

In His Own Words: Narratives of Longevity

Phase III Interview Narratives & Discussion

Selection of Participants

From the sample of 122 coupled participants who provided Self and Partner narratives for the ORI¹ (Phase I data collection) and who completed the online questionnaire (Phase II data collection), two criteria were used to support researcher's intent to select approximately 25% of the sample (approximately 30 individual participants, 15 couples) for Phase III data collection.

The first criterion for selection was a strong ability for the participant to articulate the concept of longevity as demonstrated by the content of his ORI Self and Partner narratives. The ability to articulate the concept of longevity was subjectively determined, based in great part on the researcher's psychoanalytically informed clinical training and experience, and organized by the conceptual categories generated by the attachment and object relations theory supporting the ORI. The second criterion for selection was a high score corresponding to the ORI Factors. High scores were those in the 80th and 90th percentiles of the range established by the minimum and maximum scores for each ORI factor for the entire 122 participant sample. The selection criteria yielded 44 participants or 22 couples, all of whom were contacted by email and invited to be interviewed.

In deference to the significant amount of time that participants already had spent being interviewed for Phase I and completing the online questionnaire in Phase II, researcher made only one request and one follow-up. Participants who did not respond, or whose scheduling made contact and/or interviewing difficult, were not pursued. In some cases only one half of the couple responded. The resulting interviews were administered to 28 participants, 14 couples.

This sub-sample of participants interviewed in Phase III ranged in age from 34 to 76 with a mean age of 56.6. Couples had been together from 12 years to 51 years, the longest period of time that any participants in the study had been coupled. The mean number of years that couples in this sub-sample had been together was 27 (see Table 1 with ages of individual participants and years couples were together).

¹ For a quick overview of the Object Relations Inventory, please click on the "About the ORI" link.

Table 1. Phase III interviewed coupled participants with ages and years together.

Years Together in Descending Order	Age of Older Partner	Age of Younger Partner
Interviewed Participant Couples, Years Together and Ages (N=28, 14 couples)		
51	75	69
38	75	63
34	61	64
34	59	57
28	53	49
27	64	51
26	59	53
24	62	55
23	45	42
22	52	50
21	76	44
20	66	65
18	47	44
12	50	34

Selection of Questions

Questions were selected based on analysis of the sample’s responses (N=122) to the online questionnaire as well as themes that appeared in the ORI narratives. Questions probed the following overarching categories: Satisfaction with aspects of the real relationship; permanence; communication, including conflict and the ability to confide in one another; participants’ sense of oppositeness and sameness in relation to each other; mutual admiration; sex and monogamy; and essential elements of the continued relationship.

Although general categories based on Phase I and Phase II data were used to generate questions asked in Phase III, the interviews themselves revealed new sub-categories and themes. Accordingly, the Phase III narratives generated additional findings, and although not necessarily attributable to the *entire* sample of 122 participants, they were *representative* of certain findings that applied generally to the sample.

Phase III Interview Narratives

Woven into the narratives below are the attributes of stability, permanence, and consistency, the three most highly rated attributes that participants associated with their partners (ideal and real), relationships (ideal and real) and their parents (male and female). In the course of the interviews, several sub-categories or themes emerged in addition to the general categories. The summaries of findings that precede each set of narratives are based on the Phase II interviews for the 28 participants, but also are supplemented by the findings obtained from data collected in the Phase I ORI narratives. Results are organized by category, then by related subcategories/themes. Names used in the narratives are not those of the actual participants.

Satisfaction with Aspects of the Real Relationship

The questionnaire results and interview narratives indicated that the greatest number of participants were extremely satisfied with three aspects of their relationships, their code of shared values, home and their relationships with their respective partners' families.

Code of Shared Values

When asked about shared values, participants responded with narratives that described general approaches to life as well as specific values, such as truthfulness, respect and honesty, all of which served to support

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compatibility, enabled them to accomplish tasks together, maintain ongoing communication, foster respect and, ultimately, promote the longevity of their relationships. Relevant to their individual growth and growth of the relationship, some participants spoke of the evolution of values over time and the need for adaptation:

I would say that the code of shared values was something that nearly 28 years ago certainly had a lot to do with our compatibility and our confidence that our relationship would have the ability to last, because so many of those things we saw eye to eye on.

We have pretty much the same ideals and aspirations. And what I think is wrong is what Jeremy usually also thinks is wrong.

[Values], yes, or principals, depending on which one you want to call it. There are things like just being truthful with people and always trying to do the right thing, I guess.

In terms of values themselves, we share a lot of the same values. Most of all I think probably that the highest I would rank is honesty, because we are very honest with each other.

I think we both have some unique values. I think that the shared ones are the basis of the longevity of our relationship I think that we have grown and changed and I think our core values have [changed with us].

Home

Descriptions of home revealed thoughts about the physical space and layout, but also the feeling of being together and the commitment associated with having a shared home. Home is also described as a psychological space, not necessarily limited to a physical structure. Home related projects generated enjoyable opportunities to work together and foster a sense of “grounding” as one participant stated. Selecting a home, working on home projects and managing the financial aspects of a home were manifestations of three categories explored in these findings: communication; individual talents and skills (other than communication); and permanence:

Home related projects generated enjoyable opportunities to work together and foster a sense of “grounding” as one participant stated.

We've always managed to find home, I mean both physically and emotionally, wherever we've lived, and we've moved around a reasonable amount For me, home is how we come together as a couple.

As far as the home is concerned, we have always done things together, we've always chosen together. . . . We moved into a house . . . that needed a lot of work done to it . . . but it is something that we both enjoy. So it's always been a very grounding place for us that we always have shared and enjoyed.

We made the commitment to each other [to live together] and we've always lived together and we shared a home and furnished and decorated it and so forth together.

Sean and I are both major nesters and, I mean, part of what brought us together was the sense that we had very similar taste and the same degree of care about how we put our homes together.

Home, being the nucleus, has always been a very high priority and source of satisfaction, feeling, comfort and so forth.

We enjoy the time that we spend at our house and we're not huge do-it-yourselfers, but . . . we're in agreement about what we like and what we want to improve. So, there is a fair amount of harmony about those things.

Most of our time spent together tends to be . . . sitting on the bed watching TV with the dogs and our laptops . . . which is really kind of sad when you think about it. But, it is a very safe place for us and we're very content when we are doing that.

Relationship with Partner's Family

This sub-category generated a number of issues, including the sense of emotional closeness that the participant had with his own family; whether or not the participant and his partner were “out” (i.e., had identified as being a gay man) to their families; and, if they had come out to their families, whether their families were accepting or non-accepting.

having to traverse the terrain of parental acceptance of their being gay forced participants to rely more upon each other and stand as an autonomous unit rather than seeking the support and validation of parents, siblings and other extended family members

Where families were non-accepting of their gay identification, or were otherwise problematic, the gay couples interviewed tried to maintain relationships with extended families, even if only cordial. In general, it seems that having to traverse the terrain of parental acceptance of their being gay forced participants to rely more upon each other and stand as an autonomous unit rather than seeking the support and validation of parents, siblings and other extended family members. In particular, the couples with two sets of less than supportive parents, whether due to negative parental attitudes regarding homosexuality or other issues, focused on their own relationship and the nurturance that

their partnerships provided them, notwithstanding parental interactions.

In the coupled relationships where partners found truly loving "in laws," especially where the partners' own parents were not particularly accepting of being gay, the relationship with the partner's parents were described as being resonant and deeply satisfying. Ongoing mutual involvement with immediate and extended family members was cited as a phenomenon that deepened the relationship between the couple and generated more and more shared activities, interests and concerns. Several participants cited the loss of friendships due to AIDS as an impetus for becoming closer to one another. One participant identified it as an agent in the couple's deepening involvement with family.

Notwithstanding the specific feelings that participants had toward their partners' families, many participants described having assisted their partners with a variety of frequently unpleasant tasks associated with partners' families. Those tasks ranged from helping parents, siblings or other family members with health, legal, psychological or financial problems. Most often, participants described having taken in an ailing parent, and, in some cases, nursing that parent until he or she died. Participants supported their

partners' family members based on love for their partners as well as a sense of loyalty and duty:

We both are somewhat close to pieces of our families and we respect that and that's important to us.

I think we both have problems within our immediate families as far as them not being totally accepting of our relationship is concerned. Not in the sense that they treat us badly . . . but we just don't get the same kind of, I guess, equal treatment, say, for example, that my sister and her husband do receive, like when we are visiting over the holidays For example, he doesn't really spend the night at my parents' house, and if he does, we don't sleep in the same room . . . and that's mostly because of them and what they are comfortable with. . . . I guess the way it has an effect on us is that we kind of feel like we have separate holidays from one another because we are catering to our families and not really focusing on what we would want to do as a couple. But, at the same time, and this is going back to the shared values thing, neither one of us is overly religious and neither one of us really places as high a value on holidays. So just being the people that we are, it's not that much of a sacrifice or that much of a compromise because we . . . never have the same expectation . . . as some people do. It is more important to us that we share those emotions or share with each other everyday as opposed to what some people consider important on specific days.

I think that [our lack of closeness to our families] may have a huge impact on how we define home, because home is one another and not an extended family, at least [not] biological.

I have one brother who is extremely conservative and we just don't agree on anything philosophically, so we don't discuss much with him. His two daughters, my nieces, are also both very conservative and fundamentalist They specifically refused to come to our wedding because that was 'against God's will,' and that kind of did in what closeness there might have been at one time.

I really only had one relative, who passed away last year, and he was gay and he had a partner. I think that when he passed away, they were together for like 55 years, so obviously no problem with that part of the family. . . . Then, on [my partner's] side, we're out to the entire family. They are very supportive, and in particular, his sister. She's really, really neat. When she . . . talks about our relationship, she doesn't search for words, she uses the same words as her marriage And, I guess, there are many others, in [my partner's family] . . . they are just very comfortable with us.

All of our families have known each other for almost as long as we have been together and his family is as much my family as mine are his.

I think as our friends diminished, either from dying [from AIDS] or from . . . meeting people we wanted to spend more time with, we became more involved with family And individually, we started becoming more involved with each other more as a couple. So, for example, I became his nephew's godfather; we went to my niece's wedding. . . . And so I think those [activities] filled some of the gaps from the loss or the removal of our acquaintances and friends from our daily lives, as we started to make our relationship more focused on each other.

My family loves Emilio and has given our relationship as equal [treatment] as they would any other relationship that is long-term, whether it's a married relationship or domestic partnership of opposite sex partners. So, we are fully embraced by my family and his too. His mom is in her 80s and often chides her other children, who are heterosexual and who have been married or divorced once or twice or so [about] her gay son, who has been in a stable relationship for 28 years: "How come you guys can't get it together?"

We've had a lot of family things that have put some curves in our lives--in our relationship--that we weren't expecting. But, because of my love for him and the love he has for his family, I couldn't deny that, so I pitched in.

Permanence

Participants were asked two questions under this category. The first question explored the attribute statement regarding participant parents, "I imagined that they would be together forever," which was one of the top two attributes ranked by participants who had been raised in homes with two caregivers/parents (N=105) The second question explored in Phase III interviews in this category asked participants to describe what it was like having their partners "bouncing around in their heads" for the duration of their relationships.

In response to the first question, narratives revealed that whether participants believed that their parents had healthy, loving and mutually supportive relationships that persisted over time or unhealthy, conflictual and otherwise painful relationships that, in some cases participants wished would end, participants overwhelmingly utilized whatever they experienced to generate awareness and behaviors that would support the longevity of their own relationships

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. In short, where there were lemons, participants not only made lemonade, but garnished the jug with a sprig of mint. An underlying theme that surfaced in participant responses to this first question was loyalty versus abandonment.

Participant Responses to the second question, what it was like having their partner's bouncing around their heads for all the years of their relationships, revealed the following underlying themes: stability, loyalty, comfort, reassurance, security and safety. These six themes found application in a variety of ways, one of which was enhancement of communication.

Influence of Parental Relationships on Current Relationship

Participants addressed not only the relationships between their own parents, but also the relationships between extended family members such as aunts, uncles and cousins. Participants talked about overcoming fears that their relationships would replicate the problems that they saw in their parents' relationships. In some cases, even where there existed parental problems such as alcoholism, some participants described feeling a sense of love and caring from their parents that participants imported into their current relationships:

I'm sure it has [contributed to the longevity of our relationship]. I mean, both of our parents have had only one marriage. And it lasted all their lives, and I think if there were a different pattern with my parents, sure that would have meant something to me.

I never had any thoughts when I was growing up that there would ever be a severing situation such as a divorce. . . . When Dale and I settled in together a long time ago, I always expected permanence. I was not expecting this relationship to end at any time.

My immediate family as far as cousins, aunts and uncles, they are all still married and they have been married for 60 some years. So maybe subconsciously they shaped and developed my thought process for having a relationship, regardless of whether it was heterosexual or homosexual.

I've never really understood why my parents didn't divorce. They had found this place where there was kind of a mutual understanding of, "Hey, we got this far and we've tolerated each other this long let's just kind of do it." But they were the model for me. . . . They never shared anything. As Peter and I have grown together, we've always enjoyed the things that we enjoy and we love together We just enjoy the experience.

They were together for over 70 years in their marriage. They met when they were very young. And they were probably the most happily married couple that I know. They just happen to be my parents.

Both my parents had previously been married. Both of my mom's husbands were alcoholics so she went from one to the other. But, you know, there was love in the family. But it was a different kind of love. It was a support love, I guess, and a financial love more than anything.

Well, my parents were together forever. They would have celebrated 60-something years before my father passed away. And my father and mother were true loves.

My parents, had my father lived long enough, they would have divorced, but they had not while I lived with them. . . . They were good Catholics and “you stay together for the children's sake” even though they had really grown apart earlier on. If anything, that reinforced my seeking out a healthier partner So, yes, my parents’ relationship did have an impact on the formation of my long-term relationships. And even though it was a negative environment, I still felt that I grew to know what to look for in a partner because of the negative example that I experienced.

Well, we're both children of divorce. My mother was married [several] times and my [biological] father [several] times. I had no illusion, shall we say, about what it takes to make a relationship work. I do think that it makes me try harder, because I saw the pain my parents went through, and I didn't care to have to go through that.

You know, they cared for me so well that, yeah, I think I treat my relationship the same way; I want to do everything possible for George. . . . They were both alcoholic . . . but even with that I was still first.

I've kind of always felt that Albert and I would be together always. I never felt that stability at home. I always had this anxiety that mom and dad were going to split up.

It seems to both my brother and me that [our parents’] relationship was more important to them than the relationships to us. Their relationship came first. [Likewise, my partner's] parents are pretty selfish. . . . I think my parents'

devotion to each other was very much a good model for me. That really helped me bond and see the hard work that's involved. I remember my mother always saying to me how much—and maybe my father too—how much work goes into a relationship. She was very devoted and worked very hard to keep my father happy and on an even keel. I think we do the same thing here.

I think that [the transience that I saw in my family] made me much more thoughtful and much less inclined . . . to take for granted the quality of the relationship, and much more aware of the gift of the quality perhaps than other folks." It made me want to be open, as open as I can to a commitment, to knowing who we are as a couple.

I felt insecure about [the relationship] for a long time. I don't anymore. I think that we've settled into something nice. I think that we're not imitating our parents' relationships. I guess I had those fears at the beginning.

Loyalty

The relationship's survival of hardship, including illness and familial struggles, provided the backdrop for participant expressions of loyalty and the expectation that they would remain partnered and supportive notwithstanding such challenges:

Well, we've gone through so many things It definitely gave us a deeper understanding of each other's emotions and feelings. And we really know--it really showed the love and that we were really there for each other.

Ernest has very, very poor health and there have been times that I've been sick too, but . . . we've always been there for each other. There was never any question about it. I assume that's the way that it's going to be.

When I met Arthur, I made the decision that he was going to be my life partner and I've stuck with that. I think that [my parents] taught me a sense of loyalty and it hasn't been difficult for me to be loyal, just based on their example.

I have a feeling that the “stick to it” kind of mentality probably rubs off on us from our families.

As a child, I didn't have any insecurity about my family being together for ever and ever. They were solid; they liked being together; they liked each other; they loved each other; and they were dedicated to each other There was never a thought of any of the three of us abandoning each other.

Reassurance, Security, Safety and Comfort

These four themes are closely related, and echo the highly rated attributes of stability, permanence and consistency that emerged from the online questionnaire:

It's wonderful. It's very reassuring. I have home. That part of my life is not in conflict. . . . There's something very reassuring . . . it is very reassuring that X is there and I know he always will be. It makes life a lot easier and a lot more enjoyable that I have this comfort. You know, it wasn't always easy in the beginning. As we got to know each other, we grew.

Well, it's . . . been sort of a source of comfort really; a feeling of security. I mean, he is the person that I could always lean on and the person that I look forward to being with at the end of the day . . . I guess the word that I'm thinking of is "secure." He's both somebody that I can lean on when I am going through a bad time, but he is also the first person that I think of when I want to do something fun.

There is that whole idea of trying to please your partner, make him happy and not piss him off. . . . So, we do constantly think of each other when we are arranging schedules and planning events and even just wandering from room to room. . . . being aware that maybe he is in there sleeping or working or something or other, don't disturb him. . . . So we really do consider each other a lot and spend most of our time somewhere in near presence of each other.

He's just there. He is just part of my life, like growing up with a family where you know your brothers and sisters are there . . . I like it.

It is quite a bit of comfort in that. With Alex and me, we're there for each other all the time . . . I think that there is an awful lot more happiness and security, and I don't mean just financially, but I mean also emotionally.

I'd say about 99% of the time he is a great comfort to me and a wonderful companion. . . . I don't want to get psychological, but he is basically a very kind and giving person.

It's been—most of the time—it's been just wonderful. There have been times when he infuriates me beyond belief, and I guess I would do the same to him. . . . I have this great thing about just being so secure with him.

You know in so many ways it's been a stabilizing influence for me So, to have that kind of immediately visual mirror about what somebody else is thinking and to be able to hear that intimacy, I mean, that's always a gift.

It's kind of hard to imagine what life would have been like without him because he has been such an essential piece. That we have shared so many activities and friends and have been there through losses of parents, loses of jobs, loss of friends or other family members, through sharing successes, through trying new things, through travels, it's just that he is such a key figure in my life. It's hard to imagine how any of those things would have been as achievable without him.

Well, it's been entertaining, frustrating, but very safe.

I mean the whole relationship developed into that level of permanence within about a month and a half or so of meeting. So, it was just that soul mate thing really, really joined us together in a really strong manner than I could define it, I couldn't even really explain it.

I'm very comfortable with him and I'm very much in love and I feel that we're going to be spending the rest of our lives together.

Permanence to me means stability, that I know that Phillip's going to come home at the same time and we're going to have our set schedules; that we're there for each other. And I know he's there to take care of me and he knows that I'm there to take care of him.

Communication

The ability to address concerns was cited by participants as both an ongoing challenge and an area of success in their relationships, which also is supported by the Phase II online questionnaire data. Communication and permanence were probably the two categories with the greatest intersection. A strong sense of permanence allowed participants to discuss difficult topics without fear of relationship dissolution. At the point of intersection between those two categories was participants' expression of the theme of trust, also connected to the ability to confide, both of which facilitated more open communication. That a partner was available to listen was identified as an important aspect of communication. Confiding in one another allowed for understanding, but some things were not shared so as to protect each other's feelings and to preserve autonomy. Management of conflict within the

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participants’ relationships and the ability of the couples to work together effectively—whether completing a home project or managing finances—were two articulated proving grounds for communication.

Communication and Permanence

The ability to communicate grew with the duration of their relationships and seemed to have some correlation to having experienced and weathered hardships over time. A partner’s consistent behavior over time promoted reliance and trust, which, in turn, supported open communication. Permanence also allowed for more honest communications. It supported talking about negative aspects of the relationship without fear that the relationship will end:

A partner’s consistent behavior over time promoted reliance and trust, which, in turn, supported open communication

I think that one thing that we do is we don't let emotions or anything go too far without actually sitting down and talking about how we are feeling or if we're not happy with the way that things are going. Usually. . . an issue really . . . is just a misunderstanding. I think that just talking about things is important. And probably, the longer that we've been in the relationship, we've realized that's more important and we've also developed a level of trust.

I think that at this point we're pretty comfortable being able to tell each other things that are more negative, or talk about more negative emotions and not feel scared or like there's a possibility that it's going to ruin things. And I think that we feel like we can work through most things at this point.

I imagine that what happened was just eventually things happened and that kind of changed the dynamic of the relationship and it got serious enough that one or the other of us felt that we needed to communicate that we were not happy with how things were going or that we just felt a certain way, and once we got through that and realized that it wasn't going to be the end of the relationship [we realized that] anything virtually can be worked on—well almost anything—then that's probably when we started to build that kind of trust or dynamic such that we can come to each other and talk about anything.

I think maybe a lot of people in shorter term relationships have a problem because they have a fear that if they say anything to their partners, that that's going to mean that's going to be the end of their relationships or something. And I think that's just a hurdle that people have to get through. You have to be honest if you're going to live with somebody for a long time or potentially for the rest of your life. You have to be able to tell them if you are unhappy about how things are going or whatever. So, I think that we've been together for 12 years . . . at this point we're pretty comfortable being able to tell each other things that are more

negative, or talk about more negative emotions and not feel scared or like there's a possibility that it's going to ruin things. And I think that we feel like we can work through most things at this point.

Trust is something that is developed over time Trust is when the other person has acted in certain consistent ways over a long period of time, [so] you can almost predict how they are going to behave.

The safety has only gotten greater as we survived fights and arguments and trials and family crises of one sort or another. Yeah, it only gets stronger and so I now know that no matter what, I am okay, that I can come to him and say anything that I want to and divorce is not an option. We work through everything.

I think that as years have gone by and through life's events, we have probably gotten closer and probably communicate easier and better. There's not a strain in communication as far as trying to explain something to someone. I think that in my younger years, I somehow never quite felt I could adequately communicate my feelings. I don't have that feeling any more.

Listening and Confiding

Knowing that they can confide in their partners was identified by participants as being a considerable benefit to the relationship and individually. Being able to confide—even if a partner did not have a solution to a problem—supported communication, which in turn promoted greater mutual knowledge and understanding. Knowing and feeling known by one’s partner supported comfort with and confidence in the relationship:

Being able to confide—even if a partner did not have a solution to a problem—supported communication

[I love] having a good listener as a partner; having a patient listener. Having somebody who is sort of with me without necessarily being a cheerleader.

Yes, to be able to confide within each other [has been a significant part of our relationship] because we can both understand where we are coming from, what we're feeling. But I feel that there are also thoughts and processes that should be private on either side.

We are both very, very open and honest with each other, and that feels good because it feels like you are not living with somebody who you're not quite sure who he is, or what he is thinking.

I express it; get it out. He has problems with patients, you know, he talks about it. Problems with his parents, he talks about it. I have problems with my brother, I talk about it. Yeah, we basically do listen to each other. It's the voice box, there's not much the other can do or say, but occasionally you [can].

Management of Conflict

Addressing points of disagreement directly and talking them out were the primary approaches used by participants to manage conflict

Addressing points of disagreement directly and talking them out were the primary approaches used by participants to manage conflict. As stated above, trust that matters of conflict could be discussed without the disintegration of the relationship largely fostered conflict resolution.

Participants interviewed in Phase III described striking a balance between fighting at times and letting things go so as not to fight unnecessarily. Although they

might still have been in disagreement over an issue, participants described making the best of the situation, not blowing things up out of proportion, and not harping on problems. At times participants compromised regarding different desires. Other times, they switched off, doing what one partner wanted this time and what the other partner wanted the next. Once a course was set, the participants did not carp at one another. Disagreement with a partner was generally not aired in a public way that would embarrass or belittle him. Participants also tried their best to accept their partner's peculiarities and foibles.

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When there were more serious disagreements, participants maximized opportunities to resolve problems peaceably, often employing a gentle and empathic

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approach, but most importantly, they negotiated the resolution by understanding differences how each other handled conflict and worked within that framework. Addressing problems before they could fester was deemed an effective tool for maintaining a sense of well-being in the relationship. Some participants even expressed the learning opportunity present in resolving differences of opinion. Different approaches and opinions about matters provided an opportunity for the

individual to question his partner and to examine his part in the conflict:

Even if he didn't necessarily agree with me on a particular point or action, he would support me in that situation. He would never sort of take the opposite side and embarrass me. He would always be there. And, you know, okay later on he may say, "You know that wasn't really necessarily the best thing to have done, was it?" or whatever.

We sometimes seethe with it. We do have differences, but we don't fight. . . . If he wants to do something, I generally go along and vice versa. . . . He knows it's something that I want to do, so he goes along. There are things on the other side

that I go along with also and I just make the best of it. Half of me says he always wants to spend money but doesn't think about where it's going to come from, and the other part of me says, "Why am I holding back?" I question him and I question myself.

I think that one thing that we do is we don't let emotions or anything go too far without actually sitting down and talking about how we are feeling or if we're not happy with the way that things are going. Usually [it] is just a misunderstanding. I think that just talking about things is important. And probably, the longer that we've been in the relationship, we've realized that's more important and we've also developed a level of trust.

Sometimes I'll express [my feelings about the conflict]; sometimes I will say, "Oh, I'll just go with the flow" . . . [sometimes] it's just not important; it's not that big of a deal given the context of the rest of our lives together. So, there is some verbalization of it; there is some internalization of it; but it is nothing that is hammered in place where I constantly throw it out or [say], "Remember this, remember that."

Sometimes he will get very quiet if we get into an argument and not say anything. He'll recede and I'll be conscious of that, but I want him to talk it through and . . . get it out and get it over with . . . It may be a day later, he'll say [something about it] and I usually will say that I apologize for saying it the way that I did . . . and then I'll usually try to talk a little bit about it and see where he wants to go with bringing it back to me, not to throw it in my face.

Fortunately we don't have too many [fights]. We try to talk things out, occasionally we raise our voices. . . . We worked out a . . . philosophy of "don't go to bed angry." Our relationship hasn't been a lot of work for some reason, so it's not been necessary to really have some of those really long tough discussions about this and that and the other thing.

There are times when, "Oh, I thought that you were going to do that," or "Don't tell me what to do," that type of stuff. And they blow over really quickly.

But on an emotional, mental and educational level, basically we've been pretty full on . . . That probably helps to mend things a little bit better than some might.

I do most of the cooking and I say we are going to eat healthy so I am making

fish. Well, you know fish is healthy and it has all of this omega 3 and he kind of looks at me So, I know that there are different things that he likes, but I say I'm cooking so you are going to get what I like and he doesn't get offended by that and he goes with the flow.

We, of course, get mad at each other for certain things, but we talk it out and that's kind of how we handle it.

So, by continuously communicating, I think you defuse the real small things and you talk out the important things.

He describes himself as a control freak, and, you know, I think some people wouldn't get along with his personality, but I do. I just don't let it bother me.

I don't pick sides about anything. I'll say, "I know that pattern" and I'll just walk away from it. And then, by the time I'm back, it's gone.

We put [the conflict] out and then we walk away for awhile. If we have an argument, both of us know when it is spiraling into one of those button-pushing contests. One of us has to take the initiative to walk away and then to cool own and to refocus it. . . . When something really awful has happened, we don't get into this finger pointing. We manage somehow to sit down. It may be emotional—saying what has to be said—but [we say it] and then say, "Okay, what do we do now to get this sorted out?"

We used to manage it by shouting and screaming at each other to the point of tears. We manage conflict much better now by . . . actually switching off completely on that topic for five to ten minutes. That five to ten minutes allow us to gather our thoughts and to then have a sensible, sometimes heated, discussion.

We don't let a conflict sort of go into several days. Any conflict is usually pretty much squared away when it arises. . . .

He runs and hides and I'm very much in your face. And that is still a point of contention. He's not the world's greatest communicator with conflict and I've had to learn to give him space to deal with it. . . . Yeah I just have to be patient.

You know, when I look back on the things that we get upset about, they are trivial things. They are not anything momentous or life changes or anything like that. They are just so trivial that . . . after a while, you wonder why you expended the energy getting upset in the first place. So then we sort of speak, kiss, and make up. And I guess the big thing is both of us have been able to not collect baggage in those departments over the years and carry it around. In other words, when it's done, it's past and it's not thrown in somebody else's face a month or two later when something similar happens.

Admiration

Participants seem to admire the different skills and/or personality traits that their partners bring to life, skills/traits that they would not mind emulating, but by the same token, that they know they will never be able to emulate because they are constitutionally different from their partners. Admiration addresses, at the same time, a respect for difference and autonomy, but also at times a desire for similarity.

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Several participants described with great admiration the ways in which their partners have attended to family members. Others were proud of their partners'

personal or work-related accomplishments. For some, mutual admiration was further enhanced by their common friends, who spoke positively—to one another as well as the couple—about the couple's positive attributes and accomplishments. In some of the participant narratives is an element of mentorship (i.e., through his relationship with his partner, he is made better):

I have admired Ted for his intellectual pursuits and I think Ted has admired me for my interests. . . . I don't know that I wanted to duplicate them, but I admired the things that he did over the years.

I respect his professionalism and I respect more so the way he deals with people. He's much more respectful of other people, maybe more so than I would want him to be. But I really admire that aspect of him. He went to visit his parents for a couple days this week I admire that he wanted to go down there and be with them even though he doesn't like them. He loves them. So, I do admire that. And I think he admires me, and how I deal with people. I'm very forthright with people, open, and demanding, and he wishes he were. So, yeah, it's on both sides.

I think that we're both proud of each other's accomplishments in our professional fields, in our social lives and all. I've certainly admired him from the time that I met him and . . . actually one of the things my father used to say was how much he admired Arnie. . . . When other people admire him, that helps me to do the same thing. Yeah, I think that there's a little glowing admiration there. We

certainly talk about each other all the time.

I admire him a lot. I admire him for who he is and his accomplishments and his compassion, and his helpfulness, his soulfulness. Yeah, I admire him a lot.

He is extraordinarily kind and giving and just anticipatory of my needs, much more than I am of his. Jack is a wonderful worker. If you need someone to organize and run your office for you he would be a great candidate And he is very decisive when he needs to be.

He laughs easily, which is a wonderful kind of characteristic. He is much freer with laughter than I am. And also, he is eminently more practical than I am, which I like.

I can better myself because he is a better person and he can make me stronger. He does make me stronger.

I called him my hero. He was my hero. I don't care. Gay, straight, whatever, how many people can honestly do what he did for his [dying] mother?

I just watched him [taking care of all the matters associated with caring for his grandmother] and the way he was. He was just so responsible His grandmother had a great gift from this man.

I think that among other things, we're friends, and I think that we started that way. And we each have our ways of being and interrelating with the world. The ways that Jim is in the world are admirable to me and have become models. I certainly learned a lot from him [about how to] interrelate professionally.

Oppositeness and Sameness

For the most part participants described their couplings as being harmonious with the two partners sharing many similarities, but being essentially different. Most participants did not want their partners to be mirror images of themselves.

The narratives illustrate both the ways in which participants believe others perceive them and their partners as well as the way participants perceive themselves and

their partners. Oppositeness and sameness were described in emotive and/or temperamental, cognitive and/or skill based, and physical terms.

Sometimes participants spoke of their oppositeness and sameness in terms of temperament, which affected their social presentations and, correspondingly, their social roles with respect to the way the couple interacted with others. In some cases, participants expressed that over time their temperaments changed, followed by prior roles and preferences, and in some cases, those roles and preferences changed over time:

Participants described their couplings as being harmonious with the two partners sharing many similarities, but being essentially different.

I think we're so much alike that if we didn't have those differences [in personality and traits] then we would be even more boring. . . . We had people home for dinner last night—a straight couple—and they [didn't seem to] know the difference between one person and the other. . . . Once they get to know us, there are really stark differences. It's very important. I don't think I'd be happy with being in a relationship with myself.

We're pretty opposite. I think most people would say that. . . . We will need our distance from one another because we work different and we think differently . . . and we just keep that kind of independent identity. I think that he would agree with that too, that we are very different in that respect.

That's funny, it is kind of like when you see older people and the man and woman look like they are dressed alike. There are times when we are getting ready to go out or to an event and we become what I'll describe as a "relationship clone."

So, there are those little [logistical or preferential] differences, but none of them have ever been considered anything major. . . . But on an emotional, mental and educational level, basically we've been pretty full on.

I believe I call ourselves "double compliments," where there are a lot of characteristics that are very opposite and yet there are a lot of characteristics that are very similar. I personally, and I believe John as well, would never want to have somebody that's identical to myself or himself, because we both believe that we look in the mirror often enough in the morning . . . we don't need to be doing that with a partner as well. And I believe that there needs to be some oppositeness in order to learn or teach or see different viewpoints to keep a relationship fresh and to keep thought process and development fresh. . . . I think oppositeness also builds tolerance and strength between people as does similarity.

I think that if we were too [much alike] each other it would be kind of boring. . . . When you have a partner, you get constant feed back, whether sometimes it is physical in terms of how they look at your, or sometimes it's verbal. And, when you come to a relationship, you come with different experiences in your life so you . . . can learn from each other too.

When we first met, I looked upon him as being the mouthpiece of the two of us. I was much less secure in my own body and personality, and so Anthony would be the one that I looked up to. But over the years, I think that I've become more self-assured and in becoming that, Anthony in certain situations would rely on me to take the front role.

Well, I have always been attracted to Andy, and it's because, I guess, we're the same height, same build, kind of—I hate using the word—kind of a “clone.” It's nearly like having a second person. It's like nearly a double of me, except the lighter side, the better side of me.

The main difference between him and me would be that he would be content to do things by himself more than I am. . . . But over time, he has become more extroverted and I've become more introverted with age and longevity. So, I think that we are coming into a little bit more harmony about that.

Skill and Preference Based Roles

Many participants described working partnerships in which necessary tasks were completed by the partners based on their individual skills, natural talents and/or preferences rather than assigned based on pre-designated positions in the relationship, the way gender frequently defines tasks and roles in heterosexual relationships. Accordingly, participants described being able to take leadership roles as needed and as were most helpful in the accomplishment of whatever tasks were at hand. Another point of intersection lies between admiration and the category of oppositeness and sameness:

Necessary tasks were completed by the partners based on their individual skills, natural talents and/or preferences

Sure, I cook. He cleans up. He sets the table. He's the mechanic. I drive. He navigates. Yeah, we do parse out the responsibilities. It makes life a little easier.

We're pretty much partners equal in everything. There are certain things that he is more capable of and there're certain things that I'm more capable of, and that's fine.

I think over a period of time we kind of settled into a certain pattern, like I always was the cook; he always has to do the dishes. We have kind of an understanding. He does the weekly bills, but I also track it with Quicken, and I'm kind of the computer nerd so I get online with the bank and I double check things. . . . But then he does most of the work paying the bills, and I do the taxes every year for the both of us.

He's like my rock, you know, he is my right arm. We do make decisions jointly. we share ideas we have. We work differently. And we play to each other's strengths. We both have different styles of working, but we learned to kind of cope with that. And it's not like we have to be equal, I mean, with [one of our businesses], Ben does take the lead role in that, and that's okay by me. So, I think that we just have this comfortable position that we know how we work, what makes us tick and it just works.

I think that it's very fluid There may be other things where one of the two of us doesn't mind it or enjoys it . . . and the other person does something else. Or if Jake cooks, I will do the dishes or vice versa. So there's always an easy—I won't even say compromise—but it just sort of works itself out

After we fought a lot, we figured out if we put one of us in charge on a project and the other one just followed orders that worked much better. . . . We tend to switch off regarding who is more competent on whatever project we're doing. It's like I'm a better painter, so I would take lead on any projects and involve painting. . . . Elliot is better at managing finances than I am, so he does that. He pays our bills, watches over our finances, because I hate doing that.

Sex Life and Monogamy

An ongoing sex life was deemed important to all participants, except those who had lost their libidos due to illness. Although those participants no longer had sexual desire, they maintained concern about their partners' sexual satisfaction. Participant couples who have maintained sexual activity throughout their relationships articulated a sense of contentment that seems to extend to the relationship in general. Many of the sexually compatible couples who continue to have and enjoy sex with one another seem to want to be monogamous without any sense of deprivation or stress. Several of those

couples described sex lives with a level of frequency and intensity far greater than they ever would have expected after having been together for many decades.

Monogamy was described by some participants as being an expression of strong commitment and, for that reason, an ideal state, but one that they had never been able to achieve. Some participants described non-monogamy as a more “realistic” approach to sex over time. For some couples, the commencement of their relationships while living a long distance away from each other was one factor that contributed to sexual non-exclusivity. Non-monogamy was cited by some couples as simply the preferred way to be and an approach to sex that strengthened the relationship. For some couples with discordant sex drives, non-exclusivity was a solution, but still generated conflict from time to time.

Regardless of their choice of monogamy or non-monogamy, couples consistently stated that emotional relationships with men who were not their partners would damage and/or threaten the continuation of their relationships. Many participants who stated that they were in monogamous relationships felt that they could manage learning that their partners had had sex with another man, but not that their partners were having an emotional relationship with another man.

Regardless of their choice of monogamy or non-monogamy, couples consistently stated that emotional relationships with men who were not their partners would damage and/or threaten the continuation of their relationships

For many participants, monogamy did not exclude sex with third parties or groups, provided that both halves of the couple were present and had agreed to the sexual interaction. Several participants stated that such agreements sometimes became problematic. Intellectually, they were open to seeing their partners have sex with other men, but emotionally they found themselves emotionally injured by the experience. Accordingly, several participants stated that they had ceased participating in three-somes and group sex situations, finding monogamy to be the emotionally easier path that removed an area of potential conflict. Conversely, other participants found that sexual play with a third man enhanced their feelings of love for and excitement toward their partners.

The advent of AIDS served as a catalyst for some participants choosing to become monogamous. Many of the participants who stated that AIDS served as a catalyst for monogamy also stated that they had been very sexually active before the AIDS epidemic and, by the time the epidemic began, were ready to lead sexually exclusive lives with their partners:

We are monogamous, but I don't know how important that is. If he had a relationship with somebody else . . . I know I definitely would be very upset. If he had sex with somebody else, I don't know how upset I would be. It doesn't happen and it's a lot easier that we don't do that.

We think of it, being monogamous, . . . as a personal choice for us. . . . I don't think of it as a necessary requirement for all relationships.

We met in the 80s which was right at the height of the AIDS epidemic. We understood and we did discuss at that time that we would not be doing anything with other people. . . . We have had a couple of occasions where a third party has been involved with both of us, and that was either by mutual consent or passion of the moment, let's say. But, none of those events have had any real major impact on anything that we've done. . . . We are our respective partners and that's where our sexual activities lie as well. Aside from everything else, it certainly relieves one of the concerns about the HIV status of the person that you are with.

I just personally don't think that non-monogamy is a fully committed relationship. Our sexual drive is different than what it was, you know, 20 years ago. But we still love making love. And I have no need to look around for anybody else to share that experience with.

Well, we believe in monogamy, in total monogamy. It's just the old traditions. . . . I wouldn't ever want to endanger or jeopardize anything for something that's stupid.

We do not play around separately. We on occasion have had someone join us, but know that we do not do it separately. . . . Experiencing something with him [and another man] in a sexual act—it's a turn on, so it heightens the whole sexual pleasure. . . . There's no animosity I know he loves me. I love him. . . .

[Monogamy] has not been the case through our relationship. I would say occasionally at this point it still is not. It was not [a monogamous relationship] early on at all, even though we were together. . . . Monogamy became more of a situation through the years. It is not 100% . . . but it doesn't seem to be an . . . overpowering issue.

We've always had an open relationship where you can get into sexual and physical intimacy with others . . . and sometimes that's included the two of us and another person or persons, and sometimes it has not. . . . I think the willingness and the feeling of being not threatened by physical intimacy with persons aside from each other has strengthened [our relationship]. . . . That's a shared value . . . that we've always felt that monogamy wasn't necessarily important to us. Emotionally. Monogamy. Yes. But not physical or sexual monogamy.

We both agree that . . . it's okay to have sexual relations with other people, as long as it doesn't—and it hasn't, and it won't—threaten the emotional stability and

the permanence of our primary relationship. And I think that it's kind of a more realistic perspective to take.

It would almost be too much trouble to invite a third person into that kind of a . . . sexual relationship.

Having an open relationship now makes it even better because that way I don't have to feel guilty about wanting to have sex with other people and not necessarily meaning that i have to leave him or anything stupid like that. But I still get goose bumps when I think about him and I love talking about him to other people. And I love, when I meet new friends, I want them to meet him and . . . he's an essential part of my life.

[Sex was] the hard part . . . of our relationship to navigate and it still is. And it will be forever probably, until our thingies stop working.

We made this promise to each other that we are going to be monogamous and we actually tried throughout the relationship to not be monogamous. We actually had about a year where we thought, "Okay, we'll invite third parties in," but it just did not work for us.

We went through a phase a long, long time ago before the advent of AIDS. There was some free love . . . got involved in some three ways and that kind of stuff. With the advent of AIDS, that ended. Monogamy was the only answer and that was probably 25 years ago.

Continued Viability of the Relationship

Communication, honesty and the ongoing desire to spend time with one another were the elements most frequently articulated by participants as required to support the continued viability of their relationships. Several participants deemed sexual and emotional monogamy as make-or-break requirements. Also cited by participants as supporting the future of their ongoing relationships were an active sex-life, humor and attentiveness to a wide variety of issues, including health concerns. Attentiveness seemed connected to another facet of an ongoing relationship named by participants, the ability for the couple to continue to grow and adapt to change:

Communication, honesty and the ongoing desire to spend time with one another were the elements most frequently articulated by participants as required to support the continued viability of their relationships

Well certainly, our sex life is very important . . . that we still have it and are interested in each other. And interested in talking to each other and wanting to come to each other. I often think I do enjoy [our] sex life so much and when the sex life's not there, what will it be like. But I don't worry about it too much at this point. . . . I mean, it's gotten better actually as we got older. So, that's a thrill for me because I didn't think that would be possible. So it's made the relationship better. The sex has gotten better. We look forward to it.

Just that we communicate, not that we're perfect at it.

I think it's important for me at least to get it out if I'm having a disagreement or if I'm appreciating something. And, also, I think it's important to say, "I love you."

Well, I think again a lot of is the idea that we are together, we spend time together, we . . . enjoy each other's company, and I think that's what makes us good friends as well as life partners and husbands and sex partners is that we like to do things together. For many years most people never knew one of us without the other.

Monogamy is on top of the list and the feeling of knowing that we both continue to love each other and continue to want to be together, like a working partnership.

I think the main that that is critical is that we need to communicate; we need to be honest with each other; and then we [need to] have some quality time together.

Fidelity or monogamy would be [a] deal breaker I can't see anything else.

I think that you have to pay attention to each other. In whatever area . . . whether it is from someone's health or what they are eating for dinner or, "What's happening at the office--how are you feeling." Saying, "Okay, this doesn't feel right; what is the matter here?" It's an ongoing work. I think that it's too easy to get out of relationships whether they're marriages, non marriages And people seem to be fine with that, but that doesn't make for long-standing relationships . . .

That we always tell each other where we're at with a major decision or something else that involves us. Just be honest with me about how he is and no surprises. I want to share what he is going through.

Communication. Communication is very critical. And humor. Lots of humor. Those are the two key things that have helped our relationship.

I know people will say to us a lot, "well, what's your secret [to a long lasting relationship]?" I can't put my finger on it except to say the more honest and open and communicative you are the less chance for doubt and for supposition and for mystery or mistakes to enter the picture. So, you always act with good intentions and you always act with full disclosure and a real understanding of what his needs are, what my needs are and that they do change and that's what's important to really talk about.

To be respectful of each other and to know that things often will change over time. And I think that we are both pretty flexible people.

I suppose if he got very emotionally involved with someone else where I felt like our relationship was being threatened because of his emotional response with another person. And I think that we've both had crushes on other people at times, I mean that's pretty normal. But if the crush proceeded to where I thought it was demanding his time and emotional energy and our relationship wasn't primary, that would probably push it to the edge.

I think keeping our open communication going. I think making sure that we spend time with each other that's not work focused.

The feeling that we are both in this together. I think that if one of us feels like the other is not invested in the relationship, then it is not going to last.

Honesty, the two of us being honest with each other. Basically, honesty. And communication, I think is very key to it.