

Institution: The Open University (OU)		
Unit of Assessment: C20 Social Policy and Social Work		
Title of case study: Improving couple relationships using evidence-based resources		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2005-2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Professor Jacqui Gabb	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Professor of Sociology and Intimacy	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: 2004-ongoing
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2012-2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>OU research has helped to transform how couples understand and maintain relationships. The global reach of sustained media coverage (with the audience totalling over 170,000,000), has shifted public debate on the ordinary practices that are valued and help to sustain a partnership over the course of adult life. Research evidence has informed school and youth services' educational materials and teaching practice, and adult relationship support services including Relate. Research tools have been adopted and applied in clinical practice and assessment and therapeutic interventions. The research-based Paired app, downloaded over 100,000 times, has modified relationship maintenance behaviour and improved relationship quality for couples. There are, therefore, four areas of impact characterized in this case: Public attitudes; Relationship education and guidance; Therapeutic approaches and relationship support services; and Improving relationships through (Paired) app interventions.</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>It is estimated by Relate (the UK's largest relationship support provider) that up to a quarter of the British population are in poor quality relationships; 42% of marriages end in divorce, and the economic annual cost of family breakdown is GBP44bn. There are also associated adverse impacts on adults' mental and physical health and children's wellbeing. Over the past 15 years, research led by Gabb has provided insight into intimacy and sexuality in families, and in collaboration with other OU researchers (including co-investigator Fink) the ways that everyday relationship practices enable couples to sustain their partnerships over the course of adult life. This case study highlights the research underpinning the impact on relationship quality.</p>		
Key research findings		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Routine daily interactions are at the core of how families and couple relationships function, more so than big gestures or culturally-valued dates such as Valentine's Day. It is therefore crucial to use a conceptual framework that focuses on everyday practices to investigate living relationships [O1, O2]. • Multiple qualitative methods (diaries, emotion maps, interviews, photo elicitation) shed light on different dimensions of lived experience and an 'everyday moments' approach generates rich insight into the personal meanings of routine gestures in relationships, such as bringing a partner a cup of tea in bed [O3]. • The emotion map research tool [O1] advances an emotion-centred approach to the study of families and relationships, advancing knowledge on how the home operates, spatially and symbolically, to inform affective interactions and the structural factors that shape lived experience [O3, C7]. • There are no clear-cut distinctions between the experiences of women and men, or LGBTQ+ and heterosexual couples in sustaining relationships across adult life [O2], but heterosexual men are less able to readily manage sex issues associated with ageing than gay men and women [O4]. • Parenthood adversely impacts the quality of couple relationships, especially for women [O5]. More generally, though, it is levels of happiness in a partnership which foster relationship maintenance behaviours such as kind and thoughtful gestures [O2] and these in turn help to sustain the relationship in later adulthood [O6]. 		

There is longstanding knowledge on the stressors that may contribute to relationship breakdown, but this research provides new insight into the positive factors that enable couples to sustain their relationships over time. This attention to what works, rather than the problems, has enabled a range of practical approaches and communication tools to be deployed enabling couples to improve their relationships.

3. References to the research

- O1. Gabb, J.** (2008) *Researching Intimacy in Families*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230227668>. [Winner of the British Sociological Association 'Philip Abrams Memorial Prize' for best sole-authored first book in Sociology, 2009]
- O2. Gabb, J., & Fink, J.** (2015) *Couple Relationships in the 21st Century. Research, Policy, Practice*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137434432>
- O3. Gabb, J., & Fink, J.** (2015) 'Telling Moments and Everyday Experience: Multiple Methods Research on Couple Relationships and Personal Lives', *Sociology*, 49(5), 970–987. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038515578993>
- O4. Gabb, J.** (2019) The relationship work of sexual intimacy in long-term heterosexual and LGBTQ partnerships, *Current Sociology*, 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392119826619>
- O5. Chonody, J., Killian, M., Gabb, J., & Dunk-West, P.** (2016) Understanding everyday relationship work: The development of the relationship maintenance scale, *Advances in Social Work*, 17(2), 355-368. <https://doi.org/10.18060/21155>
- O6. Chonody, J., & Gabb, J.** (2019) Understanding the role of relationship maintenance in enduring couple partnerships in later adulthood, *Journal of Marriage and Family Review*, 55(3), 216-238. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01494929.2018.1458010>

Funding includes

- G1.** 'Enduring Love? Understanding Adult Couple Relationships', ESRC (RES-062-23-3056), PI: **Gabb, J.** 2011-14, GBP507,231 [Research impact achieved: Winner of the UK's Centre for Research on Families and Relationships (CRFR) 'Evelyn Gillian Research Impact Award' (2016)].
- G2.** 'Enduring Love: The trials, tribulations and celebrations of long-term partner relationships'. Relate studentship (D-12-010-JF), Fink, J. & **Gabb J.** (2012-2015), GBP11,196.00.

4. Details of the impact

There are four areas of impact in this case, demonstrating change to: 1. public attitudes; 2. relationship education and guidance; 3. therapeutic approaches and relationship support services; 4. improving relationships through (Paired) app interventions.

Public attitudes

The scale of engagement with research findings has changed public perception of everyday relationship maintenance behaviours and shaped cultural narratives on how long-term relationships are sustained over lifecourse [C1, C2]. The launch of the study findings (14/01/2014) generated extensive media engagement. Broadcast features included live interviews on BBC TV News Channel, and multiple national and international radio stations. Published items featured in 135 articles, reaching a global audience reach of 72.2 million people. The most prolific driver of social media coverage was @guardian, whose tweets reached a potential audience of over 3.6 million users [C1]. Stories focused on three key findings from the research which indicated the constituents of a lasting relationship:

"What matters is good communication and thoughtful gestures; a cup of tea in bed in the mornings", *The Guardian* (15/06/2014, readership 614,000) [C2]; "Childless couples have happier marriages", *The Telegraph* (13/01/2014, readership 360,345) [C1]; "British women prefer tea to sex", *South China Morning Post* (19/01/2014, readership 396,000) [C1].

Sustained coverage of and engagement with findings over the subsequent six years (2014-2020) demonstrate the long-lasting influence in shaping public debate and changing public attitudes, focussing on:

“Sex isn’t the be-all and end-all to a happy ending”, Stylist Magazine (10/06/2019, readership 404,392) [C2]; *“Childless couples were happier with their relationships and their partners than parents were”*, CNN (07/12/2016, 95 million online circulation) [C2]; *“Simple acts of kindness are more appreciated than big gestures [...] bring your significant other breakfast in bed [...] everyday, a cup of tea and a biscuit”*, Steve Wright in the Afternoon, BBC Radio 2 (29/08/2019, 8.1m listeners) [C2].

Levels of public interest resulted in a co-authored self-help book, *“The Secrets of Enduring Love”* (2016) commissioned by leading market publisher Vermillion Random House. Marketed as *“the only relationship book based on extensive interviews and surveys”*, this book has sold 2,442 copies [C3] and was serialized by The Daily Mail over a week (1-5/02/2016). The Mail Online (53 million online circulation) [C2] was shared over 1,000 times and generated 275 comments focusing on the value and meanings of sex and everyday relationship work:

“Great advice. I’m actually in the process of learning this right now” [C2].
“Oh hallelujah! All of those top ten are MUCH more important than sex!” [C2].

2. Relationship education and guidance

The success of online teaching resources based on the research has changed the strategic priorities of Brook to focus on eLearning modules [C4, C5]. In collaboration with Brook, the UK’s only charity to offer clinical and sexual health education and wellbeing services to young people, the research was used to pioneer an eLearning module for teachers to use in schools. The success of these resources, in terms of levels of engagement and learning outcomes, led to a new suite of Brook eLearning modules on other topics [C4].

The development of these evidence-based teaching materials has changed teaching practice and enhanced the relationships and sex education (RSE) curriculum. Brook has trained 8,541 professionals to deliver evidence-based RSE and in 2019/20 helped 1.4m young people through their education and wellbeing work [C6, p.9]. Brook Learn had 2,983 registered users in 2019, and nearly half of these (1,133) are for the Relationships & Enduring Love module [C5, p.5]. At the launch of the eLearning module (House of Commons, 09/13/2016), MPs commended the initiative and the application of research evidence in the development of RSE materials [C5].

Teachers using the module reported feeling *“better informed”* and more able to deliver the RSE curriculum effectively:

“The resources are fantastic for discussing consent, friendship and the importance of emotions in relationships” (school nurse) [C5, p.5].
“I have achieved a better understanding of what young people may be thinking and about the myths that we need to dispel through RSE” (Head of PSHE) [C5, pp.5-6].
“I have learnt to explore all aspects of relationships with young people and to encourage them to unpick love stereotypes enforced by the media” (education specialist) [C5, p.6].

80% of users who completed the feedback rated the course good or excellent and 82% said they agreed or strongly agreed that they plan to use resources and deliver education to young people as a result [C5].

Engaging evidence-based RSE curriculum and online resources have changed young people’s understandings of how relationships are sustained over lifecourse [C6, pp.7-11]. In their evaluation of the eLearning module in schools, Brook reported that young people had gained insight into how relationships are maintained and so are better equipped to develop positive intimate relationships [C5]. Brook also works directly with more than 235,000 young people every year [C5]. Research findings have been translated into freely accessible online materials

for these young people and frontline workers. These resources received 42,000-page views from young people and have received resoundingly positive feedback [C5].

3. Therapeutic approaches and relationship support services

Findings have improved training for and delivery of relationship support services. Notably they have been adopted by Relate [C7], the UK's largest provider of relationship support, with more than 600 regional sites reaching over two million people per year across England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. This research on relationships between couples has also directly benefitted Relate in their advocacy work with policy-makers [C7].

Findings from the research have changed the training priorities of Relate and enhanced the experience of same-sex couples who engage with Relate counselling [C7]. Relate employs more than 1,500 counsellors, mediators, and educationalists. As a result of the research, Relate co-funded a PhD studentship on same-sex partnerships, supervised by **Gabb** and Fink [Funding.3b] Findings from this doctoral research have led to diversity awareness training for Relate counsellors and changes in Relate clinical practice to better support LGBT+ couples [C7].

Media coverage of the lasting significance of everyday routine relationship care practices has entered clinical settings and resulted in changes in therapeutic practice:

"The global and ongoing media coverage of study findings has shifted public debate on the ordinary practices that are valued and help to sustain a partnership over the course of adult life. I see evidence of this in my clinical practice, as couples are familiar with key findings such as the value of kind gestures in sustaining their relationships – often citing the 'cup of tea' research!" [C8].

Research techniques have also changed clinical practice methods. In collaboration with family systemic psychotherapists, the emotion map research tool has been adapted for use as part of their clinical assessment toolkit. This has had positive results published in a leading clinical practice journal [C9] resulting in regular requests from practitioners for emoticon stickers. Counsellors are using the technique to gain insight into where and when issues arise at home. For example, doorways often frame arguments, literally and metaphorically, as teenagers guard their privacy and viewpoints or parents endeavour to usher young children out of the house in a timely manner with relevant belongings assembled. Focussing attention onto these 'hotspots' has proven particularly useful in family therapy, as it opens up the intergenerational dynamic and provides a means of listening to the perspectives of children [C9].

4. Improving relationships through (Paired) app interventions

As a result of the reach and significance of the Enduring Love? study and her 'reputational standing', **Gabb** has been appointed as Chief Relationships Officer at Paired [C10], working on a new app that is designed to improve relationship quality through daily prompts that will establish positive behavioural change [C11].

The app is underpinned by **Gabb's** research and **Gabb** has contributed to the design of app content and produced a series of articles, quizzes, and daily tips, drawing on Enduring Love? research findings [C10, C11]. Topics include partnerships in the pandemic, TV-time with your partner, sharing domestic chores, relationships and mental health [C11].

Launched globally on 03/10/2020, the app received significant media coverage over the first three months, featuring in 261 pieces, including direct quotation and commentary, reaching a global audience of 801m (taking the total media audience for the research to over 170,000,000) [C12]. Highlights included Tech Crunch, The Daily Telegraph, The Independent, The Sun, and The Daily Mail online, and personal interviews by **Gabb** on Talk Radio, LBC, Times Radio, and The Huffington Post podcast. Coverage included a front page and a 6-page feature in The Times magazine on a Saturday (08/10/20) with the reporter summarising after trailing the app "*I am persuaded that small acts, rather than grand gestures, are the secret to enduring love*" [C12].

In the first three months (Oct-Dec 2020), Paired achieved 100,000 downloads, with over 8,000 daily users [C10]. It has achieved critical acclaim, winning the 'personal growth' category in the 2020 Google Play award and Apple 'apps we love' [C11]. Individual endorsement of the app and the ways it has changed relationship maintenance behaviours and improved couple relationship quality is captured in user feedback:

"It's become part of our waking ritual and helped us connect early in the day" [C10]. "Really grateful for this app! The course material and quizzes answered a lot of questions I have always needed answers for and gave me the tools to better myself and my relationship" (Google store) [C11] "The courses [...] are backed up by relationship research, and I have really enjoyed listening and reflecting on them, and I think it has definitely made me a better partner" (Apple store) [C11].

To evaluate the effectiveness of Paired, an evaluation study was completed by the OU and the University of Brighton, including three in-app monthly quizzes and linked app usage data (Oct-Dec 2020, n= 2,671), an online survey (n= 746), and 20 interviews. Statistical analysis evidenced that the app has a significant positive impact for couples, particularly on their communication. Overall relationship quality improves the longer people engage with the app, with the greatest improvements for people using the app one to two hours a week. Analysis of the in-app quizzes shows that satisfaction with communication rose from 74% to 98%. Satisfactory conflict management rose from 78% to 93%, and couples' sense of connection increased from 96% to 99%. In the online survey, 72% of users reported that they remember to do something for their relationship on days when they engage with the app, demonstrating that Paired's daily tips, based on **Gabb's** research, are working to change relationship maintenance behaviour [C10].

A partnership between Paired and Relate has been agreed: "**Gabb's** wisdom and insight into relationships and relationship support has been instrumental in progressing these conversations" [C7]. This partnership delivers a unique combined package of relationship care, education, intervention and support [C7, C10]. Relate has over five million website visitors and 65,000 couple counselling referrals per year.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- C1. Report. The Open University Enduring Love? Media Impact Report, Insight@precise.co.uk (13/01/14-21/02/14).
- C2. Global Media Coverage Report (22/02/2014-02/10/2020).
- C3. Royalty and Sales Summary [annual statement]: Barker M. J. and **Gabb J.** (2016) *The Secrets of Enduring Love*. London: Vermillion Random House. ISBN 9781785040238.
- C4. Brook resources: <https://www.brook.org.uk/your-life/about-enduring-love/>, <https://learn.brook.org.uk/>. (2016-20).
- C5. Evaluation Report of Brook eLearning Relationships online resources. (2016-19).
- C6. [Brook Success Report](#) . (2019-2020).
- C7. Testimonial: Relate, Head of Relate Comms. (2012-13 pathway to impact, 2014-2020).
- C8. Testimonial: Co-director of the Tavistock Family Therapy and Systemic Research Centre, Director of the London Intercultural Couples Centre. (2014-15).
- C9. **Gabb J.** and Singh R. (2015) 'The Uses of Emotion Maps in Research and Clinical Practice with Families and Couples: Methodological Innovation and Critical Inquiry', *Family Process*, 54(1): 185–197. <https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12096>
- C10. Testimonial: CEO, Paired. (2019-20).
- C11. Paired resources <https://www.getpaired.com/>. (2020).
- C12. Borkowski PR Wrap Report (2020).