

The Transition to Marriage Project

Approximately 149,000 couples will marry and 70,000 couples will divorce in a given year in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2001). Of the couples who marry today in Canada, approximately 40% will divorce at some point. How do couples go from being so happy that they pledge to spend the rest of their lives together, to deciding that they can no longer remain married? Although early relationship characteristics predict marital quality, there is less understanding of how couples have developed along these different marital paths. The purpose of the Transition to Marriage Project (TTM Project) is to understand relationship processes as they unfold naturally, beginning with a group of engaged couples and following them through the first two years of their marriage.

Although we asked couples about many different relationship processes, we had a specific focus in the TTM project on prosocial behaviours in marriage such as social support, forgiveness, and empathy. Traditionally, the focus in marital research has been on negative behaviours in marriage such as conflict and aggression, and how they are related to marital outcomes. This almost exclusive focus on negative relationship processes yielded much important information about marriages. However, the links between behaviour early in marriage, such as how couples solve problems or deal with conflict, and later outcomes (e.g., dissatisfaction and divorce) are inconsistent. In other words, happy couples certainly handle problems well and unhappy couples do not, but how couples handle problems does not necessarily lead to changes in satisfaction.

Since the mid 1990s, there has been a change in the trend to focus exclusively on conflict in marriages. Researchers have called for a greater focus on other key domains in marriage that have thus far been relatively neglected. New research that targets these so called “positive” relationship processes is now emerging and this project is a part of that trend.

Immediate Project Goals

- To study marriages from their beginnings as they develop over time to better understand the mechanisms that underlie marital dysfunction
- To focus on positive marital processes such as empathy, forgiveness, validation, capitalization, and social support

Down the Road...

Who funded the project?

The SFU Transition to Marriage Project was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (Grant #410-2005-0829) <http://www.sshrc.ca/>.

Interviewers who worked on the project and ‘where are they now’

Colleen Allison is completing her PhD dissertation at SFU in the Clinical Psychology program under the supervision of Dr. Rebecca Cobb.

Patrick Poyner-Del Vento is completing his PhD dissertation at SFU in the Clinical Psychology program under the supervision of Dr. Rebecca Cobb.

Eva DeHaas is completing her PhD dissertation at SFU in the Clinical Psychology Program under the supervision of Dr. Kim Bartholomew.

Kim Watt is completing her MA thesis at SFU in the Clinical Psychology program under the supervision of Dr. Bob Ley.

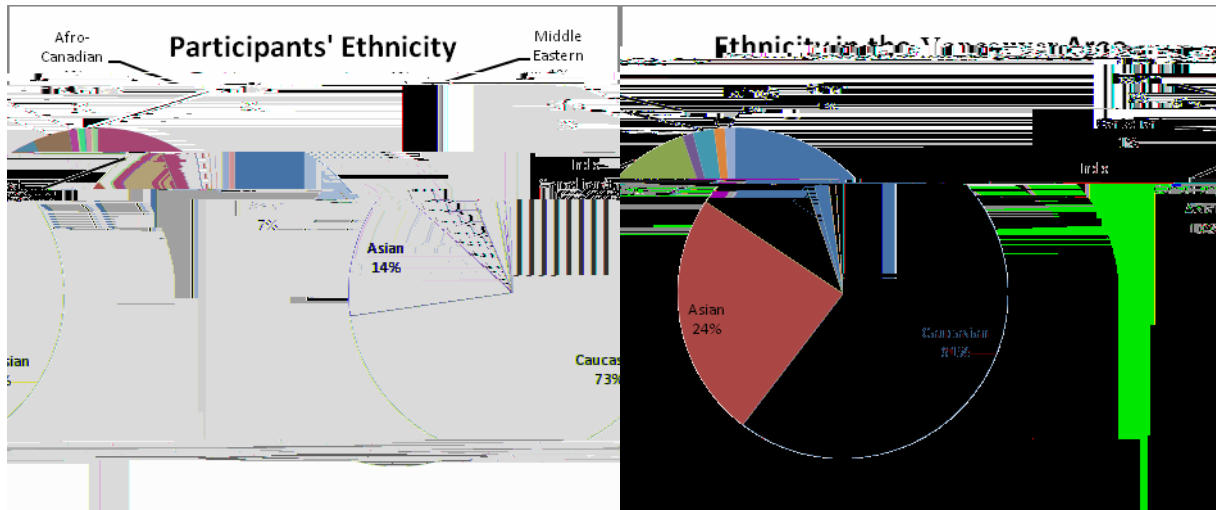
Chiara Papile is completing her MA in Counselling at the University of Victoria.

Jill Logan is currently working at Riverview Hospital and she is applying to graduate school in the Fall 2009.

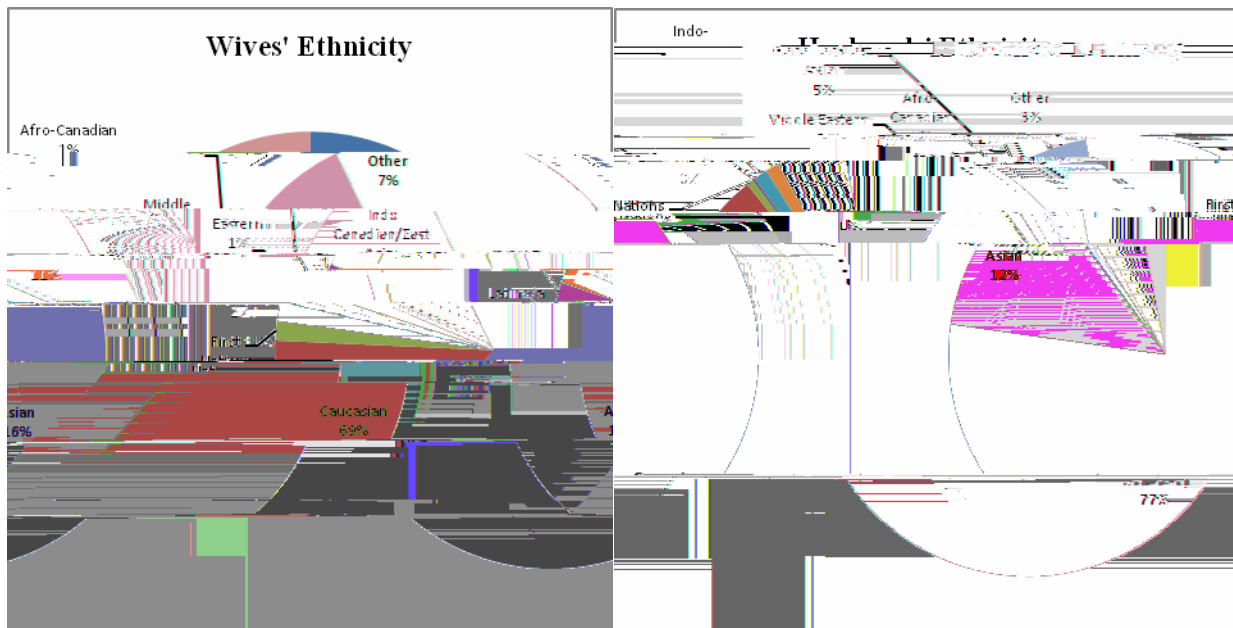
Joanne Magtoto is completing her honours BA at SFU and plans to apply to graduate school next year.

How did you recruit couples for the project?

We recruited participants through advertisements in local newspapers, on wedding-related electronic bulletin boards, on community notice boards, and on campus-based electronic notice screens; television and print media coverage; flyers posted in businesses that provided wedding-related services (e.g., wedding dress shops); and announcements mailed to local religious organizations. Members of the research team also attended local bridal shows and passed out

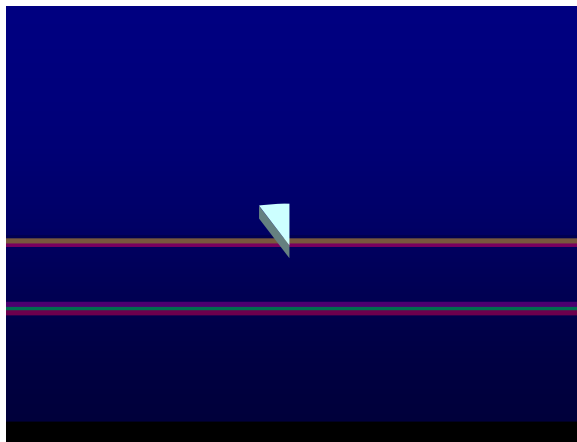


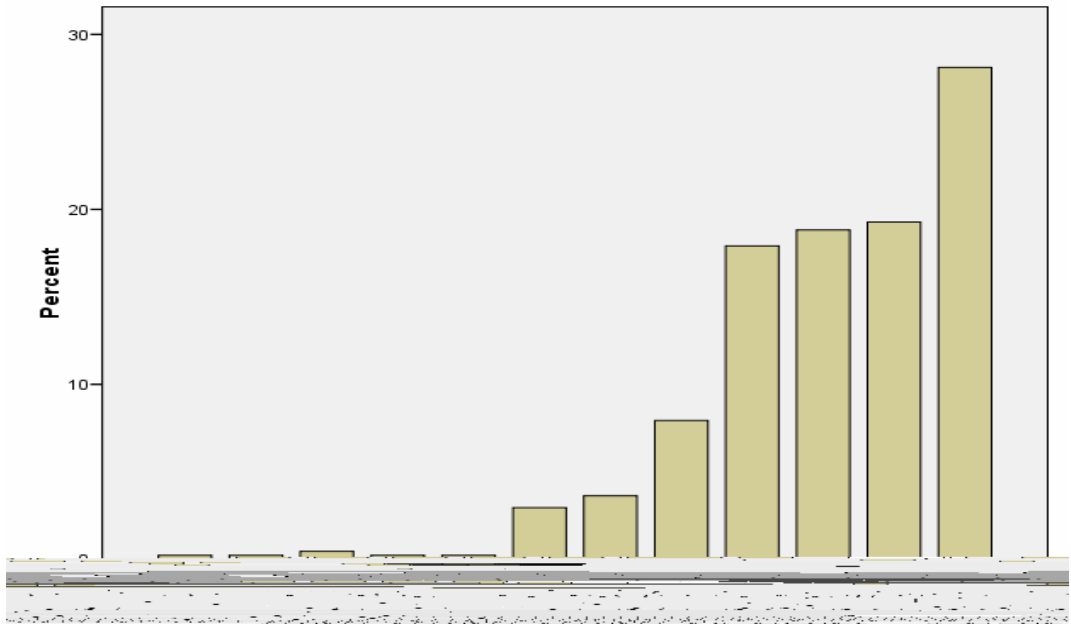
As you can see from the two graphs below, the women who responded to our recruitment efforts were more racially diverse than the men. Of the 428 couples who provided information about ethnicity, just over 21% were interracial.



Recruitment sample: Work and Education

Consistent with a volunteer sample, the recruitment couples were fairly well educated with the majority having finished high school and about 40% having completed some college or university.





How many of the recruitment couples were cohabiting?

At the time of the phone interview, almost half (41%) of the couples had been cohabiting for nearly two years (22 months). This is somewhat lower than the number of couples who cohabit prior to marriage in the US; about 60% of couples cohabit prior to marriage and usually for an average of a year and half.

How many recruitment couples had premarital or relationship counselling?

Of the 439 couples who provided the information, less than 9% had received relationship therapy, 18% indicated they had received marriage preparation, and another 26% of couples stated that they intended to seek marriage preparation. The number of couples who had either received or were planning to seek marriage preparation of some kind is high compared to national averages of about 25%. However, we do not know how many of the couples who

discussions about their relationship. Finally, we interviewed both spouses together to learn more about the history of their relationship and marriage.

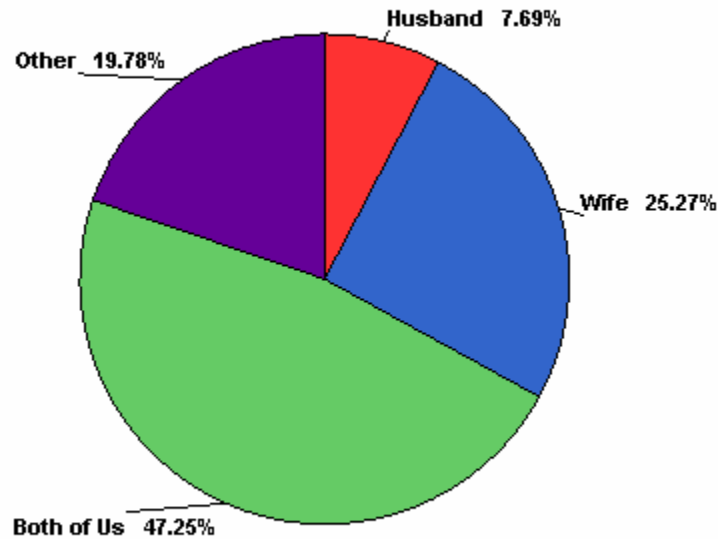
Did anyone drop out of the study or divorce?

Drop out, or attrition, is a common problem in longitudinal research. We began our study with 201 couples, and 183 wives and 180 husbands completed the final phase of the study. Thus, the rate of attrition in the study was about 10%, which is relatively low compared to other newlywed studies of similar duration where it is common to observe attrition rates from 3 to 24%.

Of those couples who did not complete the final phase, 13 dropped out of the project entirely and 5 couples that we know of separated or divorced and we no longer collected data from them.

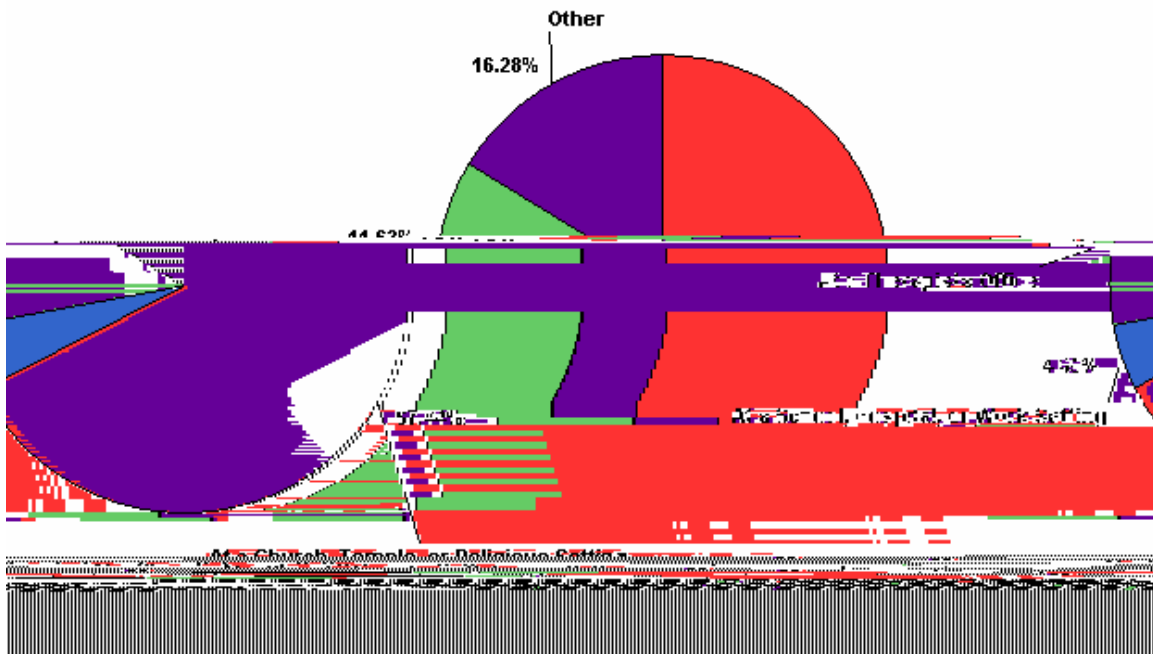
How many TTM couples participated in marriage preparation? Who initiated it?

Of the 201 couples in the TTM study, 30.61% participated in marriage preparation (marriage preparation). This is slightly higher in comp



Where did couples receive marriage preparation?

Most (67%) of the couples received marriage preparation in a church, temple, or other religious setting, and the intervention was usually led by either a religious leader or member of a religious group. Only 11% indicated that they received marriage preparation at a therapist's office. Most couples spent between 10 and 20 hours in marriage preparation, for which most paid nothing or less than \$100.



Did all the couples in the study come to SFU for the lab sessions?

During the course of the study, we asked couples to visit our research lab at SFU twice for a series of interviews and discus

In the second set of discussions, we asked each spouse to discuss a time when they were hurt by their partner. We realize this was a difficult discussion for many of our couples, but hurt feelings are inevitable in relationships and if couples handle these incidents poorly, it could have negative effects on person and relationship health. We have also begun developing a coding system to analyze the positive (e.g., I feel like my trust in you is restored 100%) and negative behaviour (e.g. “When you said that to me, it made me doubt myself a little,” or “You were so inconsiderate; did you ever stop to think about my feelings for once?”) in these discussions. Ultimately, we hope to understand how empathy and forgiveness play a role in the success of relationships.

What kinds of topics did Couples discuss in the lab sessions?

Not surprisingly, the topics varied greatly in both sets of discussions. With regard to the worry discussions, many spouses chose topics related to their family (e.g., relationship difficulties with a sibling or in-law, the hardships of living far away from parents, worry about a family member’s destructive lifestyle). Other topics that were frequently chosen were concerns related to work, finances, childrearing, or a spouse’s personal concerns (e.g., how to stay on budget, trouble with a supervisor at work or a job, when to have children, doubts about being a good parent, losing weight).

With regard to the hurt feelings discussions, the events discussed also varied greatly. A common theme was one spouse taking offense to something the other partner said or did (e.g., name-calling, being dishonest, appearing inconsiderate, or overly demanding). Another common theme was a partner feeling neglected in some way (e.g., partner did not phone home when a call was expected, forgetting an important date, lack of support from partner).

Why did you need to observe couples having marital discussions rather than just asking them about their experiences?

In our research, we approach the study of relationships from multiple perspectives and we use multiple methods. We do simply ask couples about many things in their relationships either through self-report questionnaires or in interviews. However, every method of gathering information will have some drawback; for example, self-report data can be prone to response biases—people may feel compelled either consciously or unconsciously to respond in somewhat inaccurate ways. Couples may have also behaved in ways that are not typical during the discussions because the situation is unnatural and may place certain demands on participants to “behave well.” However, by using different methods to gather information (e.g., interviews, observations, physical data, partner reports), we hope to gain a better, richer, and more balanced picture of what is happening in marriages.

Why did You Collect Saliva Samples from the Couples who Visited the Lab?

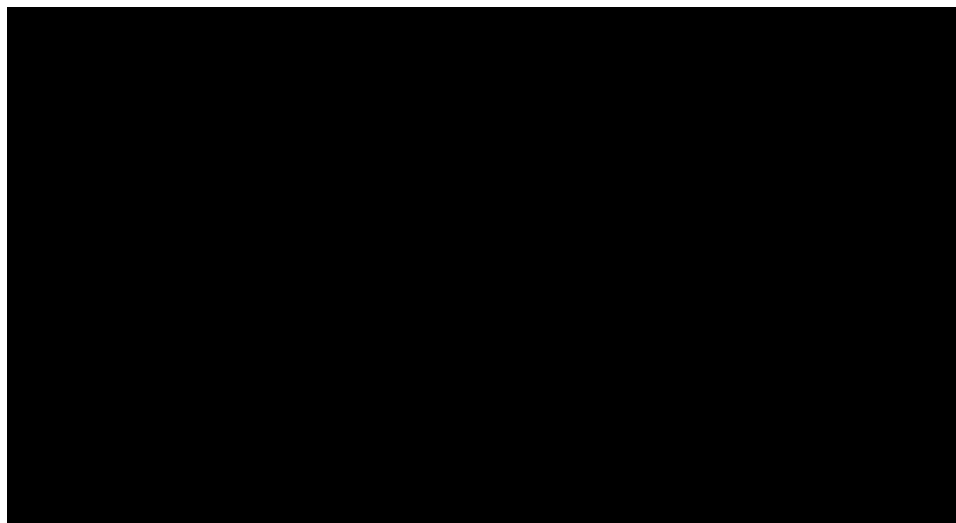
On average, women exercised for about an hour three times a week, and about half of that time was spent in cardiovascular exercise (53%). Men exercised for over an hour about 2.5 times a week, and the majority of that time (60%) was spent in cardiovascular exercise. The Centre for Disease Control and Prevention in the USA recommends 150 minutes (2 hours and 30 minutes) a week of moderate to intense aerobic activity along

The majority of spouses drank less than 10 caffeinated beverages per week, which is well within Health Canada Guidelines. Caffeine can have some adverse effects, for example, on calcium balance, bone health, and reproduction (e.g., birth weights, fertility) (Health Canada, 2007). Health Canada (2007) recommends a maximum daily caffeine intake of 400 mg, which is equivalent to three 237 ml (8 oz) cups of coffee. For women of childbearing age, Health Canada (2007) recommends no more than 300 mg of caffeine per day, which is equivalent to about two 8 oz cups of coffee. For more information visit:

<http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/iyh-vsv/food-aliment/caffeine-eng.php>

How Healthy are Newlyweds' Diets?

Diet and nutrition are important considerations for a healthy lifestyle. The men and women in this study consistently reported that they considered their diets somewhat healthy; they generally avoided sugary food and had a balanced diet of vegetables, grains, and fruits. Women regarded their diets as slightly more



Psychological and physical aggression in dating and married couples is not uncommon. Prevalence rates of intimate partner violence among married couples range anywhere from 7 to 18% for men's self-report of perpetration and 7 to 25% for women's self-report of perpetration in the past year (e.g., Brinkerhoff & Lupri, 1988; Grandin & Lupri, 1997; Sommer, 1994; Straus & Gelles, 1986). In engaged couples assessed one month before marriage, as many as 31% of males and 44% of females report being physically abusive towards their partners within the past year (O'Leary et al., 1989). Psychological aggression is even more common; as many as 75 to 98% of spouses report the occurrence of at least one act of psychological aggression within the past year (Lupri, Grandin, & Brinkerhoff, 1994; Testa & Leonard, 2001). Although the experience of at least one act of physical aggression is common, the frequency and severity of physical and psychological aggression are relatively low in most newlywed samples.

At the beginning of the study (just prior to marriage), 32 couples (16%) had experienced at least one act of physical aggression (e.g., pushing, shoving, or slapping their partner) in the previous 6 months. More than half (75.5%) of the couples reported the occurrence of at least one act of psychological aggression (e.g., yelling at, insulting, or threatening to hit their partner) in the previous 6 months. Regarding individual reports, 13.5% of husbands and 19.5% of wives had perpetrated at least one act of physical aggression against their partner, and 69.5% of husbands and 75.5% of wives had perpetrated at least one act of psychological aggression against their partner. However, the average number of acts of aggression in the previous six months was relatively low in this sample (*Mean* = 0.20 for physical and *Mean* = 1.25 for psychological aggression)

What Have You Learned about Forgiveness in Newlywed Marriage?

In our research lab, we consider forgiveness an interpersonal process whereby spouses work to repair their relationship after one partner perceives an injury (cf. Fincham et al., 2002).

lying, and spending large amounts of money without telling the spouse. Spouses mostly described events that were recent (within the past 6 months), but the range was from 7.5 years ago to the day of the lab visit.

Wives rated the events they wrote about as more hurtful than did husbands, and wives were less forgiving than their husbands were. For husbands, the length of time since the event was unrelated to hurt feelings, marital satisfaction, or forgiveness. For wives, events that had occurred earlier in the relationship were more hurtful and were associated with less forgiveness. Not surprisingly, the more serious the spouses viewed the transgression, the less forgiveness they felt currently. Couples who had already achieved some degree of forgiveness reported a more positive experience discussing the transgression in the lab, had the husbands had better health and relationship outcomes one year later. In other words, husbands who were in more forgiving relationships were happier in their relationships and they had fewer health problems and were more satisfied with their health a year later.

That is a lot of information to reduce to a manageable format so that we can analyze trends in the data.

We were fortunate to be able to collect almost all the questionnaire data via web-based surveys so we did not have much data entry to do for this project. To date we have entered all the non-web based questionnaire data, and we have coded all of the individual interviews. Right now we have a team of research assistants coding the marital discussions, and we hope to complete the hormone assays using the saliva samples this coming spring.

Given how long it takes to complete the data collection phase of a project like this, and how long it takes to complete the data coding and analysis, we anticipate that we will be writing papers and presenting at conferences based on this study for several more years. As new results emerge, we will post them on the website. We will attempt to contact the participants each time we post a major new results, so please keep us updated with your correct contact information.

Can I receive couples therapy from the project staff?

We do not provide therapy, but if you would like to receive a referral for couple or individual therapy (including some low-cost alternatives), please contact Dr. Rebecca Cobb at rcobb@sfu.ca.