

Working Out Relationships

Research, Education, and the Quest for Lasting Love

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Published in:
Child and Family Law Quarterly

Publication date:
2020

Document version:
Final published version

Citation for pulished version (APA):
Ewing, J., Barlow, A., Blake, S., & Janssens, A. (2020). Working Out Relationships: Research, Education, and the Quest for Lasting Love. *Child and Family Law Quarterly*, 32(4), 331-354.

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Articles

Working out relationships: research, education, and the quest for lasting love

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Keywords: Marriage – cohabitation – relationship education – relationship stability

Relationship and sex education became compulsory in secondary schools from September 2020 with schools required to teach pupils about the characteristics of healthy relationships. Drawing on data from the Shackleton Relationships project, this article examines the key attributes of healthy, thriving relationships. It explores the evidence from interviews with 10 divorce lawyers/mediators (to identify common reasons for relationship breakdown); 45 couples interviewed as newly-weds in 2006 and at three other intervals over the first 10 years of marriage and 10 couples in long-term relationships (15+ years) of different forms (married, civil partners, cohabitants). Couples in thriving relationships had a strong foundation of friendship and teamwork. They had realistic expectations of the relationship. Although expressions of commitment differed, individuals were committed to each other. They worked at maintaining a good connection by talking regularly and being pragmatic and solution-focused in approaches to conflict. They were aware of their partner's faults but viewed them as an intrinsically good person. Critically, they anticipated change and pulled together during stressful periods. Most had built supportive networks of family and friends. The implications of how these findings might inform a newly focused relationship and sex education are considered.

Introduction

Sex and Relationship Education (SRE) in schools has recently changed. From September 2020, the Children and Social Work Act 2017 shifts the focus to a rebranded Relationships and Sex Education (RSE).¹ This reflects a change of emphasis towards teaching about healthy relationships rather than just the mechanics of sex, reproduction and pregnancy prevention, an approach unpopular with young people.² It also follows findings of an Ofsted review that SRE education 'required improvement' in almost half of secondary schools.³ The new Act stipulates⁴

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1 Children and Social Work Act 2017, s 34(1)(b).

2 R Long, *Relationships and Sex Education in Schools (England)*, Briefing Paper Number 06102 (House of Commons Library, 2018), [1.21].

3 Ofsted, *Not yet good enough: personal, social, health and economic education in schools in 2012*, No 130065 (Ofsted, May 2013). See also *ibid*.

4 Children and Social Work Act 2017, s 34(3)(a).

that pupils should learn about safety in forming and maintaining relationships, the characteristics of ‘healthy’ relationships and how relationships may affect physical and mental health and well-being. Yet, schools have been left to work out how to deliver this sensitive area of education with little practical content guidance to date. This article will suggest that an evidence-based approach that draws on existing relationship research and is designed in partnership with young people should guide the reframing of the content and delivery of the curriculum. Recent interdisciplinary research, the Shackleton Relationships Project, sought to gain insights into the critical attributes of couple relationships that are thriving and young people’s views on relationship education.⁵

To consider how to deliver the new curriculum successfully, we undertook a systematic review of existing English language education programmes that aim to teach young people aged 11–18 skills to develop and maintain healthy intimate relationships. It concluded that most programmes reflected adult therapeutic relationship educational models, rather than being grounded in young people’s social and cultural contexts and a framework of human rights.⁶ We report on this more fully elsewhere.⁷ We also worked with young people in schools and community groups to understand how the relationship skills we had identified in our research with couples were translatable and important to them and how they envisaged delivery of RSE. We then worked in partnership with the young people to co-produce the foundations for a RSE programme. The goal of such a programme would be for young people to learn and develop skills that empower them for the future to sustain relationships that thrive. With further funding,⁸ we are building on the work with young people and will report in 2021. The focus of this article, however, is on what we can learn from couples, and from judges and lawyers tasked with dealing with the legal formalities of relationship breakdown, that might inform the RSE curriculum.

The importance of healthy couple relationships – policy and young people’s perspectives

As the COVID crisis has brought home, many kinds of relationships are essential in life. However, intimate couple relationships based on ‘love’ and extending to child-raising and then elder care remain at the heart of how our society is structured. Furthermore, good quality couple relationships play a vital role in determining the health and well-being of adults and their children.⁹ Around 60 percent of the adult population in England and Wales were living as a couple in 2019,¹⁰ and having a good relationship with a partner figures prominently in studies of well-being in responses to what is important to individuals.¹¹ However, the incidence of relationship breakdown attests to the difficulty of sustaining fulfilling intimate relationships. Forty-two per cent of marriages break down across the life course nationally, approximately

5 A Barlow, J Ewing, A Janssens and S Blake, *The Shackleton Relationships Project – Report and Key Findings* (University of Exeter, 2018) available at: socialsciences.exeter.ac.uk/media/universityofexeter/collegeofsocialsciencesandinternationalstudies/lawimages/familyregulationandsociety/shackletonproject/Shackleton_ReportFinal.pdf, last accessed 16 September 2020.

6 A Janssens, S Blake, M Allwood, J Ewing and A Barlow, ‘Identifying education programmes for relationship skills among 11- to 18-year-olds: a systematic review’ (2020) 20(5) *Journal of Sex Education* 494.

7 Ibid.

8 From the Wellcome Centre for Cultures and Environments of Health, University of Exeter.

9 S Handley, I Joy, C Hestbaek and D Marjoribanks, *The Best Medicine: The importance of relationships for health and wellbeing* (Relate and NPC Research Report, 2015); C Sherwood and P Sholl, *The Relationships Manifesto* (The Relationships Alliance, 2017).

10 Office for National Statistics, *Population estimates by marital status and living arrangements, England and Wales: 2019* (Statistical Bulletin, 17 July 2020).

11 J Evans, *Supplementary Paper: Findings from the National Well-being Debate* (Office for National Statistics, 2011).

half in the first 10 years of marriage.¹² The relationships of cohabiting parents are statistically more fragile still. They are three times more likely to separate than their married counterparts by the time their child is five.¹³ Furthermore, 25 percent of married and cohabiting couples are in distressed relationships (including eight percent in ‘extremely unhappy’ relationships), and 13 percent of married or civil-partnered partners regret getting married or getting the civil partnership at least occasionally.¹⁴

Whilst no one would advocate that couples should stay together in unhappy and unhealthy circumstances, we know that strong couple relationships matter to children’s outcomes. They promote better relationships across the family, including positive parenting practices and better quality parent–child relationships.¹⁵ How parents communicate and manage relationship conflict can influence children’s outcomes on measures including physical and mental health, educational attainment and (critically) relationship stability in later life.¹⁶ Increasingly, couple relationships are acknowledged as having an essential role in improving the long-term life chances for today’s generation of children and tomorrow’s generation of parents.¹⁷

The requirement to take a ‘whole family perspective’¹⁸ towards policy-making has led to a focus on how we prepare young people for good quality relationships as they move towards adulthood. A review of studies conducted predominantly in the USA suggests that adolescent romantic relationships are a critical period during which to strengthen the foundations of healthy adult relationships.¹⁹ Whilst we lack a similar review of the evidence in the English context, the ‘strongest message’ to come from research by Janet Walker and colleagues is that more could, and should, be done in the education system to prepare young people to learn about how to form healthy relationships.²⁰ Currently, however, most relationship support is aimed at existing, adult relationships. Intervening earlier, before individuals are committed or perhaps even before they are in relationships, may have a greater impact on improving relationship quality.²¹ Secondary school pupils will be at several stages removed from the experience of relationships of those who are married or cohabiting. The adolescent period is much more fluid (for many) in terms of relationship formation and cessation, and the tasks of this phase are distinct from those of forging more permanent arrangements as adults. Nevertheless, much can be learned from those in stable, long-lasting relationships about recognising the characteristics of healthy relationships²² and identifying the skills needed to

12 Office for National Statistics, *Divorces in England and Wales, 2017* (Statistical Bulletin, 26 September 2018).

13 A Goodman and E Greaves, *Cohabitation, Marriage and Child Outcomes* (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2010).

14 D Marjoribanks and A Darnell Bradley, *The Way We Are Now – The state of the UK’s relationships* (Relate, 2017), available at: www.relate.org.uk/sites/default/files/the_way_we_are_now_-_it_takes_two.pdf, last accessed 6 September 2020.

15 J Peltz, R Rogge, D Ronald and M Sturge-Apple, ‘Transactions Within the Family: Coparenting Mediates Associations Between Parents’ Relationship Satisfaction and the Parent–Child Relationship’ (2018) 32(5) *Journal of Family Psychology* 553.

16 G Harold, D Acquah, R Sellers and H Chowdry, *What Works to Enhance Inter-Parental Relationships and Improve Outcomes for Children*, DWP ad hoc research report no 32 (DWP, 2016); J Elliot and R Vaitilingam, *Now We Are 50: Key Findings from the National Child Development Study* (The Centre for Longitudinal Studies, 2008).

17 C Oppenheim, Foreword in Harold et al, above n 16.

18 Harold et al, above n 16; see also Department for Work and Pensions, *The Family Test: Guidance for Government Departments* (DWP, October 2014).

19 B Karney, M Beckett, R Collins and R Shaw, *Adolescent romantic relationships as precursors of healthy adult marriages: A review of theory, research, and programs* (RAND Corporation, 2007).

20 J Walker, H Barrett, G Wilson and Y-S Chang, *Relationships matter: understanding the needs of adults (particularly parents) regarding relationship support* (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2010), 99.

21 G Rhoades and S Stanley, ‘Relationship education for individuals: The benefits and challenges of intervening early’ in H Benson and S Callan (eds), *What works in relationship education: Lessons from academics and service deliverers in the United States and Europe* (Doha International Institute for Family Studies and Development, 2009).

22 Children and Social Work Act 2017, s 34(3)(a)(ii).

form and maintain safe relationships.²³ Just as we might teach life skills such as understanding mortgages long before the purchase of a first home, equipping young people to recognise and build healthy relationships as they explore their first romantic relationship embeds skills to draw upon in future relationship choices. As David Majoribanks argues:

‘Any comprehensive plan to strengthen relationships must address the environment in which young people grow and develop, and the expectations and norms they form for themselves within it. Preparation for good quality relationships early on lays the foundations for relationships later in adulthood, and education is therefore a vital opportunity.’²⁴

A recent UNESCO report recognises education as a powerful tool for preparing young people for healthy relationships at different life-stages.²⁵ In their 2017 Manifesto,²⁶ the Relationships Alliance (a consortium of four charities with expertise in supporting good quality relationships)²⁷ called upon schools to recognise that developing ‘relational capability’ – the ability to form and maintain safe, stable, and nurturing relationships²⁸ – is an essential function of education. Receiving information on relationships and sex mainly from school, rather than other sources, is associated with lower reporting of a wide range of sexual health risk behaviours and outcomes.²⁹

However, good delivery of these messages is key. Young people want to be involved in the shaping of the Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) curriculum.³⁰ They also want relationship education, not just sex education, to be provided in schools.³¹ Given this, the introduction of the RSE curriculum should be seized upon as an opportunity to build high quality relationship education, developed in consultation with young people, using innovative and engaging formats that will help them to make healthy relationship choices throughout life. Prevention, after all, is generally better than cure.

Relationship lessons from research?

Most recent UK research in this area has considered the causes of relationship breakdown³² rather than what helps relationships to thrive. Jacqui Gabb and Janet Fink’s recent study,³³ which did focus on long-term couple relationships, was large but cross-sectional, as was Janet

23 Ibid, s 34(3)(a)(i).

24 D Majoribanks, *All Together Now, Stronger Relationships for a Stronger Society: A 2025 Vision for Supporting Good Quality Relationships* (Relate, 2016). See also J Walker, ‘Commentary on H Rhodes, “Her Majesty’s department of love? The state and support for couple and family relationships”’ in A Balfour, M Morgan and C Vincent (eds), *How Couple Relationships Shape Our World: Clinical Practice, Research and Policy Perspectives* (Karnac Books, 2012).

25 UNESCO, *International technical guidance on sexuality education: An evidence-informed approach* (UNESCO, revised edition, 2018).

26 Sherwood and Sholl, above n 9.

27 Relate, OnePlusOne, Tavistock Relationships, and Marriage Care.

28 Majoribanks, above n 24. See also *Relational Capability*, available at: www.oneplusone.org.uk/research, last accessed 6 September 2020.

29 W Macdowall et al, ‘Associations between source of information about sex and sexual health outcomes in Britain: findings from the third National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (Natsal-3)’ (2015) 3 BMJ Open 1.

30 British Youth Council, Youth Select Committee, *A Curriculum for Life* (BYC, 2013).

31 *Young People’s Manifesto: What We Want and Need from RSE*, available at: legacy.brook.org.uk/shop/product/young-peoples-manifesto, last accessed 6 September 2020; The Mix and OnePlusOne, *Relationships and Sex Education: What young people and parents told us*, available at: www.themix.org.uk/news-and-research/news/parents-and-young-people-agree-that-learning-about-relationships-in-new-rse-curriculum-is-essential, last accessed 6 September 2020.

32 See, for example, L Coleman and F Glenn, *When Couples Part* (OnePlusOne Publications, 2009); K Gravningen et al, *Reported reasons for breakdown of marriage and cohabitation in Britain: Findings from the third National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (Natsal-3)*. PLoS ONE 12(3): e0174129 doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0174129; D Majoribanks, *Breaking up is hard to do* (Relate, 2015).

33 J Gabb and J Fink, *Couple Relationships in the 21st Century* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); J Gabb and J Fink, *Couple Relationships in the 21st Century (Extended Edition)* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

Reibstein's prior study.³⁴ However, cross-sectional data cannot detect change.³⁵ The Shackleton Relationships Project, by contrast, included a longitudinal element that aimed to address this issue and provide an evidence-base of what helps healthy relationships to thrive over time. It gathered deep qualitative insights from couple relationships and a unique, multi-wave longitudinal perspective. In-depth qualitative research arguably conveys nuance and aids understanding of processes in relationships better than large-scale quantitative surveys.³⁶ The project's initial findings from the couple interviews were used in a co-production process with young people to develop ideas for a relationship education programme/toolkit in the project's final phase.

Below, we detail the 10 critical attributes of thriving couple relationships that emerged from our couple interviews and suggest how our findings might inform the development of the RSE curriculum. Before doing so, we outline our aims and methods and the findings from interviews with family law practitioners.

The research study

Aims

The Shackleton Relationships Project aimed to explore the nature of happy and enduring relationships and to identify attributes and relationship skills critical to developing and sustaining them, avoiding relationship breakdown. In particular, we wanted to know:

- What are the most common or predictable reasons for relationship breakdown?
- What critical questions should be asked before entering a relationship intended to be permanent to help to increase the chances of its thriving?
- What critical relationship skills might be developed to avert the causes of breakdown?
- How might knowledge of these feed into relationship education for young people?

Methods

To address these research questions in the English context, we designed the qualitative study in three interlinking phases:

Phase 1

We interviewed 10 divorce lawyers/mediators (five men and five women) and two judges (both men) (the Practitioner Sample) to identify common reasons for relationship breakdown. We purposively recruited practitioners for their expertise and experience in family law matters. All (except the judges) were practising mediators so could provide insights into the causes of relationship breakdown (both married and cohabiting) from observing the couple dynamic in mediation. Seven practitioners were also solicitors and collaborative lawyers, two were lawyer mediators, and one was a non-lawyer mediator.

34 J Reibstein, *The Best Kept Secret, Men and Women's Stories of Lasting Love* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2007).

35 J Gershuny, 'Through the Life Course, in the Family', in J Scott, J Treas and M Richards (eds), *The Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Families* (Blackwell Publishing, 2004).

36 P Mansfield and J Collard, *The Beginning of the Rest of your Life? A Portrait of Newly-Wed Marriage* (The Macmillan Press, 1988).

Phase 2

To identify what helps relationships to thrive across the life course, we conducted follow-up interviews with Ewing's³⁷ longitudinal sample of couples married for the first time in 2006/07 (Couple Sample 1). Most had issued notices of intention to marry in a register office in the South East but were geographically dispersed. Couples were recruited³⁸ pre-marriage and couple partners were interviewed separately but consecutively by Ewing three times over the first four years of their marriage at three–six months (time 1), 12–18 months (time 2) and three–four years into the marriage (time 3). Ewing interviewed 53 couples at time 1, 52 couples at time 2 and 49 couples at time 3. Two couples withdrew from the process before time 3 and two had separated by time 2. Both of the separated couples agreed to be interviewed (separately) post-separation using a revised interview guide, although one wife subsequently withdrew. At time 4, for the Shackleton Relationships Project in 2016/17, 10 years after the parties had married, we were able to contact all but three couples interviewed at time 3, and 43 couples agreed to a further interview. This figure included the four couples known to have separated since time 3. Unless otherwise indicated, analyses below on Couple Sample 1 use data from 45 couples: the 39 intact couples interviewed at time 4, and the six separated couples. Table 1 shows retention rates across time.

Table 1: Couple Sample 1 retention rates across time

Status	Time 1	Time 2	Time 3	Time 4	Time 4 total
Intact: interviewed	53	50	49	39	39
Separated: interviewed	0	2	0	4	6
Intact: declined interview	0	1	1	3	5
Not contactable	0	0	0	3	3

Interviews were conducted face-to-face or by Skype for two couples who now live abroad. Telephone interviews were undertaken at the request of a further two couples and the four separated husbands. At the end of each interview, participants completed two written questions without conferring with their spouse or the interviewer. For interviews conducted remotely, the questions were read to the participants and responses noted accordingly. The questions were inspired by the final two questions in Spanier's Dyadic Adjustment Scale.³⁹ The first question, which Spanier suggested was sufficient to give a general indication of the overall quality of the marital relationship,⁴⁰ asked the participants to assess their global marital happiness on a scale of zero (extremely unhappy) to six (perfect).⁴¹ The second sought to measure commitment to the marriage by asking the participants to choose from four options outlining the lengths to which they would go to ensure that the marriage would succeed.

37 J Ewing, *Maintaining and enhancing marital quality: An examination of the mechanisms by which marriages become more or less satisfactory over the first four years* (PhD Thesis, University of Cambridge, 2014).

38 Ewing recruited two couples following requests to assist recruitment made to diverse faith groups registered to hold marriages on their premises; four couples through snowballing from within the sample and the rest through contacting those on the lists of intended marriages posted in a specific Registry Office (chosen for convenience).

39 G Spanier, 'Measuring Dyadic Adjustment: New Scales for Assessing the Quality of Marriage and Similar Dyads' (1976) 38 *Journal of Marriage and Family* 15.

40 G Spanier, 'The measurement of marital quality' (1979) 5 *Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy* 288.

41 Seven point scale: zero (extremely unhappy); one (fairly unhappy); 2 (a little unhappy); 3 (happy); 4 (very happy); 5 (extremely happy) and 6 (perfect). See website for a copy of the questionnaire: socialsciences.exeter.ac.uk/law/research/groups/frs/projects/shackletonrelationshipsproject/, last accessed 15 September 2020.

In 32 couples, both parties self-rated the marriage at least 4 ('very happy') at time 4. However, two couples were recovering from testing years and it was difficult to classify their marriages as thriving. Equally, two men who self-rated the relationship 3 ('happy') seemed to have taken a pragmatic approach to the written question (which indicated that the mid-point 'happy' represents the degree of happiness of most relationships). Analysis of their interview data showed them to be in relationships that both spouses indicated were deeply fulfilling, so we included them in the 'thriving couples'. At time 4, we therefore classified 32 of the 39 intact couples as 'thriving'. The other seven couples could be described more accurately as 'surviving', some at low but stable levels of happiness, others in a difficult period of their relationship.

To obtain data on couples across a broader demographic (married, civil partnered and cohabiting) and over a longer period, we also purposively recruited⁴² and conducted face-to-face interviews with 10 couples in relationships of at least 15 years' duration living in the South West ('Couple Sample 2'). Table 2 below shows the composition of the cross-sectional Couple Sample 2.

Table 2: Composition of Couple Sample 2

Status	Composition	Number
Married	Opposite-sex	3
	Same-sex (male)	0
	Same-sex (female)	1
Civil partnership	Same-sex (male)	2
	Same-sex (female)	0
Cohabiting	Opposite-sex	3
	Same-sex (male)	0
	Same-sex (female)	1

To gain a more nuanced picture, couples in this sample were interviewed by Blake jointly and separately in one visit. Sample 2 completed the same two questions from the Spanier Dyadic Adjustment Scale as per Couple Sample 1. All rated their relationship as 'very happy' or 'extremely happy' and were classified as 'thriving' accordingly.

The two Phase 2 samples therefore comprised 55 couples of whom six were separated. We classified 42 of the remaining 49 couples as 'thriving'. From analysis of our interviews in this phase, we drew out the key attributes and relationships skills that presented as common to 'thriving' relationships. We anonymised all participant identities; names used are pseudonyms. Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes from the Couple Sample 1 interviews below are from the time 4 interview after ten years of marriage. Surnames were used in previous interviews with the couples followed longitudinally so are retained here. Codes have been added to the participant quotes for Sample 2 so the reader can see relationship form and identify which individuals are in a relationship together. Quotations from joint couple interviews have the attribution that follows underlined, while quotes from the individual interview do not. For

⁴² Blake recruited participants via adverts in staff newsletters and on staff intranets of large organisations in the South West and by attending LGBTQ+ events, visiting community centres in economically deprived areas and contacting social groups for members of BME and LGBTQ+ communities who then advertised for participants.

example, 04-CB-OS indicates that the quote is from the joint interview with couple 4, cohabitants in an opposite-sex relationship. The Final Report of the project gives further demographic details of both couple samples.⁴³

Phase 3

Here, drawing on the Phase 2 findings and working with schools and youth groups, we sought to identify critical skills young people understood and regarded as important to develop healthy intimate relationships and delivery methods that might motivate young people to want, and be able, to engage with an educational relationship programme. This phase is not the focus of this article, but further details are in the Final Report.⁴⁴

Research Ethics approval was obtained through the University of Exeter Research Ethics procedures in 2016 for Phases 1 and 2 and in 2017 for Phase 3.

Limitations and strengths of this study

Both couple samples were self-selecting. This, and sample size, preclude claims to generalisability. Sample 1 reflected national ethnic variation, whereas all but one Sample 2 couples were white British. To encourage candour from participants who may have become unhappy in the marriage over time, we interviewed Sample 1 couples separately. This meant, however, that we only had observational data of interactions between the couple in Sample 2. These couples were reflecting on their relationship from the perspective of their current satisfied state. However, following couples longitudinally gave us insight into how each partner responded to and accommodated change. It also allowed us to examine which component(s) of commitment came to the fore when commitment is tested and which attributes for managing life transitions, such as becoming parents, were the most salient. The low attrition rate strengthens the data set.

Approach to theoretically informed data analysis

We sought to understand from our qualitative data which relationship attributes put couples at most or least risk of breakdown and which skills could be used to avoid or reverse relationship problems in times of difficulties, by developing an analysis framework (or lens) based on the interplay between two leading but divergent theoretical standpoints. These were the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation (VSA) model, proposed by Benjamin Karney and Thomas Bradbury,⁴⁵ and the Sound Relationships House theory, proposed by John Gottman and colleagues.⁴⁶ Figure 1 below illustrates the building blocks needed, according to Gottman's theory, to create a solid foundation and a predicted secure relationship future.⁴⁷

The first three layers from the base upwards encompass what Gottman suggests are the three critical elements of friendship: feeling known and that our partner is interested in our world; nurturing fondness and admiration for our partner and responding positively to bids for emotional connection from our partner for attention, interest or help.⁴⁸ In our analysis, these layers map most closely to '*friendship*'; the positive perspective to '*see the best*'; manage conflict to '*keep talking*' and the final two layers to '*building the relationship that suits you both*'. The

43 Barlow et al, above n 5.

44 Ibid.

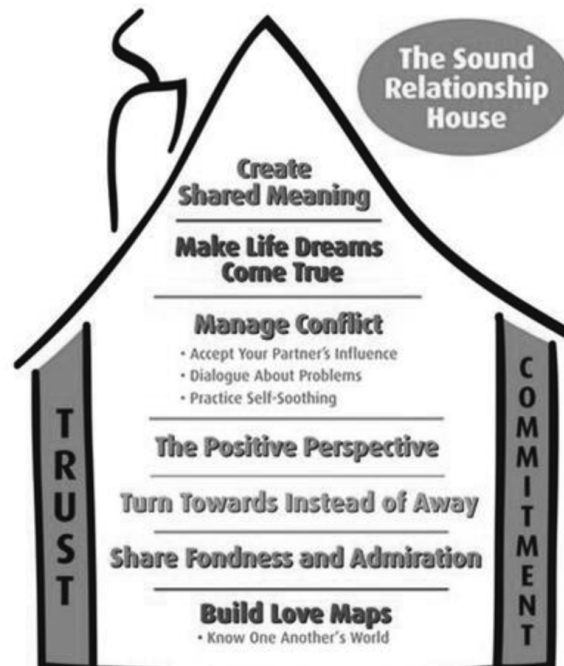
45 B Karney and T Bradbury, 'The Longitudinal Course of Marital Quality and Stability: A Review of Theory, Method and Research' (1995) 118 *Psychological Bulletin* 3.

46 J Gottman, J Murray, C Swanson, R Tyson and K Swanson, *The Mathematics of Marriage: Dynamic Nonlinear Models* (MIT Press, 2002); JM Gottman and JS Gottman, 'The Natural Principles of Love' (2017) 9(1) *Journal of Family Theory and Review* 7.

47 Gottman and Gottman, *ibid*, Figure 1, 15 (reproduced with permission from John Wiley and Sons).

48 Ibid.

Figure 1: The Sound Relationship House Theory



load-bearing walls of trust and commitment pervade the ten critical attributes of thriving relationships, but we also have a separate category for *'being committed'*.

The VSA model proposes that understanding how marriages develop, succeed and fail requires an examination of the interplay of couples' enduring vulnerabilities and the adaptive processes through which they contend with the different stresses they encounter. The model draws on attachment theory, which argues that the relationship needs that each spouse brings to the marriage have important effects on marital development. 'Enduring vulnerabilities' are 'the stable demographic, historical, personality, and experiential factors that individuals bring to marriage'. Drawing on crisis theory, which points to the importance of stressful events on marital trajectories, 'stressful events' are defined as 'the developmental transitions, situations, incidents, and chronic or acute circumstances that spouses and couples encounter'. Finally, drawing on behavioural theory, which suggests that the interaction between spouses is critical to marital development, 'adaptive processes' are 'the ways individuals and couples contend with differences of opinion and individual or marital difficulties and transitions'.⁴⁹

The VSA model suggests that:

'couples with effective adaptive processes who encounter relatively few stressful events and have few enduring vulnerabilities will experience a satisfying and stable marriage, whereas couples with ineffective adaptive processes who must cope with many stressful events and have many enduring vulnerabilities will experience declining marital quality, separation, or divorce. Couples at other points along these three dimensions are expected to fall between these two extreme outcomes.'⁵⁰

49 Karney and Bradbury, above n 45, 25.

50 Ibid.

In terms of our approach to ‘commitment’, theorists have used different terms to explain this concept. However, one model of commitment easily translates to another and there is consistency across theories and empirical findings.⁵¹ We found it helpful to consider commitment through the lens of Michael Johnson and colleagues’ framework of marital commitment: personal commitment (wanting to stay married); moral commitment (feeling morally obligated to stay married); and structural commitment (feeling constrained to stay).⁵² In Johnson’s typology, personal commitment is a function primarily of love, relationship satisfaction and couple identity. Moral commitment is primarily a function of divorce attitudes (a feeling that marriage should be honoured and upheld); partner contract (feeling morally obliged to honour the promises made to one’s partner); and general consistency values (for example, a belief that one should finish what one has started). Structural commitment (feeling constrained to stay in a relationship) pertains to barriers to leaving, regardless of the level of personal or moral commitment.⁵³ Johnson and colleagues suggest that, ordinarily, structural commitment will only come into play once a person is unhappy in the relationship.⁵⁴ Ultimately, structural barriers to leaving a relationship tend not to deter those determined to end the union.⁵⁵

We discuss how these three theoretical models applied to our findings in the section that follows, where appropriate, and within the ‘Discussion’ section below.

Findings

The practitioner sample

Overall, there was much unanimity within the practitioner sample about the common causes of relationship breakdown, corresponding broadly with the academic literature. The practitioners recognised that divorce petitions were often a constructed narrative.⁵⁶ Obvious relationship stress-points, such as violence or adultery, were identified as significant breakdown triggers. However, practitioners recognised that how people cope with life pressures can often make or break relationships. The most commonly cited were transition into parenthood (as different parenting styles were often unresolved) and different attitudes to financial issues. Couples who did not manage these transitions well often report loss of communication. Of the common predictors of relationship-failure identified, two – incompatibility and unrealistic expectations – related to things that could, and arguably should, have been discovered before marrying:

‘Nobody is doing that deep dive in terms of do we have enough here to sustain us.’ (Joanna Braithwaite, mediator and former solicitor)

A further two common predictors of relationship failure – failure to deal with issues and failure to nurture the relationship – exposed a lack of relationship skills that could, mostly, be addressed. The first, failure to deal with issues stemmed (in the view of several practitioners) from an inability to convey dissatisfaction with the relationship to one’s partner in a way that is registered and acted upon:

51 S Stanley, G Rhoades and S Whitton, ‘Commitment: Functions, Formation, and the Securing of Romantic Attachment’ (2010) 2 *Journal of Family Theory and Review* 243.

52 M Johnson, J Caughlin and T Huston, ‘The Tripartite Nature of Marital Commitment: Personal, Moral and Structural Reasons to Stay Married’ (1999) 61(2) *Journal of Marriage and Family* 160.

53 Ibid, 161.

54 Ibid.

55 C Knoester and A Booth, ‘Barriers to Divorce: When are they Effective? When are they not?’ (2000) 21 *Journal of Family Issues* 78.

56 L Trinder, D Braybrook, C Bryson, L Coleman, C Houlston and M Sefton, *Finding Fault? Divorce Law and Practice in England and Wales* (Nuffield Foundation, 2017).

‘Typically, what would be said in mediation is, “You never told me that there was a problem”, and the other person would say, “I tried time and time again to tell you there was a problem, but every time I tried to say you shut me up”.’ (Thomas Ellington, solicitor, mediator and collaborative lawyer)

‘I think most people try [to convey their unhappiness] actually. I think they try and when it doesn’t work to start off with I think they often give up and they withdraw.’ (Michelle Ingham, solicitor, mediator and collaborative lawyer)

The second common predictor of relationship failure, exacerbated by initial incompatibility, is a failure to nurture the relationship:

‘A lack of effort on both sides probably as a consequence of initial incompatibility anyway, not wanting to share the same interests, not wanting to spend time with each other.’ (Alex Bailey, Circuit Judge)

The practitioners, particularly practising mediators, indicated that different narratives around relationship breakdown and mutual blaming are commonplace:

‘[I hear different narratives] all of the time. And it’s very much a self-justification that this is happening because of the other person, because of the way they behaved, it is their fault. Which is an understandable internal communication, internal dialogue, because who wants to be the person who is at fault?’ (Tim Kingston, solicitor, mediator and collaborative lawyer)

The message from the practitioner interviews is that once partners are stuck in cycles of mutual blame and recrimination, reconciliation is highly unlikely.

Finally, the practitioners were keen to emphasise the need to build personal resilience:

‘This idea of resilience . . . makes a lot of sense to me and the idea of building people’s resilience from an early age. I think all of that would be really helpful, because I think there’s a lot of focus on couples and that’s really important but if you are not resilient in yourself it’s quite difficult to have a relationship with somebody else.’ (Camilla Grey, non-lawyer mediator)

The couple samples

Facets of attributes may combine differently when considered in the context of different styles of relationship or may become more salient at different life stages. However, from our analysis of the two couple samples, we identified two overlapping groups of 10 key relationship attributes and skills. First, some are critical for all to identify and address at the outset of the relationship to ensure compatibility or acceptance of areas of incompatibility between partners. These are: choosing carefully; underpinning friendship; realistic expectations; seeing the best in each other; open communication and being equally committed. Second, there are those attributes and skills that each partner needs to understand to be things that must be maintained throughout the relationship and through which a relationship will be happier, healthier and more resilient over the long term. These are: underpinning friendship; realistic expectations; seeing the best in each other; open communication; being committed; building a relationship that suits you both; willingness to work at the relationship; adapting to change and building a support network. We consider each of these attributes in turn.

Choosing carefully

The resounding advice from the Couple Sample 1 participants, epitomised by this quotation from John Kadera, was the need to choose one’s life partner carefully:

‘Choose the right person, that’s it. You can’t really control anything else. You choose the person that you marry . . . you can’t choose if you get made redundant and you can’t choose if your parents die or if your kids die, so choose the right person and try to keep them.’

Many in Couple Sample 1 chose their partner after an extended period of being ‘friends first’, with intimate relationships developing slowly after a period of testing the ‘goodness of fit’ within the boundaries of friendship. By first getting to know each other well as friends, couples in thriving relationships ensured that they went into their relationships with their ‘eyes open’ before romantic involvement potentially clouded their judgement:

‘On our first date we already knew each other’s stories and we’d seen each other’s bad sides even before we’d started going out, so we knew . . . [we] could deal with that even before that arose in the relationship.’ Milly Upton (time 1)

The majority of those in thriving relationships in Couple Sample 1 had ‘deliberative mindsets’. Individuals in a ‘deliberative mindset’ impartially compare positive and negative aspects of a relationship when deciding whether to pursue relationship goals.⁵⁷ These couples had weighed the relationship and had concluded that they and their partner were sufficiently compatible to progress to marriage. Having done the ‘deep dive in terms of do we have enough here to sustain us’ that the practitioner, Joanna Braithwaite, thought was critical, their marriages were thriving after ten years. Self-awareness was thought to be an essential element of judging compatibility. As Caroline Turner advised:

‘Know yourself . . . [work out] what sort of partner . . . you want to be . . . and then find somebody who helps you be the best you and that you help be the best them.’

Self-awareness and reflectiveness were absent from the accounts of the couples whose relationships were ‘surviving’ after 10 years of marriage. The surviving and the separated couples tended to be ‘implemental’ in outlook. Individuals with ‘implemental’ mindsets choose a specific goal to pursue so are concerned with how, when, and where to achieve the goal. They are more likely to base predictions of relationship survival on aspiration and therefore lack the required accurate perception of their partner’s strengths and weaknesses.⁵⁸ For example, Cathy Logan’s frustrations stemmed from the couple’s jarring goals and approaches to life. She lamented that she had given insufficient ‘headspace’ before engagement to whether she and her husband Pete were compatible: ‘[I]t’s not really that I had sat down and thought about what I wanted from my life or my relationship’.

Several separated participants spoke of asymmetry in desires to progress the relationship, with one person keener to begin cohabiting. Without assessing the relationship’s strengths objectively, they allowed themselves to become ‘caught up’ in progressing the relationship. With hindsight, several realised that they had chosen to ignore signs of incompatibility or failed to consider whether they were likely to have the life they hoped for with their partner. Interestingly, most Sample 2 couples described their coming together as driven by physical attraction, chance and love, rather than rational reflection. Some described not knowing themselves well enough or having the language skills to have discussed relationship expectations when forming their relationships. They felt it was important to be yourself from the outset in order to ensure that choices are based on accurate perceptions.

57 F Gagné and J Lydon, ‘Mind-set and close relationships: When bias leads to (in)accurate predictions’ (2001) 81(1) *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 85; F Gagné, J Lydon and J Bartz, ‘Effects of mindset on the predictive validity of relationship constructs’ (2003) 35 *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science* 292.

58 Gagné and Lydon, *ibid*.

Friendship

Confirming previous research,⁵⁹ friendship was critical to positive outcomes. Friendship was the hallmark of thriving Sample 1 relationships, as summed up by Lesley Eagan:

‘... fundamentally it’s friendship, isn’t it, that keeps you going, lots of fun... the friendship piece is there always underneath... [it] is the glue that sticks everything together. So irrespective of whatever’s going on, you know, that is always there.’

Only a few Sample 2 couples described themselves as friends explicitly, but elements of friendship – respect, shared interest and humour (having fun) – were important to all. One same-sex couple were keen to stress that they were not ‘just’ friends, and that sex was a defining feature of their relationship:

‘We’ve never had a friendship, like it wouldn’t work as a friendship, I mean it wouldn’t not, but it wouldn’t because like what would be the point?’ (Robyn-02-M-SS)

‘Well, what can happen in lesbian relationships is sort of starting off as lovers and then just losing the sex and becoming friends and we both kind of, half-jokingly, but also with some sincerity said from the start, “I don’t want to be your friend, you know, I don’t want to just be your friend, sex is important.”’ (Macy-02-M-SS)

In most thriving Sample 1 relationships, a fulfilling sex-life was integral to couple identity, helping partners to feel connected and attractive to each other, but it is ‘part and parcel of the relationship... not the be all and end all’ (Tom Newsome). Friendship rather than sex is ‘the glue’.

In both samples, friendship was instrumental in getting couples through harrowing life events (such as bereavement):

‘I think that [friendship] underpinned everything. Like what we’ve gone through and, you know, when things are tough, or hard, it’s not like you are two different people who got together. It’s two people who were already friends and so that helps.’ (Max-06-M-OS)

Friendship was also critical to recovering from breaches of trust. At time 2, following his wife’s short affair, one Sample 1 participant indicated:

‘I think initially... we fell back on... our solid friendship because we were friends for... a pretty long time before we got together. We fell back on our solid friendship and our solid relationship... in the short term [and]... I wanted to get back what I had.’

Lack of a strong bond of friendship reliably predicted marital dysfunction or breakdown. By time 3, for the six couples who had separated or went on to separate by time 4, Ewing had flagged concerns over the depth of the couples’ friendship for at least one spouse.⁶⁰ When friendship is not strong, couples who face significant challenges have nothing on which to fall back. As others have found,⁶¹ without friendship, people typically find ways of overcoming barriers to leave unhappy marriages.

Being realistic

Couples in thriving relationships in both samples had realistic expectations of the relationship and of their partner (often shaped by what family members had modelled both positively and negatively – ie what to avoid). As Sarah Henderson disclosed:

59 L VanderDrift, C Agnew and E Besikci, ‘Friendship and Romance: A Need-Fulfillment Perspective’ in M Hojjat and A Moyer (eds), *The Psychology of Friendship* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 117; see also J Gottman, *What Predicts Divorce? The Relationship Between Marital Processes and Marital Outcomes* (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1994).

60 Ewing, above n 37.

61 D Prevetti and P Amato, ‘Why Stay Married? Rewards, Barriers and Marital Stability’ (2003) 65 *Journal of Marriage and Family* 561.

‘My parents did it well and they went through some serious stuff and I was like, if they can do it then I just need to make sure I pick the right person and do it to my own abilities.’

Individuals in thriving relationships tended to be ‘developmental’ in outlook.⁶² They expected to have to work at their relationships and were open to professional help if needed, recognising that ‘it was never going to be plain sailing’ (Tom Newsome). Christopher Turner summed up this approach:

‘I come from an old school of thought where you work at things and if things aren’t perfect you stick by it . . . marriage is never going to be perfect and people that think marriage is going to be perfect are kidding themselves . . . So, I think you set realistic expectations about what marriage is . . . and then secondly you work at anything that potentially is difficult in your marriage.’

Couples in thriving relationships had rejected ‘fairy story’ notions of the ‘perfect’ relationship. They did not expect their partner to meet all their needs:

‘We didn’t have that expectation of this kind of person who is going to fulfil all our needs or be a kind of solution . . . you read fairy stories when you are a girl . . . the ending is the woman going off with the man and getting married and . . . [living] happily ever after . . . but it isn’t like that, that’s like the beginning of the story in a relationship and that’s when the work starts.’ (Ava-04-CB-OS)

Conversely, persistently unmet or unaligned (but often unrealistic) expectations were cited as causes of unhappiness or relationship breakdown, as indicated by Catherine Isaac who separated from her husband James between times 3 and 4:

‘With James . . . I was constantly looking up waiting for him to meet my needs and to fulfil me and, you know, basically I put him on a pedestal, which is impossible for the poor guy to do.’

Seeing the best

Seeing the best in their partner was a given in all but the unhappiest relationships. When satisfied in the relationship, participants viewed their partner as intrinsically good and dependable, attributing negative behaviour to circumstance.⁶³ Seeing the best did not mean being blind to the faults of one’s partner; far from it. Partners in thriving relationships ‘love compassionately’; they communicate acceptance by being aware of but making allowances for the other’s shortcomings.⁶⁴ They had learned to live with the ‘baggagy bits’ of their partner’s personality, choosing instead to focus on the positives, as Duncan Henderson illustrates:

‘. . . you are two individuals in a partnership, you each bring your own set of benefits and baggage along into the relationship and you have got to forgive the baggagy bits or learn to live with them and learn to manage with them and . . . enjoy all the benefits that each other brings.’

As Lisa Neff and Benjamin Karney suggest,⁶⁵ grounding global adoration in accurate perceptions of their partner’s strengths and weakness led partners to align expectations more closely to reality, preventing disappointment and providing a more solid foundation to intimate relationships.

62 J Ramm, L Coleman, F Glenn and P Mansfield, *Relationship difficulties and help-seeking behaviour – Secondary analysis of an existing data-set. Report submitted to the Department for Education* (One Plus One, 2010).

63 See Gottman et al, above n 46 and L Neff and B Karney, ‘Compassionate love in early marriage’ in B Fehr, S Sprecher and L Underwood (eds), *The Science of Compassionate Love: Theory, Research, and Applications* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2008) for the importance of positive global perceptions in thriving relationships.

64 Neff and Karney, *ibid*; B Fehr, C Harasymchuk and S Sprecher, ‘Compassionate love in romantic relationships: A review and some new findings’ (2014) 31(5) *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 575.

65 Neff and Karney, *ibid*.

Across both samples, we found that retaining a positive perspective about the relationship during periods of significant stress was challenging. At such times, looking back on previous successes or challenges overcome and forward to the ‘relationship horizon’,⁶⁶ to an imagined better time, aids re-establishment of positivity. Compassionate love can grow over time. It underpinned the thriving relationships in Sample 2. Ava felt that being together for a long time gave her:

‘the benefit of an overview . . . I know that sometimes you have ups and downs and it’s probably a transitory thing, you know, if we’re like having a bad patch . . . I can see that’s not necessarily going to last forever [or]... destroy the entire relationship just because like I am unhappy at a certain point in time. It doesn’t mean that I won’t be happy at a future point in time.’ (Ava-04-CB-OS)

When faced with a major breach of trust, an ability to see the best was critical. The husband mentioned in ‘friendship’, above, whose wife had a short-lived affair early in the marriage viewed her at time 3 as ‘essentially a committed and faithful person . . . [with] strong principles’. Disassociating his wife’s behaviour from her intrinsic nature was crucial to the rebuilding of a deeply satisfying relationship. However, once an ability to ‘see the best’ is lost, relationship breakdown is difficult to avoid. Sally Maxwell reflected that once deeply unhappy in her marriage she developed a generally ‘negative view’ of her husband that caused her to ‘always look towards the worst’, putting a ‘negative spin’ on behaviour that she had previously viewed positively. This led to resentment and eventual separation between time 3 and 4. As Gottman and colleagues predict, once in a negative stable state, negative effect triumphs over positive effect.⁶⁷

Working at it

The view that relationships require ‘hard work and graft and . . . you don’t just give up’ (Sarah Henderson) pervaded the accounts of thriving Sample 1 and 2 couples. However, reflecting the findings of Gabb and Fink,⁶⁸ relationship work is not ‘hard work’ provided couples are a ‘good fit’. Couples in thriving relationships were creative and intentional about carving out time together and time apart to spend with friends and pursue individual interests. Retaining ‘a sense of the individual whilst also being a partnership’, as Lisa Fisher explained, was viewed as healthy. Making time for each other, when time is at a premium, was a potent symbol of commitment that helped couples to maintain a positive connection or regain that connection where needed. The Xaviers’ marriage had been severely tested between time 3 and time 4. Time together, enjoying a shared, interest reminded Will that:

‘Sometimes you forget why you married somebody and it’s important to go back and remember. When you are free of kids . . . and you are [enjoying a shared interest] humour comes out that doesn’t necessarily show itself just in the, “I’ve got back love, what’s for dinner?” kind of conversations.’

Across the samples, couples communicated appreciation and showed they cared in small regular acts of thoughtfulness and daily rituals enjoyed together:

‘It’s just the simple things: to come home, sit down, have a chat about what’s gone on during the day, watch a bit of telly, have a cup of tea and go to bed. I mean just the simple things become very important and that’s just kind of the weave that holds everything together.’ (Geoff Illingworth)

66 Gabb and Fink, above n 33, 90.

67 Gottman et al, above n 46, 22.

68 Gabb and Fink, above n 33, 37.

In Sample 2, several participants disclosed having worked out how to communicate care effectively to their partner:

‘Bill is the person who likes the words, so I tell him. In our family, you show that you love people by doing things. So that was something that I had to learn because Bill actually needed to hear the words, I needed to actually articulate for him to appreciate. Because you know that some people like gifts, some people like touch, people like all different things. So yes, just a case of finding out which is the one that makes your husband or wife happiest.’
(Clara-03-M-OS)

Effective relationship work entailed working on oneself, doing ‘inner work’ (Selina Monroe) where needed. In thriving relationships, relationship work is reciprocal yet unspoken and unmonitored. Martin Egan summarised this at time 3:

‘We are just a team and we just get on with it and to think, “Oh I supported you today so therefore I should have this tomorrow” isn’t really how we work. We just sort of crack on with it really.’

In contrast, mutual blaming was commonplace amongst couples who separated, with each partner feeling that their efforts were unreciprocated.

Being committed

Commitment to the relationship but not necessarily to the institution of marriage is a prerequisite of thriving couples. Most Sample 1 couples saw the relationship as lifelong and marriage was viewed as a signifier of commitment, as noted by Lucy Young:

‘[We married] to make it a permanent promise to each other . . . Living together was always a bit more transient and, so it was . . . [saying] “this is for keeps, this is for life, this is our long-term commitment” that living together just didn’t quite bring.’

For several individuals in Sample 1, being married deterred separation at difficult times. The solemnity of the marriage vows gained significance in the accounts of those whose marriages had been severely tested. In Sample 2, couples emphasised adapting to change and loving compassionately to get through testing times.

A full discussion of our results on commitment is beyond this article’s scope, but we highlight three important findings. The first is that what might seem to be a negative constraint may have a positive bearing on the relationship, at least while the relationship is satisfying. Many participants stressed that they would not stay long-term in an unhappy relationship. Using Johnson’s typology,⁶⁹ they could be described as having personal commitment since they stay because they want to. However, this had a positive influence as it oriented people to work hard to ensure that their relationship remained satisfying. Similarly, although Johnson’s framework of commitment views children as a structural barrier to leaving, in happy couples across the samples, children were a positive signifier of investment, a moral rather than a structural barrier to leaving. When happy, or going through a rough patch, parents felt moral commitment to staying to provide stability and role-modelling for their children. They viewed this as a positive aspect of commitment. It only became a structural constraint to leaving in Sample 1 once one or both spouses were dissatisfied with the relationship. For Sample 2 only, structural commitment featured for couples in relationships of longer duration, who emphasised practical difficulties of leaving and a moral obligation to stay as one’s partner ages. Again, from the vantage point of a satisfying relationship, these barriers to leaving were viewed positively.

⁶⁹ Johnson et al, above n 52.

The second is the salience of gender on commitment. Johnson and colleagues report that husbands' moral commitment was most highly correlated with consistency values, that is the view that there is value in finishing what one starts. This, they suggest, is captured in the aphorism, 'Winners never quit, and quitters never win'.⁷⁰ This was evident in the thriving Sample 1 couples. Simon Underwood's assertion: 'I would never give up on a commitment' reflects the sentiments of several men. John Kaderra emphasised:

'We have got kids and I think it is important to set an example that if you make a promise you honour it and life is hard sometimes and you work through it . . . It's a commitment that I have made, and I will stick with it . . . The way I see it is that I've told [Rosie] that I will stay with her forever and I am a man of my word, so I will.'

Critically, two husbands whose satisfaction scores rebounded between times 3 and 4 reflected similar sentiments:

'You can't just quit, you know, you can't be selfish you have got to get on with it . . . I don't think you can walk away from situations you have created yourself . . . you have just got to muddle through, but then maybe that's just my way I have been brought up, I don't know. I'm not a quitter.' (Chris Small)

'I guess in some ways I am quite loyal, I mean as a trait in that, you know, if you have made a commitment then you have got to stick to it and that's in all sorts of things. So, I kind of feel like that's quite important.' (Geoff Illingworth)

In Sample 2, internal ethical values of perseverance and loyalty were found as prominent for both male and female interviewees. Reflecting Eastern spiritual teaching and social experiences of marriage, opposite-sex cohabitants and two same-sex couples who had formalised their relationship⁷¹ rejected notions of 'the one' and 'for life', instead indicating that they were committed whilst the relationship was healthy for both partners. In this comparative sample, all couples felt that formalising their relationships would not, or had not changed their commitment and several expressed frustration that non-marital commitment was deemed to be of lesser standing:

'Where you have committed to a 25-year mortgage together . . . What we have stood by each other through . . . I think we have demonstrated time and time again a commitment that if anything, is more significant and more binding than a marriage certificate . . . We could hate each other, not live together but have a marriage certificate . . . it seems a bit absurd that we shouldn't as a couple be afforded the same [legal standing].' (Sawyer-07-CB-OS)

These preliminary observations suggest that whilst commitment is undoubtedly a central component of thriving relationships, the meanings attached to commitment may change across levels of satisfaction with the relationship, length of relationship, gender, spirituality and social experience of marriage.

Keep talking

Gottman and colleagues⁷² argue that attempts to build enduring relationships should focus on promoting intimacy rather than on resolving conflict. We term this 'keep talking', as when partners maintained open relationship-focused dialogue then conflict, when it occurred, did not compromise the structural integrity of relationships. Thriving couples carved out time to talk

⁷⁰ Ibid, 173.

⁷¹ One married, one in a civil partnership.

⁷² Gottman et al, above n 46, 301.

about the minutiae of the day or deeper level issues as needed, and this open communication fuelled intimacy. Couples in thriving relationships face issues as a team. They are pragmatic and, when issues arise, they focus on finding a solution rather than on being ‘right’ or ‘winning’:

[We say] “Right so ok we know there’s an issue, how are we going to solve it?”... I think we are both very good at listening to the other person and saying, “Well you feel like that and I feel like this so how do we get past that and solve it?” ’ (Sarah Henderson)

Couples in thriving relationships kept what one husband described as ‘short accounts with each other’. They expressed dissatisfaction promptly, dealt constructively with issues and once resolved, did not revisit them. Consistent with the findings of Paul Amato and Spencer James,⁷³ many individuals in thriving relationships disclosed that communication had improved over time as they learned to accommodate their partner’s approach. Grace Barnes’ summation that, over time, she has grown to know her husband ‘deeply’ reflects the reports of many participants in thriving relationships and resonates with the ‘deep knowing’, the intimate knowledge of one’s partner accumulated over time, reported by Gabb and Fink.⁷⁴ In Sample 2, those with divorced parents described having to learn to communicate openly.

Those in thriving relationships tend to let go of minor slights or choose not to make an issue over things on which they have no strong opinion. The need for compromise peppers the narratives of Sample 1 participants; to ‘meet halfway’ (Jonathan Upton), to find a ‘middle way’ (Tahir Zehan) or ‘middle ground’ (Tom Newsome). Ava’s focus on ‘compromising’ and being ‘pragmatic’ when facing issues (Ava-04-CB-OS), reflected the views of most of the Sample 2 participants.

In Sample 1, unhappy husbands withdrew, internalising distress, thereby risking emotional disengagement. Unhappy wives, and the women we interviewed post-separation, vocalised their discontent initially but felt unheard, so stopped seeking desired changes. (‘I just don’t bother’, Gemma Edwards, time 3.) This pattern reflected the uncoupling process noted by Diane Vaughan.⁷⁵ Reflecting previous research findings,⁷⁶ the Sample 1 relationships that broke down did so asymmetrically: one spouse had given up on the relationship and emotionally disengaged some time before separating, making attempts at reconciliation mostly doomed to failure. Stuart Thompson’s admission that, by the time he realised the extent of his wife Joanna’s unhappiness, ‘it was already too late, and she’d already mentally signed out of the marriage’ reflected the uncoupling process of many. Tim Walters described trying desperately to understand his wife’s decision to separate, but, as she had been ‘silently unhappy’ for some time, reconciliation was not possible.

Building the relationship that suits you both

Couples in thriving relationships built the relationship that suited them, often defying cultural or societal norms to do so. Strikingly, there is no one ‘right’ model of a thriving relationship. What matters is that the relationship that the couple co-create has meaning for them.

Being, as Walker and her colleagues put it, ‘rooted in a common purpose’⁷⁷ strengthened the team perspective of thriving couples. Sample 1 participants used various metaphors to describe

73 P Amato and S James, ‘Changes in Spousal Relationships over the Marital Life Course’ in D Alwin, D Felmlee and D Kreager (eds), *Social Networks and the Life Course: Integrating the Development of Human Lives and Social Relational Networks* (Springer International Publishing, 2018).

74 Gabb and Fink, above n 33, 37.

75 D Vaughan, *Uncoupling, Turning Points in Intimate Relationships* (Vintage Books, 1990).

76 Ibid and see also Walker et al, above n 20.

77 Walker et al, above n 20, 53.

this joint enterprise. Ben Carmichael explained that he and his wife Sophie were ‘filling in parts of the same jigsaw’ and that ‘instead of being in opposing castles we are in the same castle together, we built the walls around us’. Using more delicate imagery, Christopher Turner captures the intimacy that this mindset creates:

‘We live in our own bubble . . . but in that bubble . . . we have actually become very, very close.’

The thriving couples’ team mindsets fuelled intimacy. Lucy Young (time 1) described her relationship with her husband Ben as her ‘first defence against the world’. Tom Newsome’s view that he and his wife Maria ‘decided to take the world on together’ reflected a similar comment from Maria at time 3:

‘We have become this little unit . . . Tom and I always say that it’s us; it’s just us against the world and that’s a really nice feeling. I feel very grounded actually, more than I ever have done in my whole life.’

A sense of going on a joint adventure; ‘a shared journey’ with a ‘shared vision of where we are going’ (Rosie Kaderra), pervades the narratives of participants in thriving relationships in Sample 1, in stark contrast to those whose marriages had not endured. As Catherine Isaac poignantly shared, leading up to her separation, she and James ‘were two trains heading on two very different tracks’.

Although a shared worldview was prevalent in thriving relationships across both samples, for some Sample 2 couples, common purpose developed over time. Two cohabitant couples described being committed to co-parenting without necessarily having a long-term commitment to each other towards the start of their relationship. Without following traditional relationship trajectories (dating, marrying, parenting), Sample 2 couples consciously developed a relationship to suit themselves, including personalised vows in civil partnership or marriage ceremonies.

Adapting to change

Following couples longitudinally allowed us to examine relationships before, at and after periods of transition, such as becoming parents. As the practitioners reported, couples often struggled to adapt to parenthood. The relationships of couples in Sample 1 who struggled to adapt were often compromised before becoming parents because they lacked shared vision or friendship was not strong. Often, parenthood crystallised fundamental and ultimately insurmountable differences between a couple. Following separation, James Isaac reflected that, before becoming parents, he and Catherine were able to ‘just paper over’ the potential for their different approaches and temperaments to cause problems, but this had proved impossible after the birth of their first child. As Catherine said in the interview immediately before separation:

‘I think me having [child] has made it clearer for me about what I want . . . [James] just has a completely different view to me . . . and I think when we first met that was really refreshing . . . but . . . being a mum, it has really re-affirmed for me my identity and who I am and what’s important to me.’

Those who adapted to change well were predominantly developmental in attitude; they expected their relationship to change over time, pulled together at times of transition and were sufficiently flexible to manage change. Elizabeth Fenton typified this approach:

‘Our family is constantly changing . . . so then you have to kind of work [out] what works now and then, so it’s kind of like adjusting the whole time really. I just think you can’t be rigid as we just live a life where we have to be flexible the whole time.’

Some thriving Sample 1 couples actively sought and embraced change or had chosen radically different directions for their lives than they had originally envisaged. Others had endured devastating changes, including life-threatening illnesses, significant financial issues or close bereavements. Lisa Neff and Elizabeth Broadby suggest that facing challenges early in a relationship provides couples with a ‘training ground in which to hone their coping responses’.⁷⁸ Our data strongly supported this. As Maria Newsome explained, ‘every little bump in the road . . . really has just made us stronger’. Like Reibstein’s participants,⁷⁹ pulling together during difficult periods of change strengthened relationships, as Andy Armstrong explains:

‘No doubt going through [major trauma] made our relationship stronger. I suppose when you go through things like that . . . you either go through it and it makes you stronger or you are unable to go through it and it doesn’t, but it did make us stronger.’

In Sample 2 (perhaps because they had experienced more change in their longer time together), openness to change and an ability to adapt to it, along with compassionate love, were the foremost relationship characteristics. Attributes such as accommodation (Jo-09-CB-SS) and acceptance of a partner’s different approach at times of change (Lance-05-CP-SS) were instrumental in getting couples through periods of significant stress, emerging like the Sample 1 couples, the stronger for it.

Building a support network

Close, supportive networks of family and friends enriched the lives of couples in both samples. In Sample 1, couples’ parents gave practical support with daily childcare and to allow couples time together. Parents had financially supported house purchases or fertility treatment. In thriving couples, parents respected boundaries and their support was much appreciated:

‘Sarah’s mother . . . is a big part of this family, a big part of our kids’ lives and, you know, the stuff she does for us and the love she shows us is amazing . . . I really recognise what she does and what she gives to us as a family.’ (Duncan Henderson)

Women drew substantial support from their mothers, sisters and/or girlfriends. In Sample 1, women in thriving relationships did not expect their husbands to fulfil all their needs. Support from female family members was only viewed with sadness if, as Cathy Logan recognised, such support ‘fills that gap’ created by their husband’s lack of emotional availability. Many men relied primarily on their wives for emotional support, but for most this was not problematic. The minority of men who had deep friendships beyond the dyad appreciated the richness they brought.

Across both samples, couples drew support from the communities in which they are members, such as work, school, church and LGBTQ+ groups, particularly if kinship groups were geographically dispersed. One Sample 2 couple were immensely grateful for the support received from their community when fire ravaged their home.

A small number of thriving couples across both samples described distant or challenging wider family relationships. Here, boundaries were often agreed between the parties to manage these challenges and minimise any negative effect on the relationship. Notably, several separated women cited negative family influences playing a part in their own relationship breakdown. Separated participants cited the lack of available family or other support as additional pressure on ailing relationships.

78 L Neff and E Broadby, ‘Stress resilience in early marriage: Can practice make perfect?’ (2011) 101(5) *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 1050, 1065.

79 Reibstein, above n 34.

The critical questions

From the identified relationship skills and attributes outlined above, we drew out critical questions for each partner to reflect on individually and then use as discussion points with their partner before committing to a relationship intended to be permanent. To sustain a happy relationship, we also recommend that they be revisited periodically, particularly at key moments such as deciding to marry or have a child. The critical questions are:

- Are my partner and I a ‘good fit’? (Can we work well as a team? Do we have similar values and outlook on life?)
- Do we have a strong basis of friendship? (Do we have fun together? Share interests and humour? Appreciate each other?)
- Do we want the same things in our relationship and out of life? (Do we each feel that we can jointly agree a plan for our lives together? Can we negotiate?)
- Are our expectations realistic? (Do we accept there will be ups and downs? Understand the need to make effort?)
- Do we generally see the best in each other? (Can we accept each other’s flaws? Respect our differences?)
- Do we both work at keeping our relationship vibrant? (Do we make time to spend together and time apart? Each show the other that we care?)
- Do we both feel we can discuss things freely and raise issues with each other? (Do we deal with issues promptly and constructively? Enjoy talking and listening to each other?)
- Are we both committed to working through hard times? (Do we both ‘give and take’? Work on ourselves? Look to a positive future together?)
- When we face stressful circumstances would we pull together to get through it? (Can we each adapt well to change? Would we seek professional help if needed?)
- Do we each have supportive others around us? (Do we have a good support network we can turn to for help if needed?)

Discussion

Summary of findings

Couples in relationships that were thriving after at least 10 years together worked well as a team. They were good friends and had fun together. They were realistic in their expectations and worked to keeping vibrant a deeply meaningful relationship. They saw the best in each other and kept communication open. They were committed to working through hard times together and adapted to change well. They also had a good support network.

Testing theory

As outlined above, the VSA model⁸⁰ predicts that couples who encounter significant stress will fall somewhere along a continuum of satisfaction and separation depending on the enduring vulnerabilities they bring into the relationship and their ability to adapt. Since we studied Sample 2 couples cross-sectionally, we were not measuring change over time, which is the purpose of the VSA model. Applying the VSA model to our Sample 1 data, however, confirmed this to be a good predictor of which relationships will endure, despite encountering relationship pressure points, such as an affair, financial difficulties or bereavement. This, as the VSA model

80 Karney and Bradbury, above n 45.

predicts, was based on the couple's ability to adapt to manage stress effectively and the enduring vulnerabilities they brought into the marriage. Our findings suggest, however, that not all enduring vulnerabilities are equal – personality factors such as insecure attachment styles appeared more corrosive than demographic factors such as having divorced parents. Gottman's Sound Relationship House theory also reliably determined ability to adapt at times of difficulty. However, the adaptation in relationships built on a solid foundation (such as friendship) was typically followed by moving forward together in a positive mode, often despite facing significant stress and some demographic factors typically associated with relationship vulnerability. Indeed, far from falling somewhere along the continuum of satisfaction and separation as the VSA model predicts, many couples who had gone through incredibly stressful times emerged much stronger and much more satisfied, provided they had the foundations of the 'Sound Relationships House' in place. This is perhaps to be expected. Couples with secure attachment styles (ie low enduring vulnerabilities) are likely to be interested in their partner's world; nurture fondness and respond positively to their partner's bids for emotional connection – the three critical components of friendship that form the foundation of the 'Sound Relationships House' theory. Secure attachment and ability to adapt seemed not only to blunt the impact of significant stress but to enhance marital satisfaction when couples pulled together to manage the stressful event. Using an approach that applied and tested the two theories in tandem on couples followed over time, we concluded that the VSA model predicts which relationships survive, whereas the 'Sound Relationships House' theory predicts which thrive.

Implications for RSE curriculum development

As relationship breakdown rates attest, building and sustaining a healthy, intimate relationship is not easy, and young people will inevitably learn from trial and error. The characteristics of healthy relationships we observed were consistent with messages that emerged from the practitioner interviews and should inform the development of evidence-based RSE. First, as part of the 'deep dive' that practitioners advocated, the importance of self-awareness, of knowing oneself, is critical. Couples with broadly shared worldviews who co-created a relationship that is deeply meaningful to them tended to report that their relationship was very happy. An effective RSE curriculum should, therefore, include content that encourages pupils to reflect on their personality, preferences and goals to understand themselves and the likely characteristics of a partner with whom they may be compatible. Additionally, given the importance of 'seeing the best' in one's partner, and since doing so will be easier if you choose to commit to a predominantly supportive partner, the need for a realistic understanding of your partner's strengths and weaknesses should be a focus of RSE.

Gottman and his colleagues have suggested that, when relationships are in difficulty, therapeutic interventions strengthening partner-friendship are 'probably the treatment of choice'.⁸¹ Certainly, friendship, shared humour and teamwork was central to the couple relationships that were thriving across our samples. RSE curriculum development should underscore the importance of a firm basis of friendship to building an enduring intimate relationship.

Walker and colleagues found that couples tend not to discuss whether their expectations are shared.⁸² Given our findings that unaligned expectations led to frustration or relationship breakdown, the reformed RSE curriculum should illustrate the importance of discussing expectations and individually assessing whether expectations are sufficiently aligned before committing seriously to the relationship. Young people's expectations must also be realistic. To

81 Gottman et al, above n 46.

82 Walker, above n 20.

counter the bombardment of the photoshopped ‘perfect’ lives of celebrities on social media, RSE should normalise the need to maintain relationships alongside learning the characteristics of a healthy relationship.

We endorse Walker’s call for work to de-stigmatise relationship support by starting it in schools.⁸³ The practitioners stressed that once partners are stuck in cycles of mutual blame and recrimination, reconciliation is highly unlikely. This underscores the need for RSE to promote a culture shift so that professional help-seeking is not a last resort. State and media efforts to normalise relationship help-seeking behaviour in Norway have had promising results.⁸⁴ Normalising relationship maintenance and early help-seeking in RSE could begin to deliver cultural change.

The triumph of negative over positive that we (and others)⁸⁵ observed longitudinally, highlights the need for couples to respond early to relationship difficulties, particularly during stressful periods. The thriving relationships we observed were not thriving by chance. Both partners recognised the need to maintain open, honest, respectful communication and to deal with conflict pragmatically and in a couple-focused way as it arose. Skilling young people to communicate effectively and manage conflict should benefit young people in several areas of life, including in their future intimate relationships and must be a priority of RSE. Given the gendered responses to unresolved issues we observed, constructive patterns of responding to issues should be taught in innovative, targeted ways that engage male and female pupils.

The RSE syllabus should take account of the nuances in the meanings attached to notions of ‘commitment’ across length of relationship, gender, spirituality and social experience of marriage that we observed.

The practitioners emphasised the need to build personal resilience. To equip young people with tools to build relationships that thrive, RSE needs to teach skills that will strengthen resilience and the ability to adapt to life’s inevitable stressors, including how to work as a team with their partners.

Finally, our findings echo those of Gabb and Fink. They report that, without the support and friendship of significant others, ‘couple relationships appear to be experienced as qualitatively poorer and less able to weather the stressors’ that couples ordinarily encounter.⁸⁶ An RSE curriculum that skills young people to form and sustain meaningful friendships and promotes healthy relationships with parents and wider families would enrich young people’s lives generally and provide communities of support to enhance future intimate relationships.

Our findings that time apart to pursue interests is healthy may empower young people to recognise potentially controlling traits in a partner. We have not looked at abusive relationships, but would underline that understanding the spectrum of abuse and identifying how it manifests within relationships must be central to any RSE programme. The young people who took part in Phase 3, particularly the girls, were clear that this was a matter of concern to them. This alone confirms how critical it is to embed this and awareness of legal remedies in any RSE programme.⁸⁷ Other agencies (such as Stop Abuse For Everyone, or ‘SAFE’) provide a good source of help.⁸⁸ We would suggest that elements of effective evidence-based programmes with a central theme of safety and freedom from abuse in relationships be incorporated in any RSE package. Lastly, any RSE programme that is developed should be subject to rigorous evaluation.

83 Walker, above n 24.

84 G Hansen Helskog, ‘The Norwegian state: A relationship educator’ in Benson and Callan, above n 21.

85 Gottman et al, above n 46.

86 Gabb and Fink, above n 33, 85.

87 Barlow et al, above n 5.

88 See www.safe-services.org.uk/support-for-families-and-individual, last accessed 4 September 2020.

Conclusions

Reducing the rate of relationship breakdown requires an approach that provides appropriate, tailored and timely relationship support across the life course, particularly across transitions. As Karney and colleagues remind us, relationship education is likely to be only an element in a repertoire of approaches to support young people to form and sustain healthy, enduring intimate relationships into adulthood.⁸⁹ The evidence shows that it is, however, a powerful tool in the arsenal of approaches and we endorse the Government's focus on healthy relationships, and teaching regarding the characteristics of such relationships, within the new RSE curriculum. Engaging pupils in the design and development of preventative education programmes (including sex education) leads to greater success of the intervention⁹⁰ and, given the clear message from the young people we spoke to,⁹¹ we recommend an approach that engages pupils in the development of RSE programmes. The RSE curriculum must be evidence-based and responsive. The findings of this study can inform the development of RSE curricula, to provide young people with the skills needed both to recognise and avoid incompatible and unhealthy relationships and to build relationships that will not only survive but thrive.⁹²

⁸⁹ Children and Social Work Act 2017, s 34.

⁹⁰ P Chakravorty, *Key principles of effective prevention education* (PHSE Association, 2016).

⁹¹ Barlow et al, above n 5.

⁹² Since writing this article, the PSHE Association has approved and kite-marked two lesson plans based on our research for adoption by teachers as part of the new RSE curriculum. See socialsciences.exeter.ac.uk/law/research/groups/frs/projects/workingoutrelationships/, last accessed 16 September 2020.