explain the causality of each perception.

Chapter 5 – Relationship improvement behaviour

During the interviews the participants were asked a number of questions about how they resolved relationship problems with their partner. The interviews covered the processes the participants engaged in within their partner, for example arguing, ignoring problems or talking about issues, and also the sources of external support that participants had used, such as

speaking with family members or using relationship counselling services. The interviews also examined the participants' attitudes towards relationship improvement and their support preferences.

Data which were relevant to these areas were coded within the framework which can be found in Appendix 7.

The coded data were analysed thematically and the most prevalent and developed themes which emerged from the data were selected for presentation in the results section. Key phrases from participants were selected to illustrate the findings of the analysis.

Appendix 4: Relationship questionnaire

CONFIDENTIAL

PARTNERSHIP SURVEY

ANSWERING THE QUESTIONS:

Please answer the questions by ticking the appropriate box. If none of the answers exactly fits what you want to say, choose the answer that comes nearest.

The following statements describe various difficulties that some couples have in their relationship. In each case, show whether the difficulty applies to you and your partner 'almost never', 'once in a while', or 'frequently'. *Please tick one box only.*

1. My partner seems to regard my words or actions as more rejecting than I mean them to be

Almost never ☐ 1
Once in a while ☐ 2
Frequently ☐ 3

2. I hold back from telling my partner what I really think and feel

Almost never ☐ 1
Once in a while ☐ 2
Frequently ☐ 3

3. When we argue, one of us withdraws... that is, refuses to talk about it any more or leaves the room

Almost never ☐ 1
Once in a while ☐ 2
Frequently ☐ 3

4. My partner criticises or belittles my opinions, feelings, or wishes

Almost never ☐ 1

Once in a while ☐ 2

Frequently ☐ 3

5. When we have a problem to solve, it is as if we are on opposite sides

Almost never ☐ 1

Once in a while ☐ 2

Frequently ☐ 3

6. I feel lonely in this relationship

Almost never ☐ 1

Once in a while ☐ 2

Frequently ☐ 3

7. I think seriously about what it would be like to be with someone else

Almost never ☐ 1

Once in a while ☐ 2

Frequently ☐ 3

8. Little arguments develop into ugly rows with accusations, criticisms, name-calling, or bringing up past grievances

Almost never ☐ 1

Once in a while ☐ 2

Frequently ☐ 3

Appendix 5: Interview topic guide

One Plus One
Relationship Research
Main Phase
September 2002

Aims of the research:

- To find out how people define problems or difficulties in their relationships;
- To investigate the kinds of problems people experience in their relationships and how they resolve (or fail to resolve) these problems;
- To explore patterns of belief and values that people bring to their relationships and how these might relate to their response to relationship difficulties;
- To find out what people understand about relationships and strategies for managing difficult experiences; and
- To find out about people's knowledge of relationship support services and experiences of both informal and formal means of help and support

1. INTRODUCTION

- Moderator introduction – working for independent research agency
- About the research – study on relationships for One Plus One
 - There is a lot of interest in relationships now and how they are changing and we want to find out what people think about relationships
 - This is a chance for people's opinions to be heard. *(we will be interviewing people of all ages in all types of relationships – not singling out any type of person)*
 - There are no right or wrong answers – we want to hear about your experiences.
- Session will take no longer than 2 hours / tape-recorded / confidentiality

2. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- **Age**
- **Occupation:** Are you working at the moment / is this your usual occupation
- **Education:** Did you stay on at school after 16 / what qualifications do you have (NVQ's what level, GCSE's, A-level or higher)
- **Ethnicity:**
 - how would you describe your ethnic origin
 - do you feel part of any nationality group
- CHECK OUT SAME DETAILS FOR PARTNER
- **Current relationship**
 - how long have you known each other
 - how long have you been together (ie in relationship)
 - how long have you been living together
 - are you married / how long married
 - do you have children (ages / gender / of current or previous relationship)
 - any step-children
 - does anyone else live with you
- **Previous relationship(s):** Identify any significant previous relationship(s). For each, ASK
 - How long it lasted
 - Any children
 - How it ended (had they lived together / been married / did they divorce)
 - Was it an important relationship for them / if so why (can come back to it later)

3. CURRENT RELATIONSHIP STORY

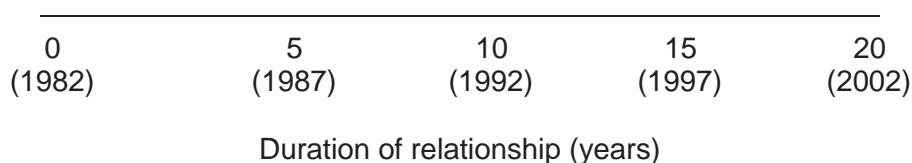
(In this section invite respondent to tell the story of their relationship ... Probe as necessary to keep the story going and to establish important information as you go along)

- I'd like you to tell me about your relationship with your current partner (husband / wife) from when you first met ...
- How you met / first impressions of each other.
- What led you to live together (a conscious decision or did it just happen)
- IF MARRIED: What made you decide to marry + PARTNER's views
- IF CO-HABITING: Did you ever think about marriage/why was that? + PARTNER's views
- Tell me about that decision – easy or difficult / any doubts + PARTNER's views
- Were there any changes in your relationship after you made that decision / got married / moved in together
- Have you / your partner had to make adjustments since living together

TIME LINE:

Invite respondent to set out a timeline of key events and milestones to give a framework to their relationship story. Use the KEY EVENTS list on the following page to help elicit relationship issues if respondent is not forthcoming BUT make sure respondent has a good chance to identify problems before suggesting ones.

Just draw a line on the bottom of the page showing the years on the bottom line as shown below. Don't mention ups and downs at this stage just enter key events eg birth of children, moving house, changing job, divorce, any health problems etc.



UPS AND DOWNS

Then introduce idea of ups and downs, stressing that every relationship has its highs and low points and that there is no typical pattern. Use the time line as an additional prompt as necessary. The 'highs / lows' line (reflecting satisfaction with the relationship) can be drawn in at any stage when it seems appropriate, even at the end.

- Many couples go through ups and downs – would you say this is true of your relationship
- Looking back, can you recall some of the really good times – what made them good
- What about some of the not so good times – in what ways were they not so good

- CHECK PARTNER'S VIEWS

PROBES FOR UPS AND DOWNS section

(Keep checking for partner perspective and ask about friends' and family perspectives too)

- How did it affect your relationship
- Did it affect any other areas of your life (e.g. work, children, health, other relationships)
- Can you recall anything else going on at the time
- How did you cope
- Did you talk to anyone else about it (*why that person*)
- What were you seeking (*help / advice / someone to listen*)
- Did it make a difference (in what way ...)
- Did your partner know you were talking to ...
- Did your partner talk to anyone
- Did you do anything else (eg formal help – counselling))
- Did it make a difference (in what way)
- Did you look for information (books, internet, self-help)
- Did you consider anything else
- Looking back now on what happened – does it look any different / would you deal with it differently
- Why do you think you were not able to do that at the time
- Do you think these issues were dealt with
- Were there any issues left unresolved

PROBE FOR KNOWN STRESSORS:

- What issues generally put stress on your relationship (Use PROBES from ONGOING ISSUES)
- Do you talk about these issues (*how ... e.g who initiates*)

KEY EVENTS ASSOCIATED WITH RELATIONSHIP DIFFICULTIES:

TRANSITIONS:

- getting married
- birth of a child (planned or unplanned)
- employment related (changing jobs, going back to work, unemployment, retirement)
- moving home
- children leaving home
- menopause
- revelation of an affair / close involvement with another / threats of leaving / period of separation
- death of a child or close relative / miscarriage /abortion
- positive events (eg big holiday)

ISSUES AFFECTING INDIVIDUAL:

- employment related (losing job, missing promotion etc)
- mental or physical health problems
- mid-life crisis
- addictions (heavy drinking, drug use, gambling)

ONGOING ISSUES:

- material difficulties (eg poor housing, financial problems)
- behavioural or health problems in children
- difficulties in relationships with other family members
 - personality issues / incompatibility
 - not spending enough time together
 - sexual difficulties
 - abuse or violence in relationship

- Do you find it easier to communicate about some issues more than others (PROBE)
- What happens when you don't agree (Probe: *would either of you become aggressive – verbally? Physically?*)

PRESENT AND FUTURE

(In this section we want to find out whether people are future-oriented and plan or whether they don't really see things this way)

- How would you describe your relationship at present
- Is it different to when you first got together / different to your expectations
- Are there aspects of your relationship you would like to change
- Do you think this is possible / likely to happen (why ...)
- Is there anything you feel you cannot change
- Do you have any regrets
- Would you choose the same person
- How do you see your relationship in the future (hopes / anxieties)

INVITE COMPARISONS WITH PREVIOUS RELATIONSHIPS

- Any similarities / differences between this and previous relationship(s)
- Why did previous relationship not last
- Any lessons learnt (eg going through difficult times)
- Has your experience changed your expectations about relationships (In what way)
- Any regrets
- Is there anything that might have helped at the time
- Could things have been different with knowledge you have now about relationships
(remember this answer when asking about suggestions at the end)
- What about the process of splitting up (could that have been better / what might have helped)
- What were the consequences of the relationship breaking up
- Views on why other people's relationships break up and consequences

4. ATTITUDES AND BELIEFS

(In this section we are trying to find out if people have particular ideas about relationships and where these come from. Try to recall statements made about previous relationship(s) when going through this section)

BELIEFS and EXPECTATIONS

- Did you have any particular ideas about relationships
- Have your ideas about relationships changed over time
- How have your experiences affected your views
- Any comparisons between how they entered different relationships
- Where did your ideas come from (e.g. family, friends)
- Are you close to your family (do you confide in them)
- Are your parents still together / what about your partners' parents (MUST ASK)
- Do you come from a religious background
(e.g do you / your family practice any faith / are you part of a religious community)
- What were your partner's views about relationships (same as yours / and now?)
- Did you have any pre-marital counselling / marriage preparation

VIEWS ON RELATIONSHIPS + PARTNER's views

- What matters most in a relationship (e.g. trust, fidelity, commitment – *ask WHY in each case*)
- What about commitment – what do you mean by commitment
- Why do some relationships work and others don't (e.g. people they know)
- What is most likely to weaken or damage a relationship (+ PARTNER's view)
- What makes one relationship break up and another, in similar circumstances, survive
- Do you think men and women hold different ideas about relationships
- And what about in your relationship (CHECK these questions against respondent experience)

5. SUPPORT SERVICES and POLICY ISSUES

KNOWLEDGE OF SOURCES OF HELP AVAILABLE

- Check awareness of sources of help for relationship issues – WHAT DO THEY KNOW
- If they do not know – WHERE WOULD THEY GO TO FIND OUT (e.g. If someone turned to you, what would you suggest)
- Obtain views on seeking help for relationship issues from the following:
 - relationship counselling (eg Relate, private counselling, NHS counselling)
 - health professionals
 - religious leaders (clergyman, priest, rabbi)
 - helplines
 - web based help (interactive information)
 - What about your partner's view

PROBES FOR EACH SOURCE

- Positive – why would you go there
- Negative – why would you not go there
- What would you expect from this service
- Who do you think this service is for
- Do you know anyone who has

POLICY ISSUES

People often say more should be done to help relationships or make separation less painful various ideas have been suggested. We would like to know your views

- Do you think anything ought to be done to help support better relationships between men and women
- Do you think anything can be done
- Information to be more readily available
 - Is there a need for more information
 - What type of information
 - where should the information be (PROBES: doctors' surgeries, schools, hairdressers, local newspapers – freebies, ANYWHERE ELSE)
 - Is there any information you would like to have
- Relationship education in school (being given knowledge about relationships e.g. the different stages a relationship goes through) – any experience of this
- Other education classes (eg for adults)
 - Skills (e.g. teaching people how to manage conflict or communicate better)
 - Knowledge (e.g. information about the impact of a baby on a relationship)

CHANGES IN MARRIAGE LAW – give examples

EXAMPLE: There are legal differences between marriage and cohabitation
(e.g a cohabiting father has to register to get the same rights over a child as the mother)

- Do you think this is a good idea
- Do you think cohabitation should be more similar to marriage legally
- Should marriage be made more difficult, demonstrating a certain level of commitment
(e.g. having to be in a relationship for a certain length of time OR having to attend some form of marriage preparation)
- Should divorce be made more difficult
 - Should couples have to wait a certain amount of time before being able to divorce
 - Should couple have to receive counselling before being able to divorce
 - Should it be different for people with children
- Any other suggestions (TRY TO RECALL EARLIER ANSWERS)

RELATIONSHIP QUESTIONNAIRE

Ask respondent to complete this and collect it when completed

SUPPORT INFORMATION

If respondent requests help, advice or support as a result of the interview or if s/he is upset during interview, offer the information sheet with support numbers if appropriate

CLOSE AND END

Appendix 6: Focus group topic guide

One Plus One
Relationship Research
Focus groups
April 2003

Aims of the research:

- To explore the background to help-seeking in relationships;
- To find out how people's attitudes and expectations about their relationships might influence decision making in response to relationship difficulties;
- To explore people's attitudes towards potential sources of help for relationship issues – views on what sort of support or services might help

1. INTRODUCTION

- Moderator introduction – independent research agency
- About the research – study on relationships for One Plus One
 - Current interest in relationships, how they are changing and how people deal with the ups and downs of a long term relationship
 - Interviewing people of all ages, married or cohabiting, chance for everyone to express their views – no right or wrong answers
 - Can talk about themselves or their relationships or talk in general
- Session will take about 1¾ hours / tape-recorded / confidentiality
- Format – quite loose and open / feel free to interject / one person speaking at a time
- Respondents introduce themselves

2. BACKGROUND TO PROBLEMS AND HELP SEEKING

I would like to start off looking at relationships very generally – how and why we get into relationships and what we might expect from them

- **Do relationships just happen to us or do we make our own relationships?**

Prompts:

- *Do we choose our partners or do circumstances choose them for us?*
- *Are we influenced by whether we want a love affair or a long term partner?*
- *Do people discuss their expectations with each other – for example, before making a commitment to a long term relationship*
- *How much control do you think we have over our relationships and what happens in a relationship?*

- **What expectations / beliefs do people have of a long-term relationship**

Prompts:

- *Where do these ideas come from*
- *Do people expect their relationship to remain the same*
- *Do people expect that it will develop / change over the years*
- *Do people expect to encounter difficulties in their relationship*
- *What sorts of difficulties might people expect in a long term relationship*
- *When do you think these difficulties might occur in a relationship
(prompt: when first living together, parenthood, illness, retirement)*

- **How might adversity (difficult times) influence one's relationships?**

Prompts:

- *adversities such as illness, death of friend or parent, unemployment, promotion, addictions, moving home, child with difficulties, financial problems*
- *How might it influence the relationship?*
- *What other things might influence the effect of adversity on a relationship?*

- **To what extent do people think about the future of their relationship**

- *Do people have ideas about the future and what they are aiming for together*
- *Do they plan, make decisions for the future*
- *What might influence whether they plan for the future?*

3. RELATIONSHIP DIFFICULTIES

- **Do you think that difficult times are inevitable / unavoidable in a long term relationship**

Prompts

- *When do you think difficult times become seen as a problem?*
- *Does talking about problems as a couple help?*
- *How bad do things have to get before a relationship breaks down*
- **Why do you think some people seem able to get through difficult times and other relationships seem to fall apart very quickly**
 - *What do you think are the differences?*
- **Do you think anything can be done to help people who are going through difficulties in their relationships**

Prompts

- *What sort of things might be useful?*
- *What sort of things might not be useful?*

4. SOURCES OF HELP AND SUPPORT

WHAT ARE PEOPLE LOOKING FOR

- **Who do people turn to for help or support when they are unhappy in their relationship**
- **What are people looking for?**

Prompts

- *help, advice, emotional support, someone to listen, some one to be on their side, information?*
- **If they talked to a friend or relative would they be looking for**

Prompts

- actual advice and help – a solution to the problem
- moral support – reassurance that they are not the only one having problems
- the relief of being able to talk to someone about their anxieties
- Someone on their side

- **What about other types of support:**
 - why would someone seek professional help for their relationship as opposed to talking to friends and relatives
 - why would someone NOT seek professional help

BARRIERS TO SEEKING HELP OR SUPPORT

- **What do you think might prevent a person from seeking help / talking about any difficulties they might have**

Prompts:

- *being unaware that there is a 'relationship' problem*
- *lack of information about what help is available*
- *not having anyone to turn to*
- *lack of belief in possibility of resolving relationship difficulties*
- *stigma, blame*
- *waiting lists or costs for counseling*
- *unwillingness of partner to attend*
- **Do you think anything can be done to support, improve or maintain relationships between men and women.**

Prompts:

- *Could more support be offered (especially for those who have no one to turn to)*
- *What sort of organizations might be able to offer support*
- *Friends and relatives; GP or other health professionals; NHS or private counselling, marriage guidance or relationship counseling; religious leaders, web based help*
- *What about improving relationships – can anything be done? What?*
- *What about maintaining relationships – can anything be done? What?*

- **Do people need information about relationships – what sort of information**

Prompts:

- *Information on relationships – in general or what to expect, or how to cope when things don't go as you hoped*
 - *Relationship education in schools / relationship skills adult education*
 - *Where would they get it / Who should provide it*
- **Summing up, what would of the most use in improving or maintaining relationships?**

Any other suggestions?

CLOSE AND END

Appendix 7: Coding framework

Name	Sources	References
Attitudes to relationships	17	25
Breakdown	55	112
Changes or development	11	11
Children	52	84
Cohabitation	72	112
Divorce	77	135
Expectations or wants	67	129
Family	18	20
Future orientation	39	64
Gender roles or differences	93	175
Infidelity	17	27
Influences on attitudes	2	2
Marriage	98	275
Relationship difficulties	44	76
Singleness	4	5
Step-families	5	7
Trust	6	10
Difficulties	13	19
Causes of difficulties (main ones)	15	19
Abusive		
Addiction (alcohol, gambling etc.)	5	9
Become bored	4	19
Change in identity	4	4
Children	12	19
Christmas	22	39
Communication	3	3
Conflict	40	87
Controlling	7	12
Death (family or friend)	13	20
Disagreements	21	48
Ex-partners	19	28
Financial	13	22
Friends – difficulties of not liking etc.	61	130
Health	11	23

Housework	16	36
Housing	23	41
In laws	20	27
Infidelity	43	94
Jealousy	14	42
Little things	15	28
Personal history	37	59
Personalities	10	19
Pets	15	23
Respect	1	1
Sexual	4	4
Threat to values	29	44
Time together	21	54
Transitions – relocating	51	108
Trust	14	24
	5	12
Causes of difficulties (other influences)		
	16	22
Age		
Alcohol	1	1
Bereavement	7	13
Changes in self	25	64
Children	5	6
Family opinions	25	77
Financial	11	13
Health	16	32
Housing	23	76
Insecure start to relationship	20	35
Lead up to marriage	11	18
Menopause	8	19
Other relationships	4	5
Parents	8	10
Religion and differences in beliefs	3	7
Studying including university	4	11
Work	1	2
	53	147
Consequences (expression of difficulties)		

	6	7
Affecting other things		
Changed self	3	5
Closer together	4	8
Drinking	26	39
Further apart	3	4
Health	22	48
Irritable	5	11
Kids	9	12
Perception of relationship (satisfaction etc.)	7	12
Physical aggression	54	152
Separation	1	1
Thought of leaving	10	24
	19	29
Relationship support and improvements		
	0	0
Action should've taken		
Action taken – resolving issues (Private)	3	3
Attitudes to help	19	24
Help received – From others (Public)	1	1
Recognising relationship problem	2	3
	5	7
What makes relationships endure?		
	105	425
Current relationship – Most valued		
Current relationship – positive changes over time	16	19
Current relationship – Strengtheners	16	24

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