

FIFTH INTERVIEW SCHEDULE – The Healthy Relationships Knowledge Exchange Fellowship– January 2021 — v.4 – 04.02.22

We will conduct semi-structured interviews with up to 39 couples married for 15 years (last interviewed for the fourth time in 2017) and 10 couples in more diverse relationships of over 20 years (interviewed for the first time in 2017) to indicate how couples have coped with the COVID pandemic and to test the ‘internal capability’ aspect of the Relational Capability Framework on couples in long-term enduring relationships.

NB, we have used ‘partner’ throughout although this can be substituted with ‘spouse’ where needed but we will mostly personalise with the name of the partner. We have also used ‘relationship’ rather than ‘marriage’ as not all are married but can personalise to the interviewee’s relationship type as needed.

Questions will cover the following four areas:

1. COVID and other change – brief summary of significant changes since the last interview, particularly how COVID has affected the couple and how they have coped.
2. Nurturing the relationship – what do couples do to keep the relationship going?
3. Communication and challenges – how the couple communicate and deal with disagreements and challenges; what they do well, what could be improved, and
4. Managing expectations, and attitudes towards separation – in what circumstances might they consider separating?

Preparing for interview

1. Read last interview.
2. Check memory space/battery life for recorder.
3. Check online consent form signed and if not have paper copy to countersign.
4. Have questionnaire downloaded ready to share screen and paper copy to sign.

Introduction

Introduce self if interview is with the diverse couple sample. Check now is still convenient. Check privacy. Check that interviewee is happy for interview to be recorded and if so, **START RECORDING.**

As a brief reminder, this research aims to provide an evidence base of how couples in long-term relationships have coped with the COVID pandemic, and the key ingredients of relationships that flourish and what partners in these relationships do to keep the relationship thriving.

You have signed a consent form dated which sets out how your interview data will be used. Do you have any questions about how we will use your data or about anything else on the consent form? If consent form not signed in advance take interviewee through the consent form.

As you know, I shall be recording the interview. As required by our university research ethics procedures, everything you tell me will be completely anonymised and treated as confidential. Nothing you tell me will be passed to your partner. We will assign a different name to you in our reports and won't include any details that would identify you. We never pass on any personal information about you to anyone else.

If there are things you don't want to talk about that's OK, don't feel you have to answer any particular question. You can stop the interview at any time and if you want to withdraw anything you've said later then you may do so provided you let me know by 31 October 2022.

There are four groups of questions. I will ask you to tell me about any significant changes in your family since the last interview, in particular how you've coped during the COVID pandemic. I'll then ask you what you do to look after your relationship and keep it going. We will consider how you manage disagreements and then finish by looking at your hopes for your relationship and why you think that some relationships breakdown. Please speak freely and explain your answers.

The interview will take about 45 mins - 1 hour.

SECTION A: Change and COVID

The world is clearly a very different place to when we last spoke five years ago, and I want to ask you some questions on how you've coped during the pandemic, but first may I ask:

Q1. Have there been any other major changes, good or not so good, in your lives since we last spoke five years ago? [Probe: moved house, changed jobs, ill-health (self or wider family), bereavement, money worries, had a child, changes in relationships with wider family.]

- How did your relationship get through this? How did you support each other? How has this changed your relationship?
- [Depending on what interviewee has said] Did the fact that X was something that you had no control over make any difference to how you responded to it/ how you got through it? [Draw here on any example interviewee gives in answer to question above e.g., redundancy]

Q2. Lots of things have changed for families because of COVID, how about you? How has it affected you – individually? - as a family? [Probe: illness, WFH, home-schooling, child arrangements and care, time with/worries about extended family, jobs, money worries, more limited wider family support, less 'me' time].

NB - check the type of accommodation the couple has: more space may make managing lockdown and relationships easier and the reverse.

- How has your relationship got through this time? How have you supported each other? How (if at all) has it changed your relationship? Any unexpected positive changes? Are there any changes that have been necessary because of COVID that you think you'll continue with after we emerge from the pandemic? If so, what are they?
- Is there anything you've learned through getting through previous challenges that you think have helped you during COVID? [If so, what?]

Q3. We're interested in what helps couples at times of change and challenge and we know that when a couple become parents it can be tough going. Looking back, on the last five years?

- How have the challenges of parenthood changed in that time? (What has gone well? What could have gone better?)
- What help do you have from family/ friends? What additional support might have helped you?
- [If children are still dependent] Are you happy with the support with childcare that you get from your partner?
- What effect do you think that being parents has had on your relationship with your partner? Overall, do you think having a child/ren has had a positive, negative or neutral effect on your relationship?
- [**Only if voluntarily childless**] what impact do you think that your decision to not have children has had on your relationship [NB for the married sample, one couple was voluntarily childless at the last interview, all other couples had become parents].

SECTION B: Nurturing the relationship

Next, I'd like to ask you a few questions on how you keep your relationship going:

Q4. Can you describe what you like about your relationship?

- What does your partner do to show you that they care? How do you show your partner that you care? [Probe affection].
- Are there any areas of your relationship in which you wish your partner was more supportive?
- Looking back, in what ways do you feel closer to your partner than when we spoke five years ago? Further apart?
- Who, apart from partner, do you feel close to?
- What effect do you think that COVID has had on how close you feel to your partner? (If relevant), have you spoken to partner about your concerns?
- What things do you like to do together?

Q5. Has the time you spend together as a couple changed over the last five years?

- Are you happy with the amount of time you spend together? And with how you spend it? [Probe COVID effect].
- How important is it to you that you have time away from each other? Are you happy with the amount of time you get to spend pursuing your own interests? [Probe how supportive they each are of time apart with family or friends].

I want to ask a couple of questions about your sex life if I may just to get a sense of how important this is in your relationship, so please can you tell me:

Q6. How important is sex in your relationship? Has the importance of sex changed over time? Is this ever a source of friction?

SECTION C: Communication and managing difficult communication

Most couples fall out from time to time, and I'd like to ask you a few questions on how you manage important and sometimes difficult conversations if I may:

Q7. How comfortable are you discussing important issues with your partner?

- Do you think the amount of time you spend discussing important issues (so not just day-to-day practicalities) has changed in the last five years? If so how/ how does that make you feel?
- If you have something important you want to discuss with your partner, how do you tend to approach this [probe an example if needed]? Is there

another example of something you didn't feel comfortable confiding in your partner? Why was that?

Q8. How do you tend to handle any disagreements between yourselves? (Walk away/ negotiate/ row?)

- Has this changed over time? What accounts for this change?
- What do you tend to fall out about? Is there anything that you find yourselves having repeat disagreements about [e.g., money/division of household chores/childcare]? (If so), why do you think this is? How does this make you feel? How do these issues generally get sorted out (if at all)?
- Are there things that you don't argue about, but you wish were different? What if anything have you done to bring about a change? To what end? How has this affected how you feel about the relationship?
- Are there things that you think you need to discuss with your partner, but you've avoided talking about it because dealing with everything that COVID has brought feels hard enough?
- When you are discussing a difficult issue with your partner and it feels like it's about to spiral and not go as well as you'd hoped, what do either of you tend to do to try to stop the conversation heading into a full-blown row? With what success? How do you spot when a discussion is about to go downhill? Do you think your partner is good at spotting when this might be about to happen?
- In any long relationship, there is likely to be times where couples feel that the other person has let them down. Without going into the specifics of the issue unless you want to, can you think of a time when you felt that your partner had let you down? How did you feel about it at the time/ respond to this? Do you feel that you have moved on from it? If so, how have you been able to put it behind you? How do you feel about it now? [common 'non-forgiveness' responses are avoidance, revenge, and grudge holding].
- Do you feel, as a couple, that you've got better at managing disagreements over time? How/ how not? What have you learned?
- Do you have any concerns that rows between you are happening too much? (If so) what, if anything, have you done either yourself or as a couple to improve things?

Q8a. **Only if major problems have been disclosed** ask whether, looking back, do you think there were any signs early on in your relationship that the issues described might surface later in your relationship? If so, how (if at all), did you deal with them at that time?

- When did you first realise that the relationship was in difficulty? When did you discuss your concerns with your partner? How did they react? (If it was the partner who first raised concerns) were you aware at that stage that your partner was unhappy?
- What steps, if any, did either of you take at that stage to try to improve your relationship? (Help from family/friends/professionals - timing of help).
- What do you think has made you stay?

SECTION D: Managing expectations, and attitudes towards separation

Q9. So, looking back, what do you think were your hopes, for your relationship at the start?

- Do you think your hopes for the relationship have changed over time? How? Have any of your hopes for your relationship not been met?
- Have you ever been concerned about the future of your relationship? Or thought about leaving?
- Have you ever sought professional help (e.g., counselling) for your relationship? **If yes**, how many times did you go? Helpful? How long did you/would you wait before seeking help? Why delay? Would you consider it in the future if needed?
- **If no**, how have you got through difficult times in the relationship?

Q10. In what circumstances, do you consider it is ok to divorce or separate?

Q11. If you were unhappy, what would be the reason for staying in the relationship?

- Some say that if things are not going well between them, they would only stay if they wanted to and were happy. Others say that they would stay because they feel it is important and they are not the kind of person to give up, especially if they have made a vow or promise. Others say that they would find it difficult to leave because they do not want to lose what they have put into the relationship; families would disapprove, and the divorce/separation process

would be too difficult. If you were unhappy which of these things, do you think best describes how you think you would feel?

Q12. If you were very unhappy, what impact, if any, do you think the fact that you are married/not married would have on your decision about whether or not to separate? [NB could ask this question above at 8a if serious issues disclosed].

- Who do you think is more committed to your relationship at the moment, you or your partner? Has your opinion on this changed at all in the last five years?

SECTION E: Conclusion

Just some general questions then in this final section. Please tell me:

Q.13. What do you think causes relationships to break down?

Q.14. Given that lots of relationships do break down, why do you think your relationship has lasted? [Probe: friendship, shared interests, fun, teamwork, commitment to children etc.]

- How do you feel about the future of your relationship? What hopes do you have for the future? How about fears for the future? What about your partner, what do you think their hopes and fears are for the future?

Q15. What do you think that couples need to help them get through times of big change?

(Becoming parents/children leaving home, chronicle ill health, job changes)?

[Flexibility, adaptability, teamwork, patience etc.]

- How do you think that you and your partner have managed/will manage some of these big changes we go through in life?
- Do you feel, as a couple, that you have got better at managing change over time? How/ how not?

Q.16. Overall, do you think that participation in the study has had a positive, negative or neutral effect on your relationship?

Q.17. When we've met previously it's always been face-to-face so I'd be interested in any feedback that you might have on how you've experienced our Zoom chat. Is there anything you prefer about Zoom compared to face-to-face? What if anything is better about face-to-face?

- Is there anything that you would like to add that we haven't discussed? Anything you would like to add to or ask about from any of the earlier questions?

Finally, then you may recall that when we met face-to-face, I asked you to complete a short questionnaire with two questions on how you would rate your relationship. [Then, if the interview is online, share the screen with the two questions below/put the questions in the chat and ask the interviewee to answer them. If the interview is by telephone read through the questions and ask the interviewee to give their response.]

The scale on the screen/ I will give you represents different degrees of happiness in your relationship. The middle point "happy" represents the degree of happiness of most relationships. Please tell me which best describes the degree of happiness, all things considered, of your relationship.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6
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Extremely Unhappy	Fairly Unhappy	A little Unhappy	Happy	Very Happy	Extremely Happy	Perfect

Which of the following statements best describes how you feel about the future of your relationship?

1. I want desperately for my relationship to succeed and *would go to almost any length* to see that it does.
2. I want very much for my relationship to succeed, and *will do all I can* to see that it does.
3. I want very much for my relationship to succeed, and *will do my fair share* to see that it does.
4. It would be nice if it succeeded, but I *refuse to do any more than I am doing now* to keep the relationship going.

Thank interviewee and remind interviewees of confidentiality/ right to withdraw or amend answers etc.

END