Understanding
Society

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

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FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

INTRODUCTION

This chapter has two main aims: to provide information about how *Understanding Society* can be used for research on family issues, and to give examples of insights into family life which can be provided by the data. We focus on two sets of relationships – those between married or cohabiting partners, and those between parents and their children.

Our analysis shows that happiness with one's partner declines with the duration of the union and with a person's age; it is higher for marriages than for cohabiting unions; and it is higher for better-educated people. In turn, children (aged 10-15) are happier with their family situation if their parents are happier with their relationship with each other. Frequent quarrels between parents and children go hand in hand with children who are less happy with their family situation. Children who talk about important matters with their parents also report higher levels of happiness with their family situation.

MEASURES OF FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS IN *UNDERSTANDING SOCIETY*

Understanding Society is set to become an unparalleled source of data on the family. Part of its strength lies in the fact that it interviews all members of sample households. This means that if, for example, we are interested in the quality of marital or cohabiting relationships, the relevant information is collected from both members of that relationship, allowing for much richer and more detailed analysis than if it were collected from only one member. And, of course, *Understanding Society's* value as a resource for family research lies in large part in the breadth of family-based data which it contains.

THE HOUSEHOLD GRID
The household grid is an essential starting point for the analysis of the family. It contains information about the relationships of all household members to one another, and is the means by which we are able to match, for example, data on female sample members with data on their male partners; or data on adolescent children with data on their parents or step-parents.

MEASURES FROM THE ADULT SURVEY

The Family Background Module
This module, which contains full partnership and fertility histories, is answered once by each sample member, in the first wave in which they are interviewed. Individuals are asked about all marital and cohabiting unions which they have had, including those which ended before they moved into their current households; and about all the children they have had or fathered, including children who may no longer live with them.

The Family Networks Module
In this module respondents are asked about family members who do not live in the same household. Respondents are asked about frequency of contact with their fathers, mothers, sons and daughters, and how long it would take to travel to the place where they live. They are also asked about the numbers of living brothers and sisters, grandparents and grandchildren that they have.

Where sample members have children aged under sixteen living elsewhere, they are asked about any child support that they pay. Additionally, for the ethnic minority boost sample and the general population comparison sample, questions are asked about remittances paid to and received from people outside the UK.

The Parents and Children Module
Another set of questions relates to parents' relationships with dependent children who live with them. These include questions on parents' attitudes to education (whether they help their children with their homework, and whether they consider A levels to be important). There are questions relating to the general quality of the parent/child relationship, including the frequency with which parents engage in leisure activities with their children; eat an evening meal together; quarrel with children; and talk about important matters with them. Questions are also asked on the extent to which parents involve the child in setting rules; and how often they praise, cuddle, shout at, slap and spank their children. This module was asked in the first wave, and will be carried every alternate wave. A set of additional questions on parenting styles, which allow the construction of standard measures of parenting style, will commence at Wave 3, and will be asked of parents whenever one of their children reaches the age of 10.

MEASURES FROM THE YOUTH QUESTIONNAIRE
This is a self-completion questionnaire, given in full to all young people aged 10-15, and given in part to young people aged 16-21 who still live in the family home[1]. This questionnaire provides a useful complement to the Parents and Children module, collecting data on many similar issues, but from the point of view of the child or young person.

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[1] Note that neither of these age groups is completely congruent with the Department for Education's definition of 'youth', which is 14-19 years old.

The youth questionnaire is given each year; however, many of the questions on family relationships appear only in alternate (odd-numbered) waves. These questions include how often young people quarrel with their mother and father, and how often they talk to each parent about things that matter. Answers are on a 4-point scale, from 'hardly ever' to 'most days'.

There are also questions on how often in the last 7 days the child has eaten an evening meal together with the rest of the family; whether they feel supported by their family; who they would turn to first when they felt upset or worried about something; and about their relationships with their brothers and sisters. Finally, as part of a battery of questions which ask young people how they feel about various aspects of their lives, they are asked to rate how they feel about their families, on a 7-point scale from 1 (completely happy) to 7 (not at all happy).

RELATIONSHIP QUALITY IN THE ADULT SELF-COMPLETION QUESTIONNAIRE

The adult self-completion section of *Understanding Society* contains a number of new questions about individuals' relationships with their spouse or cohabiting partner. These include how often the partners calmly discuss something; have a stimulating exchange of ideas; or work on a project together. The response scale has 6 alternatives, ranging from 'never' to 'more often than once a day'.

There are also questions about how often people 'quarrel with their partners'; 'get on each other's nerves'; 'kiss'; 'regret living together'; and 'consider separation', again answered on a 6-point scale ranging from 'never' to 'all of the time'. There is a question on the extent to which partners engage in outside interests together, and a final summary question on relationship quality, where people are asked to represent the degree of happiness in their relationship, on a 7-point scale ranging from 'extremely unhappy' to 'perfect' (with the middle point, 'happy', defined as the average relationship).

OTHER MODULES

Several other modules may also be relevant to researchers with an interest in the family. A child development module will commence at Wave 3, and will be administered to parents when their children reach the ages of 3, 5 and 8. This module contains a rich set of questions on children's cognitive development and emotional adjustment; the child's experience of school; the child's activities at home; and parental interactions with the child. Questions on childcare are asked each year in the main questionnaire. The life events module records (among other events) details of new births, including pregnancy history, various characteristics of the baby, and details of infant feeding. Beginning in Wave 3, new mothers will be asked about their plans to return to work (or not). Also starting in Wave 3 is a module on non-resident relationships (living apart together, or LATS). A one-off module in Wave 3 will ask about people's access to transport in order to visit their families.

NEW OPPORTUNITIES IN FAMILY RESEARCH

Understanding Society's precursor, the British Household Panel Survey, contained a range of information on family relationships which was more limited than the range in *Understanding Society*. Nevertheless, it did enable groundbreaking research in a large number of areas, including, but certainly not limited to: children's family forms (Robson, 2010; Ermisch & Francesconi, 2000); home-leaving (Ermisch & Di Salvo, 1997); partnership formation, dissolution and re-formation (Walker & Zhu, 2006; Jarvis & Jenkins, 1999; Gardner & Oswald, 2006; Skew, Evans & Gray, 2009); fertility (Aassve, Burgess, Propper & Dickson, 2006; Berrington, 2004; Iacovou & Tavares, 2010); lone parenthood (Gregg, Harkness & Smith, 2009); friendships (Pahl & Pevalin, 2005) and living arrangements in older age (Gray, 2005; Evandrou, Falkingham, Rake & Scott, 2001).

Understanding Society will open up many new avenues of research. The ethnic minority boost samples will provide an unprecedented opportunity to study family life across a range of ethnic groups, which was not possible with the BHPS. The much larger sample sizes will allow researchers to analyse relatively uncommon family forms, which again would not previously have been possible. The modules on parenting and child development are for the most part entirely new, and will allow research in completely new directions, as will the new batteries of questions on relationship quality. The section which follows gives examples of just a few of the new issues which *Understanding Society* will allow us to address.

RESULTS FROM *UNDERSTANDING SOCIETY*

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN PARTNERS

This section is based on the question which asks about people's overall assessment of their relationship with their partner[2]. Responses to this question are positively correlated with favourable answers to the other questions about the relationship (e.g. those who exchange ideas and calmly discuss something more often rate their happiness with the relationship higher).

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[2] The exact wording of the question is as follows: 'The boxes on the following line represent different degrees of happiness in your relationship. The middle point, 'happy', represents the degree of happiness of most relationships. Please tick the box which best describes the degree of happiness, all things considered, of your relationship.' Respondents rate their happiness on a seven-point scale. However, the three categories at the unhappy end of the scale are very sparsely populated, so for this analysis we have grouped these categories into a single 'unhappy' category.

Figure 1 compares the reports of married women with those of women in cohabiting unions. Cohabiting women are more likely to report happiness at the extremes of the distribution — unhappy or perfectly happy — than married women. However, the association between cohabitation and high levels of happiness partly reflects the fact that cohabitations are predominantly found among younger people (half of the cohabitors were younger than 35 years, compared with only 13% of married individuals) and are typically of much shorter duration than marriages (56% of those cohabiting had a relationship duration of less than 5 years, compared to only 8% of those who were married), – and both of these factors are associated with higher levels of relationship satisfaction.

Figure 2, which shows the association between relationship duration and happiness, illustrates this point. For both men and women, happiness declines with the duration of the relationship, but the decline is steeper for women than for men. It is also the case that older people are less happy in their relationships than younger people (results not shown).

> **For both men and women, happiness declines with the duration of the relationship**

In order to properly assess the nature of the link between relationship satisfaction and whether the couple is married or cohabiting, net of other factors like age and relationship duration, we perform multivariate analysis. As well as including age, relationship duration and whether the couple is married or cohabiting, we control for gender, the number of children, the age of youngest child, educational qualifications, employment status and household income (gross, monthly).

When we control for these other characteristics, we find that cohabiting people are significantly less happy in their relationships than married people, and that women are less happy in their relationships than men; the association between education and relationship quality shown in Figure 3 is also robust to controlling for other factors.

We also find that better educated people are happier with their relationship, as Figure 3 illustrates. Income was unrelated to relationship happiness among men, and was only mildly important for women. Only women in the highest income quintile were significantly happier than those in the lowest income quintile. This association between education and relationship satisfaction was stronger for women than men, and is consistent with the fact that better educated women are less likely to dissolve their relationships (Ermisch, 2006).
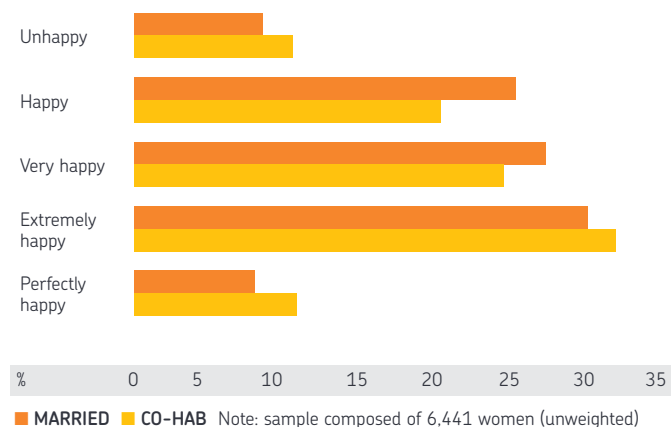
Figure 1 Women's degree of happiness with relationship

■ MARRIED ■ CO-HAB   Note: sample composed of 6,441 women (unweighted)

Figure 2 Percentage of people who report their relationship as extremely happy or perfect by duration of partnership

Duration in years

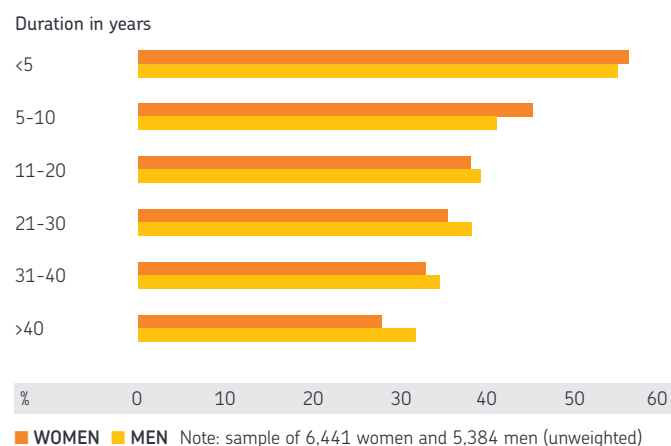■ WOMEN ■ MEN   Note: sample of 6,441 women and 5,384 men (unweighted)

Figure 3 Percentage of people who report their relationship as extremely happy by academic qualifications

Qualifications

■ WOMEN ■ MEN   Note: sample of 6,441 women and 5,384 men (unweighted)
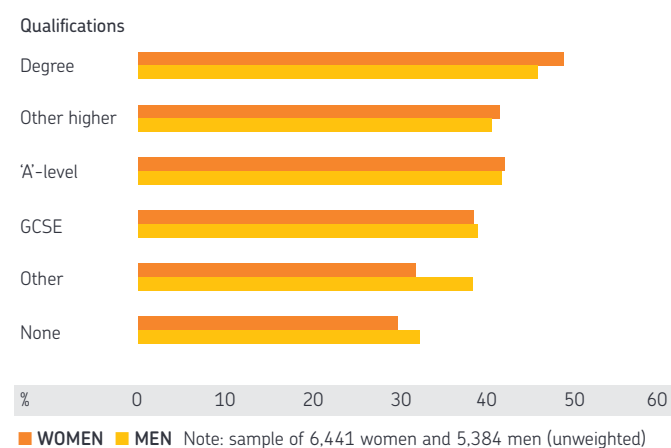
Over 60% of children aged 10-15 are completely satisfied with their family situation

Our multivariate analysis also indicates that, other things being equal, childless couples are happiest with their relationships and those with a pre-school child are least happy, with happiness increasing with the age of the youngest child. Among men, being out of employment was associated with lower levels of happiness in their relationship with their partner.

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN PARENTS AND CHILDREN

As well as providing insights into the relationships between adult partners, the data in *Understanding Society* also allow us to study relationships between parents and children. In particular, it allows us to analyse the quality of relationships as reported by parents, together with the quality as reported by their children. Figure 4 shows that young people's satisfaction with their family situation is clearly related to the quality of their parents' relationships. For young people who have both a mother and a father figure resident in the household, Figure 4 plots the percentage of young people who say they are 'completely happy' with their family situation, by their mother's rating of her relationship with the child's father figure.

The first noticeable aspect of Figure 4 is that young people are in general very happy with their family situation – well over 60% say they are 'completely satisfied' in this respect. However, the percentage does vary systematically with the quality of the parental relationship. In families where the child's mother is unhappy in her partnership, only 55% of young people say they are 'completely happy' with their family situation – compared with 73% of young people whose mothers are 'perfectly happy' in their relationships. Young people's satisfaction with their family situation also varies by their fathers' assessment of partnership quality. The relationship here is less pronounced, but there is still around a 10-percentage point difference between young people whose fathers are 'unhappy' in their relationships, and those whose fathers are 'happy' or better.

The youth questionnaire contains information on several other aspects of the parent/child relationship which may have an effect on young people's well-being. We performed multivariate analysis, again of the probability that a young person is 'completely happy' with his or her family situation, using the following set of explanatory variables: the young person's age and sex; whether the child lives in a two-parent family, a lone-parent family, or a step-family; the number of older and younger siblings in the household; the frequency that the child (a) quarrels and (b) discusses important matters with his or her mother; and the corresponding frequencies for fathers, where the child has a father figure. We also looked at how long children spent watching television, and how often they ate an evening meal with their family.

We found no difference between boys and girls, but a significant effect of age. Older children were substantially less likely than younger children to rate themselves as completely happy with their families. There was no significant difference between children living with both biological parents and children in step-families, although children in lone-parent families were less likely to report themselves completely happy with their situation. Siblings also appear to matter: having older siblings was not related to children's happiness with their family situation, but having younger siblings in the household was associated with lower levels of satisfaction – and this effect is greater the larger the number of younger siblings present in the household.

Figure 4 Percent of young people who are completely happy with their situation, by their parents' perception of their relationship with their partner
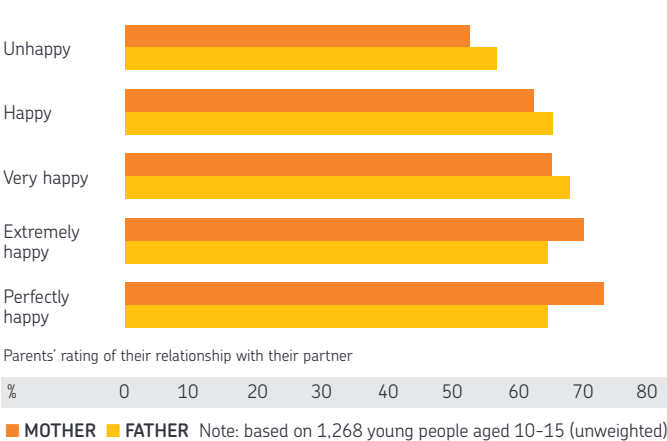

Parents' rating of their relationship with their partner

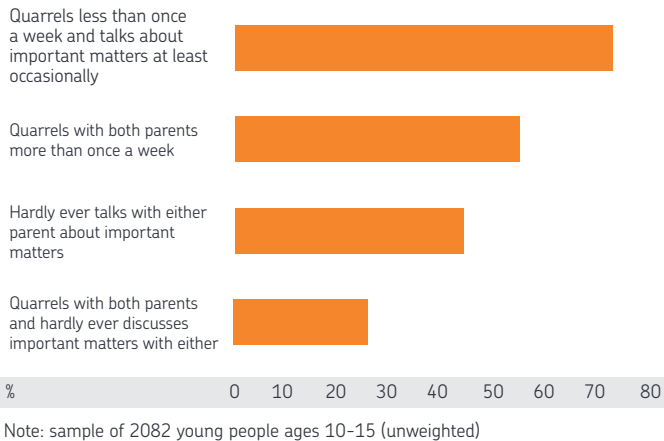■ **MOTHER** ■ **FATHER** Note: based on 1,268 young people aged 10-15 (unweighted)

Figure 5 Predicted probability that a child is completely happy with family life, by relationship with parents

Note: sample of 2082 young people ages 10-15 (unweighted)

The most important effects, however, are those relating to the frequency with which children quarrel with their parents, and discuss important matters with them[3]. The first column in Figure 5 shows predicted probabilities that a 'typical' 12-year-old child will be completely happy with family life. Children who don't quarrel with either parent more than once a week, and who discuss important matters with one or other of their parents at least occasionally, have a 74% chance of being completely happy with family life. This falls to 56% for children who quarrel with both their parents at least once a week – and to 45% for children who hardly ever discuss important matters with either parent. Children who quarrel more than once a week with their parents, *and* don't discuss important matters with their parents have only a 28% chance of rating themselves completely happy with their families.
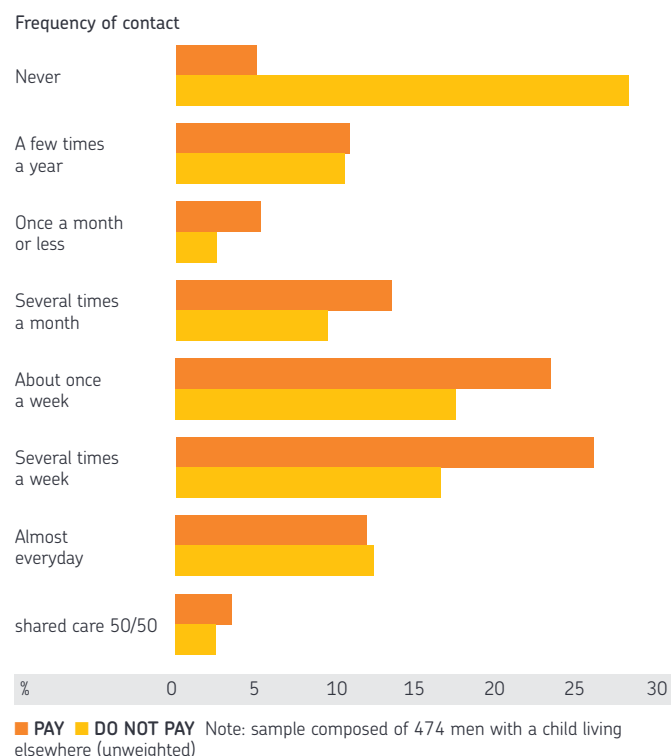
65% of fathers who pay child support see their children at least once a week

We found that hours spent watching TV are completely unrelated to a young person's happiness with their family situation. However, eating an evening meal together as a family is important: children who eat an evening meal with their family at least three times a week are substantially more likely to report being completely happy with their family situation than children who never eat with their family, or who eat together less than three times a week, reflecting the findings of a number of studies in this area (Fulkerson, Story, Mellin, Leffert, Neumark-Sztainer & French, 2006, Eisenberg, Olson, Neumark-Sztainer, Story & Bearinger, 2004).

Of course, not all children live with both their parents; a growing number of children live in a different household to one or both parents, particularly their father. *Understanding Society* contains data on these non co-resident relationships; non-resident fathers are included in questions to children on their relationships with their parents, and parents are asked about the payment of child support and the frequency of contact with their children. Figure 6 shows the frequency of contact for fathers with a dependent child living elsewhere. This distribution varies considerably between the two-thirds of fathers who pay child support and the one-third who do not[4]. Over one quarter of fathers who pay child support see their children several times a week, and a further 23% see their children about once a week. But of fathers who do not pay child support, 28% never see their child, and less than a third see them several times a week or more.

Figure 6 Contact between fathers and non-resident dependent children by payment of child support

Frequency of contact

Never
A few times a year
Once a month or less
Several times a month
About once a week
Several times a week
Almost everyday
shared care 50/50

% | 0 | 5 | 10 | 15 | 20 | 25 | 30

■ **PAY** ■ **DO NOT PAY** Note: sample composed of 474 men with a child living elsewhere (unweighted)

FUTURE WORK

It is increasingly recognised by both social researchers and policy makers (e.g. all the main political parties in the UK) that parents' relationships between each other and with their children are important for children's cognitive and emotional development and the stability of families. This includes not only what parents do for and with their children, but also the values, beliefs and motivation that are instilled by parents in their children. To take a concrete example, the current UK government is actively interested in evidence and policy ideas to support couple relationships. This chapter illustrates the rich potential for family research which *Understanding Society* offers. It is evident that even with only a single wave of data, many interesting questions may be addressed; as the same households are interviewed year after year, the scope for research will grow and grow. There is not space to list all the potential research questions which might be addressed using *Understanding Society*. But here are a few.

In this chapter, we have looked separately at men's and women's satisfaction with their relationships – but we have not examined how they are related *within* relationships. We might expect partners' levels of satisfaction to be highly correlated with one another – but how far is this really the case?

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[3] Both of these variables – quarrelling with one's parents and discussing important matters with them – are related to factors including parents' educational status, age and marital status. These factors are much more pronounced in relation to the mother than the father. However, this analysis shows that the quality of a child's relationship with his or her parents has a strong effect on his or her satisfaction with family life, even when these other factors are taken into account.

[4] The percentage paying child support is very similar to that found in BHPS data, in which questions about child support occur in the financial section of the questionnaire. For example, see Ermisch (2008).

And as we observe families over time, we will be able to ask how life events are related to relationship quality in a dynamic context. For example, we already know that unemployed men are on average less happy in their relationships than men with a job. But what happens to relationship satisfaction when an unemployed man *gets* a job? We already know that people with small children are less happy in their relationships than people without children. But again, once longitudinal data become available, we will be able to analyse in detail the changes in relationship quality which come about when a baby is born – and perhaps, to identify other factors which would help us to identify couples who are particularly at risk of suffering relationship stress on the birth of a baby.

> ### As time goes on, we will be able to assess the effects of relationship quality on a couple's children

We will also be able to study how relationship quality affects life events. You don't have to be a top social scientist to predict that couples who are less happy in their relationships are more likely to split up as time goes on. But what drives this? Do certain aspects of relationship quality predict separation better than others? Is the woman's dissatisfaction with the relationship a more important predictor of separation than the man's, or vice versa? Is separation more likely when both partners are unhappy? Or is it equally likely to occur when just one partner is unhappy in the relationship?

As time goes on, we will be able to assess the effects of relationship quality on a couple's children. We might ask, for example, how well the quality of the parental relationship affects outcomes for their children, like academic success, performance in the job market, mental health, or, after a decade or so, the children's own experiences of partnership and family life.

As well as information on the parents' own relationship, *Understanding Society* also includes questions about the parent/child relationship from the perspectives of both parents and children – and questions about parenting styles. In a dynamic context, we will be able to see how parents' attitudes and parenting styles evolve over their lives as parents; how the parent/child relationship evolves over time; and how all these factors, and others, such as employment, income, attitudes, social participation, health, and the many other facets of life on which *Understanding Society* provides information, interact to shape the longitudinal lives of a generation who are now children, but will form the next generation of adults.

Sample Size

After excluding those with missing information on the key measures 6,441 women and 5,384 men who were married or in a cohabiting partnership were included in the analysis. The youth questionnaire is self-completion and completed by the young person in confidence. Of the 2,163 young people and after excluding those with any missing information on the key measures, 2,082 young people were included in this analysis. The data are weighted to take account of design effects in the sample.

Findings

For both men and women, overall happiness with their partnership declines with the duration of the relationship, but the decline is steeper for women than for men. When we control for other characteristics, cohabiting people are significantly less happy in their relationships than married people, and that women are less happy in their relationships than men. In addition, other things being equal, childless couples are happiest with their relationships and those with a pre-school child are least happy.

Among men, being out of employment was associated with lower levels of happiness in their relationship with their partner. Income appears to be unrelated to relationship happiness among men, and is only mildly important for women. Only women in the highest income quintile are significantly happier than those in the lowest income quintile.

Over 60% of children aged 10-15 are completely satisfied with their family situation, but in families where the child's mother is unhappy in her partnership children are less likely to be completely happy with their family situation. Children's satisfaction also varies by their fathers' perception of the partnership.

Two measures of communication with parents, frequency of quarrelling and discussion of important matters are among the factors most strongly related to the probability that a young person is 'completely happy' with his or her family situation.

Having older siblings was not related to children's happiness with their family situation, but having younger siblings in the household was associated with lower levels of satisfaction – and this effect is greater the larger the number of younger siblings present in the household.

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