**Partner Selection for People with Intellectual Disabilities**

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**Abstract**

**Background:** The aim of the research was to understand what adults with intellectual disabilities look for in a partner. There have been numerous studies which explore partner selection for people without intellectual disabilities but no research which specifically identified the traits valued in a partner by people with intellectual disabilities.

**Method:** In depth interviews were conducted with eleven participants across two UK sites. All participants were adults with an intellectual disability who had been in a relationship with a partner for over a year. The narratives were analysed utilising hermeneutic phenomenology, guided by the theory of Van Manen (1990).

**Results:** The findings highlighted that participant relationships typically developed within a segregated environment for people with intellectual disabilities within the past ten years, regardless of age. People with intellectual disabilities expressed a wish to be loved, to be treated kindly and to have companionship. However, people with intellectual disabilities did not place high value on attributes such as financial security, social status or intelligence.

**Conclusions:** The research demonstrated how poorly integrated people with intellectual disabilities are within mainstream society. Desired characteristics and expectations for the relationship were rooted in a shared history and culture which was shaped by their learning disability and support needs.

**Introduction**

There is minimal research which has explored the experiences of people with intellectual disabilities in relationships from their perspective and no studies which focused on exclusively on partner selection. This research explores the intimate aspects of relationships for people with intellectual disabilities, and in particular, factors influencing partner selection.

Emerson *et al.* (2005) *National Survey of People with Learning Disabilities* established thatonly 4% of the 2,898 participants interviewed had a partner. By comparison, in the UK 63% of all men were married or co-habiting and 60% of women were married or co-habiting (Office for National Statistics, 2011). It appears that marriage and relationships rates are lower for people with an intellectual disability compared to the wider UK population. Government initiatives set out in *Valuing People* (DoH, 2001) aimed to develop opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities ‘to form relationships, including ones of a physical and sexual nature’ (p.81). However, *Valuing People Now* (DoH, 2009) highlighted that these initiatives had not been fully achieved as ‘many people are still not recognising and accepting that people with intellectual disabilities, like anyone else, want and need personal and sexual relationships’ (p.94). There are numerous benefits to being married or in a long term relationship which include; economic benefits (Chun and Lee, 2001), increased mental wellbeing (Blanchflower and Oswald, 2004a) and better physical health (Waite, 1995). People with intellectual disabilities are frequently unable to access these benefits. Historical attitudes towards people with intellectual disabilities may explain why this is the case

In 1954 there were approximately 58,100 people with intellectual disabilities living in long stay hospitals in the UK (Department of Health and Social Security, 1971). Patients were segregated by sex due to concerns that having a ‘intellectual disability’ was hereditary. This resulted in the prohibition of sexual contact for fear of procreation (Howard and Handy, 2004) and in routine sterilisations to prevent pregnancy (Roy, 2010). The hospitals had strict regimes and allowed little privacy (Abraham *et al.*, 2010 and French, 2010) and ‘any signs of sexual interest or arousal were ignored, repressed or misunderstood’ (McCarthy, 1999, p. 53).

In the 1980’s intellectual disabilities hospitals began to close and people were re-integrated within local communities. This was partly due to the influence of the ‘Normalisation Principle’ (Wolfensberger, 1972, 1983, Nirje, 1980), the belief that people with intellectual disabilities should lead an ‘ordinary life’ (Towell, 1980). Attitudes towards relationships for people with intellectual disabilities became more progressive, which was reflected in publications such as *Valuing People* (DoH, 2001) and *Valuing People Now* (DoH, 2009). The right to a ‘private and family life for all’ was enshrined in law in article eight of the Human Rights Act (1998) and the Sexual Offences Act (1956) which stated it was illegal to engage in a sexual relationship with a ‘mentally defective’ was replaced by the Sexual Offences Act (2003) which focused on an individual’s capacity to consent to sex rather than a diagnosis of ‘mentally defective’. Despite this, *Valuing People Now* (DoH, 2009) highlighted the lack of opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities to form intimate relationships due to their exclusion from locations where they would meet potential partners such as at work, colleges and clubs.

Research has demonstrated that significant restrictions surrounding the development of relationships come from support staff (Lesseliers, 1999, Hollomotz, 2008 and Kelly *et al.*, 2009) and also parents (Brown, 1994, Löfgren-Mårtenson, 2004). Kelly *et al. (*2009) reported that people with intellectual disabilities were being restricted in terms of physical contact with the opposite sex, chastised by staff for being ‘caught’ kissing’ and had their interactions with partners or potential partners monitored. People who lived in a ‘group environments’ experienced a lack of privacy, with locks not always provided on bedroom doors and staff not knocking prior to entry (Hollomotz, 2008). Hollomotz’s (2008) participants were selected from a range of support providers which suggested the issues identified were possibly inherent within support services for people with intellectual disabilities.

 No research was found that suggested that staff did not want people to have the non-sexual aspects of a relationship such as love, friendship, companionship and intimacy. White and Barnitt (2000) argued that support providers played a key role in the development and maintenance of relationships, that people do experience intimate relationships and that for individuals with limited social circles residential care homes can be a place to meet potential partners. Half of the participants in their study had met their current partner where they lived.

Little is known regarding the dating patterns for people with intellectual disabilities and no research specifically identified the traits valued in partners by people with intellectual disabilities. There have been numerous studies which explore partner selection for people without intellectual disabilities. A typology was undertaken as part of the literature review which examined research into partner selection for people without an intellectual disability, examining 20 research studies: 15 from academic research and 5 from large-scale research studies compiled by dating websites or national press. The typology identified that kindness and consideration was highly valued by both sexes (O’Reilly *et al*., 2009). Shackelford *et al.*, (2005) stated that both sexes sought partners ‘high in agreeableness, conscientiousness, and emotional stability’ (p.1269). No literature was identified which explored whether people with intellectual disabilities valued kindness and consideration in a partner. However, in light of the high levels of abuse they reportedly experience in relationships (McCarthy, 1999) it can be hypothesized that these traits would be highly valued.

Despite the advances of feminism, the women’s liberation movement and societal changes towards the ‘objectification’ of women, men continue to value the physical appearance of a partner highly (Shackelford *et al.,* 2005). Women frequently cited dependability (O’Reilly *et al.*, 2009) and financial security as desirable traits (Regan and Anupama, 2003; Lacey *et al.*, 2006) which suggested that despite advances in society with many women in high earning job roles and the Equality Act 1970 (replaced by the Equal Pay and the Equality Act 2010) there was still a desire for a man to fulfil the role of providing for the female economically. No research was located which showed whether financial security was valued by women with an intellectual disability in male partners (or vice versa). The expectations of people with intellectual disabilities may be low in this regard: only 7.1% of adults with an intellectual disability are in paid employment (Emerson *et al*, 2012).

In summary, people with intellectual disabilities experience challenges to relationships which include the prejudices of professionals and wider society, issues relating to shared housing and staff attitudes, legal issues and issues of consent. Most research focused on the sexual element of the relationship. Little is known about partner selection for people with intellectual disabilities. This research aimed to address this, focusing on the intimate heterosexual relationships of adults with intellectual disabilities. Homosexual relationships were excluded from the research as it was felt that the potentially unique barriers and challenges faced by this group of individuals deserved more in-depth attention than was possible within the remit of this research.

**Method**

The research methodology utilised was a qualitative approach called hermeneutic phenomenology based on the methodology of Max Van Manen, outlined in his book ‘*Researching Lived Experience’* (1990). Eleven participants were recruited from two charities which provided support to adults with intellectual disabilities (see Table 1). One group was a small regional charity and the other was a division of a national charity. To be included in the research, participants had to fulfil the following criteria:

* All participants were adults over 18 years of age defined as having an intellectual disability.
* They had been in receipt of a specialist service for people with intellectual disabilities at some point in their life.  All participants were recruited via a gatekeeper, a senior staff member within the ‘Support Provider Organisations’ working specifically with adults with intellectual disabilities.
* They were able to verbally communicate to a high level. They were able to talk in sentences and were able to discuss to some extent abstract topics such as love and emotions.
* They had had at least one “long term” relationship (6 months +). This did not have to be sexual but had to be a long standing heterosexual romantic/ intimate commitment. All participants met this criterion and all participants’ relationships exceeded this time frame.

Purposeful sampling was selected as the sampling method (Teddlie and Yu, 2007). Participants were only approached if they met the inclusion criteria. Gatekeepers, who were senior staff with direct knowledge of individual service users therefore able to recommend appropriate people to be involved, recruited potential participants. Gatekeepers arranged pre-meetings which were an opportunity for people to meet the first author to discuss the research and any concerns they had. This meeting helped to establish if potential participants met the inclusion criteria, if they were able to give informed consent to take part in the research and to determine the level of complexity of communication that would be appropriate in subsequent interviews.

Table 1- Demographic information of the participants

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Pseudonym** | **Age** | **Provider** | **Status** | **Living Arrangement** | **Number of interviews** |
| Alan | 60 + | Provider 1 | Married | With Wife in shared Supported Living house | 1 |
| Kerry | Under 35 | Provider 1 | Engaged | Alone with some support | 2 |
| Dean | Under 35 | Provider 1 | Engaged | Alone with some support | 1 |
| Caroline | 35-60 | Provider 1 | Partner | With Partner in Registered Care Home | 2 |
| John | 35-60 | Provider 1 | Partner | With Partner in Registered Care Home | 2 |
| Emma | Under 35 | Provider 1 | Engaged | With Fiancé in Registered Care Home | 2 |
| Liam | Under 35 | Provider 1 | Engaged | With Fiancée in Registered Care Home | 2 |
| Mary | 35-60 | Provider 2 | Partner | Alone in Supported Living Flat | 3 |
| Peter | 35-60 | Provider 2 | Married | With Wife in Supported Living Flat | 3 |
| Carrie | Under 35 | Provider 1 | Married | With Husband in shared Supported Living house | 2 |
| Joe | Under 35 | Provider 1 | Married | With Wife in shared Supported Living house | 2 |

The method used was in-depth interviews; most interviews took place with couples, each couple or individual was formally interviewed at least twice and interviews lasted approximately one hour. To ensure participants felt as comfortable and relaxed as possible, they were asked how they wanted to be interviewed: either alone, with their partner or with support staff or someone else present. All those who took part with a partner chose to be interviewed together. Two male participants were interviewed once as they did not respond to subsequent contact attempts. One male and one female were interviewed three times as their concentration span within interviews appeared shorter. An interview guide was developed for the first interview. The guide included questions which arose from the literature review such as: participants’ views on relationships (What makes a ‘good relationship? ‘What does having a partner mean to you?), what they look for in a partner (How would they treat you? What would they look like?), and demographic information regarding their current/previous relationships (Where did you meet? Can you tell me about any other boyfriends/ girlfriends?). The interview format was flexible and any topic raised by the participant was explored. Following the initial interview there was a period of reflection and a new guide was developed based on follow up questions (specific to the individual) to material raised in the first interview. This gave the research a cyclical reflective nature that had not been intended in its conception although was allowable within the terms of the ethical approval.  In addition, a researcher diary was kept which described the ‘experience’ of the interview, including how they interacted, their body language and the atmosphere in their home. This was information was utilised within the analysis to assist theme identification within the participant’s narratives.

Ethical approval was obtained from the University Research Ethics Committee, and all participants provided informed consent.

**Hermeneutic Phenomenological Reflection**

Van Manen’s (1990) goal was to ‘transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence’ (p.36), meaning that the text produced by the researcher reflected the experience of the individual and the reader was able to ‘re-live the experience’ through the interpretation of the text. Van Manen (1990) identified ‘certain experiential themes re-occurred as commonality in the various descriptions’ (p.93). The data formed part of a PhD Thesis which explored not only partner selection but how it impacted on the relationships experienced by participants. Only themes from the analysis relating to partner selection are discussed in this article. The process of how the themes were deduced from the interviews is depicted in Figure 2

**Figure 2**

Interviews with Participants

 2 -3 interviews per couple / individual lasting 45- 120 minutes

Interview transcripts and researcher diary subjected to exploratory analysis in preparation for subsequent interviews.

Participants’ ‘life stories’ constructed as a text.

Thematic analysis conducted on life history narratives and interview transcripts

Life History Narratives

Researcher Diary

Interview Transcripts

Reflected on in three ways:

* The text as a whole - to capture the most significant aspect of the text
* The highlighted approach - statements which appeared significant
* The detailed approach - every line examined to see whether it was significant to the phenomenon being explored

Final synthesis agreed.

As analysis progressed, themes began to re-occur within the descriptions. Appropriate phrases or single statements which represented themes were identified and then transformed into a textual description. Only themes relating to partner selection were discussed in this article.

**Results**

The findings presented here were part of a PhD dissertation which examined partner selection for people with learning disabilities and how these choices influence the relationships they experience. The focus of this article relates to partner selection therefore the themes included are those cited most frequently by participants in relation to partner selection. Themes included: environmental influences on partner choice, personality, companionship, physical attractiveness and expectations

**Environmental Influences on Partner Choice**

Regardless of age, all participants reported having had had their first relationship in the past ten years. It may be that the historic segregation of the sexes within service provision for this group had contributed to the lack of relationships in their younger lives or made them unwilling to report previous relationships. Possibly, the embodied reality of their learning disability might mean that they could not recall events. All of the younger participants reported prior experiences of relationships before their current one. Younger participants’ experiences appeared to mirror those of young people without intellectual disabilities, such as kissing behind the bike sheds.

*Emma:* I’ve heard it all before that. People used to do that in our school, go behind the bike shed.

Despite this, almost all participants had only experienced relationships with other people diagnosed with an intellectual disability, lived with other people who had intellectual disabilities and met partners in locations where only people with an intellectual disability congregated (to the researcher’s knowledge). Kerry and Dean were the exception, and were the only participants not living within a staffed environment. Liam and Emma began their relationship when Liam came to view a room in a supported living house where Emma was already a resident.

Liam: When I went to try out a new house, and Emma tried out new house and I asked her out and, like, I asked if her, if she wanted to go out with me.

**Personality**

Regardless of age and gender all participants desired a ‘nice’ partner. Being ‘nice’ was associated with characteristics such as being friendly, kind and gentle. This was cited as most important by all participants when asked what they wanted in a partner. The authors’ interpretation of this is that they wanted to be loved, cared about and to be special to someone. Participants’ comments about their partner suggested how important they were within their lives and positive aspects of their personalities were highly valued.

John: Nice, kind and gentle (traits valued in a partner).

Joe: She’s a great person in my life, friendly, kind, funny and fun to be with [turning to Carrie]. I love you so much. So happy about the person I am married to and also she is my soul mate.

Nine participants had experienced some form of abuse from either an ex-partner, family member or a member of the public and it was suggested that a loving relationship with a partner could be reparative in overcoming abusive relationships. Emma compared how Liam differed from an abusive partner.

Emma: He [Liam] is not the same as the other boyfriends. He is kind and gentle, lovely and caring.

**Companionship**

Companionship and having someone to share experiences with was important to participants when selecting a partner, regardless of age or gender. When asked what they valued about their partner, participants commented positively on the companionship they provided.

Caroline: That’s the thing, we [she and John] both have lots of time for each other as we do a lot of talking and everything

Kerry: Um, yeah, we [she and Dean] do, yeah, he keeps me company, friendly. Just talking to each other, you know.

Loneliness was cited as an issue among a third of participants: there appeared to be no clear connection between age, gender, being able to go out alone, number of friends or level of disability and loneliness felt.

Emma: Because I don’t want to be on my own, the best thing about a boyfriend is you can go out and do things together. Well, the thing that makes me happy being with someone is I would rather live with someone, a partner, than being on my own because I don’t like being on my own

It appeared that the fewer unpaid people involved in a person’s life (i.e. family or friends), the more significant their relationship became. In some cases, such as Peter, a partner constituted their main social outlet to the world or a substitute family. The majority of participants described how they valued a partner’s company and friendship most of all. It was clear what significance their relationship with their partner had, providing more than just a ‘presence’, it was a special exclusive relationship with a reciprocal partner.

Researcher: What do you think life would be like without Kate (his wife)?

Peter: I would actually miss her. I would actually cry……She is actually nice.

Participants also desired a partner who was willing and able to provide support, either practically or emotionally. Participants demonstrated how they supported each other through difficult situations and how this could negate the need for staff support.

Researcher: Did you report it to the police? [Attempted rape]

Carrie: Yep, I did.

Joe: I was in there to hold her hand.

Researcher: That’s awful. Did you get any counselling or anything?

Carrie: No

Joe: I was there

Carrie: Joe did it [counselling for her].

Carrie: [to Joe] Thank you for being my rock

Participants wanted a partner who could provide practical support, their concern for their partner’s welfare demonstrated how committed they were to their relationships.

Kerry: Oh, he looks after me, he knows. Because he looks after me and because I have eye problems at the moment he looks after me; when we go to Mum’s he looks after me when I am on the train and stuff.

**Physical Attractiveness**

Physical attraction was important to participants but it did not appear to be the most important aspect when selecting a partner as, when asked what they valued most in a partner, personality or companionship were cited as more important. Eight participants confirmed that they were initially attracted by their partner’s physical appearance but as their feelings progressed a stronger emotional bond developed.

*Joe:* Her face and her lips. You looked so hot (to Carrie).

John: Good looking (when asked what he found attractive about Caroline)

Caroline: The same, really, he looked good looking and everything, so yeah. His eyes and his smile.

Participants were less conventional in terms of what they considered attractive with less focus on traditional aspects of beauty such ‘slim blonde women’ (Kelly *et* al., 2009), with some favouring unconventional physical aspects such as shortness in a man. However, there was some evidence that outward indicators of disability were not seen as attractive or positive by some participants. For example, some participants reported that they were not attracted to people who used wheelchairs or breathing equipment.

Liam: She (an ex-girlfriend) can walk but not well, too much dancing for her, too much, she got a breathing mask. Went to her bedroom and she has a breathing mask and I thought ‘no thanks’.

**Expectations**

All participants desired a partner who would make a long term commitment to their relationship, three couples were married, two individuals were engaged and one couple were considering getting engaged. Only one participant, who had the highest support needs, had no plans to be married or get engaged. Almost all participants indicated that they felt proud telling people they were married, engaged or with a partner. Having a partner suggested a sense of normality and being an ordinary member of society. The ring and marriage ceremony was of great significance to some participants, it was possibly considered an outward symbol of acceptance and status, a way of signifying to the world that they were ‘just like other people’ and special to someone.

Caroline: The ring, I suppose, so yeah….I think it [the relationship] would be the same except that maybe you could sometimes show your ring off and say ‘I am engaged to get married’.

Contradicting the majority of research for non-disabled adults, no participant expressed a desire for their partner to be employed or to have financial security. There was evidence to suggest that people with intellectual disabilities believe that the benefit system does not encourage them to co-habit as it reportedly has a negative effect on their income. With limited employment opportunities, this places people with intellectual disabilities on benefits who wish to live with a partner in a disadvantageous position.

Kerry: If you are on benefits, basically they will take it away from you. I don’t know the story but all I know is that if we got married then we couldn’t live together, we would still be in separate houses.

Research highlighted that many women without an intellectual disability valued characteristics relating to a raising a family, such as financial security and dependability (Lacey et al., 2006; O’Reilly et al., 2009). This was not expressed as desirable by any participant. Only one participant (Dean) had children, female participants (and one male) expressed negative feelings regarding parenthood and no participant expressed a plan to become a parent in the future. The general feeling expressed among participants was an inability to cope with parenthood either due to self-perceived weaknesses (such as a lack of patience) or directly due to having an intellectual disability.

Caroline: I wouldn’t want kids. No, I don’t have enough patience with them. I like seeing them with other people but I wouldn’t have enough patience if it was mine so, no, I wouldn’t want kids.

Carrie: Being special needs and Down’s syndrome, we couldn’t cope with a baby.

Carrie’s views went beyond her as an individual and incorporated all intellectually disabled people, referencing a documentary she had seen as an example. A counter-perspective was then offered to her:

Researcher: There was another one [documentary] about people having a baby, what do you think about that?

Carrie: Oh I agree with getting married but not having the baby.

Researcher: What, any person with special needs [her words]?

Carrie: Yeah.

**Discussion**

The findings presented here demonstrate that people with intellectual disabilities express the same desire for a kind partner to share experiences with as people without intellectual disabilities. However, in some respects the traits that participants valued in partners differed from those identified in research focusing on people who do not have intellectual disabilities.

All participants met their partners in segregated environments specifically for people with intellectual disabilities. As in White and Barnitt’s (2000) research, the majority of couples began relationships within their shared group home which suggested that despite advances to integrate people with intellectual disabilities into mainstream society, a smaller insular society still remains, the inside of people’s homes acting like a micro social world separate from the wider world. It could be argued that some participants may have selected a partner due to their availability, possibly over key factors that influence partner selection for non-intellectually disabled people such as shared life goals, values and common interests. No participant acknowledged this in interviews but it was alluded to by Caroline and John who did not share the same views on topics such marriage, yet remained together as a couple. If participants had been interviewed individually this could have been explored further. It could be inferred that the most important factor is the scope of their social circle. If this was small, people could settle for who is easily available rather than finding someone who is more compatible.

All participants claimed to have begun their relationships in the past ten years. Participants may have experienced relationships prior to this but chose not to disclose this, however participants appeared genuine in their accounts. The findings suggests that being older did not stop participants from finding love but the lack of opportunities experienced by older participants may have limited their ability to meet a wider range of potential partners earlier in their lives. Social inclusion was a key objective of *Valuing People* (DoH, 2001) yet people with intellectual disabilities have less contact with friends compared to the wider population (Emerson and Hatton, 2008). It could be argued that people with intellectual disabilities are limited in their choice of potential partner due to continuing segregation from society.

The economic and social situation for people with intellectual disabilities is not ideal. In 2012 only 7.1% of people with intellectual disabilities were in paid employment in the UK and the majority were in receipt of benefits. All the participants in this study received benefits. However, it could also be argued that people with intellectual disabilities can make partner choices without the restrictions of concerns or expectations about socio-economic status. Research has demonstrated that some women without an intellectual disability value ‘dependability’; dependable characteristics included: high earning potential (O’Reilly *et al.*, 2009) and good financial resources (Lacey et. al, 2004). These traits may be valued due to the prospect of having children with a potential partner who could ‘provide’ for his family (Lacey *et al.*, 2004). Women in this present research showed no interest in these qualities, implying that their expression of love could be ‘less gender stereotyped’ than it was for non-intellectually disabled adults. Only one participant had children and none planned to start a family which possibly explained why these ‘dependable characteristics’ were unimportant to participants. The notion of a male ‘providing’ for his family was a traditional role developed in a shared history and society within which women with intellectual disabilities were not traditionally included due to fears of pregnancy within this population (Howard and Handy, 2004). Sexuality and parenthood for people with an intellectual disability is still considered taboo by some making it unlikely that that people with intellectual disabilities currently hold the same traditions as mainstream society due to their historic exclusion from this shared history (McCarthy, 1999; and Abraham *et al.*, 2010). Dependability was important to participants in terms of having a partner who was reliable and available to them. All participants desired a commitment from a partner; this was either stated explicitly or implied through the commitment of marriage or intention to marry. Despite their intellectual disabilities, most participants appeared able to understand and make such a commitment and depended on their partner to do the same.

Physical appearance was valued by participants although it did not appear to be the most significant aspect when selecting a partner. Participants appeared to have a more open approach to what they found attractive. Male participants did not discuss stereotypical ideals of female attractiveness such as slender bodies, low waist-to-hip ratios, and large breasts (Singh and Young, 1995). It was possible that participants held views comparable to their non-intellectually disabled peers but did not voice them as they were interviewed with a partner and did not want to hurt their feelings. Participants’ responses concerning what they found physically attractive mainly centred on facial aspects such as smiles and eyes. People with disabilities have not traditionally been considered attractive by society (Groce 1997) so fewer positive representations appear in art or media. It was therefore perhaps unsurprising that the participants did not value physical attractiveness as highly. Aspects of physical attractiveness valued by intellectually disabled adults in this research could be considered as outwards indicators of an internal quality such as kindness or happiness: many participants valued attributes such as a nice smile.

**Limitations**

Only participants in a relationship were included, and a number of the participants had been in a relationship for many years and may not have been able to recall what it was like to be a person looking for love. Single people would have perhaps provided an account of what they were looking for in a potential partner; most participants in this research, when asked this question, described their current partner. A number of couples were interviewed together. It would have been beneficial to have conducted one interview with participants individually so they had the opportunity to share and discuss without their partner. This could have resulted in a deeper level of disclosure and the wider exploration of some topics that may have been difficult to discuss in the presence of a current partner, such as sexual intimacy, or previous partners. Future research could investigate partner selection for intellectually disabled people who define themselves as homosexual, as it was felt this topic was too large for this study. Future research would allow sufficient time to examine their experiences in detail. Also the exploration of intimate relationships for people with intellectual disabilities with complex and profound needs as this is an area absent from the current research.

**Conclusion**

The desire for a warm, loving and considerate partner was valued by all. Desired characteristics and expectations for the relationship were rooted in a shared history and culture. People with intellectual disabilities share many similarities in terms of what they desired in a potential partner with their non-intellectually disabled peers. However, for people to have the equal opportunities within relationships such as access to a wide range of partners or the possibility of parenthood and marriage, there need to be significant changes. People with intellectual disabilities require more support to increase their social networks and to become more integrated into society to increase their opportunities to find love with a compatible partner.

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