x love design

Love x Design

When a designer's toolkit meets long-term romantic relationships

by Mathura Mahendren

A major research project submitted to OCAD University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
of Master of Design in Strategic Foresight & Innovation.

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ABSTRACT

In a world where we are increasingly isolated in our shrinking homes, remote work arrangements, and digital spaces, the pressure on our long-term romantic relationships to be our primary source of connection, support, and inspiration is unprecedented. At the same time, we are investing less time into these relationships than we have in the past. The frustration that results from this gap takes a tangible toll on our health and wellbeing, and presents an opportunity for design-driven innovation.

This MRP asserts that we can benefit from being more intentional in our relationships. It proposes that leveraging a designer's toolkit - which includes empathy, ideation, experimentation, integrative thinking, and systems thinking - can help us create the conditions for such intentional experiences. It embarks on a design process that includes looking at the history of marriage, consulting experts that work on the frontlines of relationships, engaging individuals in long-term romantic relationships, mining insights gained through auto-ethnography, prototyping three relationship design experiences, and testing one of these prototypes for participant feedback.

Taken together, these engagements validate the innovation opportunity that exists at the intersection of relationships and design and provide preliminary support for the hypothesis that relationships may be evolving into a vehicle for spiritual fulfillment and self-transcendence. This research concludes that not only can relationships be designed, but it is crucial that they be designed and re-designed to thrive within the dynamic contexts in which they exist.

Keywords: love, relationships, marriage, design, design thinking, foresight, spirituality, self-transcendence, Maslow.

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It takes a village.
Here's a window into mine...

Helen Kerr
I knew you were my supervisor before I knew my topic. Thank you for embodying that one can design from the heart and with rigor, and for giving me the space to fall off the face of the earth and re-emerge with insights. From one ancient soul to another, it has been such a gift to cross paths.

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Thank you for saying yes to being my secondary supervisor before I could explain what that meant, for seeing this work for what it could be, and for planting the words that took root in such a profound way: "You love love, you do design, just put them together." Thank you for knowing I could do this before I did.

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Thank you for putting your word behind my work after just one meeting. Knowing that you trusted my ability to hold the space for participants to share, helped me believe that I could.

All the experts and participants who shared their time and insights
Thank you for trusting me with your experiences. I hope I've done them justice.

The parentals
Thank you for the opportunity to be born out of a love like yours. Now that I think about it, you've both modeled love as a force for self-transcendence, for being in service to the greater good, for as long you've been together. It just took me 25 years and lots of tuition to figure it out!

Centre for Social Innovation, Christie Pits Park, Bickford Park & Dufferin Grove Park and all of the current and former stewards of these spaces
Thank you for the physical space which gave way to the mental and emotional space from which to create.

The humans who made the time to come out to my defence
The love in the room was felt, the diversity noticed, and the curiosity infectious. Thank you.

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Thank you for being the lobster-squid to my octopus, for being *"the place where I stand when my feet are sore"*[1], and for creating the space in our relationship for this thesis to thrive. I know I can do it alone, but thank you for giving me so many reasons to not want to, to choose otherwise, to choose you. My heart is a richer place for being able to host you. I hope you'll stay awhile. Je t'aime.

[1]Beautiful words credit to poet and theologian Pádraig Ó Tuama, who is also the community leader of *Corrymeela*, Northern Ireland's oldest peace and reconciliation organization.

DEDICATION

To my body.

Thank you for being the vessel through which this work entered the world.

It was a long labour, and at times pretty dark, but you knew all along that it was *"not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of the womb"*[2].

I couldn't have done it without you.

Now, we rest.

[2]Powerful word credits to Valarie Kaur: a social justice activist, lawyer, filmmaker, innovator, mother and Sikh American thought leader who founded the *Revolutionary Love Project* — a movement that envisions a world where love is a public ethic.

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Let's get started,
shall we?

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Dear Reader,

Thanks for being here!

My identities and lived experiences have inevitably coloured this work, and I share them with you in the hopes that you will consume this research with that awareness. Think of it as a list of ingredients displayed by a meal.

My name is Mathura. My spirit is Temwa. I am both 25 years old and 400 years old. I am a woman of colour. I was born in Canada, to Sri Lankan immigrants. I am a settler on Turtle Island. I was raised and formally educated in the West, though I credit Mzuzu, Malawi and Kanifing, The Gambia for the learnings that turned me inside out. I identify as a cis-gendered, heterosexual woman, and am currently in a long-term monogamous relationship with another human who identifies as a cis-gendered, heterosexual male. I am able-bodied and neurotypical. I don't identify with any particular religion, and my relationship to spirituality is nascent but burgeoning despite my discomfort. I am a storyteller by nature, and design researcher by nurture.

And the rest, I'm still figuring out.

See you on the other side!

Love,

Mathura

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

"So we come to one person and we are basically asking them to give us what once an entire village used to provide. Give me belonging, give me identity, give me continuity, but give me transcendence and mystery and awe all in one. Give me comfort, give me edge. Give me novelty, give me familiarity. Give me predictability, give me surprise. And we think it's a given and toys and lingerie are going to save us with that."

- ESTHER PEREL, COUPLES THERAPIST

In a world where we are increasingly isolated in our shrinking homes, remote work arrangements, and digital spaces, the pressure on our long-term romantic relationships to be our primary source of connection, support, and inspiration is unprecedented.

At the same time, we are investing less time into these relationships than we have in the past. The frustration that results from this gap takes a tangible toll on our health and wellbeing, and presents an opportunity for design-driven innovation.

This MRP asserts that we can benefit from being more intentional in our relationships. It proposes that leveraging a designer's toolkit - which includes empathy, ideation, experimentation, integrative thinking, and systems thinking - can help us create the conditions for such intentional experiences. It embarks on a design process that includes looking at the history of marriage, consulting experts that work on the frontlines of relationships, engaging individuals in long-term romantic relationships, mining insights gained through auto-ethnography, prototyping three relationship design experiences, and testing one of these prototypes for participant feedback.

The history of marriage reveals an evolving institution that has served different functions at different times. What started off as a survival strategy for forging cooperation between local hunter-gatherer groups, marriage has since evolved into a means to preserve a family's wealth and economic stability, an access point for physical and emotional intimacy, and most recently, an enabler of personal growth and self-expression on the path to self-actualization.

Our expectations of our long-term romantic relationships have effectively ascended Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Even more, this research uncovers the lesser-known, highest rung of Maslow's hierarchy: self-transcendence. In other words, the highest human motivation is NOT to achieve one's fullest potential (self-actualization), but rather to be of service to something greater than oneself (self-transcendence).

Accordingly, this MRP proposes that the next frontier for long-term relationships will see them evolving into a vehicle for self-transcendence and spiritual fulfillment. Beyond supporting us in the pursuit of our highest selves, we will expect our relationships to help us feel connected to and be in service to something bigger than ourselves. This hypothesis is strengthened by signals of change that allude to rising spirituality in North America.

Experts working on the frontlines of relationships (ranging from therapists to relationship scientists to break-up coaches) provided key insights about the nature of the bond between romantic partners, patterns they were observing in their practice, and the frameworks they use to understand and unpack relationships. These insights informed the design of cultural probes (workbooks) and interview questions that were then used to engage individuals in long-term relationships.

In turn, participant research yielded a wealth of knowledge about relationship function, how relationship dynamics change over time, areas of tension and ease within relationships, courageous conversations that individuals would want to have with their partners, the kind of space they would need for honest dialogue, how time is spent in a relationship, what is needed to nurture a relationship, the questions individuals have about their partner and relationships overall, the kinds of relationship design activities in which they would prefer to engage, and the types of outcomes they would expect to achieve in doing so.

Participants' enthusiasm for this research in combination with the data they provided reveal an interest in and demand for more intentional ways of engaging in long-term relationships. These insights informed the development of three designed experiences - The Couples Walk, Ritual Design Workshop, and Polarity Mapping Workshop - of which The Couples Walk was tested with participants.

Ultimately, participant engagement validated the innovation opportunity that exists at the intersection of relationships and design and provided preliminary support for the hypothesis that relationships may be evolving into a spiritual enterprise. This research concludes that not only can relationships be designed, but it is crucial that they be designed and re-designed to thrive within the dynamic contexts in which they exist.

chapter

1

INTRODUCTION

- Origin Story
- MRP Intents
- Boundaries of Investigation
- Rationale
- Research Question
- Methodology

ORIGIN STORY

It all started when....

This MRP emerged in so compelling a way that I couldn't ignore.

It began in April 2018 when my friend Dil asked me to facilitate a couples design session to celebrate his and his partner Shil's 3rd anniversary of dating. Neither of us knew what a couples design session was, but I bought his rationale of,

"You love love, you do design, just put those things together."

I had just finished my second of three semesters of the Strategic Foresight and Innovation (SFI) program at OCAD University, and I dug back into my courses for something in which I could anchor the session. I chose to start the session with a Hopes and Fears exercise, followed by a Relationship Model Canvas (a play on the Business Model Canvas). While those were the anchors, it also felt important to ground the space in guiding principles, create a brave space for sharing authentically, and evoke a sense of connection between the couple. For these elements, I drew on my capacity for deep empathy, storytelling, and anticipating all the things that could possibly cause harm.

My very first couples design session turned out like nothing I had ever seen, felt, or facilitated before. Even putting aside that Dil and Shil were the ideal couple for this sort of experiment (in their endless curiosity and willingness to venture into the unknown together), the session was able to hold space for and surface questions and insights of great depth. So much so that it served as a jumping off point for many of their discussions to come.

Of course, Dil and Shil didn't keep this experience to themselves. They shared it with their friends with such enthusiasm that one of them contacted me the next day requesting a similar session for them and their partner.

I knew I had landed on something powerful, but I couldn't wrap my head around exactly what it was and why it was so powerful. I also felt overwhelming imposter syndrome facilitating this sort of intimate experience without any "legitimate credentials." And yet, so many people that learned of this experience highlighted its potential to become a flourishing business, particularly given the unique niche it occupied between strategic planning and couples therapy.

I wasn't averse to this, but felt like I was entering a system I didn't fully understand. I craved the satisfaction of taking it apart to its bare bones, examining why it is constructed the way that it is, understanding the functions it serves, identifying opportunities for change, and putting it back together in a way that allows me to think about my contribution as part of a much broader whole. In other words, I wanted to unpack the system of love, of long-term romantic relationships in particular, through a design-based approach.

And that is how a one-off experiment became a year-long MRP on intentional relationship design.

MRP INTENTS

- Situate the present state of long-term romantic relationships today within the history of human coupling, incorporating theories that span multiple disciplines.

- Provide an accessible vocabulary to talk about experiences or dynamics that unfold within long-term romantic relationships today, drawing on insights from experts in the field as well as individuals in long-term relationships.

- Propose a paradigm for the next frontier for long-term romantic relationships that is rooted in the signals of change we are seeing today.

- Share and reflect on three intentional relationship design experiences that were inspired by the insights that emerged from the literature, experts, and the humans who are engaging in long-term romantic relationships in their daily lives.

- Provide permission to think more creatively and with curiosity about how we might better understand our long-term relationships and design to unleash their fullest potential.

BOUNDARIES OF INVESTIGATION

For the sake of maintaining a reasonable scope, this MRP's exploration of the past, present, and future of long-term romantic relationships is largely limited to a North American context. It is also bound by the following definitions of three key terms:

Love

This MRP will adopt psychiatrist and author M. Scott Peck's definition of love, as shared in his book, *The Road Less Travelled*. "Love is the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth… Love is as love does. Love is an act of will—namely, both an intention and an action. Will also implies choice. We do not have to love. We choose to love." While this definition spans all forms of love, this investigation will focus on love in the context of long-term romantic relationships.

Relationship

For the purposes of this MRP, all uses of this word will reference romantic relationships, unless specified otherwise. Three key principles, based on research, will be used to define what constitutes a relationship (Finkel, Simpson, & Eastwick, 2017).

1. **UNIQUENESS:** A relationship functions as its own entity that is distinct from and irreducible to the two constituent partners. Relationship outcomes depend not only on the specific qualities of each partner but also on the unique patterns that emerge when the partners' qualities intersect.

2. **INTEGRATION:** Opportunities and motivations for interdependence tend to blur the psychological boundaries that separate partners and facilitate the merging of two partners into a single psychological entity.

3. **TRAJECTORY:** Relationships change over time. The long-term trajectories of relationship dynamics are affected by each partner's continually updated perceptions of the couple's relationship-relevant interactions and experiences.

Long-term relationship

In the context of this MRP, "long-term" is arbitrarily defined as a romantic relationship that has already spanned a minimum of a year, with the intention to continue into the foreseeable future.

A NOTE ON SAMPLE POPULATION CHOICE:

Why romantic relationships?
While many types of relationships - work, family, friends - may benefit from leveraging a designer's toolkit, this research focuses on romantic relationships because 1) They were my muse. As referenced in the origin story, the seed for this thesis was first planted in the form of a couples design session and 2) The subsequent interest from others in a couples design session validated that designing their relationship might be an area of interest for romantic partners.

Why relationships that are 1+ years old?
While it may be most proactive to start designing relationships from the moment they begin, I chose to engage with relationships that were at least 1 year old because 1) I wanted to *understand* the nature of relationships before designing for them and a year's worth of relationship provides participants with more experiences upon which to base their responses and 2) Insofar as relationship duration is a marker of commitment, I assumed that those in committed relationships would be more willing and interested in making this investment (i.e. the time and energy required to engage in relationship design).

RATIONALE

Why are long-term romantic relationships worth unpacking?

Because our relationships are linked to our health and well-being.

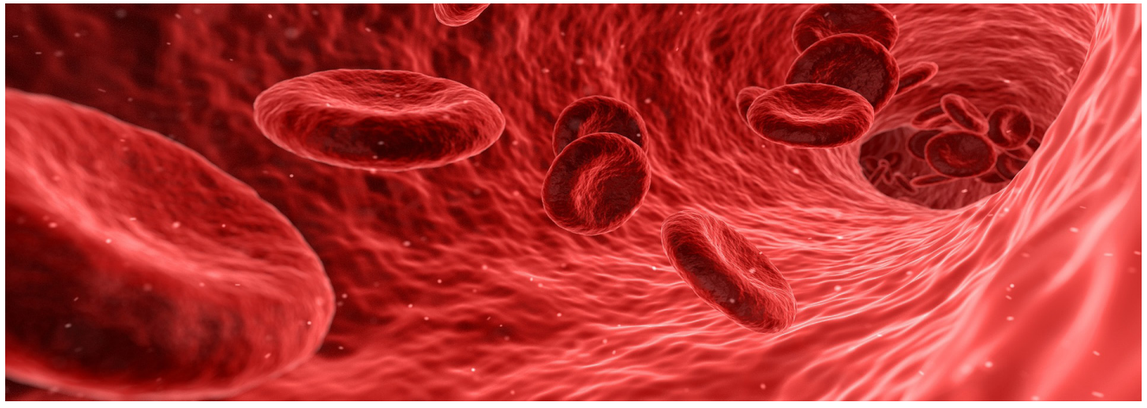
In the words of couples therapist, author, and speaker Esther Perel,

"The quality of our relationships determines the quality of our lives."

This linkage has only strengthened over the years. The extent to which marital quality is an important predictor of life happiness was almost twice as strong in 2000s as it was circa 1980 (Finkel, 2017). Furthermore, research reveals that an unhappy marriage can increase one's chances of getting sick by roughly 35 percent and shorten one's life by an average of four to eight years (Gottman & Silver, 1999). In contrast, people who are happily married live longer, healthier lives than either those who are divorced or unhappily married.

While the reasons for these differences are still emerging, it is hypothesized that in an unhappy marriage, people experience chronic, diffuse physiological arousal (DPA). DPA is our body's built-in alarm system, which is activated in moments of conflict or real or perceived danger. The heart speeds up, blood flow to the gut and kidneys slows down, and adrenaline starts to pump, ultimately provoking a "fight or flight" response (Brittle, 2018). DPA has protected humans for millennia. However, when experienced chronically, it results in added wear and tear on the body and mind, which can manifest in any number of physical ailments (e.g. high blood pressure and heart disease) and a range of psychological troubles (e.g. anxiety, depression, substance abuse, psychosis, violence, and suicide) (Gottman & Silver, 1999).

In understanding these critical connections between our relationship health and our overall health, it becomes possible and important to design for optimal health.



Because marriage and long-term relationships are facing unprecedented pressure under the weight of our expectations.

"Never before in history has any culture expected so much from this union as we currently do in the Western world," writes sociologist Stephanie Coontz in *Marriage, a History*. "The adoption of these unprecedented goals for marriage [have] had unanticipated consequences that have since come to threaten the stability of the entire institution." (Gadoua & Larson, 2014)

Marriage as an institution is undergoing an identity crisis. What was once the prerequisite for survival, economic security, preserving lineages, strengthening political ties, having sex, and having children, is becoming less and less necessary for or relevant to fulfilling those functions.

Yet, in other ways, the stakes are higher. Increasing life expectancy means that marriages that lasted 20-30 years when life expectancy was 40-50 years, now have the potential to last 75+ years (Gadoua & Larson, 2014). Today, committing to "til death do us part" means finding a partner with whom we believe we can unlock that potential over double or triple the time we did before the 20th century. Furthermore, as we become increasingly isolated in our shrinking homes, remote work, and online social networks, we are becoming more dependent on our partners as our primary source of emotional connection and psychological support. In a survey conducted by authors Susan Pease Gadoua and Vicki Larson, more than 90 percent of participants agreed that an ideal marriage is one that encourages mental, emotional, and spiritual growth in each other (Gadoua & Larson, 2014).

Marriage, and long-term relationships overall, which were once bound by rules and obligation, are now characterized by unprecedented choice and freedom. This choice and freedom come with heightened expectations:

"So we come to one person and ask them to give us what once an entire village used to provide. Give me belonging, give me identity, give me continuity, but give me transcendence and mystery and awe all in one. Give me comfort, give me edge. Give me novelty, give me familiarity. Give me predictability, give me surprise."

– ESTHER PEREL, COUPLES THERAPIST

In other words, our consumerist culture with its values of "personal gain, entitlement, and hedging one's bets" has permeated our long-term relationships, with commitments lasting as long as the other person is meeting our needs (Perel, 2017). As observed by psychologist and author William Doherty,

"We still believe in commitment, because we know that committed relationships are good for us, but powerful voices coming from inside and outside tell us that we are suckers if we settle for less than we think we need and deserve in our marriage."

This research will examine how and why the role of marriage and long-term relationships have shifted over time, share models that situate our current expectations, and provide a framework in which to manage what can seem like polarized needs in a relationship.

Because love is lucrative.

For better or for worse, there is (and has been) a lot of money being made around our long-term relationships. While the following statistics are not exhaustive in terms of the industries that cater to our relationship-related needs, they provide a window into the scale of wealth that is generated as a result.

U.S. WEDDING INDUSTRY

$72 billion (2016) (Schmidt, 2017)

U.S. DIVORCE INDUSTRY

$450 billion (2015) (VICE, 2015)

U.S. VALENTINE'S DAY SPENDING

$19.6 billion (2018) (National Retail Federation, 2019)

U.S. DATING INDUSTRY

$2.5 billion (2015) (LaRosa, 2018)

U.S. SELF-IMPROVEMENT / PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT INDUSTRY

$9.9 billion (2016) (LaRosa, 2018)

It is useful to note that compared to the amount of money that is invested at the beginning of a relationship and/or a marriage (e.g. investments into dating and weddings) and at the end of a relationship and/or a marriage (e.g. divorce-related costs), there is not much to show for the investments (albeit monetary) made into relationships and/or marriages during the time in between.

"In a multi-billion dollar wedding industry - the average cost of a wedding is $37 000 in Canada and $40 000 in the US - 0% is spent on the relationship. That's insane. If you want to have a vibrant, healthy, life-giving relationship, that is not something that accidentally happens at all. But it's the way that the majority of people approach their intimate relationships."

- SHAWN MILLER
WEDDING OFFICIANT

In this investigation, this observation sparked an exploration into the kinds of investments (monetary or otherwise) that couples may want to make into their relationship over time.

"A good relationship is better health insurance than a careful diet and a better anti-aging strategy than taking vitamins."

- DR. SUE JOHNSON

RATIONALE

Why use design thinking to unpack the system of long-term romantic relationships?

Design thinking is a process for creative problem solving. It is a human-centred approach that draws on elements from the designer's toolkit like empathy and experimentation to arrive at innovative solutions. Table 1 co-relates Design Thinking elements to the concepts explored in this study.

Given that design thinking is described as the process of arriving at innovative solutions, it is important to define what the outcome of "innovation" means in the context of this study. The ideal innovation lies at the intersection of the trifecta of desirability, feasibility and viability, an idea that originated from international design and consulting firm, IDEO (IDEO, n.d.).

In the context of this MRP, an ideal innovation provides:

- A ***desirable*** solution, one that my customer (i.e. individuals in long-term relationships) really needs.
- A ***feasible*** solution, building on the strengths of my current operational capabilities.
- A ***viable*** solution, with a sustainable business model.

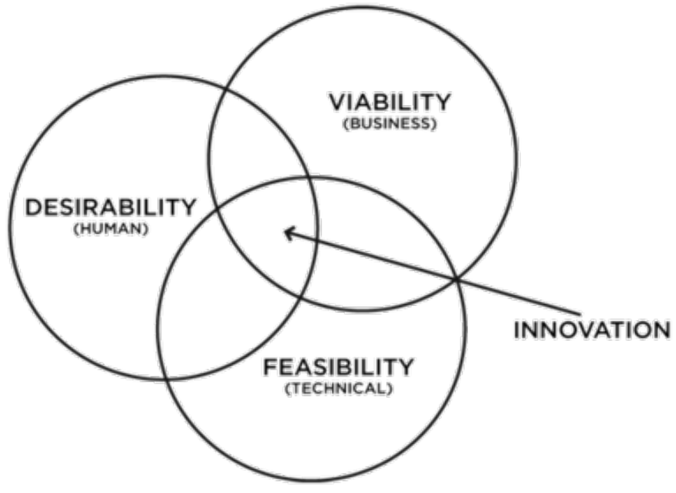


FIGURE 1: THE SWEET SPOT FOR INNOVATION (IDEO, n.d.)

TABLE 1: DESIGN THINKING ELEMENTS & HOW THEY RELATE TO THIS STUDY

Element	*What it means*	*What it looks like in this study*
Empathy	Developing a deep understanding of the needs and motivations of the people for whom you are designing (Stanford d.school, 2010).	Connecting with experts who work on the frontlines of long-term relationships; looking back at the history of marriage to better understand how we got here; creating space for individuals in long-term relationships (including myself) to reflect on and share their experience.
Ideation	Combining the understanding you have of the problem space and people you are designing for with your imagination to generate creative solution concepts (Stanford d.school, 2010).	Creating space for individuals in long-term relationships to generate creative ideas that cater to their relationship dynamics and individual preferences.
Experimentation	Iteratively generating and testing artifacts intended to answer questions that get you closer to your final solution (Stanford d.school, 2010).	Using every opportunity to interact with individuals in long-term relationships as an opportunity to provide them with prototypes with which they can interact and provide feedback.
Integrative Thinking	Constructively facing the tension of opposing ideas and, instead of choosing one at the expense of the other, generating a creative resolution of the tension in the form of a new idea that contains elements of the opposing ideas but is superior to each (Martin, 2007).	In defining the problem space: exploring and integrating knowledge of long-term relationships from multiple disciplines, including evolutionary biology, psychotherapy, psychology, sociology, relationship science, philosophy, and anthropology. In ideating potential solutions: integrating the needs of people in long-term relationships (desirability), the possibilities of technology (feasibility), and the requirements for business success (viability).
Systems Thinking	Adopting a holistic approach to analysis that focuses on the way that a system's constituent parts interrelate and how systems work over time and within the context of larger systems (Bunge, 2000; Sterling 2010).	Understanding how long-term relationships are impacted by shifts in adjacent systems - the economy, the political climate, the introduction of new technologies, evolving social norms, the state of the environment, and the values and belief systems that shape culture - and designing solutions that are informed by these shifts.

CURIOSITIES

- How have long-term relationships evolved over time? Why?
- How have/are various social, political, economic, environmental, technological movements shaped/shaping relationships over time?
- What are common pain points within long-term romantic relationships?
- Who is profiting from the current state of affairs of long-term romantic relationships?
- Can the design toolkit be applied in the pursuit of more intentional long-term romantic relationships?
- Which core principles of design thinking might be most relevant to relationships?
- What are the ways in which intentional relationship design is already happening?
-
- What are the sources of resistance against applying design to relationships?
- What are some tangible ways of applying design thinking to relationships?

RESEARCH QUESTION

How might we leverage the designer's toolkit to design more intentional long-term romantic relationships?

METHODOLOGY

The process and the tools that provide the structure from which insights may flow.

THE DOUBLE DIAMOND

Design processes are characteristically cyclical, ambiguous, complex, and messy and this one was nothing short of that. The Double Diamond is a visual map of the design process that puts some structure to its different stages (Design Council, 2019). The diamond shape depicts that in all creative processes, a number of possible ideas are created ('divergent thinking') before refining and narrowing down to the best idea ('convergent thinking'). The Double Diamond indicates that this happens twice – once to confirm the problem definition and once to create the solution. In this exploration, I went through the stages of the Double Diamond multiple times, in order to create various artifacts, including the research question, the questions for expert interviews, the workbook with which to engage participants, the participant interview questions, and finally the designed experiences. This aligns with the cyclical nature of the creative process, where ideas are developed, tested and refined a number of times, with weak ideas being dropped in the process.

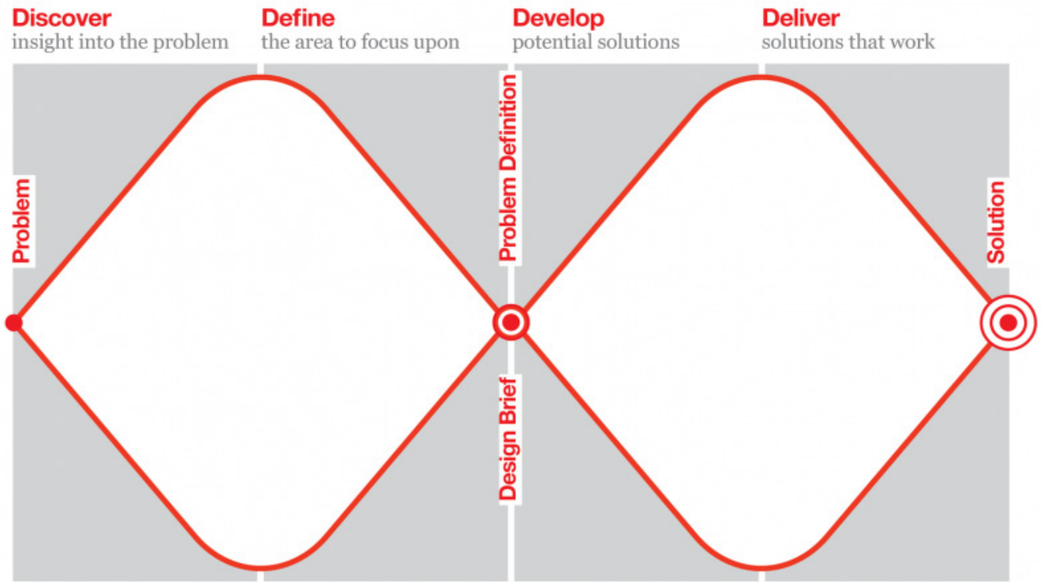


FIGURE 2: THE DOUBLE DIAMOND DESIGN PROCESS (Design Council, 2019)

METHODS

A range of methods, encompassing both primary research (expert interviews, workbooks, participant interviews, and designed experiences) and secondary research (literature review) were leveraged in this investigation. See Figure 3 to see how, together, these methods make up a modified double diamond methodology.

Literature Review

An extensive review of the literature was conducted to gain an understanding of the history of marriage and long-term romantic relationships, and synthesize research across a range of disciplines (e.g. psychology, sociology, anthropology, and evolutionary biology) on the state of relationships today.

Timeline

A timeline was used to help synthesize the various eras within the history of marriage.

STEEPV Signal Capture

STEEPV is a horizon scanning tool that was used to identify signals of change and synthesize emerging trends across six dimensions - Social, Technological, Economic, Environmental, Political, and Values - that might have an effect on the future of long-term relationships.

Expert Interviews

Semi-structured interviews ranging from 0.5-1 hour in length were completed with 11 experts in the field of romantic relationships. This group of experts included psychotherapists, relationship researchers, dating coaches, a break-up coach, a psychiatrist, a wedding officiant, and a service designer. The full list of experts interviewed can be found in Appendix A.

Workbook

The workbooks were designed as a type of cultural probe, intended to bring participants' awareness to their relationship so that they would be primed to dive deeper during the subsequent interview. The workbooks consisted of five 10-20 minute creative activities that prompted reflection on the participant's relationship, to be completed over five days. They were distributed to 25 participants (22 in Toronto, two in Hamilton, and one in New York City).

Participant Interviews

Participants were engaged in 1-1.5 hour one-on-one interviews after completing their workbook. The interviews were designed to incorporate creative and interactive elements to break up their traditional question/response format. 23 interviews were conducted in-person, and two were conducted online to accommodate participant needs.

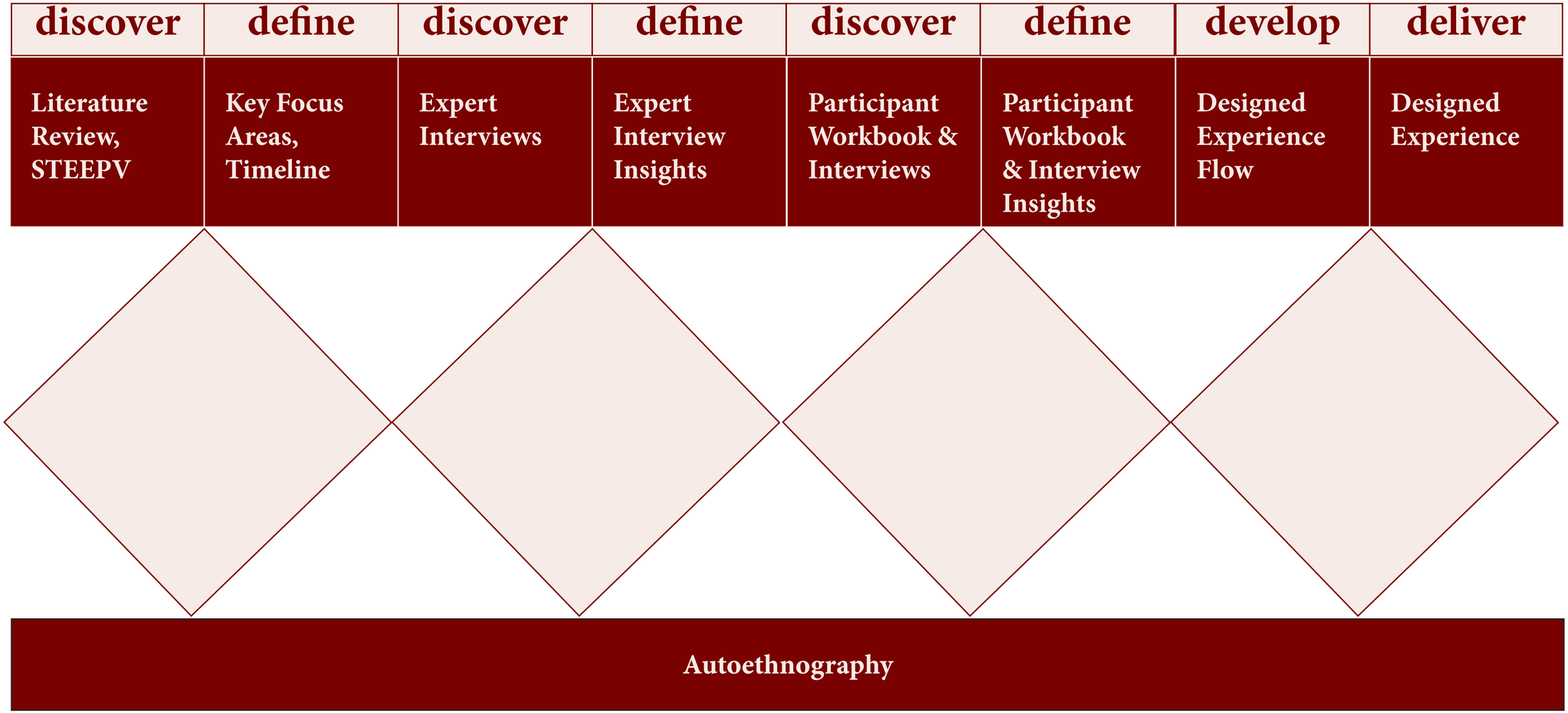
Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a form of self-reflection and writing that explores the researcher's personal experiences and connects this autobiographical story to a wider cultural-political-and social meanings and understandings (Collins Dictionary, 2019). As someone in a long-term relationship myself, much of what I explore in this MRP is personally relevant to me and my own relationship. Many of my written reflections informed the process and outcomes of this MRP, and one is shared within this document (See pg 142).

Designed Experiences

Concepts for three designed experiences were prototyped based on the insights that emerged from the earlier phases of this project. Although the intention was to build out and test all three concepts with interested participants, only one of these experiences was able to be tested within the timeline of this MRP. The concept for the tested experience is featured in the Designed Experience section meanwhile the second and third concepts are detailed in Appendices E and F respectively.

FIGURE 3: PROJECT METHODOLOGY (MODIFIED DOUBLE DIAMOND)



chapter

2

WHERE HAVE WE BEEN?

- The Evolution of Pairbonding
- The History of Marriage
- Patriarchy and the History of Marriage
- White Supremacy and the History of Marriage

THE HISTORY OF MARRIAGE

A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots. Let's put down some roots.

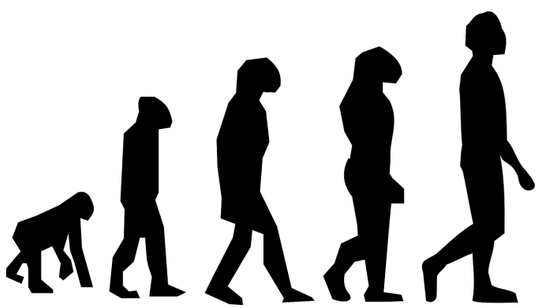
To fully appreciate the state of long-term relationships today, it is useful to understand the history of long-term relationships and how where we are today has been influenced by where we have been in the past. For the sake of maintaining a reasonable scope, the scope of this analysis - and therefore any conclusions that may be drawn from it - is limited largely to Western, North American societies.

WHEN AND WHY DID PAIRBONDING EVOLVE?

In biology, pair-bonding is defined as an exclusive union with a single mate at any one time: a monogamous relationship (Merriam-Webster, 2019). It is hypothesized that pair-bonding evolved in humans, specifically *Homo erectus*, approximately two million years ago (Fletcher, Simpson, Campbell & Overall, 2015).

Monogamy is rare in mammals. It is not normally genetically advantageous for a male to remain with one female when he can copulate with several and pass more of his genes onto future generations. As such, males of most species try to accumulate a harem. It takes very special circumstances before a male will travel with a single mate and help her defend her young. From a female's perspective, pair-bonding is not normally adaptive either. A male can be more trouble than he is worth. Females of many species prefer to live with female relatives and copulate with visitors. If a female needs a male for protection, they travel in a mixed group and copulate with several males. In other words, a host of ecological and biological conditions must be present in the right proportions before the benefits of monogamy exceed its costs, making it the best - or only - alternative for both males and females of a species (Fisher, 1992).

For humans, the perfect storm came with the evolution of bi-pedalism (i.e. walking on two feet, instead of four). Bi-pedalism also involved surviving by walking, collecting, scavenging, and moving on; nuts, berries, fruit, and meat were spread across the grass (Fisher, 1992). As a result, males could not collect or defend enough resources to attract a harem. Even if a male could attract a group of females to follow him, it would have been difficult for him to protect them from wild animals stalking the herd and other males vying to steal them. Under normal circumstances polygyny could not work. However, a male could walk beside a single female (within the large multi-male/multi-female group), guard her during estrus[3] from other males, and help her raise her young. In other words, monogamy (Fisher, 1992).



[3]the period of maximum sexual receptivity of the female.

The female's predicament was even more compelling. With the evolution of bi-pedalism, females became burdened by their young. When they had walked exclusively on all four limbs, the newborn clung to the mother's abdomen. Then, as the infant aged, it rode on mother's back as the female ambled along - unimpeded by her child. But as they adapted to life largely on the ground, females began to regularly walk erect. Now they had to carry the infant in their arms instead of on their backs, which significantly impeded their ability to hunt, gather, and protect themselves and their young (Fisher, 1992). They began to need extra protection and extra food until they weaned the child, or they or their offspring would not survive. So as pair-bonding became the only alternative for females, and a viable option for males, the brain circuitry for intense romantic attraction and a sense of attachment to a partner evolved (Fisher, 1992; Rooker & Gavrilets, 2016).

MARRIAGE IN THE PRE-HISTORIC ERA

From 80 000 years ago to 10 000BCE, humans organized in hunter-gatherer societies, living in groups of a few dozen people, made up of several family units. They lived a nomadic lifestyle given that the amount of food available was directly affected by what the environment could feasibly support. The groups were egalitarian and worked together to find enough food and build shelter for survival (Groeneveld, 2016).

Having a flexible, gender-based division of labour within a mated pair was an important tool for human survival. One partner, typically the female, focused on the surer task of finding food through foraging or digging. Meanwhile the other partner, typically the male, could try for the less predictable but more plentiful gains of hunting (Coontz, 2005). Yet, this division of labour did not make nuclear families self-sufficient. Collective hunting and gathering, and sharing the daily fare remained vital to survival.

Given that the outcomes of hunting and gathering varied on a daily basis, the surest way for individuals to minimize the risk of not having enough to eat on a bad day was not to save what they gathered or killed on good days for later use by their "own" nuclear family, but rather to pool and divide the whole harvest among the entire group every day (Coontz, 2005).

One of marriage's[4] crucial functions in the prehistoric era was its ability to forge networks of cooperation and resource sharing beyond the immediate family group or local band. Bands needed to establish friendly relations with eachother so they could travel more freely and safely in pursuit of game, fish, plants, and water holes or move as the seasons changed. When people married into new groups, it turned strangers into relatives and enemies into allies. Marriage was one of several strategies including gift giving, interband sharing, and periodic large gatherings for ritual occasions, that hunter-gatherers used to create ties of kinship with other groups and defuse tensions. It was an especially powerful way of binding groups together because it produced children who had relatives in both camps (Coontz, 2005).

MARRIAGE FUNCTIONS

survival, forging networks of cooperation and resource sharing beyond local groups / band; a way to create a circle of reciprocal obligations and connections.

PRIORITIZES

the group / community / band

KEY INSIGHTS / MOTIVATIONS

there was no use in or incentive for hoarding resources; sharing was vital for survival.

[4]Although little is known about marriage rituals in the prehistoric era, research shows that people deliberately sought partners beyond their immediate family, and that they were likely connected to a wider network of groups within which mates were chosen, in order to avoid becoming inbred. Furthermore, the symbolism, complexity, and time invested in the objects and jewellery found buried with the remains also suggests that these societies may have developed rules, ceremonies, and rituals to accompany the exchange of mates between groups, which perhaps foreshadowed modern marriage ceremonies (Sikora et al., 2017).

MARRIAGE DURING THE AGRICULTURAL REVOLUTION (10 000BC - 1700s)

The agricultural revolution, which began in 10 000BC greatly influenced the role of marriage.

ENVIRONMENTAL

The agricultural revolution was catalyzed by many factors, including the end of the last Ice Age. As the land warmed, the larger animals died out and were replaced by smaller animals, leaving groups to hunt smaller game and more of it. Meanwhile, the changing land created conditions for greater plant fertility. Domesticating plants and animals became feasible, and more efficient land use (edible calories per acre) meant a nomadic lifestyle was no longer necessary (National Geographic, 2019).

TECHNOLOGICAL

The introduction of the plow, which required significant strength to operate is credited with designating farm labour as men's work and catalyzing the sexual double standard where women were inferior to men (Coontz, 2005).

ECONOMIC

The increase in men's control of economic resources came with a decrease in women's social and sexual power. The woman's place was in the home, serving the man and raising the kids. This new sedentary lifestyle reinforced permanent monogamy where husband and wife were tied to each other and their land. Furthermore, the need to protect property and landholdings resulted in increased warfare, which ultimately fuels a system of patriarchy where men hold more power than women (Coontz, 2005).

POLITICAL

Robust food surpluses enabled by the Agricultural Revolution meant that not everyone needed to produce food, which gave way for specialization in roles (e.g. soldier, trader, bureaucrat). The elites learned to read and write, which increased their ability to produce more goods and services. This specialization led to social stratification, and the emergence of rank and hierarchy. The political elites formed a centralized government and societies that were once driven by egalitarian values were now chasing social status, political power, and capital preservation (Coontz, 2005).

As kin groups began to assert permanent rights over territory and resources, some families amassed more goods and power than others. The wealthier families lost interest in sharing resources, pooling labour, or developing alliances with poorer families. With the growth of inequality in society, the definition of an acceptable marriage narrowed. Wealthy kin groups refused to marry with poorer ones, and both men and women faced greater restrictions on the behaviour (Coontz, 2005). Men, like women, could be forced to marry women chosen by their parents. But because women could bear a child with an "impure" bloodline, their sexual behaviour tended to be more strictly regulated, and females were subject to severe penalties for adultery or premarital sex. Distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate children became sharper and wealthy families disavowed any children born to couples whose marriage they had not authorized (Coontz, 2005).

SOCIAL

The family was the central social institution that did the work of governments and markets today (e.g. producing food and shelter, protecting themselves and their property, educating children, tending to the sick, building furniture, etc.). Living alone was a great economic and physical challenge, and for many millennia, people married because an individual simply could not survive trying to do everything on their own (Coontz, 2005).

A 2015 study has shown that in contemporary hunter-gatherer societies, men and women tend to have equal influence on where their group lives and who they live with. In fact, sexual equality may have proved an evolutionary advantage for early human societies, as it would have fostered wider-ranging social networks and closer cooperation between unrelated individuals. The findings challenge the idea that sexual equality is a recent invention, suggesting that it has been the norm for humans for most of our evolutionary history. Sexual inequality, it seems, is a phenomenon that took root with the emergence of agriculture (Dyble et al., 2015; Devlin, 2015).

MARRIAGE'S FUNCTIONS

the primary vehicle for accumulating, transmitting, and preserving wealth, status, property, and political influence

PRIORITIZES

the stability of the family (blood relations) over the needs and desires of individuals

KEY INSIGHTS / MOTIVATIONS

wealth preservation, political power, social status; "the more you have, the less I have" mindset, the idea of "ownership"

MARRIAGE DURING THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION (1790 - 1900)

ECONOMIC

As market economies strengthened, young people began to work for wages outside their homes and became less dependent on inheriting land or wealth from their parents for a start in life (Coontz, 2005).

ENVIRONMENTAL

Many left their farms and families and moved to cities in search of employment, feeding massive urbanization (Coontz, 2005).

POLITICAL

In the late eighteenth century, the French and American revolutions challenged political absolutism (i.e. unlimited and unquestioned centralized authority), weakening the patriarchal model upon which marriage had been based. Simultaneously, the Enlightenment-era worldview championed individual rights and insisted that social relationships, including those between men and women, be organized on the basis of love, reason, and justice rather than force. Marriage came to be seen as a freely chosen private contract between two individuals that should not be too closely regulated by church and state. In many ways, the first inklings of feminism and the fight for women's rights began in the 1790s (Coontz, 2005).

Although a conservative reaction to the revolutions prompted American and French legislators to roll back the political freedoms granted to women and children at the height of revolutionary activity, gender relations had still shifted in significant way. It was harder to dismiss calls to extend equal rights to women when people no longer believed that every relationship had to have a ruler and a subject (Coontz, 2005).

SOCIAL

The fear that marriage based on love would produce rampant individualism, coupled with a sharp increase in out-of-wedlock births among the working class, led to the emergence of two significant ideologies that influenced marital relationships in this era:

- **the separate spheres doctrine.** It asserted that biological differences between men and women dictate that they should occupy different roles. Specifically, the male breadwinner/protector should occupy the harsher public sphere of politics and the economy, meanwhile the female homemaker should occupy the more compassionate private sphere of the home. The family was seen as a private retreat for the virtues and emotions threatened by the aggressive and competitive spirit of commerce; a place where men could escape from the stress of business and recover their humanity. The doctrine of separate spheres claimed that husband and wife were different but equal (i.e. women were not inferior to men), and both were unquestioned authorities in their spheres. This ideology forestalled the inherently individualistic nature of the "pursuit of happiness" by making men and women dependent upon each other and insisting that each gender was incomplete without marriage (Coontz, 2005).

- **an unprecedented emphasis on female sexual purity and chastity.** Women were considered asexual beings whose purity should inspire all decent men to control their own sexual impulses and baser appetites. Putting women on a moral pedestal was a way of forestalling a resurgence of 1790s feminism without returning to traditional patriarchy (Coontz, 2005).

While this era saw the emergence of the love-based marriage ideal, the persisting social structure provided

few opportunities for spouses to interact in a friendly, informal manner, even once married. Husbands and wives existed in sex-segregated spheres, limiting how much spouses had in common and sharply restricting the time they spent together. The emphasis on sexual purity also restricted opportunities for physical intimacy between spouses and painted a picture of love that should have "a genteel, almost chaste flavor" (Coontz, 2005).

While these ideologies may be considered repressive in modern times, they had several positive consequences that allowed them to persist for as long as they did. They gave women a culturally approved way to say no to a husband's sexual demands (especially in a world where birth control was unreliable), made domestic violence much less acceptable, and provided an argument for improving welfare provisions and raising wages to support the single breadwinner household (Coontz, 2005).

VALUES

Mirroring the separate spheres doctrine, this era saw a clear separation between marketplace and government values (e.g independence, self-reliance, and ambition) and the values of the home (e.g. love, mutuality, companionship, selflessness, sacrifice, and self-denial). Family was no longer a microcosm of the greater society, but rather a counterweight to it (Finkel, 2017).

MARRIAGE'S FUNCTIONS

love, companionship, mutuality, a sense of "completion" through accessing the opposite sphere

PRIORITIZES

the nuclear family, the couple

KEY INSIGHTS / MOTIVATIONS

men and women are different but equal; fear of "rampant individualism" and the "chaos" that might ensue from granting equal rights; Goldilocks approach = "not too oppressive, not too free"

MARRIAGE DURING THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY (1900 - 1960)

The notion of love-based marriage continued into the first half of the twentieth century, which in itself had many distinct sub-eras.

1900-1929: THE SEXUALIZATION OF MARRIAGE

The steady rise in women's education and employment[5] between 1900 and 1920, combined with an easing of social restrictions, allowed men and women to begin interacting casually in many of the same spheres. An explosion of public commercial space (e.g. dance halls, carnivals, theaters, and restaurants) allowed courtship to become more uninhibited than before, and dating culture spread quickly. In stark contrast (and possibly as a reaction) to the sexual repressiveness of nineteenth-century marriage, sex became the number one topic of conversation (Coontz, 2005). Psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud spread his theories about the power of the sexual instinct, rates of pre-marital sex rose, and the stigma attached to sex outside of marriage faded in many circles. The budding awareness of female sexual desire was embodied by the flappers of the 1920s, and after marriage a woman was expected to "hold her husband not by her "quiet goodness" but by her active sexuality" (Coontz, 2005).

While the attitude towards LGBTQ+ communities was hardly approving, "there was a surprising level of tolerance for everything from discreet clubs in small communities to openly gay dances and parades in larger cities". The new focus on sexual pleasure raised the stakes for a successful marriage and increasingly, people filed for divorce because their marriages did not provide love, companionship, and emotional intimacy (Coontz, 2005).

As marriage gained new prominence as adults' most important social relationship, this era saw the rejection of close same-sex friendships and extended family ties in favour of prioritizing marital intimacy (Coontz, 2005).

MARRIAGE'S FUNCTIONS

love, companionship, sexual pleasure

PRIORITIZES

the married couple

KEY INSIGHTS / MOTIVATIONS

sexual radicalism in reaction to sexual repression; marital intimacy > same-sex friendships and extended family ties; personal marital freedom

The contraction from the sexual radicalism of the 1920s came in several forms.

- Most people still believed that women should retire from work after a few years, and this became possible for more families as men's wages rose in the unprecedented prosperity of the 1920s. Furthermore, given job segregation and pay discrimination against women, there were few incentives for wives to take paid work if they did not have to. The fact that women were still economically dependent on men and needed to marry in order to survive was the biggest obstacle to making personal happiness and marital freedom the most important goal of marriage (Coontz, 2005).

- Many American states tried to contain the "excesses" of personal marital freedom by enacting laws prohibiting interracial marriage (Coontz, 2005).

- By the 1930s, the openness to homosexual subcultures had vanished (Coontz, 2005).

- In an attempt to combat rising divorce rates and promote "togetherness" in marriage, marriage counselling became popular in the 1930s (Coontz, 2005).

Perhaps the biggest contraction of all came in the form of the Great Depression.

1930s: THE GREAT DEPRESSION

Catalyzed by the 1929 stock market collapse, rising unemployment shifted attention away from social and sexual issues to questions of survival. The Great Depression accelerated the influx of married women into the workforce. However unlike the 1920s, almost no one saw women's work in the 1930s as liberating (Coontz, 2005). They often had to take on low-paying jobs, and their unpaid workload at home increased as they were less able to afford the conveniences of the 1920s. To make things worse, there were fewer opportunities to call on family ties, which had been weakened by industrialization (Coontz, 2005).

Governments used positive measures, like the Social Security Act of 1935 in the U.S., to bolster male breadwinner marriages. It implied, for the first time, that the federal government was responsible for the welfare of individual families. However, this safety net exempted agricultural and seasonal workers, who were disproportionately African American and Latino (Coontz, 2005).

MARRIAGE'S FUNCTIONS

survival

PRIORITIZES

the nuclear family

KEY INSIGHTS / MOTIVATIONS

government takes responsibility for the welfare of individual families; work to make ends meet.

[5]These advances in women's work and employment were catalyzed in part by women getting the right to vote in the U.S. in 1920, and across several Canadian provinces starting in 1916.

1939-1945: WORLD WAR II

During WWII, with the men gone to war and an increased demand for war materials, an increasing number of women joined the workforce - this time on a much more financially rewarding and culturally approved basis than in the past. Women worked in jobs that had previously been unthinkable for their sex, and the war opened up unprecedented opportunities for African American women, who had remained pigeonholed in menial and domestic work during the economic expansion of the 1920s (Coontz, 2005). Initially, women saw their work as temporary, just for the duration of the war, and not for personal fulfillment. Although most expected to leave the workforce when the war ended, many women came to enjoy the work and its economic benefits, and wanted to remain at their jobs after the war (Coontz, 2005).

Prolonged spousal separations during the war, combined with a renewed sense of female independence, resulted in a short-lived spike in divorce from 1945-1946. Ultimately, however, the end of the war also brought a renewed enthusiasm for marriage, female homemaking, and the male breadwinner family (Coontz, 2005).

MARRIAGE'S FUNCTIONS

patriotism

PRIORITIZES

the nation

KEY INSIGHTS / MOTIVATIONS

women's participation in the workforce was encouraged out of necessity, as men were away at war

1945-1960: THE GOLDEN AGE OF MARRIAGE

The two decades following WWII are often referred to as the Golden Age of Marriage. The 1950s saw men and women double down on the idea of separate spheres, seeking stability after the Great Depression and WWII (i.e. 16 years of uninterrupted turmoil). Federal policy initiatives provided economic opportunities for postwar husbands and their families, including tuition loans, cheap life insurance for servicemen, government-guaranteed mortgages, and tax advantages for married couples (Coontz, 2005). These initiatives incentivized the male breadwinner / female homemaker model of marriage, making women more economically dependent on men. TV became the dominant form of entertainment and depicted the lives of middle class homemaker-breadwinner families. This shift was helped by the rise of the mass consumer economy and television's role in equating consumer goods (e.g. the refrigerator, washing machine, etc.), with family happiness (Coontz, 2005).

"These young men and women had also grown up during the Great Depression, when family life was particularly turbulent. They valued a stable home."

- HELEN FISHER, ANTHROPOLOGIST

Remarkably, the golden era of marriage crossed socio-economic and ethnic lines. Although the ideal of the male breadwinner marriage had already spread beyond the middle classes by the 1920s, it had been unattainable for many farming families and the majority of the working class. However, from the 1940s through the 1960s, the federal subsidies and the rapid rise of real wages across the population moved millions of working-class Americans into middle-class occupations and lifestyles (Coontz, 2005). Many working class families could now afford to live in single family homes, the vast majority of which were being built in the suburbs. Suburbanization further reinforced the social isolation of the nuclear family (Coontz, 2005).

With the end of the war, most men and women rushed to marry and start families. The age of marriage fell and the rates of marriage rose. Young couples also had babies at much higher rates than their parents and grandparents, and 1957 marked the peak of the baby boom (Coontz, 2005).

MARRIAGE'S FUNCTIONS

love, companionship, mutuality

PRIORITIZES

the nuclear family

KEY INSIGHTS / MOTIVATIONS

stability after two decades of turmoil; riding the wave of economic prosperity; being the "perfect family"; near universal acceptance of breadwinner/homemaker model of marriage and the primacy of the nuclear family; consumer revolution equated more stuff to more happiness and painted marriage as a gateway to "the good life".

1945-1960: THE GOLDEN AGE OF MARRIAGE

"It took more than 150 years to establish the love-based, male breadwinner marriage as the dominant model in North America and Western Europe. It took less than 25 years to dismantle it."

- STEPHANIE COONTZ, HISTORIAN

Between 1960-1980, marriage lost its role as the central institution that governed young people's sexual lives, their assumption of adult roles, their job choices, and their transition into parenthood (Coontz, 2005).

The social movements of the 1960s and early 1970s, along with fundamental changes in women's work roles and reproductive rights, brought on a series of far-reaching transformations including:

- **1964:** The Civil Rights Act of 1964 ended segregation in public places and banned employment discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex or national origin (History.com, 2010).
- **1967:** The U.S. Supreme Court ruled that marriage "across racial lines" was legal in all states (Coontz, 2005).
- **1968-1978:** A series of U.S. Supreme Court rulings expanded the rights of nonmarital children and unwed mothers, breaking the hold marriage had over the legitimacy of children and contributing to the increase in out-of-wedlock births (Coontz, 2005).
- **1968:** The Fair Housing Act was enacted, preventing housing discrimination based on race, sex, national origin and religion (History.com, 2018).
- **1969:** The Stonewall Riots - a series of spontaneous, violent demonstrations by members of the LGBTQ+ community against a police raid at the Stonewall Inn - catalyzed the gay rights movement (History.com, 2017).
- **1970s:** Legislators across North America and Western Europe repealed all remaining "head and master"[6] laws and redefined marriage as an association of two equal individuals rather than as the union of two distinct and specialized roles (Coontz, 2005).
- **1970s:** No-fault divorce laws were enacted (i.e. anyone who wanted a divorce could get one) and the divorce rate more than doubled between 1966 and 1979 (Coontz, 2005).
- **1973:** The U.S. Supreme Court ruled that women had the right to choose abortion (Coontz, 2005).

6 "head and master" laws are those permitting husbands to have final say regarding all household decisions and jointly owned property without their wives' consent or knowledge.

WOMEN IN THE WORKFORCE

The expanding economy of the 1960s needed women, married and unmarried, enough to offer them a living wage. As women saw more opportunities in the workplace before and after marriage, their aspirations grew. More women postponed marriage to complete college. Their frustration at the remaining limits on their progress paved the way for a broad-based women's rights movement that would further accelerate women's entry into the workforce and higher education, on better terms (Coontz, 2005).

Other, less favourable forces that pushed women into (or kept them in) the workforce include the increasing economic pressure on families in the wake of the international recession of 1973 and surging home prices in the 1970s (Coontz, 2005). As women spent more of their lives at work, they became more likely to define having a job as an important part of their identity. By the turn of the century, most women no longer worked solely for the needs of their families. A woman's decision to work depended less on her husband's wage and more on her own earning capacity (Coontz, 2005).

As more wives entered the workforce, a new market opened up for household conveniences like wash-and-wear clothes and prepared foods, which in turn made it easier for them to participate and stay in the workforce. These same conveniences made it possible for men to live bachelor lives after leaving their parental homes (Coontz, 2005).

THE SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE REVOLUTIONS

The first birth control pill became commercially available in 1960, giving women the opportunity to separate sex from childbirth and lifting the fear of unwanted pregnancy that had structured their lives for centuries. Premarital sex became the norm, and birth rates in the 1970s fell even lower than they had been during the Depression (Coontz, 2005).

The increase in approval of pre-marital sex and technological advances like in-vitro fertilization meant that marriage was no longer a precondition for having a baby (Gadoua and Larson, 2014).

SHIFTING LIVING ARRANGEMENTS

Increase in unmarried cohabitation

In the second half of the twentieth century, living together became a normal stage in courtship, and for some, living together has become an alternative to marriage. This has been further enabled by domestic partnership laws in most Western countries, which grant unmarried couples the same insurance benefits, inheritances, and other legal privileges as married partners (Coontz, 2005).

Increase in solitary living

The large pool of single youth living outside of the parental home, along with the extension of the lifespan, contributed to an explosion of solitary living in Western societies. Never before have so many people lived alone, and never before have unmarried people, living alone or in couples, had the same rights as married adults (Coontz, 2005).

Single men and women today also exercise much more personal discretion about whether and when to get married. Marriage used to be the gateway to adulthood and respectability, and the best way for people to maximize their resources and pool labour. This is no longer the case. While marriage still allows two people to merge resources, divide tasks, and accumulate more capital than they could as singles, it is not the only way they can invest in their future. In the words of European demographer Anton Kuijsten, marriage, which used to be "the obligatory entrée" during the 1950s, "has become the optional dessert." (Coontz, 2005)

"...today's singles are ushering into vogue a long pre-commitment courtship process, what I call slow love. They want to know every detail about a potential partner before they tie the knot, slow love. This may be adaptive behavior in an age when many of us have too much property, making divorce potentially devastating, and most of us know how to protect ourselves from pregnancy and divorce...For the past 10000 years, marriage was the beginning of a partnership; today it's the finale."

-HELEN FISHER, ANTHROPOLOGIST

THE GRAND GENDER CONVERGENCE

The second-wave feminist movement (1960s-1980s) hastened the transition from the doctrine and practice of separate spheres to the grand gender convergence. As the name suggests, the converging roles of men and women - in labour force participation, paid hours of work, hours of work at home, occupations, and education - mean that today's men and women largely inhabit a single sphere[7]. The relative lack of role differentiation in today's marriages means that spouses must engage in extensive and frequent communication and coordination.

The merging of the separate spheres was implied in the popular second-wave feminist notion that "the personal is political." In other words, how we interact in private, and in our intimate relationships, has political implications, and therefore the nature of those interactions should be examined in the public sphere (Goldhill, 2018).

MODERN VALUES

The values that govern people's behaviours and attitudes around relationships today are influenced by many of the cultural shifts that took place in the second half of the twentieth century. The shift from obedience to authority to autonomy and voluntary cooperation meant that acceptance of singlehood, unmarried cohabitation, childlessness, divorce, and out-of-wedlock childbearing increased everywhere in North America and Western Europe (Coontz, 2005).

These values were further reinforced by the emergence of existentialism, a new philosophical-psychological movement, which focuses on the lived experience of each individual person and is "centrally concerned with rediscovering the living person amid the compartmentalization and dehumanization of modern culture" (May, 2015).

Existentialism, in turn, was accompanied by the rise of humanistic psychology which asserts that humans are inherently good, and driven toward personal growth. It concurs that the successful pursuit of self-actualization depends on our relationships with significant others and their ability to help us develop and grow (Finkel et al., 2017).

MARRIAGE'S FUNCTIONS

self-fulfillment, self-expression, intimacy, fairness, emotional gratification, liberation, authenticity, personal growth, self-discovery; genuine friendship between near equals; foster spouses' personal growth

PRIORITIZES

the individual / the self

KEY INSIGHTS / MOTIVATIONS

autonomy and voluntary cooperation > obedience to authority; individual liberty > collective discipline, human diversity > group conformity; individual autonomy > state authority; self-discovery and being good to oneself > self-denial and self-sacrifice; expressive individualism

[7]While there has been a coming together of men's and women's roles, it is important to note that on average, women are still paid less than men for equivalent work and bear a disproportionate burden of household and emotional labour (Schieder & Gould, 2016).

TABLE 2: HISTORY OF MARRIAGE SUMMARY

HISTORY OF MARRIAGE SUMMARY

	MARRIAGE FUNCTIONS	PRIORITIZES	KEY INSIGHTS / MOTIVATIONS
Pre-historic Era	• Survival • Forging networks of cooperation and resource sharing beyond local groups / band • A way to create a circle of reciprocal obligations and connections	The group / community / band	• There was no use in / incentive for hoarding resources; sharing was vital for survival
Agricultural Era (10000BC-1700s)	• The primary vehicle for accumulating, transmitting, and preserving wealth, status, property, and political influence.	The stability of the family (blood relations) > the needs / desires of individuals	• Wealth preservation, political power, social status • "The more you have, the less I have" mindset • The idea of "ownership"
Sentimentalization of Marriage (1790-1900)	• Love • Companionship • Mutuality	The nuclear family, the couple	• Men and women are different but equal • Fear of "rampant individualism" and the "chaos" that might ensue from granting equal rights • Goldilocks approach = "not too oppressive, not too free"
Sexualization of Marriage (1900-1929)	• Love • Companionship • Sexual pleasure	The couple	• Sexual radicalism in reaction to sexual repression • Marital intimacy over same-sex friendships and extended family ties • Personal marital freedom
The Great Depression (1930s)	• Economic survival	The nuclear family	• Government takes responsibility for the welfare of individual families • Both men and women work to make ends meet
World War II (1939-1945)	• Patriotism	The nation	• Women's participation in the workforce was encouraged out of necessity, as men were away at war
Golden Age of Marriage (1945-1960)	• Love • Companionship • Mutuality	The nuclear family	• Stability after two decades of turmoil • Riding the wave of economic prosperity • Being the "perfect family" • Near universal acceptance of breadwinner/homemaker model of marriage and the primacy of the nuclear family • Consumer revolution: more stuff = more happiness, marriage as a gateway to "the good life"
Self-Expressive Era of Marriage (1965- present)	• Self-discovery, expression, and fulfillment • Intimacy • Emotional gratification • Liberation • Genuine friendship between near equals • Foster spouses' personal growth	The individual / the self	• Autonomy and voluntary cooperation > obedience to authority • Individual liberty > collective discipline • Human diversity > group conformity • Individual autonomy > state authority • Self-discovery and being good to oneself > self-denial and self-sacrifice • Expressive individualism

INSIGHTS FROM THE HISTORY OF MARRIAGE

What patterns are evident in the history of marriage and long-term romantic relationships?

1 Who marriage prioritizes has become more individualistic and less collectivistic over time.

What started a survival strategy to build cooperation between hunter-gatherer *groups*, evolved into an alliance for wealth preservation between *families*, then an access point for love and intimacy between *two people*, and most recently into an enabler of personal growth and self-expression for *individuals*. As such, the question of who or what marriages and/or long-term romantic relationships are prioritizing at any given time is an important one to ask before embarking on relationship design.

2 Multidimensional forces shape relationships.

While marriage and long-term relationships may fall under the social sphere, their form, function, and trajectory are greatly influenced by shifts in the environment (e.g. the last Ice Age), technology (e.g. the invention of birth control), economy (e.g. The Great Depression), politics (e.g. WWII), and values (e.g. the rise of existentialism). As such, relationship design should be approached with an awareness of these interconnected spheres, and in anticipation of changes within and across all of them.

3 Ideological overcompensation in movements.

The history of marriage reveals a tendency among those who are advocating for a new set of ideas to exaggerate their attack on the status quo in order to shake things up and then to back off in favour of more modest goals. This happened in the sexual radicalism of the 1920s, as well as in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Coontz, 2005). An awareness of this overcompensation is useful in grounding relationship design within a broader timeline of a cultural shift, rather than in a peak moment of a movement.

4 The legacy of patriarchy and white supremacy are ever-present in the history of marriage.

However, historical accounts have a tendency to not call them by their names. The following sections spotlight specific consequences of patriarchy and white supremacy in the history of marriage.

PATRIARCHY AND THE HISTORY OF MARRIAGE

How have the values, norms, and systems of patriarchy shaped the history of marriage?

Patriarchy is most commonly understood as a form of social organization in which cultural and institutional beliefs and patterns accept, support, and reproduce the domination of women and younger men by older or more powerful men (Levy, 2007). In this sense, everyone, regardless of gender or sex is subject to the harmful consequences of patriarchy at some point in their lives. In the words of couples therapist Terry Real, "patriarchy is the water that we all swim in and we're the fish". Patriarchal culture defines traditional gender roles, and paints the essence of masculinity as contempt for the feminine. It asserts that what it means to be a "man" is to NOT be a girl and not be feminine (Caprino, 2018).

Unsurprisingly, historical accounts focus little on the experiences of males that are not aligned with the patriarchy's definition of masculinity: strong, independent, unemotional, logical, and confident. However, this does not mean these experiences did not exist.

- Industrialization resulted in often grim employment and living conditions for the poor and working classes. The brutal working conditions and the piecemeal approach to production within factories meant that many men were doing monotonous and unfulfilling work. Furthermore, the source of a husband's familial authority changed from land ownership (stable and absolute) to wage labour (neither stable nor absolute), which threatened men's sense of masculinity (Coontz, 2005).

- With the demise of political absolutism, male identity was precariously poised between not being able to assert supremacy at all and being too inclined to assert it by force (Coontz, 2005).

- Research shows that men did indeed become more domestic during the 1950s. Husbands and wives relaxed gender stereotypes in their division of grocery shopping, garden work, and household repairs. The majority of couples aspired to mutual decision making in the home, and nearly a third of couples claimed that they regularly met that ideal (Weiss, 2000; Coontz, 2005).

- Many 1950s men did not view male breadwinning as a source of power but as a burdensome responsibility made worthwhile by their love for their families. They remarked on how wonderful it felt to be able to give their children things their families had been unable to afford when they were young (Rutherdale, 1999; Coontz, 2005).

- In his 1955 best seller *Must You Conform?*, Robert Lindner wrote about the experience of the alienated breadwinner. He wrote that when a man tried to live up to all of society's expectations at work and at home, he became "a slave in mind and body...a lost creature without a separate identity" (Lindner, 1971).

"The patriarchy has no gender."

- AUDRE LORDE

Calling attention to these experiences is an important step in acknowledging that the patriarchal culture did and does not optimize for men, but rather for domination. Similarly, traditional gender roles were built for stability, not intimacy. According to Real,

"leading men and women into intimacy is synonymous with leading them beyond patriarchy." (Real, 2018)

As such, designing relationships to meet the expectations of modern-day couples involves redefining the relationship between masculinity and femininity while acknowledging its patriarchal origins.

WHITE SUPREMACY AND THE HISTORY OF MARRIAGE

How have the values, norms, and systems of white supremacy shaped the history of marriage?

White Supremacy refers to the "political, economic and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings" (Newkirk, 2017).

Similar to the system of patriarchy, many historical accounts of marriage have limited coverage of the experiences of people of colour, particularly the experiences that call into question the system of white supremacy. Some of these experiences include:

- In nineteenth century Europe and North America, the establishment of a male breadwinner/female homemaker family in the middle and upper classes often required large sections of the lower class - which disproportionately consisted of people of colour - to be *unable* to do so. Women who could not survive on their husbands' wages worked as domestic servants in other people's homes and provided cheap factory labour for the production of new consumer goods. Without their work, middle-class homemakers would have had little time to "uplift" their homes and tend to the emotional needs of their husbands and children (Coontz, 2005).

- Television content in the 1950s reflected a universal picture of family life in which dads went off to work and moms took care of the home. In reality, African American wives and mothers were much more likely than whites to work outside the home, even while their children were young, because their husbands were seldom paid enough to support a family (Coontz, 2005).

- When governments used positive measures to shore up male breadwinner marriages after the Great Depression, the social security safety net exempted agricultural and seasonal workers, who were disproportionately African American and Latino (Coontz, 2005).

- After World War II in the U.S., affirmative action policies provided economic opportunities for postwar husbands and their families, including free tuition and cheap mortgages. However, these policies primarily benefited white men. African American veterans faced such widespread discrimination in housing and education that their ability to reap the full benefits of these policies was limited (Coontz, 2005).

In acknowledging the presence of white supremacy in the history of marriage and the inequities it has and continues to perpetuate, it becomes possible to design with an awareness of its influence.

chapter

3

WHERE MIGHT WE BE HEADED?

- The Mount Maslow Model of Marriage in America
- Unpacking Maslow, Uncovering Myths
- Relationships as a Vehicle for Self-Transcendence
- The Rise of Spirituality
- Implications of Rising Spirituality for Long-Term Romantic Relationships

TOWARD AN INTEGRATED MODEL OF MARRIAGE

How might we conceptualize the past, present, and future of relationships within a unified framework?

THE MOUNT MASLOW MODEL OF MARRIAGE

While there are many models, frameworks, and theories that seek to explain the relationship dynamics between couples, there are few that 1) integrate knowledge that exists across disciplines about relationships and 2) explain how relationship dynamics have shifted throughout the course of history. One such model, which has shaped the trajectory of this MRP, is the Mount Maslow model of marriage in America (Finkel, Hui, Carswell, & Larson, 2014). Proposed by social psychologist Eli J. Finkel and his colleagues, it asserts that:

- The primary functions of marriage have shifted markedly over time. Specifically, they have ascended Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which, from bottom to top, encompasses physiological needs, safety needs, belonging and love needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization needs.

- Over time, Americans have asked more of their marriage in terms of higher level needs (e.g. esteem, self-actualization) and less in terms of lower level needs (e.g. physiological and safety needs). Facilitating the fulfillment of higher level needs requires an increased investment of time and psychological resources to ensure that the two spouses develop a deep bond and profound insight into each other.

- Despite increasingly looking to their marriage to help them fulfill their higher level needs, Americans have, on average, reduced their investment of time and psychological resources in their marriage.

- Insufficient investment* to meet the emphasis on higher level needs has undermined spouses' marital quality and personal well-being. (*Those spouses who manage to invest sufficient resources experience especially strong marital quality and personal wellbeing, given the fulfillment of higher level needs).

- Spouses experiencing the adverse effects of this imbalance have three general options for improving or reversing these consequences: optimizing their usage of the resources that are available (optimize existing supply), increasing their investment of time and psychological resources in their marriage (increasing supply), and asking less of the marriage in terms of facilitating their higher needs (decreasing demand).

These concepts are brought to life through a powerful analogy. Finkel et al. reconceptualized Maslow's hierarchy as a mountain - Mount Maslow - instead of as a pyramid (see Figure 4). As with any large mountain, the air gets thinner, and the oxygen sparser, at higher altitudes. As marriage in America has become increasingly oriented toward higher rather than lower altitudes on Mount Maslow, it has required greater oxygenation - greater nurturance regarding each other's emotional and psychological needs. If spouses expect their marriage to help them fulfill such needs but are unwilling or unable to invest the time and psychological energy (the "oxygen") required at that altitude, the marriage is at risk for suffocation. This can manifest as lethargy, conflict, and perhaps divorce. Individuals can reoxygenate their marriage (i.e. recalibrate the balance between what they are asking from their marriage and what they are investing in it) by optimizing the existing oxygen, investing in supplemental oxygen, and/or requiring less oxygen.

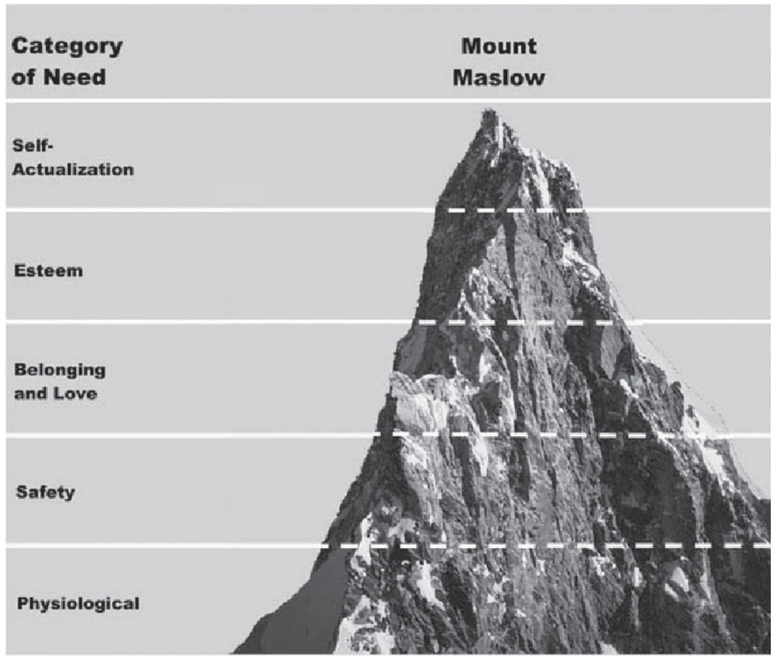
This Mount Maslow analogy drives home that the major change over time is not an overall increase in how much Americans expect from their marriage (more vs. less), but rather a dramatic shift in the substance of their expectations (from lower to higher altitudes). While this model emerged within an American context, its assertions are generalizable to the broader North American scope of this MRP.

Ultimately the Mount Maslow model holds that marriage, in short, has tilted toward an all-or-nothing state. The average marriage is getting worse, as increasing expectations of marriage paired with decreasing investment breed disappointment. At the same time, the best marriages are getting better as investment in meeting higher level needs results in increased fulfillment.

"I think a big issue," says an anonymous wife, "is that we both want to be taken care of at the end of the day, and neither of us has any energy to take care of the other."

(FINKEL, 2017)

FIGURE 4: THE MOUNT MASLOW MODEL OF MARRIAGE (Finkel et. al, 2014))



MOUNT MASLOW MODEL OF MARRIAGE

Higher level needs require more "oxygen" than lower level needs.

If the Mount Maslow Model of Marriage is based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs, what are some of the assumptions implied in this framework? Let's dig a little deeper.

Given that the Mount Maslow model is largely influenced by the seminal work of psychologist Abraham Maslow, I delved into some of his original texts to better understand his thinking. Surprisingly, this exploration revealed several myths around Maslow's hierarchy of needs, significantly altering the course of this investigation. They are as follows:

1 MYTH: Maslow created Maslow's pyramid.

Contrary to popular belief, Maslow never created a pyramid to represent the hierarchy of needs. In fact, the image of a pyramid was created in the process of bringing Maslow's psychological work into management studies, and it has since taken on a life of its own (Bridgman, Cummings, & Ballard, 2019).

IMPLICATIONS

- The image of the pyramid has the potential to misrepresent Maslow's original assertions. For example, a popular criticism of the hierarchy of needs today is the view that people are motivated to satisfy only one need at a time, that a need must be fully satisfied before they move to a higher level need on the pyramid, and that a satisfied need is no longer a motivator of behavior. This is not what Maslow believed. According to him, most people "are partially satisfied in all their basic needs and partially unsatisfied in all their basic needs at the same time" (Maslow, 1943). He insists "any behavior tends to be determined by several or *all* of the basic needs simultaneously rather than by only one of them" (Maslow, 1943, *emphasis in original*). This nuance is both ignored and misrepresented in the pyramid, since a hierarchical triangle "promotes the presentation of levels that must be addressed separately before these are transcended and higher levels moved up to" (Lidwell, Holden, & Butler, 2010; Bridgman et al., 2019).

2 MYTH: Self-actualization is rare.

Maslow believed that self-actualization was extremely rare in the population, and argued that it was virtually unattainable among young people (Maslow, 1943). Recent research has found this to be untrue. In fact, self-actualization was not correlated with age, education, race, ethnicity, college GPA, or childhood income, and there were no gender differences found in self-actualization (Kaufman, 2018). While there are certainly environmental barriers to self-actualization, where some environments can help bring out the best or the worst in us, there was no evidence that the characteristics of self-actualization are limited to a particular subset of humanity.

IMPLICATIONS

- This further calls into question the image of a pyramid which visually asserts that the higher the need, the fewer the number of people that can attain it.
- There is an opportunity to adopt an abundance mindset around the pursuit of self-actualization, where more for you does not mean less for me.

3 MYTH: Self-actualization is a selfish, individualistic pursuit.

Although it has been framed as a selfish and largely individualistic pursuit by modern commentators, self-actualization, as conceptualized by Maslow, is quite the opposite. Maslow identified 10 characteristics of self-actualizing people (see Table 3) that still hold up to scientific scrutiny today, and taken together, they reflect that self-actualizing people are motivated by health, growth, wholeness, integration, and humanitarian purpose (Kaufman, 2018).

IMPLICATIONS

- The pursuit of self-actualization can have a positive impact beyond the individual and foster a broader culture that values and embodies the aforementioned characteristics.

4 MYTH: Self-actualization is a selfish, individualistic pursuit.

Self-actualization may not be the highest motivation on Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Towards the end of his life, after publishing his work on the hierarchy of needs, Maslow was working on a new theory linking self-actualization to self-transcendence and spirituality (Maslow, 1961). Given his sudden death, this thinking was not popularized in the same way as the initial hierarchy

Table 3: 10 Characteristics of Self-Actualizing People (Kaufman, 2018)

1. **Continued Freshness of Appreciation** (Sample item: "I can appreciate again and again, freshly and naively, the basic goods of life, with awe, pleasure, wonder, and even ecstasy, however stale these experiences may have become to others.")
2. **Acceptance** (Sample item: "I accept all of my quirks and desires without shame or apology.")
3. **Authenticity** (Sample item: "I can maintain my dignity and integrity even in environments and situations that are undignified.")
4. **Equanimity** (Sample item: "I tend to take life's inevitable ups and downs with grace, acceptance, and equanimity.")
5. **Purpose** (Sample item: "I feel a great responsibility and duty to accomplish a particular mission in life.")
6. **Efficient Perception of Reality** (Sample item: "I am always trying to get at the real truth about people and nature.")
7. **Humanitarianism** (Sample item: "I have a genuine desire to help the human race.")
8. **Peak Experiences** (Sample item: "I often have experiences in which I feel new horizons and possibilities opening up for myself and others.")
9. **Good Moral Intuition** (Sample item: "I can tell 'deep down' right away when I've done something wrong.")
10. **Creative Spirit** (Sample item: "I have a generally creative spirit that touches everything I do.")

of needs. He focused on the paradoxical connections between self-actualization and self-transcendence, specifically, *why is it that the most self-actualized people are those who are the most self-transcendent?*. He became convinced that self-actualization is healthy self-realization on the path to self-transcendence (Kaufman, 2018). As he wrote in his 1961 paper *"Peak-Experiences as Acute Identity Experiences"*:

"The goal of identity (self-actualization . . .) seems to be simultaneously an end-goal in itself, and also a transitional goal, a rite of passage, a step along the path to the transcendence of identity. This is like saying its function is to erase itself. Put the other way around, if our goal is the Eastern one of ego-transcendence and obliteration, of leaving behind self-consciousness and self-observation, . . . then it looks as if the best path to this goal for most people is via achieving identity, a strong real self, and via basic-need-gratification."

In other words, Maslow suggests that the highest human motivation is actually self-transcendence, and not self-actualization as is widely believed.

A recent study found support for Maslow's observation that self-actualized individuals are more likely to report self-transcendent experiences (Maslow, 1961; Kaufman, 2018). However, it found that self-actualization was strongly correlated with the unity aspect of the self-transcendent experience (increased feelings of oneness with the world), but not the sense of loss of self (decreased self-salience) (Kaufman, 2018). This more nuanced finding supports Maslow's contention that self-actualizing individuals are able to paradoxically merge with a common humanity while at the same time maintaining a strong identity and sense of self (Maslow, 1961). **In other words, self-actualized people do not sacrifice their potentialities in the service of others; rather, they use their full powers in the service of others - an important distinction** (Kaufman, 2018).

IMPLICATIONS

- Placing self-transcendence above self-actualization results in a radically different, paradigm shifting model. The ultimate motivation shifts from realizing one's own potential to being of service to something bigger than oneself. Furthermore, in the context of this research, if self-actualization is not the highest rung on the hierarchy of needs, it implies that relationships have the potential to evolve one step further, into a vehicle for self-transcendence.
- This knowledge presents an opportunity to reframe investments in personal growth and development as a means of realizing one's fullest potential in order to be of service to the collective whole, rather than as an individualistic pursuit.

This myth-busting exercise catalyzed two distinct but linked mindset shifts which altered the course of this MRP:

The highest human motivation is NOT to achieve one's fullest potential, but rather to be of service to something greater than oneself.

The highest function of a relationship is NOT to help partners achieve their fullest potential, but rather to help partners be of service to something greater than themselves.

It is also important to understand that this line of thinking is relatively fresh. The idea that self-transcendence, not self-actualization, is the highest human motivation, is not yet widely known.

Accepting this "update" of sorts to Maslow's hierarchy requires overturning the prevailing (and deeply ingrained) myth that we are in pursuit of ourselves, and reconciling that we are in pursuit of something much bigger than ourselves, where our role is to be of service to that bigger thing. The challenge with this shift is that the majority of our worldviews, systems, and behaviours, at least in the North American context, are rooted in the primacy of the self. Changing, or even challenging, this core myth would require swimming against the tide, and a willingness to unlearn and rebuild. That said, being able to conceptualize and anticipate this upcoming horizon means we can design with an eye to the future, while remaining responsive to the realities of the present.

In order to develop an awareness of emerging trends around spirituality and self-transcendence, a signal capture exercise was conducted using the STEEPV horizon scanning method. The following section highlights the insights that surfaced and proposes potential implications for the future of long-term romantic relationships.

THE RISE OF SPIRITUALITY

If self-transcendence is indeed the highest human motivation, do emerging trends show evidence of increased interest in self-transcendence and spirituality?

SPIRITUALITY
For the purposes of this investigation, spirituality is defined as *"a way of being in the world in which a person feels a **sense of connectedness** to self, others, and/or a higher power or nature; **a sense of meaning** in life; and **transcendence** beyond self, everyday living, and suffering"* (Weathers, Mccarthy, & Coffey, 2016)[8].

WE ARE SEEING A RISE IN SPIRITUALITY

Many researchers have noted that at the same time Church attendance in the West has declined, there has been a noticeable increase in spirituality (Ambrosino, 2019). So much so that this trend has a name: the Spiritual But Not Religious (SBNR) phenomenon.

According to a 2017 Pew Research Center survey, 27% of U.S. adults say they think of themselves as spiritual but not religious, up 8 percentage points since 2012. Another survey of 2000 American adults found that those who identify as SBNR tend to skew younger and more educated than religious Americans, with 40 percent holding at least a four-year college degree and 17 percent having some form of postgraduate education. They are also more politically liberal than the general population, though they mostly avoid partisan labels (Public Religion Research Institute, 2017). These individuals reported feeling connected to "something much larger than" themselves and "felt particularly connected to the world around" them and to a "higher purpose" (Public Religion Research Institute, 2017). Notably, most Americans who are classified as SBNR still identify with a religious tradition, even if they are less likely to attend services or say religion is important in their lives. The SBNR trend eludes to a step away from the doctrine and hierarchy of traditional religion and more toward a DIY approach to spirituality in which individuals practice whatever helps them achieve a sense of union with the transcendent (Ambrosino, 2019). These practices may include yoga, meditation, tarot, and/or crystal healing, which have all been gaining in popularity.

One researcher describes this modern spirituality as "a personalised, subjective commitment to one's values of connection to self, others, nature, and the transcendent" (Moore, 2017). One of the biggest critiques of this "radical democratization of spiritual life" and customization of spiritual practices is that the sense of lineage and connection to broader moral imperatives can be lost, fueling a self-centered mentality (Samuel, 2018). Interestingly, a common thread among those who identify as SBNR is a desire for community, which their more solitary ritual practices are not able to give them. These individuals are torn between a yearning for the communal aspects of their childhood religions and an aversion to uniformity of practice and beliefs which "gets a bit culty" and "often means people stop asking questions" (Burton, 2017).

The rise in spirituality is reflected in signals of change across economic, political, technological, and environmental spheres:

- Based at Columbia's Business School, *Glean* is the world's first incubator and network for spiritual entrepreneurs. Spiritual entrepreneurs are defined as leaders seeking to embrace the abundant opportunity in today's shifting religious landscape by building new ventures that work toward character formation, human flourishing, and communal well-being (National Jewish Centre for Learning and Leadership, 2017).

- Best-selling author, spiritual leader, and "Oprah-approved" Marianne Williamson is seeking the Democratic nomination for the 2020 U.S. Presidential elections. She declared, "I'm going to harness love for political purposes" on the Democratic debate stage and believes that America needs a "moral and spiritual awakening" (Stewart, 2019).

- The $2 billion psychic reading services industry has experienced growing audience demand over the past five years. In July 2019, *Séance*, a subscription-based app which features a marketplace of spiritual advisors who offer answers to customers, was released on the App Store (Séance, 2019).

- In November 2018, Indigenous spiritual leaders from Canada sat down with spiritual and religious leaders from across the world at the seventh annual Parliament of the World's Religions gathering, to share ideas about how to approach issues of climate change. They spoke on topics including: how to approach climate change from an Indigenous perspective, spiritual relationships with water, and Earth consciousness (Johnson, 2018).

Furthermore, we are seeing an increasing demand for each of the three defining attributes of spirituality: connectedness, meaning, and transcendence.

[8]This definition emerged through a concept analysis of spirituality, which found that all definitions of spirituality refer to the multidimensionality of spirituality, the uniqueness of spirituality to each person, and the understanding that spirituality is broader than religious beliefs or affiliation. Furthermore, in terms of defining attributes, all of the definitions make reference to the transcendent dimension of spirituality, the connectedness to self, others, nature, and/or a higher power, and the need to find meaning in life (Weathers et al., 2016).

1 SIGNALS OF CHANGE: CONNECTEDNESS

More and more, our circumstances are motivating us to seek connection with ourselves, others, and/or a higher power or nature.

- The burdens of the self and the chaos of our outer worlds have pushed us to seek stillness within ourselves, whether it be through meditation, yoga, or journalling.

- Many also retreat to nature as a reprieve from their otherwise buzzing world of notifications. In fact, many wellness retreats build on this instinct by hosting their offerings in natural settings like forests, mountains, beaches, or even jungles.

- The devastating effects of climate change have also made us acutely aware of the ways in which our actions are connected to the current state of our environment. This increasing sense of connectedness has prompted carbon taxes from politicians, plastic-free mandates from large corporations, and more sustainable consumption habits at the level of individual consumers.

- The rising isolation in our (digitally) hyperconnected world has prompted drastic action around the world, including the appointment of a Minister of Loneliness in the U.K, whose campaign 'Let's Talk Loneliness' includes a new £1.6 million initiative that supports activity in community spaces to promote social connections (GOV.UK, 2019). We are also seeing an increase in spaces (residential, office, and commercial) that are intentionally built to facilitate connections between people.

2 SIGNALS OF CHANGE: TRANSCENDENCE

According to Maslow, self-transcendence brings the individual what he called "peak experiences" in which they transcend their own personal concerns and see from a higher perspective. These experiences are often accompanied by strong positive emotions like joy, peace, and a well-developed sense of awareness (Messerly, 2017). A highly self-transcendent individual may also experience "plateau experiences" in which they consistently maintain or enter a state of serenity and higher perspective (Messerly, 2017). We are seeing signals of change that point to both an increased demand for as well as an increased investment in transcendence.

- The use of psychedelics like psilocybin mushrooms, LSD, MDMA, and ayahuasca to transcend afflictions of the self like depression, anxiety, and PTSD is becoming increasingly discussed in the public realm. In 2018, journalist Michael Pollan's book *How to Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us About Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, and Transcendence* was named one of the 10 Best Books of 2018 by the New York Times Book Review (Bowles, 2019). Goop, actress Gwyneth Paltrow's health and beauty brand, regularly features pieces with voices touting the health benefits of the drugs, claiming MDMA makes talk therapy more effective or ayahuasca increases a person's appreciation of nature (Bowles, 2019). Although these substances are illegal in most jurisdictions, researchers are exploring their potential uses in treating a series of mental health conditions.

- We are also seeing a movement toward transcending the natural limitations of the human body. A trend often referred to as transhumanism, it is driven by the belief that the human race can evolve beyond its current physical and mental limitations, especially by means of science and technology (Lexico, 2019). This includes augmentation through wearable technology, comprehensive genome editing tools that can be ordered to one's home, and brain-based internal implants that will enhance physical and mental abilities (Research and Markets, 2018). A less technology-driven manifestation of this trend is showcased in the 2018 documentary *3,100: Run and Become* which featured the Sri Chinmoy Self-Transcendence 3,100 Mile Race, the world's longest certified foot race. Founded by the late Indian spiritual leader Sri Chinmoy in 1997, the 3100 Mile Race challenges runners to "transcend their own previous capacity", "gain spiritual insights" and "overcome the entire world's preconceived notions of possibility" (Goulding, 2019).

- Lastly, we are seeing monetary investment into better understanding self-transcendence. For example, in 2016, a group of U.S. based researchers received a $2.1 million grant from the John Templeton Foundation to research the importance of "getting over yourself", or self-transcendence. The inspiration for the project came from noticing how many privileged people seemed dissatisfied with their lives (Goldhill, 2016).

3 SIGNALS OF CHANGE: MEANING IN LIFE

A need to find meaning in life and understand one's purpose is a key motivator for modern day individuals.

- Within an employment context, Harvard Business Review's *Meaning and Purpose at Work* report, which surveyed 2,285 American professionals, found that more than 9 out of 10 employees are willing to trade a percentage of their lifetime earnings for greater meaning at work. On average, participants were willing to forego 23% of their entire future lifetime earnings in order to have a job that was always meaningful (Achor, Reece, Kellerman, & Robichaux, 2018).

- Within long-term relationships, research from The Gottman Institute shows that in the strongest marriages, spouses share a deep sense of meaning. Beyond just "getting along", they also support each other's hopes and aspirations and build a sense of purpose into their lives together (Gottman & Silver, 1999).

- We are also seeing an increase in demand for practitioners who help us make meaning of our experiences including psychotherapists, spiritual advisors (e.g. reiki practitioners, psychics, energy healers, etc.), and within a corporate context, anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists. (Baer, 2014; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019)

IMPLICATIONS OF RISING SPIRITUALITY

Spirituality is on the rise. So what?

It is not a coincidence that this increase in spirituality is happening at the same time as what I refer to as the saturation of the self. We are overwhelmed, alone, and unfulfilled in the pursuit of "I", and are craving something that grounds this pursuit in something bigger than ourselves. And so, we seek connection, meaning, self-transcendence, and find some of these answers through spiritual practice.

Given the broad-based, cross-sectoral nature of the rise of spirituality and its defining attributes, I propose that it will also affect and be affected by our long-term romantic relationships. For much of the history of marriage, relationships were an economic and/or political enterprise. In the late 19th century, they evolved into an emotional enterprise, where relationships were expected to provide emotional support in addition to financial stability. In the 1960s, expectations of facilitating personal growth and self-expression were layered onto our intimate relationships. Today, we are seeing evidence of another evolution.

Supported by the "updated" Maslow's hierarchy of needs in which self-transcendence is the highest human motivation, I propose that the next frontier will see relationships evolve into a vehicle for self-transcendence and spiritual fulfillment. This hypothesis is explored as a thread within the expert interviews, participant research, and the designed experiences within this MRP, and revisited in the conclusion.

We are overwhelmed, alone, and unfulfilled in the pursuit of "I", and craving something that grounds this pursuit in something bigger than ourselves.

▼

▼

The next frontier will see **relationships as a vehicle for self-transcendence and spiritual fulfillment.**

chapter

4

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

- Expert Interview Insights
- Design Principles for Participant Research
- Insights from Participant Research

PRIMARY RESEARCH

Expert Interview Insights

In mining the experiences of experts who work on the frontlines of relationships - dating coaches, psychotherapists, relationship researchers, wedding officiants, breakup coaches, and divorce lawyers - several key insights emerged. These insights were instrumental in designing subsequent participant research.

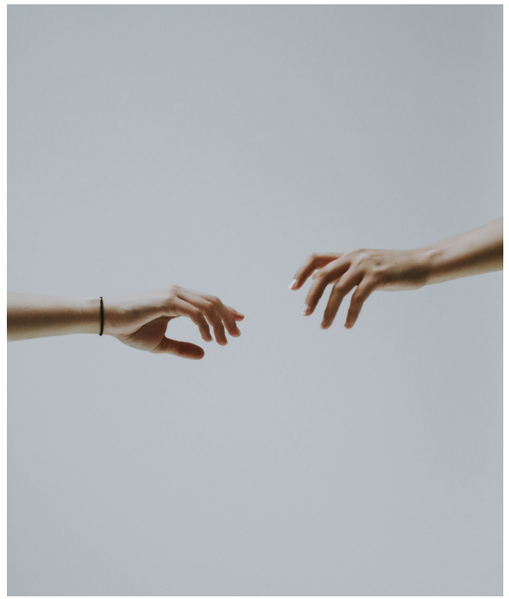
EXPERT INSIGHT

1 Craving deeper connection, resisting vulnerability.

There can be a sense of aloneness within relationships and an accompanying desire to make deeper contact and experience a deeper connection with our partners. At the same time, we experience resistance and discomfort around being vulnerable, which is necessary for deeper connection. In the words of one expert, deeper contact means:

"I'm not operating from my concept of myself anymore, I'm not operating from an image, I'm being as true to myself as I can be in this moment. So when that's happening, especially if it's happening from both the people involved, there's the possibility for really deep contact. Because concepts can't be in contact."

This sort of vulnerability requires trust in one's partner to show up, receive, hold space for, and navigate what we are about to reveal to them. It also requires courage to push past fears of rejection in revealing one's true self. However, overarching trends show that partners are spending less and less time alone together, therefore limiting opportunities to build the foundational trust and courage required for deeper connection (Finkel, 2017). Couples are spending more time at work and with parenting than in the past, and are even less likely to reliably pursue their daily activities together. This mismatch between expectations vs. reality can result in partners not feeling seen or heard, proposals for opening up relationships[9], the pursuit of affairs as a means of seeking connection, and ultimately feeling distance within the relationship.



[9]This is NOT the only reason people explore open relationships.

EXPERT INSIGHT

2 The importance of creating space in fostering connection.

Experts consistently, and perhaps counterintuitively, highlight the need to create space in order to foster deeper connection between partners. They acknowledge that when you are close to someone, you mix up to some extent who you are and who they are - a phenomenon called "Inclusion of the Other in the Self" (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991). You care about what happens to them, because in a sense it happens to you. At the same time, you can become too enmeshed with the Other and become unable to experience yourselves as separate individuals. When people become fused - when two become one - connection can no longer happen. There is no one to connect with.

In this sense, creating space allows partners to regain their sense of self, recognize each other as individuals with distinct needs and experiences (rather than as extensions of each other), and collaboratively build something together. As one relationship coach put it:

"If you put a couple nose-to-nose and ask them how they feel, first of all they can't see their partner. Second of all, most people choke with the claustrophobia. If you put people really far from each other, now they're just distracted. There's this middle ground where you're close enough to your partner that you feel connected, but far enough that you can see them as separate and whole."

Cultivating healthy psychological distance can also help fuel desire in relationships. It can balance out our tendency to eliminate otherness and seek intimacy in order to protect ourselves from feeling alone. When intimacy collapses into fusion, it is not a lack of closeness but too much closeness that impedes desire (Perel, 2016). Our ability to tolerate our separateness - and the fundamental insecurity it engenders (i.e. our partners are not "ours") - is necessary in maintaining interest and desire in our relationship (Perel, 2016).

"Love enjoys knowing everything about you; desire needs mystery. Love likes to shrink the distance that exists between me and you, while desire is energized by it. If intimacy grows through repetition and familiarity, eroticism is numbed by repetition. It thrives on the mysterious, the novel, and the unexpected. Love is about having; desire is about wanting. An expression of longing, desire requires ongoing elusiveness. It is less concerned with where it has already been than passionate about where it can still go. But too often, as couples settle into the comforts of love, they cease to fan the flame of desire. They forget that fire needs air." - ESTHER PEREL

EXPERT INSIGHT

3 Increasing interest in alternative relationship structures.

Experts point to an increasing interest among couples in exploring alternative relationship structures. This shift is influenced by several factors including a growing understanding that one person may not be able to meet all of our needs over the course of an increasing lifespan, as well as a larger societal movement to reimagine what constitutes a family. Once defined by blood and kinship, family lines are now blurring "as people divorce, remarry, divorce again, cohabit, adopt, use donors and surrogates and blend families" (Perel, 2017).

In their book, *The New I Do*, authors Susan Pease Gadoua and Vicki Larson raise the notion of purpose-driven marriages as becoming more acceptable, or perhaps even better than love-driven marriages. Rather than expecting one person to meet all of our needs, they outline seven alternative marital structures that identify the specific function of a given partnership and encourage spouses to meet other needs in other ways, with other people, or in some combination. These alternative structures include: The Starter Marriage, The Companionship Marriage, The Parenting Marriage, The Safety Marriage, The Open Marriage, The Living Apart Together Marriage, and The Covenant Marriage. While these alternative forms of partnership have been practiced for some time, often privately, they are now garnering more media and mainstream attention (Scotti, 2018).

The idea of multiple marriages within one's lifetime is also becoming more acceptable. Whether it looks like several marriages with the same person that are each focused on distinct priorities, or relationships with different people at various life stages, the core theme is that our relationships should change as our needs change. In the words of couples therapist Esther Perel:

"Monogamy used to mean one person for life. Now monogamy means one person at a time."

The concept of monogamy is also coming into question as a growing minority of couples experiment with forms of consensual non-monogamy. In contrast to infidelity, which is a unilateral decision, consensual non-monogamy means that both partners have equal say in the decision to take their unfulfilled needs outside of the relationship (Perel, 2017). While some believe that opening up relationships in this way undermines the "specialness" of one's primary relationship, others are motivated by the desire to live out the often polarized values of commitment and freedom that can have difficulty co-existing within the traditional rules of monogamy. Although therapists are wary of individuals who propose open relationships as a way of combating a sense of deprivation within their current relationship without having to hurt their partner - which often delays the inevitable breakdown of the relationship - they are also witnessing couples for whom opening up has added fuel to their passion for each other.

EXPERT INSIGHT

4 The rise of "communication problems".

In the transition from an era where clear gender roles and responsibilities meant that communication was not vital for relationship survival, to an era where the lack of role differentiation *requires* extensive and frequent communication and coordination between partners, "communication problems" have surfaced as a common concern that couples bring to their therapists.

Specifically, partners struggle with seeing each other's perspective and talking about things without arguing. Both highlight the emotional nature of relationship conflict. The reason relationship distress so often plunges us into inner turmoil is because we are wired to use our partners to help us regain balance in the midst of distress and fear. If they instead become a *source* of distress, then we are doubly bereft and vulnerable (Johnson, 2013).

In fact, the most common reason we struggle to have empathy for the people we love is because we are distracted and overwhelmed by some preoccupying emotion within us (e.g. fear of losing or upsetting a partner) that blocks our ability to focus on their anguish. Stress or depression can also exhaust an individual's mental resources, leaving them emotionally numb and unable to empathize with their partner (Johnson, 2013).

As such, achieving optimal communication in the modern era requires that we develop deep insight into our own psychological experiences (our needs, goals, anxieties, and frustrations), share them with our partners, and work consistently to harmonize our behaviours with them (Finkel, 2017).

"I find it somewhere between poignant and tragic that, for all their eventual hyper-honesty, the divorcing husbands and wives I represent assume so often, for the finally unhappy years of their marriage, and that their spouse could hear what they weren't saying."

- JAMES SEXTON, DIVORCE LAWYER

EXPERT INSIGHT

5 Having a sense of one's own experience.

Relational self-awareness, or the ability to take a curious stance vis a vis yourself, is an important prerequisite in building healthy relationships (Solomon, 2017). People who have relational self-awareness can talk about their earlier relational experiences and how they shape their relationships today. They can turn their attention inward and name what they are feeling (versus just acting out what they are feeling). They can view a relationship problem as a combination of "some stuff I did wrong" and "some stuff you did wrong." They can listen to feedback about themselves without fighting back or running away, or they catch themselves as they start to fight back or run away and try again to listen with an open heart to the feedback (Solomon, 2017).

Conflict escalates when people are not able to own their defensive responses to feelings that they are experiencing inside. These feelings are often not about the relationship itself, but rather the darker feelings about themselves that the relationship is bringing up (e.g. "I'm too much." "I'm unworthy of love." "You don't really love me." "You don't need me." "I'm bad."). People who are relationally self-aware can recognize these feelings and respond to their partners from that more vulnerable place. When they are validated by their partner for doing so, it strengthens their sense of self-acceptance and undoes the very feelings they are carrying around within themselves.

EXPERT INSIGHT

6 Growing together in the era of self-actualization.

As our intimate social networks have winnowed, we expect our partners to help us grow into and unleash our highest potential. In reality, facilitating a partner's pursuit of personal growth and self-expression can involve pushing them outside of their comfort zones and challenging them in ways that may not promote the smoothest relationships dynamics. While the pay-off may be worth the risk, partners today are faced with the dilemma of comforting us at the risk of inducing complacency and inertia OR challenging us at the risk of inducing conflict and insecurity (Finkel, 2017).

In this sense, timing is essential. When individuals try to share constructive feedback or broach a sensitive issue with their partner, *regardless of their readiness to receive it*, it is more likely that their partner will resist. They perceive that you are prioritizing the thing you are trying to accomplish over their experience, and feel neither seen or heard. This can be avoided by tuning into your partners' openness to hearing what you are about to share, and tracking it moment to moment to determine how much further you should push.

This sort of mutual growth facilitation requires mutual trust and a commitment "to being changed, to being acted upon by the beloved in a way that enables us to be more fully self-actualized" (hooks, 2010). Equally, this includes celebrating our partner's success, which has been shown to have a bigger positive effect than supporting them when things go badly (which is still important) (Aron, 2019).

In relationships where both partners are striving toward their highest potential, the question of "Whose turn is it to grow?" can emerge when resources (e.g. physical, financial, energetic, etc.) are limited. Furthermore, it can be difficult to measure when one has "succeeded" in the pursuit of personal growth, given that self-actualization needs are less tangible and vary greatly from person to person.

Lastly, with all of this growing, it is important to be intentional about growing together in order to mitigate the risk of growing apart in the relationship. Experts suggest that adopting a practice of continual learning and curiosity about each other and about relationships in general can help partners grow in the same direction.

7 The impact of changing gender roles.

The relations between men and women have changed more in the past thirty years than they did in the previous three thousand (Coontz, 2005).

Gender-based defaults within relationships are much weaker today. Couples must figure out, often on a regular basis, the role each spouse will play regarding paid employment, child-rearing, cooking, and other household chores. This relative lack of role differentiation in today's marriages means that spouses must engage in extensive and frequent communication and coordination (Finkel, 2017).

On the flip side, today's partners are able to move beyond feeling compassion for each other and actually gain insight into each other's experience. Consequently, they have become much more capable of achieving deep mutual understanding, which in turn increases their likelihood of navigating conflict constructively (Finkel, 2017).

That said, challenges to the grand gender convergence persist in several forms.

Firstly, generational differences between parents raised within traditional gender roles and their children who were brought up in a more egalitarian culture can result in judgment and disapproval from the former toward the latter's gender-defying choices.

Secondly, long-standing definitions of masculinity have contributed to asymmetry in the grand gender convergence. Specifically, women's adoption of assertive qualities has been stronger than men's adoption of nurturant qualities, a gender difference that is especially prominent among the less educated (Finkel, 2017). This imbalance makes sense given that masculinity is more fragile - relative to femininity which does not require social validation - and requires repeated demonstration and social proof (Finkel, 2017).

Thirdly, while the grand gender convergence is widely accepted as a favourable shift, we are still confronting what it means to live out the values it imbues. Nowhere is this more apparent than in what is described as "the masculinity paradox" (Perel, n.d.). While new definitions of masculinity encourage modern men to embrace a new suite of emotional skills that were not traditionally part of their repertoire, traditional markers of masculinity are still embedded deep within our culture and our psyche (Perel, 2017).

Several experts highlight the role of women in the masculinity crisis, particularly around their readiness to receive male vulnerability.

"It's not just men who are raised to think that men should be strong, women are living in the same environment. You might think you want something different, but that is what we have internalized as attractive."

When women's expectations of men to share their feelings and be strong are at odds, they are left conflicted and respond at times in ways that discourage male vulnerability. Advice columnist Irma Kurtz summarizes this predicament from the male perspective:

"Men are finding it ever more difficult to squeeze themselves and their erections into the shrinking maneuvering space between being a wimp or being a rapist."

(Perel, 2017)

The egalitarian ideals of the grand gender convergence also permeate our sex lives. They frame sexual arrangements in which one partner is dominant and controlling, and the other submissive and passive, as inherently hierarchical and oppressive (Perel, 2006).

Consequently, we fear that playing with power imbalances in sexual encounters, even in a consensual relationship between mature adults, risks overthrowing the respect that is essential to human relationships. In yielding to this fear, we fail to recognize the nuanced perspective that explicit and negotiated exchange of power, which transfers freely and consensually from one party to another, can be motivated by the erotics of power and not by violence or pain. In some ways, consensual power plays in sex subvert the rigid distribution of power that pervades our society (Perel, 2006).

EXPERT INSIGHT

8 The importance of creating safe spaces for truth-telling.

"When we reveal ourselves to our partner and find that this brings healing rather than harm, we make an important discovery - that intimate relationship can provide a sanctuary from the world of facades, a sacred space where can be ourselves, as we are.... This kind of unmasking - speaking our truth, sharing our inner struggles, and revealing our raw edges - is sacred activity, which allows two souls to meet and touch more deeply." - JOHN WELWOOD

Philosopher Sissela Bok's book *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* was among the first works to draw attention to the extent to which lying has become accepted and ordinary in our daily interactions. Much of the lying people do in everyday life, and particularly in their intimate relationships, is done either to avoid conflict or to spare someone's feelings (hooks, 2000). At the same time, the ability to speak our truth (however subjective) in our intimate relationships is necessary in the pursuit of deeper connection and self-actualization.

Choosing to reveal ourselves, to be fully honest, is risky, and it is important to create safe spaces within our relationships for truth-telling (hooks, 2010). Safe spaces tend to be full of belonging cues that let individuals know that they are safe, that their partners are invested in and value what they are about to share, and that the relationship will continue. They notify our ever-vigilant brains that they can stop worrying about dangers and shift from survival mode into connection mode, a condition called psychological safety (Coyle, 2017).

It is important to note that belonging cues need to be continually reinforced. This is because the amygdala, the ancient part of our brain that is constantly scanning our environment for threats, does so in the same way that it did when we were hunter-gatherers (Coyle, 2017). When we sense a threat, the amygdala sets off the fight-or-flight response that floods our body with stimulating hormones, narrowing our focus to survival. In relationships, this response can manifest as criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and/or stonewalling - all of which hinder an individual's capacity to engage in truth-telling (Gottman & Silver, 1999). Alternatively, when we receive a belonging cue[10], the amygdala switches roles and starts to use its immense unconscious neural horsepower to build and sustain our social bonds. In other words, it sets the stage for honest, meaningful engagement (Coyle, 2017).

[10]Belonging cues include, among others, proximity, eye contact, energy, mimicry, turn taking, attention, body language, vocal pitch, and consistency of emphasis. As with any language, belonging cues cannot be reduced to an isolated moment but rather consist of a steady pulse of interactions within a social relationship (Coyle, 2017).

EXPERT INSIGHT

9 Love requires intentionality and active practice.

Interviewed experts unanimously agree that love in the modern era is a verb, an active practice that requires intentionality. They believe that "great relationships are not accidental" and that "anything you want to last a lifetime doesn't just happen".

This is in direct contrast to how love has traditionally been portrayed in the mass media, which teaches us 1) that it is difficult to find the right partner ("the One"), but the relationship should be easy once we have found them, 2) that love is supposed to be a mystery and knowledge makes it less compelling, and 3) that communicating needs explicitly within a relationship kills the romance (hooks, 2000). In actuality, taking the time to share intentions with our partners means that we are no longer trapped by the fear and anxiety underlying relationship interactions that take place without discussion of intent and desire. In our sexual relations, where knowing nothing was once the basis for excitement and erotic intensity, now knowing more is the basis (hooks, 2000). Furthermore, the clarity that comes with this knowledge frees up mental and emotional space that can then be invested into deepening the relationship.

Ultimately, in approaching loving as an active practice, we shift our focus from the object of our love, to honing our capacity to love (Fromm, 1956).

EXPERT INSIGHT

10 Romantic love is an attachment bond.

It is widely accepted within the field of relationship science that adult romantic love is an attachment bond, mirroring the one between primary caregiver and child (Johnson, 2013).

John Bowlby, the psychologist who first proposed attachment theory in 1951, maintained that the need to attach persists through life and is the force that shapes our adult love relationships. As he wrote: "All of us, from cradle to grave, are happiest when life is organized as a series of excursions, long or short, from the secure base provided by our attachment figure(s)" (Johnson, 2013). A growing body of research confirms his assertions.

Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that a person's adult style of romantic attachment may be affected by their attachment history with their primary caregiver in childhood (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Just as our attachment styles in childhood are influenced by the responsiveness of our caregivers, the way we attach to our partners is coloured by their ongoing response to the core attachment question, "Are you there for me?". A secure bond has three basic elements (Johnson, 2013):

- **accessibility** - you give me your attention and are emotionally open to what I am saying;
- **responsiveness** - you accept my needs and fears and offer comfort and caring; and
- **engagement** - you are emotionally present, absorbed, and involved with me.

On the other hand, the erosion of a bond begins with the absence of emotional support, resulting from small moments of missed connection and fuelling a growing sense of deprivation. A landmark study of married couples found that the most important factor in predicting a marriage's collapse was not the amount of conflict present but rather the couple's lack of emotional responsiveness, a classic sign of insecure attachment (Johnson, 2013). Repairing a bond, or healing attachment injuries, requires couples to actively turn toward each other and reveal their fears and longings. Otherwise, similar to a torn muscle that fails to mend and constricts movement, an injured relationship that is not healed stiffens and becomes less elastic, spontaneous, and playful (Johnson, 2013).

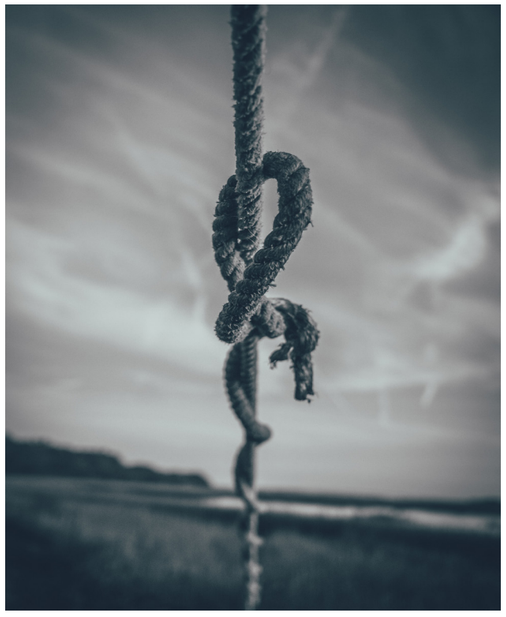
Thankfully, opportunities to be accessible, responsive, and engaged with one's partner present themselves everyday. Clinician and researcher Dr. John Gottman refers to them as bids for connection. A bid is any attempt from one partner to another for attention, affirmation, affection, or any other positive connection. Examples of bids include: "How do I look?", "I've been cooking all day, I'm so tired", "What have you been up to?", "Do you want to take that dance class together?", or even an audible sigh. A partner responds to a bid either by turning toward their spouse or turning away. A tendency to turn toward one's partner is the basis of trust, emotional connection, passion, and a satisfying sex life (Gottman & Silver, 1999). In Gottman's six-year follow-up study of newlyweds, he found that couples who remained married had turned toward their partner's bids an average of 86 percent of the time, while those who ended up divorced had averaged only 33 percent (Gottman & Silver, 1999).

Of course, there are inevitably times when bids are missed. This is both normal and common. In the words of psychologist and researcher Dr. Sue Johnson,

"Loving is a process that constantly moves from harmony to disharmony, from mutual attunement and responsiveness to misattunement and disconnection - and back again."

The key to relationship stability, then, lies not in the ability to avoid fights but in the ability to repair routine disconnections (Johnson, 2013). This is where a history of turning towards each other can be useful. According to Gottman, each time partners turn toward each other, they are funding their "emotional bank account" and strengthening their bond. They are building up "savings" that can serve as a cushion when they are faced with a major life stress or conflict. The abundance of goodwill they have stored means that they are less likely to fall into distrust and chronic negativity when things get tough (Gottman & Silver 1999).

Sometimes bids are harder to detect. This is especially true when they are wrapped in criticism and/or hidden in harsh delivery. For example, "Why do you have to work so late all the time?" may actually be, "I miss the time we spend together in the evenings" in disguise. Receivers of such bids can benefit from focusing on the underlying bid, over the delivery. Meanwhile, the makers of such bids can work on softening the way they initiate their bids, even if doing so means feeling more vulnerable (Gottman & Silver, 1999).



Given our natural tendency to oscillate from moments of connection to moments of misattunement, setting up rituals in which we intentionally reset the dial, reattune, and reconnect with our partners can be a powerful antidote (Johnson, 2013). A ritual is a structured event or routine that you each enjoy and depend on and that both reflects and reinforces your sense of togetherness (Gottman & Silver, 1999). Read more about designing rituals in Appendix E: Ritual Design Workshop.

DESIGNING PARTICIPANT RESEARCH

Evidence-informed design principles to guide participant research.

The following principles guided the design of the two participant research methods: the workbook and one-on-one interviews.

1 Design to surface, not solve.

The engagements should bring participants' awareness to their experience in their relationship by asking questions, not by prescribing best practices or solutions.

2 Access deeper (potentially more vulnerable) experiences through play and creativity.

In order to develop deep insight into participants' experiences while minimizing the risk of traumatic reactions, playful and creative prompts and exercises can be utilized. While play and creativity inherently require vulnerability, they can feel less threatening and more curiosity-driven than direct probing about one's relationship.

3 Design to surface a spectrum of relationship experiences.

There is valuable insight to be gained from the things that have worked as well as the things that have not, the easy and the difficult, the joyful and the painful. Create a container that is inclusive enough to catch the range of relationship experiences.

4 Use accessible analogies to make the intangible tangible.

Relationship experiences are subjective and can be difficult to quantify or describe. Using analogies like "a relationship bank account" or "a relationship heat map" can help unearth more concrete responses, while ensuring participants interpret what is being asked of them through a shared and familiar mental model.

5 Design to engage a range of learning styles (e.g. visual, analytical, linguistic, kinesthetic, etc.) where possible.

The quality of participants' responses is in part influenced by the ways in which they are engaged and how well those ways align with how each participant naturally processes information (i.e. their dominant learning style(s)).

Design principles **create the structure** for a sandbox within which to construct ways of engaging with users.

PRIMARY RESEARCH

Participant Research Results

PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

Who was and wasn't represented in the primary research, and to what extent?

25 individuals in long-term romantic relationships were engaged in participant research. Each completed the workbook (See Appendix C for full workbook) and participated in the subsequent one-on-one interview (See Appendix D for the interview discussion guide). Participants' demographic information is summarized below:

60% were female-identifying

40% were male-identifying

Average age:

34 years old

Average length of current relationship:

4.3 years

12% were in same-sex relationships

88% in heterosexual relationships

16% identify as married

72% identify as living together

68% identify as being in a monogamous relationship

40% are people of colour

WORKBOOK INSIGHTS

What were participants' experiences of completing the five relationship-relevant activities in the workbook?

Beyond bringing participants' awareness to their experience of their relationship, as an artifact, the workbook also provided useful feedback on how different awareness-bringing activities were received by participants. The following summarizes how each of the five activities were experienced by participants.

1 ACTIVITY: RELATIONSHIP POEM

The first activity asked participants to convey their relationship through a poem. Participants found the templated structure of the poem challenging in terms of capturing complex feelings in a few words, and useful in summarizing it so succinctly. Essentially an "About Us" page for the relationship, this activity pushed participants to deeply investigate who their relationship was and what it represented. They felt affirmed when the answers were clear and experienced discomfort when they were not. Participants confronted internal judgments when they compared their poem to the example poem, or when they felt like the words that they chose were not good or creative enough. Several suggested removing the example altogether to avoid comparisonitis.

Given that it was the first activity, a handful of participants expressed a desire for some sort of ritual or practice (e.g. meditation) that would allow them to switch into the mindset needed to engage in these activities. They expressed feeling "catapulted into it" and that it takes time to verbalize how they feel about their relationship. Lastly, some participants reflected back the difficulty in using words as the medium to convey feelings and suggested incorporating imagery and visuals into the activity.

2 ACTIVITY: RELATIONSHIP BANK ACCOUNT

The second activity asked participants to reflect on the previous few days and record their deposits and withdrawals into their relationship bank account. Deposits were defined as actions that put energy into the relationship (i.e. turning toward the relationship), and withdrawals were defined as actions that take energy out of or away from the relationship (i.e. turning away from the relationship).

Out of all five workbook activities, this one landed as the most provocative, for several reasons. Firstly, adopting the terminology of "deposits" and "withdrawals" and the analogy of a "bank account" created dissonance and/or discomfort for participants who did not appreciate "comparing something as profound and complex as intimate relationships to a bank account", "reducing a relationship to monetary metaphors", and being "so remote from emotions". They shared that this aversion could be a result of their uneasy relationship to money/banking, resistance to the transactional nature of the deposit/withdrawal framing, and/or the binary nature of the two categories. There also seems to be a clear mental distinction between money and intimate relationships, where money is dirty and relationships are sacred, that causes discomfort when the two concepts intersect.

Several participants questioned what constitutes a deposit or a withdrawal:

- *What is considered a deposit into the relationship vs. something that is just expected in a cohabiting or co-parenting relationship?*
- *Are investments into my own personal growth and self-care or into priorities outside my relationship necessarily withdrawals from the relationship?*
- *Aren't all deposits and withdrawals subjective?*
- *What if something I consider to be a deposit / withdrawal is not experienced as such by my partner?*

Participants also emphasized the role of context and how what was going on in their lives that week influenced the nature and number of deposits or withdrawals they made. They were curious about doing this sort of exercise over time and seeing how their deposits / withdrawals might change. It could also be that the provocative response to this activity was tied to its ability to trigger participants' insecurities around "enoughness" and "too-much-ness" (i.e. Am I giving/taking enough? Am I giving/taking too much?).

At the same time, participants acknowledged the utility of an exercise that allowed them to pause and examine their behaviour through such an explicit exercise. As one participant put it,

> "I have this picture of the kind of partner I am, but it's humbling to see how that actually manifests in our day-to-day."

Ultimately, participant reflections suggest that the function of the activity was useful, and that other, less controversial metaphors (e.g. "planting vs. picking flowers" as one participant suggested) could be explored.

3 ACTIVITY: RELATIONSHIP EVOLUTION

In describing four key evolutions in their relationship, along with what was lost and gained in each one, participants appreciated the opportunity to examine the entire duration of their relationship and revisit major milestones. They acknowledged their tendency to default to naming the macro-evolutions over the micro-evolutions. While the latter are more subtle and harder to put a finger on, they "ultimately change the way we "relate" in our relationships." Participants also acknowledged that while they tend to think of evolution based on what was gained, it was useful to name the things that were lost. Even more, through the process of completing this activity, several participants realized that there were some losses from previous evolutions that they were still grieving.

4 ACTIVITY: RELATIONSHIP HEAT MAP

In this activity, participants were asked to map ten aspects of their relationship (e.g. money, sex, chores, etc.) on a heat map based on the amount of relative tension held within each aspect.

Many liked the visual and relative nature of the exercise. Similar to the positive and negative connotations attached to deposits and withdrawals respectively, participants tended to perceive the red areas (i.e. areas that held the most tension) as bad, and the blue areas (i.e. areas that held the least tension) as good. They hesitated to put topics in the warmer areas of the map, as it activated feelings of shame and/or failure. As one participant suggested, “using "hot and cold" instead of "good or bad" might be a helpful way of reframing issues we have energy about without any judgment on whether it’s right or wrong to have energy.” Several participants also noted that there were more red areas on the map than blue (which was not intentional) and suggested the need for a more balanced heat map. Some identified that the topics that hold tension for them are not necessarily topics they cannot discuss with their partner, but rather topics that bring up personal insecurities or limiting beliefs, which make those conversations harder to have.

Lastly, some participants found that it was difficult to come up with ten different aspects of their relationship to add to the map and suggested providing a list of topics that they could consider.

5 ACTIVITY: RELATIONSHIP BINGO

The final activity asked participants to create a personalized BINGO card for their relationship. In each square on the card, they were asked to write an activity that they would like to do in their relationship but have not yet had the opportunity to explore OR a conversation that they would like to have with their partner but have not yet had the chance to have.

As intended in its design, most participants found that creating a bucket list of things they want to do and/or conversations they want to have with their partner was a fun way to end the workbook. Several participants reflected that they are able to talk openly about most things with their partner and therefore found it difficult to list conversations that they had not already had. Others felt skeptical about their bucket list items when they imagined their partner’s reaction to them, whether it be rejection, resistance, or hurt. They worried about hurting their partner by suggesting that they wanted more from their relationship than what their partner already offers. In the words of one participant,

> “There's some shame in dreaming of more when the implication is that the present reality is inadequate.”

At the same time, most participants felt empowered by the instructions which asked them to brainstorm with the assumption that they would have the necessary resources as well as their partner’s openness.

Once participants had completed their ***workbook****, they came in for a* ***one-on-one interview****, where they spoke about...*

RELATIONSHIP FUNCTION

What functions do relationships serve in people's lives? What are the jobs to be done? Why did/do people hire them?

Companionship

As the most frequently described relationship function, companionship in relationships provides us with someone who will accompany or "go with" us as we go about our day-to-day lives. It offers us someone to spend time with, to eat with, to cook for, to take care of us and for us to take care of. Participants also describe seeking companionship to overcome loneliness and staying in relationships, at least in part, for fear of being alone.

Being seen for one's potential and accepted for who they are now

Beyond being present to witness the happenings in a partner's life (which could be described as companionship), participants described a deeper, almost paradoxical function that their partners filled. The ability to see and reflect back a better version of someone, while being able to accept and affirm who they are in this moment is a powerful offering that participants experienced in their relationships. Some described this experience as "unconditional love" and "being seen". Furthermore, several participants reflected that they liked how they felt around their partner, implying that something about their partner's presence made them feel good or better about themselves.

Partner-in-crime

"I was looking for someone to go adventuring with me," one participant said. While this function could technically fall under companionship, the distinct focus on fun, adventure, spontaneity, excitement, openness to exploration, and "doing crazy things together" merited a separate category.

A sense of home

The word "home" came up quite a few times as participants described their relationship. "Finding home in a person," as one participant called it, includes a sense of grounding, comfort, safety, stability, consistency, predictability, and a knowing that one will be loved and understood. Having this home base provides participants with a sense of security from which to explore and grow.

Facilitating growth

The majority of participants, either implicitly or explicitly, acknowledged their relationship's role in facilitating their growth. This includes supporting them, challenging them, and holding them accountable to the growth to which they committed. One participant described their partner as "a great accelerant" in their personal growth journey.

Physical intimacy

While it is often not the first relationship function to come up, participants cite the role of relationships in providing an access point for explorations around physical intimacy and sexuality. This function is heightened for those who show and receive love primarily through touch.

Support while moving through a difficult experience

Several participants shared that the start of their relationship was marked by moving through a challenging experience either with or while being supported by one's partner. For those who were supported through a tough time by their partner, they trusted them because they had seen "the darkest parts of me" and continued to show up. For those who supported each other through a hard time, they were bonded by the shared experience and sense of shared accomplishment.

Complementarity >> potential for co-creation

Many participants described the ways in which their partner's nature complements their own. Whether it was a pairing of analytical with intuitive or mind-based with body-based, their traits combined in such a way that enhanced the qualities of each other and how they were able to function together. At the same time, participants highlighted the importance of shared values and being aligned "on all the major sticking points". In some ways, the convergence of complementarity and shared values foreshadows the heightened potential for successful co-creation, whether that be a shared project, business, or child. These forms of co-creation could also provide spiritual fulfillment in the sense that both partners would be in service to something bigger than themselves.

Easier than the alternatives

Last but not least, one participant identified the less romantic but entirely practical reality that sometimes one stays in a relationship at least in part because it is easier than looking for a new one.

"Buying another product is hard, and continuing to use an existing product is easier."

Building a healthy relationship requires significant investment and people naturally consider the costs and benefits of leaving one to look for another.

CHANGE WITHIN RELATIONSHIPS

How have the individuals in the relationship, as well as the relationship dynamics, changed over the course of the relationship?

As expected, the changes participants described in themselves, their partners, and their relationship dynamics over the course of their relationship were quite specific to their respective contexts. However, several underlying themes surfaced across participants' experiences.

I Can Be Your Mirror, But You Have To Own What You See

Much of the individual change in relationships is catalyzed by a partner's ability to reflect us back to us. In doing so, they present us with a question: "How do you feel about what you see?" Over the course of their respective relationships, participants' response to this question has prompted them to step more intentionally into their strengths as well examine the parts of themselves that are more difficult to own. They realized that they alone were responsible for what they saw in the mirror.

"Our lives are integrated but we still have to own our own journeys. There's not this singular journey. I have to own my relationships, my body, my space, my dreams. This person can support and be intertwined into it, but it's not theirs."

"You can't actually ask this person to be all of the things. You have to be most of the things for yourself."

In situations where individuals are unable to own what they see in the mirror, they can experience a sense of resentment toward their partner for reflecting back a part of themselves that they are not willing and/or ready to own.

Creating Space for Two: Marie Kondo-ing for Relationships

Creating space for two individuals where there was once one (i.e. entering into a relationship), involves a process that can be compared to the modern day phenomenon of "Marie Kondo-ing"[11]. In order to create physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual space for their partners, individuals are pushed to examine what really matters to them and be willing to purge (or

[11]The Marie Kondo method is a system of simplifying and organizing one's home by getting rid of physical items that do not bring joy into your life. It was created by organizing consultant Marie Kondo and is described in detail in her book *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up.*

compromise on) the other things. It involves developing a deeper understanding of who one's partner is, how they became who they are, what parts of them can be changed, and what is here to stay. With this understanding, partners learn to ask for what they need, set clear boundaries, and become more open to creating an environment where their partner too can thrive. Finding this balance likely involves a series of trial-and-error adjustments, with several participants describing the transition as an initial feeling of codependence, to an abrupt shift to extreme independence, and ultimately finding a medium that felt comfortable for both of them. It is important to note that this process of creating space and setting boundaries is an ongoing process as the individuals in the relationship and their needs are constantly changing. In other words, Marie Kondo-ing in a relationship is more of a ritual to be revisited than a milestone to be reached.

Factors Outside the Relationship

If we consider the relationship as a system, it is affected by and affects both its internal and external environment. Changes within the external environment (e.g. a death in the family) can also catalyze change within the individuals, which can then shift relationship dynamics. Equally, changes within the relationship can affect how the individuals interact with their external environment. One participant, for example, shared that being accepted as they [singular] are within their relationship freed up more energy for them to deepen ties with their family by being less judgmental and more empathetic toward their family members.

The Ever-changing Relationship Story

As the individuals within a relationship change, their dynamics change, and the stories they tell to make sense of their relationship also change. As meaning-making machines, we adapt our stories about why we are together and why the changes that happened needed to happen, in order to reconcile our past, present, and vision for our future.

TENSION VS. EASE IN A RELATIONSHIP

What are the moments that hold the most tension vs. the least tension in relationships?

As a tangible metaphor for tension in a relationship, participants were given an elastic band with which they could interact. Imagining that their relationship was the elastic band, participants were asked to describe a moment when their relationship felt the most taut and when it felt the most slack.

The moments that felt the **most taut** included moments when:

- One or both people in the relationship felt unimportant.
- One or both people in the relationship was/were experiencing shame.
- One or both people in the relationship had to choose between their needs and the needs of the relationship or their partner.
- Trust was broken.
- Partners were navigating uncertainty.
- Expectations between partners were misaligned.
- Reconciling one's relationship to/with a partner's family.

The moments that felt the **most slack** included moments when:

- Partners were celebrating or honouring their relationship (e.g. anniversaries).
- Partners were not worried about money.
- Partners were travelling together.
- Partners were in alignment.
- Partners had successfully navigated a moment of vulnerability.
- The possibilities felt endless.

In addition to the moments listed above, most participants described their day-to-day experience of their relationship - their default state - as fairly slack, with moments of tension arising periodically.

BRAVE SPACE CONVERSATIONS

What are the conversations that require partners to be brave in initiating with each other?

In order to better understand the kinds of conversation that intentional relationship design can help facilitate for couples, participants were asked to think of and share a brave conversation they might want to have with their partner. A brave conversation is one that would require the initiant to be courageous in broaching, as it is often on a topic that holds tension (real or perceived) for either or both of the individuals in the relationship. While the specifics of participants' responses are omitted to uphold privacy, all of the conversation topics they shared fall into one or more of the following categories.

- Something we haven't yet talked about.
- Something my partner hasn't reacted well to in the past.
- Something I know my partner doesn't feel similarly about.
- Something that would involve or risk hurting my partner in expressing.
- Something I am worried will elicit a strong, defensive reaction in my partner.
- Something that involves a big change from our current situation.
- Something we've talked around but haven't reached clarity on.
- Something I don't know if I want to pursue, but feel is worth talking about.
- Something that involves sharing a part of me that I struggle with.
- Something I don't think my partner is ready to talk about.
- Something my partner is resistant to.
- Something that feels like we have different expectations about.
- **Something that is true for me.**

Notably, all of the brave conversation topics participants described fit within "Something that is true for me." The ultimate motivation for initiating a brave conversation, despite the risks involved, is that it would allow the individual to be in alignment with their truth. In other words, people choose to open such a conversation when they feel that the cost of not being in integrity with their values and/or honouring their needs outweigh the potential cost of the conversation.

ANATOMY OF A BRAVE SPACE

What does a brave space for intentional relationship design look, sound, smell, and feel like?

To better understand what participants might need in order to have these conversations, they were asked to build a model of what a brave space[12] for that conversation would look like for them, using craft supplies. The intention behind the instruction to build was to create an opportunity for participants to reflect through making and express through art what might be difficult to capture in words. They were also given a chance to describe their models verbally once complete. Based on their models and descriptions, a brave space includes:

A sense of possibility

Participants want to start their brave conversations with "a blank canvas", and a feeling of openness. They want to not be constrained by their fears or previous experiences, and rather be open to the possibilities of where the conversation might take them. For many, being in nature facilitates this sense of possibility.

A feeling of being grounded

Given the inherent uncertainty associated with the outcome of brave conversations, participants expressed the importance of feeling grounded and calm. In their models, participants symbolized this through anchors (literal anchors, as well as people who could serve as anchors), symbols of spirituality, and most commonly, through elements of nature (e.g. trees and birds).

Nature

Almost half of the participants included elements of nature in their brave space models, and quite a few imagined their conversation happening in nature. Being in nature seems to elicit a sense of safety, peace, and possibility. As one participant described,

"Around by the trees would be a brave space to talk about something future oriented because it feels open, dreamy, everything is possible. Whereas in a room, it feels like you're constrained by your fears."

While some described scenarios in which they were stationary in nature (e.g. sitting on a field of grass, or under a tree), others highlighted the value of moving through nature (e.g. on a walk/hike). For those who preferred the latter, the physical movement helped them feel safer during tough conversations because it gave them something to focus on and do together as they worked through a challenging topic.

[12]While the term "safe space" has traditionally conflated safety with comfort, the term "brave space" recognizes that critical dialogue cannot be fostered by ruling out conflict and discomfort. Bravery is needed because "learning necessarily involves not merely risk, but the pain of giving up a former condition in favour of a new way of seeing things" (Rom, 1998). It is a space in which participants can say, "We have difficult and uncomfortable conversations but I never feel unsafe."

Privacy

The majority of participants described their brave conversation as one that was intentionally held in a private space. This afforded them a greater sense of safety, a sense that the conversation was "contained", and a space with no distractions. For the few models in which others were present, participants described these additional characters as anchors for the conversation, people who contributed to rather than took away from their sense of safety.

Safety and non-judgment

Safety and non-judgment were described as crucial ingredients for a brave conversation, and prerequisites for honest, vulnerable sharing. One participant described it as,

"knowing that there's room for all of your ugly bits and good bits."

In brave conversations, participants are often faced with the choice of being "good" and being "true" (to one's self), and the fear of being bad (e.g. a bad person, a bad partner, etc.) can get in the way of sharing one's truth. For many, their sense of safety is intimately linked with their partner's sense of safety. Especially among male participants, there was a sense of fear and hesitation around sharing their needs honestly, for fear that it would upset, hurt, and/or elicit a defensive reaction or complete shutdown from their partners. In their models, these participants focused on creating a space in which their partners would feel safe, which would in turn enable them to share more openly. Lastly, given that much of the judgment we experience comes from within, one participant underscored the importance of self-compassion in addition to compassion for one's partner.

Lubricant

A lubricant, by definition, is a substance that is introduced to reduce friction between surfaces in mutual contact. Several participants described substances or experiences that could be introduced in order to lubricate their brave conversation. In terms of substances, participants suggested consuming a glass of wine, cannabis, psilocybin mushrooms, or MDMA before having the conversation. One participant described their experience of cannabis as,

"Weed brings me down if I feel anxious."

This data supports earlier findings around the use of psychedelics to transcend afflictions of the mind in order to facilitate deeper connection with oneself, others, or nature. In terms of lubricating experiences, participants suggest spending time in their physical bodies (e.g. hiking, skiing, biking, being in a sauna, having sex) as a relaxing, body-based way to open a brave conversation.

Self-awareness
Participants cited the importance of self-awareness in engaging in a brave conversation. For some, this means coming into the conversation having already unpacked their baggage around the subject, and for others it involves being able to "see themselves" as the conversation unfolds and understand how their in-the-moment reactions are related to their previous experiences.

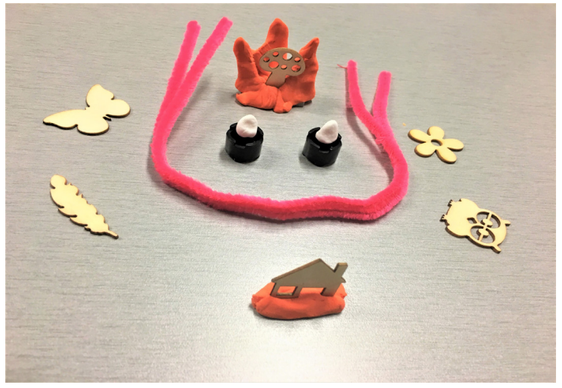
Contact
In their brave space models, participants reiterated the significance of being in contact with their partners during their brave conversation. Depending on the model, this contact took different forms, including: sitting next to each other, facing in the same direction, holding hands, making eye contact, choosing mutual vulnerability, and listening to understand the other's perspective rather than to react to it. Participants described contact with each other as "seeing each other for who we really are" and "the embodiment of being there for one another".

Creativity and silliness
Several participants noted that although these conversations by nature can be heavy, they wanted to be able to be a little silly, inject lightness into the heaviness, and be open to exploring creative solutions.

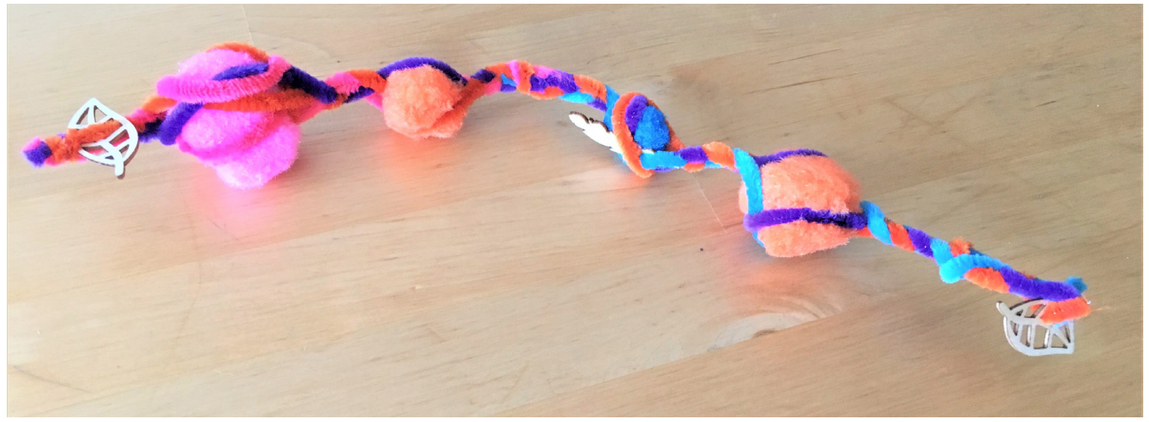
Physical space
Just over 50% of participants described their brave conversations as happening outside of their homes (e.g. in nature, on walks, at a cottage, during a retreat, etc.). The rest created models that depicted spaces which held meaning within their home, like their bed or couch. It seems that it is less about the space itself, and rather about what the space signifies for each person. While one person may find their home comforting for their brave conversation, another might find it constraining.

Knowing we'll be okay after
The knowledge that they and their partner would be okay after the conversation was an important part of participants' brave spaces. For some, this manifested tangibly. For example, they wanted to be able to go and do something fun after having worked through a tough conversation. For others, it was a more intangible knowing that no matter the challenge, they were both invested in and committed to moving through it. For others still, it was the safety of knowing that they could continue the conversation afterwards if need be, and be able to move through it together a second time.

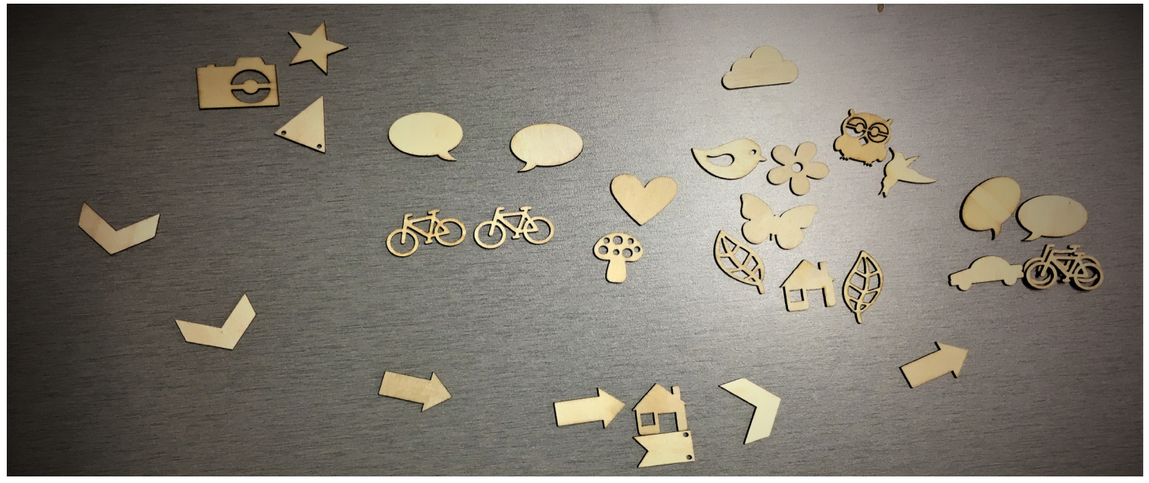
Examples of Brave Space Models



"An external home (not mine/not his) surrounded by ***nature*** *and beauty, sitting by the fire with some kind of* ***lubricant (e.g. mushrooms, weed)****. Not in a way that's intense, but a tiny bit of lubricant, even if it was a glass of wine. When you've spent the day* ***in your physical body (hiking, skiing, in a sauna, having sex)*** *and then you have a conversation, there's an opening for it in some ways. Having the conversation* ***after a more relaxed, body-based experience."***

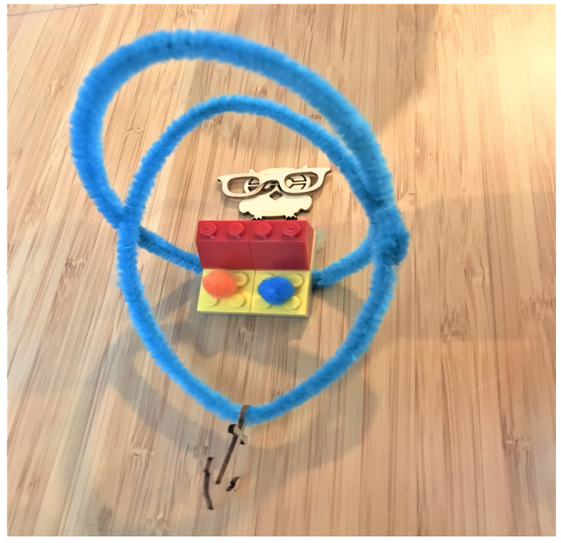


"This is a description of the process. These strands are our interweaving ideas and these balls are points of conflict or tension. So there are bigger points of conflict or tension at the beginning, and that subsides as we work through it, and it gets harder again and eventually there's this little ball in there and it just softens, eases. We're invested in and committed to wearing it through and using whatever resources we need to see it through to the end without abandoning it so that our relationship remains intact even through these bumpy parts. ***The brave space is in knowing that we'll continue to weave through it together, no matter the size.*** *We'll explore it, we'll go into it, wrap ourselves around it, and continue to the other side. Nature helps us get through things. They are important things for us to ground ourselves.* ***Nature is very powerful for us."***



*"We're on a road trip. We're sharing the driving and we take our bikes. We go **somewhere in nature, make some love, do some drugs** (we've had good success with **MDMA as a connector**), go on a **bike ride** (achieving something together), and have talks along the way. The arrows represent **continuation**. It's something that happens again afterwards. Being able to have these discussions at home is important."*

*"The blocks don't appeal to me at all. Don't need blocks in a safe space. Need **soft, round things.** There are things that are not sharp or dangerous in this. Everything is basically soft and round. There's just two of us there. We have **physical contact**, we're holding each other's hands. We are looking into each other's eyes. We have the embodiment of being there for one another. We've connected and understood that the conversation is going to be hard but **we're going to get through it**. My speech bubble is blue (I'm the blue person) and I'm saying something that's hard. **She's thinking in the same colour as what I'm saying which means that she's empathizing with it.** And she doesn't have her own speech bubble overlapping mine. She's listening, thinking about how that might make me feel, connecting with it, and responding to it with where she's at."*



*"A love seat that's **open and still contained** by the T-bar. There's a strong anchor to it and we can both see how the space is anchored, so that my partner feels **safe and grounded.** We're sitting next to each other, facing the same direction and she feels **connected.** The anchor for me is about safety. And there's a container that **excludes any sort of judgement.** The owl wearing sunglasses means we're both taking the perspective of this **wise seeing ourselves.** We can say, "Oh I can see how that affected me and how it's related to how I'm approaching this now." There's some **compassion, some self-compassion**, so we each have something soft to hold on to. We can feel that softness and hold and feel held as we talk about these things."*

*"This is a bed, our best moments have been in our bed. Our conversations, cuddles, intimacy all happen in whatever beds we've shared and that's what I think of when I think of having a conversation with my partner. I chose white because for this conversation I think I would want to have a **blank canvas t**o start. A lot of my problems with this topic don't have to do with my relationship with my partner at all and more to do with my family and homophobia in the family. That's not something I want to carry into this conversation. I would want to **come into this conversation having already unpacked my baggage.** I've chosen colourful pom-poms to **be creative with the conversations** and not be constrained by what people/society/norms tell us what family should look like and raising children needs to be. I take issue with the 2 parents, 2 kids in an apartment doing their own thing model and I think community is more important to me. I chose these three things because they're **things that elicit calmness for me: music, nighttime, and being in a forest** and those are things I would invite into my psyche."*

What does time spent in the relationship look like?

Time in a relationship takes on several different forms that seem to be present across all of the relationships described:

Time spent together, but not in the relationship

Participants differentiate between time spent in each other's presence, versus time spent in the relationship when they are completely present with each other. The former does not imply the latter. For couples who live together, this can look like the time in the morning before they go to work, the time spent doing chores or work around the house, watching TV together, and/or co-working in each other's presence.

Functional check-in time

Couples also spend time in which they are present with each other, but not necessarily tending directly to the relationship. This often looks like making shared decisions (e.g. *What are our plans for the long weekend? Are we RSVP-ing to that wedding? What colour should we paint the walls? What groceries do we need this week?*) as well as the day-to-day check-ins about each other's days and work. This sort of check-in seems to happen during the work week, during meals, while walking the dog, over morning coffee, and/or right before bed.

Quality time

Participants describe quality time in the relationship as tending to the relationship and each other in a way that is unrushed, undistracted, and intentional. For most, this kind of time is reserved for weekends or deliberately scheduled date nights. It is the kind of time that almost all participants want more of but struggle to schedule in. Beyond setting aside the time, it requires a shared intention to connect with one's partner - whether that is through conversation, play, touch, adventure, or some combination of them.

What factors influence the kind of time that couples spend together in a relationship?

There are several key factors that influence how much of the three kinds of time a couple spends together:

Work

How time is spent *in* the relationship, especially during the weekdays, is largely dictated by both individuals' jobs. While there may be a few functional check-ins here and there, participants do not spend much time connecting with their partners during work. Notably, however, work also affects how couples spend time together *outside* of their jobs. Mirroring the words of couples therapist Esther Perel,

"We bring our best selves to work, and our leftovers home to our relationship."

Particularly for those who are emotionally and mentally spent in their jobs, it becomes harder to connect across either of these dimensions in one's relationship. The stress of work lives in our bodies even after we leave the office or turn off our laptops. Several participants noted the importance of transition time between work and their relationship in which they need to be fully disengaged in order to recharge. For those who work flexible hours or for whom work schedules are always changing, the boundaries between work and life can easily blur and make it difficult to carve out dedicated time to not work.

Rituals

The participants who manage to optimize time *in* the relationship, particularly during the chaos of the work week, are those who have developed rituals around the things that matter most to them. This includes the couple who intentionally set their alarm earlier so that they can snooze and cuddle in the morning, the couple who goes to bed an hour earlier than they plan to sleep so that they can check-in while being in physical contact (which is important to both of them), the couple who makes a point of doing check-ins about work while they walk the dog to minimize how much of work they bring into their home, the couple who coordinates so they can take the streetcar home together, the couple that does daily affirmations/gratitude on Whatsapp, or the long distance couple that has set up dedicated Skype dates twice a week for both wedding planning and to tend to their relationship. By making a norm of these activities, participants have designed opportunities for connection into their relationship, thereby increasing the likelihood for it to happen.

Living apart

For couples who live apart and/or are long distance, time spent together seems to take on a different dimension. The fact that they do not have access to each other all the time means that the time they do spend together is often intended to be quality time. For most participants who live apart, this arrangement feels fair as the physical distance makes more of a clear distinction between the times that are their own and the times that are dedicated to the relationship.

Life projects/circumstances

Participants highlighted that there are certain "projects" or circumstances that can throw time in a relationship for a loop and (sometimes single-handedly) dictate how time is spent. This includes planning a wedding, having a baby, someone going back to school, or an unforeseen health condition.

TIME IN THE RELATIONSHIP

(How) do participants want to change the way they spend time in their relationship?

When asked how they would like to change the way time is spent in their relationship, participants described the following:

Be more intentional about the time we spend together

Participants want to be more present with each other in the time they spend together and with other couples. They want to spend less time talking about the relationship and more time doing and being in the relationship. They want to be active rather than passive about how they spend their time.

Less TV

Quite a few participants expressed a desire to watch less TV. They acknowledge that it is not a meaningful use of time, while noting that it is a shared activity that involves very little emotional energy and "doesn't require any actual brainpower", especially when the couple's reserves are tapped from work. "We can be touching but not engaging," as one participant put it.

More fitness

Quite a few participants shared that they want to engage in more physical activity as a couple. For some, it is about feeling more attractive in their bodies, which in turn affects their experience of desire. For others, it is about being healthy and understanding that especially in cohabiting relationships, one partner's habits can easily influence the other, for better or for worse.

Make the routines more fun

Some participants remarked that the things that used to be fun at the start of their relationship (e.g. cooking together) have now become a routine. They crave that initial sense of fun and spontaneity.

More time apart

Participants expressed a desire to find new ways to spend time with themselves and/or socialize with friends independently of each other. This desire was motivated by wanting to grow outside of the relationship, as well as wanting to invite in new energy that would ultimately serve to strengthen the relationship.

PREFERENCES IN RELATIONSHIP DESIGN ACTIVITIES

What kinds of relationship design activities are participants drawn to? Why?

In order to understand the kinds of relationship design activities participants might actually want to engage in with their partners, they were presented with a deck of 16 activities (see next page for full list) and asked to sort them into "Yes" or "No" piles to indicate whether or not they would be interested in doing them. Figure 5 shows participants' activity preferences.

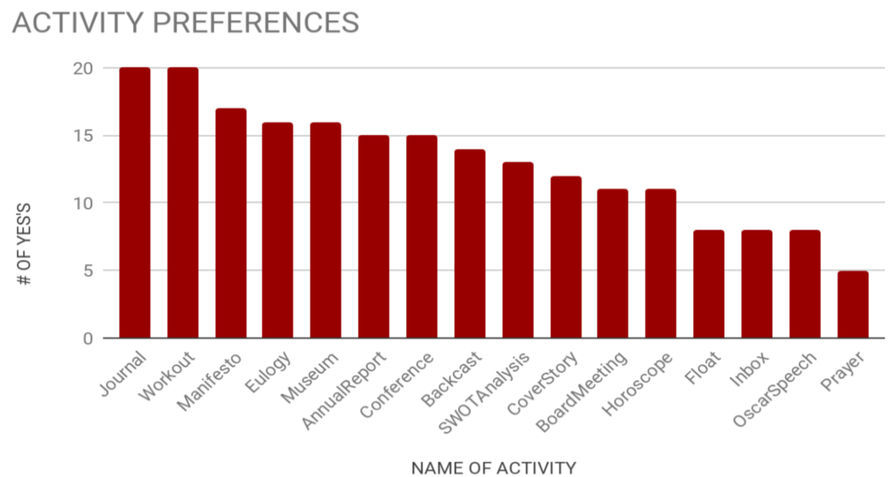


FIGURE 5: RELATIONSHIP DESIGN ACTIVITY PREFERENCES

The distribution of activities reveals several themes. The top five activities were all described by participants as creative and all but the workout were associated with "telling the story" of their relationship. The top two activities, the journal and workout, are more regularly occurring rituals, while the other three (manifesto, eulogy, museum) are one-time activities that may be revisited once in a while. The activities that fall in the middle of the graph were ones around which participants had mixed feelings. Many of them (e.g. conference, SWOT analysis, board meeting) reminded participants of work, and while some appreciated the parallels to their jobs, others experienced it as a turn-off. This aversion was most pronounced with the Relationship Inbox, which was one of the least preferred activities. Most participants also disliked the Relationship Float and Oscar Speech as they felt that they were "too gloaty" and boastful. The least preferred activity was the Relationship Prayer. Almost everyone who put it in the "No" pile justified their choice with "I'm not religious." Interestingly, almost everyone was willing to move it to the "Yes" pile if it was renamed as a "Relationship Affirmation". This finding reflects the aforementioned "Spiritual But Not Religious" trend, as participants appreciated the ritual and the sense of connectedness it could foster, without the religious association.

16 RELATIONSHIP DESIGN ACTIVITIES

Relationship Oscar Speech
Your relationship just won the Oscar-equivalent for Best Relationship. Write and/or perform your acceptance speech.

Relationship SWOT Analysis
Map out the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats for your relationship.

Relationship Cover Story
Your relationship is being featured on the cover of a magazine. What's the magazine? Why are you being featured? What is the picture? Imagine the story you would want it to be and design the cover.

Relationship Inbox
Create an email account that is reserved solely for you and your partner to send emails to each other throughout the day.

Relationship Board Meeting
Exactly as it sounds. Host a board meeting for your relationship. Who's on the board? What are you discussing? Where is it happening? What decisions are made?

Relationship Horoscope
At the start of every week, write a horoscope for your relationship for that week. Think about what you have going on that week and leave room for the unknown. Channel your inner fortune teller.

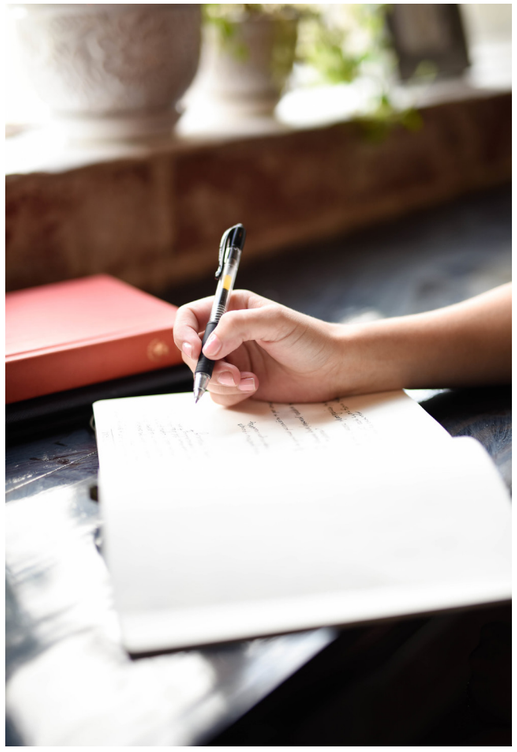
Relationship Manifesto
Create a manifesto for your relationship that will raise the bar during the good times and motivate you through the tough times.

Relationship Workout
Figure out which muscles need flexing in your relationship and design creative ways of working them out.

Relationship Annual Report
A lot happens in a year. Create an annual report for key stakeholders (whoever they may be) about key milestones and learnings in your relationship.

Relationship Journal
Keep a journal in your home that you and your partner both write in. Your entries can build on each other's or be completely unrelated.

Relationship Backcast
Decide where you want to be in your relationship x years from now. Work backwards to map out all of the milestones - big and small - that need to be achieved in order to realize your vision.



When asked to reflect on why the yes's were yes's and no's were no's, participants shared the following reasons:

I LIKE these activities because...

- They're fun!
- It allows for spontaneity and breaks the routine.
- It's about making a thing that's characteristic / a physical manifestation of our relationship.
- It involves setting an intention / vision for our relationship and creating a path toward it.
- It helps us define the values of our relationship and offers us a compass.
- They are one-time / periodic activities (can be done once in a while).
- They offer structure to flow.
- They are designed to identify and improve potential pitfalls.
- They are focused on learning and growing.
- They leave room for the uncertain / unknown.
- They yield results.
- They focus on memories and connection.
- They are creative and have an artistic form.
- They involve telling stories.
- It allows you to deal with things as they come up.
- It involves surrounding yourself with a team of people who are there for you and your relationship.
- I know what these concepts are at work and can incorporate them more easily as a result.
- It's simple and we can integrate it easily.
- It's embodied (involves using our bodies).
- It allows me to explore the future and also be present here today.

THINGS THAT MATTER:
Enjoyment, spontaneity, guidance, clarity, ease, creativity, nostalgia, openness, flexibility, learning, growth, results, action, intentionality, familiarity, bodies.

I DON'T LIKE these activities because...

- They remind me too much of work, too businessy.
- I'm not religious.
- I don't want to talk about our relationship ending.
- They are externally-facing, it's about putting our relationship on display for other people (like Instagram).
- It's too preachy.
- It feels boastful.
- It's too much to commit to doing every day / requires too much upkeep.
- It feels clinical.
- They involve more thinking and less feeling and being.
- It feels like a really big production.
- They are focused on celebrating and honouring the relationship.
- I'm uncomfortable with it and don't want to confront it.
- It requires a specific routine and I'll only take on routines if I know there's a specific reward at the end.
- It creates rigidity.

THINGS THAT MATTER:
ease, fear, humility, flexibility, fun, results

Several participants asked to take photos of the activity cards because they wanted to remember them to try in their own relationships.

What do participants feel is needed in order to nurture their relationship?

"If you could have a subscription love box delivered to your door every month, and in it, it had everything you need to nurture your relationship, what would be inside it?"

In order to understand what participants needed in order to tend to their relationship, they were asked what they would want included in a "subscription love box" that was delivered to their door every month. A subscription box is a recurring, physical delivery of niche-oriented products packaged as an experience and designed to offer additional value on top of the actual retail products contained in the box. In this sense, the contents of the hypothetical subscription love box would be personalized to the subscriber's relationship and could contain anything or anyone that they felt would nurture their relationship (Morris, 2016). Participants' responses fell into the following categories:

Prompts for connection

Quite of few of the items that participants desired in their love box can be categorized as "prompts for connection". In other words, they provide a structure within which partners can connect with each other. These prompts took several forms:

- **Questions:** Participants wanted access to "deep questions" that would prompt them to check-in with each other, learn more about each other, and initiate some of the harder conversations that participants struggle to raise on their own. They wanted "questions that you wouldn't normally ask, that facilitate sharing more than you'd normally share." In some ways, these are questions that participants *want* to ask their partners, but may not feel permission to or have the time to ask otherwise.
- **Photos:** Several participants wanted artifacts that would prompt them to think about, reflect on, celebrate, and/or re-examine past moments in their relationship. This includes: an old photo of them that they would have to write about, a photo frame that they would have to populate, or "some version of the Facebook Memories feature."
- **Co-exposure to new content:** Participants wanted the love box to introduce them to new content that they could consume and explore together. This includes subscriptions to interesting podcasts, curated Spotify playlists, and recommended books and movies. This would guarantee the shared experience of being exposed to the same content while taking the burden of finding the content off of the couple.

Activities

All participants wanted "activities" of some sort in their love box. Although they all wanted "things to do" with their partner, some of them wanted the option of picking from a sample platter of activities (e.g. a box of date night ideas), while others wanted the love box to prescribe a specific activity. The majority fell into the latter category as they felt a prescription from the love box would be accompanied by an increased sense of accountability and higher chance of follow-through compared to leaving the couple to their own devices. Participants wanted the activities to include enough structure to get them going, while leaving room for them to make adjustments and inject their own creativity. Some suggested activities include: something fun to do right before we go to bed, writing letters to future or past selves, a board game, a template for a relationship manifesto, gratitude sharing, rotating trying activities that each partner enjoys, writing messages to each other and hiding them around the house, and talking about the things that make each partner feel loved and having the opportunity to repeat those things.

Within the broader category of "activities", there were three key sub-categories that emerged:

- **Experiences in the city:** Although participants had no limit on the geographic scope of experiences/things/people that could be included in their love box, almost all participants focused on local experiences. They wanted a list of interesting events happening in the city, local adventure ideas, tickets to arts and culture experiences in the city, and suggestions for outdoor activities.

With financial accessibility in mind, they asked for a mix of experiences that were free and had a cost.

- **Co-creation challenge:** Beyond just consuming an experience together, participants experienced a desire to make something or solve a challenge together. Whether it was making a meal using mystery ingredients or embarking on a city-wide challenge with one's partner, participants were drawn to activities that involved co-creation.

- **Body-based products and experiences:** Massages were the most commonly cited love box item across all participants. Their popularity highlights the importance of the body-based connection, as well as how tending to and nurturing our bodies can contribute to nurturing our relationships. Participants wanted to both experience a massage, as well as learn how to give each other a massage. While the former "creates a sense of relaxation and a clear mind", the latter also creates an opportunity for sensuality and physical intimacy. Other body-based products and experiences participants listed include: facial masks, a bar of really nice soap for showers together, a mud bath, essential oils, instructional videos on how to reach orgasm, sensual/sexual toys, and "lovely lotion and beauty products for my partner so they can feel all goddessy." Lastly, participants wanted opportunities to explore their "edge" in terms of their physical bodies (e.g. going to a naturalist space, going to a sexually charged space, etc.), to see what feels comfortable for them as a couple.

Lubricant

Participants included some aforementioned "lubricants for connection" in their love boxes, including: cannabis, a nice bottle of wine, and/or MDMA. As one participant described of MDMA,

"It filters out everything and you just feel love. It helps you move from feeling on-edge to "Hi I'm just here with you.""

Stories from other couples

A handful of participants wanted their love boxes to include stories from other couples. They especially wanted to hear words of wisdom and lessons learned from couples who had been together for a long time. Participants envisioned these stories serving as inspiration for and affirmation of their own relationship, particularly during hard times.

Individual self-care

While most of the love box items were directed toward the couple, several participants highlighted the importance of including items that would help partners tend to their individual needs.

"You can include two actual cups, one for each of us to fill with whatever energizes us."

Time with others

A few participants included "time with friends" in their love box wishlist, although it seemed to be less of a priority than connecting with each other.

Gifts

A few participants suggested that the love box take turns including gifts from each partner to the other. These gifts could be material items or acts of service (e.g. cooking your partner's favourite meal).

Practical needs

Often at the beginning or end of their love box wishlist, participants addressed their practical needs. These are the things that they would need taken care of in order to surrender fully into nurturing their relationship. This part of their love box wish list included: dedicated time (calendar invite and all) to tend to the relationship, someone do all the chores including cooking and cleaning, food to keep them nourished as they explore the box's contents, enough money to not be stressed about taking time to work on the relationship, and a babysitter.

"Put time in the box. Here's 60min, you can use it any time this week."

Ultimately, the love box as a concept was a useful tool in unearthing the kind of products or experiences that participants might actually engage with, which in turn revealed their core needs in terms of nurturing their relationship. As a product, participants were quite excited by the idea of receiving a love box, with several of them asking if it was a real product that was being launched. As one participant shared,

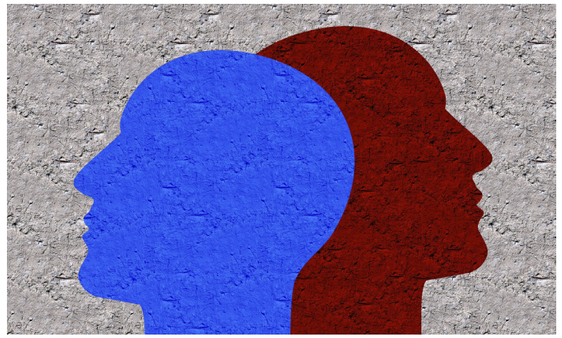
"I'd seriously consider subscribing to the love box, especially if we lived together, because it's someone else injecting energy into our relationship and all you have to do is prioritize the time instead of having to be creative all the time."

DESIRE TO LEARN

What do partners want to learn when they engage in intentional relationship design?

Navigating Conflict

Participants wanted to learn how they might better work through conflict. Specifically, they wanted to learn how to become "better arguers", not hold grudges, recognize their triggers, better manage their reaction and navigate their partner's reaction when either are triggered, find alignment in moments of conflict, and lastly, how to confront things as they come up to avoid letting tensions balloon.



Improving Communication

Given the popular presentation of "communication problems" in therapists' offices, participants' desire to improve their communication skills is unsurprising. However, as participants identified, "communication" includes a wide variety of skills, including: gaining the vocabulary to express one's own needs, learning nonviolent communication (specifically, expressing needs with clarity, compassion, self-responsibility, empathy, and the common good in mind), naming and articulating one's own feelings, initiating conversations about "the elephant in the room", communicating across cultural differences, communicating when triggered, recognizing when one is projecting onto one's partner, creating space to give and receive honest, constructive feedback, and communicating about less tangible experiences like the kind of psychic energy[13] that each partner brings to a situation.

Managing Polarities

In almost every interview, participants raised a desire to learn how to manage contradictory needs and/or desires within their relationship. They wanted to know how to balance consistency with spontaneity, safety with challenge, honouring and celebrating the relationship with growing and learning in it, and long-term visioning with being present in the now. Of all the polarities raised by participants, two in particular were consistent across all participants:

- **Independence and togetherness:** In wrestling with competing desires for independence and togetherness within their relationships, participants asked the following questions: *How do we create space in our togetherness? What does independence look like in a monogamous relationship? How do we balance time apart vs. time together? What do each of those things mean to us? How do we maintain independence and a sense of self as we move closer? How do you deal with feelings of wanting space from a (perfectly good by traditional standards) relationship? In what ways might the way we rely and depend on each other stifle our self-growth? How might I find new ways to spend time with myself? How might we design for solitary time that would allow me to be more present in our interactions as a couple?*

- **My needs and relationship needs:** When confronted with prioritizing their needs with their relationship's needs, participants asked: *How does me taking time to do something for myself impact the relationship or how I show up in it? When does prioritizing the self (e.g. going to bed early) happen at the expense of the relationship (e.g. cuddles) and vice versa? What is the work that we need to do individually so that we can function better as a team? How do you work on self development in tandem with relationship development? What are the moments in which accepting my partner means I'm not accepting myself? How can I show up to my relationship fully engaged when I'm so tired when I come home?*

Participants acknowledged that both needs in each pair are important to maintaining a healthy relationship and want to learn how to balance them in a way that does not leave them overwhelmed or overdrawn on either side. The Polarity Mapping Workshop outlined in Appendix F is designed to help participants navigate such competing tensions.

Loving You Better

The most popular question, which every participant asked in some way, shape, or form, is:

How can I love my partner better?

Participants were so curious about: what makes their partner feel safe/relaxed/stressed/cared for/happy/anxious/frustrated/turned on/off, the things they do not say in the relationship, what they are actually thinking during a fight, their hopes and their fears, and their goals. Quite a few participants wanted to know more about their partner's experiences in childhood, in order to better empathize with the way they respond in the relationship. This deep desire to truly understand one's partner is two-fold. Firstly, knowing their partner's authentic experience in the relationship helps build a culture of honesty and trust, and ultimately makes participants feel safer in their relationship (i.e. fear and insecurity thrive on the unknown). Secondly, equipped with this knowledge about their partners, participants genuinely want to please, uplift, support, serve, hold space for, and as much as possible, unconditionally love their partners. Thirdly, in continuing to ask and be responsive to this question, participants work to counteract their fear of taking each other and their relationship for granted.

It is important to note that while participants were really curious about their partners, for many, something seemed to get in the way of that curiosity manifesting as questions. We are still transitioning out of a culture that frames communication and knowledge as things that "kill the romance", and this translates into us believing that our partners should be able to read our minds and hear what we do not say. Given this context, asking a question feels vulnerable, as though we are admitting that there is something we do not know about our partner. It can feel like a weakness, even though these questions have the potential to option useful and connective conversations. As such, part of the work of relationship design will be to facilitate the asking and answering of these questions and reframing them as an act of love and rather than an admission of failure.

Practicing Presence

Participants wanted to learn how to be more present in their relationships. They wanted to learn to spend more time being *in* their relationship and less time talking *about* it. They wanted to be more conscious and intentional about how they spend time together. This includes watching less TV, reducing screen time across their devices, and learning to manage emotional energy in a way that leaves some to invest into one's relationship. In

[13]Psychic energy is defined as an actuating force or factor. It is the psychological feature that arouses an individual to action toward a desired goal; the reason for the action; that which gives purpose and direction to behaviour (The Free Dictionary, 2019).

making these shifts, they ultimately wanted to experience more flow as a couple.

Elevating Sex and Intimacy

Participants wanted to learn how to initiate conversations around their sex lives and intimacy with their partner. Specifically, they wanted to learn how to "get better at physical intimacy" without making either partner feel inadequate. They acknowledged that sex and intimacy are intricately linked with their relationship to their own bodies, and how their bodies have changed over the course of their relationship. For those whose sex lives have become more structured due to busy schedules, they wondered how they might inject more spontaneity into intimacy.

Maximizing Growth

Participants are invested in understanding how their relationship can help them and their partner "become their highest selves and achieve their purpose." They acknowledge that there are unique ways in which one can grow in an intimate relationship (compared to other relationships) and expressed a desire to maximize this growth. Even more, some participants were interested in building outwards from their relationship and understanding how they could together serve and support others by drawing on their strengths. In other words, they were interested in understanding how their relationship could facilitate self-transcendence!

Aligning on Purpose

Growing in the same direction requires that partners are aligned on a shared vision for the relationship, what it stands for, and where it is heading. Participants expressed a desire to learn how to arrive at this shared compass and roadmap.

Rebuilding trust

Participants want to know how to earnestly rebuild broken trust. They want to know how to apologize in a way that reaffirms their commitment to the relationship and to do what they can to avoid the same mistakes in the future.

Bringing in other people

A few participants highlighted the insular nature of long-term romantic relationships, and the ease and unsustainability of relying on one person for all of one's emotional needs. They wanted to learn how they might bring other people in closer to the relationship. They were curious about connecting more intimately with other couples, as well as building a trusted community of people who know and are there for them and their relationship.

Understanding other relationship stories

Participants were extremely curious about the state of other long-term relationships. They want to know how other relationships in their community are navigating boundaries, decision-making, and challenges in communication. They want to soak in the wisdom of couples who have been together for many years, weathered major changes and challenges (e.g. changes in bodies, health, financial stability, etc.), and developed insight into how relationships change over time. From couples their own age, participants want to know whether they are "normal". As one participant asked,

"I want to know, compared to the other relationships around us, are we closer to or further from what's considered normal?"

In an era where relationship expectations are shifting dramatically, participants are looking for these insights as anchors to understand whether they are "doing it right", how they might "do it better", and how they might sustain it through "a decades-long relationship."

Navigating Change

When it comes to navigating change, participants want to learn a suite of skills. Firstly, they want to know how to acknowledge, contend with, and correct for the changes that happen to them (e.g. the way our bodies change as we age/heal from injury, the way our relationship needs change as life circumstances change, the way our relationship changes as one or more of the bonds that bind us breaks/changes, etc). Secondly, they want to know how to proactively create lasting changes in their habits, behaviour, and relationship dynamics. Last and most importantly, they want to learn how to be in partnership effectively and successfully as both they and their partner are constantly changing.

Examining Relationship Narratives

Participants want to better understand how the narratives that they and their partner hold about their relationship, affect its potential. They want to examine where these internal narratives come from, how they influence the roles they each play in their relationship, and whether or not these roles are serving them.

Creating Space for Play

Amidst all of their desires to improve their communication and optimize their growth, participants also want to learn how they can play more in their relationships.

OUTCOMES & MEASURES OF SUCCESS

What outcomes do participants expect out of engaging in intentional relationship design? What would success look and feel like?

In order to understand the kinds of outcomes or "success metrics" participants were striving toward in their relationship, they were asked to define what an ideal relationship looks like to them. Based on their responses, success looks and/or feels like:

Interdependence

The most common marker of an ideal relationship was interdependence. This includes mastering the balance of being one while being two, working towards collective goals while maintaining individual pursuits, and feeling deeply bonded while not feeling not tied to each other.

Safety

Feeling safe, which appears to be intimately linked with feeling seen, was a recurring element in participants' perception of healthy relationships. This includes being able to communicate honestly, with integrity and candor, and trusting that the relationship can create and hold the space for that. As one participant described,

"It feels like being seen. Having everything be able to be discussed safely. Being seen looks like the ability to share things without fear, guilt, or shame. Because if you are acting from a place of fear, guilt, or shame, then you're hiding something that you think is unseeable or shouldn't be seen. Knowing that your partner can and will see that and still love you."

Clarity

Clarity - around shared values, the purpose of the relationship, expression of individual needs and expectations, communication, and the strengths and weaknesses of the relationship - was an important marker of relationship success for participants.

Longevity

Participants saw an ideal relationship less so as a destination to "get to", and rather a state (of love) to maintain over time. As one participant put it, "I think our relationship is pretty ideal right now. To me an ideal relationship looks like this in 30 or 40 years. That in 30 years we still touch each other, or hold hands, do surprises for each other, and find ways to impress each other. It looks like the honeymoon phase for a long time."

Acceptance

A sense of acceptance towards each other, as seen in a "really good friendship", and being able to support each other from that place of acceptance was important to participants.

Growth

Participants wanted a culture of curiosity and learning, that catalyzes and provides a "home base" for individual growth in the relationship.

Ease

Ease in the day-to-day experience of a relationship, where it "doesn't feel like work" was important to participants.

A sense of abundance

An ideal relationship was described as one in which partners can overcome scarcity mindset, feel like "our kingdom is big enough for the life that we want", and believe there is space in the relationship to contain the fullest versions of both partners and what they create together.

Resilience

Participants recognize that change is inevitable and see the ability to adapt to and collectively navigate these changes as a key determinant of relationship success. They see strength in resilience.

Joy

Success is marked by moments of great delight and pleasure in the relationship.

"Being on the same team. If you win a championship with a team, the bonds with those people are stronger. I want to be in a relationship that feels like we won a championship."

Chapter

5

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

- What to Make With These Insights?
- Design Principles for Prototype Development
- Designed Experiences
- The Couples Walk: Flow
- The Couples Walk: Feedback
- The Couples Walk: Facilitator Reflections

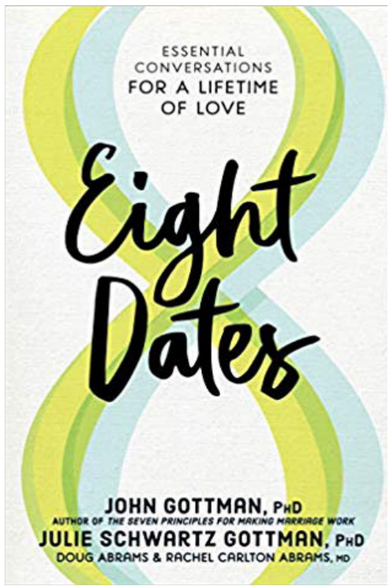
WHAT TO MAKE WITH THESE INSIGHTS?

What can I create that will address the needs of these individuals, in a way that is desirable, feasible, and viable?

The ultimate outcome of this MRP was initially intended to be a toolkit of activities that would facilitate intentional relationship design between couples. Long story short, there is no toolkit. This is true for two reasons.

1. I found a book that already offers the kinds of tools that this toolkit would have provided. *Eight Dates: Essential Conversations for a Lifetime of Love*, is written by leading marriage researchers and clinicians Drs. John and Julie Gottman alongside Dr. Rachel Carlton Abrams and Doug Abrams. The book is an invitation and a step-by-step guide that facilitates the design of eight dates, each one focused on a topic crucial to a joyful relationship: trust & commitment, addressing conflict, sex & intimacy, work & money, family, fun & adventure, growth & spirituality, and dreams for the future. There is a chapter dedicated to each date, beginning with a summary of the authors' research-based insights on that topic, followed by stories from their own relationships, and the experiences of participants who have tried these dates. Each chapter concludes with a detailed guide for a date, including the conversation topic, how to prepare, suggestions for date locations, what to bring, potential pitfalls and how to troubleshoot them, a set of open-ended questions to ask each other, and an affirmation to say aloud to one another at the end. It is thorough, rooted in rigorous research conducted by The Gottman Institute, and written in accessible language. With respect to this MRP, it provides a framework in which to discuss many of the questions that participants wanted to explore through the process of intentional relationship design. While no one resource is perfect and there is definitely room for improvement, creating another toolkit did not seem like the best use of my time.

2. In the process of reading this book and examining my own operational capabilities (i.e. my feasibility as an "organization"), I realized that creating a toolkit is not where my strengths lie, nor is it what brings me joy.



The combination of these two realizations prompted the questions:

Where am I missing in the relationships space?
What are my unique abilities and how can I contribute to this space by leveraging them?

This reflection (initially captured as a journal entry) yielded a list that doubles as 1) a set of my strengths that have surfaced through this project as well as 2) a set of design principles to guide prototype development.

While participant research shone a light on what a desirable intervention might look like, this self-reflection gave me a stronger grasp of the kind of intervention that would be most feasible given my internal capacity.

my strengths >> design principles

1 I...design and facilitate *experiences*[14].

2 I... ask powerful questions.

3 I...set up a brave space for connection and depth.

4 I...reflect back what I am seeing and/or hearing.

5 I...tell stories and make the connections between seemingly disconnected things easy to understand.

6 I...design to engage different kinds of learners / learning styles.

7 I...design to engage multiple dimensions of one's being (physical, mental, emotional, spiritual).

8 I...design for emergence[15].

9 I...design with an understanding and anticipation of human nature.

[14]Cambridge Dictionary defines "experience" as "(the process of getting) knowledge or skill from doing, seeing, or feeling things."

[15]In philosophy, systems theory, science, and art, emergence occurs when an entity is observed to have properties its parts do not have on their own. These properties / behaviours emerge only when the parts interact with a wider whole.

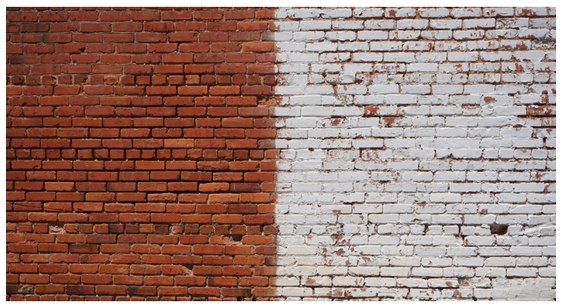
DESIGNED EXPERIENCES

Concepts for three designed experiences, one was chosen to test with participants.

Guided by the nine design principles, participant insights, and a hypothesis of where relationships are and might be headed in the future, concepts for three designed experiences were prototyped: The Couples Walk, Ritual Design Workshop, and Polarity Mapping Workshop. The Couples Walk was built out and tested with participants, however the other two experience concepts are yet to be validated. The rationale, flow, and outcomes of The Couples Walk are described in detail below, while the case for the Ritual Design Workshop and Polarity Mapping Workshop can be found in Appendix E and F respectively.

1 The Couples Walk

2 Ritual Design Workshop



3 Polarity Mapping Workshop

DESIGNED EXPERIENCE #1

The Couples Walk: A Jane's Walk

Description

The Couples Walk was designed as a 2-hour experience for couples who were looking to engage more fully - physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually - in their long-term romantic relationships. It was intentionally designed to be in the city, outside of participants' homes, in nature, in motion, in their bodies, free of cost, and in the presence of other couples who share the same intention. In other words, these were the design constraints within which the flow of the walk was designed.

Objective

Design and model an accessible container in which couples can connect more intentionally with each other. Accessibility in this case focuses on financial, time, and ease accessibility.

Test Details

The experience was designed specifically for, and tested during the 2019 Jane's Walk Toronto festival (May 3-5), an annual festival of citizen-led walking conversations that make space for people to observe, reflect, share, question, and re-imagine the places in which they live, work, and play. The Couples Walk was listed as an official walk on the Jane's Walk website and Facebook page as well as advertised through my personal channels. 30 participants consisting of 15 couples showed up at Christie Pits Park in central Toronto for the Sunday morning walk. The walk started at Christie Pits Park and ended at Dufferin Grove Park, with stops at Bickford Park and the intersection of Grace St. and College St. (See Figure 6 for The Couples Walk route).

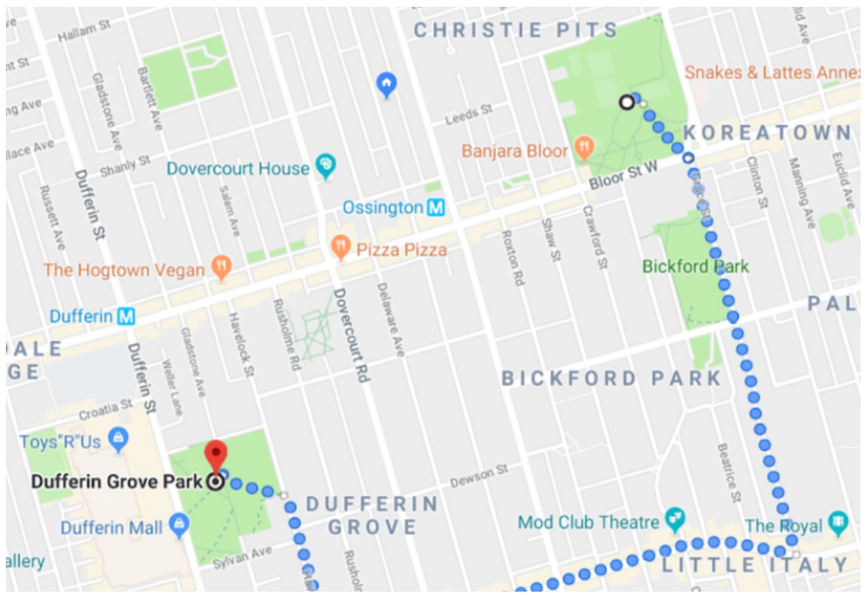


FIGURE 6:
MAP OF THE COUPLES WALK ROUTE

Meeting Place + First Stop: Christie Pits Park

Objectives:

- Introduce myself, provide context, set rules of engagement.
- Give participants an opportunity to ground within themselves and their relationships.
- Get participants talking to each other and inject energy into the group.

INTRODUCTION

Hi lovers. Thank you all for showing up to The Couples Walk this beautiful morning. I wanted to start off by introducing myself and telling you a bit about why I wanted to facilitate this walk. My name is Mathura and I'm currently working on a thesis project at OCAD that looks at the intersection of love and design, essentially asking how we might design more intentional long-term romantic relationships. As a part of my research, I spent some time this winter interviewing people in long-term romantic relationships and this walk was inspired by some of the insights that emerged. For example, when I asked participants to build out a what a brave space would look like for them to have a challenging conversation with their partner, so many of their spaces were situated in nature or had elements from nature. When I asked them what kinds of activities they would want to engage in, people wanted to be outside, they wanted to feel like they had time and space, they wanted to explore new things in the city (ideally some of them were free of cost), they wanted the sense of accomplishment of having completed some sort of challenge together. They wanted to create space for conversations that they wouldn't have with their partner in the day-to-day, but also participate in activities that allow them to be present in the relationship and not just talk about it. They wanted to hear the stories of other couples. And last but not least, they wanted to learn how to create space for their individuality within the togetherness of the relationship.

If you're here today, my guess is that you're interested in at least some of those things as well. This is an ordinary walk that has the potential to become an extraordinary experience. The key to that potential is your participation and the unique contributions that only you can make. Everything is an invitation and the choice to participate and to what extent is ultimately yours. Some of today's activities may feel entirely foreign, and others may be all too familiar. I'm inviting you to approach all of them and each other with curiosity today. Especially our partners. These people that we think we know so well - let's be curious about them. Let's ask them questions without assuming we know what their response will be. Let's acknowledge that they too are changing constantly. Let's acknowledge that both people in the relationship hold power and vulnerability. Feedback from our partners, whether it's positive or negative, verbal or non-verbal, holds significantly more weight than feedback from anyone else. Let's respond to each other with that awareness.

We are lucky to be walking through an incredible amount of green space today and

let's show it the respect it deserves. As we walk on the traditional territory of many Indigenous nations, let's also give thanks to the Indigenous communities that have been stewards and caretakers of this land for generations and remember our commitment to truth and reconciliation.

Given the nature of what we're exploring today and the desire to create a space where people can express themselves freely, I'm going to ask that we not take any photos or videos during the walk itself. If you want to document the conversations between you and your partner, feel free to voice-record your conversation with their consent on your phone. Otherwise, I would encourage you to put your phones on airplane mode, so that you can be fully present.

SILENT SOLO WALKING

Usually when we think of deepening relationships, we think of how we might connect more with our partners. In a handful of the interviews I did with therapists, they described the importance of creating some space and some distance in order to see the relationship more clearly. As a metaphor, when you're standing nose to nose, it's hard to see the bigger picture. Given that most of this walk is about connection, I thought it might be useful to start these first few minutes with ourselves as individuals. Take a few minutes to walk around and think about your intention for the next hour and a half. Don't go too far, we'll meet back up here in 5 minutes.

[Participants disperse in different directions across Christie Pits Park, and return in 5mins]

PARTNER SHARING

Thank you for taking the time to do that. Now find your partner and share your intention for the walk.

IMPROMPTU NETWORKING

Now that you've grounded within yourselves and your relationships, let's take some time to get to know the other folks on this walk. When I say go, I invite you to walk around and high-five all the other participants you walk by. As you high-five each person, yell "Yea!". Keep walking and high-fiving until I say stop. When I do, you're going to find a partner, ideally someone you don't already know, and share your intention with them. We're going to do this three times.

[Ask participants to thank their partner for sharing their intention with them before they start walking around again.]

DEBRIEF IMPROMPTU NETWORKING

What was that like? Does anyone want to share anything that came up?

[Participant reflections]

WALKING TO THE NEXT STOP

Thank you so much for sharing. Our next stop will be Bickford Park. As we are walking there, feel free to do what you need to do to transition from that activity. For some of you, this may mean walking in silence, others might want to share what they heard from others with their partners, and others still might want to chat with other couples. I trust you to do what feels good for you.

[Group walks to next stop together]

Second Stop: Bickford Park

Objectives:

- Ground in the environment and feel supported by it.
- Practice vulnerability and connect through play.

ADVICE TRUNK

Now that you've had some time to ground in your body, I want to take a moment to acknowledge some wise folks that you can draw on for support and inspiration during today's walk. But first, I invite you to close your eyes.

When we think about our long-term relationships, the assumption is that we want them to endure, we want them to weather the storms, we want them to be resilient, we want them to grow with us as we grow and not stagnate.

Well, some of these wise folks that I'm talking about have been around for a long time. They have mastered the art of weathering change. They acknowledge the need for periods of growth and periods of rest and renewal. They are fully engaged during their periods of growth and fully disengaged in their periods of rest. They have mastered an understanding of what is within their control and what isn't, and adapted accordingly. They are able to take something toxic from the environment and transform it into fuel, not only for themselves but for other beings in their ecosystem. You step into their presence and their vitality is palpable.

Take a moment. Breathe them in.

They are firmly grounded by their roots, while also reaching high into the sky with their shoots. The roots provide nutrients, water, and stability, while the shoots absorb the sunlight for photosynthesis. The roots and shoots are interdependent, both necessary for growth. Even when these folks appear to be going their own ways, they are intricately connected and supported by an underground network of peers. And last but not least, they too have rituals - for one, they mark the passage of each year with a ring.

Thankfully, this park is full of them. When you open your eyes, I want you to walk toward a tree that you feel drawn to. Multiple people can been drawn to the same tree. Just like we might go to advice columns with our relationship questions, today we'll consult with the advice trunks. Once you are at a tree, silently ask it for any guidance it might have to offer you. You can ask a specific question, or ask for guidance in general. Don't think of the answer, wait for it to come. Listen to what it says. I recognize that this can feel odd and I'm extending the invitation anyway because it's a chance for us to be open to wisdom that's readily available and significantly underused. Stay with your tree, conversely silently with it, and I will signal for you to come back in a few minutes.

[Participants disperse in different directions across Bickford Park to find a tree.]

DEBRIEF ADVICE TRUNK

How was that for you? Does anyone want to share what they heard from their tree?

[Participant reflections]

WALKSHOW

Now that we've gotten advice from the trees, let's warm up some of our muscles. In the comfort of this somewhat enclosed park space, we are going to practice different ways of walking that are not conventional per se. Then, once we're out in the open on College Street, partners can challenge each other (or other couples) to walk in this way. Let's start off by standing facing our partner and taking 10 big steps back.

First up, we have the slo-mo walk. Walk towards each other in slow motion, being as dramatic as you can be. Once you meet each other in the middle, continue walking in slo-mo past each other until you reach the opposite side.

[Repeat with Pink Panther / Spy Walk, Skipping, Runway Walk, Royal Walk/Waving like the queen, Phoebe Run, Walking a Non-Existent Dog, Walk Like How You Think You'll Be Walking In 40 years]

WALKSHOW DEBRIEF

What was that like for you?

[Participant reflections]

Often times, vulnerability in relationships is centered around having important, potentially challenging conversations. Depending on who we are, risk taking and vulnerability can also take other forms. Play, for example, is a form of vulnerability. In doing these funny walks, you all took the risk of looking silly in front of your partner and in a public space. As we make our way to our next stop, take some time to connect with your partner about what that experience was like for you. Share what was easy or hard, natural or strange, fun or uncomfortable

about either or both of the experiences you engaged in at this park.

[Participants walk down Grace Street, a quiet residential street lined by a beautiful canopy of trees on either side]

Third Stop: Grace St. at College St.

Objectives:

- Facilitate a transition from a more natural, private space to a busier, more public city street.
- Provide participants with prompts with which to engage in deeper conversation around various aspects of their relationship.

As you can see we've hit College Street, which by nature is busier, more exposed, and arguably less peaceful and serene than some of the other spaces we've been in so far on this walk. I want to acknowledge that this change in environment can affect the way you feel and the energy you bring to the rest of this walk. Also, we've been moving and in the sun for over an hour now and maybe you're hungry, thirsty, tired, have to go to the bathroom, and/or feel like you've hit your vulnerability threshold for the day. Those are very real experiences and I encourage you to honour them. This walk was intentionally designed to spend the first half grounding within ourselves, our relationships, and our environment and practicing vulnerability. We have one more stop left on this walk, and on the way there, I've come up with a list of questions that you can ask each other if you feel up for it. If not, it's a list of questions that you can take home with you and explore when you are ready. There are 10 questions on this list, but I encourage you to choose one or two to explore for the rest of the walk. It's less about getting through all of the questions and more about using them as an access point to talk about the things you may not otherwise have/make the time to talk about. For those of you who still have a bit more play left in you, feel free to challenge each other to walk in unconventional ways down College Street! I'll see you all at Dufferin Grove Park.

[Participants walk down College Street, and turn right at College and Gladstone to walk toward Dufferin Grove Park]

Fourth Stop: Dufferin Grove Park

Objectives:

- Help participants re-ground in their bodies.
- Create a space for reflection and feedback.

[Participants gather near the Reflexology Footpath at Dufferin Grove Park]

Thank you all for making it to the last stop of this walk. Right now, we're standing in front of a reflexology footpath. This footpath was built in 2014 in memory of someone who was very active in the park, and was inspired by the footpaths she came across during her travels in South Korea. The different kinds of stones on this infinity-shaped footpath are arranged in such a way that they massage your feet as you walk on them. Depending on what you feel comfortable with, you can walk on the stones in shoes, socks, or barefoot.

[Participants walk along the footpath]

Along with being an extremely accessible yet underused public asset, walking this footpath at the end of this walk also symbolizes the need for periods of rest, recovery, and contraction following periods of exertion, growth, and expansion. Today you might have pushed yourself physically, mentally, emotionally, and/or spiritually, and it's important to take the time to tend to the spent muscles before re-engaging them. Relationship strength, like physical strength, is built through periods of stress followed by periods of recovery. Let this massage for your feet be the first step in that recovery.

Before we go our own ways, I would love to check in to see how you're doing. Let's go around and share one word that describes how you're feeling right now. If you have and feel up to offering more feedback, please do. I can start.

[Facilitator shares their word and reflections, followed by participants].

Thank you all!

The Couples Walk: A Jane's Walk

These questions are meant to be jumping off points. If they don't resonate in their current form, feel free to modify them as needed or ask new ones altogether. For the most fruitful discussions, take turns sharing and listening and let your curiosity guide your conversation.

1. What rituals do you have in your relationship? What does each ritual mean or signify for you? (A ritual a structured event or routine that you each enjoy and that both reflects and reinforces your sense of togetherness.)

2. What is a story that you tell yourself about your relationship? How does it serve you (or a part of you)? How has it not served you?

3. How does your relationship tell you that it's strained? How does your relationship tell you that it's healthy? What are the signs and symptoms of each?

4. What does it mean to 'let oneself go' in a relationship? (How) have you let yourself go in your relationship (currently or in the past)? What do you want to revive in your relationship? What do you want to introduce in your relationship?

5. What does growing in this relationship look like for you? What does growing outside of this relationship look like for you?

6. What does rest and renewal in this relationship look like for you? What does rest and renewal outside of this relationship look like for you?

7. Who and what experiences have shaped your expectations of your relationship? How does their influence show up in the day-to-day of your relationship?

8. Maintaining desire with a partner over time requires that we are able to bring a sense of the unknown into a familiar space. What are some ways in which you can bring a sense of the unknown into your relationship?

9. Much of our dishonesty (however minor) in everyday life is done either to avoid conflict or to spare someone's feelings. What would enable you to be more honest and speak more of your truth in your relationship?

10. When is your relationship most conducive / receptive to change? When is your relationship least receptive and / or resistant to change?

Curious about how
The Couples Walk
went?

▶ ▶ ▶

See what participants had to say after the Walk!

Participant Feedback

Participants' feedback on The Couples Walk provided a window into the desirability, feasibility, and viability of the experience

Desirability

- *"It was so **simple and accessible**. For example, if it was a retreat setting, it's harder to recreate that. With the walk, we never have to think about the venue."*

- *"It was unquestionably one of the most unique walking experiences I've had. **I had really deep and provocative conversations with my partner.** Even though we were distant in our perspectives at times, something about the physical closeness and the fact that we were walking together made that distance feel less threatening. **I thought it was a really good use of our time.**"*

- *"Being able to connect with the trees was really important. Personally, I loved it because **it grounded me**."*

- ***We can't wait to do the rest of your questions,** we've kept them so we can keep working on them. They're questions that you can keep coming back to, like every quarter or every year, whatever your rhythm is.*

- *"There's a design format that comes with walking in nature that's subtle, but really significant. **The fact that my partner and I were able to engage in pretty emotionally charged, triggering conversation and not face each other was important.** The fact that we were walking with some people and a facilitator we trusted was really big."*

- *"We actually skipped down part of College Street and that **felt pretty cool.**"*

Feasibility

- *"What you said at the beginning really **made me feel like you cared and made me feel safe** to talk about and explore more challenging things."*

- *You held space not in a controlling sense, but you gave us an instruction, and you would just let us go and have one-on-one conversations. There was something about that dance and rhythm that **felt so safe**."*

- *"As someone who wants to have these conversations, and can't afford a therapist, I felt safe to bring up a challenging topic with my partner. Something about it felt **natural and safe and fun** and not like you're sitting in a therapist's room with them listening with a clipboard, paper, and pen. There's a different dynamic altogether."*

- *"In terms of your facilitation, the way you thought through the entire thing, was brilliant. **You definitely nailed connection and depth.** Thank you for doing that for all of us."*

Viability

- *"We're getting married soon and we were talking about the kinds of rituals we want to start practicing. After today, **we're adding walks like these to our list**!"*

- *"I've never been on a Jane's Walk like that. I've never been on a walk like that. **I'd pay money to go on a walk like that."***

- *"I said I would do it again and I meant it. **I think it could obviously keep expanding if you wanted to do it again.***

Constructive feedback

- *"**I wish I had the questions a little bit earlier**, maybe before we started walking down Grace Street. It would have been nice to have started to get into that flow."*

- *"My constructive feedback is that **the whole time, I wanted to know what other couples were thinking and talking about.** I wonder if there's a way to design for us to share with other couples and help each other. In the past, you would go to your communities to help resolve relationship stuff, so I was curious about what it would be like to be with a group of couples you don't know and be able to process some of the shit that's so real in our lives. I wondered if it might actually feel safer to talk to couples we don't know as opposed to our friends."*

Facilitator's Reflections

Creating space before connection is important.

Starting by creating an opportunity for participants to walk on their own and set their own intentions was pivotal. As one participant noticed, our group was walking more slowly and mindfully than anyone else at the park. When participants came back to their partners, their energy shift was palpable. They were more present to their experience and more attentive to their partners (e.g. facing them, more physical contact, affirming body language,etc.). Whereas coming to The Couples Walk with their partners may have been a subconscious default ("Who else would I go with?"), it was now a conscious choice.

Nature is a powerful tool.

Perhaps the most risky exercise from a facilitator's perspective, was asking participants to listen to trees. As such, the accompanying visualization was intended to provide context, acknowledge and ease resistance, and make a potentially unconventional exercise feel more tangible. Based on participants' reflections in the debrief, it was largely a success. Out of all of the activities, the most participants shared their reflections after the tree activity, and they ranged from ones that might be considered more unconventional (e.g. "I asked the tree x, and it told me y") to others that were more tangible (e.g. "I noticed so many more details on the tree that I never do."). Ultimately, connecting with the trees served its purpose in helping participants be more present to their environment, and as a result feel more connected to and supported by it.

Facilitating deeper connection between couples requires a shared intention.

As a facilitator, choosing not to actively facilitate more intimate conversations between couples was a game-time decision made to preserve the safety of all participants. While some participants, particularly those who knew at least one or more couples in the groups, seemed open to this, others seemed reluctant and were already pushing edges by engaging in the walk with their partner in a group setting. Although the idea of walking with other couples was in the walk description, deeper conversations between couples requires a group of participants with a shared intention to connect in this way, and a baseline level of trust between all participants. While it can be done, this intention needs to be clear in the event description so that participants can self-select in or out, and revisited throughout the course of the experience.

[16]Running like Phoebe or "The Phoebe Run" means running while flailing one's arms and legs, seemingly in an uncontrollable manner. It is in reference to the way a character named Phoebe runs on an episode of Friends, an American television sitcom.

Accessing vulnerability across different dimensions engages empathy and an appreciation for diversity.

Throughout the experience, participants were invited to be vulnerable by sharing their intentions with their partner, high-fiving strangers, sharing their intentions with their strangers, listening to a tree, walking/running around a park in unconventional ways, and having potentially challenging conversations with their partner in the presence of other couples. Different individuals and different couples found certain forms of vulnerability easier and harder than others. For some, talking about their feelings came easily, while running like Phoebe was terrifying. For others, high-fiving strangers was easy, but listening to a tree felt uncomfortable. In this way, naming and trying the different manifestations of vulnerability built a greater appreciation for the diverse ways in which we try to connect with each other and the world around us.

The questions were powerful.

Once a brave space had been created, the list of questions carried the experience for most participants. The questions were curated based on the key challenges and curiosities that emerged in prior participant research, and intentionally designed to invite a range of perspectives on the conversation at hand. For the most part, they were designed to be horizontal, in that they could be an entry point into almost anything an individual wanted to discuss, rather than vertical or topic-specific.

The implicit integration of spiritual elements was well-received.

An underlying thread in the design of this walk were the three defining attributes of spirituality: connectedness, transcendence, and meaning. While never explicitly stated, they were woven in across the experience. In the first half of the walk, participants were invited to ground in and connect with themselves, their partners, the group, and the nature around them. The visualization and subsequent talking to trees exercise was intended to facilitate self-transcendence, specifically a feeling of unity with other beings and feeling connected to something bigger than oneself. In fact, participants' reflections on this exercise indicate that some of them may have had what Maslow termed 'peak experiences.' These experiences are often accompanied by strong positive emotions like joy, peace, and a well-developed sense of awareness, which quite a few participants embodied and articulated after the exercise. Lastly, setting an intention for the walk and answering questions about the rituals and narratives that make up one's relationship were intended to bring a sense of meaning and purpose to participants' experience of the walk. Although further testing is needed, the success of these elements supports the hypothesis that the intersection of spirituality and relationships can yield rich experiences for partners.

The verdict

Based on participant feedback and my own observations, I believe that The Couples Walk was successful in its objective to create an accessible container in which couples can connect more intentionally with each other. The unique design constraints (e.g. a walk, being outside, facilitating for a group of couples) helped push the boundaries of what a connective experience could look like beyond having a conversation, and created space to engage the often underused physical and spiritual modalities, before engaging participants' often exhausted mental and emotional capacities.

An Autoethnographic Reflection

Although I did not participate in The Couples Walk as a participant, I did have the chance to go through the questions with my partner. Below is the auto-ethnographic reflection I wrote afterwards.

Experienced May 22, written May 23

We were sitting across a table at a restaurant for dinner when he asked me, "So what was the first question on the list of questions you gave out for the The Couples Walk?"

I was equal parts endeared that he wanted to go through them, panicked because we were about to go through them, and relieved because I'd already thought extensively about the first question and knew that it was a fairly easy answer for me. What are the rituals in your relationship and what meaning do they carry? This was a question that brought me joy to think about and reflect on.

For me, our rituals, whether we referred to them as that or not, represent so much of our us-ness and the way our love shows up in the world. They make me feel grounded in our togetherness and serve as containers for the love, in all of its forms and abundance, that is itching to be expressed between us.

Listing this question as first was intentional. I wanted couples to feel rooted in their love, appreciate the forms in which their unique alchemy shows up in the world, and inject new life into them simply by sharing the meaning that each ritual holds for them. As participants going through this exercise, the question facilitated the exact emotions that I as the designer had intended.

As he read out the second question, however, I could feel my throat close up. What is a story that that you tell yourself about this relationship? How does it serve you? How does it not serve you (or parts of you)? While my answer for this one was clear, the sense of pride that came with sharing rituals was long gone. This particular story that I told myself was built on fear. It was built to keep fears at bay, and as a result, felt totally authentic to my lowest self and entirely inauthentic to my highest self.

Who designed these questions anyway? Right. Goddammit.

In anticipation of the shame that would invite itself in if I shared this story, I asked him to share first. As it turns out, his was a story that served his highest self - it was built on hope and gratitude with an awareness of potential blindspots. He explored it thoroughly as he shared his perspective and asked me if there was anything that he might've missed or wasn't seeing. Screw him for telling the better story.

As we paid the bill and began the long walk home, I could feel myself shrinking, not only under the weight of my story, but also in anticipation of the shame in sharing it. He could sense it. "What are you thinking about?" he asked. This is another one of our rituals. This is an impromptu question that we ask each other, often on walks, often out of sheer curiosity. For me, it symbolizes our ability to share honestly about whatever we're thinking in that moment (regardless of whether it is appropriate or relevant in that moment) and to receive the other's answer without any expectation of or judgment of what it is.

There was a long moment of silence between us, and noise in my mind. The integrity of the ritual was in its honesty and yet being honest in this moment felt so exposing. After what felt like an eternity, the words came out of my mouth and the tears rolled down my face. I shared and he listened, squeezing my hand in the moments where I felt the most vulnerable. I finished talking and quietly erected walls around the tenderness inside me.

There, I did it. I had answered the question, but I didn't want to share any more of it. I didn't want him to see me like this, in my ugliness. We walked in silence for a long time. I entertained the voices in my head, my throat closed up as if in anticipation of the wave of emotion wanting to come through, and with every sniffle he held my hand a tad more firmly. Part of me wanted to run the other way and hide, and the other wanted to cry all the tears that were in my body.

In the moments where I was able to get out of my head, I was grateful for the simple motion of putting one foot in front of the other, hand in hand, and the experience of maintaining a sense of physical synchronicity when other dimensions of us felt so distant from each other. There's a sense of peace, groundedness, and possibility that comes with this motion.

It's almost as if these questions were designed to be discussed while walking...

"Honest autoethnographic exploration generates a lot of fears and self-doubt and emotional pain. Just when you think you can't stand the pain anymore **that's when the real work begins.** Then there is the vulnerability of revealing yourself, not being able to take back what you 've written or having any control over how readers interpret your story."

- CAROLYN ELLIS,
The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography

chapter

6

CONCLUSION

- Conclusion
- Limitations
- Next Steps / Future Directions
- A Final Word(s)
- Bibliography

CONCLUSION

Is it possible to leverage a designer's toolkit to architect more intentional long-term relationships? And if so, how?

This MRP set out to understand the opportunities for innovation that exist at the intersection of love, specifically in the context of our long-term romantic relationships, and design. In other words, is it possible to leverage a designer's toolkit to architect more intentional long-term relationships? And if so, how?

The short answer is yes, relationships can be designed. In taking a design-based approach to relationships - one that prioritizes empathy, ideation, experimentation, and integrative, systems thinking - it is possible to develop and facilitate experiences that are tailored to partners' needs, create a brave space for growth and exploration, are resilient to change, and are informed by the broader context in which they exist. In terms of my own strengths and operational capabilities, such experiences would also be a **feasible** undertaking.

This research also revealed significant demand and **desirability** for experiences that facilitate intentional relationship design. Manifesting through the overwhelming number of participants who expressed interest in participating in the research (more than its scope was able to accommodate), recurring questions like, "So where can we get this subscription love box?", and the openness to The Couples Walk from members of the general public, this investigation has elicited a steady stream of interest from others about the relationship potential that can be unleashed when engaged intentionally through the lens of design. While further business model development and testing is required to confirm the **viability** of these experiences, feedback from participant research and The Couples Walk strengthen the business case for this work.

This investigation also helped situate the current state of relationships within a broader history of marriage, the functions they have served over time, and emerging trends that will shape their future. Expert insights and participant responses provide preliminary support for the hypothesis that relationships are becoming a spiritual enterprise[17], a vehicle through which we expect to fulfill our needs for connectedness, self-transcendence, and a sense of meaning and purpose in life.

[17]It is important to note that the concept of relationships as a vehicle for spiritual fulfillment is not so much a new one, as it is one that has been buried beneath the modern day obsession with the self. As author bell hooks points out, modern day commentary on love feeds "the dangerous narcissism fostered by spiritual rhetoric that pays so much attention to individual self-improvement and so little to the practice of love within the context of community." She compares it to the teachings about love offered by Erich Fromm, Martin Luther King Jr., and Thomas Merton who emphasized, "love as an active force that should lead us into greater communion with the world." She reflects that, in their work, "loving practice is not aimed at simply giving an individual greater life satisfaction; it is extolled as the primary way we end domination and oppression." (hooks, 2000) In hindsight, it makes sense that an interpretation of relationships that positions them as a tool with which to end domination and oppression would be buried in a largely capitalist society that thrives on those same realities.

"We expect from relationships now - transcendence, mystery, awe, wholeness, meaning - all the things we used to look for in religion. Spirituality and relationality have collapsed into each other." - ESTHER PEREL

Furthermore, in revisiting Eli J. Finkel's Mount Maslow model of marriage with knowledge of Maslow's later work, it appears that self-transcendence - a defining attribute of spirituality - would be the next logical step in the ascension of marriage's functions on Maslow's hierarchy. This reframing of the highest human motivation as self-transcendence rather than self-actualization shifts our currently all-consuming focus on the self to achieving one's highest potential in order to be in service to something much bigger than oneself. It positions relationships as a force for effecting change beyond the individuals in them, by catalyzing growth within the individuals in them.

According to the Mount Maslow model, one can assume that relationships as a vehicle for self-transcendence would require even more of an investment, or "oxygen", from partners than does self-actualization. Based on Eli Finkel's paradigm of the "all-or-nothing" marriage, this would mean that the best relationships have the potential to become even more rewarding as they facilitate our highest level need for self-transcendence, while the average relationship risks getting worse as expectations rise even higher without adequate investment to match. Equally, any significant threat to our lower level needs can swiftly shift our motivations down Maslow's hierarchy. Like the Great Depression and World War II shifted relationship function from emotional and sexual fulfillment to security and survival, an economic and/or environmental crisis could have a similar effect on the function that our long-term relationships fill in our lives. **As such, not only can relationships be designed, but it is crucial that they be designed and re-designed to thrive within the dynamic contexts in which they exist.**

So...is this therapy?

As a practitioner of relationship design, it is important to say that it does not equate to psychotherapy. Psychotherapists are licensed mental health professionals who are trained to help their clients better understand their feelings and process their experiences. I believe relationship design is different from, yet complementary to, therapy in several ways.

Firstly, the primary intent of relationship design is to surface, rather than solve, feelings, dynamics, challenges, hopes and fears in a relationship. Therapists, on the other hand, are well equipped to help individuals work through and process what is surfaced in relationship design exercises.

Secondly, therapy tends to focus on revisiting and working through past experiences and how they affect one's experience of the present. Meanwhile, relationship design is informed by insights from the past and the present, identifies gaps between where we are now and where we'd like to go, and helps build a bridge out to desired futures.

Lastly, while therapy has become more common in recent years, there is still a stigma attached to it. Particularly with couples therapy, the assumption is that partners access it when something is "wrong" or needs to be "fixed". In this sense, relationship design presents as a more proactive, co-creative investment that focuses on strengthening and deepening the relationship rather than repairing it. It may also be more accessible in its multi-dimensional approach for those who find traditional talk therapy challenging.

Ultimately, I believe there is space for partners to benefit from relationship design and therapy together or separately based on their needs and the resources available to them.

LIMITATIONS

In what ways is this body of work limited?

Both the primary and secondary research conducted for this MRP were limited largely to a Western context. As such the valuable insights and diversity of thought that would have come from integrating Eastern and Indigenous perspectives is missing.

The research participants in this MRP were diverse in some ways, yet similar in other ways. Although the oldest participant was 67 and the youngest participant was 24, the average age of participants was 34 years old, which skews to the younger end of the spectrum. Only three out of 25 participants were parents, which means the parenting perspective could have been better represented. The average length of participants' current relationship was 4.3 years, with the longest relationship being 13 years. Those that have been in their relationship for much longer (e.g. 20+ years) were not represented in this research. It is possible that these individuals may have different needs, habits, and relationship insights, and as a result, respond differently to the notion of designing their relationship. Assuming that most of these people would be older than those interviewed in this study, it is possible that they may also have a different perspective on spirituality and self-transcendence and the role of their relationship in facilitating both.

Additionally, although participants were not asked to share data about their socio-economic status, it is likely that low-income populations were not well represented in this research. Each participant needed to spend a *minimum* of two unpaid hours across both the workbook and the interview, and this may not be time that individuals with low-income can afford to spend. Furthermore, many of the therapists and coaches that were interviewed as experts identified their clientele as middle-to-high income. One therapist who had worked with impoverished populations earlier in their career remarked that,

"They're bringing a whole other range of stressors that are realistically bigger than what therapy can help someone with. When you're really stressed about paying your bills, you're just living with a level of stress - that's a reality, that's not in your mind. It felt more limited in terms of what I could do as a therapist."

While this MRP tried to be mindful of financial accessibility in terms of the types of designed experiences that were proposed, this body of work would benefit from directly engaging and co-designing experiences that address the day-to-day needs and realities of couples with lower income.

The individuals who were interviewed for this research likely represent a subset of the broader population, rather than all of it. Not only were these individuals curious to examine their relationship, but they were able and willing to spend at least 10-20mins every day for five days reflecting on it and then talk about it with a (sometimes) complete stranger for 1-1.5hours. This "early adopter" persona requires a certain level of vulnerability, openness, and interest that not everyone might have as their baseline.

Lastly, this research engaged participants over a short period of time (1-2 weeks), likely yielding a snapshot of their relationship. It is possible that following and engaging participants over a longer period of time could yield different and/or more nuanced insights.

NEXT STEPS / FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Where might we go from here?

Possible next steps and/or future directions for this research include:

- testing the appetite for the second and third designed experiences (outlined in Appendix E and F respectively) and piloting them if there is enough interest.

- looking for and/or designing opportunities to repackage and disseminate the insights from this work in forms that are more accessible to the broader public (e.g. books, talks, podcasts, blog posts, experiences, etc.)

- building a stronger case for the concept of relationships as a vehicle for self-transcendence. This will likely include integrating insights from the field of transpersonal psychology (a subfield of psychology that integrates the spiritual and transcendent aspects of the human experience with the framework of modern psychology), which I only encountered closer to the end of this exploration.

- exploring other products, services, and/or experiences that might be created from and informed by the vast amounts of data and insights that were collected through this MRP.

- testing the core ideas of this MRP with populations outside of the "early adopter" persona (e.g. couples who are older, who have been together for 20+ years, and/or who are parents) to gain a better sense of potential resistance to relationship design.

- testing the merits of engaging in relationship design earlier in one's relationship, specifically earlier than the minimum one year threshold that was required to participate in this research.

- working with populations who were not represented at all or sufficiently in this research, including individuals with lower income, folks who identify as neurodiverse, and/or relationships which consist of more than two individuals.

- investigating how the insights from this MRP can apply to other kinds of relationships (e.g. family, friendships, colleagues, etc.)

EPILOGUE

A Final Word(s)

I have been in a long-term relationship with this MRP. The irony blew my mind when it dawned on me. I have been in a relationship with this MRP, and as messy as it has been at times, I am convinced that it is a strength to be owned rather than a liability to be buried.

For the first half of our now year-long relationship, I thought of myself as a vessel for this MRP. It had ideas that were looking to enter the world, and as author Elizabeth Gilbert might say, it chose me as the vehicle through which to transport them. As with most new relationships, I was both flattered and terrified. I resisted it, but its ideas were too compelling to turn down. I gave in.

I quickly realized that clearing the path for these ideas to come through in their most authentic form, meant that I had to examine myself, the vessel, and work to remove any barriers that were preventing the ideas from flowing through. Like blood struggling to flow through a plaque-lined artery, these ideas exposed me to the limiting beliefs, biases, and experiences I held about love and relationships that were compromising my ability to be the best possible vessel for this MRP. My commitment to it has pushed me to challenge beliefs of mine that I wouldn't have otherwise, opening me up to my own resistance and the insights that emerge when that resistance dissolves. I the vessel, was changing. I was expanding to accommodate what this MRP had the potential to become. Equally, the nature of vessel influences the delivery of its content. The way I think, the words I use, the analogies I draw, have all influenced how this MRP shows up in the world. It too has been changed by being in a relationship with me. As with true co-creation, we have both given up parts of ourselves in order to create space for something bigger than either of us to emerge.

As with all relationships, timing was key. There were times when the MRP was ready to come through me, but I the vessel was overwhelmed, distracted, resistant, and/or exhausted. And there were times when I the vessel was ready and waiting, only to be stood up by an MRP that either did not trust that I was giving it my undivided attention or was still figuring out what it wanted to be when it grew up. Equally, there have been moments of intense alignment and flow. The floodgates open, there is zero resistance, and we are able to witness and co-create from the best parts of ourselves.

This MRP, in its current form, is a culmination of all of those moments. I the vessel, in my current form, have been shaped by all of those moments.

Thank you for bearing witness to our co-creation. The moment it left our collective consciousness and entered the world outside my head, it became an entirely different creature - one I am still getting to know. If there is something about this work that you feel compelled to reflect back to me, know that I am craving mirrors. Your honest, compassionate feedback is welcome. I would love to hear from you at mathura.mahendren@gmail.com.

Love,

Mathura

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All of the existing bodies of knowledge that helped build this one.

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IMAGE CREDITS

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chapter

7

APPENDICES

- A: List of Experts Interviewed
- B: Expert Interview Discussion Guide
- C: Participant Workbook
- D: Participant Interview Discussion Guide
- E: Designed Experience Concept #2: Ritual Design Workshop
- F: Designed Experience Concept #3: Polarity Mapping Workshop

APPENDIX A

List of Experts Interviewed

The following experts participated in 0.5-1hour semi-structured interviews to inform the discovery phase of this research.

- **Dr. Alexandra Solomon:** Alexandra is a clinical assistant professor in the Department of Psychology at Northwestern University and a licensed clinical psychologist at The Family Institute at Northwestern University. She maintains a psychotherapy practice for individual adults and couples, and teaches and trains marriage and family therapy graduate students.

- **Dr. Arthur Aron:** Arthur is professor of psychology at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. He is best known for his work on intimacy in interpersonal relationships, and development of the self-expansion model of motivation in close relationships.

- **Avi Klein:** Avi is a Manhattan-based psychotherapist and licensed clinical social worker. His 2018 *New York Times* op-ed piece is titled "What Men Say About #MeToo in Therapy."

- **Ayla Newhouse:** Ayla is Lead Service Designer at the design and innovation consultancy, Fjord Copenhagen, and the author of *ABCs of Dating by Design*.

- **Effy Blue:** Effy is a European-born, U.S. based relationship coach specializing in non-monogamy and other alternative relationship structures.

- **Frank Rocchio:** Frank is a psychotherapist and college level instructor who has been serving clients (individuals and couples) for over 15 years, in Toronto and the Niagara Region.

- **Dr. Judye Hess:** Judye is a clinical psychologist who has taught Family Dynamics and Couples Therapy at the California Institute of Integral Studies, and currently runs a private practice where she facilitates couples, family, and group therapy.

- **Logan Ury:** Logan is a 2018 TED Resident, behavioral economics researcher, and dating coach. She is currently writing a book with Simon & Schuster on how to make better decisions in romantic relationships.

- **Dr. Lucy Chen:** Lucy is a fourth year psychiatry resident at The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH).

- **Natalia Juarez:** Natalia is a Toronto-based breakup/divorce coach and dating strategist. Breakup coaching covers initiating a break-up, break-up recovery, and/or winning one's ex back. Dating strategy involves creating a dating plan to attract high-quality matches.

- **Shawn Miller:** Shawn is Co-Founder and Officiant at *Young, Hip, and Married*, a company that offers creative and personalized wedding ceremonies and relationship coaching.

This research is also informed by the following experts who were not interviewed, but whose books provided key insights into the state of relationships today and in the past:

- **Alain de Botton**, *The Course of Love*

- **bell hooks**, *All About Love*

- **Esther Perel**, *Mating in Captivity* & *The State of Affairs*

- **Dr. Eli J. Finkel**, *The All-or-Nothing Marriage*

- **Drs. John and Julie Gottman**, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*

- **Dr. Sue Johnson**, *Love Sense*

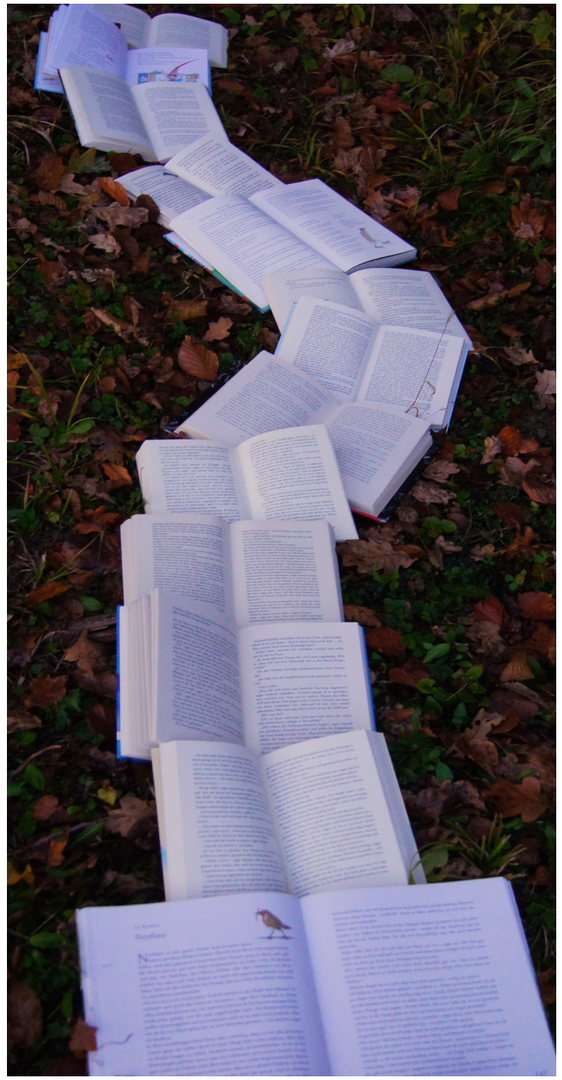
- **Stephanie Coontz**, *Marriage, A History*

- **Susan Pease Gadoua and Vicki Larson**, *The New I Do*

- **Erich Fromm**, *The Art of Loving*

- **Dr. Helen Fisher,** *The Anatomy of Love*

- **James Sexton**, *If You're In My Office, It's Already Too Late*



APPENDIX B

Expert Interview Discussion Guide

Thank you for agreeing to chat with me today. I want to take about an hour of your time to talk to you about your practice and the insights that you've gleaned about the nature of long-term relationships and how they're changing. I'm doing quite a bit of reading and researching to try and tap into different perspectives on how relationships are evolving, but it's always so great to be able to chat with practitioners who are on the front lines interacting with couples in their day-to-day. Ultimately, I'm hoping this exploration will result in a toolkit of sorts that couples will be able to draw on to help facilitate conversations that strengthen and deepen their relationship.

I will not disclose any identifiable information based on this interview. If I would like to include any specifics in the final report, I'll ask for your permission first.

If you are comfortable with me recording this call for note-taking purposes, I'd like to do that now. If not, that's not a problem. Let me know if you're unable or do not want to answer any questions, and we'll move on to the next one.

Positionality

What is your background? (e.g. academic, professional, spiritual, cultural, etc.)

How long have you been practising?

What theories and dogmas inform your approach to your practice?

Clientele (if relevant)

What is the demographic of your clientele? (age, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, religion, socio-economic status, occupation, etc.)

How do your clients want to grow / strengthen / deepen their relationships?

What are the challenges / points of tension that come up most often among your clients?

Have the types of challenges that arise changed throughout the course of your practice? If so, how?

What skills are lacking / need to be developed among your clients in order to address these challenges / points of tension?

Tools

What tools do you draw upon most often to help your clients address these challenges?

What makes these tools effective?

What tools have you found most useful/effective in getting clients to articulate their:

- Hopes
- Fears
- Expectations

What kinds of resistance do you encounter from clients to the tools you prescribe or suggest?

Is there consensus within your industry about the effectiveness of these tools? If no, what are the points of contention within your industry?

How do you find / develop / modify these tools?

Do you ever draw on tools / approaches from other disciplines? If so, in what ways (specific examples of concepts and approaches) has drawing from other disciplines been useful?

Now that you know a bit more about my project, are there other resources (people, books, tools) that you would suggest I look into?

APPENDIX C

Participant Workbook

Love x Design

How might we design more intentional long-term romantic relationships?

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

From marrying for survival, to marrying for economic stability, to marrying for love, we have entered an era in which we are asking more of our long-term romantic relationships than ever before. In addition to loving us, we expect our partners to help us grow and become better, more authentic versions of ourselves, yet struggle with communicating our needs and investing accordingly. Instead, we fall back on the notion that 'the right person' will know and be able to support us in these ways.

> *"So we come to one person and we are basically asking them to give us what once an entire village used to provide. Give me belonging, give me identity, give me continuity, but give me transcendence and mystery and awe all in one. Give me comfort, give me edge. Give me novelty, give me familiarity. Give me predictability, give me surprise. And we think it's a given and toys and lingerie are going to save us with that."*
>
> - ESTHER PEREL

Paradoxical as these challenges may sound, they are ripe for a design-based intervention. Being explicit and intentional about our expectations and ability to invest, in essence designing our relationships, opens us up to new ways of thinking about them and relating to one another. Rooted in the core principles of empathy, ideation, and experimentation, the design discipline can provide methods to structure conversations that can help us better understand and empathize with our partners, and as a result build more meaningful relationships.

This is an important area of investigation as the quality of our relationships is a key determinant of our quality of life. This research seeks to better understand the state of long-term romantic relationships today - the good, the bad, and the ugly - in order to develop a design-based toolkit to facilitate intentional relationship design between partners.

THIS WORKBOOK AND YOU

Now that you know a bit more about the project, let me say THANK YOU for your willingness to participate in this research. The exercises in this workbook are meant to be completed in advance of your interview and are intended to prompt reflection about your current relationship. Your completed workbook will serve as a starting point for our interview conversation.

Know that there are no right or wrong answers, just authentic responses. The five exercises in this workbook should take no more than 10-20 minutes each to complete, and would ideally be completed one per day.
I would recommend setting aside some time each day in a comfortable space, away from distractions, to complete each activity. Any insight you are able to share in this workbook will be immensely helpful in ensuring the outcomes of this projects are truly human-centred. Remember that you do not need to complete any activity you are uncomfortable doing, and you are free to revoke your consent at any moment prior to the analysis of the data. (February 14, 2019).

While this workbook is intended to be submitted at the interview, participants are free to use and share these exercises outside of the study.

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me at 3164551@student.ocadu.ca

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Your Name:

Age:

How long have you been in your current relationship?:

How would you describe your relationship status/model? (check all that apply)

- ☐ Married
- ☐ Common-law
- ☐ Long-distance (separate cities)
- ☐ Living together
- ☐ Living apart
- ☐ Monogamous
- ☐ Open
- ☐ Polyamorous
- ☐ Swinging
- ☐ Other:_____

How would you describe the sexual identity of your relationship?

- ☐ Same sex relationship
- ☐ Heterosexual relationship
- ☐ Other:_____

DAY 1: About Me

You've been asked to write the equivalent of an "About Me" page for your relationship. However, it must be in the format of a cinquaine, a five-line poem. Use the structure below to write your poem.

Name of Relationship
Two adjectives that best describe the relationship
Three verbs that describe what the relationship is doing
Four words that describe/capture the current state of the relationship
One word that describes what the relationship symbolizes or represents to you.

Example:
Love&Rizk
Ancient, accepting
Grounding, Giggling, Growing
Unbelievably real, really unbelievable
Anchor

_____
(Name of relationship)

_____, _____,
(Adjective) *(Adjective)*

_____, _____, _____,
(Verb) *(Verb)* *(Verb)*

_____
(Four words that describe the current state of the relationship)

_____
(What the relationship represents to you, one word)

Please use this space to capture any reflections or feedback you have about the previous activity.

DAY 2: Relationship Bank Account

The below is the latest bank statement from your relationship bank account. Think about the past few days. What have been your deposits into and withdrawals out of your relationship bank account?

Deposit: An action that puts energy into the relationship; turning toward the relationship
Withdrawal: An action that takes energy out of/away from the relationship; turning away from the relationship

Record your withdrawals and deposits below:

Date of Transaction	Type of Transaction (i.e. Withdrawal or Deposit)	Description of Transaction
Sunday October 21	*Withdrawal*	*I know my partner is in the middle of a stressful week at work and I didn't ask about it.*
Monday October 22	*Deposit*	*Spending time with my partner's dad who is in town.*

Please use this space to capture any reflections or feedback you have about the previous activity.

DAY 3: Mapping the Evolutions of Your Relationship

Much like how our biologies have evolved over hundreds of years to enable our survival in various cultures and environments, our relationships also evolve, in big and small ways, to help us adapt to changes in our lives and within ourselves. Evolution includes losing traits (e.g. our tails) and gaining traits (e.g. opposable thumbs) in order to facilitate adaptation and enable survival.

In the four boxes below, describe four points at which your relationship evolved. Describe what triggered the evolution and what was lost and gained as a result of it.

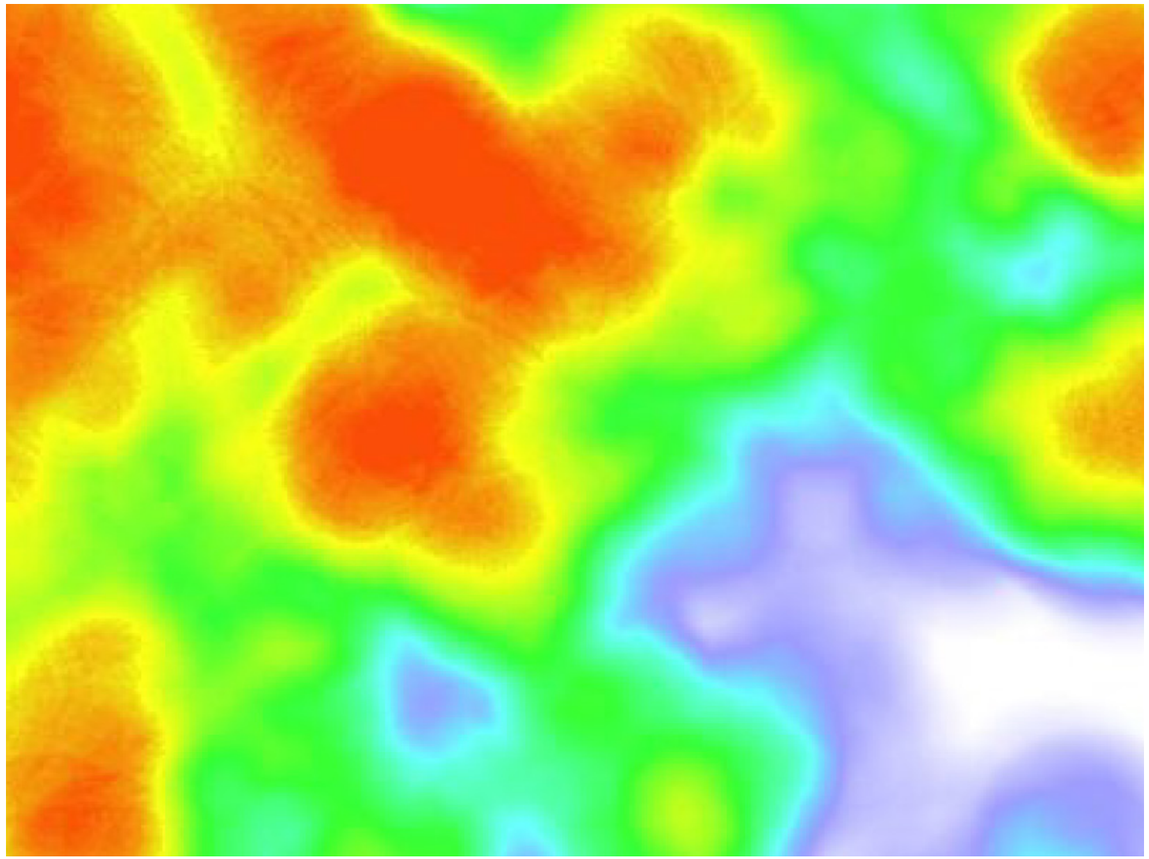
Evolution Name: **What triggered this evolution?** **What was lost in this evolution?** **What was gained in this evolution?**	**Evolution Name:** **What triggered this evolution?** **What was lost in this evolution?** **What was gained in this evolution?**
Evolution Name: **What triggered this evolution?** **What was lost in this evolution?** **What was gained in this evolution?**	**Evolution Name:** **What triggered this evolution?** **What was lost in this evolution?** **What was gained in this evolution?**

Please use this space to capture any reflections or feedback you have about the previous activity.

DAY 4: Relationship Heat Map

Heat maps are used to visually represent data, in which data values are represented as colours on a map. Imagine this particular heat map depicts levels of tension that exists within your relationship, where the cooler areas (blue being the coolest) represent the topics or aspects of your relationship that hold less tension (i.e. easy to do/talk about, doesn't engender stress, anxiety, or worry) in your relationship, and the warmer areas (red being the hottest) represent topics or aspects of your relationship that hold more tension (i.e. difficult to do/talk about, associated with significant stress, anxiety, and/or worry).

With a black or dark blue pen, write onto the map **a minimum of ten** topics / aspects of your relationship, with their placement on the map showing the **relative level of tension** they hold in your relationship (e.g. money may be in the bright red because it holds the most tension, sex may be in the orange because it's tense, but not as much as money, and household chores may be in the blue because they get done without any fuss or conflict).



Please use this space to capture any reflections or feedback you have about the previous activity.

DAY 5: Relationship Bingo

If we think of relationships as a creative process, an important part of the process is imagining the possibilities that it could yield. As your final exercise, I invite you to create a personalized BINGO card for your relationship. Each square should include one activity that you would like to do in your relationship but haven't yet had the opportunity to explore OR a conversation that you would like to have with your partner(s) but haven't yet had the chance to have (e.g. learn more about my partner's childhood, run together, run without my partner, talk about power dynamics in our interracial relationship, do a professional photo-shoot together, go to a sex club together, etc.). Assume that you will have the necessary resources, your partner's openness, and nothing to lose.

BINGO		

Please use this space to capture any reflections or feedback you have about the previous activity.

YOU'RE DONE!

Thank you so much for taking the time to complete this workbook in advance of your interview. Please remember to bring this workbook to your interview to hand off to me. I look forward to hearing your experience of completing these exercises, as well as your reflections and feedback, soon.

APPENDIX D

Participant Interview Discussion Guide

Thank you so much for making the time to come in today! I'd love to spend the next 60-90mins learning about your experience completing the workbook, developing a deeper understanding of your current relationship, and exploring how you might want to strengthen or deepen it. The format will be a semi-structured interview, which means that I have a set of questions I'd love to ask you, but there's flexibility to spend more time on some topics vs. others depending on where our conversation takes us.

Given that we're talking about intimate relationships, there's a chance that we may talk about experiences that are sensitive, emotionally charged, and/or linked to trauma. If at any point before, during, or after the interview you feel that you require support, here are some resources you can access locally (provide participants with the Support Resources document). As the interviewer, I will be taking a non-judgmental stance with respect to what you share in this interview. You don't have to answer any questions you don't feel comfortable answering and can say 'Pass' when/if that is the case. If you need a few moments to process on your own or be by yourself, I'm happy to provide that space. We can also end the interview at any point, so please let me know if you would like to do so and there will be no penalty involved. In terms of the data collected today, only I will have access to the raw data and I won't disclose any identifiable information based on this interview. If at any point you decide that you don't want some or any of the data collected today to inform the study, please let me know before February 1, 2019 and it will be destroyed.

With all of that said, my hope is that in whatever way, shape, or form, this next hour and a half will ultimately be a positive experience.

Before we get started, I invite you to read and sign this consent form. If anything is unclear, please feel free to ask me.

Last but not least, if you're comfortable with me recording this interview for note-taking purposes, I'd like to do that now. If not, that's not a problem and I'm happy to take notes by hand as we go.

DEBRIEF WORKBOOK

*Thank you so much for taking the time to complete the activities in the workbook! *Prompt participant to bring out their workbook**

1. What was your experience of completing the workbook?
2. What was your favourite activity?
3. What was the toughest activity?

4. Was there anything that surprised you?

Collect workbook from participant

RELATIONSHIP FUNCTION + EVOLUTION OVER TIME

Before we deep dive into your relationship as you experience it now, I'd love to understand a bit of its history. Think back to where you were when this relationship began - physically, mentally, emotionally, professionally, spiritually, financially, socially, etc. Think about the functions that needed to be fulfilled in your life, the jobs that needed to be done at the time...

1. Why did you hire your relationship? What were the jobs to be done at that time?
2. Why do you continue to hire this relationship over other relationships?
3. How have **you** changed throughout the course of your relationship?
4. How has **your partner** changed throughout the course of your relationship?
5. How has **your relationship/relationship dynamics** changed throughout the course of your relationship?
6. If you were to give your relationship a performance review, what would you say are its areas for improvement?
7. Think about organizational culture and all the ways it is felt and experienced within and outside of the organization. Now think about the equivalent for your relationship - your relationship culture. How would a third party describe your relationship if they were in its presence?

TENSION AND EASE WITHIN THE RELATIONSHIP

Give interviewee an elastic band.

1. Imagine your relationship is an elastic band. When has it felt taut?
2. When has it felt slack?

ANATOMY OF A BRAVE SPACE

1. Think of a conversation you would want to have with your partner that would require you to be brave (i.e. one that holds some tension). What would a brave space to discuss and tackle these points of tensions look like? Using the materials here (Lego, Play-doh, pipe cleaners), build what a brave space for that conversation looks like for you.

Ask interviewee to explain what they have built and what each element of their creation represents.*

Thank you so much for sharing that.

I'd love to pivot now to some questions that are more focused on the kinds of exercises you might be interested in doing with your partner and what you would hope to get out of it.

TIME IN THE RELATIONSHIP

First off, let's start with time, which is inevitably a constraint that plays into our lives.

1. How much time do you dedicate to your relationship every day? Every week? How is this time spent?

2. Is there anything you would want to change about the way you spend time in your relationship?

3. Realistically, how much time are you willing and able to spend on your relationship every day? Week? Month?

Thank you for sharing. Knowing how much time you can realistically spend on your relationship is extremely helpful to know when designing any sort of relationship tool. Now, let's talk about the types of activities/ exercises you might be interested in doing.

PREFERENCES AMONG A SERIES OF DESIGN EXERCISES

Give participants a sheet with the following concept descriptions for relationship exercises

- **Relationship Oscar Speech:** Your relationship just won the Oscar-equivalent for Best Relationship. Write and/or perform your acceptance speech.

- **Relationship SWOT Analysis:** Map out the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats for your relationship.

- **Relationship Cover Story:** Your relationship is being featured on the cover of a magazine. What's the magazine? Why are you being featured? What is the picture? Imagine the story you would want it to be and design the cover.

- **Relationship Inbox:** Create an email account that is reserved solely for you and your partner to send emails to each other throughout the day.

- **Relationship Board Meeting:** Exactly as it sounds. Host a board meeting for your relationship. Who's on the board? What are you discussing? Where is it happening? What decisions are made?

- **Relationship Horoscope:** At the start of every week, write a horoscope for your relationship for that week. Think about what you have going on that week and leave room for the unknown. Channel your inner fortune teller.

- **Relationship Manifesto:** Create a manifesto for your relationship that will raise the bar during the good times and motivate you through the tough times.

- **Relationship Workout:** Figure out which muscles need flexing in your relationship and design creative ways of working them out.

- **Relationship Annual Report:** A lot happens in a year. Create a annual report for key stakeholders (whoever they may be) about key milestones and learnings in your relationship.

- **Relationship Journal:** Keep a journal in your home that you and your partner both write in. Your entries can build on each other's or be completely unrelated.

- **Relationship Backcast:** Decide where you want to be in your relationship x years from now. Work backwards to map out all of the milestones - big and small - that need to be achieved in order to realize your vision.

- **Relationship Prayer:** Create and say/sing a prayer for your relationship every night before you go to bed. This can be the same prayer every day, or you can change it up as life happens.

- **Relationship Eulogy:** When the end comes, what will the people you love say about your relationship? What will they remember? What will they share?

- **Relationship Museum:** If a museum were to dedicate an entire exhibit to your relationship, what artifacts would be showcased? (Remember, artifacts can take many forms.)

- **Relationship Float:** There's a relationship parade happening in your city. Design a float that embodies the essence of your relationship. What does it look, sound, feel, smell like? How does it engage with people?

- **Relationship Conference:** You and your partner have full control over the agenda for a conference dedicated entirely to your relationship. What do you want to learn? How will you learn it? Where will you learn it?

1. Which of these exercises sound most intriguing to you? Why?

2. Which of these are you most turned off by? Why?

3. If you could get a subscription love box delivered to your door every month with everything you need to nurture your relationship, what would be in it?

DESIRE TO LEARN

As we think about designing these exercises, it's also helpful to know what people are interested in learning.

1. What, if anything, do you want to learn about relationships?

2. What, if anything, do you want to learn **about** your partner?

3. What, if anything, do you want to learn **from** your partner?

OUTCOMES AND MEASURES OF SUCCESS

Now let's say you decide to spend some time doing these design-based activities that revolve around your relationship. Let's talk a bit about what success might look like for you.

1. What is your ideal relationship? (i.e. What are you striving for?)

2. What outcomes would you expect out of engaging in these activities? How do you want to feel after completing these exercises?

3. And last but not least, what would make working on your relationship the most enjoyable thing ever, that you look forward to?

Thank you so much for taking the time to chat with me today. Your insights will be instrumental in shaping the toolkit of exercises that will come out of this project. I will be in touch with the final project when the study is complete!

APPENDIX E

Designed Experience Concept #2: **Ritual Design Workshop**

The second designed experience is a ritual design workshop. Before diving into the concept for this experience, it is useful to unpack the idea of ritual and why it can be an effective point of intervention.

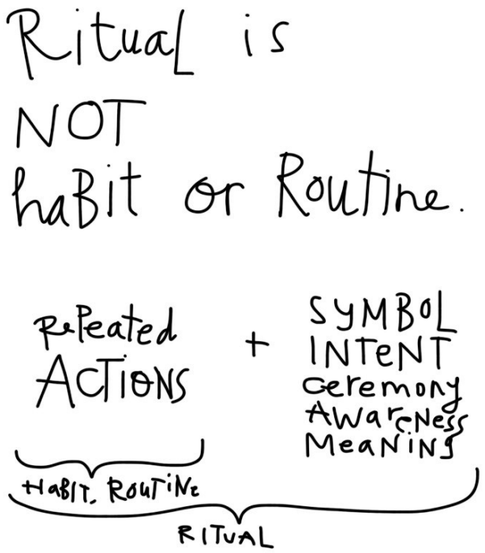
What is a ritual?

Stanford's Ritual Design Lab defines a ritual as an act done in a particular situation and in the same way each time, that has been imbued with symbolism and meaning. The key differentiator between ritual and routine, is that the former makes meaning and the latter does not (Ozenc, 2016). A relationship ritual, as defined by clinician and relationship researcher Dr. John Gottman, is "a structured event or routine that you each enjoy and depend on and that both reflects and reinforces your sense of togetherness" (Gottman & Silver, 1999).

Where does ritual come from?

Evolutionarily, it is believed that rituals evolved as a way of maintaining and promoting social cohesion. While this was once achieved through grooming, increasing group sizes meant that it was no longer possible because it was time-prohibitive. At the same time, it became evident that certain rituals, like dancing, were capable of producing the same pharmacological effects as grooming, and hunter-gatherers began to practice them more regularly (Ambrosino, 2019). Religions have long been the dominant suppliers of rituals, and according to evolutionary psychologist Robin Dunbar, religion evolved as a way of facilitating many people at once to participate in an endorphin-triggering activation

FIGURE 7: RITUAL VS. HABIT/ROUTINE DEFINITIONS (Ozenc, 2016)



(Ambrosino 2019; Samuel, 2018). He reflects that many of the rituals associated with religion, like song, dance, and assuming various postures for prayer, "are extremely good activators of the endorphin system precisely because they impose stress or pain on the body". More often than not, participants come out of these rituals feeling relaxed, at peace, and bonded with the people they are doing it with (Ambrosino, 2019).

However, in an age of increasing religious disaffiliation, many are caught between religious rituals that now feel hollow and a desire to experience deeper connection and build stronger bonds with their community and loved ones. Couples therapist Esther Perel hypothesizes that Americans love getting married, despite the fact that it is no longer a prerequisite for many of the things it used to govern, because it is one of the few remaining rituals that is rooted in tradition, has a structure to which we can adhere, and norms which we can follow (Perel, 2017). In a moment in time where choices are abundant and uncertainty is abound, she sees our affinity for marriage as part of a broader thirst for solidity, norms, and ritual.

The brain on ritual

Understanding the effect of ritual on the brain can help us better understand the role of ritual in our lives. Andrew Newberg, a neuroscientist who studies the brain in light of religious experience, notes that rituals satisfy two basic functions of the brain: self-maintenance ("How do we survive as individuals and as a species?") and self-transcendence ("How do we continue to evolve and change ourselves as people?"). While there is not just one part of the brain that facilitates these experiences, he focuses on two of them. The first is the parietal lobe, which is the area that processes sensory information, helps us create a sense of self, and helps to establish spatial relationships between that self and the rest of the world. A deactivation of the parietal lobe is observed during certain ritual activities. One's sense of self starts to blur, and the boundaries between self and other – another person, another group, God, the universe, whatever it is the individual feels connected to – begin to dissolve and the individual feels one with it (Ambrosino, 2019; Edmonds, 2019). The second is the frontal lobe, the area of our brain which normally helps focus our attention and concentrate on things. There is increasing activity observed in this area during ritual. This can be experienced as an increased sense of presence as individuals focus their minds on the actions at hand (Ambrosino 2019; Edmonds, 2019).

It is useful to note that the aforementioned sense of deep connection and a feeling of presence are both states that research participants in this MRP strived to experience with their partners and in their relationship.

Why engage in ritual?

Engaging in rituals can have benefits for individuals both within and outside of their long-term romantic relationships. Rituals can facilitate:

- **Reconnection / re-attunement:** Given that the connection between partners in a relationship naturally oscillates between moments of attunement and synchronicity and moments of misattunement and disconnection, setting up rituals in which they intentionally reset the dial, reattune, and reconnect with each other can be useful (Johnson, 2013).

- **Community:** Practicing a ritual that others have practiced before you, or that others are practicing at the same time as you, can make you feel connected to them and as a part of a larger whole (Ozenc, 2016). Communal identity is created and consolidated through these shared experiences.

- **Transition:** Rituals can also facilitate transitions. They can help with honouring what was, grieving what is lost, creating space for what is to come, and celebrating new beginnings. This includes transitions between days (e.g. gratitude journal before bed), between spaces (e.g. transitioning from work to home or vice versa), between traditional milestones (e.g. transitioning into or out of marriage, parenthood, owning a home, etc.), and more.

- **Behaviour change:** Rituals are uniquely positioned to facilitate behaviour change because, in contrast to will and discipline, which require pushing oneself to a particular behaviour, a ritual pulls at us. It is fuelled by a deeply held value and over time, requires less and less conscious energy, leaving us free to strategically focus the energy available to us in creative, enriching ways (Loehr and Schwartz, 2003).

- **Awareness & intentionality:** What distinguishes ritual from habit or routine is that it informs our consciousness that something special is happening. It alerts our frontal lobe and we become more aware of what we are

doing, and more intentional about the meaning and symbolism of our actions (Ozenc, 2016). It increases how present we are to what is happening.

- **Spirituality:** Rituals can invoke experiences that are not entirely rational or explainable, and surface emotions that can be best described as spiritual. In other words, rituals can serve as an access point to higher forces (e.g. the divine, God, the Universe, a higher power, etc.) that are neither "normal" or human (Ozenc, 2016).

Genres of Ritual

There are two main genres of rituals, which are distinguished by their intensity and frequency. Small "r" rituals are more agile and casual in nature, and tend to happen regularly. This includes one's morning coffee ritual, kissing one's partner before leaving for work, or Sunday dinners as a family. These rituals are often disguised as everyday routines, but they carry more meaning and symbolism. Capital "R" Rituals are grander and more intense in their scope, sometimes representing once-in-a lifetime experiences. They are often more coordinated, formalized, and large-scale (Ozenc, 2017). This includes weddings, sporting events, or large-scale pilgrimages (e.g. Burning Man, Hajj, Vipassana, etc.). Typically, as the frequency of a ritual increases, its intensity decreases.

Although my inclination is to focus the ritual design workshop on designing small "r" rituals, which tend to be more accessible (financially and time-wise), this can be re-evaluated based on the needs of the workshop participants.

Anatomy of a Ritual

Designing an effective ritual involves understanding its key components. These include:

- **Narrative:** A ritual is built upon a story that is a manifestation of one's beliefs and values. Depending on the kind of ritual, it says something about the individual, the couple, or the group that engages in it (Ozenc, 2016). It is this narrative and accompanying sense of purpose that adds meaning to routine and compels the individual, couple, or group to adhere to this ritual.

- **Embodiment:** Rituals are enacted and embodied. A ritual at its core is a performance. As such, the process of designing a ritual should also involve enactment and performance, which can be facilitated through tools like bodystorming and improv (Ozenc, 2017).

- **Play:** Rituals are rooted in "serious play" - activities done for their own sake, which may not serve an immediate survival capacity, but which have "a very large potentiality of developing more capacities" (Ambrosino, 2019). As a social construct, serious play provides a safe space for ritual participants to be vulnerable. Vulnerability in turn helps participants to build trust among themselves, as well as be open to experiment with behaviours they typically would not engage outside of a ritual context (Ozenc, 2017). Notably, play too is embodied.

- **Structure, not recipes:** A good ritual has a structure that, like most compelling narratives, has a beginning, middle, and end. However, within that structure, a good ritual also needs to have flexibility. If a ritual is prescriptive, or offers a recipe-like experience, it is likely to lose its authenticity (Ozenc, 2017). This is especially true in a world that values personalization and subjective experience. As such, facilitating ritual design requires creating a flexible structure within which individuals can create rituals that cater to their respective needs and narratives.

These four ingredients will serve as design pillars when developing the arc and flow of the Ritual Design Workshop.

Ritual Design Workshop Flow

While the flow of the actual ritual design workshop will be tailored to suit its participants, venue, and duration, below is a general arc that has been drafted based on existing insights on ritual design, as well as insights from The Couples Walk. This experience can be facilitated for a single couple or a group of couples.

1. Set up a brave space for engagement.

2. Create an opportunity for participants to ground as individuals.

3. Create an opportunity for participants to ground as partners.

4. Create an opportunity for participants to ground as a group (if relevant).

5. Engage in a ritual as a couple/group and unpack the anatomy of that ritual.

6. Acquaint participants with the definition of ritual and its value in our lives.

7. Expose participants to a diverse range of rituals through examples of relationship rituals that are already being practiced.

8. Have participants map and share the rituals that already exist within their relationship

9. Support them in unpacking the meaning of these rituals, the values they represent, why they have been sustained over time, and how they might be elevated.

10. Have participants map the moments in their relationship that are ripe for bringing meaning or values into their actions (i.e. ripe for ritual). Examples include: when someone is triggered, when someone wants to have sex, threshold moments (i.e. moments when individuals are entering or exiting their relationship, such as before/after work, before going to bed/after waking up, when seeing one's partner after some time/when leaving one's partner for some time), when celebrating a win, etc.

11. Activate participants creative muscles through a mind-opening exercise.

12. Have participants choose a moment for intervention on their maps and brainstorm potential ritual ideas for that moment.

13. Emphasize the role of the narrative and have participants articulate the meaning they want to imbue to this moment, and in turn, this ritual.

14. Have participants bodystorm (i.e. act out) ritual ideas to see how they might feel in action, and iterate them accordingly.

15. Where participants are comfortable, encourage them to share back the ritual prototypes they designed.

16. Where participants are comfortable, facilitate the sharing of feedback on ritual prototypes from fellow workshop participants.

17. Create a space for participants to reflect on the experience of ritual design.

APPENDIX F

Designed Experience Concept #3: **Polarity Mapping Workshop**

"Thriving relationships are the ones that straddle contradictory needs."

- ESTHER PEREL

The third designed experience focuses on identifying, unpacking, and managing the polarities that present within a relationship. Before diving into the concept for this experience, it is helpful to understand what polarities are, how they have emerged in our relationships over time, and why they can be an effective point of intervention.

What are polarities?

Barry Johnson, leadership expert and author of Polarity Management: Identifying and Managing Unsolvable Problems, describes polarities as pairs of interdependent opposites that belong to the same whole. In other words, they need each other to maintain and gain performance, and the system in which they exist needs both to survive (Levknecht, 2013).

"Think of it like breathing. Breathing isn't a choice between inhaling or exhaling. If you inhale to the exclusion of exhaling, the negative results show up quickly. And the reverse is also true. The polarity approach says, we must both inhale and exhale."

- BARRY JOHNSON

This concept of interdependence has existed since ancient times. The Taoist "yin-yang" symbol, for instance, represents interdependent energies - like light and dark - and the acknowledgement that life is about both (Levknecht, 2013). Today, common personal polarity pairs include: home-work, self-other, activity-rest, optimism-reality, caution-courage, and structure-flexibility. Within teams or organizations, stability-change, mission-margin, cost-quality, and diversity-uniformity are recurring polarities.

How have polarities emerged in our relationships?

Polarities have existed within our relationships for a long time. Whether it is the focus on the individual/couple vs. the collective/family, home vs. work, or stability vs. change, polarities are not new to relationships. What is new is the shift in the kinds of needs we expect to have fulfilled in our relationships and the lack of norms or rules that tell us how to manage them. In examining how our relationship needs have evolved over time (see Table 4), we see that when relationships were an economic enterprise largely focused on stability, both men and women had their respective ways of contributing to that stability in the agricultural era (i.e. men were responsible for the field tasks and women were responsible for the farmhouse tasks). Furthermore, all of the needs in this era were synergistic. Stability bred predictability which bred dependability which bred safety. As relationships evolved into an emotional enterprise, and emotional needs joined stability needs, the male breadwinner / female homemaker model of marriage tasked males with stability needs and females with the emotional needs. While the two sets of needs were not necessarily synergistic, they each had a designated person to ensure their fulfillment. Today, as relationships take on a spiritual function, a new set of needs has entered the picture. This set of needs introduces significantly more polarities into relationships than there were in the past: safety-challenge, independence-togetherness, predictability-spontaneity, and love-desire to name a few. Simultaneously, the grand gender convergence means that there is less gender-based division of needs and both partners in a relationship are responsible for fulfilling all of these contradictory needs for each other. In this way, the ability to manage polarities has risen as an important skill in navigating modern-day relationships.

This impetus was also felt by the research participants in this MRP who expressed a desire to learn how to balance specific polarities including: my needs vs. relationship needs, closeness vs. space, and long-term visioning vs. being present in the now.

TABLE 4: THE EVOLUTION OF RELATIONSHIP EXPECTATIONS OVER TIME

Relationships as an ECONOMIC enterprise	Relationships as an EMOTIONAL enterprise	Relationships as a SPIRITUAL enterprise
10000 BC - 1700s	1790-1965	1965 - now
Security Stability Predictability Reliability Dependability Safety	Security Stability Predictability Reliability Dependability Safety + Comfort Love Togetherness Intimacy Connection	Security Stability Predictability Reliability Dependability Safety + Comfort Love Togetherness Intimacy Connection + Adventure Spontaneity Challenge Novelty Mystery Exploration Surprise Desire Awe Independence Transcendence

How might we manage polarities?

The approach to polarity management that is outlined below is informed by and at times directly drawn from Barry Johnson's Polarity Management™ model (Johnson, 1998).

The difference between polarities and problems Polarities are ongoing, chronic issues that are both unavoidable and unsolvable. They cannot be solved in the way a conventional problem would be, by working out which of the two options is preferable and choosing that one. In fact, applying traditional either/or problem solving to polarities actually worsens the difficulty. Instead, polarities need to be leveraged. In adopting the both-and mindset of polarity thinking, we see that the two opposing values can complement each other when they are managed in a balanced way (Johnson, 1998).

The first step in managing polarities is being able to distinguish between a problem to be solved and a polarity to be managed. "Problems to solve" are defined as those with one right answer (*e.g. 2+2=?, the current prime minister is..?, acorns fall down from trees instead of up because…?*) or 2 or more right answers that are independent (*e.g. Q: how do we get from Toronto to Vancouver? A: By car, by train, by plane, by helicopter, etc. All of them are "right" answers, and they are all independent of each other.*). Polarities, on the other hand, have two or more right answers that are interdependent (*e.g. Should you get your three nephews the same gift as a way of treating them equally or gifts that are unique to each of their personalities? Both choices - diversity and uniformity - are right and they have consequences for the other pole, and the greater system, over time*) (Johnson, 1998).

More often than not, when we are faced with a difficulty, we default to our problem solving mindset. We instinctively start looking for "the right answer" because this is the nature of the majority of the problems we are presented with in our formal education. While polarity thinking is a supplement to either/or thinking and not an alternative, knowing when to employ each one is crucial (Johnson, 1998).

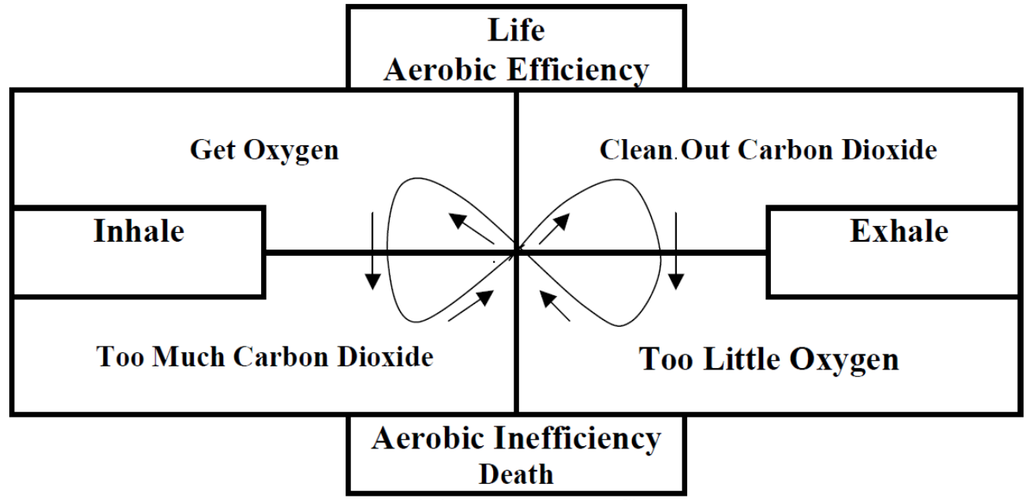
The Anatomy of a Polarity

Once an issue has been identified as a polarity to be managed as opposed to a problem to be solved, it is useful to map the key aspects of the polarity that contribute to it manifesting in the way that it does and eliciting the reactions that it does. To facilitate this process, Barry Johnson has created a tool called a Polarity Management Map™ (see Figure 8 for an example).

It consists of 8 parts:

- Two "neutral" boxes, at either end of the central, horizontal axis. These contain the names of each pole.
- Two "upside" boxes above the neutral names. This is where you put the positive results of focusing on each of the poles.
- Two "downside" boxes below the neutral names. This is where you put the negative results of over-focusing on one pole to the neglect of the other.
- The box on top is for the Higher Purpose. This contains the answer to the question, "Why invest in managing this polarity?" The answer goes beyond getting the upside of each pole.
- The box on the bottom is for the Deeper Fear. This is usually the opposite of the Higher Purpose and represents the worst case situation if the problem is not managed.

FIGURE 8: EXAMPLE OF A POLARITY MANAGEMENT MAP™ FOR BREATHING (Johnson, 1998)



Mapping out all eight components helps visualize the system as a whole. It also makes it easier to see how the poles influence each other. We see that:

- There is a natural flow from the downside of one pole to the upside of the other. After moving into the upside of the opposite pole, over time the system will saturate and move toward the downside of that pole. This creates natural pressure to self correct by moving to the upside of the original pole. This flow is visualized as an infinity loop. This symbolizes that polarities are ongoing, and the key is in learning how to manage them well over time (Johnson, 1998).
- Two forces contribute to the shift from one pole to the other: the increased pressure from the downside of one pole and the increased attractiveness of the upside of the opposite pole. For example, in the case of breathing, the longer you hold your breath, the greater the pressure from the downside of inhaling and the more attractive exhaling becomes (Johnson, 1998).

When a polarity is managed well, both upsides are maximized while both downsides are minimized. This win-win outcome helps you attain and maintain your higher purpose. A polarity is managed poorly when the focus is kept on one pole to the neglect of the other, ultimately resulting in the downside of the preferred poll. In this sense, there is no win-lose outcome, but rather a loss for the whole system (Johnson, 1998).

How might we effectively manage polarities over time?

Once there is an understanding of the nature of a polarity, Barry Johnson's Polarity Management Map™ includes two additional elements which facilitate the shift from knowledge to action (see Figure 9). This includes Action Steps and Early Warning Signs. Action Steps identify structures, policies, or practices that will ensure that you gain or maintain the positive results in each upside quadrant. Meanwhile Early Warnings are the "red flag" symptoms that indicate when you are in the downside of each pole so you can avoid spending unnecessary time in either (Johnson, 1998).

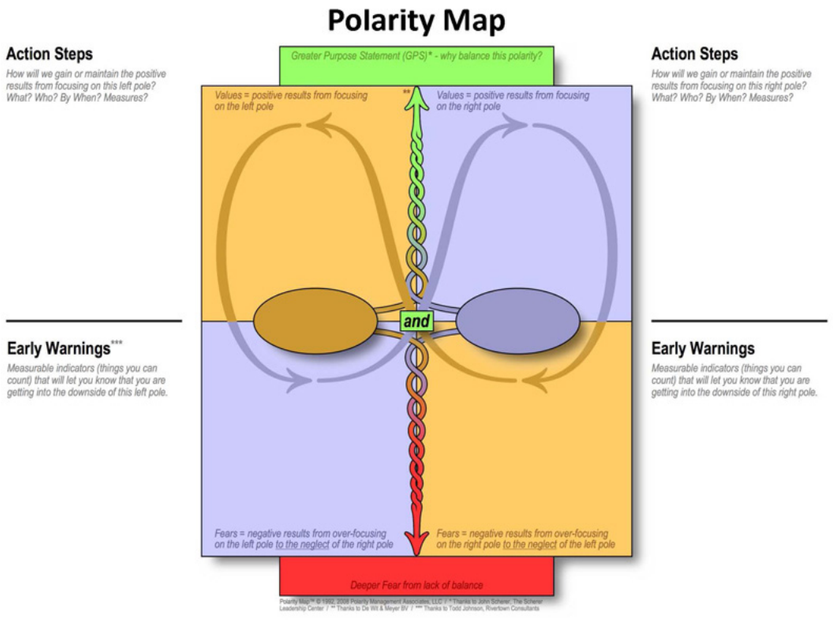
Things to be aware of:

- Half of a polarity looks very much like a problem to solve. When we have a "problem," the downside of one pole, and a "solution," the upside of the opposite pole, it seems that all we need is a strategy to move through the "gap" between the problem and the solution. From this perspective, it appears that there is no need to look any further (Johnson, 1998).

- Typically when we encounter resistance to our solution, we think it is a communication problem that will be solved by being clearer about: 1) How bad the problem really is; 2) How great and essential our solution is; 3) And/or how thorough our strategy is. This thinking increases resistance in a polarity situation. The resistance is coming from those, equally caught in either/or thinking, who see the upside of the present pole as the solution and the downside of the pole we are promoting as a problem to be avoided (Johnson, 1998).

- Pole preference is made up of a combination of values and fears. A person or group prefers one pole over another because they value the upside of their preferred pole and/or they fear the downside of the opposite pole. When individuals or groups are in conflict over opposite poles, it is important to recognize that there are conflicting values and fears that are in tension. Naturally, both sides want to move toward their values and away from their fears (Johnson, 1998).

FIGURE 9: A COMPLETE POLARITY MANAGEMENT MAP WITH ACTION STEPS AND EARLY WARNING SIGNS (Levknecht, 2013)



Polarity Mapping Workshop Flow

While the flow of the actual polarity mapping workshop will be tailored to suit its participants, venue, and duration, below is a general arc that has been drafted based on existing insights on polarity management, and insights from The Couples Walk. This experience can be facilitated for a single couple or a group of couples.

1. Set up a brave space for engagement.
2. Create an opportunity for participants to ground as individuals.
3. Create an opportunity for participants to ground as partners.
4. Create an opportunity for participants to ground as a group (if relevant).
5. Have participants engage in/embody a polarity as a couple/group and unpack the anatomy of that polarity (e.g. inhaling and exhaling).
6. Acquaint participants with the definition of polarity and distinguish it from a problem.
7. Expose participants to a diverse range of polarities through examples of personal, organizational, and relationship polarities.
8. Have participants individually list the polarities in their relationship and share back with their partner
9. Have couples choose a polarity within their relationship that they would like to explore further in this workshop.
10. Have each partner in a couple individually list out the hopes and fears that they associate with each pole of the polarity. Invite partners share these hopes and fears with each other and ask each other questions to deeply understand where these hopes and fears come from.
11. Facilitate an activity that helps participants: reflect on the hopes and fears exercise, transition from a potentially emotional space to a more intellectual space, and re-energize by moving their bodies.
12. Introduce 8-part Polarity Management Map™.
13. Have couples refer back to their Hopes and Fears to complete the Polarity Management Map™ together.
14. Create an opportunity for partners to reflect on and share insights from the process of completing the Polarity Management Map™.
15. Highlight key dynamics that are present within the Polarity Management Map™.
16. Facilitate an activity that will serve as a break from (explicit) workshop content, and re-energize participants.
17. Have partners individually come up with Action Steps and Early Warning Signs for each pole. Have partners share these with each other to create a shared set of Action Steps and Early Warning Signs to accompany their Polarity Management Map™.
18. Encourage participants to act out or talk through a specific situation in which an Early Warning Sign might present, in order to get a sense of whether their Action Steps would actually be effective.
19. Create a space for participants to reflect on the experience of polarity mapping.

The end.

Thank you for your time, energy, and attention.

Please feel free to share any feedback you might have at mathura.mahendren@gmail.com