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## The Experience of Being Married to an Adult with Dyslexia

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### Abstract

**INTRODUCTION:** This study researches the experience of being married or in a long-term relationships with an adult with developmental dyslexia, investigating how dyslexic adults can camouflage their disability, why non-dyslexic partners choose dyslexic partners, and the effects of living with an adult with learning difficulties/differences.

**METHOD:** A semi-structured interview script was used with to N=4 long-term non-dyslexic partners of dyslexic (areas of investigation included: dating, marriage/long-term relationships, knowledge of dyslexia, parenthood/children, career success and emotional health). Qualitative data was analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis-IPA.

**HYPOTHESIS:** The study will find that dyslexics use many camouflaging or avoidance strategies to cope with life and many of these can be misunderstood and seen as odd by long-term partners. The study will find that many dyslexics misunderstand their own learning difficulties/differences or deny they exist, and this prevents them advocating for themselves to others.

**RESULTS:** The study found that many dyslexics may hide their difficulties, and will only disclose their problems/ difficulties when forced to – a choice between covering up their dyslexia and maybe losing a thriving relationship. Dyslexic partners may have specific problems with communication: from an inability/

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*difficulty in reading social clues, difficulty pronouncing long multi-syllabic words, coming up with bizarre things in conversation, to panicking when routines are interrupted and doing things in the wrong order in shops. Society may judge dyslexic partners as abnormal and socially inapt/handicapped.*

*Non-dyslexic partners can be surprised by how much their dyslexic partner's relied on daily routines for survival. They were also frustrated by their dyslexic partner's inability to do simple tasks e.g. writing a shopping list, taking telephone messages, and paying bills on time; so most take over all such chores. 'Social-exchange theory' was introduced to understand this phenomenon, with evidence from other groups with learning difficulties.*

*Unrealistic career choices were found by dyslexics which could be argued to be denying their difficulties, and their parenting style suggesting a deep rooted dislike for matters relating to school, especially teacher interactions, linking to their own negative experiences at school.*

*CONCLUSION: The study indicates that dyslexia is more than just a disability that affects literacy, but one that in adulthood affects long-term relationships/marriage and communication in the community and the workplace.*

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**Keywords:** Adult Dyslexia, Marriage, Learning Difficulties, relationships, communication

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### **What is Dyslexia?**

Rose's (2009) recent UK government review of Dyslexia (specific reading disability) defined dyslexia as a learning difficulty that primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent word reading and spelling. Characteristic features of dyslexia indicate difficulties in phonological awareness, verbal memory and verbal processing speed. It occurs across the range of intellectual abilities,

and is best thought of as a continuum, not a distinct category, with no clear cut-off points. Co-occurring difficulties may be seen in aspects of language, motor co-ordination, mental calculation, concentration and personal organisation. A good indication of the severity and persistence of dyslexic difficulties can be gained by examining how the individual responds or has responded to well-founded intervention.

Whilst there are disagreements understanding the cause of developmental dyslexia, many believe phonological deficits are core difficulties (Snowling, 2000; Thomson, 1996). Research has investigated medical-based identification, with DNA being the most likely route (Bishop, 2009; Grigorenko, Wood, Meyer and Pauls, 2000), however to date identification has relied upon educational psychologists and specialist teachers to diagnose 'dyslexic-type deficits' through a number of sub skill assessments.

Whilst dyslexia is widely understood to affect reading, writing, short-term memory and associated traits (Thomson, 1996, Riddick, 1996, Miles 1994) there is less information available about how dyslexics interact with society and their environment at large (Scott, 2004, Alexander-Passe, 2006, 2010, 2015a, c). Many studies and researchers ignore dyslexia being a life-long condition that affects individuals from cradle to grave, with possible emotional/psychological manifestations as a result of their interactions with society.

Alexander-Passe (2010, 2015a, c), Scott (2004), McNutty (2003) all agree that many adult dyslexics camouflage their difficulties using advanced coping strategies to project an image of normality. As dyslexics are very conscious of their differences, a secondary persona is commonly created to operate in their wider community. This persona works the majority of the time; however when it cracks it can be highly embarrassing, demonstrates how vulnerable they can

be, confirming their otherness compared to their peers.

There is however a shortage of research concerning dyslexia and adult partner relationships, and this paper aims to shed light on this subject.

### **Dyslexia and Relationships**

The question now is raised about closer relationships, firstly with family and work colleagues, and secondly with friendships which may lead to dating and marriage (long-term relationships). Can the dyslexic operate their secondary persona in these situations/environments?

Different family structures offer differing levels of support. Non-dyslexic siblings would be aware of their dyslexic sibling's difficulties, but in adulthood may misunderstand how much their dyslexic sibling can still struggle with these difficulties/differences. Parents are more likely to understand their child's difficulties, especially the dominant parents (e.g. the mother), however they may be blinkered to the extent their learning difficulties can affect working and personal relationships with others - as they are so used to their child's dyslexia that they are oblivious to their differences. In the main they are relieved their child has survived school and gained employment, and to them this has meant they have 'over-come' their difficulties and moved on (Scott, 2004), as if they were 'cured'?

In the workplace the dyslexic is there to perform a task or role, and in positive environments this has meant 'reasonable

adjustments' to perform as per their peers (e.g. dictaphones, spell/grammar-checkers, other ICT). Work colleagues only see the secondary persona, as in most cases they do not have time to think further. Dyslexics rely heavily on routines to cope in their everyday world (Alexander-Passe, 2010, 2012; Scott, 2004), and are reluctant to discuss or disclose their dyslexia to others for fear of direct/in-direct embarrassment, bullying, and reduced promotion prospects (McLoughlin, Leather and Stringer, 2002; Alexander-Passe, 2015a, c).

When it comes to friendships, Alexander-Passe (2010, 2012) suggests that many dyslexics avoid socially mixing with work colleagues, due to a lack self-confidence in general discussions (e.g. discussing news events and other topics) in large groups, as they feel unable to keep track of conversations. This is felt to be greater in groups where they feel others are superior to themselves in intelligence and culture, where they tend to either make their excuses or leave early, or not go at all. Dyslexics generally belittle their views compared to peers, and this adds to their social exclusion.

When it comes down to finding long-term partners, their prior avoidance of social situations, means they lack confidence in meeting others. Manifesting as being unable or unwilling to talk to others in social settings, or feeling unable to hold down a serious conversation - long enough for another to feel attracted to them. This is before they even mention they are dyslexic and if they dare, their troubled schooling and childhoods.

Marriage offers the dyslexic numerous safeguards but also many dangers. Whilst it is possible to have a secondary persona at work and with friends, when it comes to living with someone 24/7, the ability to hide differences are near impossible. Partners will see the significant difficulties faced by their dyslexic partners, and them relying on routines for daily survival. Without understanding dyslexia (if their partner is even diagnosed) they will begin to get frustrated and angry about their dyslexic partner's inability to do what they perceive are basic tasks (e.g. taking telephone messages and buying all items from a shopping list).

#### **Other disabilities/differences and Relationships**

It would be useful to look at dating and relationships in others with disabilities e.g. learning disabilities (both development and acquired) to gain a broader perspective.

Few studies have investigated the relationship between carers and partners, after their partner became disabled after marriage. Parker (1993) noted such *'married couples are left virtually unsupported, either practically or emotionally, at times when their relationship may be under considerable strain. Sexual relationships may falter or cease because of lack of knowledge, embarrassment or not knowing whom to approach for help. Other couples may be left in an empty shell of a marriage because no practical alternatives to their situation are offered'*. Understood (2015) suggests this is due to the patient-caregiver

relationship. After a while, you may find that you are no longer emotionally attached to the relationship, and this means relationships are likely to fail, unless other reasons are found to hold the relationship together.

Commentators tend to focus on the question of whether couples with learning disabilities have firstly the right to marry, secondly should they be sterilised, and lastly if they have children are they intelligent enough to bring them up and therefore should any children be put up for adoption (Marrin, 2008; Smith-Squire, 2009; Beber and Biswas, 2009). This argument has tended to focus on severely learning disabled couples, such as those with Downs Syndrome.

Researchers argue that married couples, where one has an acquired learning disability, use a variety of approaches and patterns in their collaboration in their daily lives, including the division and delegation of tasks (Schulz, 2008; Berg, Johnson, Meegan and Strough, 2003). Schulz noting that study participants felt this strengthened relationships, rather than weakening them. Parker (1993) discusses the power differences exist in such relationships, bringing an un-balanced division of household chores, with disabled partners often forced into devolving a lot of their power over say financial matters which can lead them to feel an unequal partner in the relationship. Whereas the more able partner who takes on 'more than their fair share' of choices can feel over-whelmed by the responsibility, and can develop resentment for such a heavy responsibility.

Garee and Cheever (1992) document examples of several married couples, where one or both members of the couple have disabilities. Coping strategies include: the use of technology, planning of the home environment, focusing on strengths, having realistic expectations of what each other can do, doing what each can do, sense of humour, creating their own roles, finding time for oneself, work, awareness of self-care issues, and a having strong love bond. The reported need for 'finding time for oneself' has also been found by Schulz (2008), who notes '*generally speaking, the more severe the disability a participant has, the less alone time (privacy) they have because of the amount of care or assistance they needed*'. Thus the need for time out '*to collect one's thoughts*' was deemed important to retain mental health.

NCLD (2009) suggests the following guidance to those in a relationship with disabled partners: (this starts by focussing on the non-disabled partner and then lists suggestions for the disabled partner)

- ◆ You should have a good understanding of your strengths as well as your challenges.
- ◆ You should understand how your disability affects your behaviour and your ability to communicate.
- ◆ Your partner/spouse should understand that learning disabilities could interfere with many aspects of everyday life.
- ◆ You both should understand that some tasks might take you longer

- to do than they take other people.
- ◆ Be as self-reliant as possible so that your partner does not feel overburdened or in a patient-caregiver relationship.
  - ◆ Explain to your partner the accommodations you need. For example, if you have trouble following a series of directions and your partner asks you to do three things after dinner, reply with a direct statement, such as 'Please write down what you need, or give me the directions one at a time.'
  - ◆ Agree to trade-off household tasks so you handle the ones that you can comfortably do. E.g. your partner/spouse may handle such tasks as paying the bills and balancing the finances, while you do the grocery shopping.
  - ◆ Be open to improving your social skills. Ask your partner/spouse to give you feedback on things you should/should not do.

The concept of imbalance and weighing the advantages and disadvantages of one's relationship can also be seen with the 'social exchange theory' (Michener, DeLamater & Myers, 2004; Murstein, Ceretto & MacDonald, 1977; Duck, 1983; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). According to this theory, relationships are an exchange between parties as an attempt to increase rewards and reduce costs, and that people evaluate relationships with others through comparing alternatives (Dowd, 1975; Murstein, et al.,

1977). The negotiated exchange between parties is seen as the following equation ( $OUTCOME = BENEFITS - COSTS$ ), and importantly because different individuals have different expectations of relationships, an individual's satisfaction is dependent on more than just outcome. The difference in expectation is therefore seen as the following ( $SATISFACTION = OUTCOME - COMPARISON LEVEL$ ), but when the comparison level is different between partners, they determine whether to stay in such a relationship. This has much to do with the alternatives open to them, they are less dependent on staying in an unhappy relationship, this is described as ( $DEPENDENCE = OUTCOME - COMPARISON LEVEL OF ALTERNATIVES$ ).

Miller (2005) argues against the 'social exchange theory': as it can reduce human interaction to purely rational processes arising from economic factors; the theory has a linear structure, where some relationships might skip steps or go backwards; and lastly the theory relies on the ultimate goal of relationships requiring intimacy.

Berg, Johnson, Meegan, and Strough (2003) compared marriages between disabled and non-disabled, using open-ended qualitative interviews with young and old non-disabled married couples, investigated how they used collaboration in their relationship. Most couples reported that they collaborated with each other to make decisions and problem solve about managing finances, household repairs, and other major decisions such as where to live. Patterns were identified in their collaboration, such as division of labour due to traditional sex

roles, interests, abilities and/or motivations, or the use of lead roles in the collaboration. They believed they complemented each other in their approach, and reported few difficulties in collaboration.

Empirical studies are mostly concerned with acquired disability, which is very different to those with developmental dyslexia. These studies imply any deficit to be a difference, however the acquired element could however be related to dyslexics gaining identification in their marriage, normally after their children are diagnosed. In such cases, their newly diagnosed dyslexic partner is dealing with psychological issues of resentment and anger, which can lead to depression or other mental health issues. Non-dyslexic partner have already taken on larger shares of household duties and this diagnosis can sometimes be a relief as a label has now been placed on such difficulties. However they can now feel embarrassed by their lack of support up to that point. The above empirical review relating to 'social exchange theory' may be helpful in explaining their mixed emotions in taking on the heavy burden of most household chores, and give understanding to their emotional struggles being in a relationship with someone with social, emotional and learning difficulties/differences.

The NCLD (2009) also discusses most important ways one can maintain a healthy and long-lasting relationship between learning disabled and non-disabled partners is by practicing good, clear, open communication. These include:

- ◆ Being direct and specific about your needs. Ask for what you need from your partner; don't expect him or her to read your mind.
- ◆ Avoiding criticizing your partner's personality. For example, don't say 'You're so messy!' or 'You never listen to me!' or 'You always only think about yourself!'. Trying not to use 'You' statements when there is a conflict. For example:

Your partner: *'You were going to tidy up the living room, but there's still a bunch of papers and books lying around! Can't you ever finish anything that you start?'*

You respond: *'You're never satisfied with anything I do!'*

Instead, using 'I' statements, such as the following: *'When you criticize my efforts, I feel bad. I'll be happy to put away the books, but I'll need to know if you want any of these catalogues before I throw them away.'*

## Methodology

### Sample

Participants were located from spouses and long-term partners of dyslexic participants from Alexander-Passe (2010, 2012). The criteria for this study was: (1) non-dyslexic individuals, (2) in long-term relationships of at least two years with a diagnosed developmental dyslexic partner were required for this study, so comparisons could be made to dyslexic

partners. N=4 adults were recruited, three females and one male, all in the 43-57 year age range, as noted in Table 1. No test of non-dyslexia was used to confirm they were not dyslexic.

Table 1. Participants

Non-dyslexic partners	Age	Gender	Children (Dyslexic)
Amber	43	Female	Yes
Sophie	47	Female	Yes (D)
Julie	57	Female	Yes (D)
Ivan	46	Male	Yes (D)

### Apparatus

An N=32 items semi-structured investigative qualitative interview script was used (See Table 2), with interviews lasting approx. one hour. During the first interview a number of items were added to the interview script, which was then posed to the rest of the sample. The author planned flexibility in the interview process as this group might have problems with recalling information and might need time to reflect on their answers.

### The Interview Process, Confidentiality, Informed Consent and Personal Disclosure

Participants were sent details of the study before the interview, and all verbally

confirmed participation before the start of each recorded interview. Participants were also advised that they could avoid any questions that were too emotional difficult to answer, and to halt the interview and their participation in the study without reason; fortunately, no participants took this option.

Confidentiality was assured at several points:

1. in the original study advert;
2. an email confirmation/requests for basic details (name, age, education etc.);
3. at the start of each interview,
4. advising participants that pseudonyms names would be used.

Each participant was also reassured that they would receive a copy of their transcript which they would have the opportunity to check/modify. As the interviews concerned participants disclosing emotionally painful or frustrating events it was felt best that the interviewer (the author) also disclosed, where required, that he was diagnosed dyslexic at fourteen years old, married to a non-dyslexic partner with several children from this relationship.

### Analysis

Interviews were recorded digitally, transcribed, spell-checked with minimal grammar changes; lastly a check was made for readability. Transcripts were then emailed to each volunteer for them to check and amend if required, with the opportunity for them to add additional



Table 2: Interview Script N=32 items.

<p><b>DATING</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ How long have you been married/ in a relationship to your partner?</li> <li>◆ How long did you date?</li> <li>◆ What was it like dating a dyslexic?</li> <li>◆ At what point did you know he/she was dyslexic?</li> <li>◆ Do you think he hid his difficulties?</li> <li>◆ Up to that point, did you have any knowledge of dyslexia?</li> <li>◆ Was xxx the first dyslexic you had personally knew?</li> <li>◆ Did xxx's dyslexia affect your dating relationship?</li> <li>◆ Do you have any funny stories that you recognise have come from xxx's dyslexia?</li> <li>◆ Did xxx always remember your name? Or other people's names e.g. your friends/family?</li> <li>◆ Was it frustrating dating a dyslexic?</li> <li>◆ Do you think you were attracted to the quirkiness that dyslexia brings (or as a result of coping with dyslexia)?</li> </ul> <p><b>MARRIAGE/LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIP</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Being in a long-term relationship with xx, do you recognise his dyslexia difficulties?</li> <li>◆ Do you help xxx cope with his/her difficulties? If so, what do you do?</li> <li>◆ How much do you think xxx avoids certain tasks?</li> <li>◆ Is it easy being married to a dyslexic?</li> <li>◆ How much do you feel you manage your partner?</li> <li>◆ At times have you ever called him or her your 4th/5th child?</li> </ul>	<p><b>DYSLEXIA</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ What are xxx's dyslexic symptoms you recognise?</li> <li>◆ Can you define dyslexia?</li> </ul> <p><b>PARENTHOOD/CHILDREN</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Do you have children?</li> <li>◆ If you do not, did dyslexia affect your decision, or your dyslexic partner's decision?</li> <li>◆ How old are your children?</li> <li>◆ Are they dyslexic?</li> <li>◆ Who was the first person to recognise their difficulties?</li> <li>◆ How is xxx going into school to meet their teachers?</li> <li>◆ Does xxx get stressed when talking to the teachers?</li> <li>◆ How is xxx with your children's homework? Does xxx help?</li> <li>◆ Do you think dyslexia affects xxx's help with homework?</li> </ul> <p><b>CAREER/SUCCESS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ How do you think xxx's education was affected by their dyslexia?</li> <li>◆ How do you think xxx's career has been affected by dyslexia?</li> <li>◆ Do you think xxx is successful? Reaching his/her potential?</li> </ul> <p><b>EMOTIONAL HEALTH</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Do you think xxx is happy or sad with his/her lot?</li> <li>◆ Does dyslexia get them down? If so how and why?</li> </ul>
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notes or post interview revelations, as interviews can commonly trigger post-interview thoughts. Interviews were then subjected to IPA analysis.

### **Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)**

IPA is a relatively recent analysis model used by researchers, however has a historical origin with the phenomenology and Husserl (1970) aim of returning to studying living things. This refers to "to return to the things themselves is to return to *that* world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge *always* speaks" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Husserl was very interested in the life-world, comprises of the objects around us as we perceive them and our experience of our self, body and relationships.

Whilst there are many forms of phenomenology in use, IPA uses Idiographic ideals, deemed suitable for this study. Smith developed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Harré and Van Langenhove, 1995; Smith and Osburn, 2008) to analyse elements of the reflected personal experience - the subjective experience of the social world.

Giorgi (1994) a critic of this analysis model argued that phenomenology avoids the reductionist tendencies of other research methodologies, and uses the researcher's assumptions/ divergent links to inform new insights from the data, rather than forcing data to fit pre-defined categories. Such intuition in the researcher allows 'outside the box' thinking. Each researcher is used as an interpretative element to understand

themes and body language, compared to Discourse Analysis (Potter, 1996) which relies on precise analysis of the words used and the researcher has no input in the process.

Many research studies have used IPA to date (Duncan, Hart, Scoular, & Brigg, 2001, Thompson, Kent, & Smith, 2002; Clare, 2003; Biggerstaff, 2003; French, Maissi, Marteau, 2005). IPA deems samples as small as 1-2 as average, with those being 3-7 being large, and those above this figure as unusual.

IPA was deemed suitable for this sample based on:

- (1) Being 'social model of disability' and inclusion friendly, aiding understanding in special need samples;
- (2) Allowing flexibility and the ability for themes from initial participants to inform an investigative interview script.

### **Results**

This paper includes excerpts from Alexander-Passe (2012).

### **DATING**

#### **What was it like dating a dyslexic?**

*When you are dating you are not altogether aware of it, it's not until you have been together for quite a while, or living together that you gradually become aware that this person has some sort of reading problem. And for me it came about*

*with my ex-husband, long before the introduction of computers, I was aware that he didn't read, he just didn't read for pleasure'. (Julie)*

*'I had dated doctors and lawyers before, but thought Mike was unique. To go out with someone practical, who worked for themselves etc? I found that more exciting'. (Sophie)*

Participants noted that they were not entirely aware of their partner's dyslexia whilst they were dating, however they recognised they were quirky, exciting and different, but this was attractive to them, and this stood them out to be different to other adults they had dated before, one could call this their USP (unique selling point). The partners however did not question why they were quirky.

### **When did they disclose their dyslexia to you? And why?**

*'I think he told me quite early on, but not in the first few weeks, perhaps 6-7 months into our relationship.*

**Why then?** *I suppose you need to need to write things down and it was getting awkward and he was getting more comfortable with me. So he needed to tell me, and he knew I wouldn't have a problem with it, and when he told me I encouraged him to discuss it more'. (Sophie)*

*I don't remember, but I think it might have been in the first or second date, whilst talking about school and education'. (Amber)*

Non-dyslexic partners in this study had different experiences regarding disclosure, Sophie was told 6-7 months into their relationship, and Ivan and Amber knew much earlier, probably in the first or second date, regarding general conversation about childhoods and education. Both Sophie and Ivan were told to explain their partner's strange behaviour, which may have been puzzling and off-putting to most.

Disclosure is important, as it firstly shows a willingness to be honest about their difficulties, secondly that they felt safe in their relationship to risk being perceived as abnormal, and lastly their ability to cover it up was getting harder to achieve. Amber found her partner very open who saw their dyslexia as a positive part of their lifestyle. Sophie saw disclosure as a very positive step and encouraged greater dialogue about his difficulties, rather than brushing it off as an insignificant factor in their life together.

### **Did they hide their dyslexic difficulties?**

*'Definitely, it's only been a few years (5 years) that has been comfortable telling people about it. He will now tell others quite openly, but he would never tell people before. He wouldn't want to tell people. He would ask others to write things for him at work. Now he will talk about it to others. **What sort of things do you think he has been hiding?** Reading and writing, writing numbers down completely wrong. He would get over it another way, like getting someone else to write it, or leaving it, or*

*leaving the job. I think he is now more able to deal with it, telling people he can't do it because of his dyslexia, and get others to do it for him'. (Sophie)*

*'No, not from me, but from others. She is a really nice person and that was more important than her problems from my point of view'. (Ivan)*

Sophie and Ivan spoke of their partners hiding from their dyslexia from others, but not from them during the dating process, apart from what has been noted earlier. However Sophie and Amber discovered their partners using a range of coping strategies to deal with their difficulties, in Sophie's case they were more negative which meant sometimes turning down work or leaving a job earlier without pay. Amber found some of her partner's coping strategies were unusual, however they seemed to work, thus disclosure to gain special allowances were not needed.

### **Did dyslexia affect the dating relationship?**

*'Yes definitely. The thing that sticks out the most with my current dyslexic partner is that he doesn't read. He gets hospital letters but doesn't read them, he misses out words. What really affects our relationships is that he doesn't read emails or text messages from me'. (Julie)*

*'No. the only thing I would say is I gave him the benefit of the doubt*

*more than other people without dyslexia'. (Amber)*

*Very disorganized. I had not realised that dyslexia affects everything he does; there are good days and bad days'. (Sophie)*

Evidence suggests that whilst dyslexia can affect the dating process, as partners can forget about their partner's difficulties and judge them by normal society standards (reading and writing). The lack of knowledge about dyslexia and its effect on individuals resulted in both the dyslexic and their non-dyslexic partner misunderstanding the multi-dimensional effects of such deficits. Dyslexia can be seen as a non-descript cloud that covers a relationship, meaning either the partner gives a greater benefit of the doubt as in the case of Amber, or the partner's misunderstanding the difficulties resulting in frustration at their dyslexic partners inability to read important letters or emails from them. The former is positive and the latter is negative and unhelpful. However the former could be argued as seeing their partner as disabled and making 'reasonable adjustments', and the later as nagging or encouraging their partners to overcome their difficulties and find suitable coping strategies.

### **Difficulty with short-term memory**

***'Did Mike turn up late for a date? Yes, he has done that many times. I was going out for a dress, and we were meeting to buy things for our engagement party and I was waiting there for three hours, like a lemon.***

*Turning up on the wrong day... I had not realised that dyslexia affects everything he does'. (Sophie)*

Short-term memory deficit is an intrinsic aspect of dyslexia, so it is not surprising that dyslexics will either forget about times and dates, and arrive three hours late as in Sophie's case, or in Amber's case will make telephone calls and suddenly forget the name of their partner, even after dating for many months. Sophie notes that dyslexics have good and bad days, so one day he will remember and the next he won't, which is extremely confusing for others and only confirms a dyslexic partner's unreliability – at times they will also not believe their partner has dyslexia or see it as a poor excuse – 'you were fine yesterday'.

### **Communication Problems**

In traditional concepts of dyslexia, communication problems are not flagged as intrinsic. However in this study communication problems were flagged by partners as problematic.

### **A social liability?**

*'I will often remind him of people's names in social circumstances or if we are going into a social thing or we are entertaining ourselves, I will normally prep him e.g. so and so's son has just passed examinations, to remind him. So when he opens conversation he doesn't come over as rude as he has forgotten about a momentous thing in these people's life. I won't let him go in blind to those sort of situations'. (Amber)*

***'In social settings, is Hannah generally quiet? Yes. Do you know why? I think she is frightened of saying the wrong thing. I think there have been times when people have responded to her 'what are you on about?' So sometimes she doesn't make sense sometimes in conversations and this worries her? Yes that's correct'. (Ivan)***

Dyslexic partners in this study seem to have problems either expressing themselves in social environments, and either tended to be extrovert and not care what they say, or introvert, quiet and reserved due to prior negative experiences. Amber found her husband was unaware of his communication problems and at times was a social liability, commonly 'putting his foot in it' by being inappropriate or sometimes rude. Ivan however found his partner was frightened of saying the wrong thing to others, as in the past she has confused others or come across as strange or weird. All participants in this study noted their dyslexic partner's ability to make random or divergent comments in conversation, which can be inappropriate or construed as 'missing the point' in group discussions. This could be firstly down to their dyslexic brain making divergent connections to things (e.g. a dogs bark and a tree's bark) or their inability to hold conversations in their memory and are 'grabbing at straws' to find appropriate things to say in groups.

One could question if Amber's partner's ability to be rude or abrupt in conversation or in emails is due to an inability to read social situations or

choosing appropriate language for each setting. Such an inability could be due to unawareness of social clues or lacking the perception that individuals are unlike him, and require more than yes/no answers to questions; resulting in communication, both spoken and on paper to give the shortest unemotional response to a question, in a military or business type response.

Amber also notes that her partner has developed coping strategies for conversations, by developing a number of choice phrases or saying, which have been successful in the past. Whilst a positive strategy, she notes that he forgets who he has used them with and how often they have been used due to his short-term memory deficit, thus he can appear as lacking or predictable to others.

#### Difficulty pronouncing hard words?

*'Sometimes he and the boys could not pronounce a word, so they all come to see me. They are aware that he is also dyslexic. They are aware he can't say certain words, so they come and see me. He will avoid saying hard words; he will do that every day. Even when he is typing he will always find an easier word to type/write'.  
(Sophie)*

*'She will avoid saying long words if possible. (Ivan)*

As children, dyslexics generally have problems with reading multi-syllabic words, and it is commonly thought with practice they will learn such ability.

Therefore it is assumed as adults they are able to read normally. One could argue that the reason why such difficulties have not been identified by other researchers, in that dyslexics on the whole are highly resourceful in developing complex coping strategies to camouflage for themselves (Morgan & Klein, 2000).

From an alternative perspective, the dyslexic's inability or difficulty sounding out multi-syllabic words could come from a combination of:

- ◆ **sequencing difficulties** (decoding and dealing with the correct way to pronounce words e.g. with the word phenomena, knowing how it should be broken up, so 'ph eno men a', or 'phe no men a', and understanding the silent parts to the words, and knowing the 'ph' rules of pronunciation),
- ◆ **motor skills deficit** (their brain telling their mouth how it should be pronounced, their mouth not working how it should be pronounced, so an inability to listening to one's bodies),
- ◆ **hearing deficit** (unable to hear correctly the sounds and feedback to the brain their vocal result),
- ◆ **low self-confidence / emotional** (failing at past attempts at such words and being mocked for their inability to say words correctly, then being phobic about trying again).

## MARRIAGE

### Is dyslexia more prevalent and more frustrating in a marriage?

***Was it frustrating dating a dyslexic?***

*No, it is more difficult now. I just found what he could and couldn't do frustrating; it takes years to really understand it. (Sophie)*

***Was it frustrating dating a dyslexic?***

*Dating no, being married yes (Amber)*

Both Sophie and Amber have found that whilst their dyslexic partners' difficulties were not prevalent whilst dating, in a long-term relationship, living together they are more able to see how much they rely on routines and this can be highly frustrating. It can be a shock how so much of a dyslexic's life is affected by their almost OCD routines and procedures, and how poor their working memory and short-term memory deficits affect them, in most basic tasks.

### Sharing the household chores?

*I do all the financials, school dates, forms and stuff'. (Ivan).*

***'What else do you think you share out, or won't give him as he would have difficulties? There are no chores I won't give him, if they need to be done. You can't always rely on him to get everything off a shopping list... So I recon I have a 70/30 chance that things I ask to be done are done. If it's really important I will send a text message or nag a bit. If it's not that***

*important I don't worry so much, if it's not done then it's not the end of the world'. (Amber)*

In all relationships, a combination of abilities and difficulties was found. All lasting relationships rely on sharing household and family chores: shopping, cleaning, dealing with the school, and remembering to pick up the dry cleaning etc. In a relationship with a dyslexic, their organisation and short-term memory problems can mean that a larger proportion of chores are taken on by non-dyslexic partners e.g. financial and paperwork. How does this affect a relationship, is it strengthened or weakened? One could argue that the non-dyslexic partner goes in with their eyes open to their partner's inability to do certain chores, but evidence from these non-dyslexic partners found, they were unaware of the true nature or extent of their dyslexic partner's difficulties. Thus expectations are not met and this can strain a relationship. The 70/30 reliability ratio as noted by Amber is interesting, and suggests on the whole her partner is reliable, and she has entrusted him with financial matters - whether this was wise or not.

She also notes that she had to train her partner in how things should be done which I'm sure she was not expecting to do. Her laid back attitude to cleaning and cooking reflects a willingness to see beyond the disability and respects her partner's abilities and differences. As Julie notes, she is married to a man, and thus expects him to be a normal man, thus different and sometimes difficult - this is normal!

Sophie and Ivan's take a different approach and understand they either need to totally take over tasks, or to check everything their partner has done (we will talk about managing dyslexic partners later). One could argue that either their partner is less able to do such chores as Amber's husband does, as they may be more severely dyslexic, or they feel the need to control all aspects of their lives. On marriage, many couples (dyslexic and non-dyslexic) feel the need to retain separate bank accounts, keep their own savings in separate accounts, and to avoid joint accounts at all cost.

It could be argued that Amber has empowered her partner to cope with his difficulties, and this makes her outlook on dyslexia positive and inclusive. However she has noted that due to increased parental responsibilities she has less time for such responsibility and therefore has absolved herself of such matters - for the better or worse. She also notes that he does extremely well to cope with financial matters as he has more patience that she does with paperwork.

### Piles of paper

*'Do you have a Mike pile for his stuff? Yes, it's a mess'. (Sophie)*

*He is very untidy and has piles everywhere, in the office, by our bed, in the lounge and the kitchen. I constantly nag him about them (Amber)*

The evidence suggests that along with organisational problems, dyslexics have problems managing huge paper-trails as

a result of modern living: bills, letters, flyers for services, junk mail, forms, to school newsletters etc. The list is endless and most people struggle to cope. Julie who has been in long term relationships with two different dyslexics gives an interesting reflections. One creates piles to read at a later point (if ever), the other will just hide the papers and ignore they had ever come. The first is more positive, but the later could be more realistic. Amber finds her partner will create piles of papers to file or work on, but then gets to the point of managing the piles; much of this is due to his difficulty sorting very diverse paperwork and to hoarding things, as they may be of use at some time in the future. Hoarding is a common problem in many households and can't be seen as a solely dyslexic problem.

### Managing a dyslexic partner?

*'If there is anything that requires him to be somewhere on time, I would generally check up on him to make sure he is there on time. I will often remind him of people's names in social circumstances or if we are going into a social thing or we are entertaining ourselves, I will normally prep him'. (Amber)*

*'If it's really important I will send a text message or nag a bit. If it's not that important I don't worry so much, if it's not done then it's not the end of the world. **So it sounds like you manage him?** Yes that's true'. (Amber)*



*'Mike does most of the paperwork but I check everything.... **He pays bills on time?** No, that is a problem, like for the credit cards, I have to write it down and make sure he has done it; I have to constantly chase him to see if they have been paid. I have a board for reminders for him. I suppose I am constantly in the background reminding him to do things'. (Sophie)*

Female participants tend to manage their dyslexic partner, being aware of their difficulties and trying to empower their partners to take on tasks. Ivan on the other hand is the only husband in this study, his coping strategy tends to be to take over and this can only confirm the debilitating element to his partner's dyslexia.

Amber seems quite clear that she manages her husband, but is very positive about the things he can do. It's not that he can't do the things asked of him, but his short-term memory deficit gets in the way. If nagging is a managing tool, then nagging a dyslexic seems to be common in Sophie's and Amber's management styles. One could argue that many partners (especially female ones- an alternative view is that when woman challenge men they are labelled as 'nagging', but when men challenge woman they are not. This could therefore be interpreted as sexist) use nagging as a means to get their own way in relationships, not just with dyslexics. Julie seems to with her partner's permission to highlight in colour questions in emails that need to be answered, as he prefers all main communication to be in writing. Sophie uses a reminder notice board to

remind her husband of things to do, as they work together, but she will manage tax and other paperwork. She notes that she is constantly there in the background to make sure things don't go wrong.

Amber prepares her husband in social settings, so he does not come over as rude or uncaring to others and has something to say. Her management style is similar to a personal adviser to a chief executive, who will prompt with personal information that would make guests feel special.

#### **An additional child?**

*'Have you ever called him your additional child because you need to manage him? Yes. (Amber)*

***'Do you call Mike your fourth child?'** Yes absolutely, it's just like having another kid, the mess, the paperwork, he is queuing up with the kids to get things proof-read, and I'm exhausted, as everyone wants me to check their work every evening. It just takes up so much time. (Sophie)*

As noted before, the need to manage your dyslexic partner can mean that you in essence see him/her as an additional child, Sophie and Amber agree with such a view, but this can mean their partner is disempowered and unable to be self-sufficient. Does this mean they are a lesser partner in the relationship? Does it mean they cannot advocate for themselves? Or have their partners given in and enjoy managing as it's easier for them?

### Is it easy being married to a dyslexic?

*'Yes it can be, you know, he changes from day to day, you get dyslexic days, you can just see from his writing or sleeping. From a bad dyslexic day he talks in his sleep. So dyslexic nights as well'. (Sophie)*

*'Sometimes I see it is difficult differentiating between how people cope with life's challenges and whether they are impacted adversely by dyslexia'. (Amber)*

The evidence seems to suggest that being married to a dyslexic is not easy, but partners recognise that no marriage is easy as everyone is different. Dyslexics pose a different set of challenges and these can be frustrating, along with dealing with their many automatic routines to do things. As noted before, it was easier dating a dyslexic than being married to one. Their quiriness can be interesting whilst dating, but living with that 24/365 can get too much.

Sophie notes that their partner's dyslexia can change often with good/bad days, and interestingly good/bad nights as well. Julie suggests that any mention of dyslexia's weakness traits to their partner or dyslexic children can make them prickly and on edge, as this only confirms to them that they are abnormal and need to try harder to cover up their inadequacies.

### Do they read for pleasure?

*'Once a year on holiday he will finish a book in two weeks, but he reads a lot of factual stuff everyday. I buy it for him. It must be a certain size print, the first thing I do is check the print size, and not too big, so it's manageable....but he does read newspapers everyday'. (Sophie)*

*'He just didn't read for pleasure. **How about newspapers?** No, he read for information, he would read quite a bit for information. He is a scientist, but he did not read for pleasure. He told me it took too long for the meaning to come to him and he got bored. But as a result of that he considered reading to be a complete waste of time, and if I was reading he would comment, 'You're reading again!' He was rushing about doing useful things, I was just reading for pleasure. It made me feel guilty, that I was relaxing, he didn't know how to relax and read, so he always kept himself busy, and eventually I felt very uncomfortable about it, as he kept whizzing past me when I was reading! Eventually I stopped reading'. (Julie)*

Participants note a mixture of attitudes towards reading. Sophie needs to choose an easy book for her husband on holiday as he won't read books during the year. Julie's partner hated her reading for pleasure, he saw it as a waste of time as he couldn't do it, she was made to feel so guilty that in the end she just gave up for an easier time. Ivan's partner found that

whilst she didn't read books she has been motivated to read on the computer, maybe with the help of assistive software of coloured tints. Amber's husband did enjoy reading but reading for pleasure comes second to work-based reading.

***'As an English graduate it must be hard for you? It's very frustrating; to get them to read is impossible'.***  
(Sophie)

Educationalists believe if parents read for pleasure, so will their children, but not in the case of Sophie with her three dyslexic children. But it's especially important for a dyslexic parent to act as a mentor and read in front of their dyslexic children, as this will reinforce the concept that reading is good and helpful to their progress.

## PARENTHOOD

### Did their dyslexia affect your decision to have children?

*'It never crossed my mind. In hindsight should it? No. If one of them would have been dyslexic, with the awareness of one's parents, it would have just been something else to deal with'.* (Amber)

*'I wasn't bothered by it, as I knew we would get through it. I liked who he was'.* (Sophie)

It is very positive to know that their partner's dyslexia did not put them off from having children, and shows an awareness that with the right help and support it can be managed. One never

knows if a child will be healthy or develop difficulties growing up, so I guess these parents went into parenthood with their eyes open to such facts.

### Who deals with the school and homework?

***'With homework, did you help them, and go beyond what was needed? Always, because any sort of homework required writing. It was always a major battle to get them to do it; as they didn't want to do it'.***  
(Julie)

***'How is Mike with your children's homework? He helps a lot, but not on the literacy side, as that's my area. But in maths and science he is better than me so he helps them'.***  
(Sophie)

***'How is Hannah with your children's homework? She helps a bit with the reading. Who helps the children with their homework? It's me in the main'.***  
(Ivan)

Dyslexic parents and homework are normally a difficult combination, as they relive their own troubled childhoods through their children. Both being faced by the child's difficulties gives the dyslexic parent another chance to solve mathematical mysteries, and this teamwork can be empowering, with the dyslexic parents becoming a mentor.

***'Some dyslexic parents like the challenge of their children's homework? He does that sometimes,***

*he likes a challenge. Then gets cross when it comes back marked as wrong'. (Sophie)*

However this does not mean they will get it right, and as Sophie notes when her partner tried to do the homework themselves and get it wrong, it can confirm that education is still a mystery to them. The evidence suggests that school homework is the mainstay of the non-dyslexic partner, with their partner helping out here and there, but the main responsibility is with the more able parent.

*'He does anything I ask him to do for their homework. I don't think he likes helping them with their homework if it impacts on him doing his own thing, and the frustrations of dealing with young children doing their homework, than to do with his dyslexia. Its only if I step back completely from a topic that he steps in and does it, there was one area of their homework I have stepped back and said it's down to him and he does it well with them, and there have been no problems so far. I asked him once to help the boys with a science project. Rather than just getting it done in the shortest possible time, he tried to make it fun, and did a practical experiment outside with my red kitchen bucket filled to the brim with water to test gravity, and swung it over his head, the kids loved it but I ended up with no bucket as it shattered into pieces. So I think when he has the time and inclination he is a very exciting*

*person to do homework with. He wants learning to be fun and visual, and prefers that to reading through books with them? I'm unsure if that's because of his dyslexia, or just because it's boring. I also find it boring, but one of us has to sit down and do it with them each week - the reading, writing and stuff. I would also like to go outside and do fun experiments with red buckets'!* (Amber)

*'He is disappointed that his children are not dyslexic'. (Amber)*

Amber's sees her partner being reluctant to help with homework, and this may come from none of his four children being dyslexic, and therefore may feel detached from their education being so different to his own. He had noted to his wife that he was aiming to home-teach his children if they were dyslexic, but as they weren't, this option was not needed, so maybe this could be the reason. She also notes that he found homework to be boring and wanted to make it more practical and interactive, with water flying everywhere. However when given an aspect of homework to do with all his children, he has taken it on board and they are excelling at it, so as she notes *'when he has the time and inclination he is a very exciting person to do homework with'.*

### **Is homework a stressful time with a dyslexic child?**

*It's a nightmare, I haven't given up. There comes a point when they have*

*to control their own homework. They need to fail to really learn this lesson'. (Sophie)*

**'Have you allowed them to go into school with incorrect work?** *Yes, because if I know they have had enough time and mucked about, they need to learn the consequences, of not putting in the effort required. I'm happy for them to get a D to serve them right'. (Sophie)*

**'Did you ever allow them to go into school with incomplete work, even if they couldn't do it?** *Yes, I felt to a teacher it was important to do that from time to time, to let their teacher see what they were really like. There is no point doing it for them' (Julie)*

*'To get children to do homework can be a huge battle as you know, and if there are non-dyslexic siblings then unfair comparison is common. A lot of friction can be related back to learning difficulties, trying to teach your own children. Teaching your own children is never a good idea. A psychologist once said to me, just back off when things get bad, especially in the teenage years. They need you to be mum, the person to take the crap. He said even though you're a teacher, it doesn't matter what you know. They need you to be their mother not their teacher. I now advise other parents to back-off otherwise your relationship will be severely affected. You're in the support role not the critical one'. (Julie)*

All agree that managing homework is hard with dyslexic children, and that at times can be a battleground, causing lots of friction. As the partners are non-dyslexic, the friction could be due to this parent not truly understanding the difficulties faced, and they try and replicate the failed teaching strategies used in the classroom (which worked for them at school).

The parent's role is to motivate and be supportive, as noted by Julie, but if it goes beyond this, then the parent/child relationship can change, and for the worse. Sophie and Julie will allow their children to go into school with incomplete work if they feel they have messed about (wasted time), and Sophie will do what she feels as unnecessary homework for them, as she understands that their efforts should be focussed on certain main subjects.

Julie sees her role as parent as a facilitator, and will spend a lot of time reading to them all their course work, even committing to tape a huge A 'level book. Sophie notes that at the end of her day, she normally has all her children, and husband queuing up to get their work/letters spell/grammar checked, thus her role is also to facilitate her children's efforts.

### **Finding out your child is dyslexic**

*It was a shock and upsetting to find out that Joseph our first born was dyslexic, but I knew we would cope with it. **Do you think Mike was concerned having dyslexic kids?** Much more than I was, as he knew*

*what it was like growing up as a dyslexic? When he found out about Joseph he was really devastated, really upset. I remember being in the classroom, and when it was even mentioned without a diagnosis, he ran out of the classroom crying. It was at the start of year two, he could not cope with that, he was in a real state for quite a while. I said it will be alright, let's get him assessed. He was also crying when Joseph was formally assessed, he knew what he would have to fight for and go through. (Sophie)*

The quote from Sophie is really interesting, as her husband Mike was significantly affected by the untested notion that his child could be dyslexic. He knew what the challenges were going to be like and he dreaded the pain and suffering they were going to endure. He knew it was going to affect his child's life and be a struggle for him as the parent. Mike noted in a separate interview (Alexander-Passe, 2010), that he had hoped by marrying a non-dyslexic English graduate that there would be less chance of dyslexic children, 'by diluting his dyslexia' (and he has three severely dyslexic children as the result). The realisation that his worst nightmare was a reality was too much for him to cope with, thus *'he ran out of the classroom crying...he could not cope with that, he was in a real state for quite a while'*.

#### **A special bond between dyslexic parent and dyslexic child**

*'Half the time they talk a different language to me'. (Sophie)*

*'Are you confident they will do well and get a career? Do they see Mike as a mentor? Absolutely, especially Joseph, which is great for Mike'. (Sophie)*

*'He is disappointed that his children are not dyslexic. Not that he wants them to experience difficulties, but he sees it as people with higher intelligence with higher achievers'. (Amber)*

Sophie's family is very interesting; as they have three very dyslexic children, and her husband has been fortunate in finding his children have very similar talents to him. This means that *'Half the time they talk a different language to me'*, suggesting that this special bond brings with it its own language. Mike noted in Alexander-Passe (2010) that they saw his wife, Sophie as 'Muggle-born' to take a simile from 'Harry Potter', which must reflect her being the odd-one-out in her family (not being dyslexic) and not speaking the same language, whereas in Amber's family, her dyslexic husband is the odd-one-out, which might be affecting his interaction with his kids homework. Amber's husband is disappointed by his children not being dyslexic, as it would seem he was looking for that special bond - fighting the education system and the world together!

#### **Has having a dyslexic children/husband affected your knowledge of dyslexia and career choice?**

*'So you learnt more about it from knowing Mike or having dyslexic children? Both, firstly through Mike, but even more when the kids were*

*diagnosed. I even went on courses, and I now work with SEN kids in schools, to know more about it for them'. (Sophie)*

**'Have you learnt more about dyslexia now? Yes, definitely a lot more. Sequencing and other problems'. (Ivan)**

Most dyslexics only know the basics about their difficulties, and assume what they do and their coping strategies are separate from dyslexia. However when a non-dyslexic partner gets involved it's a different ball game, as they have the insight to investigate further and learn more about the condition. So together they learn more about this mysterious disorder that affects most areas of life. When children are born, it's an even greater impetus to learn more and due to the empathy they now feel for their children, many are moved to change careers into special needs education, as in the case of Julie and Sophie. Both Ivan and Amber noted they have learnt a lot more about dyslexia and its effect on their partner's life.

#### **How is going into school to meet your children's teachers?**

*'She is not very keen on it, not at all. Even to pick up the children to go to medical appointments she will avoid it - it's me going in all the time. Does Hannah get stressed when talking to the teachers? Yes, we both go in, but she hates it. She remembers her dreadful time there; school was not a great experience for her'. (Ivan)*

*'If he gets angry about anything, it's to do with the school and their education... It's a constant battle. They don't understand the needs of dyslexic pupils''. (Sophie)*

*'He seems fine. Stressed by it? No, but that could be because he has spent many years doing things around education and has probably built up so many coping strategies that he has confronted and overcome any issues he may have had from childhood'. (Amber)*

Parents of dyslexic children are faced with greater difficulties due to mainstream school teacher's lack of knowledge about the condition. Non-dyslexic partners know of their partner's past history in education and can understand how it can make them cautious, but they don't quite understand the anger that boils up in them as a response to teachers, walking through a school door, seeing/siting on little chairs, or seeing work pinned up onto walls. This is greater where there are dyslexic children (Julie and Sophie) but less where they are not (Amber).

#### **Are you optimistic about your dyslexic children's future?**

Parents of dyslexic children can be faced with a challenge to focus themselves to think about careers, and Sophie describes such a challenge with two very different dyslexic children. She recognises their route to employment may differ from her own and the need to make use of more vocational courses. It's interesting that Mike her husband really wants their

eldest to go to university, which is something he never achieved. Is he living his childhood again through his eldest child, making sure he gets the chances he never did. One hopes the pressure to achieve his father's dream is not too great.

## CAREER/SUCCESS

### Has your partner's childhood/schooling affected him?

*'Yes, I can only talk 3rd hand, but from what I can understand, he didn't find any of the lessons interesting, he was unable to adequately receive, interpret and regurgitate the information in the way the teacher required it. That meant he was criticized harshly by teachers, even though they may have been aware of his dyslexia. This made him feel inferior in terms of his academic abilities and he was moved into fields where his academic disabilities were less prevalent. So moving into more practical subjects, vocational skills and career choices which I don't think he would have chosen if he wasn't dyslexic'. (Amber)*

Both Amber and Sophie were straight A students who excelled at school and university, so they look at their dyslexic partner's difficulties from school and now in their adults careers, and see the two things correlate and that difficulties early on are long-lasting. They understand and are empathetic to vocational routes in education, and can now see that non-

traditional routes are possible and ideal for such individuals.

### Has Dyslexia affected their careers/potential prospects?

#### **Does Mike rate reaching his potential on becoming a lawyer?**

*Yes, he resents it, as he goes through life it is harder to go to university. I tell him it's never too late. I think he has the confidence now to do it as he would get extra help – assistive software/a laptop/extra time allowances'. (Sophie)*

#### **'How do you think Hannah's career has been affected by dyslexia?**

*Yes, she had a lot of bullying in the workplace; she used to get very angry about that. That's why she is self-employed now; she is a lot happier working for herself'. (Ivan)*

*'Here is a bone of contention. I think he is striving to be something that does not come easily to him (academic) and ignoring his strengths, that he could do well in, as he wants to be seen as "good at his job and by the way he is dyslexic", rather than "he is dyslexic and this is why he is good at this job". I don't think he is being honest with himself'. (Amber)*

Potential is a subjective and can be difficult to understand, especially in the case of dyslexics where there have been so many missed possibilities at school and further/higher education. From a non-dyslexic's perspective, they see their



partners 'struggling' in careers they are unsuited to, and 'success' in those making use of skills they have. However what they are good at doesn't mean they enjoy it or want to work in for 40 years.

Amber has issues with her husband wishing to develop a career despite facing possible difficulties. She would prefer him to work with his strengths rather than weaknesses, whereas he wishes to develop his weaknesses into strengths.

Sophie's husband resents not being a lawyer and sees himself as not reaching his potential, even though he works for himself in a thriving electrical business.

Julie's husband compares himself unfavourably to his more academic brothers and comes off as failing, even though he might be more intelligent/capable.

Ivan has found his wife experienced bullying in the workplace due to her dyslexia and she now works for herself. He now notes she is happier working for herself and has more scope to do what she does well with less stress, pressure and bullying. Thus it could be argued, is more likely to fulfil her potential

## Discussion

The following areas were investigated: dating, marriage/long-term relationships, knowledge of dyslexia, parenthood/children, career success and emotional health.

Results suggest that some dyslexics may hide their dyslexia at the start of a relationship, and will only disclose their problems/difficulties when they are finding it hard to cover up for errors made or missing dates etc. So the choice is between covering up their dyslexia and losing their thriving relationship. Such disclosure could be viewed as laying their cards on the table and being really open to someone, but also taking the chance their partner will take an adverse reaction and push them away. The time scale for disclosure is important as it explains how relaxed they are about their dyslexia, and their ability to communicate about their difficulties to others - self-awareness and self-advocacy.

Some dyslexics may disclose in general conversation in the first 1-3 dates if they are self-confident, and see their dyslexia as a positive as in Ambers case. If the dyslexic is really anxious about themselves and their difficulties as in Sophie's case, then its 6-7 months down the line.

Non-dyslexics dating dyslexics with little or no knowledge of the condition are faced by individuals with: a strange combination of difficulties, a poor sense of direction and driving incorrectly down a one way road, bizarre routines, or divergent things said in conversations etc.

Evidence suggests that dyslexics have specific problems with communication: from an inability/difficulty in reading social clues,

- ◆ difficulty pronouncing long multi-syllabic words,
- ◆ coming up with bizarre things in conversation,
- ◆ panicking when routines are interrupted
- ◆ doing things in the wrong order in shops.

Humans are skilled at picking up slight differences in how people talk, act and react, thus various difficulties in dyslexics mean they can be seen as weird, abnormal and socially handicapped.

When dyslexics finally find a suitable partner, their partners are soon hit by how often dyslexics rely on routines to survive each day, and how much they are frustrated by their inability to do what to them are simple tasks e.g. writing a shopping list or taking a telephone message. Such things were not a problem on the odd occasion, but when living with someone 24 hours a day, 365 days a year they can get very frustrating. Much of this comes down to their dyslexic partner's reluctance to read and manage their own life.

Non-dyslexic partners are also surprised by their partner's inability to take on household chores and how much of an organisational mess they can be, in some cases due to their inability to pay bills on time, so most take over all such chores. In many ways they have to check everything and treat them like an additional child, with constant reminders like Sophie with a reminders board. Socially they will also be troubling as they will forget their friends/family's names along with forgetting social engagements, which will

be embarrassing for their non-dyslexic partner. As Amber notes 'if I am out and the phone rings, he will chat and take a message, but I will never get it. This can be difficult socially', this suggests non-dyslexic partners can also feel socially embarrassed as they may seem rude to others for ignoring them and their messages.

There is a 50% chance that any child they have will be dyslexic, and this should normally have been discussed before marriage, however the actual realisation that their child is dyslexic can be hard for both partners to cope with. Whilst the non-dyslexic parent is supportive; in the dyslexic, the thought of passing on their difficulties (seen as by some as 'damaged genes') and their child suffering through school and life (like they have) can be too much for some, resulting in crying, anger, frustration, anxiety and depression as in Sophie's husband's case.

It is also likely that the non-dyslexic partner will deal with everything to do with the school (forms, playdates etc.) along with their homework. With dyslexic children the difficulties can be so pronounced that homework time is a daily battleground and highly draining (Sophie). The effect can be so great that the non-dyslexic partner may change careers into one to work with other children with special educational needs, as they now have empathy to such struggling. It cannot be under-estimated how hard homework is with a dyslexic child; however the dyslexic parent can turn into a mentor to prop up their child's self-esteem. When the dyslexic parent has

non-dyslexic children, such a parent can be hit by how different they are, and cannot believe how easy some children find school and academic tasks, and how easy it is for them to get 9 or 10 out of 10 in school tests. This can distance the dyslexic parent from their child as their own school experience is so different to that of their children.

Whether there are dyslexic or non-dyslexic children, the dyslexic re-entering school for their children can bring back all sorts of emotions, with some avoiding school at all costs. Talking to teachers can be difficult, as they can revert to a child, and manifest anger towards teachers for not listening to them and their child's needs. With a dyslexic child the anger is even greater, as they are amazed that schools haven't changed that much from when they were there, and children's difficulties are still not being properly supported.

Non-dyslexic partners are aware of their partner's childhoods, but are unaware of how much their schooling has affected them as adults, along with the career prospects. But after years of marriage they can see that dyslexia affects all aspects of life and self-employment may be the best route for some dyslexics, so they can shine with their abilities and suffer with their difficulties. Reaching their potential is hard for dyslexics, as they feel they are still suffering from repressive schooling, and being pushed into vocational careers for their own good (in fields they can do well in) camouflages their real desire to be lawyers or teachers. They question whether they can follow their dreams and be what they always wanted to be, rather than

something they could do easily. Maybe they do not recognise their intrinsic strengths, as areas that others find difficult. If they did recognise this then maybe they wouldn't fight fate so much.

## Conclusion

This paper began with a broad literature review: What is dyslexia? Dyslexia and Relationships, Other disabilities/difference and Relationships.

It suggests that whilst public perception of dyslexia is child-orientated, there is a perception that dyslexia is a condition that individuals grow out of as adults - this study aims to question such a perception and to expand on it to question if relationships between dyslexic and non-dyslexic partners is to similar relationships with disabled and non-disabled partners of different learning difficulties. As Parker (1993) noted such 'married couples are left virtually unsupported, either practically or emotionally, at times when their relationship may be under considerable strain'.

The 'social exchange theory' (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005) was discussed in regard to adult relationships with other disability groups; to understand these relationships, their outcomes, satisfaction and the dependency negotiations that occur. Evidence in this study supports the view that it is also very relevant to relationships with dyslexic adults. Sophie, Ivan and Julie indicated that there was an unfair share of responsibilities laid on their shoulders and they acted as a carer in their relationships.

Non-dyslexic partners interviewed in this study indicated they were attracted to a dyslexic personality type, described as quirky and alternative. However they felt unprepared for the whole dyslexic package: poor communication skills, unreliability, social liability amongst their friend / family, disorganisation, unwillingness to deal with schools due to their PTSD post-traumatic stress disorder) from their own days at school, avoidance of reading and writing, inability to read a shopping list, unwillingness to take messages. They also noted that their dyslexic partners had inferiority complexes to do with careers, noting they showed stubbornness to work within their abilities, choosing to aim for careers that were unsuited to (but were stimulated by), due to dyslexia-type literacy / organisational difficulties. This can cause anxiety and frustrations and can have adverse effects on their relationships.

This unique and original study has indicated that long-term relationships with dyslexics are possible, and can thrive if both partners are open to the abnormal sharing of responsibilities which may run counter to society norms:

- ◆ dyslexic men are not always great running household finances and can lose or hide paperwork rather than face full on the need to organise and work in linear ways.
- ◆ dyslexic woman may not be the best person to create shopping lists and to go shopping.

But aren't such stereotypical concepts just that, concepts? Who says that everyone can't be different as per the 'social model

of disability')? Non-dyslexics are attracted to the non-conformity of the dyslexic personality profile, but do not realise that such non-conformity goes deeper than skin level; it affects who they are in all aspects of life e.g. how they think and act, how the talk and even how they sleep.

### Limitations

It should be stressed that this study was undertaken with a small N=4 sample and thus generalizations made from such a study should be taken with caution. According to Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), studies are likely to consist of small samples N=2-6, and this means of data collection can be data rich and worthy of study. It is hoped that subsequent studies will support these findings.

### Implications for the Asian context

The data for this study was gathered in the UK, where there is a substantial knowledge base within the community at large of the problems of dyslexia. However, this may be mainly in the context of reading and spelling, and perhaps writing. In Singapore, there is a strong awareness of dyslexia, and both its strengths and weaknesses, based on the problems acknowledged by the founding father of Singapore Lee Kwan Yew. There is a clear recognition that it is possible to be successful with dyslexia, that enhances the potential outcomes for many dyslexic people. However, there is little awareness here of the associated

difficulties in organisation and memory that can impact so severely on dyslexic adults, and complicate the outcomes of their relationships. In other countries around the Asia Pacific region, there may well be less awareness of dyslexia in all its manifestations, despite sterling work from advocates in those countries. Here there may be continued discrimination against dyslexia, and failure to acknowledge the potential strengths.

This study is potentially important to enhance public understanding of the complexities of dyslexia, and to encourage those who suffer from this condition to express their continuing problems and try to help others to understand the difficulties they encounter and provide support rather than criticism. Dyslexia can be a strength as well as a weakness, but understanding the condition is important for others across the life span, from parents and other loved ones, to teachers and colleagues who interact regularly with dyslexics.

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