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Sex and Intimacy

Abstract: *Sex and intimacy are experienced in couple relationships through a diverse range of modalities. Different levels of desire for sex are typical in couple relationships and these are often differentiated by gender, age and parenthood. There is, however, no correlation between differences in desire and diminished ratings of relationship satisfaction. Sexual intimacy is experienced as an embodied form of deep knowing alongside other forms of intimate communication. These findings suggest that we need to think again about what constitutes a normal and/or healthy sex life, as couples appear to understand the vagaries of sex as part and parcel of their long-term relationships and not a problem per se. The longevity of partnerships seems to be connected with couples' capacity to negotiate changing circumstances.*

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There is a wealth of research on sex and sexual intimacy which builds on and extends the pioneering sex survey research of Kinsey and colleagues (1948; 1953) and the sociological studies of Masters and Johnson (1966; 1970). Findings from the most recent wave of the Natsal survey provide fresh insight on sexual behaviour, attitudes, health and well-being across the UK population, highlighting the progressive liberalisation of sexual attitudes and lifestyles (Natsal, 2013). Analysis which falls under the broadly defined sociological umbrella has sought to problematise sex by situating sex and sexuality in context. Work in this vein has drawn attention to the ways that sexual scripts shape sexuality and gendered sex lives (e.g., Johnson, 2005; Kimmel, 2007; Plummer, 1995; Simon & Gagnon, 2003). Building on early second-wave feminist work on the political meanings of sex (Koedt, 1973; Rich, 1980), this body of work has also usefully focused attention on heterosexuality as a site of gendered norms, sex and power (Hockey et al., 2010; Jackson, 1999; Langford, 1999; Meadows, 1997; Rahman & Jackson, 2010). Studies of same-sex relationships have similarly highlighted the intersections of sexuality and power and the ways that understandings of sex lives and sexual identities are constituted through socio-cultural and historical domains (Plummer, 1995) wherein public-private worlds intersect to shape contemporary intimate life (Berlant, 1997; Frank, Clough, & Seidman, 2013). In this work, sex has been troubled as a site of desire, longing and despair (Berlant & Edelman, 2013), with queer studies focusing critical attention on the contested meanings of sex beyond the heteronorm (Frye, 1991; Stein, 1997; Wilton, 1996). Research on bisexuality has further extended these analyses by calling into question the underpinning binary of 'the sexes' (Barker & Langdridge, 2008). This rich and wide-ranging body of work reminds us that, while sex may be an important means of intimate expression and a source of sustainable pleasure for some people, for others it can be an uncomfortable and sometimes emotionally painful area of personal life (Smart, 2007).

We situate our analysis of sexual intimacy in the context of these studies and critical inquiry. Like other findings presented thus far, the experience of sexual intimacy in the *Enduring Love?* study was not defined through types of relationship but instead criss-crossed the sexual spectrum. However, sexual experience was significantly shaped by a range of factors including age, parenting status, gender and biography – perhaps more so than most other forms of relationship practice. In many ways, as Chapter 3 discussed, how love and intimacy were experienced,

understood and deployed in couple relationships drifted in and out of focus across couples' accounts of their intimate lives together, sometimes being situated at the forefront of what was said and at other times being left unarticulated or hinted at in ambiguous terms. Yet intimacy and togetherness remained the underlying context. Sex was typically embedded within emotional dimensions of the relationship rather than seen as a simply physical encounter.

Engendering intimacy

In response to the survey question, 'What does your partner do for you that makes you feel appreciated?',¹ answers included under the rubric of 'physical affection' ranged from fleeting gestures to tender moments of intimacy. Our analysis thus focuses on the range and meanings of intimate experience and the temporal dimensions of such relationship practices. Indeed, time and the quotidian rhythms of a relationship were perceived as crucial features in nurturing and nourishing a partnership. Many of the answers either explicitly stated or implicitly implied that it was the regularity of intimate contact that was appreciated alongside the gesture itself.

Greets me with a kiss every evening when I come in from work
Strokes my hair until I sleep
Rubs my back every night

A kiss, caress and massage were all frequently mentioned by participants and included here in coded responses as physical affection. These *touching* gestures appear to be experienced as a sign of their partner's appreciation both because of the thoughtfulness of the gesture and because of its corresponding mutuality. That is to say, a tactile gesture can never be singular because when we touch something we are automatically touched back (Gabb, 2011a). Couples emotionally and symbolically connect through these reciprocal interactions; such embodied sensations of touch fold us back upon ourselves and produce a reflexive response (Grosz, 1993). The touching caress of a partner therefore serves to connect the couple *in relation* to each other.

Gender was not a distinguishing variable for these survey responses; indeed, there was marked congruence between the answers of women

and men, with both groups appearing to equally and highly appreciate physical affection. The answers of mothers and fathers were equally aligned, although for this group their answers ranked it less highly than other things identified. Survey data thus portrayed a gender-neutral picture of physical affection. In the study's qualitative data, however, evident gendered differences could be identified and in many cases these did appear to shape the couple dynamic. These differences between qualitative interview and survey data should not, however, be read as epistemological contradiction (Hesse-Biber, 2010); instead, they point to the tensions between reported relationship ideals (what couples *should* do) and rich accounts of lived experience (the messiness of what couples do *in practice*). As such, the disparity between these data adds further gravitas to the meaningfulness of physical affection in the couple relationship as couples wrestle with the relationships they live with and those they live by (Gillis, 1996).

Lucy and Garry, for example, openly acknowledged their different levels of need for hugs and physical affection, situating this within the context of their particular relationship narrative.

LUCY: I probably crave more hugging type affection than you do, would you say that's true?

GARRY: Yeah.

LUCY: But I've got used to not getting it...

GARRY: We, kind of, gravitate to different positions [on individual sofas] but it's not by design, is it? Although, when there's been a swap over very occasionally, the remark will be made, 'Don't get too comfortable on my sofa.' But that's just –

LUCY: All very tongue-in-cheek.

GARRY: Laughing and joking, you know. I think you want cuddles more than me.

LUCY: I do like a cuddle and I would like Garry to say, 'Oh, come over here and have a cuddle,' very occasionally. And sometimes I have told you that, haven't I? There are times when I do crave more –

GARRY: Contact.

The exchange in this interview is telling on many levels, demonstrating how Lucy and Garry negotiate difficult areas of their relationship through good humoured banter – a communication strategy that was deployed by many couples in the study, as discussed in Chapter 3. Here, we can see how the couple interview brought together the otherwise 'his' and 'hers' format of individual interviews and facilitated insight into how

couples relate to each other (Heaphy & Einarsdottir, 2013). For Lucy and Garry, it enabled them to build a combined account of physical affection that accommodates both 'the issue' and Garry's acknowledgement of his partner's need for greater physical intimacy. The relationship they portray demonstrates a marked difference between the two parties and is quite traditionally gendered. In the following couple interview with Alun and Eleri, gender appears to be decentred as the differentiating feature in their couple relationship, but its salience nevertheless remains between the lines.

ALUN: Intimacy. We're quite tactile, aren't we? We're quite huggy, kissy and touchy and feely.

ELERI: Yeah, I remember after the last interview...it got me thinking about it a little bit more in the interview. And I realised that we did things like, sometimes we brush our teeth together and we hold hands brushing our teeth! [High pitched] I hadn't noticed it and I was just, like, this is ridiculous. Holding hands! A, it's impractical; we've got a tiny bathroom and we have to shove each other out the way to spit when we are brushing our teeth. But I hadn't...I don't think I'd really noticed.

ALUN: Well, I hadn't until you mentioned it and I wouldn't...I don't think I would have noticed it otherwise.

ELERI: No. So, whenever we're in here watching telly, we're connected physically in some way.

Both Alun and Eleri talked fondly about the physical closeness of their relationship, an embodied proximity which facilitates couple connection. This heterosexual couple clearly cherish physical contact equally and openly talked about their 'touchy feely' predispositions. It is interesting to note, however, that it is the female partner who noticed the affection which accompanied their bathroom rituals *and* ascribed meaning to this interaction – something that was otherwise unnoticed by her partner. This greater attentiveness to the couple and how they physically and emotionally interact was mirrored in other couples' data although emotional investment and physical affection were not the exclusive purview of women. Many men were keen to highlight their openly expressive and tactile nature.

RODNEY: I think it's in my nature. I'm, kind of, a tactile person, you know? ... my father was a lot like that. I think I have that from my father ...and [partner's] family also is very huggy...we both come from families where you express affection, physically, by, you know, big hugs and holding hands and stuff like that, yeah.

In many accounts of couple intimacy, participants sought to explain and justify why they behaved the way they did, both looking inwards at the couple dynamic and outwards at their relational biography (Heaphy et al., 2013), with behaviour being traced back and forth across their past, present and intimate futures. The desire to locate behaviour was sometimes defensive, driven by a compulsion to rationalise what might otherwise be perceived as an omission or 'personal failing'. But on many occasions, as with Rodney, it was used to embed a sense of togetherness through invocation of a unified stance – articulated through, and enshrined in, the combined pronoun 'we', which represents the couple relationship. This is illustrated in the couple interview of Henry and Anne:

HENRY: I like, really like our cuddles or something where we just go to the bed and lie on the bed together and hug and –

ANNE: Yeah, kisses.

HENRY: Not particularly sexual, but just being very, very close, and, kind of, feeling, you know, um, feeling our bodies next to each [other] I think it's very bodily, but it's not necessarily sexual, it's just about being close and very comfortable with each other.

ANNE: Yeah, I might touch your tummy [laughing] or something like that.

HENRY: Yeah, it's nice.

For Henry, the shift from the singular to plural first-person pronoun works to consolidate the harmony of like minds, and like bodies. The fondness that is present in the exchange between Henry and Anne is unmistakable, with both parties crafting a shared couple story that is knitted together through their mutual interjections. Their dialogue also reinforces the often keenly felt distinction between physical intimacy and sex. Embodied affection is characterised as crucial to Henry and Anne's relationship whereas the vagaries of their sex life is of a secondary order, a distinction that was even more categorically stated by another couple, Rose and Hugh:

ROSE: [Sex] is one of the prerequisites of a relationship for me, and I think for you. But there are other areas of a relationship which I think are...need a lot more work, and are far more important...like trust, money, love, teamwork.

HUGH: There are things that are more enduring.

Sentiments such as these were echoed by many participants. Sex was identified as one factor among many others in the couple relationship mix. There were other qualities and relationship practices which were

‘enduring’ and which enabled a relationship to endure. This does not, however, diminish the significance of sex, but instead situates it *in context*, that is to say in the broader context of the couple relationship narrative. In the following section we focus on the in/significance of sex in order to unpick its meanings in long-term couple relationships. In so doing, we draw attention to the factors which impact on couple’s sex lives and how couples work together to negotiate such eventualities.

The in/significance of sex

Survey responses to the question ‘Sex is an important part of your relationship?’ tell an incontrovertible story about sex and the couple relationship, graphically demonstrated in Figure 4.1.

The National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (Natsal) has provided detailed data on sexual behaviour in contemporary Britain. Three waves of Natsal surveys have taken place: Natsal-1 in 1990–1991, Natsal-2 in 1999–2001 and Natsal-3 in 2010–2012. From these longitudinal datasets it is claimed that women’s sexual behaviour has changed over the past ten years, with an increase in the number of sexual partners and

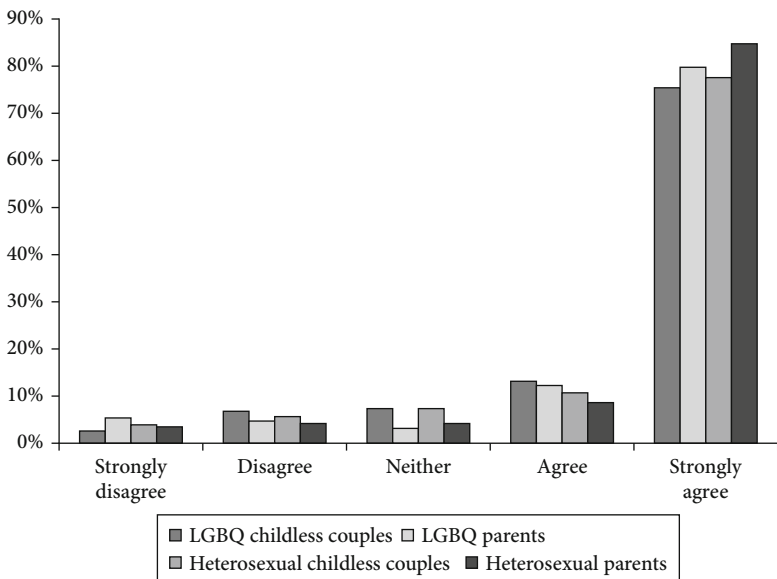


FIGURE 4.1 *Sex is an important part of our relationship*

sexual experimentation. The gender-neutral responses to the *Enduring Love?* survey question on the significance of sex thus appear to support the attitudinal shift reported by Natsal. When we examine the responses to other related questions, however, this consensus and allied 'progressive' attitude begin to unravel. Indeed, responses to the statement 'My partner wants to have sex more often than I do' reveal a far more traditional picture, with answers being clearly differentiated by gender and parenthood. Women (mothers and childfree) were most likely to agree with this statement. Men (fathers and childfree) were most likely to disagree with it. When gender and parenthood were combined, differences became even more significant.² Mothers were four times more likely than fathers to agree with this assertion. The number of children living within the family also seemed to have a larger and significantly more adverse effect on mothers than on fathers. Relationship duration likewise appeared to have an impact, with greater relationship longevity corresponding with a decrease in congruence around sexual desire. There were several additional factors which differentiated responses still further, namely residency and sexual orientation.³ Those who were 'going out' or did not live with their partner (living apart together (LAT) couples) were the most likely to indicate congruence in sexual frequency and desire in their relationships; likewise, LGBQ couples – both parents and childfree. It was couples in married heterosexual relationships who were the most likely to perceive the most significant differences in sexual frequency and desire.

There are several explanations that might account for such findings. It could be that sexual scripts (Simon & Gagnon, 2003) in heterosexual relationships both reflect gendered differences and serve to cleave apart lives and experience already crafted as distinct – corroborating the cultural rhetoric of 'men are from Mars, women are from Venus'. Alternatively, women, as wives and mothers, may be adhering to a socio-cultural script wherein bemoaning the shortcomings of men is expected. In some ways we can only speculate explanations for these particular survey findings. Other survey data do, however, point to the resilience of stereotypical gendered attitudes. For example, in response to the question 'What does your partner do for you that makes you feel appreciated?';⁴ men (child-free and fathers) were three times more likely than women (childfree and mothers) to mention sexual intimacy. A considerable degree of caution is arguably required before advancing straightforward gendered readings of such data. Critical analysis of sex research has shown that

men are more inclined to overstate their sexual activity in sex surveys whereas women tend to downplay this dimension of their relationship (Stephenson & Sullivan, 2009). Survey findings, therefore, tell us just as much about the cultural constitution of sex and prevailing patriarchal norms as they do about sexual attitudes and practice.

Our analysis of the *Enduring Love?* survey data on sexual desire and frequency is, therefore, situated in this socio-cultural context. Moreover, and of crucial importance, while previous research has shown a correlation between relationship and sexual frequency satisfaction (Smith et al., 2011) this was not borne out in our data. For both mothers and fathers, dissatisfaction with sexual frequency did not appear to undermine overall (high levels of) relationship and partner satisfaction. It would appear that for mothers and fathers who took part in our survey, fluctuations in desire and sexual activity were understood as a component part of the parenting couple partnership and as such did not, per se, lead to relationship dissatisfaction.

Responses to the survey questions serve to instantiate a picture of sex and couple intimacy that is articulated through gender but which cannot be reduced to this. For example, for women, heterosexual and LGBTQ alike, when describing what makes them feel appreciated, sexual intimacy was typically characterised in loving terms with the emotional meanings of sex being often emphasised.

He makes an effort and wants to please me when we make love

We have wonderful sex very often – it makes me feel loved and cared for

He's interested in me sexually after years together

In these women's responses, their partner's attentiveness to their needs was perceived as highly significant, with selflessness and generosity being repeatedly singled out. Another recurrent feature, as the responses above illustrate, was a sense of gratitude for continuing sexual attraction, over time, 'after years together'. Such a focus on appearance demonstrates pervasive – and invidious – socio-cultural norms which associate women's physical beauty with youthfulness, while men's attractiveness draws on their social status and power beyond embodied years. Thus it is unsurprising that there were no corresponding comments from men on ageing and their physical appearance. Heterosexual men's comments in this vein tended to focus on their partner's continuing desire to look attractive (for them) and/or her compliance with their sexual desire and preferences. Here, responding to the question 'What does your partner

do for you that makes you feel appreciated?’, the focus was on the sex act and included sometimes blunt – or even brutal – descriptions that lacked any relational dimension.

Oral sex

Is almost always prepared to have sex

Has sex when she doesn’t really want to

In these survey responses of heterosexual men, sex appeared to be used as a dispassionate commodity. Such answers seem diametrically opposed to the egalitarian ideals and ‘pure relationship’ era (Giddens, 1992) that are professed to characterise contemporary relationships in western culture. They are more akin to data found in earlier studies of ‘his and her marriages’ (Duncombe & Marsden, 1996; Mansfield & Collard, 1988). Sex is presented in selfish terms, couched in the discourses of individual need with no regard for the other’s feelings. It is also pertinent to note here that different forms of sexual practice were afforded different value. Engaging in ‘oral sex’ was seen as a favour rather than part of everyday sexual practice, something which the partner does *for you* rather than *with you*. The anonymity afforded by the online survey may have facilitated such candour; there was, after all, no researcher present and no traceable connection back to the words spoken. As such there was perhaps less ownership of the statements registered.

There were, however, some responses by men that were compassionate and far more fondly phrased. For example:

Hot sex and cups of tea ... great combination

While it may focus on the act of ‘hot sex’, this response shows no sign of disparagement and the sentiments are anything but dispassionate. The pleasures of a cup of tea featured with regularity and remained a highly meaningful and often jealously guarded dimension of the couple relationship, as discussed in other chapters. Here, for this male participant, the combination of sex and the totemic cup of tea appears to epitomise relationship satisfaction. An older heterosexual male participant who was in a relationship of over 20 years, he seems to celebrate and cherish the *extraordinariness* of this combination and his response is steeped in wit and affection. It is important, therefore, not to polarise gendered responses. Marked differences did characterise some answers, but this does not tell the whole relationship story. Yet there is another factor that *did* seem to set apart one group of answers: parenthood. The responses of

both mothers *and* fathers brought into stark relief the impact of having children on the sex lives of the parenting couple.

Sex and parenting

The greediness of parenthood in terms of time and energy, and the ‘cost’ of this on the couple partnership provides the experiential backdrop and context for the study’s survey data. The statistical significance of the intersections of gender and parenthood was incontrovertible (Gabb et al., 2013), with free-text responses to the open questions highlighting the adverse impact that children have on the couple relationship dynamic and experiences of sexual intimacy.

We don’t have sex very often (small children) and we don’t talk about this

Our sex life is not great since having children

How couples work to manage the tensions between parenthood and partnership was addressed in the qualitative dimension of the study. Here, findings corroborate the wealth of research that points to the pressures that young children bring to bear on the couple relationship (Marshall, 2013; Walker et al., 2010) and the intimate couple (Gabb, 2008). In practical terms, the impacts of sharing the ‘marital’ bed with children – when they are sick, upset or want a cuddle and company – were undoubtedly testing for many of the parenting couples. For some, this was perceived in stark terms, with children being seen as a wedge that served to physically and emotionally prise apart the couple.

Feminist research has drawn attention to the intersections of gender and power in shaping heterosexual relationships (Jackson, 1999; Meadows, 1997), while a focus on gendered inequalities in household relationships has shown how women’s double bind as wives and mothers shapes their personal relationships, both inside and outside the home (Hochschild, 1989; 2003). Such gendered patterns in couple relationship experience were typically present in the interview data, being manifest in many different forms. In the context of relationship practices more particularly, the picture was often messy and emotionally complicated.

LOUISE: I think Luke would like to have sex more, it’s not that I would like to have sex less, but I am less bothered...I’m not frustrated I suppose with my lack of it.

LUKE: You also engineer it so we can't. So to be fair [...] You will only have sex if you have a bath, are in bed by ten, you know, all of these conditions which will never happen. So basically, you said, you know, every blue [moon] I'll have sex with you...

LOUISE: That's the rule.

LUKE: Except of course it never happens.

For parents of young children like Louise and Luke, the intersections of power and sex were often writ large and couples were painfully aware of the detrimental impact this had on their formerly equal partnership. Though the exchange above is shrouded in banter and good humoured repartee, tensions nevertheless remain. For Louise and Luke, sex has become a vehicle through which other underlying resentments are acted out, taking on a particularly powerful and symbolic function. Both partners talked about being simply exhausted from juggling work, family life and practical childcare responsibilities. When opportunities arose or when 'couple time' was carved out, however, Louise simply felt unable or perhaps unwilling to switch between multiple and different personae:

LOUISE: I don't have, almost have that energy to kind of shift from just being the knackered person who's just been at work all day and then tried to put the kids to bed, into kind of wife and lover [...] I have to make a mental transfer [...] If I'm knackered, and I'm not saying this is good, it's not a good thing, but sometimes I can't be arsed [...]

LUKE: But you know [...] I think it's partly a power thing.

LOUISE: Yeah, I'm sure there's an element of that.

In the course of their interviews the couple proceeded to talk about how sex was being used as an emotional and practical means to redress Louise's sense of 'powerlessness' at work, in her career and in her role at home, as primary childcare provider. There was a tangible sense of underlying distress and resentment in Louise's comments about the sacrifice of a fast-track career with all the self-esteem this bestows; the drudgeries of daily childcare responsibilities that characterise and overwhelm her; an imagined future of success and professional kudos side-lined before it even started. Sex thus affords Louise a means to take control. Her sexual resistance wrests power away from her partner and affords her some sense of embodied agency and power over her otherwise fraught and frustrated life. In Luke's individual data, however, he raised the impact that Louise's strategic behaviour was having on him. Working excessively

long hours to establish a professional career, tensions within this couple relationship were starkly presented. Both parties were struggling equally in their own ways to keep the different and often competing dimensions of their work–family–personal lives in balance. Equilibrium was rare. However, what appears to enable this couple to ‘hang in there’ is their shared underlying belief that their present-day lives and lifestyles are temporary. This moment in time does not epitomise their long-term relationship. As a couple they currently lack resources, due to having young children and both working in time-greedy careers, but they both want to, and can, see beyond this point in time. Their couple relationship is more, and worth more, than this.

For Louise and Luke, the importance of the relationship horizon was crucial in their reflections on relationship longevity. Their relationship was sometimes characterised as years to come, in other instances it was just around the corner, in the here and now, conjured from stolen moments that transported the couple out of the everyday humdrum of their otherwise busy lives. In such instances, sexual desire happily returned, once tiredness subsided and the ebbs and flows of couple time was re-established.

LOUISE: Feels like a real holiday not having [children] here (though I do miss them). [Partner] and I have lazy hour in bed in the morning which we never usually get and have sex for the first time in a week or so. We go out for a lovely breakfast with the Saturday paper at a local greasy spoon café and get on really well.

These data illustrate the significance of temporality in understanding couple relationships. When the knotted threads of parenting and partnering can be teased apart, precious time affords opportunities to rediscover intimacy, sex and simply being together. For this couple, parenthood poses a range of practical challenges, not least to sexual intimacy, but it does not define their couple relationship. Imagining the relationship horizon enables them to keep going, to invest in their lives together – for the long haul. There is a sense in the data, then, that parenting couples develop resilience through holding onto the longed-for and imagined relationship horizon, keeping it secure through the immediacy of small moments of intimacy in the here and now. The intersections of time and space are crucial in couples’ management of this imagined project, serving to ground what might otherwise be ephemeral and precarious.

Making space for intimacy

As we discussed in Chapter 2, feeling ‘at home’ with yourself and the couple relationship was often situated at the core of what couples in the *Enduring Love?* study valued about their life together. Home was crucial in both holding and containing experiences of couple intimacy and sexual relations that were, in turn, routinely shaped by the physical environments in which couples lived and loved at different points in the life course. Home functions as a sign that is loaded with connotation (Gabb, 2008) wherein understandings of home equate with a series of overlapping front and back stages (Morgan, 1996) which are structured along a public–private axis (Allan & Crow, 1989). In families, ideas of propriety inform the use of rooms and shore up distinctions between parents and children by constructing boundaries around sex and intimacy (Gabb, 2013). Separate spaces that may appear mutually exclusive if charted on a two-dimensional map are simultaneously occupied on an everyday level (Rose, 1993, pp. 140–159). Data from the study revealed that couple space and/or a space associated with sexual intimacy were often squeezed to the very limits of sustainability in family households, as Debs clearly demonstrated when talking through her emotion map data (Figure 4.2).

DEBS: The kitchen is the heart of the home – it clearly is! [Laughs] ... I don’t think any of the spaces feel hugely private or coupley. Our bedroom certainly doesn’t because the kids play in the bed the whole time; it’s one of their favourite places to play.

The kitchen, and relationship practices such as eating together at the kitchen or dining room table, featured in many accounts of couple experience and/or imaginings of what intimate life could or should be in the future, if circumstances allowed. Moments of couple intimacy featured in Debs’ emotion map are located in the kitchen as the couple shared a snatched embrace, and in the hallway as they swapped over household ‘shifts’, leaving for and returning from work. For Debs and her partner, these moments of reunion at the beginning and end of the day were described with great fondness. The children’s excitement at seeing the returning parent was highly cherished. As we noted in Chapter 1, ideas of home across the study’s dataset were perceived as crucial in sustaining the couple relationship. In the context of family households that included children, couple space was often impossible to keep private, but protecting couple intimacy appeared less important in these circumstances, as

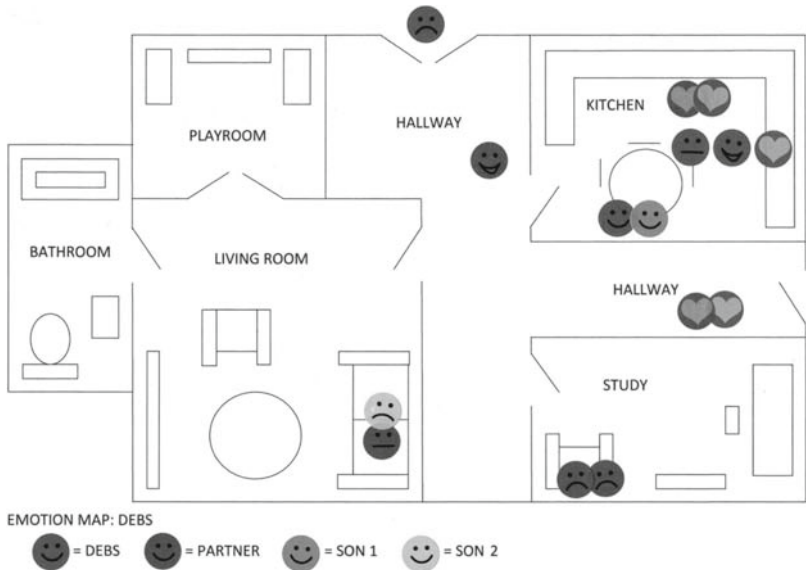


FIGURE 4.2 *Debs' emotion map*

Debs illustrates, then building a sense of togetherness into the fabric of the home, where all parties could grow together and be together.

Debs: Yes, hugely important, yeah. No I think home is – you know, we're both quite homey. It's far more than a place to lay your head, yeah. And we love this house ... we moved here and within two weeks I was pregnant which you know, felt very psychologically – very significant in terms of you know I felt so 'at home' that I was able to get pregnant [laughs]. And then I lost that baby, so it's not quite such a nice story, but you know it's kind of part of our story about how right this place feels to us and how important it is to us to live here. Not just in the house but in the wider community and the wider sense. We feel very settled – we both feel very settled, yeah, and that's important.

Debs' couple biography is built into the bricks and mortar of the home she and her partner share. For another recently married couple, this idea of home featured centrally in the ways they imagined their long-term relationship. At the point of interview, the couple had just made the decision to buy a house together and they were actively looking for a property that would accommodate their needs as a newly-wed couple. In her descriptions of this imagined place, Anna does not fantasise a cereal box ideal of coupledness, but a place that *fits* the relationship needs and desires of her and her partner. Whereas Debs portrays a home in which

couple intimacy wraps around the exigencies of parenting, the home that Anna imagines provides a privacy and permanency that she longs for, an environment that will comfortably accommodate the couple's future family lives alongside their open sexually permissive relationship.

ANNA: I want to live in my house for about 30, 40 years. I don't want to sell and move again! Which means I have to think, well, actually if we're ever going to have children, we're going to have to have at least a three-bedroomed house, because it gives us the space to grow [...] Our house is going to be [...] somewhere that reflects us, that we can use as we need to, or as we want to [...] our sexual activities are very restricted by this house, incredibly restricted, because we can't put any solid... anchor points in [...] you put an anchor point in a floor (here) and someone else comes in and goes, 'What's that there? Why is that there?' [...] It's that opportunity to be able to say, okay, let's tailor the house to us, and to what we want to do with it and how we want to conduct our lives in it, so that it becomes our space and not just [...] the place we happen to live in.

The home being described here by Anna is, therefore, performing vital relationship work, in that it both allows the couple to live the relationship that they both want, individually and together, and accommodates their future plans which include parenthood. While parents in the study acknowledged the impossibility of parent-partner distinctions in the uses of the home's spatial dimensions, childfree younger couples were inclined to imagine a compartmentalised future for the different elements of their everyday life. Anna's soon-to-be purchased home thus allowed the possibility of disentangling the couple's material, planned and fantasy lives together. Here, the public-private axis (Allan & Crow, 1989) is not refuted or ignored; instead it is fashioned into a multi-dimensional helix that enabled Anna to reconcile and embrace the different emotional/practical, maternal/sexual and adult/child areas of her life. Parenthood, partners, children, sex and sexuality are mutually situated within Anna's spatio-temporal 'frame': a shifting scaffold that in many ways resists simple categorisation. The arrival of a child is highly likely to muddy her clearly defined imagined boundaries, but what her account demonstrates is how home is invoked to positively hold the couple relationship and personal experiences of intimacy therein.

In other circumstances, where resources and cultural capital were less freely available, the inadequacies of space, the precariousness of tenancy agreements and the inability to call a space their own adversely impacted

on how couples could inhabit their households and experience intimate life together.

INTERVIEWER: So what would help you feel more secure?

KRIS: Being employed for one. I think, if you spend too much time in the same house with each other, you get under each other's feet. And that's just, that causes arguments. I know that ... that happens with a lot of couples, that you do need time away, not large amounts of time but time to do your own things as well as do things together ...

[My dream home] would be nothing flash or extravagant, just something with a bit of space, so that, you know, if [child] wants to go to her room somewhere, she can go to there without [other child] following her. Or space to put things or, you know, a bit of a garden or something so they can have a bit of fun in the summer.

For couples like Kris and his partner, critical intersections of time and space highlight how resources converge to shape the couple relationship both in terms of what is experienced and what can be imagined. While Anna conjures a future where time and space, home and intimacy can be fashioned and secured, Kris struggles to grasp security for himself and his family. Endless time together does not engender quality couple time; instead it leads to arguments. Restrictions of space and the pressures of having to share a bedroom with young children inevitably take a heavy toll on couple relationships. Household space and relationship practices which some couples take for granted are simply unavailable or even unimaginable for others. Welfare reforms which imposed a 'bedroom tax' (2013) have served to make hard lives even harder. For socially disadvantaged couples, retaining any sense of discrete couple time and/or privacy of space for intimacy can feel impossible.

As the above examples illustrate, home represents far more than a place to lay your head and/or for a couple to live together; it is experienced as part of who the couple is, and, in the context of this chapter, how each partner experiences physical affection and sexual intimacy. There may be multiple configurations of intimacy and physical affection and great variations in sexual practice, but to sustain a couple relationship these dimensions require space to accommodate them. Space also enables couples to adapt, emotionally and physically, to the changes that occur across the life course and the resulting effects that these have on their relationship.

Ageing bodies and relationship duration

Facing the challenges and opportunities posed by long-term relationships was something that at times vexed couples as they sought to manage the sexual problems that accompany ageing and the disruptions these heralded for established patterns of intimacy.

TED: Since [I've been unwell], I have to admit to being impotent, so – so admitting to impotency, I, we did sleep in the same bed for some time but then agreed I went into the smaller bedroom because we were more comfortable. We could roll about at our own will and so on. I could get up if I wanted to. [Partner] could get up and do whatever. And we're perfectly happy with that. We weren't happy that we couldn't share, you know, our physical relationship in that way, but every night we do say we love each other.

In this interview extract, Ted's description of his impotency and its effects highlights a crucial change which is so often an unspoken dimension of couple relationships and which, therefore, has to be 'admitted'. Being impotent disrupts not only socio-cultural norms of coupledness, in which a sexual relationship is central, but also related ideas and meanings around the conjugal bed as a space in which a couple's respective sexual needs are met. This is reflected in Ted's concern to provide reasons for no longer sleeping in the same bed as his partner, which largely elide the absence of any sexual intimacy in their lives and focus instead on the way *separate* bedrooms allow them to be more comfortable and avoid disruptions to each other's sleep patterns. By vacating their shared bed and thus distancing himself from regular close physical contact with his partner, Ted may arguably feel more able to manage the emotional difficulties he experiences around his impotency and its impact on his relationship. These sleeping arrangements, while not a panacea for this change in their life together, have allowed Ted to fashion other practices through which he can demonstrate his continuing love and affection for his wife, one of which, as he touchingly states, is the night-time routine of declaring their love for each other.

When men's accounts of ageing included the lessening of sexual inclination and/or health issues such as impotency, sentiments remained raw and were often framed by the male participant as a personal failing. Trying to stave off the cultural spectre that associates masculinity with sex drive, between the lines and in their text these men typically presented deeply vulnerable personae. Notwithstanding a supportive and understanding

partner, there was a tangible sense of men feeling disappointed in themselves and their perceived failure to meet what they understood to be the expectations of their partner and society. In other instances, however, accommodating changes brought on by an ageing body that fails to keep pace with both emotional and physical desires, the relationship appeared to be enriched as the couple embarked on joint endeavours to find solutions that worked for both parties. Here, intimate knowledge and trust were crucial factors in couples' 'coping' strategies; so too humour.

CLIVE: We don't feel the need to have sex all the time because I think after 13 years, you know [...] it's just an extension of the way we are with each other [...] but even then sometimes, you know, the fact of the way you are it's not a pressure, even then you can find a comedy element sort of creep in because you can find you're trying to be intimate but you're having a battle with the bedclothes, which is kind of like there's three of us in this relationship – me, you and the duvet – and it's like we might as well give up. And you can have that laugh because there isn't the pressure of like, 'We must have it now.'

For this gay couple, being able to laugh about changes in their sex life makes the situation both safe and enjoyable. Their intimate knowledge of each other enables them to enjoy the playfulness of the moment, sexual or otherwise. Responding to the sex and intimacy collage which included the front covers of various relationship handbooks, another couple likewise drew in humour and light-hearted banter to regale their sexual story.

MARGARET: *The Sex Starved Marriage*. Oh you can relate to that, poor [partner], after my hormones packed up [...] We used to have baths together but we don't bother with that anymore. It takes so much time [...] We have showers instead of baths. The older you get the less time we have for things [...]

MARTIN: We had one or two books that we were looking at.

MARGARET: But sex is so painful now that it isn't adventurous anymore.

MARTIN: You tend to sort of do it for my benefit rather than for yourself, don't you? But you seem to enjoy it. You're good at conning me if you're not.

MARGARET: Well I make the best of it shall I say [...] I think companionship creates a lot of intimacy [...] I think we've got a lot of intimacy [...]

MARTIN: I was quite surprised at myself that I haven't lost my desire if you like, without using medicine [...]

MARGARET: It is once every week or once a fortnight. So you might be likely more, not sex starved, but slightly sex hungry at times.

For Margaret and Martin, their mismatch in sexual desire is managed through affectionate banter but this is not used to make light of a difficult

issue; instead their shared humour and sense of fun render it a safe topic for discussion.

MARGARET: Martin makes it fun because we have a joke as well, don't we. We laugh. So instead of being passionate it is quite entertaining. [Laughter]

MARTIN: Yes.

MARGARET: It's not boring.

MARTIN: I try to make a variation and jokes and stuff.

The relationship work that both parties are doing here, both in the interview and in their sex lives, is palpable. Their laughter is not derisory but a consequence of mutual fondness. The first blush of a new relationship may have worn off but the relationship has not tarnished. Newness has been replaced by treasured familiarity: their pleasure in a shared life together. While the sex issue may have otherwise put great stress on the couple relationship, overcoming the problem has served to strengthen their partnership and evident commitment to each other and the couple project.

Older couples often spoke about drawing on the shared resources and 'wisdom' accrued through past experiences. This time in life was just one chapter in a much longer relationship narrative. For 'second time rounders' such temporal continuities were absent, but past experiences were not necessarily cast aside. Starting afresh was perceived as an opportunity to reflect on and cherish time that might hitherto have passed by unnoticed. While the general trend in divorce rates is downward, towards the upper age ranges there is an increase (ONS, 2012). For some, this so-called grey divorce was not associated with endings or an unhappy finishing point. This point in their life course signalled a chance for new beginnings: a time to start investing in a new relationship and building a future together, second time round. For example, Hayley, a 'second time rounder', painted a picture that was rich in literal and metaphorical 'fresh shoots'. Their garden and growing menagerie had provided a site of nurturing for their relationship. This embodied investment in a joint endeavour held the potential to flourish, over time, through their physical and emotional attention.

HAYLEY: I went downstairs and made breakfast for us which we ate in the garden. Since moving in last Oct. we have worked hard on making the garden nice. We tour the garden together every day to see how things are: veggies growing, chickens happy, plants taken etc. We do this whilst talking about our plans for the future.

Second time rounders like Hayley were not lamenting past failed relationships or rushing to catch up on missed opportunities; instead, there was

a sense that these couples enjoyed taking time, pausing for reflection and appreciating what they had in life rather than taking things for granted. In this context, perhaps, couples brought to the relationship knowledge gained from previous relationships: lessons learned. There was, in many ways then, a greater appreciation of time spent together in these couples. Associations of mid- and later-life with a dwindling interest in sex did characterise many couples in this age cohort but other data served to counter cultural myths about ageing and decreased sexual desire. As children left home or the pressures of career and home life became more equally balanced, relationships could take on a 'second life'.

NINA: I think it's got better and better. I think it's deeper, in a funny sort of way. I think as we've matured [...] I can't help thinking it's about coupling and uncoupling. So the more, in a way, autonomous an individual you are, the more the coming together can be rich and deep, and actually, I think it keeps us going [...] Sex] hasn't always been as frequent as it is now, which is interesting, isn't it? When we were younger it was a lot less frequent, because we were both working hard full-time and were knackered, basically.

Rather than familiarity and its association with boredom adversely affecting couple intimacy, Nina suggests that deep knowing and sharing a life (and love) together can *enrich* the sexual relationship. Over the passage of time and with the increased availability of couple time, the intimate connection between Nina and her partner has been enhanced and strengthened. Whether a new relationship second time round, or the second life that can accompany the post-parenthood era, the opportunities offered by these *second chances* were typically warmly embraced and welcomed. Couples appeared to relish finding ways to accommodate changes in personality, interests, physical abilities and circumstances within the dynamic couple relationship. Sexual intimacy was embedded into the broader fabric of what worked for each couple and their particular relationship narrative.

MOLLY: I think as, as it gets further along you get, you've had more shared experiences so you've got more things to kind of pull upon [...] when you're first together and it's all exciting and new [...] that's just a change, that it's not necessarily a bad thing. You're not kind of panicking that like, 'Oh well, you know, we used to have sex all the time and now we don't because -'. But, just seeing that things, things change as the relationship kind of matures and sort of not seeing that as a negative, that's just kind of, that's how it changes because it's got to change.

The sentiments expressed here by Molly in many ways typify those articulated across the dataset. Sexual intimacy was one factor in the

couple relationship. Fluctuations in desire were inexorably tied into other life factors, but it was the sharing of a life together, the investment in that joint venture and the acceptance that change is an integral part of this shared life which enabled couples to weather the ebbs and flows that characterise sexual intimacy and the passage of time in long-term relationships.

Notes

- 1 See Appendix 2, Table A2.1: 'What does your partner do for you that makes you feel appreciated?'
- 2 See Appendix 2, Table A2.5: 'My partner wants to have sex more often than I do' by gender and parenthood.
- 3 See Appendix 2, Table A2.6: 'My partner wants to have sex more often than I do' by relationship status and residency; and Table A2.7: 'My partner wants to have sex more often than I do' by parenthood and sexuality.
- 4 See Appendix 2, Table A2.1: 'What does your partner do for you that makes you feel appreciated?'