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The role of the parent: the disillusion of a child's expectations

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A portfolio submitted for the Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology (DPsych)

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Declaration of powers of discretion

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Section A:

Preface

Children look to their parents to provide them with security; to provide them with the feeling that the world is a safe place. Encompassed in the seeking of this security, children hold the expectation that their parents will serve as models of good behaviour and regardless of whether they follow their parents' lead or not, children expect their parents' behaviours to serve as guidance (Lusterman, 2005). According to Lusterman (2005), when a parent's behaviours are not reflective of the qualities a child expects in his/her role model, this can elicit feelings of great distress and despair as children can become confused, disillusioned and uncomfortable.

Nogales and Belotti (2009) echo this sentiment, as they explain that if a parent behaves in a manner which is incompatible with a child's expectations of how members of their familial personal environment; the space from which they derive their 'sense of safety and security' from should behave, the world can become an unsafe, disorienting place.

Interestingly, the expectations a parent has for his/her children, and the implications of these expectations, is a topic that is extensively discussed both within the world of academic research (Goldenberg, Gallimore, Reese & Garnier, 2011; Seginer, 1983) and also in every-day society. But what about the expectations a child has for his/her parents? What happens when the image, in a child's mind, of what a parent should represent; what they should stand for, is shattered? This theme; the role of the parent and the disillusion of a child's expectations of the parent in this role, is the thread which permeates the works in this portfolio.

In sections B and C I present my research in two forms: thesis and journal. This research explores the lived experience of parental infidelity. A concept I found

particularly powerful, was the suggestion by Nogales and Belotti (2009), that engaging in parental infidelity is not only the breaking of a promise of monogamy to one's romantic partner, but it is also the breaking of an 'unspoken promise' to one's children. It is the breaking of the promise to children that they can expect to be a part of a loving and devoted family unit; the members of which will always remain loyal to one another. The research component of this portfolio explores the implications of the breaking of this promise and thus, the disillusion of this expectation and an overarching expectation that parents will always lead by example; mirroring in their own behaviours, the values and qualities they have taught their children. The research elucidates how the disillusion of these expectations has shaped participants' lives; the implications of the disillusion of these expectations, for the mental health and psychological well-being of offspring, for the roles and responsibilities it has meant they have had to take on, for the challenges it has elicited in their own relationships, both romantic and other-wise, and the ways in which they have sought healing.

In section D, I present the clinical component of this portfolio. I present a clinical case study demonstrating my therapeutic work with a woman who sought psychological support for depression. I worked with this client within a Cognitive Behavioural Therapy framework (Westbrook, Kennerley & Kirk, 2011) and as such, one aspect of our work together was the exploration of any early experiences which may have served as predisposing factor(s), in the development of her depression. One of these early experiences was this client having been abandoned by her father at the age of nine. She returned home from school one day and he was no longer living in the family home. When she questioned where he had gone and whether he was returning, the client was told by her mother that her father no longer loved them and therefore, he was

not to be spoken of, again. We explored together the meanings the client may have attached to this early experience and it transpired that this experience appeared to be fundamental in the development of ‘core beliefs’ regarding her being unlovable and worthless and of people inevitably being rejecting of her. The client described having had this ineluctable expectation of her father, to serve as a source of unconditional love throughout her life, and felt that his sudden abandonment of the family and the subsequent absence of any desire shown by him, to re-connect with her, was the disillusion of this expectation. The client described this disillusion resulting in her living in a world, within which it felt that love was not in abundance, nor was it freely or unconditionally given. Furthermore, the presence of a loved one was not staunch or unwavering and could become a source of abandonment or rejection in an instant. The failure to meet her expectations also extended to the client’s mother. Although her mother’s behaviour was not an explicit abandonment, we explored the implications of her mother’s inability, following her father’s departure, to facilitate a family space which represented warmth and unconditional love. The client also described the role the disillusion of her parental expectations played, in the development or lack thereof, of deep, relational connections with others and as elucidated in the case study, how this influenced various elements of her life, over the years.

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Section B: Research Component

Exploring the lived experience of parental infidelity

Abstract

A recent survey found that 36% of men and 21% of women have engaged in an extra-marital affair at least once (Trustify, 2018). The impact of infidelity on the partner who has been betrayed has been widely studied. Research has shown that it can precipitate severe anxiety and depression (Cano & O'Leary, 2000) and can cause significant damage to an individual's self-esteem and confidence (Charny & Parnass, 1995). However, there has been very little exploration of the experience of infidelity, for individuals outside of the relationship dyad, such as their offspring. The endeavour of the current study was to extend our knowledge on this by exploring the lived experience of parental infidelity. Qualitative data were collected from individual, semi-structured interviews with six adult participants who had experienced parental infidelity at least ten years prior to their participation in this research. An interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodology was used and a critical-realist epistemological stance was taken. Analyses revealed findings of four master themes elucidating participants' experiences of parental infidelity: adultification, challenges in romantic relationships, the psychological experience and the pathway to healing. These master themes were sub-categorised into sub-themes as follows: adultification – becoming an emotional carer and awareness of parental sexuality, challenges in romantic relationships – fear of abandonment and relationship breakdown, intergenerational transmission of infidelity and differentiation, the psychological experience – an everlasting pain, the sense of self and loss: detachment and disconnection, the pathway to healing –

restoration through destruction, perspective: intellectualisation and understanding and honesty and openness. Findings indicate that parental infidelity is related to various aspects of an adult child's life. Theoretical, research and clinical implications alongside limitations and ideas for future research are discussed.

“Where there is loyalty, weapons are of no use”

(Coelho, 2013, p.167)

Chapter One

1. Introduction

“...so your dad cheated on your mum...that must have been tough to discover. What exactly brings you here today then?” Years ago, this was my therapists’ response to my sharing my experience of parental infidelity. Granted, I hadn’t divulged the particularly painful details surrounding my experience, because I had just met this woman. But her lack of knowledge and understanding of the wide-reaching implications of parental infidelity became evident and manifested itself as patronising and lacking empathy. I left that session feeling disappointed, confused, questioning whether I was being overly sensitive and feeling sure that I wouldn’t be making another appointment with her. What I did do, is begin to explore what is known within the world of academia and research, about the implications of parental infidelity, which I quickly came to realise, was very little. So I turned my attention to those around me who I knew had experienced parental infidelity too. I spoke to friends and family about their experiences and how they felt this experience may have influenced their lives. The response was bewildering. It quickly became evident that for those who have experienced it, parental infidelity can be an excruciatingly painful, traumatic experience which leaves in its’ wake, destruction, in various aspects of individuals’ lives. My belief since then has been that this experience needs

validation; the implications of parental infidelity need elucidation through scientific inquiry and exploration.

Infidelity has been defined in various ways across the literature. Early definitions were largely concerned with illicit sexual contact with someone other than the partner with whom, an individual is in a monogamous romantic relationship (Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin & Gebhard, 1948; 1953). This definition was later expanded to move beyond sex solely and focus on the notion of betrayal; encompassing both sexual and emotional intimacy and connection, which remains unknown to one's romantic partner (Glass & Wright, 1992). According to Lusterman (1998) the focal point is the secrecy. Regardless of whether one is engaging in a sexual or non-sexual relationship with someone outside of their monogamous relationship, the important element is that it remains a secret from their partner. More recently, infidelity has been defined as the "breach of trust and/or violation of agreed upon norms" (Blow & Hartnett, 2005, p.192) within a romantically, sexually and emotionally exclusive monogamous relationship.

The development of the notion of a non-sexual relationship potentially constituting infidelity was based upon the belief that earlier definitions "reflected a male bias by using extramarital sexual intercourse as the criterion for extramarital behaviour instead of considering a full range of extramarital sexual and emotional involvement" (Glass & Wright, 1992, p.361).

Whilst I recognise the importance of exploring the developing definitions of infidelity across the existing literature, for the purpose of this research, infidelity will refer to extramarital sexual affairs and will not encompass emotional infidelity. The reason for this is that it has been shown that extramarital sexual affairs are easier to define and describe, whilst emotional infidelity can be more

open to subjective interpretation, more nebulous and indeterminate (Fenigstein & Peltz, 2002).

Therefore, infidelity in this research is defined as sexual contact with an individual outside of one's romantic relationship, without the knowledge or consent of one's romantic partner, to whom they have promised monogamy.

In a recent survey, 36% of men and 21% of women said they had engaged in an extra-marital affair at least once (Trustify, 2018). The impact of infidelity on the partner who has been betrayed has been widely studied. Research has shown that it can precipitate severe anxiety and depression (Cano & O'Leary, 2000) and can cause significant damage to an individual's self-esteem and confidence (Charny & Parnass, 1995). However, there has been very little exploration of the experience of infidelity, for individuals outside of the relationship dyad, such as their offspring. According to Lusterman (2005) parental infidelity may shatter the expectations children had of their parents; the role models they believed would always provide a feeling of safety and security. Thus, when parents fail to meet these expectations, children are likely to experience distress. However, there remains a plethora of unanswered questions regarding how this distress may be manifested and what is truly encompassed in the lived experience of parental infidelity.

In this research the terms 'child' or 'children' refer to offspring of any age.

I will now present an outline of the relevant theoretical frameworks, followed by a review of the existing research; the current threads, in the parental infidelity literature. Finally, I will present my rationale for conducting this research.

1.1 Relevant theoretical frameworks

1.1.1 Attachment Theory

The theory of attachment, initiated by John Bowlby (1958d; 1960d; 1961c) "regards the propensity to make intimate emotional bonds to particular individuals as a basic component of human nature, already present in germinal form in the neonate and continuing through adult life into old age" (Bowlby, 1988, p.120-121).

In their study of infants Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters and Wall (1978) initiated the concept of 'attachment styles' and determined three styles of attachment: secure, insecure avoidant and insecure ambivalent. A secure attachment style was defined as an infant holding the belief that their attachment figure will be able to meet their needs, will be sensitive to, and able to attend to, their distress and will serve as a 'safe base' from which they can discover their environment (Main & Cassidy, 1988). Within this style, attachment figure(s) are viewed as "being available, responsive and helpful" (Bowlby, 1980, p.242). An insecure avoidant attachment style was defined as infants being both physically and emotionally independent; unlikely to seek their attachment figure in times of distress or orientate towards their attachment figure as a base whilst exploring their environment (Behrens, Hesse & Main, 2007). The caregivers of children with this style are likely to be 'insensitive' and 'rejecting of their needs' (Ainsworth, 1979) and withdrawn or unavailable during difficult or emotionally distressing experiences (Stevenson-Hinde & Verschueren, 2002). An insecure ambivalent attachment style was defined as infants failing to experience a sense of 'security' from their caregivers, therefore experiencing difficulty moving away from the attachment figure in order to investigate novel environments.

Typically, the infant will display ‘clingy’ or ‘dependent’ behaviours towards their attachment figure but will be rejecting of, and fail to be soothed or comforted by them, in times of distress. The caregivers of children with this style are likely to have presented inconsistent levels of attendance to the child’s needs (Ainsworth, 1979).

According to Bowlby (1973) attachment styles are, for the most part, formed throughout infancy through to adolescence. It is thought that at this stage, attachment styles then “become relatively resistant to, but still not impervious to, change” (Hazan & Shaver, 1994, p.70).

According to Fraley and Shaver (2000) the same ‘biological system’ is responsible for the drive to form attachments in both infant-caregiver relationships and in adult relationships in later life. It has been proposed that ‘inner working models’; the beliefs and expectations individuals hold regarding their views about themselves and their close relationships are relatively stable and the individual differences in the attachment behaviours of adults are ‘reflections’ of their early experiences with attachment figure(s). These individual differences can contribute significantly to one’s mental health and the quality of one’s adult relationships (Fraley & Shaver, 2000; Rholes & Simpson, 2004). It is also important to recognise the view that these ‘inner working models’ are not necessarily ‘static’, but instead can be dynamic and “may be altered in response to new information” (Collins & Read, 1990, p. 661). This ‘new information’ can refer to new relational experiences or a deepened understanding of oneself (Kenny & Rice, 1995).

Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) identified a ‘four category model’ within which they categorise four adult attachment styles: secure, anxious-

preoccupied, dismissive-avoidant and fearful-avoidant. They state that corresponding with one another are: a secure attachment as a child with a secure attachment as an adult, an anxious-ambivalent attachment as a child with an anxious-preoccupied attachment as an adult and finally, an avoidant attachment as a child corresponds with both dismissive-avoidant and fearful-avoidant attachment styles as an adult.

Adults with a secure attachment style typically display comfort with being both intimate and independent without fearing abandonment or a lack of acceptance. In comparison to other attachment styles, securely attached adults report higher levels of ‘satisfaction’ within their relationships and appear to hold more positive views about themselves and the individuals they are in relationships with (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991). Adults with the anxious-preoccupied attachment style may experience difficulty with the regulation of their emotions. They often experience feelings of doubt about their worth and how valued they are by their attachment figures, which can elicit feelings of self-blame if an attachment figure is unresponsive. They tend to seek elevated levels of responsiveness, physical and emotional intimacy, reassurance and approval from their relationships and can become very dependent, emotionally expressive and impulsive in relationships (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991). Adults with the dismissive avoidant attachment style seek elevated levels of independence which can appear as denying a need for close relationships and as a desire to avoid attachment in its’ entirety. Adults with this style may view themselves more positively than they view attachment figures, thus seeking less intimacy with others. There is a ‘defensive’ element of this style; there is often a suppression or hiding of feelings and a distancing oneself from potential sources of unresponsiveness or rejection (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991).

Adults with the fearful-avoidant attachment style are likely to have negative views of themselves or their attachment figures and tend to experience mixed feelings; a desire for emotional closeness whilst also fearing emotional closeness and the notion of trusting or depending on others. They are likely to experience discomfort in expressing affection and in comparison to securely attached adults, are much less likely to seek intimacy and may instead, suppress or hide their feelings. Individuals with this attachment style are likely to see themselves as not being worthy of responsiveness from attachment figures, whose intentions they do not trust (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991).

It has been stated that “adult romantic love has been conceptualised as an attachment process that is conceptually parallel to most people’s earliest relationship: infant to mother” (Brennan & Shaver, 1998, p.837). Cassidy (2001) notes that the fundamental difference between these two attachment processes is that the relationship between two adults requires both individuals to take on dual roles; giving and receiving care.

According to Hazan and Shaver (1987) one’s attachment style serves as the base from which one can explore and establish romantic connections as an adult. They found that adults with similar attachment styles presented with similar views regarding romantic relationships, their understanding of loneliness and their relational patterns. It is believed that individuals develop beliefs and expectations surrounding relationships and attachment throughout their lives, which plays an important role in influencing the ‘type’ of romantic partners individuals seek (Caspi & Herbener, 1990). It has been stated that “attachment functions are transferred to the romantic partner and, as such, adult romantic

relationships follow similar processes and serve similar functions as the childhood attachment relationship" (Davila & Bradbury, 2001, p.372).

However, it is important to recognise that romantic relationships also present as an opportunity for a new 'secure base' and for insecure attachment styles to be altered; to be healed (Crowell et al., 2002). However, if this is not resolved, attachment insecurity can be very damaging in a relationship; a number of researchers have suggested that marital distress may be 'grounded in' attachment insecurity (Davila & Bradbury, 2001; Davila, Karney & Bradbury, 1999; Johnson, Hunsley, Greenberg & Schindler, 1999; Kobak, Ruckdeschel & Hazan, 1994).

The role of adult attachment in infidelity

The theory of attachment elucidates how parents' relationships with one another can have an influence on the developing attachment styles of their children (Miller, 2016). Miller (2016) believes that parents' own attachment issues are inevitably playing a role in their infidelity and are therefore inextricable from their attachment to both their partner with whom they are in a romantic relationship with and their children. Miller (2016) found that adults who have experienced parental infidelity consistently present relational patterns which appear to have emerged as a result of their early experiences of parental infidelity. These individuals seem to understand their parents' infidelity as an 'avoidance' of the problems within their parents' marriage. They understand this avoidance to be due to fears around the 'aggression' and the 'destruction' which could come up if these problems are not avoided and this avoidance, though initially eliciting feelings of anger and disappointment, appears to become an internalised

mechanism for adults who have experienced parental infidelity; a way to protect both oneself and others from potential conflict (Miller, 2016).

Furthermore, Miller (2016) explains that during the period of infidelity, parents may be experienced by their children as 'unavailable'. This can lead to children experiencing negative emotions, particularly anger, at elevated levels which parents can feel unable to manage. As a result, parents can become manipulative both towards their partner and/or their children, in an attempt to avoid having to deal with these negative emotions which can then lead to passive-aggressive relational patterns and behaviours, becoming the family norm. As a result of the complex 'patterns of avoidance' and an absence of resolution, within the family system, Miller (2016) has found that the relationships within these families typically lack genuineness, are experienced as very fragile and any negative affect or conflict feels highly threatening.

Walker and Ehrenberg (1998) found that adult offspring, who believed that parental infidelity was the cause of their parents' divorce, were significantly more likely to have insecure attachment styles. The researchers concluded that witnessing parental betrayal and infidelity may lead to offspring fearing this betrayal within their own relationships; holding negative views of others, particularly around their abilities to remain loyal, thus perhaps inhibiting their willingness to enter into romantic relationships or heightening the likelihood of their having insecure attachment styles within these romantic relationships.

Platt, Nalbone, Casonova and Wetchler (2008) wished to build upon this research and further explored the role parental infidelity plays in the developing attachment styles of offspring. The researchers hypothesised that exposure to parental infidelity will be positively correlated to participants' holding negative

views about themselves and others and to participants' having a 'fearful attachment style'. However, in this study, findings did not support this hypothesis as they found that there were no significant differences between the styles of attachment of participants who had and had not experienced parental infidelity; thus highlighting that a great deal remains to be understood about this phenomenon.

Critique of the attachment theory

The attachment theory has also been met with critique; theorists highlighting why this theory alone may not answer all of the questions we have about infidelity. Field (1996) argues that this model views the mother as the primary attachment figure whilst in fact it may be the case that an infant has the same type of attachment, at the same time, with their father or a sibling for example. Harris (1998) builds on by arguing that an infant's primary attachment figure is not solely responsible for shaping his/her personality, and states that it is possible, and likely, for a child to be influenced by multiple people. For example, she suggests that a strong desire to fit in socially can mean that a child's peers may influence him/her more than parents and that what a child learns at home may be irrelevant to their existence in the outside world. Harris (1998) also argues that the attachment theory fails to adequately explore the role of genetics; presenting the 'nurture assumption' pointing out that separated twin studies elucidate the power of genes in an individual's personality traits.

1.1.2 Object Relations Theory

Klein (1948) and Fairbairn (1994) explicate splitting; a way in which infants cope with the experience of overwhelming negative affect; by splitting parts of themselves and their parents off. It has been proposed that this may be a way in which children respond to feeling helpless, intolerable rage, or rejection elicited by parental infidelity and how this can ultimately result in "the intergenerational transmission of trauma of infidelity and other kinds of traumatic avoidance in relationships as each generation internalises a fear of being truly known by others in intimate relationships" (Miller, 2016, p.256-257). Miller (2016) explains that if aggressive feelings are projected, this will result in some of these feelings not becoming integrated and therefore may end up being enacted, and inevitably causing significant difficulties, in subsequent romantic relationships, for these individuals, later in life. Miller (2016) presents an interesting hypothetical example of a woman whose father has been unfaithful. If this woman's father is repudiating of her rage in regards to his infidelity and instead behaves in a rejecting or disdainful manner towards her, this may become enacted in a further relationship with a romantic partner. This feeling of rage may be experienced by her as incredibly dangerous and needing to be avoided, but rather than resulting in her 'preserving peace', which she is attempting to do, this is likely to further strengthen her internalised fear of becoming 'truly known' to her romantic partner (Miller, 2016).

1.1.3 Social Learning Theory

The Social Learning Theory (SLT) (Bandura, 1977) states that human beings learn from each other through observing, imitating and modelling one another. A key concept of this theory is that individuals do not learn by solely observing the

behaviour of others but also through observation of the attitudes of others and outcomes of others' behaviours. According to the theory, the observation of others is the way in which we construct ideas about the performance of new behaviours; what we observe becomes 'coded information' which later serves as a guide for our own actions (Bandura, 1977). The theory posits four conditions which it states are necessary for 'effective modelling'. These are: attention, retention, reproduction and motivation. The encompassing of these conditions has led to the SLT often being referred to as the 'bridge' between theories of behaviourism and cognition (Upton, 2010). One tenant of this theory is the notion of 'reciprocal determinism', the idea that an individuals' environment, psychological processes and their behaviours interact with one another to construct personality (Bandura, 1986).

The SLT has been used as a theoretical framework to explain the intergenerational transmission of relationship behaviours, attitudes and beliefs (Amato & DeBoer, 2001; Whitton et al., 2008). According to the theory, an individual's understanding and knowledge, regarding the development and maintenance of a romantic relationship, i.e. what is acceptable and desirable, is learned directly through what they observe in, and what is communicated to them through, their parents' relationship. In particular, behaviours which are seen to have positive outcomes are much more likely to be modelled by offspring due to the positive reinforcement (Bandura, 1986).

The parents' relationship is not only the first, but also the most influential romantic relationship observed by offspring. One's family of origin plays a fundamental role in the development of complex cognitive structures and scripts regarding romantic relationships (Bryant & Conger, 2002).

An assumption of the SLT is that it is cognitions; one's attitudes and beliefs which play a pivotal role in the intergenerational transmission of relationship behaviours. Many researchers believe that the intergenerational transmission of these behavioural patterns occur as a result of the intergenerational transmission of beliefs and norms regarding relationships and commitment; highlighting the role the relationship between one's parents, plays in shaping one's own romantic relationship (Cui & Fincham, 2010; Segrin, Taylor & Altman, 2005).

Weiser and Weigel (2017) explored this notion in greater depth by conducting research which had two primary goals. The first was to explore whether or not parental infidelity specifically, is associated with a higher likelihood of offspring engaging in infidelity within their own romantic relationships. The second was to use the theoretical framework of the SLT to explore the 'underlying mechanisms' involved in this familial pattern. The researchers conducted three studies. In the first, they presented two hypotheses. Firstly, they hypothesised that there would be an association between having experienced parental infidelity and an increased likelihood of having been unfaithful within a romantic relationship. Secondly, they hypothesised that this association would be mediated by two variables: trust and self-efficacy. The results supported the first hypothesis. They found a direct positive association between having experienced parental infidelity and having ever engaged in infidelity whilst in a relationship. Further examining all participants who reported having engaged in infidelity at least once, analyses showed that 20% of these individuals reported having no experience of parental infidelity, in contrast to 33% who had had an experience of parental infidelity. They concluded that individuals who have experienced parental infidelity are twice as likely to be unfaithful within their own

romantic relationships than individuals who have not experienced parental infidelity. The results of this study did not support the researchers' second hypothesis. Variables 'trust' and 'self-efficacy' were not revealed as mediators of the association between the infidelity of offspring and parental infidelity (Weiser & Weigel, 2017).

The focus of their second study was the exploration of participants' specific beliefs about infidelity, based upon the theoretical assumption of the SLT, that offspring internalize the relationship norms and beliefs they observe in the parents' relationship, which then shapes the way they behave, within their own. Weiser and Weigel (2017) drew upon findings from earlier research which showed that, through their infidelity, parents can communicate to offspring that it is unreasonable to expect fidelity in a romantic relationship and that infidelity can elicit favourable outcomes. This can result in offspring experiencing a loss of inhibition regarding engaging in infidelity themselves and it can increase their positive and decrease their negative beliefs about infidelity (Reibstein & Richards, 1993). In this second study, researchers once again hypothesised that there would be a positive association between parental infidelity and the infidelity behaviours of offspring. Further, based upon the SLT framework, the second study also presented a new hypothesis. The researchers hypothesised that participants' who have experienced parental infidelity will hold more favourable beliefs about infidelity and these beliefs will mediate the positive association between parental infidelity and participants' own infidelity behaviours. Once again, results revealed a direct positive association between having experienced parental infidelity and having ever engaged in infidelity. Further examining all participants who reported having engaged in infidelity at least once, in this study, analyses showed that 19% of these individuals

reported having no experience of parental infidelity, in contrast to 32% who had had an experience of parental infidelity. The second study also found a positive correlation between having ever been unfaithful and the willingness to be unfaithful whilst in a relationship. However, analyses did not support the second hypothesis; beliefs about infidelity did not serve as a mediating variable in the association between parental infidelity and the infidelity of offspring. Further analyses did show that participants who had engaged in infidelity reported more favourable beliefs about infidelity than participants who had not. However, this difference was marginal and therefore researchers were unable to sufficiently comprehend the 'intergenerational infidelity pathways' (Weiser & Weigel, 2017).

For their third study, the researchers considered whether there was an 'intervening variable' which had led to this absence of an association between parental infidelity and participants' beliefs about infidelity. According to the SLT, exposure to content, either directly through communication or through observation, is necessary for individuals to encode and incorporate this content into their own cognitive structures and schemas. Therefore, the third study focussed on the communication, both direct and indirect, about infidelity that participants had received from their families as it appeared that this may play an important role in determining the meanings an individual attaches to their parents' infidelity and how this relates to their own beliefs about infidelity. They presented five hypotheses. Once again, the first was that there would be a positive association between having experienced parental infidelity and the infidelity behaviours of participants themselves. Secondly they hypothesised that there would be an association between parental infidelity and an increased likelihood of having had the experience of receiving, from one's family of origin, positive messages about being unfaithful and negative messages about fidelity

and being faithful. Thirdly they hypothesised that there would be an association between parental infidelity and offspring having more beliefs about infidelity being ‘acceptable’. Fourthly they hypothesised that participants who report a higher number of accepting beliefs about infidelity would have received a higher number of negative messages about faithfulness and a higher number of positive messages about being unfaithful. The final hypothesis was that there would be an association between holding a higher number of ‘accepting’ beliefs about infidelity and a higher likelihood of having been unfaithful at least once. Moving on to the results of this study, firstly, analyses revealed that participants who had experienced parental infidelity were significantly more likely to have been unfaithful, at least once, within a romantic relationship. Next, analyses revealed that individuals who had experienced parental infidelity were significantly less likely to have received messages about the importance of remaining faithful to romantic partners and significantly more likely to have witnessed one or both parents communicate that it is acceptable to be unfaithful. Furthermore, they found that once again, there was not a significant, direct association between parental infidelity and the beliefs of offspring regarding infidelity. However, analyses did reveal a significant correlation between all of the ‘communication variables’ and the beliefs of offspring regarding the acceptability of infidelity. Beliefs that infidelity is acceptable were significantly positively correlated with having received messages about infidelity being acceptable and were significantly negatively correlated with having received messages about the importance of fidelity and with having witnessed parental conflict regarding infidelity. Furthermore, beliefs that infidelity is likely to have negative outcomes were significantly positively correlated with having received messages about the importance of fidelity and with having witnessed

parental conflict regarding infidelity and were significantly negatively correlated with having received messages about infidelity being acceptable. Beliefs that infidelity is likely to have positive outcomes were significantly positively related to having received messages about infidelity being acceptable and significantly negatively correlated to having received messages about the importance of fidelity and remaining faithful. Analyses also revealed a significant positive correlation between offspring having ever been unfaithful and their holding of beliefs that, being unfaithful is acceptable and is more likely to have positive, than negative outcomes.

Weiser and Weigel (2017) recognise that a limitation of their study is the fact that the correlative nature of the design does not allow for directional conclusions. The study's finding that there was not a significant, direct association between parental infidelity and the beliefs of offspring regarding infidelity highlights that our insight here is limited. This is interesting and is perhaps a limitation of the SLT framework itself, in that the emphasis is strongly on the behavioural outcome and perhaps less explanatory of the mechanisms resulting in this behavioural outcome.

1.2 A review of the literature

1.2.1 Adult romantic relationships

In recent years, there has been an increasing exploration of the impact of parental infidelity on the romantic relationships of adult offspring. In light of the findings, therapists working with relationship issues regarding infidelity have noted that "the occurrence of infidelity in one's family of origin might profoundly

impact his or her attitudes towards infidelity and forgiveness in his or her own relationship" (Olmstead, Blick & Wills, 2009, p.55).

Nogales and Bellotti (2009) found that parental infidelity had an influence on attitudes towards romantic relationships, intimacy and love, of 80% of participants. They found that adult offspring who had experienced parental infidelity were likely to experience difficulties in maintaining healthy romantic relationships. The study found that 70% of participants stated that their experience of parental infidelity lessened their abilities to trust their romantic partners. Gottman (2011) highlights the importance of having a strong sense of trust within relationships and the fundamental role it plays, in both partners feeling safe, secure and able to be open with one another. Amongst individuals who have experienced parental infidelity, a weak or an entirely absent sense of trust within their romantic relationships can reduce the level at which they are willing to allow themselves to be guided or supported by their romantic partners and/or are able to experience sexual curiosity. This lessened sense of trust has also been found to be positively correlated with these individuals being more likely to engage in infidelity themselves (Cramer, Abraham, Johnson & Manning-Ryan, 2001).

This intergenerational transmission of infidelity is a theme which has appeared throughout the literature (Fish, Pavkov, Wetchler & Bercik, 2012; Nogales & Belotti, 2009). Platt, Nalbone, Casanova and Wetchler (2008) recruited 102 female and 48 male college students and their analyses revealed a significant positive correlation between paternal infidelity and the likelihood of male participants engaging in infidelity themselves. This correlation did not exist between paternal infidelity and female participants engaging in infidelity, or

between maternal infidelity and the infidelity behaviours of adult offspring of either gender.

Havlicek, Husarova, Rezacova and Klapilova (2011) also explored the correlation between parental infidelity and self-reported infidelity behaviours in romantic relationships of adult offspring. The sample consisted of 86 couples, all of whom were Czech except four women who were Slovakian, aged between 18-40 with varied financial incomes, who had been together for at least 2 years and were childless. Analyses revealed a positive correlation between infidelity behaviours and paternal infidelity. However when men and women were analysed separately, this correlation remained significant for men only. There were no significant effects of parental divorce on either sex, reaffirming the effect of parental infidelity specifically, as opposed to the breakdown of the parental relationship/marriage. It is important to note that a limitation of this study was the dependence on self-report as a method of data collection. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, it is reasonable to consider that participants may have had reason to not be entirely honest about extra-marital sexual behaviours. Furthermore, Havlicek et al. (2011) highlight the fact that their participants were selected on a voluntary basis and this may mean that individuals with more 'conservative' views on sexuality may have refrained from taking part, and therefore may not be represented in the sample.

Consistent with the findings from Havlicek et al. (2011), Weiser (2013) recruited a sample of 276 men and 440 women and also found there to be a positive correlation between parental infidelity and individuals having ever engaged in infidelity. Further supporting previous findings, this study also found that only

paternal infidelity was positively correlated with participants engaging in infidelity, whilst maternal infidelity was not a significant predictor of infidelity.

More recently, Weiser, Weigel, Lalasz and Evans (2017) also explored the infidelity behaviours of undergraduate students and found that exposure to parental infidelity, parental divorce and the levels of conflict and satisfaction they perceived to be present within their parents' relationship were all associated with the likelihood of the offspring being unfaithful within their own romantic relationships. Moreover, alongside perceived levels of satisfaction within their parents' relationship, parental infidelity was found to be one of the two most significant predictors of participants' infidelity.

Further exploring the intergenerational influences of parental infidelity on the romantic relationships of adult offspring, a limited amount of research has taken a more systemic approach by adopting the 'contextual therapy model' framework and exploring the role of 'relational ethics'; a cornerstone of this framework (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986). A model of family therapy, the focus of contextual therapy is the balancing of trust, loyalty and justice/fairness in relationships across generations. It explores how families achieve interdependence as a result of all members recognising that they have an obligation to contribute "relational resources grounded in love, care and support to meet each other's needs" (Schmidt, Green, Sibley & Prouty, 2016, p. 194) whilst simultaneously declaring their need to also receive these relational resources, from family members (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Krasner, 1986). Ducommun-Nagy (2002) defined 'relational ethics' as the acknowledgment of the fact that in order to be sustained, close, be it familial or romantic relationships, require a balanced dynamic of justice, fairness and commitment;

the members of the relationship to behave in a manner which promotes and ensures trust and loyalty. With regard to parental infidelity, this framework explores how the act of parental infidelity, a clear violation of trust and loyalty, may influence adult offspring's perceptions of relational ethics within their own romantic relationships (Schmidt et al., 2016). Relational ethics within relationships of individuals of the same generation, i.e. romantic partners are labelled 'horizontal', whilst relational ethics within intergenerational relationships, i.e. parent-child relationships are labelled 'vertical' (Hargrave, Jennings & Anderson, 1991).

Schmidt et al. (2016) used the Relational Ethics Scale (RES) (Hargrave et al,, 1991) to investigate the relational ethics; trust, loyalty, justice, fairness and entitlement, of 411 adults who had experienced parental infidelity. They found a significant correlation between paternal infidelity and lowered levels of 'horizontal' relational ethics. This correlation was 'partially mediated' by the participant having ever engaged in infidelity him/herself. Experiences of maternal infidelity were not revealed to be significant. It is important to note that the sample used in this study was predominantly female and the authors do recognise the importance of gender in parent-child relationships. Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that a more gender-diverse sample may have elicited different results.

Nevertheless, providing support for their findings, Kawar, Coppola and Gangamma (2018) also used the Relational Ethics Scale (RES) (Hargrave et al., 1991) to investigate potential differences in the relational ethics of adults who had and had not experienced parental infidelity. This study found that participants who had been exposed to parental infidelity scored significantly

lower, than participants who had not, on the vertical relational ethics measures and on the horizontal relational ethics measures, indicating that parental infidelity can negatively influence individuals' relationships with members of their family of origin and their romantic partners.

1.2.2 Sexual development

The development of sexuality is a process spanning one's entire lifespan and may be influenced by and comprised of multiple tenants such as one's socio-economic standing, 'biological disposition' and cultural and familial factors (Negash & Morgan, 2016). According to Kaplan (1974) sexuality is an experience of pleasure which is so deeply intense and a force that is 'ubiquitous' in a human being's existence, that it can be "readily associated with fear and guilt and thus highly vulnerable to the establishment of conflict" (Kaplan, 1974, p.146). According to Wardle (2002) the discovery of parental infidelity may exasperate any feelings of fear and/or guilt, children have relating to their sexual development. Furthermore, Schnarch (1991) states that children are highly perceptive to ruptures occurring within their parents' sexual relationship and this can affect their developing 'erotic map'.

Pearman (2010) also found that exposure to parental infidelity can lead to offspring developing sexual schemas which are abnormal or distorted. These schemas or 'sexual scripts' have been correlated with experiences of rigidity and increased anxiety during, or the total avoidance of, sexual activity (Negash & Morgan, 2016).

1.2.3 The role of age

It appears that age may play an important role in determining the varying impact of parental infidelity (Lusterman, 2005). According to Duncombe and Marsden (2004) the level at which a child has developed both cognitively and emotionally, based upon his/her age may be a mediating variable in whether they adopt parent-like roles and whether they experience feelings of being abandoned, of self-blame and of betrayal. Starting with self-blame, Duncombe and Marsden (2004) found that in comparison to adolescent children, offspring of a younger or pre-adolescent age may be more likely to blame themselves following the discovery of parental infidelity. Whilst adolescents may be less likely to experience self-blame, the causality and prospective implications of the parental infidelity may still be difficult for them to understand and process; a confusion which can become an internalised fear. Furthermore, older children are more likely to experience 'parentification': the adopting of an adult role. This role can result in adolescents becoming overburdened and as a result can lead to heightened feelings of anger and resentment towards the parent who has been unfaithful. This parental role can also elicit a compelling need for children to control all the different elements of their surroundings (Brown, 2001). With regards to loyalty and feelings of betrayal, younger children are less likely than adolescents to view infidelity as a moral issue and may therefore be less likely to feel that they have been betrayed by their parent. Instead, these children are more likely to feel that they are being neglected and are more likely to fear no longer being loved by the unfaithful parent (Duncombe & Marsden, 2004). Due to increased cognitive and emotional development, adolescents are more able to intellectually understand infidelity and are therefore more likely to attribute blame and responsibility to the parent who has committed the infidelity. This can

be problematic because it can result in ‘unilateral loyalty’ towards the parent who has not been unfaithful which can then result in the construction of ‘dysfunctional triads’, a dynamic which can be held by the individual from adolescence, through to adulthood (Duncombe & Marsden, 2004).

1.2.4 Topic avoidance and privacy turbulence

The avoidance of specific topics, alongside the consequences of this avoidance and the factors which may motivate or predict this topic-avoidance has been widely explored in the existing literature (Afifi, Caughlin & Afifi, 2007). Research has shown that the perception alone, of topic avoidance has been correlated with ‘relational dissatisfaction’ (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003) and that not discussing traumatic events is likely to elicit further health difficulties (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986) and can lead to lowered self-esteem and thought suppression which can result in the experiencing of intrusive thoughts and rumination (Pennebaker & O’Heeron, 1984).

Within the topic avoidance literature, the parental relationship has been elucidated as a particularly sensitive subject area (Afifi, 2003). Within this subject area, a number of contextual variables, such as: step-family relational dynamics and divorce have been identified as ‘breeders’ of topic avoidance (Thorson, 2009). One of these variables is infidelity. Infidelity is a topic often regarded as ‘taboo’ (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985; Vangelisti, 1994; Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997) and has been shown to be completely immersed and entangled in secret keeping, privacy and topic avoidance (Lusterman, 2005; Vangelisti, 1994; Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997).

Lusterman (2005) suggests that even if parents haven't explicitly discussed, with offspring, the fact that parental infidelity has taken place, the conflict and tension between parents can still negatively impact children. For younger children, there may be an unconscious response to parental anxiety or conflict, which can manifest in their becoming whiny or increasingly irritable. For slightly older children of an adolescent age, the experience may be one of becoming slightly aware of tension but feeling unsure whether or not to question the source of the tension or to reveal any information they have become exposed to. Adult children are much more likely to be fully aware of the tension and explicitly question their parents regarding its' source. However, according to Brown (2001) following children's discoveries of parental infidelity, it is common for parents to insist that the infidelity and information or family difficulties or tensions surrounding the infidelity, are not openly discussed, but rather, avoided. This avoidance can become a burden for offspring; a burden which has the potential to be carried into their adult lives.

Furthermore, Thorson (2009) explored how individuals manage the information they become exposed to, following parental infidelity and the potential enactment of 'rules', by offspring, regarding the protecting of information, or the providing of access to information, about their parental infidelity. The study found that offspring described enacting two 'protection rules' (Petronio, 2002), which were categorised as 'external' and 'internal'. External protection rules referred to participants' endeavours to protect information about the infidelity from individuals outside of the family in an attempt to avoid 'scrutiny'. Internal protection rules referred to participants' trying to protect the information about the infidelity, within the family, in order to avoid other family members becoming upset. The study also found that variables: context, age, sex, physical

environment and ‘code terms’ were conducive in the development of ‘privacy access rules’ (Caughlin & Petronio, 2004) which refers to situations within which offspring feel that it is acceptable for them to discuss their parental infidelity within the family unit. Thorson (2009) does reflect on the fact that the sample size in this study was very small and therefore over-generalisation of the findings should be approached with caution. In particular, in this study, participants who identified as ‘Hispanic’ reported that discussing parental infidelity was particularly taboo. However, Thorson (2009) notes that it is important for people not to assume, based on this finding alone, that it is solely Hispanic families who experience this ‘cultural tension’.

Moreover, Thorson (2015) explored the ‘privacy turbulence’ experienced by adult offspring after discovering parental infidelity. Privacy turbulence; a strand of the Communication Privacy Management Theory (CPMT) (Petronio, 1991) refers to the experience of having been given private information, by the ‘original owner’ of that information and feeling caught, feeling they rather would have not known and/or lacking in clarity regarding what is the most appropriate and the least disruptive way, to control this private information (Petronio, 2013). The experience of privacy turbulence has been categorised into three ‘family privacy dilemmas’. These are: ‘confidant’, ‘accidental’ and ‘illicit’ (Petronio, 2002). A confidant dilemma refers to an individual choosing to confide in another, by sharing private information. In terms of parental infidelity, an example of this would be a parent disclosing to their child (of any age), the fact that they are having an affair, then asking that child to keep this information a secret as the revealing of this information could harm other family members. This experience is likely to be relieving for the person who has shared the private information, in this case the unfaithful parent, but can result in that child

experiencing turbulence; unease and a feeling of burden, particularly if the child condemns the parents' behaviour (Thorson, 2015). An accidental dilemma refers to accidentally discovering private information, which if shared with others, could cause harm and distress. An example of this would be for offspring to unintentionally discover a parents' infidelity. Once again this may cause turbulence, as on the one hand, offspring may experience distress regarding the fact that disclosing this information could hurt other family members and may lead to the destruction of the family system. On the other hand, offspring may also experience distress if they feel that keeping this secret could lead to the prolonging of their parents' infidelity or that it may convey to others, that they approve of the infidelity (Thorson, 2015). Thirdly, an illicit dilemma refers to discovering private information through having snooped through, or spied upon private belongings. If a child discovers their parents' infidelity in this way, then alongside fearing that the disclosure of this information could be destructive to their family, they may also feel distressed about getting in trouble for having spied in the first place. However, once again, keeping this information a secret, is likely to elicit distress for the child about whether this will extend the infidelity and/or whether this reflects his/her approval of the infidelity (Thorson, 2015). Exploring privacy dilemmas in the context of parental infidelity, Thorson (2015) supported the CPM framework as analyses revealed that all three types of privacy dilemmas were described by the participants. In addition, based upon this data, a fourth type of dilemma was added to the existing literature: 'dishonesty dilemma'. This refers to experiences in which parents were dishonest about the existence of an affair and children were accused of lying, if they tried to share the information they had, with other family members. This was experienced as stressful as it was threatening of: the

knowledge they held, the desires they had to be honest and transparent and their personal level of credibility within the family system. The study also elicited an experience of ‘asynchronous privacy control efforts’ between parents and in particular, younger children, who presented a delayed understanding of ‘privacy access rules’ regarding the infidelity. One participant in the study described her experience as a nine year old child, who inadvertently, revealed her mother’s infidelity to her father, due to her lack of understanding or knowledge of what was actually happening or what the meaning of her mother’s behaviour was.

A limitation of this study is that only one member of each family was interviewed and therefore the study does not provide any insight into whether multiple children from the same family experience privacy turbulence in a similar way, or whether their experiences are entirely different from one another. Furthermore, the sample only included offspring over the age of 19 and Thorson (2015) discusses the fact that if younger children had been included, the study could have explored moral development in the context of privacy turbulence and also gained insight into the role of age in the experiencing of privacy turbulence.

Thorson (2017) highlights the fact that the topic-avoidant nature of parental infidelity presents a dilemma for offspring regarding whether to adopt an individual, or a communal style of coping. Berg, Meegan and Deviney (1998) define the two concepts. An individual coping style refers to a person taking full responsibility for the difficulty they are experiencing and seeing this difficulty as a personal problem, he or she is solely responsible for resolving. This sole responsibility does not necessarily have to be taken upon oneself; it can also be relational and transferred to another individual. On the other hand, communal

coping refers to individuals sharing responsibility for a stressor and working together to reach a resolution.

Thorson (2017) explored how adult children cope with their experience of parental infidelity and convey their feelings of condemnation or unhappiness, regarding their parents' behaviour, within a 'topic-avoidant environment'. The study elucidated three strategies of coping: 'communicative sanctions' which offspring place upon their parents, 'acting out' and 'setting ground rules'. Firstly, the communicative sanctions were categorised into: 'withholding address terms', 'withholding terms of endearment' and 'giving the silent treatment'. Next, acting out was categorised into: 'using the information', which referred to participants' using information about the infidelity to intentionally induce power, hurt or embarrass the unfaithful parent and 'outbursts'. Whilst the 'outbursts' did not address the infidelity and continued to uphold the avoidance of this topic within the family, it manifested in a way which "allowed the anxious 'fever' to break" (Thorson, 2017, p.183) and therefore was experienced as a form of relief for participants. Finally, the setting of 'ground rules'; which was reported by participants as a mechanism to cope with changes in the family structure, for example the developing relationship with a step-parent or relational dynamics between new siblings.

On the other hand, Brown (2001) suggests that in stark contrast to avoidance of the subject, some parents discuss the infidelity incessantly with their children. The reason for this may be that parents are seeking closure, or it may be due to parents using this as a tool to create new bonds and alliances with their children against the other parent. The latter can be particularly problematic as it can result in children being exposed to inappropriate disclosures and/or feeling

conflicted regarding their loyalty and thus feeling caught in between their parents; a feeling which has been positively correlated with worsened mental health (Schrodt & Afifi, 2007). This highlights that parental infidelity can affect offspring, both, if the infidelity becomes a source of secrecy and topic avoidance or, is discussed continually.

1.2.5 Communication and the role of familial messages

Despite being very limited, there has been some exploration in the literature, of the messages that children receive from members of their family, following parental infidelity, and the role this may play in the experience they have.

Thorson (2014) explored the impact of messages received following the discovery of parental infidelity, on the extent to which offspring experience 'feeling caught'. The term 'feeling caught' has been defined as an occurrence of triangulation; when children find themselves in the middle of parental disputes (Schrodt & Afifi, 2007) and experience a 'loyalty conflict' when teams begin to form within the family system and are opposing of one another (Emery, 1994).

Thorson (2014) found that participants described receiving messages, both passive and active, that were both discouraging of their 'feeling caught' and encouraging of their 'feeling caught'. The content of the messages discouraging this experience were categorised as: 'keeping conflict between the parents', 'there is no good/bad guy' and 'change is good'. The first category, 'keeping conflict between the parents' refers to participants' experiences of having perceived their parents consciously trying to keep the parental conflict between themselves and uninvolving of the children. Next, 'there is no good/bad guy'

refers to participants' experiences of their parents actively trying to avoid the blame of the infidelity being attributed to solely one parent. One example of this was a participant describing an incident in which he was discussing his mother's infidelity with his parents and his father chose to reveal his own previous infidelity, which the participant had not been aware of, ultimately reducing the blame the participant was attributing to his mother, for the present difficulties in the family. Thirdly, 'change is good' refers to participants' experiences of their parents elucidating potential positive implications of the changes to the family system, following parental infidelity. One example of this was a participant's mother speaking positively about the prospect of the children gaining a new step-mother.

On the contrary, the content of messages encouraging 'feeling caught' were categorised as: 'uncovering information', 'child as mediator' and 'managing other family members' opinions'. Firstly, 'uncovering information' refers to participants' experiences of being called upon by a parent who suspects his/her spouse is being unfaithful, to help discover more information, for example by asking children to investigate their spouse's whereabouts or interactions with other people. Next, 'child as mediator' refers to participants' experiences of being called upon by the parents' to be the facilitator of their interactions with one another; to act as a messenger of sorts. Finally, 'managing other family members' opinions refers to participants' experiences of having to discuss the infidelity with other members of their families and manage experiences within which their personal opinion differed to the opinions of others. For example, one participant described having an experience in which her grandparents were condemning of her mother's infidelity and wanted her to voice her disapproval and convey that she was upset with her mother, which didn't align with the

opinions she wished to vocalise (Thorson, 2014). This study highlights the importance of familial communication following infidelity. Extending this point further, according to Afifi, Granger, Denes, Joseph and Aldeis (2011) it is also important to explore how 'communicatively skilled' children perceive their parents to be, as they argue that adolescent offspring who perceive their parents to be highly communicatively skilled are more capable of recovering from a distressing experience than adolescents who do not perceive their parents to be highly communicatively skilled. Thus, Thorson (2014) recognises that this study could be extended by exploring the potential influence of the level of communicative skill offspring perceive their parents to have, on related future individual and relational experiences.

In a similar thread, April and Schrodt (2018) explored the influence of disclosing parental infidelity to offspring, in the style of 'person-centred messages', on the way in which offspring then attribute responsibility and how willing they are to forgive the infidelity. The 'person-centredness' of the messages of disclosure were assessed using an adaptation of the 'person-centred scale', developed by Jones and Guerrero (2001) and included items rating how sensitive, helpful, understanding, caring, warm and supportive, participants' perceived their parents' messages of disclosure to be. The study revealed a significant negative correlation between participants' attribution of responsibility to the unfaithful parent and their level of willingness to forgive. However, analyses revealed there to be no significant correlation between the person-centredness of the messages of disclosure and the level of the participants' willingness to forgive their unfaithful parent and no significant correlation between the person-centredness of the messages and the participants' attribution of responsibility. In considering why these results may not have been significant, the researchers

highlight the fact that the situations in this study were hypothetical; the participants had not experienced parental infidelity in their real lives, which may have influenced the validity of results.

Exploring a slightly different strand of communication, Thorson (2018) investigated the impact of communication on adult children's forgiveness of parental infidelity. Forgiveness in the study was defined as an increase in benevolence and a decrease in avoidance. The study found that the likelihood of adult children forgiving their unfaithful parent is higher if they receive a sincere apology from the unfaithful parent for the infidelity. The study also found that a child's empathy for the parent and a child's 'positively valenced attributions' for the causality of the parent's infidelity were significant mediators of forgiveness.

1.3 Rationale

The first element of my rationale is simply the paucity of research exploring the experience of parental infidelity. There has been very little exploration of this topic, which has resulted in a number of unanswered questions; a gap in the literature which I wish to address.

Moreover, the fundamental element of my rationale for conducting this research is the importance of the knowledge that stands to be obtained and subsequently generated; its' application to Counselling Psychology. My belief is that the understanding and insight that can be gained from this research can be utilised by counselling psychologists to develop therapeutic interventions which can help individuals and their families heal, following an experience of parental

infidelity. By elucidating relevant knowledge through research, we can help counselling psychologists in their process of creating a therapeutic space in which clients can address unresolved difficulties following parental infidelity; ensuring that these difficulties do not get overlooked, but are instead met with empathy, knowledge and understanding.

Research findings could lead to the development of therapeutic interventions which could aid in validating the experience of parental infidelity as important and impactful. Interventions based upon research findings could address insecure attachment styles, familial patterns of infidelity or fears of being betrayed and could create a space in which individuals can explore and gain a deeper understanding of their relationships with themselves and with others.

Furthermore, infidelity in relationships is a huge issue for couples, both highly prevalent and particularly challenging for clinicians to treat (Peluso & Spina, 2008; Whisman, Dixon & Johnson, 1997). Therefore, research potentially elucidating how infidelity may relate to adults' early experiences of parental infidelity, could increase the effectiveness of the therapeutic work clinicians are doing with these couples. Not only will this knowledge help the therapist gain insight into the person but Weiser and Weigel (2017) also feel it could elicit disclosure from clients about infidelity, if they perceive their therapist to be knowledgeable about familial patterns of infidelity.

In addition, findings from research exploring the lived experience of parental infidelity can also help counselling psychologists who may be working therapeutically with the parents themselves; research can elucidate how may be best, i.e. least negatively impactful, for parents to address infidelity with children, for example how to disclose the information, communicate about the

topic or how to manage the change within the family system which will inevitably follow.

According to Miller (2016), it is common for patients/clients to be unaware of the psychological consequences of their experiences of parental infidelity and the role these consequences play, in the presenting problems with which they begin counselling/psychotherapy. Therefore, it is important to conduct research exploring the lived experience of parental infidelity, in order to raise awareness; to elucidate and disseminate the consequences this experience can have; knowledge which is fundamental in the process of working through these consequences.

Finally, there are a number of specific gaps in the literature which this research will address. Firstly, the existing literature has predominantly taken a quantitative approach, which has resulted in the restricted exploration of specific variables and has not allowed for any directional conclusions to be drawn. The current study takes a qualitative approach; an in-depth, exploratory approach engaging with various aspects of an individual's life following parental infidelity. Next, to the extent of my knowledge, all of the current literature explores this topic using a pre-determined theoretical framework, i.e. Attachment Theory, Object Relations Theory, Social Learning Theory, or a specific thread/ topic area, i.e. adult romantic relationships, sexual development, the role of age, topic avoidance and privacy turbulence, communication and the role of familial messages. This feels restrictive and dismissive and thus, the current study does not impose any pre-determined theoretical frameworks or existing topics from the literature, but rather creates a space in which, through the deep exploration of various aspects of an individual's life following parental infidelity, new ideas

and new findings can emerge. Next, there is an important temporal component to consider. The existing literature predominantly takes a snapshot approach; the majority of studies are looking at parental infidelity within a specific time frame, i.e. discovery, parental apology, when offspring began having their own romantic relationships. The current study addresses this gap by placing zero restriction on which stage of parental infidelity participants can discuss. The participants in this study can explore for example, their earlier childhood experiences, sibling relationships friendships and romantic relationships over the years, their experience of parental infidelity when they had children themselves later in their life and many more. Furthermore, the existing literature has predominantly recruited samples of undergraduate students; participants in the 18-30 age cohort. This feels restrictive as the current study aims to explore the experience of parental infidelity and the dynamic understanding and sense-making around this experience, over the years. Therefore, the current study aims to address this gap and in order to do so, has no upper age limit. In addition, though this is not the predominant approach, one study in the existing literature did use hypothetical experiences of parental infidelity; the participants had not truly experienced parental infidelity. This feels inauthentic and the current study will only recruit participants who have truly experience parental infidelity. Furthermore, there are specific gaps in the literature which this research will address. Firstly, the existing literature has predominantly taken a quantitative approach, which has resulted in the restricted exploration of specific variables and has not allowed for any directional conclusions to be drawn. The current study takes a qualitative approach; an in-depth, exploratory approach engaging with various aspects of an individual's life following parental infidelity. Next, to the extent of my knowledge, all of the current literature explores this

topic using a pre-determined theoretical framework, i.e. Attachment Theory, Object Relations Theory, Social Learning Theory, or a specific topic area, i.e. adult romantic relationships, sexual development, the role of age, topic avoidance and privacy turbulence, communication and the role of familial messages. This feels restrictive and dismissive and thus, the current study does not impose any pre-determined theoretical frameworks or existing topics from the literature, but rather creates a space in which, through the deep exploration of various aspects of an individual's life following parental infidelity, new ideas and new findings can emerge. Next, there is an important temporal component to consider. The existing literature predominantly takes a snapshot approach; the majority of studies are looking at parental infidelity within a specific time frame, i.e. discovery, parental apology, when offspring began having their own romantic relationships. The current study addresses this gap by placing zero restriction on which stage of parental infidelity participants can discuss. The participants in this study can explore for example, their earlier childhood experiences, sibling relationships friendships and romantic relationships over the years, their experience of parental infidelity when they had children themselves later in their life and many more. Furthermore, the existing literature has predominantly recruited samples of undergraduate students; participants in the 18-30 age cohort. This feels restrictive as the current study aims to explore the experience of parental infidelity and the dynamic understanding and sense-making around this experience, over the years. Therefore, the current study aims to address this gap and in order to do so, has no upper age limit. In addition, though this is not the predominant approach, one study in the existing literature did use hypothetical experiences of parental infidelity; the participants had not truly experienced parental infidelity. This may restrict the study's ability

to elicit authentic and in-depth insight. The current study will only recruit participants who have truly experienced parental infidelity.

Therefore, my aim is to address these gaps in the literature and extend our knowledge by conducting qualitative research, exploring participants' subjective views of themselves, others and the world, following their experiences of parental infidelity.

My research question is:

How do offspring perceive their lived experiences of parental infidelity?

Chapter Two

2. Methodology

2.1 Overview

Having now introduced the topic of my research and outlined my aims and my research question, in this chapter I will present my methodological approach. I will begin by presenting my rationale for taking a qualitative approach to methodology. I will then move onto outlining my choice of methodology: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA); its' theoretical underpinnings and my rationale for this choice. Next, I will present the epistemological stance of this research and I will then outline my consideration of alternative choices of methodology.

I will then move onto detailing how the study was conducted; the methods adopted at each stage of the process. I will explore ethical considerations, present my analytic strategy and address the ways in which this study may be evaluated.

Furthermore, I recognise that reflexivity is a key component of qualitative research. It is the recognition that the influence of the researcher on the research is inevitable and necessitates acknowledgement and reflection (Finlay & Gough, 2003). I have kept a reflexive journal throughout to aid the development of a reflexive account of my research and enable critical reflection. Reflexivity is addressed throughout this chapter, in relation to each stage of the project and I will also close the chapter with a separate section on personal reflexivity.

2.2 Rationale for a qualitative approach

Fundamentally, my rationale for taking a qualitative approach was determined by my research question and the answers that I wished to obtain. As I began to explore the topic of parental infidelity, I felt that the existing literature had largely taken a quantitative approach. According to Liamputtong (2013), taking a quantitative approach can reduce the complexity and multifaceted nature of human experience, which qualitative researchers can gauge the true scope of, by immersing themselves into participants' social worlds and allowing them to communicate the sense they make of their experiences, in their own words. This appeared to be the case as I felt that the reduction of the experience of parental infidelity into quantifiable variables had resulted somewhat, in a focus on the correlative association between the experience of parental infidelity and one's own romantic relationships. It felt dismissive to explore one aspect, and my aim with this research, was to explore participants' views about the self, others and the world following parental infidelity, for which I felt exploratory qualitative methods; concerned with rich descriptions of the individual experience, captured from the participant's viewpoint (Willig, 2013) were required. Consistent with my research question, which is concerned with how individuals make sense of, and the meanings individuals attach to, their experiences of parental infidelity, I felt that a qualitative methodology could facilitate an exploration of the dynamic understanding of this experience as it focuses on the description and/or interpretation of participants' individual experiences and meaning-making (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Furthermore, qualitative methodologies are valuable for the study of sensitive topics, such as parental infidelity, due to the humanistic nature of data collection methods (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015).

Lamiell (1987) highlights the fact that statistical results deduced from quantitative research, which may be generalisable to groups of people, do not necessarily apply to each individual within the group; discounting subjectivity, which is a focal point of this research. Additionally, Maxwell (2004) believes qualitative methods are advantageous for research such as this study, aiming to elucidate the meaning, context and processing of human experience and explicate the specificities of a particular event. One element I felt I had to consider during my decision-making, was the criticism facing qualitative methodologies in regards to whether they are scientific in their approach to knowledge generation. My views are aligned with Harre (2004), who refutes criticism about how scientific this approach is as he argues that in the qualitative study of human life, reflexivity, intentionality and meaning making are key components of scientific study.

In addition, consistent with the epistemological parameters of my research, qualitative research is methodologically pluralistic; the focal point is not the 'truths' but rather, the "relative plausibility" (Mishler, 1986, p.112) of one set of interpretations of the data, in comparison to potential alternatives.

I decided upon the use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, 1996).

2.3 What is IPA?

"IPA is a version of the phenomenological method that accepts the impossibility of gaining direct access to research participants' life worlds." (Willig, 2013, p.87). It aims to gain insight into the subjective, lived experience of a given phenomenon whilst recognising that the researcher's views and assumptions will inevitably become constituents of subsequent analyses, which must be

acknowledged as an interpretation rather than a direct depiction of the experience. This analytic process is referred to as “a double hermeneutic because the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them” (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p.3). This methodology draws on three key theoretical underpinnings: phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography.

2.4 Theoretical Lens

2.4.1 Phenomenology

The phenomenological school of thought aims to gain insight in to the lived experience of a phenomenon, as it occurs, from the point of view of the subject (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003a). Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), the founder of transcendental phenomenology believed that subjective human experience cannot be isolated from an objective world (Zahavi, 2003). Husserlian phenomenology placed great emphasis on the ‘intentional’ relationship between ‘objects’ and the conscious experience (McIntyre & Smith, 1989). Husserl believed that in order to truly understand the essentiality of this subjective experience, one must take on a ‘phenomenological attitude’, which necessitates the reflexive process of attending our gaze to each specific thing as it appears, rather than as a part of a system in which it exists (Husserl, 1927). He proposed the ‘phenomenological method’ which consists of ‘epoché’, ‘phenomenological reduction’, and ‘imaginative variation’ (Moustakas, 1994). Epoché refers to the concept of ‘bracketing’ individual biases in an attempt to “invalidate, “inhibit” and “disqualify” (Schmitt, 1959, p.239) our perceived validity of prior knowledge and experience. Phenomenological reduction refers to the reducing of what is being presented, into “mere phenomena” (Husserl, 1977, p.20); elucidating the

content of what is being consciously experienced (Willig, 2013). Finally, 'imaginative variation' is a reflective process in which one strives to understand 'how' an experience has come to being, by considering various alternative structural elements such as time, spatial and relational qualities (Brann, 1991).

2.4.2 Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is the theoretical study of interpretation; the implications of which, have significantly impacted the development of IPA; an interpretive approach to phenomenology. Martin Heidegger (1889 – 1976) believed that description and interpretation are not distinct entities and that an individual's access to the lived experience is always by way of interpretation (Heidegger, 1962). He proposed that the aim of phenomenology is dually perceptual and analytical; it is not only to explore the meanings of what visibly appears before us, but also to examine meanings which may exist latently; a process which requires interpretation (Moran, 2000). Dilthey (1976) proposes that rather than an explicit method, our 'being' as humans, is hermeneutic. In contrast to Husserl, Heidegger argues that sense-making is a dynamic and cyclical process. He believes it is impossible to entirely bracket our 'fore-conception' each time we encounter a new 'object', and whilst these presuppositions can inform our understanding of new things, the new things can also elucidate the nature of these presuppositions (Smith et al., 2009). This concept is highlighted in the theory of the 'hermeneutic circle' (Gadamer, 1990; Schleiermacher, 1998) which refers to the circularly process in which; to understand the whole, you must understand the parts, and to understand the parts you must understand the whole; an integral element in the IPA analytic strategy.

2.4.3 Idiography

Idiography refers to the focus on specifics; the exploration of phenomenon in great depth, from individual viewpoints, within a given context (McLeod, 2015). Researchers argue that nomothetic approaches fail to account for distinctive human dispositions (Allport, 1961) or provide detailed understanding of emotional, behavioural and psychological processes at the individual level (Smith, Harre & Langenhove, 1995).

2.5 Rationale for choosing IPA

There are multiple tenets to my rationale for choosing this methodology. IPA allows participants to convey their experience from their own perspective, without imposing restrictions such as preselected theoretical notions. This elucidates the significant aspects of a specific experience in a particular context (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006). The aim of this methodology is to explore the meanings participants attach to their experience and gain insight into the processes involved in their sense-making (Larkin, Eatough & Osborn, 2011). This felt consistent with the aims of my research and my research question. The focus of IPA on specificity and the assumption that a seemingly identical situation can be experienced by different individuals in drastically diverse ways (Willig, 2013) was of particular importance to me, as my interest in this research emerged from a fascination in the very different responses my brother and I had to our father's infidelity. In addition, IPA has been found to be valuable in the study of subject matter which is "emotionally laden" (Smith & Osborn, 2015, p.1), which I feel parental infidelity is. Furthermore, the sensitive nature of the topic was considered as a potential obstacle in recruitment, which also

contributed to choosing IPA, as the idiographic approach means that a small number of participants are required. This was also more feasible for me as a student with resource and time limitations. Another facet of my choice was the compatibility of IPA with my views as a trainee counselling psychologist; both disciplines value the subjective experience, the collaborative process and reflexivity (Kasket, 2012). This is important as the overarching rationale for this study is to generate insight to aid counselling psychologists in their therapeutic work.

I am aware that IPA also has limitations. Firstly, IPA studies have been critiqued for having small sample sizes (Pringle, Drummond, McLafferty & Hendry, 2011). However, in response to this, I am in agreement with Smith et al. (2009) who argue that in fact smaller sample sizes can elicit richer, more in-depth insights from participants, which I feel is the case in this current study and a strength of the current study which may have been inhibited if the sample size was much larger. Another critique of IPA studies has been that during the analysis phase, emergent themes or ideas from the first participant account the researcher analyses, may be carried through and thus influence the analysis of the narrative accounts which follow (Pringle et al., 2011). I feel I have addressed this in two ways. Firstly, I made an early decision to avoid listening to any audio, write up any transcripts or read any material from any participant interviews, until all data collection was complete. I did this in order to ensure that any emerging themes or ideas from earlier interviews did not have influence on subsequent data collection. Next, I followed Smith et al. (2009)'s advice on how to address this issue. They argue that if researchers systematically and rigorously follow the steps they have outlined in their analysis framework, then this should ensure that there remains no scope for there to be any concerns

about each case having been analysed on its' own and justice having been done for each participants' individuality and individual lived experience. I paid specifically close attention to ensuring that I rigorously and systematically followed the steps outlined by Smith et al. (2009).

Moreover, IPA does not deny the existence of a 'reality', but is concerned with the nature and meaning of this reality for the subject. Whilst the researcher can gain insight into this experience, analyses will be an interpretation; mediated by the participant, researcher and their interaction (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). This is compatible with the ontological, epistemological and axiological positioning of this research, which I will outline next.

2.6 Epistemological stance

This research adopts the critical-realist position, a position which emerged through the works of Roy Bhaskar (1978; 1979; 1998) and has since, been widely dissertated and elaborated upon, by scholars (Archer, 1995; Collier, 1994; Lawson, 1997; Sayer, 1992).

This position assumes a realist ontology. Fletcher (2017) outlines the three levels into which the critical realist ontology is stratified. The first level is the 'empirical level'. This level is the realm within which empirical measures of events/objects can be taken, but the events "are always mediated through the filter of human experience and interpretation" (Fletcher, 2017, p.183). Next, is the level of the 'actual', where this filter of human experience and interpretation does not exist. At this level, events are occurring regardless of whether or they are experienced or interpreted, and what is occurring at this level is different

from the observations made at the empirical level (Danermark, Erkstrom, Jakobsen & Karlsson, 2002). The final level is the ‘real’; the level at which the causal structures or ‘mechanisms’ lay. These are the properties within objects/structures, which drive the causal forces, producing the events observed at the empirical level (Fletcher, 2017).

A fundamental tenant of the critical realist position is the critique of positivism and the ‘epistemic fallacy’; the notion that ontology can be reduced to epistemology, that the entirety of ‘reality’ can be ‘empirically known’ by scientific research (Bhaskar, 1998). Fletcher (2017) highlights that this critique can also be applied to social constructionist approaches, which propose that the construction of reality, is entirely through ‘human knowledge or discourse’.

Critical realism has been identified as being ‘theory-laden’ as opposed to ‘theory-determined (Fletcher, 2017). The position accepts that a ‘real social world exists’ and philosophical and scientific theoretical works can endeavour to understand the causal mechanisms driving phenomena, social ideas, activities or events and thus, perhaps move us closer to this ‘reality’. However, the position also accepts that knowledge can differ in how close it truly is to this reality (Danermark et al., 2002).

The critical realist position assumes a relativist epistemology. It assumes that an individual’s perception of phenomena is mediated, to varying degrees, by their social, historical, biological and cultural contexts (Parker, 1998). According to Bunge (1993), the way in which an individual perceives facts is dependent on that individual’s beliefs and expectations. The critical realist approach “assumes that although our data can tell us something about what is going on in the ‘real’ world, it does not do so in a self-evident, unmediated fashion” (Willig, 2013,

p.16). This research does not assume that the data collected reflects a ‘mirror image’ of the phenomena of parental infidelity, but rather, the assumption here is that the data collected must be interpreted in order to extend our understanding about the lived experience of parental infidelity. Therefore, the role of the researcher is one of an active being, interpreting and sense-making within one’s own contextual system. Thus, critical realism accepts that encompassed within the production of knowledge, lays an ‘inherent subjectivity’ (Madill, Jordan & Shirley, 2000). Therefore, reflexivity is a core component; whilst this stance assumes these cultural and individual perceptions to be inevitable, it is important for a researcher to acknowledge and discuss the position they approach the data from.

The critical realist position serves as a ‘methodology framework’, but this position is not associated with a specific set of research methods (Fletcher, 2017). Therefore in the positioning of this research, it is important to also consider methodology. It is believed that IPA is “theoretically rooted in critical realism” (Fade, 2004, p.647). Fade (2004) explains that it is accepted that structures of reality, which are ‘stable’, regardless of whether or not humans conceptualise them, exist, and further, the existence of the different meanings individuals attach to different experiences, the fundamental interest of IPA, is possible, because individuals are experiencing different aspects of this reality. This research aligns itself with the positioning of phenomenological research “roughly in the middle of the realism-relativism axis” (Harper & Thompson, 2011, p.89) in that the concern of the research is not strongly situated in understanding whether or not narrative accounts are ‘factual’, but simultaneously accepting the existence of an external reality and a ‘correspondence between’ a participant’s subjective experience and their

narrative account (Harper & Thompson, 2011). This research perhaps delineates from the traditional critical realist "search for causation" (Fletcher, 2017, p.181) as the fundamental focus here, is the subjective, lived experience of parental infidelity, which can extend our understanding on this experience.

Reflexivity

In settling upon the epistemological position of my research, I explored a range of classifications. The reason I chose the critical realist position is because this position resonated as most compatible with my approach to knowledge as a researcher and as a trainee counselling psychologist. I began by exploring the 'naive'/'direct' realist position as outlined by Madill et al. (2000) and Willig (2013). My beliefs did not align with the holding of both a realist ontology and epistemology; this notion that the data researchers collect is by and large, a direct representation of reality (Willig, 2013). Moreover, based on my belief of inevitable subjectivity in research, I felt particularly uncomfortable with the idea that in order to 'warrant' the status of knowledge, the findings of a research study need to be replicable; the belief that all observers/researchers should and would, elucidate identical findings if the research were to be repeated (Madill et al., 2000). Contrastingly, I also explored social constructionist orientations. My understanding of this approach is that it is rejecting of the belief that "objects, events and even experiences precede and inform our descriptions of them" (Willig, 2013, p.18) and instead, proposes that we use language to socially construct a version of reality, for a particular purpose, which is incompatible with my beliefs. Furthermore, I was not interested in exploring the use of language and the process of the social construction of knowledge. The focus of this

research was the production of knowledge regarding individual, subjective, lived experiences of parental infidelity; the description of participants' inner realities.

2.7 Consideration of alternative methodologies

Due to the shared philosophical foundation; the interest in gaining rich, in-depth insight into a given phenomenon, Descriptive Phenomenology (DP) (Giorgi, 2009) was considered. However, the assumption of DP that it is possible to 'bracket' all presuppositions in order to understand phenomena in eidetic form (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008), is inconsistent with my epistemological position. Furthermore researchers argue that DP is more suitable for research aiming to bring attention to a given phenomenon as it looks for commonalities to give rise to a general structure, whilst IPA focuses on individual sense-making (McConnell – Henry, Chapman & Francis, 2009; Matua & VanDerWal, 2015) which felt more compatible with the aims of this research, as although there is a paucity of research, parental infidelity is not a rare, unknown phenomenon for which awareness needs to be raised.

Grounded Theory (GT) (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was considered as it is the foremost alternative to IPA (Smith et al., 2009), and the inductivist approach to generating original theory without pre-determined theoretical frameworks (Starks & Trinidad, 2007), was appealing. A 'moderate' social constructionist approach to GT (Charmaz, 2000) was briefly considered, but rejected, as phenomenological methods are thought to be better suited than GT for psychological research aiming to explore the subjective experience of a few,

without generalising on a wider scale or aiming to generate theory and explain social processes (Willig, 2013; Shank, 2008) as it produces a 'macropicture' not a 'microanalysis' (Creswell, 2005). Further to this point, GT typically requires a large number of participants (Smith et al., 2009), which is not feasible, nor pertinent for this research.

Discourse Analysis (DA) (Potter & Wetherell, 1987) was very briefly considered but decided against as the role of language is not the focus of my research. In addition, my views are inconsistent with DA on the status of language and cognition. DA argues that verbalisations of mental states have a purpose and should be analysed as separate entities, whilst IPA subscribes to the social cognition paradigm and is interested in the content of verbalisations and seeks to gain insight into the cognitions of participants in relation to the phenomena being explored (Smith, Jarman & Osborn, 1999). This felt more consistent with the aims of this research.

2.8 Participants

2.8.1 Sampling

A purposive, homogeneous sample of 8 individuals who have experienced parental infidelity was initially recruited. Due to some methodological difficulties, which are explained in greater detail later in this chapter, material collected from 6 of the 8 individuals, has been used in the analysis. The sample size was determined by the idiographic nature of the study, feasibility in regards to recruitment and time constraints, and the view that a sample of 4-10 is suitable for an IPA study at doctoral level (Hefferon & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011). The

demographic profile of the study was dependent upon the willingness of individuals to volunteer their participation. I recognised that there would be a large number of individuals who fit the criteria; therefore my choice of participants was solely based upon order of response to my advertisement posters. I recognise that this method may allow for self-selection bias but I held a strong desire for the study to be open to anybody who wished to explore their experience in this way. Details of participants are presented in Table 1. below.

Age	Occupation	Nationality	Gender
65	Retired	English	Male
23	Student	English	Female
59	Psychologist	Welsh	Female
25	Healthcare professional	South African, Belgian and German	Female
29	Student	English	Female
35	Editor	English	Female

Table 2.1: Summary of participant demographics

Inclusion criteria

- Parental infidelity could be maternal or paternal infidelity as the existing literature has not revealed sex effects meriting the exclusion of either. Infidelity referred solely to sexual infidelity as emotional infidelity appears to be harder to define (Fenigstein & Peltz, 2002).
- Participants had to have discovered their parental infidelity at least ten years prior to data collection. The rationale for this was two-fold. Firstly,

upon consideration with my supervisor, a ten year period was considered to be a sufficient amount of time to have processed the experience, reducing the likelihood of participation inducing distress. Secondly, in order to explore participant's dynamic experience of parental infidelity, my supervisor and I felt that a period of at least ten years since discovery, would have allowed for some reflection upon the experience, which we felt would be valuable for the research.

- Participants had to be over 18 as this research is exploring the experience of adults.

Reflexivity

Initially an age criterion of 18-30 was set, in following of the existing literature which has predominantly recruited the 'young adult' cohort. However, the upper age limit immediately presented as an obstacle to recruitment, with multiple individuals over the age limit expressing desire to participate. On reflection, it also became evident that there is a gap in the literature exploring the experience of older adults and I felt I did not have a robust rationale for why this age criterion should remain. Therefore an ethics amendment form was submitted and the upper age boundary was removed.

Exclusion criteria

- Individuals currently suffering from severe mental health issue(s). I felt that as parental infidelity is a sensitive topic, potential risk of harm may

be heightened. I felt that in this case, there may be the possibility that participation may be more likely to be experienced as distressing or unhelpful. I decided to assess this by asking two questions: “do you see any potential obstacles for your participation?” “A little about your emotional life, have you previously seen a counsellor/psychologist?”. I felt this was both sensitively worded and promoted participant autonomy in regards to making this decision. The way I approached this, was that regardless of participants’ answers, I explained why I had asked and the potential that currently suffering from a severe mental health issue may heighten the risk of participants experiencing distress, should they decide to participate. I did not have a particular timeline after which participants would be deemed no longer suffering a mental health issue, but rather my focus was on how participants were currently feeling and on providing them enough information to make the decision as to whether participation may elicit distress, themselves. None of the participants said they were currently suffering with severe mental health issue(s), nor did I experience this to be the case. Had I had a concern, I would have raised this once again with the participant and with my supervisor, in order to determine how would be best to proceed.

- Individuals I personally know; I felt it was important for my knowledge of each participant, prior to data collection to be equal.

2.8.2 Recruitment

Participants were recruited using advertisement posters (Appendix A). The poster outlined the inclusion criteria but the exclusion criteria were not included,

in order to avoid any potential public stigmatisation of mental health. Posters were distributed at City, University of London and areas: Enfield and Islington, as this felt appropriate for the proposed audience and was feasible for me in that these areas were close by to my home and the university I attend. Posters were only distributed where permission had been obtained. The locations were: the Rhind and College Buildings of the City, University of London campus, libraries, shop windows and local super-market notice board bulletins.

2.9 Data collection

Data was collected using one-to-one semi-structured interviews. This is the favoured method for IPA as it enables participants to voice their individual perspectives by speaking freely about their experiences, resulting in rich, in-depth data and the evolution of narratives in an authentic way as opposed to highly structured interviews which impose a fixed structure, into which participants must constrain their experience (Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005). The use of diaries was considered but I felt parental infidelity is a sensitive topic and it may feel intrusive for participants to have their diaries read. Interviews were not conducted over Skype, as I felt human interaction would be important to reflect upon. The duration of interviews was guided by my aim for interviews to last approximately between 60-90 minutes as I felt this would be a sufficient amount of time to build rapport and engage in a meaningful interaction without the participant becoming overwhelmed. The interview durations ranged between 55-95 minutes. Each participant was interviewed once; multiple interviews were considered but are typically more useful in longitudinal research or ‘before-and-after’ studies (Smith et al., 2009).

An initial interview schedule (Appendix B), outlining a small number of open-ended questions was constructed, to ensure that whilst interviews remained participant-led and the schedule was used flexibly, sufficient data, relevant to the research question, was being collected. I briefly touched upon each question in each interview, however, the time spent exploring different aspects of the lived experience varied depending on pertinence to each individual participant.

To avoid 'post-positvizing' (Ponterro, 2005) the questions were not literature led. The formulation of each question was evaluated on: relevance to the research, contribution to the interview dynamic and ethicality (Kvale, 1996b). The order of questions was guided by Spradley (1979); starting with descriptive questions before inviting an evaluative stance. Prompts were included as a tool if participants were to need encouragement in expanding, however, I also paid great attention to short answers as I recognised that this may indicate an underlying assumption in the question, which may not have resonated with the participant; something which I could then explicitly address.

I do recognise that there are some disadvantages to using interviews as a data collection method. Firstly, Halcomb and Davidson (2006) argue that transcribing interviews is very time consuming, physically draining and can be vulnerable to human error and technical difficulties. In response to this, my views are aligned with Wengraf (2001) who argues that verbatim transcription of participant interviews coupled with researcher notations before, during and after the interview are vital to the process of creating high quality qualitative research. Therefore, I was happy to dedicate the time and effort to take notes before, during and after each interview and to transcribe my data verbatim. I was aware

that this can become tiring which can then perhaps result in small human errors. Therefore, I took regular breaks during the process of transcribing to ensure that I was rested and could focus properly. I also regularly checked over my transcriptions and rewound the audio to listen multiple times in order to avoid making mistakes. Another critique of this method has been that due to individual differences between researcher and participant, such as: class, sex, cultural differences and language barriers, material from interviews can become misunderstood and/or misinterpreted (Halcomb & Davidson, 2006). This is something I took very seriously and endeavoured to address. During the interviews, I paid particular attention to anything the participant said which I did not understand, for example, if the participant made a cultural reference that I was not familiar with or used a saying/metaphor the meaning of which I did not understand. In these moments, I immediately asked the participant to clarify what they had said, what this meant and most importantly, what this meant for them in the context of their experience of parental infidelity, to ensure that I did not misinterpret the meaning they had attached to their use of language, during my analysis.

Reflexivity

The interview schedule evolved throughout, as participants brought to light, aspects of their experience which felt interesting and pertinent to further explore. In the second interview, the participant reflected upon the feelings she had experienced, once she had agreed to take part in the research, and what aspects of her experience of parental infidelity, this reflection had brought up for her. I felt this was interesting and added it to my questions, moving forward. Further topics, brought up by participants, which I added during data collection;

informing a revised interview schedule (Appendix C), explored: healing, trust, sibling relationships and feelings about children born out of infidelity.

As recommended by Willig (2013) I approached each interview with an ignorance; attentively listening to participants; the experts of their experience.

I did not take notes during the interview as I felt this may be distracting, but I created a 'face sheet' for each participant meaning that after each interview, I noted my reflections on the experience; my own feelings before and after the interview, contextual factors; and potential implications of social identity (Potter & Hepburn, 2005) to ensure I do not take the interview solely at 'face value' (Willig, 2013); in preparation for further reflection during analyses.

2.10 Procedure

Individuals interested in taking part contacted me via e-mail. I responded by thanking them for their interest and then proceeded to the screening process for suitability as outlined above. All the individuals I was contacted by were eligible to take part. Thus, I then sent the participation information sheet (Appendix D) and the informed consent form (Appendix E) and requested that they consider their participation for at least 24 hours, in order to encourage careful consideration and processing of the information provided. After that time, participants contacted me to confirm their wish to participate and a date, time and location for the interview was set. At this stage, I also asked participants to consider if there were any issues they were not willing to discuss and if so, to outline these. No issues arose at this stage. Once participants arrived at the

interview, an introduction and an informal discussion about the interview took place. I gave participants an opportunity to ask questions and informed consent was obtained. I checked that the digital recorder was working, and the interview began. Once each interview was over, participants were presented with a debrief form (Appendix F), which we discussed together. The aims of the research were fully explained, participants were asked to reflect on their experience of participation and if they had any questions. No further support was required at this stage, but if it had been, this would have been arranged.

Financial compensation was not offered as my aim with this research was to give a voice to individuals who genuinely wanted to talk about their experience. I was willing to compensate for travel expenses as I felt that spending money may have been an obstacle to recruitment, but this did not arise as an issue.

2.11 Pilot

Three pilot studies were conducted. These were with two friends and one colleague, who met the research criteria but did not take part due to my prior knowledge of their parental infidelity experience. Piloting was valuable in assessing whether the interview questions were worded sensitively and generating knowledge meaningful to my research questions.

Reflexivity

The pilot studies did shape my interview schedule and style. Firstly for one question: “imagine if your father/mother had committed the infidelity instead of your mother/father”, I added “would that feel different?” as the pilots highlighted

there was an assumption that it would make a difference, when it may not do so.

Next, all three of the pilot participants commented on the fact that I was moving through the questions relatively quickly and could perhaps pay closer attention to follow up questions I could ask based on what the participants' answers are, rather than focusing too strongly on getting through the interview schedule. I held this at the fore-front of my mind during data collection.

Furthermore, I also noticed after my first pilot, that the interviewee had gone on somewhat of a tangent and had provided information which wasn't relevant to my research question. As a result of this, I practiced some ways, some phrases for example, which I could use, to try and bring the focus back to the research question, should this happen with my participants.

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2.12 Ethics

An ethics application was submitted and ethical clearance from City, University of London Ethics Committee has been granted.

This research has been conducted in accordance with the British Psychological Society code of human ethics (BPS, 2014).

As outlined above, participants were given full details of the purpose and procedure of the research, before informed consent was obtained. Individuals were made aware of their right to withdraw at any time during, and up to six weeks after data collection, without penalisation. The six week period was chosen as I felt it was long enough for participants to process their experience
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and make a decision, but before data analysis begins, which is when Smith et al. (2009) advise, is appropriate. Confidentiality, within the BPS safety and risk boundaries, was upheld. Data has been anonymised and participants were invited to choose their own pseudonym as this can be a tool in readdressing ownership (Wolf, 1996). Data was stored in a locked drawer and access to computer documents always required a password. Participants were debriefed and further support would have been available if this had been required.

Informed consent was addressed throughout, as I recognise that semi-structured interviews can hold an element of 'unknown' (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2008). What I mean by this is that I recognise that often participants can consent to participating in research without knowing exactly what it may entail, or for example, how they may feel in response to a particular question or idea. For this reason, in moments where I noticed participants were for example, a little hesitant or recalling an emotional memory, I ascertained their consent to continue their participation.

I recognise that parental infidelity is a sensitive topic, the potential impact of which, was important to address in regards to the avoidance of harm. Prior to the interview, participants were asked if there were any topics they were not willing to address and participant well-being was monitored throughout. It is my hope that the therapeutic implications of this research ultimately benefit the participant and many others. At the end of each interview, provided that participants were interested, I discussed the potential therapeutic implications this research could have and the way in which it could potentially help other individuals who have also experienced parental infidelity. The reason I did this,

is that participants have shown less aversion to sensitive topics if they feel the outcome will be worthwhile (Lewis & Graham, 2007).

The sensitive nature of parental infidelity also presented potential issues with my dual role as 'clinician-researcher' (Yanos and Ziedonis, 2006). Before each interview began, I discussed the nature of the dual roles, providing examples of what is/is not appropriate and participants were informed that the interview is part of a research project and not a therapeutic experience. I also closely monitored my own role and the way in which I felt I was relating to each participant to ensure subtle power relations did not arise (Karnieli-Miller, Strier & Pessach, 2009). Furthermore, I decided that once each interview had ended, I was happy to discuss my personal experience of parental infidelity, should participants ask, as a means of readdressing a potential imbalance of power and a possible feeling of vulnerability in realising that they have disclosed very personal information to an individual they know very little about.

Reflexivity

I felt this was an important experience. Five participants asked about my personal experience and I felt, each time, that it was an experience of shared vulnerability and connection between us. Each participant thanked me for sharing my story and commented on the fact that it had been a positive experience for them to explore our shared experience. Participants made comments about feeling less isolated in their experience and feeling appreciative that they could understand more about the person who was conducting the research.

I noted one comment down immediately after the interview as it truly struck me. After I shared my experience, one participant said she felt pleased this research was “in the hands of someone who knows the pain and really wants to understand this topic and generate some knowledge that can really help others.” I feel this impacted me in two different ways. Firstly, it became a source of motivation, to keep going. Secondly, I feel it allowed me to truly delve into the data that I collected. Initially when I began to analyse, I felt I was almost shying away from the data, in case I misrepresented anybody’s experience in any way. However, I feel continually reflecting on this comment aided this process in that it allowed me to gain focus, to gain clarity and most importantly I feel, gain confidence in what I was doing and why I was doing it.

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Regarding further dissemination, anonymisation will be maintained. I did not wish for participants to contribute to the analysis as this can elicit concern about how one is represented (Karnieli-Miller et al.,2009).

I did not anticipate any significant personal physical risk, and this is not an issue which arose. However, a safety procedure with my supervisor was put in place before each interview. Regarding any personal emotional distress being elicited due to the subject matter, I did consider this thoroughly, but ultimately decided that I did not foresee any significant risk. I felt this way for two primary reasons. Firstly, I felt that the fact that I had had therapy to explore my experience of parental infidelity meant that I had already processed this emotion to a significant extent. Secondly, I felt that the passion and drive I had to conduct this research in the hopes that I can help others, would continually give me a
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sense of strength and resilience during the process, and reflecting on this now, I feel that this was indeed the case.

2.12.1 Ethics of interpretation

I recognise how crucial it is for me to engage with my responsibility to carry out 'ethical interpretative practice' (Willig, 2012); to discuss the ethical challenges inherent to interpretative analysis and reflect upon the epistemological position I take as the researcher. Congruous with IPA, the critical realist epistemological position I have taken, recognises that interpreting my participants' experiences involves a process of my digesting and metabolizing the original material, which leads to something being added to, i.e. 'transforming' said material (Willig, 2012) resulting in a "blend of meanings, articulated by both participant and researcher" (Lopez & Willis, 2004, p.703). As a result, I recognise the power I have; to mould what becomes known of my participants' experiences of parental infidelity and this raises issues about abusing that power and misrepresenting them; particularly problematic and unethical when consequences of interpretations are hurtful, damaging, oppressive or disadvantageous (Willig, 2012).

One way in which I have navigated this is that I have not taken a 'suspicious' approach to interpretation. I have not adopted an expert role, claiming to know what my participants are 'really' saying, or imposing formal theoretical frameworks in the endeavour to understand underlying mechanisms or structures, which according to Flowers and Langdridge (2007) can make ethicality particularly challenging because it suggests that the researcher may know the meaning of participants' experiences better than they do and can heighten the risk of misrepresenting individual experience; the heightening of a

risk I was not willing to engage in. I recognise this is not the same as exploring meanings which the participants may not be aware of, as the “focus of a hermeneutic inquiry is on what humans experience rather than what they consciously know” (Lopez & Willis, 2004, p.728), however my focus throughout, remained on staying close to the data and finding grounding for my interpretations by rooting them in my participants’ narrative accounts (Tindall, 1994).

Furthermore, I have used the three strategies put forth by Willig (2012) to aid researchers in addressing ethical issues. Firstly, I have held my research question at the forefront of my mind; remembering that approaching the data with this motivation; shaped by my personal experience of parental infidelity, will shape my interpretations. I feel I have maintained modesty about what can be revealed; I recognise that I am conducting research with constraints and limitations and cannot claim to have answered all questions about parental infidelity.

Next, Willig (2012) explains that the subsequent interpretations of the data they have provided, may impact participants more than the process of actually providing it. However, ethical procedures typically focus on the data collection stage, which means that participant’s voices can become lost as the research progresses. My understanding of what is meant by this is that there is great sensitivity towards participants around the process of data collection. At this stage, as researchers we consider the psychological implications for participants, of participation. For example, the implications of talking about emotionally sensitive topics, such as parental infidelity, and therefore, we put into place measures to ensure we can effectively manage any potential distress.

However, the issue is that there is much less focus on the effect on participants, of the findings we ultimately present; the interpretations we as researchers make, of the narratives they have provided. In order to address this issue, whilst participant collaboration and involvement being ongoing and maximal, would ethically be ideal (Latour, 2000), where this is not feasible, as in my research, it is fundamental that I address 'ownership'. I acknowledge that my interpretations may say an equal amount or more, about me, as they do about my participants. Furthermore, I recognise the 'considerable distance' between the original data and any claims I make about its' meaning. I honour and value the integrity of my participant's narrative accounts in their own right and I endeavour to explore and amplify the layered meanings associated with their experience, without claiming I know what they're 'really' saying (Willig, 2012).

Thirdly, I remain open to different interpretations. I accept that differing interpretations can be elicited, which are not invalidating of one another (Madill, Jordan & Shirley, 2000).

I feel I have worked to ensure that I "contextualise and narrativise" (Willig, 2012, p.59) in order to gain a deeper understanding and avoid honing in on a 'snap-shot' which can lead to misunderstanding and in turn, misrepresenting my participants (Willig, 2012).

Finally, alongside psychological consequences of my interpretations, throughout the process of my analysis, I have considered the consequences in the wider context, i.e. societal, political, cultural, within which they are situated (Teo, 2010).

2.13 Analytic strategy

Data was transcribed verbatim following the Potter and Wetherell (1987) notation. I recognise transcription is a form of interpretation in itself, and data was transcribed at a level of detail I felt was appropriate to IPA; prosody was not transcribed, non-verbal expressions were noted but not coded. Transcription began once all data had been collected as I felt that any awareness of preliminary emergent themes may influence subsequent interviews. The analytic strategy has been guided flexibly, by the heuristic structure outlined by Smith et al. (2009).

2.13.1 Reading and re-reading

I began by reading each transcript multiple times. The first time, I simultaneously listened to the audio of the interview. After that I read each transcript with the voice of the participant in mind, to completely immerse myself. I noted down any powerful reminiscences of the interview in order to avoid becoming distracted and allow me to attend to the participant's world.

2.13.2 Initial noting

As I became familiar with the transcript, I began to think about what feels particularly interesting or important; I began the stage of 'initial noting'. In order to do this, I started making annotations, which I noted on the right-hand side margin. I categorised my annotations; by noting them in different colours, black, red and blue, for three groups: 'descriptive', 'linguistic' and 'conceptual', respectively. Descriptive comments were phenomenological in nature, referring to insight into content. Linguistic comments were concerned with language, such as metaphors, in relation to conveying content. Here, I also considered whether the meanings for words used by participants are the same for them as they are for me. Conceptual comments were interpretative in that I shifted my

focus from the specifics to an overarching understanding. I remained mindful of the fact that the annotation must be comprehensive and maintain the complexity of the data.

2.13.3 Developing emergent themes

Next, I began the process of the identification of 'emergent themes'. At this stage I started to fragment the narrative, which up until now had been explored as a whole, to uncover themes, which are conceptual but also remain grounded in the data. My aim here was to map the 'interrelationships' between the annotations I had made during the 'initial noting' stage, but not base this solely on concrete chunks of the transcript but rather on the learning I had obtained through my annotation of the entire transcript. The key at this stage was to: "speak to the psychological essence of the piece and contain enough particularity to be grounded but enough abstraction to be conceptual" (Smith et al., 2009, p.92). I noted each emergent theme in green on the left hand side margin. For an example of a segment of annotated transcript, see (Appendix G).

2.13.4 Searching for connections across emergent themes

Next, for each participant I created a new Word document and wrote a list of all the emergent themes in chronological order, for one example, see (Appendix H). I then began the process of clustering to develop sub-themes. To do this, I used a range of methods, depending on what felt appropriate for the material. I began by eyeballing the themes and firstly used abstraction; gaining a sense of themes which gravitated towards each other, i.e. 'putting like with like'. I also used polarisation to group the positive aspects of parental infidelity against the negative aspects. I also explored numeration as I felt that with unstructured

interviews, the frequency at which a theme emerges may reflect importance to the individual, though I did this tentatively as I do not feel frequency is a sole reflector of importance. This stage was processed cyclically to ensure generated themes remained representative of the original text. Once emergent themes were clustered, 'sub-themes' were given a descriptive label which encompassed all the emergent themes in that cluster, for one example (see Appendix I) and in order to reflect upon internal consistency, were each placed in a table with corresponding page/line numbers and key words. At this stage, if I felt that an emergent theme no longer appeared to be directly relevant to the research question, it was not included in any clusters.

2.13.5 Moving to the next case

This process; the stages outlined above, was then repeated for each participant. My aim throughout this stage was to treat each transcript as if it were the first.

2.13.6 Looking for patterns across cases

I then wrote out each sub-theme onto a post-it note and placed these on the floor, (Appendix J). I assigned a different colour to each participant and marked each post-it which had one of their sub-themes, with that colour. I did this so that when I had finished clustering the sub-themes, I could easily detect whether each participant had been included in each cluster, in order to ensure that each 'master' theme, was representative of every participant. To get to this stage, once I had all the sub-themes, from each case laid out, I began to search for patterns. I used post-it notes so that it was easy to manually move themes around, to see which gravitated towards each; where the connections and commonalities lay. Once all the sub-themes had been clustered, I created a

'master' table of these themes with a corresponding quote and line number from each participant.

Reflexivity

Consistent with IPA and the critical realist epistemological position of this research, I recognise that my analyses are not a direct depiction of my participants' experience of parental infidelity, but that they are always an interpretation; mediated both by the participant and I as individuals, and our interaction (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). My approach to interpretation "combines a hermeneutics of empathy with a hermeneutics of 'questioning' " (Smith et al., 2009, p.36) as I try to make sense of my participants making sense of their experience of parental infidelity; the 'double hermeneutic' (Willig, 2013). Reflecting on this, I found it quite challenging to find the 'centre ground position'; amalgamating empathic and questioning stances (Smith et al., 2009). On one hand, as predicted by Smith et al. (2009), as a novice IPA researcher, I found myself feeling more comfortable working at the descriptive level of interpretation. As I began to develop emergent themes and engage in the 'hermeneutic circle' (Schleiermacher, 1998), I felt some discomfort in 'fragmenting' my participants' experiences and I felt cautious about taking too central a role or pulling away from their accounts. However, I was simultaneously also concerned about producing too descriptive an analysis. I found the paper by Smith (2004) very helpful, in understanding how to move from a descriptive level to deeper levels of interpretation particularly in their illustrations of working at a micro-analytic level with metaphors as my

participants used metaphors fairly frequently and it was helpful to learn how to analyse ‘metaphorical weight’.

On the other hand, perhaps due to my training as a counselling psychologist, it has also been quite challenging to maintain my psychological interest but refrain from being influenced by formal theoretical pre-existent frameworks. More specifically, perhaps because I have had psychodynamic psychotherapy following my own experience of parental infidelity and explored unconscious material relating to this experience, I noticed at times, a pull towards more psychoanalytic interpretations, which I recognise are not compatible with IPA and my epistemological position. In these moments I found it helpful to think about IPA as a reading from the ‘inside’ rather than from the outside as would be the case if I were taking a ‘psychoanalytic position’ (Smith et al., 2009).

I also found it very helpful to frequently return to the original material. In moments where I felt concerned about moving too far away from the narrative accounts, which I particularly felt when I was clustering sub-themes into master themes, it was helpful to pick out extracts from the transcript which reflected the master theme. I feel this reassured me that I was remaining grounded in the data.

I also feel it is important for me to reflect upon ‘inter-subjectivity’ (Finlay & Gough, 2003). During the analytic stage, as I delved deeper into my transcripts, I noticed some differing elements, across the interviews. Firstly, I noticed with one participant due, I feel, to our differences, specifically in age and socio-economic background, he was regularly making references to political and literary contexts, which I was not familiar with and in retrospect, I believe due to focussing on this at a practical level, I noticed moments in the interview where I

missed the opportunity to encourage the participant to describe his lived experience in certain moments, in greater detail. Furthermore, I feel it is worth noting that four of my participants had a psychology based educative/training background, which may reflect a shared experience, to some extent, between these participants and I, which I did not share with participants who did not have a background in psychology. This may have influenced the level of depth or speed at which, rapport was developed. I also recognise that a psychology background may reflect an increased level of self-awareness or exploration of one's personal experiences, which may have influenced the level at which participants were able and/or willing to share their experience of parental infidelity.

In addition, five out of six participants were Caucasian. One participant was of an ethnic minority background and I felt this was an experience I shared solely with this participant and I noted during analysis, that perhaps for this reason, this participant was the only one to refer to cultural issues around the discovery of parental infidelity.

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2.14 Methodological difficulties

I initially recruited 8 participants. However, two participants raised both an ethical and a methodological dilemma for me. I felt the material presented by these participants related to different phenomena and upon extensive consideration, I decided against using this material in my analysis. In the first case, the participant extensively explored an entirely different experience of early trauma. Whilst I tried to use different prompts throughout the interview, to bring the conversation back to parental infidelity, the subject matter in the
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material collected, was almost entirely related to a different experience and therefore I felt it was appropriate not to include this data in this research. Furthermore, my feeling throughout the interview was that it was very important for this participant to have a safe space to talk openly about the experience of this early trauma and I felt it would have been unethical to not allow for this to happen and to instead, insist on the subject being solely about parental infidelity. In the second case, from the moment the interview with this participant began, I became aware that there may be a language barrier. It was clear that English was not this participant's first language and we began to struggle to communicate; we could not understand each other clearly. I began by asking "can you tell me a little about your experience of parental infidelity?" To this, the participant responded "what is infidelity? What does parental infidelity mean?" In this moment I felt it would be unethical to simply explain the meaning of parental infidelity and continue the interview, because I did not feel I had consent; the participant had signed the consent form but without understanding the meaning of the topic in question, I did not feel this consent form was valid. Furthermore, I did not know whether the participant now fit the inclusion criteria. I did not want the participant to feel excluded or dismissed in any way, simply because of the language barrier, so what I decided to do was explain the meaning of parental infidelity, assess whether the participant fit the inclusion criteria and then allow for some time, approximately 20-30 minutes, for the participant to consider whether or not to take part, and if so, to sign another consent form. After this time, the participant assured me that she did fit the inclusion criteria and did wish to take part. In response to this, I agreed to conduct the interview. However, the entire way throughout the interview, my feeling was that the participant did not understand many of the questions being asked and was

perhaps answering “yes” and elaborating in a way she felt would be fitting, because she had a strong desire to take part. The participant did vocalise, multiple times, her strong desire to take part in lots of psychological research. After the interview, I voiced my concerns to my supervisor. My supervisor’s advice was to give this a little time and see how I felt about the material, when it was time to analyse. When I began my analysis; listening to the audio and re-reading my transcripts, I truly could not understand the participant, the language barrier was significant and was perhaps made more difficult by the fact that I was now listening through a recording device. In addition, my feeling that the participant was perhaps still unsure what the research was about and was simply ‘going-along’ with what I was asking, remained. Therefore, I decided it was appropriate to not include this data in the research. My focus throughout this entire process was to ensure that this was managed sensitively and ethically and in order to do this, both participants were informed of this decision.

2.15 Evaluation of research

Madill et al. (2000) outline the importance of epistemology in the determining of evaluative criteria for a piece of research. The two must be consistent. The epistemological stance of this research assumes that the findings of this research will inevitably be an interpretation; mediated by the participant, researcher and their interaction (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). It does not assume that a ‘correct’ methodology can directly elucidate an external ‘reality’, therefore the evaluative criteria for quantitative research, which assess validity: “the extent to which a concept is accurately measured” (Heale & Twycross, 2015, p.66) and reliability: “the extent to which a research instrument consistently has the same results if it is used in the same situation on repeated

occasions" (Heale & Twycross, 2015, p.66), cannot be appropriately applied to this qualitative research. This issue has led to the development of guidelines more suitable for evaluating qualitative research (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1992; Elliot, Fisher & Rennie, 1999) with principles of transferability and reflexivity emerging as commonalities.

In deciding upon the evaluative criteria for this research, I initially considered taking the approach outlined by Kvale and Brinkman (2009), in which they explore the notion of redefining the terms validity and reliability in a way which is appropriate to one's epistemological position. However, I felt it would be more authentic and veracious to use criteria which had been developed specifically for qualitative research, rather than attempt to mould terminology which has ultimately been developed within the paradigm of naive realism.

For this reason, I decided upon the use of the four principles presented by Yardley (2000). I will now outline these principles and the ways in which I believe I have addressed them.

'Sensitivity to context'

Throughout this process, I have engaged with an awareness of the perspectives and the socio-cultural and linguistic contexts within which each individual has approached this study. Furthermore, I have maintained my sensitivity to the data considering deeply, the meanings of the material for the participants and thoroughly exploring relevant theoretical frameworks, literature philosophical underpinnings of IPA methodology, rather than approaching the data with pre-determined categories held in mind. I have also considered ethical issues extensively, particularly the element of power in the context of the data collection interviews.

'Commitment and rigour'

I feel I have taken a thorough approach to each and every stage of this research, particularly during data analysis where I have explored and engaged with, the topic extensively, to aid my theorising in order to reach a more sophisticated level and employed a range of different methods. I feel I have also remained dedicated to enhancing my competency in conducting IPA research, by exploring a range of materials, i.e. books and research papers. Furthermore, I feel my commitment not only encompasses the rigorous approach I have taken to the conducting of this research, but also the personal commitment I hold, to address the absence of therapeutic interventions drawing on research of this kind; an absence I discovered, when I most needed it. I also feel the radically different ways in which my brother and I responded to our father's infidelity has enhanced my commitment to elucidating the subjectivity of each experience. Furthermore, I have placed importance on ensuring diverse perspectives are represented, as I agree that 'completeness' is of more value rather than 'convergence' Fielding & Fielding (1986).

'Transparency and coherence'

I believe I have described both in depth and with clarity each aspect of my research. For coherence, I have endeavoured to remain guided by my aims and research question whilst deciding upon my methodology and epistemological stance, to ensure a 'good fit'.

'Impact and Importance'

I recognise it is important to conduct research which can be utilised theoretically, socio-culturally and practically. The aim of this research was to

generate potentially novel perspectives into the experience of parental infidelity, which may motivate further psychological research. Ultimately though, the aim is to have practical, therapeutic implications by generating knowledge which can better equip practitioners to deal with the emotional processing of parental infidelity.

Reflexivity

To close this chapter, I feel it is important to explore 'introspection' (Finlay, 2002); to acknowledge the personal experience which led to the development of this research and briefly touch upon how I feel this may have influenced the methodological process.

My personal experience of parental infidelity inspired this research. As outlined in the introduction, this interest and will to generate understanding particularly to therapeutic practitioners, was fuelled by multiple experiences with practitioners who conveyed a lack of understanding in the emotional difficulties I was experiencing. Having had time and effective therapy to process my experience, I felt able to explore this topic without being adversely impacted. I also feel the fact that I had had therapy to deeply understand and emotionally process my own experience was a fundamental part of my being able to acknowledge and attempt to bracket the preconceptions I inevitably brought to the research. Within my reflexive practice, my approach to bracketing and ensuring that I was aware of any biases and preconceptions, was the 'cyclical approach' presented as a 'model of the hermeneutic circle' by Smith et al. (2009). I followed the lead of Smith (2007) who described his cyclical process. He explains that you start

on one point of the circle. Here, you are caught up in your own preconceptions, prior experiences and expertise. From this point, the next step is to acknowledge these preconceptions and endeavour to bracket them before you interact with your participants or any data. In order to do this, a piece of advice I received from one of our tutors at university, was really helpful. She told me to write down everything I think I know about this experience, what its' implications are, and everything I think I am going to discover from this research. She then told me to 'follow the surprises', seek what I didn't think I would find, which I feel really helped me to stay close to and stay true to the data. Smith (2007) explains that once you attend to your preconceptions, you shift your focus from yourself and your own experience, to your participant and his/her experience and can then facilitate an open space in which you can intensely attend to and engage with your participant and later, with your data. As you do this, you continue to move around the circle. You return to your 'home base' but you are now 'irretrievably changed' because of your experience with each participant. Smith (2007) then describes the 'virtual mini-circle' you go around, where you re-engage with each transcript, asking questions and trying to make sense of it. This is a complex process and regarding the 'dynamics of preconceptions', I found it really helpful, as advised by Smith et al. (2009) , to view myself and my 'ongoing biography' as the 'whole' of the hermeneutic circle and view each encounter with a new participant as the 'part'. This really helped me to visualise how the two should engage with one another. Another tool I found really helpful with this process was the writings by Dahlberg, Drew and Nystrom (2001), particularly in their discussion about 'openness' ; about the importance of holding in the forefront of our mind, what we as researchers are bringing to each interaction with participants and with our data. What struck me in

particular, was their definition of openness in ‘reflective life-world research’ which was: “to have the patience to wait for the phenomenon to reveal its own complexity rather than imposing an external structure on it, such as the dogmatic use of theories or models” (Dahlberg, Drew & Nystrom, 2001, p.112). They provide ‘theories or models’ as their examples of an ‘external structure’, but in my understanding and process, I also included my preconceptions. This notion of openness as patience really struck me because it alerted me to the fact that because I have had the experience of parental infidelity, I may be drawn, as a result of what feels easier, to see in the data, what I already knew, and therefore, reduce the complexity of the phenomena. I kept this at the forefront of my mind at each step of this process and I really feel it helped me to continually push a little further, explore a little deeper. During my viva exam, whilst discussing how I approached bracketing, my examiners suggested that it can also be helpful to have an in-depth ‘interview’ with one’s research supervisor during which the research supervisor can ask a plethora of questions exploring your presuppositions about your topic, in order to ensure that as a researcher, you become aware of biases and preconceptions. I had not heard of this before, but I felt that it sounded like a very useful tool and I will certainly consider using it if I am to conduct more research.

Furthermore, prior to beginning the research process, I felt a little apprehensive about addressing my experience publicly in a sense. On reflection now, I feel this apprehension encouraged a deepened empathy on my part, for my participants, both during the data collection stage and analysis stages. I feel that I deeply understood and therefore acknowledged how difficult a topic parent infidelity can be to discuss openly, and as a result I feel that I have

remained aware, throughout the process, that my data needed to be managed with sensitivity.

Chapter Three

3. Findings

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter I present a number of themes which endeavour to present insight into the participants' lived experiences of parental infidelity.

Due to the fact that the participant interviews generated a wealth of data, some difficult decisions, regarding what was to be presented here, had to be made. I have chosen to present the material which I feel is directly relevant to my research question and is representative of this populations' core experience, whilst also ensuring that each individual participants' voice is captured.

In this chapter, I have chosen not to incorporate any existing literature or research. The reason for this is that I wanted to focus on interpreting the participants' narrative accounts in great detail, and I felt incorporating existing literature may shift this focus away from the lived experience of this unique population.

I am using direct quotations from the interviews and I have noted the participants' name and in brackets, the page and line number of each quotation, beside it. Where I have omitted text within a quotation, I have indicated this by using: (...). I have indicated identifying details by using: [---], pauses or silences by using: ... and non-verbal responses are written in parentheses [ ]. I have written words or phrases which were emphasised by the participant, in bold and words which participants raised their voice to vocalise, in capital letters.

The data has been clustered into 4 master themes, each of which is then divided into sub- themes. Each master theme is organised around an exploration of the lived experience of parental infidelity, the sense-making process and the meanings individuals have attached to this experience.

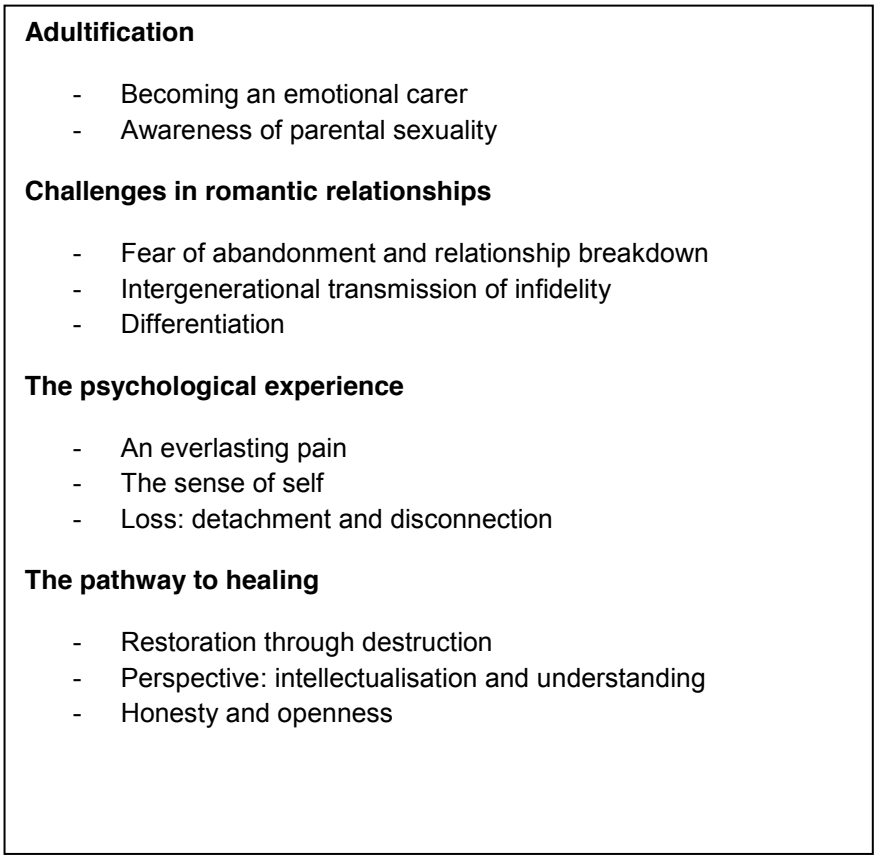

Figure 3.1 Representation of master and sub-themes

3.2 Theme one: Adultification

This master theme encapsulates participants' experiences of early exposure to adult themes or behaviours and/or the adopting of adult-like roles, traits or responsibilities, often in the absence of understanding their 'meaning or appropriateness' (Burton, 2007).

"...you're a child you have it from a child's point of view, but at the same time you're thrust into an adult world which you didn't previously know about..." Renee (22, 9-10)

3.2.1 Becoming an emotional carer

This sub-theme explores participants' experiences of taking on the role of an emotional caregiver for a parent; a paradoxical experience as the role of the parent is typically associated with being the care-giver.

"my mum had quite severe depression so I kind of cared for her quite a lot and that is really difficult when you're young, so that also had an impact on me" Alice (1, 30-31)

My understanding here is that the adopting of this role may not have been solely based upon participants' choice and desire to do so. One element appears to have been experiencing a sense of obligation.

"I felt like it was something I had to do. I felt like I kind of had no choice because it was affecting my mum so badly." Renee (4, 1)

"...coming home and finding my dad crying, and he said 'your mum's left me'..." Sylvia (3, 1)

The use of "your mum" elicits a sense of belonging, or ownership on Sylvia's part and my interpretation is that this may reflect an experience of feeling obligated or responsible to care for the emotional distress caused by this belonging.

*"Sometimes I felt like I was a bit of a...the emotional carer for my mum (...) I was kind of the **only** place she could have this emotional unloading" Nancy (6, 7-8)*

Nancy's emphasis on the word "only" suggests to me, an experience of feeling isolated in managing her mother's emotional distress; feeling solely responsible for her emotional well-being and therefore obligated to take on the role of an emotional caregiver.

"I would always go to her when she was crying, and I didn't know why because I couldn't always hear it, I would sometimes find her in the middle of the laundry room just crying and I'd go (...) and sit with her" Nancy (4, 12 – 16)

Nancy's experience of seeking out her mother's distress even in the absence of physically hearing it, suggests to me, a permanent state of high emotional arousal, an emotionally draining state to be in, for Nancy, as she appears to have been aware that there may at any moment, be an emotional state she needs to attend to.

For Alice, my understanding is that adopting this role led to conflicting feelings; an experience of simultaneously battling feelings of responsibility for managing her mother's distress alongside attending to her own needs and the emotional response adopting this role evoked in her.

"I felt like my mum was sort of using me as a friend, you know...'sit and talk about these horrible men, they're all pigs!' But I didn't want to hear that" Lucy (11, 32 & 12, 1)

"I went away to boarding school and I remember huge amounts of guilt (...) Who was going to look after her? (...) I was really frightened what would happen to her (...) I remember doing my French homework and hearing her sobbing, and blood curdling sobs, not just a tear, like howling, and being the only one in the house and being like, should I go to her? Should I? I'm doing my French homework [imitates thinking] I'll go and I would go and comfort her, and then I had to be quite strict with her, I had to be like "STOP (...) "pull yourself together" because she (...) not a psychotic depression but (...) she was just really distressed, so I had to manage that (...) and being pissed off at that, but also then feeling guilty for being annoyed with her because she was (...) struggling" Alice (6, 21-30)

Similarly to Nancy, Alice recalls being the "only one" which I interpret as reflecting an experience for Alice too, of feeling solely responsible for managing her mother's distress. Furthermore, Alice's use of "blood curdling sobs", a term which is defined as a horrifying scream which arouses terror, suggests to me that this was a terrifying experience for Alice. Her use of "howling" evokes an image of an uncontrollable animal-like distress, which may further convey how distressing this experience may have been for Alice. Alice's example of "doing French homework" immediately pulls my attention back to her young age and this may reflect the importance for Alice, of reiterating the young age at which she assumed this adult responsibility. It also struck me that as Alice conveyed this hypothetical decision making process, she does not appear to pause or stutter, it appears very familiar to Alice, which suggests to me that this dilemma encompassing conflicting emotions became one of norm for her.

Lucy also appeared to experience conflicting feelings, in that she felt in order to care for her mother she had to share her mother's anger towards her father, despite not truly understanding why.

> *"I was angry (...) I wasn't sure why I was angry at him but I knew I had to be angry at him because my mum was angry" Lucy (5, 2)*

A further dimension of this experience appears to be retrospective reflection, now as an adult, on assuming the role of an emotional carer as a child.

> *"I sometimes resent the things she exposed me to (...) nasty phone calls, (...) nasty emails and messages (...) thinking back, I shouldn't have been exposed to that at that age, it was quite upsetting, I felt confused and isolated (...) and powerless." Nancy (6, 10-14)*

> *"it really wasn't okay that my mum told me all those things (...) I was angry with her for leaning on me so much, it's kind of felt like my world crumbled a bit in my 20s" Alice (15, 2)*

My interpretation of Nancy's use of "sometimes resent" in present tense, and Alice, whose age is still within this decade, referring to her "20's" is that, this is an emotional experience they are currently having, which perhaps reflects a gradual processing of this experience and a new understanding of the emotional implications and the meaning and appropriateness, or lack thereof, of having assumed this role at a young age.

Staying with retrospection, Alice also explored the impact of this early role on the way she responds, now as an adult, to the distress of others.

"I've always had to be strong and sometimes when I see people not being strong I'm like "BE BETTER" but actually (...) it isn't fair, they're not my mum" Alice (6, 33 & 7, 1-2)

It appears an internal conflict remains. Alice raising her voice: "BE BETTER" followed immediately by "but actually" to me, perhaps reflects an experience of frustration coupled with an immediate retraction of that frustration as she realises this negative feeling may be misplaced.

Furthermore, assuming adult responsibility appears to have elicited negative feelings, not solely toward the parent in distress, but there also appear to be strong feelings of anger and blame toward the unfaithful parent.

"I'm still angry (...) I'm angry at him that I had to be the grown up for him and my mum" Alice (10, 4-5)

Exploring a hypothetical conversation she may have had with her father, during her adolescence, Lucy said:

"my life is really difficult because I've got a mum that's crying every night, I'm angry at you for doing that" Lucy (30, 17-18)

Lucy referring to having "a mum" evokes a sense of ownership; having a belonging. My interpretation here is that this may reflect the strong sense of ownership and therefore responsibility Lucy experienced over her mother's emotional well-being. Lucy's speech being hypothetical reflects to me, an experience of having held on to the anger she expresses, which she wishes she had expressed as an adolescent.

Similarly, Alice also explored her feelings towards the unfaithful parent.

“do you know what you did? (...) because of you (...) I had to look after a depressed mother when I was seven years old, I had to get her out of bed, you shouldn’t be doing that when you’re seven. I was worried that she was going to kill herself (...) do you know? Do you really know?” Alice (9, 21-23)

My interpretation here is that Alice repeatedly questioning whether her father is aware of the impact of his infidelity may reflect an experience of feeling that her distress and the severity of the difficulties she has managed, has up until this point, been unheard.

A different dimension assuming the role of an emotional caregiver appears to have encompassed, is an experience of internalising emotions for fear of becoming a burden to a distressed parent.

“because everyone was fussing around my mum, I kind of didn’t want to be any trouble so after I finished crying the first time, I didn’t cry anymore” Renee (3, 24-25)

“I couldn’t be putting any more pressure or any more stress on my mum so I made a conscious decision to keep my feelings internalised not focus on them, sort of bottle them up” Renee (22, 24-26)

“it meant she was stuck with three children to look after” Renee (4, 7)

The word “stuck” suggests a sense of burden and my understanding here is that this perhaps reflects Renee’s experience of feeling this way, thus wishing to internalise any emotional experiences which would require the care or attention of her mother.

Alice also explores the internalisation of her emotions.

“mum was just so miserable and (...) I were so miserable, and I remember taking on that role being the clown or the joke maker or the conversation maker, but I was the youngest!” Alice, (6, 8-10)

My understanding here is that the stark contrast between being “miserable” and “being the clown” may reflect the stark contrast between Alice’s internal experience and how she was presenting herself to the outside world. The use of “clown” also suggests to me, one hiding one’s real self behind heavy make-up or a mask. Further, my interpretation of the repetitive use of the same word: “miserable”, to describe both her mother’s experience and that of her own, is that this may reflect Alice’s desire to convey that despite having the same negative emotional experience, Alice assumed the role of attending solely to her mother’s needs. This may reflect an experience for Alice of great focus being placed on the impact of infidelity on the individual within the relationship, and perhaps the needs of those outside of the relationship dyad, being forgotten.

Becoming an emotional caregiver also appears to have encompassed an experience of taking a role in decision making regarding important matters and liaising with the unfaithful parent, in order to reduce emotional distress.

“My mother then got pregnant a third time and I remember her asking me (...) ‘Do you think I should have a third child?’” John (10, 7-9)

“My mum’s still hysterical and I remember going, “Well, I don’t think you should be driving. This is not… I don’t think this is really safe” Lucy (5, 6-8)

“He sort of came to me (...) and said, “Well, do you think I should go?” And I went, “Well, I don’t know. What do I know about this? I don’t really

know what's going on. I know you've done this, but I don't know how bad that is. Is it… I don't know." Lucy (6, 6-9)

"I remember thinking in the conversation I was the adult, I was saying 'How did you think this was the right way to manage this?' and he was like 'I've never done this before' and I was like 'Well I've never done this before, and I'm 10 (...) how is it that I'm already the grown up in this situation?" Alice (3, 19-24)

There is a striking contrast between the maturity of the themes being discussed, i.e. having another child, moving out of the family home, driving while it is unsafe to do so, and the clear lack of understanding and confusion of the children these are being discussed with. This appears to have been an experience for offspring, of feeling strongly aware that there is an issue which needs to be addressed, but feeling stuck in a lack of knowledge and understanding of how to address it, whilst also being aware that it is not the role of a child to address it and thus, simultaneously feeling frustrated for having been called upon by adults, to do so.

Alice recalls many years later, experiencing emotional distress and being able to lean on her mother for support, which felt like:

"...finally the roles were in the right place (...) but it felt very alien to me" Alice (7, 10-12)

Her mother taking on the role of a caregiver, feeling "alien" to Alice perhaps reflects what a norm this role reversal had become.

3.2.2 Awareness of parental sexuality

This sub-theme explores participants' experiences of early exposure to adult theme: parental sexuality.

> *"I think I was probably, as a child, given too much sexual information about my parents' relationship." John (16, 11-12)*

An awareness, or an obtaining of, information about their parents' sexual behaviour, appears to have been experienced as painful and extremely uncomfortable.

John explained that he felt his father wished to communicate his knowledge of John's mother's infidelity with a female lover, to John's mother, by discussing sexual topics openly:

> *"...he used to buy my mother lesbian magazines and my mother used to say to him (...) 'I don't know why you keep buying me all these lesbian magazines' and he said, 'well, I thought it might turn you on'. I was subjected to quite a lot of these conversations over dinner tables or repartee" John (16, 18-22)*

My understanding of this phrase "subjected to" is that it is suggestive of a painful experience one is being forced to endure, which perhaps conveys how painful an experience this was for John. Furthermore, these conversations taking place over "dinner tables or repartees" is suggestive to me, of regularity and "repartee" in particular, may suggest a casualness in attitude from John's parents – a contrast to the painful experience this appears to be for John. This

may reflect a feeling for John, of disconnection to his parents and further, perhaps a feeling of their disregard for his pain.

A different form of exposure to parental sexuality was through John's discovery of "love letters" his mother and her lover wrote to one another:

> *"my my my mother talks about when we had sex....together (...) erm she says 'alright then, dive down your rabbit hole, and... and...the that's in there aaaand I suspect that you know, 'dive down your rabbit hole' is is a a ...fairly open reference to my mother's vagina....[laughs] maybe.." John (14, 3-18)*

My understanding here is that John's stuttered speech, long pauses and laughter appear to reflect distress and discomfort. His use of "maybe" when he appears to be quite clear on what the term means, also suggests perhaps an element of denial in accessing this sexual knowledge about his mother. Later in the interview, John explains that he asked for the destroying of unopened letters in the event of them being found after his mother's death:

> *"I said just destroy them, I don't want them" John (15, 6-7)*

In the exploration of what it meant for John to read and subsequently want to destroy these letters, the word "destroy" elicits for me, an image of a raging fire burning the letters until their existence is eradicated. This may not only be a symbol of John's unwillingness to be exposed to further sexual content in relation to his mother but also perhaps reflects John's anger in having been exposed to it at all and wishing to eradicate this experience all together.

John also recalls sexually explicit conversations with his mother in which she detailed why she did not wish to have sex with his father.

"...she said (...) he developed (...) bad breath and she didn't like it. And (...) that (...) my father used to complain bitterly (...) about the lack of sex and she said to me once, 'I got so fed up of him wanting sex, so I said to him, 'ok then, let's have sex' and do you know? He couldn't get it up'. When I think about it, fancy sharing that information with me! [shakes head]" John (22, 3-10)

After the interview, I had noted that his headshaking felt suggestive of confusion and disbelief, which suggests to me, that John may be struggling to understand why his mother would share this sexually explicit information with him. Additionally, John's phrase: "when I think about it now..." prompts me to wonder whether John has not previously explored his experience in this way; perhaps reflecting that this became an accepted norm for John, despite what appears to me, to have been a difficult experience.

Similarly, Sylvia explored the undesirable feelings conversations of a sexual nature regarding her mother's infidelity, elicited for her.

"I remember a particular row, when my dad said something of a sexual nature about him (...) he made some sort of reference to him in bed or something, and we were in the house – well I was there. I don't remember who else. I was there and I remember feeling quite shackled about that" Sylvia (8, 1-4)

Sylvia's use of "shackled" creates an image for me, of a prisoner shackled in chains and my interpretation of this is that it may reflect an experience for Sylvia, in that moment, of feeling imprisoned; feeling a desperation to escape the conversation, but being unable to. In addition, this being a "particular row"

Sylvia remembers, may reflect its' importance, perhaps due to how particularly difficult an experience it was. The difficulty of this experience may be further reflected in Sylvia's lack of knowledge about her surroundings in this moment; her inability to focus on anything else and therefore remaining unaware of details, for example, "who else" was there. She instead, repeats: "I was there", which perhaps reflects the importance of this for Sylvia as an individual being. Furthermore, her repetition also suggests an experience of feeling shocked that this conversation was being had in front of her.

Alice also recalled a situation, which she wanted to escape.

> *"I just remember being really hot and clammy and really like 'oh my God I want to get out of here', 'who is this woman?' She was in the kitchen doing something, and he went to get a drink, and then he came back and gave me a hug, and he had lipstick there and I knew that she had obviously given him a kiss on the lips, and I was like 'ergh, I'd never seen you do that with my mum' I felt incredibly disloyal to my mum(...) I feigned illness, and I remember my dad putting his hand on my head and saying, "oh my God, yeah you're really hot" and it wasn't because I was ill, it was because I was so worked up by what was going on and really hot and uncomfortable" Alice (2, 22-28)*

Alice's experience differed in that the awareness of her father's romantic life and sexual behaviour was more implicit than John and Sylvia's, yet it elicited an equally uncomfortable and undesirable emotional response. Rather than being due to becoming aware of sexually explicit information, Alice's strong negative reaction appears to be due to a sudden awareness of new dimensions of her father's character, which she had not seen in his relationship with her mother.

Exploring a different dimension of this experience, John considers what impact this early exposure to sexual information about his parents, may have had on his experiences as an adult.

> *"I had a far too highly developed sense of sexuality at too young... a at at a very young age, it's only recently I've begun to think about that" John (16, 21-22)*
>
> *"Colleagues used to say, 'your conversation is quite sexualised' (...) and I used to think why am I so sexualised in my discussion with other people? And it clearly comes from being made aware of my parents' sexuality." John (22, 16 – 27)*

John's use of "too young" followed by "very young age" emphasise to me, how young he was. Based on John's experience of psychodynamic psychotherapy and his strong views, throughout the interview, about the impact early experiences have on one's entire life, my interpretation is that the emphasis of his young age, may be John communicating how damaging he feels this experience was for him, which is perhaps further supported by the fact that he speaks extensively about the negative consequences of it, much later in his lifespan.

3.3 Theme two: Challenges in romantic relationships

This master theme explores the challenges the participants discuss having encountered within their own romantic relationships following their experience of parental infidelity.

3.3.1 Fears of abandonment and relationship breakdown

This sub-theme explores participants' fears of abandonment by a romantic partner; encompassing their experiences of trust in relationships and desires to marry.

> *"my mum had left a couple of years then, but I do remember being incredibly nervous that he would leave me. I just remember feeling so needy and I would always say to him, "You'll never leave me?" Sylvia (8, 28-30)*

> *"it was so important for me to be (...) really happy on my own in a way that I'd never been in a relationship because I was always frightened of the other person leaving" Alice (11, 23-24)*

Both Sylvia and Alice refer to "always" being frightened or seeking reassurance, whilst Alice also reflects on "never" having been free of this feeling within any relationship she has been in, therefore it appears that this experience of anxiety may have been generalised and incessant rather than truly related to a specific romantic partner or romantic relationship. Alice's active choice to remain single and Sylvia's reiteration of being "incredibly" nervous and "so" needy perhaps reflect how strong this feeling of fear was.

The element of trust pervaded participants' narrative accounts. On the one hand, Alice explores feelings of hatred and deep mistrust towards men.

> *"I was like "fuck you, because actually, do you know what you did? I don't trust men because of you... I think men leave and have affairs because of you!" Alice (9, 20-22)*

"I sometimes wonder if I wish that I'd not found out (...) maybe I wouldn't have hated men so much and mistrusted them so much" Alice (19, 1-4)

On the other hand, for Renee, Nancy and Lucy a lack of trusting romantic partners is not experienced as a sole issue. However the women explore differing reasons for this.

"*I don't really have any sort of trust issues. I don't have any of those sorts of… what you'd expect from someone that has had a father that's had an affair" Lucy (20, 28-29)*

"I never kind of go, 'Oh, is he looking at someone?' I never do that. I never do anything I never… stalk other girls on Facebook, I just don't… I don't do it. I don't even look through their phones. I've never, ever done that with a boyfriend (...) actually… it's the opposite effect. I worry that men would think that I'm damaged goods, because I've come from infidelity life, and that, 'She's always going to be paranoid, she's always going to be the worst girlfriend to have because she's got all these trust issues' (...) I probably have overcompensated in that way. I definitely have." Lucy (21, 21-28 & 22, 3-6)

It appears that Lucy experiences strong feelings of worry about being labelled "damaged goods"; an identity she understands as: a mistrusting, paranoid woman, difficult to be in a relationship with. Lucy's repetition of "never" being hyper-vigilant about infidelity perhaps reflects how strongly she fears this label. Her use of "I don't *even* look through their phones" suggests to me, that looking through a partner's phone is the norm or that she experiences a strong pull to

do so, perhaps experiencing feelings of mistrust, but resisting, in fear of the negative label.

Whereas for Renee and Nancy, it appears the entity of trust in a relationship evolved over time:

> *"my feelings towards men were for a long time quite suspicious" Renee (9, 28)*
>
> *"now if I go into a relationship I generally trust them, I'm not one of these people who would ever go and snoop on somebody's text messages" Renee (11, 10-11)*
>
> *"I went through a period of bitterness and suspiciousness of men" Nancy (13, 1-2)*

Renee's use of "one of these people" draws my attention to Lucy's exploration of the identity "damaged goods"; a label which could perhaps be placed on someone who would "snoop on somebody's text messages", perhaps reflecting on Renee's behalf, a conscious awareness of and a desire not to fit into, this identity.

Another dimension of the fear of a relationship breakdown is the impact of this, on participants' desires to be married.

> *"I've never been married, I don't really have a desire to be (...) because I know how awful it can be if it goes wrong and you're left" Renee (11, 18-21)*
>
> *"it wouldn't really 100% shock me if I got divorced but I'd rather not" Nancy (15, 10-11)*

For Renee and Nancy, the notion of marriage appears to elucidate a strong focus on potential relationship breakdown and further, Renee's use of "you're left" suggests a fear of being abandoned. Nancy's lack of shock about potentially being divorced and her use of "I'd rather not" suggests to me, a sense of casualness, which is strongly contrasting to the serious topic she is referring to. My understanding of this is that despite divorce being something she wishes to avoid, she may be experiencing a feeling that it is inevitable. For Alice, her reservations surrounding marriage relate more directly to an anticipatory anxiety about fears of infidelity and abandonment.

> *"There is something that scares me about getting married, absolutely" Alice (18, 27)*

> *"Maybe if I do get married I'll wake up and think 'holy shit, he's going to have an affair' (...) at the moment I trust him (...) but yeah, I'm very scared that's going to happen, for sure" Alice (18, 15-19)*

The strength of this anticipatory anxiety may be reflected in the fact that Alice is "very scared". Furthermore, Alice's questioning whether she will "maybe" fear abandonment and her use of "at the moment I trust him" reflect to me, a feeling that things could change instantaneously, thus perhaps resulting in Alice remaining in a state of unease at all times.

3.3.2 Intergenerational transmission of infidelity

This sub-theme explores participants' experiences of infidelity within their own relationships. The narratives fell into two distinct categories: having been unfaithful, or having been cheated on.

Sylvia, Alice and Renee explored their experiences of having been cheated on.

> *"both of my sisters are divorced, neither of them ever had any affairs with anybody, but both their husbands did (...) within my marriage (...) I certainly had never been unfaithful, (...) but my husband(...) , I'm pretty definite that he did (...) I always thought it was really important to be faithful. I thought faithfulness was really important in a marriage, and I wouldn't have even dreamt of it (...) it hit me really hard" Sylvia (8, 11-18)*

> *"I had a really bad relationship (...) he cheated on me (...) and I felt like my world had fallen apart when that relationship ended." Alice (7, 4-6)*

> *"I would have gone back actually to my 21 year old self (...) in a relationship with someone that was unfaithful and (...) been like "get out", don't repeat the same mistakes" Alice (19, 7-9)*

> *"My first relationship, my boyfriend did cheat on me (...) it was always something I'd hoped to avoid but obviously didn't." Renee (10, 10 & 11, 1)*

> *"I would never cheat on somebody because for me that is one of my morals. I just wouldn't, I think it's wrong (...) I would never cheat on somebody" Renee (12, 10-18)*

The experience of being cheated on encompasses multiple dimensions for the women. Sylvia and Alice explore the emotional impact of the infidelity: a hard, world-ending experience. For Alice and Renee, it concerns a direct association with their experience of parental infidelity. It appears the women both felt strongly about avoiding the "same mistakes" they witnessed in their parents' relationship. Renee's desire having "always" been to avoid infidelity in her own relationships, may reflect the importance of this for her and also perhaps reflected that this was something important to her from very early on, relating to all relationships in general, rather than the specific relationship she is discussing.

For Sylvia and Renee, there also appears to be a desire to convey their strong views against infidelity. Renee referring to it as a "moral" issue and for Sylvia, something she wouldn't even "dream of" perhaps conveys how unfathomable being unfaithful feels for these women. This may be further reflected in the repetition of speech by both women: for Sylvia the fact that it is "really important to be faithful" in a marriage and for Renee, the fact that she would "never" cheat.

On the other hand, Lucy and John explore their experiences of being unfaithful.

> *"I've cheated. Yeah, I have. Like, not even once. So, it's definitely something that…it's definitely something I've thought about (...) this was a serious five-year relationship, I could have got married and had babies with this guy! (...) and yeah, I did...I did cheat on him [shakes head]."*
> *Lucy (23, 25-33)*

"I was unfaithful to my partner (...) and I felt absolutely dreadful for weeks afterwards" John (21, 9-25)

"I still fancy other women but you see that it does so much damage" John (20, 17-18)

For John, it appears that being unfaithful is an experience of feeling regret; feeling "dreadful" and reflecting on what he has learned from this experience, which for him, is how damaging infidelity can be and therefore the importance of not acting on physical attraction towards other women.

For Lucy, the emotional experience appears to be different. After the interview, I had noted that her shaking her head appeared to me, to convey confusion; a lack of understanding of her own behaviour. This lack of understanding is perhaps further reflected in her speech, for example in her emphasis on how serious a relationship this was, and in particularly her use of "like not even once" suggests that it would make more sense to her, had it been once, in one specific relationship. Further, Lucy repeats the fact that she does think about her infidelity, which suggests that understanding her behaviour is important to her.

3.3.3 Differentiation

This sub-theme encompasses the experience of participants differentiating between themselves and their unfaithful parent within their own romantic

relationships and/or differentiating between their romantic partners and their unfaithful parent.

I will begin with the experience of participants differentiating between their romantic partners and their unfaithful parent.

> *"I've actively not chosen someone like that in that I don't want to marry my dad, not literally, but I don't want to marry someone like him, and my current partner is not like him." Alice (18, 24-26)*

> *"He is so honest and transparent (...) he is just worlds away from my father, they're very different and funnily enough he is very similar to the person that my sister has married (...) they have very stable family values, they're just solid, really solid and consistent, and my dad never, ever was." Alice (12, 4-11)*

In Alice's experience, it appears to be very important for her that her partner is distinctly different from her father, reflected in her description of her partner being "worlds away" from him. My understanding is that her repetition of "solid" reflects the importance for her, of a stable, consistent relational experience, solid enough that she doesn't need to fear it being broken down.

Contrastingly, Lucy explores the similarities between a former romantic partner and her unfaithful father:

> *"There were good times, he did remind me of my dad sometimes though, in that he very much liked sport, and my dad liked sport, but likes all different kind of sport and he'd watch all different kinds of sport. And he*

did that. And he watched a few of the same TV programmes as my dad, as well, which was always really a little bit weird" Lucy (23, 1-4)

Lucy's use of "though" suggests to me, that whilst "there were good times" within her former relationship, it was a negative element of the relationship, that he reminded her of her father. The similarities Lucy discusses: watching sport and a "few" of the same television shows, strike me as being very general hobbies, rather than niche interests that may not apply to many people and therefore may stand out as a similarity. My interpretation of this is that it may reflect, in Lucy, a heightened awareness of, or a specific scanning for, similarities between romantic partners and her unfaithful parent, perhaps as an important aspect of the relationship. Furthermore, in reference to how weird it feels, Lucy says "really a little bit" which appears as an oxymoron, which may reflect Lucy experiencing confusion on how she feels about these similarities or why exactly it feels "weird".

Moving onto differentiation of the self from the unfaithful parent, Nancy discusses the differences between herself and her father within her own romantic relationships:

"so completely different in our behaviour and emotions, everything. We're completely different (...) he's not like me, therefore I won't be a cheater (...) I couldn't put someone else through that (...) If I cheated on someone knowing the impact it's had (...) I might be struck by a moment of insanity and cheat on my partner, but I'm saying now I wouldn't do it and I wouldn't want them to feel the way I've felt" Nancy (17, 1-11)

It appears to be important for Nancy to convey how “completely different” she is to her father in every aspect. She directly equates being unlike him, with not being a cheater, suggesting that there are no other dimensions of being unfaithful. My understanding here is that it appears as though there is a feeling of safety in detaching herself from being like her father; if she is unlike him in any way, then she can feel secure in that she will not “put someone else through that”, “that”, referring to a painful experience. Perhaps further differentiating herself from her father, she compares his behaviour to something she would only do if she were to be “struck by a moment of insanity”: a phrase commonly used to refer to something one would never intentionally do. Nancy also refers to her experience of parental infidelity and the behaviour of being unfaithful in a romantic relationship, interchangeably: “I wouldn’t do it” referring to infidelity in a romantic relationship and “I wouldn’t want them to feel the way I’ve felt” referring to her experience of parental infidelity, which may reflect a difficulty in defining the betrayal she feels.

On the other hand, Lucy explores ways in which she may be similar to her father within her own romantic relationships and what this means for her:

> *“I actually got bored… which also really sometimes worries me a little bit because I’m like, “oh my god! I must be like my dad in some way.” Lucy (22, 27-30)*

> *“I just went off and found someone else, which is… I do… I say that I feel bad, but I don’t. I don’t. And I don’t know. And then that’s what scares me, because that does make me like my dad, you know? That’s terri-…*

you should feel bad, because how can you do that? Because, your dad did the same thing! And I remember one thing I said to my friend was "Yeah, but my dad said. My dad told. I haven't done that (...) which is quite...I know it's bad but...it's just what happened" Lucy (24, 1-12)

For Lucy, being like her father in "some way" is a source of worry; it is scary. It appears to be an experience of emotional conflict for her; fearing being similar to her father in any way and simultaneously not feeling the remorse she thinks she "should" feel. The importance of being different from her father is perhaps reflected in her attempt to distinguish a difference between them by highlighting the fact that her father eventually told her mother about his infidelity, whereas she has not revealed hers to her former romantic partner. My interpretation here is that it appears to be so important for Lucy to differentiate herself from her father, that despite the fact that the example of a difference she has thought of, is one in which her behaviour is "bad", she is still willing to voice it.

3.4 Theme three: The psychological experience

This master theme explores the participants' psychological experience following their discovery of parental infidelity; the emotional experience, the sense of self and their experiences of loss, detachment and disconnection.

3.4.1 An ever-lasting pain

This sub-theme explores the meanings participants have attached to the magnitude of their experiences of parental infidelity and the ever-lasting nature of its' consequences.

The overall experience appears to have been one of emotional turmoil for participants, encompassing: sadness, confusion, isolation, pain, fear, anger, emotional abandonment and trauma.

> *"it caused a lot of emotional turmoil (...) I was very upset" Nancy (2, 31-32)*
>
> *"I felt confused, isolated and (...) powerless" Nancy (6, 14)*
>
> *"I remember the feeling of being so scared (...) I'd get stress nose bleeds" Nancy (18, 16)*
>
> *"you see the pain that it brings" Sylvia (8, 26-27)*
>
> *"it was just painful" Alice (6, 8)*
>
> *"I found out about the affair (...) I was very angry" Alice (8,17)*
>
> *"I've had this trauma with my family" Alice (18, 32)*
>
> *"For many, many years I did actually just end up crying every single night (...) I was so depressed I couldn't get out of bed" Renee (19, 18-19)*
>
> *"that's what caused the alcoholism, the emotional abandonment" John (12, 1-2)*

Referring to her own husband's infidelity, Sylvia said:

> *"I haven't told the children (...) I feel it would shatter them" Sylvia (13, 19-20)*

Sylvia's belief that knowledge of their father's infidelity would "shatter" her children suggest to me, an experience of having been "shattered" herself, by her own parental infidelity.

What has pervaded participants' narratives is that parental infidelity is an experience of great enormity and ever-lasting emotional implications.

"...he caused so much pain (...) I'm a child hurt by a separated family" Nancy (7,12 & 8,21)

"it's horrible it sticks with me so much to this day!" Nancy (3, 18)

"it was 100% a factor and the start of what became a very long road of mental health issues" Nancy (10,1)

"it has been such a large impact on who I've ended up being" Nancy (19, 31)

"I'll never really forget what happened, I don't think you can" Alice (14, 23)

"it shaped who I am as a person, without a doubt" Alice (15, 23)

"It's a life-changing thing" Lucy (12, 8)

"I'm over it now (...) it's kind of fine, I mean it's not fine really" Lucy (13, 8)

"a major impact on my life, it was the major event of my life and it had a very very negative impact" Renee (8, 18-19)

"it's something I'll always be working on (...) the pain never really goes away but you learn to live with it" Renee (18, 4-6)

"I've thought about it so much over the years" Renee (18, 24)

"the relationship between my mother and her lover destroyed my younger brother's life, I feel that strongly about it " John (12, 11- 12)

There appears to be a strong need for participants to convey how "life-changing" and "major" the experience of parental infidelity is. An experience one explores "over the years" with the power to "shape" and "destroy" one's entire existence and leave behind an ever-lasting pain one is never able to forget.

Renee's repetition of "very" perhaps reflects the importance of the magnitude of this experience for her.

Nancy's referral to herself, in the present tense, as a "child" who is hurt, suggests to me, that although she is now an adult, she feels the pain of this experience in the same way she did as a child, perhaps conveying how ever-lasting this pain truly is for her.

For John and Nancy, there also appears to be a sense of certainty about the implications of this experience, for Nancy a "100%" certainty regarding its' role in her journey with mental health issues and John feeling "very strongly" about the destructive role his mother's infidelity played in his brother's addiction.

My understanding of Lucy's self-contradictory exploration of whether it is now "fine" is that it may reflect within her, a strong desire to be fine but a simultaneous awareness that the implications of this experience still remain.

3.4.2 The sense of self

This sub-theme explores participants' experiences of their sense of self; their identities, their self-esteem and their self-worth following parental infidelity.

For Renee, Nancy and Alice, one dimension of this experience is feeling unlovable, not good enough, worthless and replaced.

> *"There is that kind of feeling when you're a child, if my father's left to live with this woman he can't really love us. Or he can't love us enough or we're not good enough" Renee (17, 9-11)*

> *"I felt like it was quite I'd say a personal attack, he's my father, (...) if my dad can't love me then are other people going to love me (...) there must be something wrong with me if my dad can't stick around at home, he doesn't like me." Nancy (9, 32-33 & 10, 1-11)*

> *"I had an eating disorder (...) because of my negative experiences with the people who were so close to me,(...) , as probably my mum was made to feel and think, is it me? A lot of the time I knew it wasn't me, but it still hurt anyway. I felt unlovable and not worth much, just had a low self-esteem" Nancy (11, 19-23)*

> *"that increased the feeling of self-worthlessness because why wasn't I good enough and he had to go and have a child with someone else?" Nancy (21, 30-32)*

> *"I remember him saying every year 'we'll go skiing' (...) and he never did, but he went skiing with his girlfriends (...) I couldn't care less about skiing, it was about wanting to go away with my dad and yet again him passing me out for a girlfriend (...) that really hurt me." Alice (8, 30-33 & 9, 1)*

My interpretation of Renee's use of "us" is that it may reflect an experience of not having separated herself from her mother but instead viewing the family as one entity and therefore perhaps experiencing the impact of the betrayal from the same perspective as her mother.

Similarly, Nancy compares her experience to that which she would expect her mother's to be, though she reflects on intellectually knowing the difference, the emotional pain appears to be the same, perhaps again, reflecting a difficulty in being able to separate oneself from the parent who has been cheated on.

Alongside Alice, Nancy also takes a more individualistic perspective. Nancy's use of "personal attack" evokes for me a sense of something being blown apart; perhaps reflecting how damaging Nancy feels this experience was to her sense of self-worth. Her use of "must" is suggestive of certainty, perhaps further reflecting how strongly she experienced feeling unlovable or that something was wrong with her, which was further perpetuated by her father having children with his new partner.

For Alice, her use of "yet again" suggests a sense of constant disappointment for her. She refers to "girlfriends" in plural, which may reflect a feeling of constantly being rejected for and replaced by, different women. This may have exacerbated how hurt Alice was, as my understanding is that she may have experienced it as being rejected for, or replaced by, women who appear to be interchangeable themselves; not particular or special to her father in any way.

For John, his experience appeared to be one of feeling his mother is part of a new entity which he is not a part of and instead, feels put down by.

"...her partner didn't play a very clever game, (...) she was so aggressive (...) any argument would be finalised with 'well haven't you read [name of novel]? (...) they ended so many discussions with that, that was the ultimate put down (...) you know in social science terms we could say 'oh haven't you read [name of literary piece] (...) and if the person hasn't I sort of think ooh ooh ooh lacking here [laughs] better keep quiet" John (8, 18 - 33 & 9, 1- 11)

It appears that John experienced feeling that he was "lacking" and that he should "keep quiet" in response to his mother and her lover's "put down". His referral to our shared background in social sciences and referring to he and I as "we", raises for me a notion of a team of two, against one, which may reflect how John experienced these moments with his mother and her lover on one team, against him, alone.

For Lucy and Sylvia, a different dimension of the sense of self, was the experience of feeling shame.

Individual to Sylvia, her experience of self-worth and in particular, shame, does not relate to the infidelity itself, but the lack of support she offered her father, the parent who had been cheated on, which led to feelings of being disliked and unwanted by him.

"I'm kind of ashamed that I never really saw my father's perspective on it" Sylvia (2, 1)

"I sometimes think he didn't really like me, in comparison with my sisters and my brother, who spent a lot of time with him (...) I was upset, I just thought my dad just didn't want me" Sylvia (4, 31-33 & 5, 1-6)

The experience of shame is slightly different for Lucy.

> *"It's like Jeremy Kyle, isn't it?" Lucy (7,7)*

> *"My mum can say 'okay my husband cheated on me but look at my two daughters. I've got two masters students.' (...) and (...) I'm good at relationships, you know. I can do all this. So, I'm quite okay...(...)I've got nothing to be ashamed of" Lucy (36, 15-21)*

Lucy compares her family to Jeremy Kyle, a term frequently used to describe shameful behaviour within families. Later, she refers to her success in academia and romantic relationships as tools to explain why she has nothing to be ashamed of, which is contradictory. My understanding is that this may reflect for Lucy, an experience of having to prove herself and prove her self-worth. I also notice that Lucy asks me whether I think it is like Jeremy Kyle, perhaps reflecting a feeling that others will view her, and her family, as shameful. This feeling may be further reflected in Lucy's discussion of identity.

> *"I worry that men would think that I'm damaged goods, because I've come from infidelity life" Lucy (21, 23-24)*

> *"I think a lot of people think, "She's come from a broken home (...) she must have daddy issues" Lucy (26, 21-23)*

There appears to be a repeated experience of labelling herself with negative, derogatory terms: "damaged goods", "broken home", "daddy issues". The infidelity appears to hold a central place in Lucy's identity, thus how she views herself and believes others' view her too. Her use of "infidelity life", evokes in

me a thought of a prison sentence ‘for life’, which I interpret as Lucy perhaps experiencing these identities as something she cannot ever escape.

This experience of labelling one’s identity is shared by Nancy.

> *“Now I value my self-worth a lot more (...) it’s not all about being a child at home in a broken family” Nancy (11, 7-9)*

The fact that her “self-worth” is, no longer “all about” being from a “broken home” suggests that earlier in Nancy’s life, her “self-worth” was entirely about this negative identity, perhaps reflecting the strength of its’ negative impact on Nancy’s self-worth.

Renee also explored the implications of her “low self-confidence” for her relationships with peers and with romantic partners.

> *“when it happened I’d just started secondary school (...) as a result, I became very introverted and very withdrawn. Because I was depressed (...) I ended up being bullied quite severely, I didn’t really have any friends, school was horrible” Renee (15, 16-19)*

> *“I was basically the weakest one (...) because I had no self-confidence so I ended up being the one that everyone picked on”. Renee (15, 30-31)*

> *“down to my low self-esteem (...) I probably let people in general treat me worse than I should have” Renee (10, 4-5)*

> *“I’ve never had a lasting relationship (...) maybe because I aimed too low maybe, in terms of partners” Renee (21, 5 – 12)*

The magnitude of these implications is perhaps reflected in their presence throughout a wide span of her lifetime, from her school-days, to romantic relationships much later in life. An element which is striking is Renee's high level of self-awareness and her ability to link the impact of the infidelity on her self-confidence to other areas in her life. However, despite this awareness, Renee has not had a lasting relationship, which perhaps conveys that an awareness of the impact alone, has not been sufficient in healing it.

Renee and Nancy also explore their experiences of feeling they were to blame. For Renee this blame was explicitly attributed to her by her mother, whilst Nancy's experience was more intra-psychic; self-blame.

> *"she did blame us actually, 'if you'd been better behaved he wouldn't have left' (...)It made me feel like a piece of dirt really, it made me feel worthless" Renee (4, 17-18 & 5, 11)*
>
> *"I just felt like I was in the way, I was a pain, I shouldn't be there" Renee (6, 13)*

Renee's comparison of herself to a "piece of dirt" strongly emphasises how worthless she was feeling. Having experienced this feeling of worthlessness at home, with peers and within personal relationships, perhaps reflects an experience for Renee of feeling unable to find a space of solace; somewhere to feel loved and valued.

Both Renee and Nancy voiced a wish to return to their younger selves and address this feeling of blame.

"Probably just, "It's not your fault." Yeah, (...) It's not your fault" Renee (16, 16-17)

" it's actually not your fault, that it was his choice and his decisions and his fault that he left and it's not because of you and not to judge your worth on whether or not he's around and loves you" Nancy (19, 31-33 & 20, 1 – 4)

My interpretation of the fact that reiterating they were not to blame, was the sole topic both women wished to address if they had the chance to speak to their younger selves, and the repetition of "it's not your fault", is that it may reflect how fundamentally important they feel this still is, and how significant they feel having heard this at that time, could have been.

3.4.3 Loss: detachment and disconnection

This sub-theme explores participants' experiences of the loss of, and detachment from, deep relational connections following parental infidelity.

For John, it appears that intellectuality and literary interests functioned as a base for a "shared identity" and "close relationship" between he and his mother. His narrative explores the loss of this, following his mother's infidelity with a partner who had different intellectual interests.

"...the separation from my mother was painful" John (8, 16)

"...it was the intellectual side of the relationship which caused a problem, because my mother and I were very close, in relation to books (...) she

essentially introduced me to [literary names] and I sort of read all these at a very young age and continued to study (...) for about eighteen...eighteen to twenty years and I attended international conferences and presented papers..." John (7, 1-4)

"...you know, with people, if you like something that they like, we share some of their identity..." John (26, 18-19)

"... but [mother's lover] was very much a 19th century literary buff (...) and my mother's intellectual interests switched away from modernism to 19th century..." John (7, 14-15)

Literary works appear to be an important part of John's identity as he describes their presence in his development across his lifespan. His use of "very young" and repetition of "eighteen" may serve as John's way of emphasising this importance and in turn, perhaps highlighting the painfulness of this separation from his mother, with whom he experienced sharing this identity. Furthermore, exploring John's use of "switched away"; the word "switch" brings up two notions for me. One is the notion of replacement; switching one for another. The other is the feeling of a swift or abrupt change; the quick image of switching on and off a light for example. Therefore, this phrase may be reflecting John's experience of feeling abruptly replaced by his mother's lover.

It appears that the important aspect here, is not the switching of his mother's literary interests but the reason for the switch; the influence of her lover. John experiences this as a "betrayal", which appears to be because this feels personal, rather than intellectual; making this an emotional separation from his mother, the pain of which I interpret as being conveyed in John's deep inhaling and stuttered, slowed speech.

"...it was another betrayal, because I felt she wasn't dismissing things on their intellectual merit" John (26, 12)

" she would dismiss writers not on her own cognisance but on the basis of discussions with her partner." John (8, 17-18)

"...the manifestation was an intellectual dichotomy [deep inhale] but in real...reality of course it was [speech slows] a...an emotional dichotomy..." John (8, 14-15)

Furthermore, it appears that John's experience of this separation encapsulates feelings of conflict.

"...I really ought to read [name of novel] (...) because they both read [name of novel] seemed to be reading it constantly and continuously" John (8, 29-30)

"...you had to gird your loins to go and see them together..." John (9, 15)

John may be trying to remain connected with his mother, through literary works, or feeling that he "really ought to", but finding this to be a painful experience, which is perhaps conveyed and emphasised in John's comparison of this experience, to girding one's loins, which can refer to the feeling of bracing oneself for danger or an attack.

In reference to his brother, John says:

"...he was emotionally abandoned aswell and having gone through [pause] sort of treatment myself and understood, began to understand [speech broken/not fluid] my feelings..." John (27,2-4)

My understanding is that John appears to be communicating an experience of "emotional abandonment" of his own; as he appears to be referring to himself when he says "aswell". Furthermore, he follows this by discussing having had psychotherapy, which appears to be an exploration of how he has dealt with his experience of this abandonment.

Moreover, John's experience of loss may encapsulate not only the loss of a shared identity with his mother, but also the identity of the family unit as he had known it up until his mother's infidelity. John explains:

> *"...they actually met the year before in [city], when we were when my mother was on a family holiday..." John (8, 20-21)*

John changes "when we were" to "when my mother was"; which I interpret as perhaps conveying John's experience of his mother's detachment from being a part of the "we" which appears to reflect the family unit.

Renee also explores her experience of the loss of the identity of the family unit as she had known it up until the discovery of her father's infidelity.

> *"later that day, I remember my dad making pasta bake (...) we were all sat around together like a family" Renee (5, 31-33)*

Her use of "like" a family, suggests that she did not experience this as an authentic family.

Similarly to John, Renee, Alice and Nancy explore their experiences of detaching from the unfaithful parent and losing the connection they once had.

"We saw him on occasional weekends, when he had time to see us (...) it was obligatory really, he was never emotionally close and he wasn't nearly as strict as he used to be because I think he felt guilty" Renee (7, 14 -23)

"I didn't see him for probably a good few years (...) I blocked him out of my life (...) then from like 16-18, (...) I did sort of see him, but I never, ever stayed round at the house that he was living with (...) I never, ever stayed there. I think I stayed there once." Lucy (12, 26-32 & 13, 1)

"I absolutely disconnected from him, I was there in body but not in spirit (...) I didn't engage in conversation (...) I really gave him the cold shoulder (...) I just wouldn't look at him, I wouldn't talk to him" Alice (3, 3-7)

"It was part of the whole kind of detachment process, it's like [father's name] has no impact on me anymore. He's not my dad (...) he's my biological father, I have his genes but he's not my dad (...) Okay, yes technically for nine years he was a reliable dad, but he's not been a parent, so why should I call him dad" Nancy (17, 17-24)

"When I did meet with him (...) he was nice to me, but it was never really genuine" Nancy (17, 30-32)

"...he's only going to do things for his self-interest, he might feel better if he sees his daughter, like 'I'm doing my daddy duties, seeing my daughter' " Nancy (20, 23-25)

For Alice, Lucy and Nancy, it appears to have been an active choice to disconnect and detach from their unfaithful fathers, i.e. refusing to see or speak to him. Nancy refers to the “detachment process” as being like her father cannot impact her any longer. Therefore, this choice to actively detach oneself from the unfaithful parent, may reflect a desire to detach oneself from the entire experience of parental infidelity and its’ painful implications or “impact”. The strength of this desire is perhaps further reflected in Lucy repeatedly reiterating that she “never stayed” at her father’s new home and Alice’s use of being there in “body” but not in “spirit”; suggesting a very strong desire to ensure that no part of her inner self would connect with her father following his infidelity.

For Renee, this appears to have been a different experience in that she would see her father when “he had time”. This phrase suggests to me, that Renee may have experienced having no choice in the matter and feeling that she was not a priority her father would make time for, but rather an obligation her father would fill time, with.

For Renee and Nancy there also appears to be the element of authenticity, feeling that the connection trying to be made by their fathers was due to “guilt” or “self-interest”, which appears to have significantly reduced the value and meaning, for the women, of these attempts to re-connect.

For Nancy, there also appears to be an inner conflict regarding the connection she has with her father, manifested in her questioning of what to call him. In what appears like an inner-dialogue, she refers to him by multiple pronouns. My understanding is that this may reflect a confusion for Nancy, a strong desire to push away this person whose behaviour has had many negative implications for

her life, but experiencing difficulty in doing this, as she recalls positive experiences she has had with this person, for many years also.

John also shares this experience of using the terms “mum” and his mother’s first name interchangeably when referring to his mother, which similarly to Nancy perhaps reflects an experience of feeling unsure where he stands with his connection and emotional closeness to his mother.

Moreover, the experience of loss and disconnection does not solely refer to participants’ experiences with the unfaithful parent, but also extends to siblings, the wider family circle and peers.

For Sylvia, Lucy and Alice, their experience encompassed a loss of the connection they had with their siblings.

> *“I’d sort of got under my mum’s sort of umbrella of the situation” Lucy (18, 11-12)*
>
> *“my sister (...) she was very angry at life. She was angry at my dad, she was angry at my mum, she was angry at me, she was angry at herself (...) there was just nothing. There was no relationship there” Lucy (30, 26-27 & 31, 3-7)*
>
> *“We weren’t close at all, we weren’t teammates at all (...) I knew that she hated going to my dad’s (...) she hated all his girlfriends, and if we were ever alone it might feel like the two of us, but as soon as we were at home with mum (...)we were a bit more separate” Alice (13, 10-20)*

"...there was this allegiance with me and my mum, and my sisters, my brother and my father (...) it may have caused a bit of a split thinking about it with the children" Sylvia (16, 12-14)

There appears to be a theme of "teams" pervading the narratives regarding siblings. There appears to have been a need to be pick a side, pledge an "allegiance" or stand under one parents' "umbrella", which resulted in a "split"; a loss of the connection shared with siblings who were not "teammates". Alice says that when she and her sister were alone, they may feel like "the two of us"; referring to Alice once again, feeling an emotional closeness with her sister, thus further reflecting the role of their parents in their disconnection from one another.

For Lucy, the experience of loss further extended to her relationship with her auntie.

"it did turn out that my auntie did know pretty much a lot of the time that my dad was doing this (...) that was affected quite badly. She actually lived with us for a bit, when we were younger (...) we'd play silly games, listen to music (...) I didn't talk to her for probably way longer than my dad" Lucy (16, 32-33 & 17, 1-2)

For Lucy, the discovery that her auntie knew of the infidelity and kept it from her resulted in a further loss of a strong emotional connection. The fact that it took longer for Lucy to speak to her auntie, than her father, perhaps reflects how important this emotional connection had been for her, during her life time, which perhaps conveys how painful losing it, may have been.

For Alice, it was also an experience of disconnection from her peers. It appears that the experience of parental infidelity was emotionally and mentally consuming, preventing Alice from being “carefree” in a way that allowed her to emotionally connect with others her own age.

> *“I remember feeling very disconnected from my peers at school, I remember girls being very giggly, and silly, and carefree and I didn’t get it, I just couldn’t engage with that because I had this other stuff going on, that felt a lot more real and serious” Alice (6, 11-13)*

Alice being unable to “get it” perhaps reflects how far removed she was from experiencing life in the same way as her peers.

A further dimension of loss, pervading participants’ narratives is an overarching loss of trust in those around them.

> *“I don’t know how true it is, because this is my mum saying it (...) I don’t know why my mum would lie, but also, I can see why she might, because it’s trying to get back… go on her team” Alice (9, 14-16)*

> *“When this happened to me, I started to think about how it completely shatters your trust in people, and it puts into question truths. I think that’s the biggest change” Sylvia (6, 20-21)*

> *“It’s definitely impacted how I trust people (...) I became sort of fascinated, maybe obsessed with what people are saying and what they actually mean or what people are showing and what they actually mean (...) I became I guess quite suspicious” Nancy (10, 18-27)*

Sylvia's use of "shatters" evokes for me, an image of glass shattering into tiny pieces; perhaps reflecting her experience of the compete annihilation of her trust, such to the extent that she questions "truths".

For all the women this experience appears to encompass an incessant and "obsessive" need to question the honesty and motives of those around them and a fear of their trust being manipulated, for the gain of others, for example for Alice's mother to get her back on her "team".

3.5 Theme four: The pathway to healing

This master theme explores elements which appear to have been pivotal in participants' process of healing following their experience of parental infidelity.

3.5.1 Restoration through destruction

This sub-theme explores participants' experiences of recognising the positive, restorative consequences of their experience of parental infidelity.

One dimension of restoration appears to be the infidelity leading to resolution of a turbulent marriage and therefore an end to participants' experiences of witnessing parental conflict and parental distress; in its' place, gaining a sense of freedom to live a happier life.

> *"She's married now, she's super happy, she's not had an episode in 10 years, so she is really well." Alice (7, 16)*

> *"it was really the central focus, this very unhappy marriage" Alice (8, 4-5)*

“once my father left and she was forced to then get a job and get a career, I think she really loved that and in fact since then (...) she’s done really well (...) last year she did her PhD!” Renee (9, 8-11)

“I’m almost glad that my mum managed to get out (...) and become her own woman” Lucy (3, 17-18)

“They used to row. They used to row all the time” Sylvia (3, 24)

“I just don’t see how she could have got out of that marriage if she didn’t have him there, so yeah...maybe that is a positive, because she was really unhappy (...) so I guess... yeah... that’s a positive, that she was able to get out of it. But it’s not the ideal.” Sylvia (11, 10-14)

“ and I’ve had a stepfather for all these years, and it’s the only grandparent for my children (...) so he has proved to be somebody who I’ve been very close to over the years, actually”. Sylvia (10, 24-27)

For Alice, Lucy, Sylvia and Renee, the focus appears to be on the reduction of distress and the gaining of success, experienced by their mothers. Both Lucy and Sylvia refer to the infidelity as a means to “get out”, which evokes for me, an image of one confined, unable to escape, perhaps reflecting how turbulent the marriage they witnessed was. For Sylvia, there also appears to be the positive implication of having had a new father figure in her life with whom she could have a close relationship with. Her use of “actually” suggests to me, that perhaps she has not reflected on her relationship with her step-father in this way before. Furthermore, my interpretation of Sylvia’s repeated pausing, use of

“I guess” and reiteration that it’s not “ideal” is that it may reflect a discomfort and a resistance on Sylvia’s part, to acknowledge a positive consequence of what has been a very painful experience.

For Nancy and John, there is also an exploration of how the resolution of a turbulent marriage has added a richness and/or lessened distress both for their parent and within their own lives.

For Nancy, this encompassed an enriching of her experiences; a loss of restriction and a gaining of freedom.

> *“things are actually better without him, because he was grumpy (...)and self-centred (...) after he left we travelled to a lot of places which we probably wouldn’t have gone to with him, I guess there was some kind of freedom that came with him leaving, because we weren’t restricted by his self-interest. My mum ended up (...) doing more what she wanted and she actually cared about what we wanted as well (...) I think I’ve got a richer experience out of life because if he stuck around, still being the person he is it would have been restrictive” Nancy (13, 31-33 & 14, 1-16)*

For John, the positive impact remained within the notion of a resolution of a turbulent parental marriage and parental conflict. However, it differed in that John was the only participant for whom the infidelity did not lead to parental divorce. Therefore the resolution to the turbulence in his parents’ marriage lay in his mother, through her infidelity, finding a way to have her needs met outside of the marriage, whilst “keeping the hive together”, which John experiences as important, in the prevention of further negative consequences such as: his father potentially breaking down, a separation which would have led to him not

seeing his mother, or an “intolerable” relationship with his father”, which may have occurred, had his parents divorced.

> *“Well it kept the family together (...) she took the decision to hold it together (...) if she had not held it together, what would have happened? (...) Would my father sort of…would he have gone to pieces? I do not know, if my mother was living just with [her lover], would I want to go and see her? I do not think so (...) in some respects (...) I think if she had not made those moves, the relationship with my father would have become so intolerable that it would have exploded.” John (29, 1-8)*

John’s use of “exploded” reflects to me, how destructive he fears the consequences may have been.

Another dimension of the positive impact of parental infidelity is the learning; the knowledge that participants feel they have acquired from the experience.

> *“It’s certainly been a massive learning experience. Massively. (...) I’ve learnt a lot about me and I’ve learnt a lot about relationships (...) I think the positive thing is it’s made me independent, it’s driven me to be independent (...) and it’s definitely made me more self-aware (...) just in terms of what makes a good relationship, what makes a bad relationship, what’s healthy, what’s not healthy (...) what you shouldn’t put up with, what you should put up with.” Renee (14, 31-22 & 15, 2-7)*

> *“I know that if I get married and I have children I won’t make the same mistakes (...) I hope to go into it with my eyes open, and I’ve talked to my mum a lot about it and I don’t think she did go into her marriage with her*

eyes open, she was still relatively naïve, and I don't think I am" Alice (18, 4-7)

"from looking at their relationship, I know what not to do. There was very little communication. There was very little compassion. There was very little compromising. There was none of that, really, that I saw. And I think that that's something that you should, as kids, be able to see your parents doing. So, I (...) I can sort of see how relationships should… not be... " Lucy (27, 2-7)

The knowledge acquired appears to surround romantic relationships; an understanding of what a healthy relationship should encompass and which behaviours should or should not be tolerated. Renee's repetition of how "massive" the learning has been perhaps reflects the importance of the magnitude of this, for her. Furthermore, for Lucy in particular, it appears that fundamental elements which were absent in her parent's marriage; communication, compassion and compromising, are of particular importance. Although she mentions these elements, my understanding of Lucy's pause between "should" and "not be" is that it may reflect an experience for her, of feeling confident that she knows how relationships should not be, but an inner questioning of whether she knows how relationships actually should be. Similarly with Alice, she says she "know(s)" that she will not make the same mistakes, but also follows this with the fact that she "hopes" she won't, suggesting to me, a very strong desire to not make the same mistakes but also a simultaneous feeling of unease or uncertainty that this definitely won't happen.

Another dimension of the positive implications of parental infidelity is that it may serve as a tool for success. For Lucy, this refers to a drive for independence and academic and professional success.

> *"because of the divorce, I still remember my mum saying to me: 'don't ever, ever rely on a man, go out and do something (...) if shit hits the fan, you've always got something to fall back on'...and I'll never forget that. And then I went, "Alright, well I'm going to do something then." And now I've come to a bit of an extreme. I'm like, "I'm going to get a masters, now! [laughs] " Lucy (34, 18-23)*

Lucy referring to her academic success as an "extreme" suggests to me, that she perhaps does not feel she would have achieved at the level she is at, had it not been for the drive to succeed she acquired, following her experience of parental infidelity. For Alice, it related less explicitly to success regarding achievements for example, but rather to her developing her personal sense of resilience.

> *"having a mum suicidal and having to get her out of bed when you're 7, and having to look after her, and getting her in the bath, all that stuff, it is not nice (...) I do think it has made me resilient, and I can cope." Alice (17, 33 & 18, 1-4)*

My understanding of Alice's statement "I can cope" in which she was referring to any situation which she may face in the future, is that it may reflect both a sense of resilience but also a feeling of self-assuredness, following her experience of parental infidelity.

3.5.2 Perspective: intellectualisation and understanding

This sub-theme explores the importance of participants' intellectualising their parents' infidelity in order to gain some understanding of causality and an ability to empathise with the unfaithful parent; a fundamental element in the sense-making process and the journey to acceptance and healing.

For Renee, John and Sylvia, this experience encompassed an evolving understanding of the difficulties within their parents' marriage which may have led to infidelity.

> *"As you grow up, you become more understanding of the actual adult situation, what it's like for them (...) I certainly understand that my mum was hard to live with...but at the same time I don't agree with what my father did any more than I did back then." Renee (8, 19-28)*

Renee explores her ability to now empathise with her father, in a way she unable to as a child. However my understanding here is that it feels important for Renee to convey that her empathy does not equate to her approval of his behaviour.

> *"My father's relationship with my mother was lacking in anything really that was arts based, my mother really sort of desired that intellectual literary connections". John (8, 2-5)*
> *"She found intellectual and emotional and sexual solace in another person." John (20, 18-19)*

For John, he initially explores the intellect-based disconnect in his parents' marriage but then refers to the "intellectual, emotional and sexual solace" he feels his mother was seeking, which perhaps reflects the magnitude of what John feels was missing from his parents' marriage thus allowing him to understand his mother seeking this elsewhere. Further, his use of the word "solace" evokes in me, a sense of what one seeks in order to escape great distress, which perhaps further reflects how distressing John understood his mother's experience in her marriage to his father, to be, further allowing him to experience empathy towards her.

Similarly Sylvia also explored her understanding of why her mother may have been unfaithful.

> *"The drinking was a real issue. I hated it. And so I probably thought, well, I can understand her not wanting to be with this man who drinks so much. But if my dad would have done it, I would have looked at it more from the point of view that he was hurting her" Sylvia (5, 29-32)*

> *"I think she could see no way out of this unhappy marriage, and then this guy comes along and takes an interest in her, and she'd probably be flattered by that" Sylvia (9, 25-26)*

> *"I don't think she ever loved him like she loved my dad. I think he was a way out." Sylva (14, 8)*

Sylvia's experience slightly differs to John's in that her understanding does not apply solely to an issue within her parents' relationship, but encompasses her own feelings of hatred towards her father's drinking, a feeling she uses to

understand and empathise with her mother's behaviour. The strength of this feeling is perhaps further reflected in that fact that Sylvia does not see herself empathising with her father, should the roles within the infidelity, be reversed.

For Alice, her understanding takes a different perspective; rather than her parents' marriage, she focuses on reflecting on her father's early upbringing.

> *"he was sent away to boarding school when he was 5 years old, (...) there's a lot of interesting literature on men that are sent away to boarding school at a young age, what it does for how they connect with people, their inter-personal, relations (...) It makes perfect sense my dad is the way he is (...) so I understand it from… I can intellectualise it from a psychological perspective, and actually I feel incredibly sad for him, but I'm still angry because he is also a grown up" Alice (9, 28-32 & 10, 3-4)*

Alice's ability to intellectualise her father's infidelity encompasses her drawing upon knowledge of how his early years may have impacted his inter-personal dynamics. It appears Alice's intellectualisation elicits an experience of conflicting emotions for her; a sadness for difficulties her father may have experienced, an objective psychological understanding, but also a remaining anger towards him and a need to convey that her understanding does not equate the dissolution of this anger.

For Lucy, her intellectualisation, which has led to an understanding and acceptance of her father's infidelity, appears to be an amalgamation of both: understanding how his early experiences and his relationship with her mother may have played a role in his infidelity.

"I've accepted it, and I kind of actually understand it, I understand it (...) he's had health problems and (...) he had a tough background…a tough life (...)And...I love my mum dearly, but…(...) she became a housewife. How boring is that? (...) I don't ever remember seeing a spark to the relationship (...) I can see why he's done it (...) I don't like it, but it makes it very easy for me to go, "Alright, it's fine"...to make sense. It makes sense. I completely understand why it's happened. I don't know which trigger it was that made you do it, but (...)look at all this bad stuff that's happened to you, I can understand why you might need to go and seek comfort from someone else...(...) but, he's still not a happy man...that makes me sad for him, (...) But (...)I've changed my attitude, massively, from the day it's happened to like today. And I'm glad it has, I'm really glad it has. I'm glad I'm not still angry." Lucy (28, 28-33 & 29, 1- 27)

Similarly to Alice, Lucy's understanding of her father's behaviour has elicited feelings of sadness. In addition, whilst Lucy also conveys she does not approve of his behaviour, unlike Alice, an intellectualisation and an ability to make sense of her father's infidelity has led to the dissolution of her anger. Lucy referring to the intellectualisation making it "very easy" to feel fine again, and her repetition of how "glad" she is about no longer feeling angry, perhaps reflects how fundamentally important this process has been in her healing. Furthermore, Lucy's repetition of the fact that she understands or that it makes sense to her, evokes an image for me of someone who has had a revelation and elicits for me, a sense of relief, which may reflect a feeling of a sense of relief for Lucy, in understanding why this has happened. In addition, my understanding of Lucy's

pausing and her prefacing her negative views of her mother, with “I love my mum dearly”, is that this may reflect a hesitation to and a discomfort in, critiquing the parent who has been faithful and has experienced distress, however, for Lucy it appears this was important to do, in order to gain a rounded understanding and through that, an acceptance of, the situation.

3.5.3 Honesty and openness

This sub-theme encompasses the role of honesty and openness surrounding the parental infidelity. The theme has multiple dimensions. For some participants it refers to the meanings they have attached to their experiences of having had honest discussions with their parents during this time, for others it refers to the experience of the absence of honesty from their parents during this time and for some participants’ it refers to the experience of being honest and open themselves, during this time.

Alice and John explore their experience of perceiving strong emotion, in the absence of clear, factual information, leading to feelings of confusion and discomfort.

> *“I just remember being really hot and clammy and really like “oh my God I want to get out of here’ and ‘who is this woman?’ ” Alice (2, 22-23)*

> *“when my mother introduced her, my mother blushed, she was completely overcome (...) and I went ‘Oh,’ I went mentally ‘Oh what’s going on here’ because (...) it was clearly a very firm, a strong emotional*

bond between them and for the next few years the discussion, the regular discussion between my wife and I was do you think they're having an affair, yes maybe they are, no, maybe they aren't" John (6, 28-33)

"My mother would hint but she would never be specific." John (18, 1)

Alongside undesirable feelings, this lack of his mother's honesty and "specific" openness appears to have initiated an experience for John, of years of confusion and seeking clarity. The fact that "regular discussions" were had, perhaps reflect how important it was for John to uncover the truth. John's response to what his initial reaction was, to finally discovering his mother's infidelity was:

"I can't remember. It might have been a kind of 'oh', I think one of surprise or 'ah, confirmed at last.'" John (15, 17)

It appears that due to a lack of honesty, John's experience, up until this point, was one of utter confusion and disorientation; leading him to be unsure if he was surprised or relieved to "confirm" what he already knew, two distinctly opposite reactions.

For Nancy and Alice, the experience also involved secrecy; having to refrain from being honest and open about what they knew and how they felt.

"I was so offended and hurt and cross that he had asked why I was upset with him (...) 'you never sat me down and told me you'd met someone, you just pushed this woman into our lives and mum doesn't know about her, how is this okay?" Alice (3, 13-21)

"my mum was like 'your dad told me that he's got a girlfriend." I was like 'Shit, how do I handle this? I know, and I've known for nearly a year, how do I go about this?' and so I kind of said "Oh I thought you knew." And my mum was like 'What? You knew?' I couldn't bear to tell her that I'd been disloyal and I'd betrayed her for so long" Alice (3, 29-33)

For Alice, this experience elicited feelings of being hurt and offended that her father had put her in this position; that he had asked her to betray her mother's trust. Alice's use of not being able to "bear" the conversation with her mother suggests to me, that this experience of being disloyal to her mother, was truly painful for her.

For Nancy, the secrecy related to her being asked by her mother not to tell others outside of the family home about the infidelity, due to the "taboo" surrounding infidelity and divorce in their Christian community.

"it was kind of one of those you can't really talk about it things (...)it's not so taboo. But back when they split up, coming from a Christian family (...) it was like don't tell anyone (...) I was really upset (...) I don't really know what's going on and why but I can't tell anyone." Nancy (4, 16-23)

"sometimes I'd cry at school and then they'd be like what was wrong, and I would just say I can't tell you, and one day they called my mum in and she got really angry, saying you can't say those things because they'll call child services or something" Nancy (5, 4-6)

"the first time I self-harmed was when I was nine and this was after the first separation, and this was the whole you can't tell anyone, I was like, oh my god I don't know what to do with all my feelings, I didn't really know why I was doing it (...) I was just like I can't handle the emotional pain and so I took it out in physical pain." Nancy (12, 11-14)

Internalising her emotions and withholding this secret resulted in an experience of simultaneous feelings of confusion around what was truly happening and why it had to remain a secret, feelings of fear that if she did express her distress she would be taken away from her mother and feelings of pain and sadness about the separation of her family: an emotional turmoil so painful, it resulted in her starting to self-harm at a young age.

Similarly to Nancy, Lucy and Renee also experienced an environment at home in which the infidelity was not openly and honestly discussed. Lucy also sought comfort in expressing her distress at school.

"My mother didn't like talking about my father, she took away all the photos of him and she said once: 'As far as I'm concerned, he's dead' (...) that made me feel a bit shit really." Renee (22, 32-33 & 23, 14)

“we were all sat around (...) the whole situation was weird (...) my mum just sitting there, complete silence, she was numb. She couldn’t even… she didn’t look at me. She didn’t look at my sister. She didn’t look at my dad. And we just sort of chatted like normal. I just… I don’t really know, I couldn’t even tell you what we were talking about.” Lucy (5, 32-33 & 6, 1-4)

“it was the first day back at school, and I was just about to start my GCSEs, hadn’t done all this prep work, and… I just said, “Well, my dad’s had an affair.” And it was almost like a weight was off my shoulder.” Lucy (6, 14-16)

Renee remembering a remark her mother “once” made, perhaps reflects the strength of this particular incident and the strength of how badly being unable to discuss her father and the situation within the family home, made her feel.

Lucy being unable to recall the conversation at dinner, may reflect a surrealistic experience of seeking honesty and clarity having just discovered her father has been unfaithful but instead being met with silence and “normal” conversation. Further, the way in which Lucy revealed her father’s infidelity at school appears to have been somewhat blurted out which suggests that this may have become an experience for Lucy, of no longer being able to withhold information she had a strong desire to share. This feeling is perhaps further reflected in the fact that being honest and open was a “weight” off her shoulders, suggesting that this had been a heavy load to carry.

On the other hand, Sylvia and Alice and Lucy explored the positive influence honesty has had, and the important role honesty has played, in their ability to heal from this experience.

For Lucy, the honesty was in the form of her father explaining why he was going to leave the family home and it was fundamental in dissolving her feelings of hatred towards her father.

> *"...he went, 'Well, I have to fix myself, first of all,' which now – to this day – I understand, which is actually quite sort of relieving. Because, I don't have to sit and hate my dad all the time, which is quite refreshing" Lucy (8, 11-13)*

For Sylvia, it was the element of trust:

> *"with my mother, I don't think that changed my thing about trust, because she was fairly open about it. He did use to come down, as I said, to pick us up, and I was aware of it, really (...) I don't think she did lie about it" Sylvia (7, 8-19)*

In Sylvia's experience, her ability to trust others was not altered by her experience of parental infidelity because of the fact that her mother was open about her infidelity, Sylvia was aware of what was going on from the start and therefore perhaps did not experience a sense of having been deceived by a loved one she previously trusted.

For Alice, the role of honesty was in gaining clarity.

“I think it was good that you said that someone that found out more than 10 years ago because (...) to work out how you feel about it, like I said for me the facts didn’t come through until so much later that if it were any sooner it would have been too difficult to talk about I think and I wouldn’t have had the clarity that I think I have now.” Alice (20, 1-4)

The role of “facts” appears to have been fundamental in Alice gaining clarity in order to be able to not only “work out” how she feels about her experience but to process her emotions such that it is no longer too difficult to discuss.

Chapter Four

4. Discussion

I will begin this chapter by returning to my research question and providing a brief overview of the findings. I will then present the contributions of this research to the discipline of Counselling Psychology; its' theoretical and research implications. Following this, I will provide a summary of the findings I feel are unique to this study. Next, I will outline clinical implications ascertained from each master theme. I will then explore some limitations of the research and highlight some areas for future research. Lastly, I will end with some personal concluding reflections.

4.1 An overview of the findings

The question driving this research is: exploring the lived experience of parental infidelity. The endeavour was to gain an understanding of, and insight into participants' experiences of parental infidelity; how they make sense of, and the meanings they have attached to, this experience. Presented in the analysis, were four master themes: 'adultification', 'challenges in romantic relationships', 'the psychological experience' and 'the pathway to healing'. These themes elucidate the lived experience of parental infidelity, encompassing participants' internal and external worlds, within various dimensions of their lives; their relationships with themselves, their relationships with others, the roles and responsibilities they have assumed, their psychological well-being, and the elements significant to their process of healing.

4.2 Contributions of the research

In presenting the contributions of this research to the field of Counselling Psychology, I will present the implications of each theme individually. Throughout this section, I will refer to this research as 'the current study'. The term 'children' will refer to offspring of any age.

4.2.1 Adultification

The first theme elucidated by the current study is 'adultification', which was then divided into two sub-themes: 'becoming an emotional carer' and 'awareness of parental sexuality'.

This finding aligns itself with Burton (2007) who theorised four different stages of childhood adultification: 'precocious knowledge' which refers to children witnessing and/or acquiring an awareness of adult topics or behaviours, 'mentored adultification' which refers to children adopting adult roles often without sufficient supervision from an adult, 'peerification', which refers to a child taking on the role of a parent's peer, or subordinate/confidante and 'parentification', which refers to a child adopting the role of a parent to his/her siblings and/or parent. Burton (2007) based his theorising on ethnographic research exploring the lives of low income families. The experience of adultification has also been studied with different populations: homeless young people (Schmitz & Tyler, 2016) and children of divorce (Jurkovic, Thirkield & Morrell, 2001). With regard to parental infidelity, touching upon this notion, Duncombe and Marsden (2004) proposed that children may experience

‘parentification’; taking on roles of the parent, following the discovery of parental infidelity.

The current study presents two unique findings. Regarding the two sub-themes elucidated by this study, based upon the definitions by Burton (2007) ‘becoming an emotional carer’ may fit the description of ‘peerification’ and ‘awareness of parental sexuality’ may fit the description of ‘precocious knowledge’.

Becoming an emotional carer

This finding is consistent with the research conducted by Nogales and Bellotti (2009) who found that parents who have been betrayed often cross the boundary between an appropriate level of comfort-seeking from their children, to an inappropriate dependence on children, to act as ‘emotional caretakers’ or ‘surrogate mates’, which results in children carrying an ‘inappropriate burden’. The current study found this inappropriate burden can take various forms, including the terrifying experience of witnessing a parent in such great distress, experiencing a sense of sole obligation and isolation in the role as an emotional carer, feeling like a burden the distressed parent has been ‘stuck with’ and therefore feeling one must be helpful to the distressed parent by taking care of him/her and finally, experiencing a constant state of high arousal and vigilance towards the parents’ emotional state.

Furthermore, the current study and the research conducted by Nogales and Bellotti (2009) both found that due to becoming consumed with their own emotional turmoil, the betrayed parent can be unavailable to children, and fail to provide the emotional support and nurture, children need during this time. Extending our understanding, the current study found that due to experiencing their parent(s) as overwhelmed with emotional turmoil, children may internalise

their emotions during this time, for fear of becoming a burden to their distressed parent. This can lead to children being unable to express difficult emotions and/or in the presence of their parents, behaving in a manner which is starkly contrasting to how they are feeling internally, for example ‘being the clown’; appearing joyous whilst one is in-fact, feeling ‘miserable’. This finding may also lend itself to the ‘Self-Presentation Theory’; specifically the concept of ‘audience pleasing’ (Baumeister & Hutton, 1987).

Moreover, both the current study and the study by Nogales and Belotti (2009) also found that children may experience conflict between feeling that in order to emotionally care for their betrayed parent they need to share the betrayed parents’ disdain towards the parent who has been unfaithful. If children do not authentically experience this disdain, it can lead to their experiencing resentment towards the betrayed parent for expecting this from them. Once again extending our understanding on this experience of conflicting emotions, the current study also found that children may recognise that attending to the betrayed parents’ emotional needs, diminishes their ability to attend to their own, which can lead to a conflicting emotional state of feeling annoyed at the distressed parent, followed by guilt for having felt this annoyance. In addition, the current study also found that children may experience strong feelings of anger toward the unfaithful parent, if this parent is being held by the child, as responsible for him/her having had to assume the role of an emotional carer. Participants described hypothetical situations within which they confront the unfaithful parent about the burden which was placed upon them, suggesting it is important for this to be recognised and acknowledged.

An element of this finding which is unique to the current study is participants' experiences of a retrospective exploration of having assumed this role as a child. This study found that adult children may process this experience gradually, across their life-span; recognising and developing an understanding of the implications of this early role, much later in life. Furthermore, the current study found that one of the potential implications of this early role can be the lessening of a child's patience and a heightened level of frustration towards the distress of others.

Awareness of parental sexuality

The second dimension of adultification elucidated in the analysis was the negative consequences that may be elicited as a result of offspring becoming aware of, or obtaining information about, their parents' sexual behaviours.

This finding aligns itself with existing literature which highlights how parental infidelity may impact the sexual development of offspring (Negash & Morgan, 2016; Pearman, 2010; Schnarch, 1991; Wardle, 2002).

According to the theoretical notion 'the illusion of parental celibacy' (Freud & Strachey, 2011; Shopper, 2002) a necessary part of healthy development is for a child, during his/her developing adolescent stage, to develop the illusion that his/her parents either do not engage in sexual activity at all, or only do so in order to procreate. The theory proposes that this illusion allows for the containing of a child's natural curiosity but avoids exposing the child to considerable information about his/her parents' sexual relationship, which he/she is unable to handle. Shopper (2002) believes that this 'de-sexualisation' of the relationship between the parent and the child, is fundamental to a child's healthy development, but suggests that this process may be halted by parental

infidelity. The findings of the current study provide some support for this, as one participant described his belief that an extensive awareness of his parents' sexual behaviours and regular discussions in the family home about his mother's sexual behaviour outside of her marriage, negatively impacted his development. This took various forms, including what he referred to as a 'highly developed sense of sexuality at too young an age', and highly sexualised conversation which was deemed inappropriate, particularly in his work-place, which led to his being reprimanded on multiple occasions.

Furthermore, the current study found that an awareness of parental sexuality appeared to elicit strong negative affect; feelings of extreme discomfort and pain. Moreover, this study found that it may not only be painful for a child to experience his/her parents openly and explicitly discussing sex, particularly in reference to the unfaithful parents' infidelity, but also how difficult an experience it is, for one's parents to disregard, or be unaware of this pain.

A further element of this sub-theme which is unique to the current study is the experience of becoming aware of parental sexuality in a less explicit, indirect manner. The current study found that an awareness of parental sexuality can be developed through the witnessing of the unfaithful parent being affectionate with their new partner. Based upon this study, this can have two consequences, the first is that it can reveal a new dimension of a parents' character to a child, particularly in cases where the child had not witnessed his/her parents have an affectionate relationship with one another. Secondly, by being present and witness to this affection, feelings of disloyalty on behalf of the child, towards the betrayed parent, can be elicited.

4.2.2 Challenges in romantic relationships

The second theme elucidated by the current study is 'challenges in romantic relationships', which was then divided into three sub-themes: 'fear of abandonment and relationship breakdown', 'intergenerational transmission of infidelity' and 'differentiation'.

This finding provides support for earlier research which has shown that an experience of parental infidelity may relate to difficulties adult offspring experience in their endeavours to maintain healthy romantic relationships (Cramer, Abraham, Johnson & Manning-Ryan, 2001; Nogales & Bellotti, 2009; Olmstead, Blick & Wills, 2009).

Fear of abandonment and relationship breakdown

One challenge was participants experiencing strong fears of being abandoned by their romantic partners; an incessant worrying about whether their partners would suddenly leave and a constant seeking of reassurance from their partners that this would not be the case. This fear did not appear to be specific to one relationship or one romantic partner but rather, continuous and generalised across relationships.

Whilst this finding is unique to parental infidelity, Davila and Bradbury (2001) suggest that an insecure attachment style may be positively associated with an individual's anxiety about being abandoned by a romantic partner and concerns about their worthiness of being loved. Attachment researchers have shown that there is a positive correlation between parental infidelity and insecure attachment styles (Walker & Ehrenberg, 1998). Therefore, this may be the mediating factor, here in the current study.

The current study also found that fears of abandonment influenced participants' desires to marry. Some participants described concerns about their partner suddenly abandoning them, after having made a commitment of great magnitude. Some participants also described questioning the importance and the value of marriage following parental infidelity. This finding aligns with earlier research which has suggested that for offspring, the concept, the meaning and the value of marriage is likely to become questioned and/or undermined by parental infidelity (Nogales & Belotti, 2009; Thorson, 2007).

Participants also described their experiences of trust in relationships. Whilst some participants felt this was a difficulty they had resolved over time, one participant who's father had been unfaithful described a deep hatred and mistrust towards men; a finding consistent with earlier research which has suggested that adults who have been exposed to parental infidelity may experience their trust in romantic partners becoming severely damaged (Nogales & Bellotti, 2009; Walker & Ehrenberg, 1998).

A finding unique to the current study, was a different dimension of trust; participants' experiences of actively trying not to be hyper vigilant or lacking in trust, regardless of whether they authentically trust their parents or not, due to fears of being labelled with negative identities such as "damaged goods" or a woman who has "daddy issues".

Intergenerational transmission of infidelity

The current study provided support for the notion of the intergenerational transmission of infidelity. Participants fell into two groups: either having ever

been unfaithful themselves, within their own romantic relationships or having ever been betrayed by a romantic partner. This finding is consistent with Nogales and Bellotti (2009) who suggested that adult offspring would fall into one of these two categories. Furthermore, this finding provides further support for earlier research which has shown there to be a positive correlation between having experienced parental infidelity and adult offspring committing unfaithful behaviours in their own romantic relationships (Fish, Pavkov, Wetchler & Bercik, 2012; Havlicek, Husarova, Rezacova & Klapilova, 2011; Platt, Nalbone, Casanova & Wetchler, 2008; Weiser, 2013; Weiser, Weigel, Lalasz & Evans, 2015).

However, the current study found that regardless of which category participants fell into, there was a unanimous understanding and recognition of the severely negative impact infidelity can have. For participants who have never been unfaithful, infidelity presented as a moral issue they were fundamentally against, whilst for participants who had been unfaithful, an exploration of the impact infidelity can have on partners and/or the comparison of their behaviour to their unfaithful parent led to this becoming for them, an experience of deep regret and a behaviour which lacks sense. This contradicts earlier findings which suggested that adults who have experienced parental infidelity and been unfaithful in relationships themselves, are significantly more likely than those who have not, to hold the beliefs that infidelity is acceptable and that the outcomes of infidelity are more likely to be positive than negative (Weiser & Weigel, 2017).

Differentiation

A unique finding of the current study was the importance of differentiation. Participants exhibited a strong need to differentiate themselves and/or their partners from their unfaithful parent. With regard to differentiating their romantic partners from the unfaithful parent, one participant described actively choosing someone who she felt did not share any commonalities with, bear any resemblance to, or remind her in any way, of her unfaithful parent. Whilst a different participant described strong concerns about commonalities her partner potentially does share with her unfaithful father, despite these commonalities appearing to be very general, i.e. 'he likes to watch sports on television'; applicable to many individuals. These commonalities were reflected upon as the only negative aspects of her partner, further highlighting how important this differentiation appeared to be. With regard to participants differentiating themselves from the unfaithful parent, the differentiation appeared to play a role in feeling safe and distancing oneself from the possibility of ever hurting their loved ones with their behaviour. Furthermore, for one participant the potential of sharing traits or characteristics with her unfaithful father transpired as a trigger for anxiety. This particular finding supports Cunningham and Skillingstead (2015) in their suggestion that adult children may express worry and concern about being destined to be unfaithful and behave like their unfaithful parent(s) because it inherently runs in their family and/or because they believe their parents have failed to model a healthy romantic relationship.

4.2.3 The psychological experience

The third theme elucidated by the current study is ‘the psychological experience’, which was then divided into three sub-themes: ‘an everlasting pain’, ‘the sense of self’ and ‘loss: detachment and disconnection’.

An everlasting pain

The findings suggest that parental infidelity is a traumatic experience and can lead to severe emotional turmoil for children; encompassing feelings of sadness, confusion, isolation, pain, fear, anger and emotional and physical abandonment. This is compatible with Lusterman (2005) who suggests that parental infidelity is indeed an experience of trauma and is likely to elicit feelings of pain, fear and confusion.

Unique to the study however, was the highlighting of the ‘ever-lasting’ pain elicited by parental infidelity and the magnitude of the implications of parental infidelity on participants’ entire lives. In the current study participants displayed a strong need to convey and emphasise that the pain of this experience is not one which diminishes over-time, despite participants wishing for this to be the case. Furthermore, the study highlights the enormity of this experience for offspring, penetrating across the life-span and across various dimensions of their lives. An element of this which felt striking is that participants appeared very self-assured and certain about the impact of parental infidelity on their lives, for them the importance appeared to lay in conveying that to others. This may suggest that there is a tendency for others to fail to acknowledge how painful, how impactful and how enduring the experience of parental infidelity can be.

The sense of self

Next, Nogales and Bellotti (2009) briefly touched upon children's potential loss of self-esteem and their developing an understanding that they may be unworthy of 'monogamous love', following parental infidelity. Extending our knowledge on this, the current study found that parental infidelity can play a role in influencing the development of an individual's sense of self and can lead to the loss of self-esteem, which can then lead to a number of difficulties elucidated by this study including: isolation and loneliness, difficulties feeling worthy of love in romantic relationships and the development of a severe eating disorder. The findings suggest that children may be unable to distinguish between the separate entities: the family system and their parents' romantic relationship, thus interpreting parental infidelity as a personal attack on them, by their unfaithful parent. As a result, children can attribute this personal attack to their being unlovable, not good enough and not worthy of parental love. The participants describe that this loss of worthiness to be loved by a parent, can then transcend to questioning whether they are worthy to be loved by anyone. The current study highlights three factors which can exasperate feelings of being unworthy of love and/or not good enough. One factor is if the unfaithful parent goes on to have more children with a new partner. The second is if the unfaithful parent reduces the amount of time he/she physically spends with the children and the children perceive the unfaithful parent to be spending this time with a new partner instead. The third is if children experience their unfaithful parent becoming a part of a new entity with their new partner, of which they are not a part of.

Moreover, the current study also found that the children of parents who have committed infidelity can experience deep feelings of shame. This finding is consistent with Nogales and Bellotti (2009) who found that children who have

experienced parental infidelity can feel ashamed of being a part of a family system within which the sexual behaviour of a parent will always serve as a 'black mark' against them. Children may also feel shame due to beliefs that the behaviour of their unfaithful parent, which they deem to be shameful, is in some way also reflective of their own character and dignity. Extending our knowledge on this, the current also elucidated two new dimensions of the experience of shame. The first is that one participant described feeling ashamed of herself for not having supported or cared for her father, the betrayed parent, to a greater extent at the time of the discovery of the parent infidelity. The second is that some participants conveyed a strong need to establish why they were not ashamed and used external factors such as academic accolades or professional successes, as evidence.

The role of parental infidelity in children's developing identities was also elucidated. The study found that children identified as "damaged goods" and being from a "broken home", following experiences of infidelity, which led to their experiencing lowered self-worth and anxiety about being attached to these labels, by others.

Furthermore, the current study provided support for Duncombe and Marsden (2004) who suggested that pre-adolescent children are likely to blame themselves for their parents' infidelity. Extending our understanding, the current study elucidated two forms the attribution of blame can take. The first was as described by Duncombe and Marsden (2004); a self-blame, likely due to young children's developmental stage; a lack of cognitive understanding regarding the causality and implications of infidelity. The second was due to a betrayed mother explicitly blaming the children and their behaviour, for their father's

infidelity and subsequent departure from the family home, an experience the participant held responsible for making her feel utterly worthless.

Loss: detachment and disconnection

A unique finding of the current study was the loss of identity children may experience following a parents' infidelity. This presented itself in two ways. The first was a participants' description of losing the part of his identity which he shared with his mother; an experience of being replaced by his mother's lover. The second was participants' descriptions of losing their identity as a family unit; no longer understanding or knowing what the term family meant, who it included or what it represented.

Moreover, participants described the disconnection and distancing which took place between them and their unfaithful parent. Once again this took two forms, the study found that on the one hand, children may actively make the decision to disconnect in a bid to detach themselves from the entire experience of parental infidelity and its' painful implications. This finding is consistent with Thorson (2017) who found that children may actively choose to use 'silent treatment' as a means of coping with parental infidelity. On the other hand, children may feel that the interactions with the unfaithful parent are no longer authentic and that the parent is present due to guilt or obligation, which lessens the value of their interactions with this parent. Further, the study also found that children may feel they are no longer wanted; time is no longer being made for them and that their unfaithful parent would prefer to be with his new partner. It is important to recognise here, that participants in this study described this

process of disconnection and detachment as painful, regardless of how or why it happened.

Consistent with Thorson (2017) who found that following the discovery of a parents' infidelity, children may place the 'communicative sanction' of withholding address terms, the current study found this to be the case with two participants. John described using the term "mum" and his mother's name interchangeably, whilst Nancy described what appeared to be an inner conflict; a recognising that genetically her father is her father and being able to refer to him as "dad" up until the discovery of his infidelity, but following his infidelity, referring to him by his first name, due to her feeling that he is no longer deserving of being called "dad". Nancy's case supports the conclusion by Thorson (2017) which states that withholding address terms is a form of retaliating to a parents' infidelity without having to openly discuss the infidelity. However, in John's case, his experience appeared to be less aligned with this conclusion. It appeared that his use of "mum" and his mother's first name interchangeably, was less of an active choice, but perhaps more of experience of confusion; a loss of understanding about who this person now relationally represents in his life and how this fits with the understanding he had prior to discovering the infidelity, about her identity and his relationship with her.

Moreover, the study found that the experience of loss and detachment may extend beyond a child's relationship with the unfaithful parent but also to the betrayed parent, siblings, other family members and peers within their wider circle. This finding is consistent with research which highlights the influence parental infidelity can have on children's interactions with individuals outside of their nuclear family (Lusterman, 2005; Nogales & Belotti, 2009; Thorson, 2014),

however the study is unique in its' focus on relational loss, thus highlighting the role parental infidelity may play in a child becoming increasingly isolated and feeling alone.

Furthermore, participants' experience of loss and detachment also encompassed the loss of trust. Whilst the findings of the current study do encompass participants' deep mistrust in romantic partners, which is consistent with findings from earlier research (Cramer et al., 2001; Platt et al., 2008; Walker & Ehrenberg, 1998) it also extends it to an overarching loss of what Lusterman (2005) and Nogales and Bellotti (2009) describe as the sense of security and safety that parents provide for their offspring, when they serve as models of good behaviour. Therefore, it can become not only the unfaithful parent who is untrustworthy but the world which suddenly becomes a less safe place, a place within which people cannot be trusted. In the current study, participants described how their ability to trust everyone around them was entirely shattered; leaving them persistently anticipating a betrayal and with an incessant and obsessive need to seek truth and question the authenticity and honesty of everybody. This finding supports Nogales and Bellotti (2009) who concluded that parental infidelity takes away a child's ability to take anything or anyone at face value, but instead, may result in their approaching every interaction they have, in suspicion.

4.2.4 The pathway to healing

The fourth theme elucidated by the current study is 'the pathway to healing', which was then divided into three sub-themes: 'restoration through destruction', 'perspective: intellectualisation and understanding' and 'honesty and openness'.

This master theme highlighting three specific elements which participants described as fundamental to their process of healing was a unique finding of the current study.

Restoration through destruction

The first sub-theme elucidated the importance of recognising the positive, restorative implications of parental infidelity. One facet of this was the finding that for some participants, parental infidelity led to the end of an unhappy marriage and therefore an end to participants' witnessing parental conflict and distress, which resulted in their gaining a sense of freedom to lead happier lives. This is compatible with literature which argues that the continued exposure to parental conflict is more detrimental to the emotional well-being of offspring, than the exposure to parental divorce or separation which puts an end to the marital conflict (Emery, 2006; Jekielek, 1998). This finding is also compatible with Thorson (2014) who found that keeping the conflict solely between parents and out of children's awareness can be beneficial as it can reduce the 'loyalty conflict' children are likely to experience during parental infidelity.

Moreover, for one participant, John, this did not end his parents' marriage but did end the continual conflict and turbulence within the marriage. John described the infidelity as a way his mother could tend to her needs without leaving his father, an act which he feels would have been far more detrimental. In this case, the current study also provides support for Wallerstein, Lewis and Blakeslee (2002) in their suggestion that divorce can be unnecessary and can be more damaging for children, than their parents staying together, if the

parents manage to ensure that the children are not exposed to conflict and tension.

Another facet of the positive implications was the participants' recognition of all of their learning; the breadth of knowledge and insight they have gained as a result of their experience of parental infidelity. This referred predominantly to learning about romantic relationships; shaping participants beliefs about what is acceptable, what is desirable and ultimately what constitutes a healthy romantic relationship. The current study elucidates the importance participants place on communication, compassion compromise and fidelity. This finding contrasts the suggestion by Weiser and Weigel (2017), derived from the Social Learning Theory framework, that if offspring perceive their parents to be happier following a divorce due to infidelity, this may constitute the positive reinforcement of infidelity, thus resulting in offspring learning that infidelity in a relationship is likely to have a positive outcome and may result in offspring feeling more willing to engage in infidelity.

The final facet of positive implications was the assertion that infidelity can serve as a motivator for success. For one participant, this referred to academic and professional success; as a means of striving towards independence and empowerment. For another, this referred to a deepened sense of resilience and self-assuredness regarding her ability to cope.

Perspective: intellectualisation and understanding

The next facet of this theme, which participants described as fundamental to their process of healing was the ability to intellectualise and as a result understand to some extent, the causality of the infidelity; why their parent(s) did what they did. The participants predominantly attributed the causality of the

infidelity to two factors: the turbulence in their parents' marriage prior to the infidelity and/or the unfaithful parents' upbringing and early experiences which may have impacted the way in which he/she behaves in relationships. The study found that understanding through intellectualisation allowed participants to develop a sense of acceptance towards the unfaithful parents' behaviour, though it remained very important for participants to emphasise that this understanding and/or acceptance did not equate to approval. This aligns with Rosewarne (2009) who argues that whilst intellectualisation certainly does not and should not, trivialise infidelity or deem it to be inconsequential, it can be helpful in that it elucidates the complexity of the process of engaging in infidelity. Thus it appears in the current study that this elucidation of the complexity of infidelity may allow offspring to understand that this is a complex issue and perhaps it is not as simple and clear-cut as the betrayed parent being 'good' and the unfaithful parent being 'bad', which echoes Thorson (2014) in her finding that it is helpful for children if parents break the concept of the good/bad guy, and avoid attributing all the blame on to one parent.

Honesty and openness

The final facet of this finding was the importance of honesty and openness; adding to the current literature on the implications of topic avoidance, privacy dilemmas and secrecy, elicited by parental infidelity (Brown, 2001; Lusterman, 2005; Thorson, 2009; Thorson, 2015; Thorson, 2017; Vangelisti, 1994; Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997).

In the current study, the first dimension of this finding was the meanings participants described having attached to their experiences of having had honest discussions with their parents following their discovery of parental

infidelity. Lucy described her father's honest explanation about why he was moving out of the family home, following his infidelity, as a relieving experience which diminished her feelings of hatred towards him. Moreover, Sylvia described her mother's openness about her infidelity, as the sole reason her ability to trust others was not damaged by her experience of parental infidelity. Furthermore, Alice described getting the "facts" about the infidelity as crucial to her process of gaining clarity and as a result feeling able to emotionally process the experience; to think about it clearly and to discuss it openly. This provides support for Nogales and Bellotti (2009) who argue that whilst parents often feel they are benefitting their offspring by keeping infidelity a secret, because their 'bad' behaviour may set a 'bad example', if a situation is explained to a child in a sensitive manner, this is less detrimental for the child's emotional well-being, than secrecy.

On the contrary, participants described their experiences of secrecy. For Alice, this involved her father exposing her to information about his infidelity, which remained unknown to her mother; a 'confidant privacy dilemma' as defined by (Thorson, 2015). Thorson (2015) concluded that whilst this experience may be relieving for the parent, for a child who condemns the infidelity, as was the case for Alice, it can elicit turbulence; potentially a huge burden for a child and extreme feelings of unease. The current study supports this finding as Alice described feeling hurt and offended that her father would knowingly put her in this position and simultaneously feeling unbearably disloyal towards her mother.

Furthermore, Nancy described an 'external protection rule – outside scrutiny' (Thorson, 2009), in which her mother, the betrayed parent, asked Nancy to keep the infidelity a secret from individuals outside of the family, in an attempt to

prevent the family from becoming scrutinised by the community. This secrecy was particularly important to Nancy's mother due to the 'taboo' of infidelity and divorce in the Christian community, of which they were a part. This finding is consistent with research which has found 'protection rules' can be based on cultural expectations (Caughlin & Petronio, 2004; Petronio, 2004; Thorson, 2009).The current study elucidates the lived experience for offspring, of maintaining this secrecy. For Nancy, internalising her emotions elicited feelings of confusion, fear, distress, pain and sadness; a painful emotional turmoil which resulted in her beginning to self-harm at a young age.

Furthermore, building on the literature surrounding topic avoidance, Renee and Lucy described the topic of infidelity being entirely avoided by their families. This took two forms. In Renee's case this was an explicit desire of her mothers', who referred to her father as 'dead' indicating the topic is not one to be discussed. On the other hand, Lucy described experiences of her family avoiding openly discussing the infidelity but chatting about 'normal things', perhaps in a manner which suggested the infidelity did not exist; an experience which made Lucy feel numb and led her to have what Thorson (2017) categorised as an 'outburst', supporting her earlier finding that outbursts are a way in which children may endeavour to cope with familial avoidance of the topic of infidelity. Although, counter to Thorson (2017), who stated that the outburst would still not address the infidelity, but solely serve as a form of relief, in this study, Lucy's outburst did address the infidelity and did not continue to uphold the avoidance of the topic of infidelity.

Furthermore, John and Alice described their experiences of continually perceiving strong emotion between family members, whilst the avoidance of

openly discussing the infidelity and providing offspring with factual information, was maintained. For participants this led to feelings of confusion, discomfort and many years of seeking answers which may provide clarity about the unknown. This supports Nogales and Bellotti (2009) in their assertion that the never-ending lies and secrecy which surround a family, following a discovery of parental infidelity, can lead to a reality for children, which is confusing, unsettling and disorientating.

4.3 Unique findings

I believe that this research has elucidated some important unique findings which I wish to briefly summarise and highlight below.

Firstly, this research has extending our understanding on becoming an emotional carer after the experience of parental infidelity. Unique to this study are the findings that:

- due to experiencing their parent(s) as overwhelmed with emotional turmoil, children may internalise their emotions during this time, for fear of becoming a burden to their distressed parent which can lead to children being unable to express difficult emotions and/or in the presence of their parents, behaving in a manner which is starkly contrasting to how they are feeling internally.
- children may recognise that attending to the betrayed parents' emotional needs, diminishes their ability to attend to their own, which can lead to a conflicting emotional state of feeling annoyed at the distressed parent, followed by guilt for having felt this annoyance.
- individuals may retrospectively explore their experiences of having assumed the role of an emotional carer, as a child. This study found that

adult children may process this experience gradually, across their life-span; recognising and developing an understanding of the implications of this early role much later in life. The current study also found that one of the potential implications of this early role can be the lessening of a child's patience and a heightened level of frustration towards the distress of others.

Next, this research has elucidated the fact that parental infidelity can result in an experience for offspring, of becoming aware of their parents' sexuality. The study has also extended our understanding of what the implications may be for offspring who become aware of their parents' sexuality or sexual behaviours. Unique to this study are the findings that:

- an awareness of parental sexuality may elicit strong negative affect; feelings of extreme discomfort and pain. It may not only be painful for a child to experience his/her parents openly and explicitly discussing sex, particularly in reference to the unfaithful parents' infidelity, but the study has also shown how difficult an experience it is, for one's parents to disregard, or be unaware of this pain.
- the experience of becoming aware of parental sexuality may also exist in a less explicit, indirect manner; that an awareness of parental sexuality can be developed through the witnessing of the unfaithful parent being affectionate with their new partner. The study found that this can have two consequences, the first is that it can reveal a new dimension of a parents' character to a child, particularly in cases where the child had not witnessed his/her parents have an affectionate relationship with one another. Secondly, by being present and witness to this affection,

feelings of disloyalty on behalf of the child, towards the betrayed parent, can be elicited.

Next, the current study extended our understanding on the implications an experience of parental infidelity can have on the romantic relationships of offspring. Unique to this study are the findings that:

- following an experience of parental infidelity, offspring may experience strong fears of being abandoned by their romantic partners; an incessant worrying about whether their partners will suddenly leave and a constant seeking of reassurance from their partners that this would not be the case. This fear did not appear to be specific to one relationship or one romantic partner but rather, continuous and generalised across relationships. Davila and Bradbury (2001) suggest that an insecure attachment style may be positively associated with an individual's anxiety about being abandoned by a romantic partner and concerns about their worthiness of being loved. Attachment researchers have shown that there is a positive correlation between parental infidelity and insecure attachment styles (Walker & Ehrenberg, 1998) and therefore, this research presents unique findings which provide support for the notion that attachment may be the mediating factor, here.
- parental infidelity can have implications for a different dimension of trust; participants discussed their experiences of actively trying not to be hyper vigilant or lacking in trust in romantic relationships, regardless of whether they authentically trust their parents or not, due to fears of being labelled with negative identities such as "damaged goods" or a woman who has "daddy issues".

- regardless of which category participants fell into: having been unfaithful in a relationship or having been cheated on, there was a unanimous understanding and recognition of the severely negative impact infidelity can have. For participants who have never been unfaithful, infidelity presented as a moral issue they were fundamentally against, whilst for participants who had been unfaithful, an exploration of the impact infidelity can have on partners and/or the comparison of their behaviour to their unfaithful parent led to this becoming for them, an experience of deep regret and a behaviour which lacks sense. This finding is unique as it contradicts earlier findings which suggested that adults who have experienced parental infidelity and been unfaithful in relationships themselves, are significantly more likely than those who have not, to hold the beliefs that infidelity is acceptable and that the outcomes of infidelity are more likely to be positive than negative (Weiser & Weigel, 2017).
- the concept of differentiation was fundamental. Participants exhibited a strong need to differentiate themselves and/or their partners from their unfaithful parent. With regard to differentiating their romantic partners from the unfaithful parent, one participant described actively choosing someone who she felt did not share any commonalities with, bear any resemblance to, or remind her in any way, of her unfaithful parent. Whilst a different participant described strong concerns about commonalities her partner potentially does share with her unfaithful father, despite these commonalities appearing to be very general, i.e. ‘he likes to watch sports on television’; applicable to many individuals. These commonalities were reflected upon as the only negative aspects of her partner, further highlighting how important this differentiation appeared to be. With

regard to participants differentiating themselves from the unfaithful parent, the differentiation appeared to play a role in feeling safe and distancing oneself from the possibility of ever hurting their loved ones with their behaviour. Furthermore, for one participant the potential of sharing traits or characteristics with her unfaithful father transpired as a trigger for anxiety.

The study also extended our understanding and elucidating new findings regarding the psychological experience following the discovery of parental infidelity. Unique to this study are the findings that:

- an extremely important factor was the highlighting of the 'ever-lasting' pain elicited by parental infidelity and the highlighting of the magnitude of the implications of parental infidelity on participants' entire lives. In the current study participants displayed a strong need to convey and emphasise that the pain of this experience is not one which diminishes over-time, despite participants wishing for this to be the case. The study highlights the enormity of this experience for offspring, penetrating across the life-span and across various dimensions of their lives. An element of this which felt striking is that participants appeared very self-assured and certain about the impact of parental infidelity on their lives, for them the importance appeared to lay in conveying that to others; highlighting a potential tendency for others to fail to acknowledge how painful, how impactful and how enduring the experience of parental infidelity can be.
- that children may be unable to distinguish between the separate entities: the family system and their parents' romantic relationship, thus

interpreting parental infidelity as a personal attack on them, by their unfaithful parent. As a result, children can attribute this personal attack to their being unlovable, not good enough and not worthy of parental love. The participants describe that this loss of worthiness to be loved by a parent, can then transcend to questioning whether they are worthy to be loved by anyone. The study identifies three factors which can exasperate feelings of being unworthy of love and/or not good enough. One factor is if the unfaithful parent goes on to have more children with a new partner. The second is if the unfaithful parent reduces the amount of time he/she physically spends with the children and the children perceive the unfaithful parent to be spending this time with a new partner instead. The third is if children experience their unfaithful parent becoming a part of a new entity with their new partner, of which they are not a part of.

- parental infidelity can elicit feelings of shame and this study presents two new dimensions of the experience of shame. The first is that one participant described feeling ashamed of herself for not having supported or cared for her father, the betrayed parent, to a greater extent at the time of the discovery of the parent infidelity. The second is that some participants conveyed a strong need to establish why they were not ashamed and used external factors such as academic accolades or professional successes, as evidence.
- parental infidelity can have implications for children's developing identities. The study found that children identified as "damaged goods" and being from a "broken home", following experiences of infidelity, which led to their experiencing lowered self-worth and anxiety about being attached to these labels, by others.

- the experience of blame can take differing forms. It is not only 'self-blame', as identified in earlier research which can be experienced by children following parental infidelity, but this study found that children may also experience, a betrayed mother explicitly blaming the children and their behaviour, for their father's infidelity and subsequent departure from the family home, which can have highly negative and highly impactful implications.
- children may experience a loss of identity, following a parents' infidelity. This presented itself in two ways. The first was a participants' description of losing the part of his identity which he shared with his mother; an experience of being replaced by his mother's lover. The second was participants' descriptions of losing their identity as a family unit; no longer understanding or knowing what the term family meant, who it included or what it represented.

Finally, the fourth master theme 'the pathway to healing'; highlighting three specific elements which participants described as fundamental to their process of healing was an entirely unique finding of the current study.

- The first sub-theme elucidated the importance of recognising the positive, restorative implications of parental infidelity. One facet of this was the finding that for some participants, parental infidelity led to the end of an unhappy marriage, or an end to the conflict within the marriage, and therefore an end to participants' witnessing parental conflict and distress, which resulted in their gaining a sense of freedom to lead happier lives. Another facet of the positive implications was the participants' recognition of all of their learning; the breadth of knowledge

and insight they have gained as a result of their experience of parental infidelity. This referred predominantly to learning about romantic relationships; shaping participants beliefs about what is acceptable, what is desirable and ultimately what constitutes a healthy romantic relationship. The final facet of positive implications was the assertion that infidelity can serve as a motivator for success. For one participant, this referred to academic and professional success; as a means of striving towards independence and empowerment. For another, this referred to a deepened sense of resilience and self-assuredness regarding her ability to cope.

- The second sub-theme was the ability to intellectualise and as a result understand to some extent, the causality of the infidelity; why their parent(s) did what they did. The participants predominantly attributed the causality of the infidelity to two factors: the turbulence in their parents' marriage prior to the infidelity and/or the unfaithful parents' upbringing and early experiences which may have impacted the way in which he/she behaves in relationships. The study found that understanding through intellectualisation allowed participants to develop a sense of acceptance towards the unfaithful parents' behaviour, though it remained very important for participants to emphasise that this understanding and/or acceptance did not equate to approval.
- The final sub-theme was the importance of honesty and openness. This finding had several dimensions. Participants described the positive implications of having had honest, open conversations with their parents about the infidelity. Participants also described the negative implications and the distress elicited, as a result of secret keeping and as a result of

an absence of honest, open conversations within the family about the infidelity.

4.4 Clinical implications

4.4.1 Adultification

The findings suggest that it is important to recognise that it is inappropriate for children to take on the role of an emotional carer for a distressed parent. Parents should maintain appropriate emotional boundaries with their children and not call upon them to be carers, confidantes or ‘safety buffers’. For offspring, this can have multiple negative consequences, some of which may become elucidated much later in life.

It is important to acknowledge that the consequences of infidelity are not restricted to the parameters of the relationship dyad and recognise that the entire family system may be impacted. Thus, it is important for children to have a safe space in which they can express their emotions and should not feel these emotions need to be internalised. Whilst it is common for a distressed parent to become emotionally overwhelmed during this time, it is important for parents not to become emotionally unavailable and create a space within which children feel like a burden or an added stressor for the distressed parent. In addition, findings suggest that it is important for children, to have the extent of their distress as a result of the infidelity, acknowledged by both the betrayed and the unfaithful parent.

Further, it is important to differentiate the relationship between the parents themselves and the relationship between each parent and his/her children.

These two relationships are entirely separate entities. Therefore it is important for children to feel they hold the right to respond to each parent in the way that feels authentic to them. Thus, a child's relationship with each parent should not be dependent on the child's feelings towards, or relationship with, their other parent.

In addition, it may be effective for clinicians or clients, to hold in mind that the assuming of this role in early life, may relate to the way in which an individual responds to the distress of others, later in life, which may relate to difficulties they experience at present.

Next, the current study has found that an awareness of parental sexuality, explicit and/or implicit, can have negative consequences for a child's emotional well-being, sexual development and relationship with one or both parents. Therefore, it is important to keep knowledge of parental sexual behaviour, out of children's awareness, to the extent that this is possible. Where this is not possible, for example if a child overhears a conversation between his/her parents which is of a sexual nature, it may be helpful for parents to acknowledge that this is likely to have been an unpleasant experience for the child.

4.4.2 Challenges in romantic relationships

This theme highlights the role parent infidelity can play in the difficulties adult offspring experience in their own romantic relationships. Understanding the way in which parental infidelity may relate to specific challenges can be particularly

useful knowledge for clinicians working therapeutically with couples, with families or with individuals who are presenting with relationship difficulties.

The findings suggest that it is imperative for offspring to be recognised as their own entity; differentiated from either the parent, betrayed or unfaithful, as comparisons or suggestions of resemblance, can trigger various manifestations of anxiety and concern. Similarly, it has transpired that even the sharing of very general characteristics such as enjoying watching sport on television, between adults' romantic partners and their unfaithful parent can elicit anxiety for individuals who have experienced parental infidelity, which could in-turn elicit problems within their romantic relationships. Based on the fact that the characteristics which may trigger these concerns appear to be very general, it may remain unknown to individuals and their partners that this is serving as an elicitor of anxiety, thus this knowledge may be particularly valuable for clinicians to hold in mind.

Next, as the findings suggest that parental infidelity can lead to problematic views on marriage, it may be valuable for adults who have experienced parental infidelity to have an open, safe space in which they are encouraged to discuss their views on marriage, the meanings they attach to this experience and what their fears and concerns surrounding this long-term commitment may be.

In addition, regarding implications within a broader context, this research also highlights the negative consequences societal labelling of notions such as "damaged goods" and "daddy issues" can have and elucidates the value of working towards diminishing their existence in our society.

4.4.3 The psychological experience

The findings of this study suggest that the validation of this experience is paramount; the acknowledgement that it can be an enduringly painful trauma, potentially impacting various aspects of one's life, may be a fundamental part of an individual's process of healing.

The findings have also elucidated the influential role parental infidelity can have on a child's loss of self-esteem. As demonstrated by the participants, this loss of self-esteem and self-worth can have serious negative implications for a child's mental health. Thus, it is imperative for children to understand that they are not one with the betrayed parent; that they are a separate entity and that their father's infidelity is not a personal attack nor is it a reflection of their worthiness of love; a belief which can become enacted in their own relationships. To aid this understanding and work towards ensuring children do not feel physically or emotionally abandoned, it may be helpful for parents, in particular the unfaithful parent, to reassure children of their love, spend time with the children to the extent to which they did before the discovery of the infidelity and endeavour to build new bonds with children; including them in any life changes, such as moving into new home, moving onto a new relationship or having more children.

Moreover, findings also suggest it is important for children to understand and recognise that their parents' behaviour is not a reflection of their character, personality or the way in which they will behave in their own relationships.

Furthermore, it is fundamental that children understand they are not to blame or responsible in any way, for the behaviour of their parent(s). It is important to ensure parents are not explicitly blaming children due to their own emotional

turmoil and to remain aware that children may have a tendency to blame themselves, thus to reassure them that this is not the case.

In addition, it is crucially important to recognise that for children, the experience of parental infidelity can lead to multiple simultaneous losses, despite this perhaps not being clear for others to recognise, and may take time and therapeutic work, to process.

4.4.4 The pathway to healing

This theme elucidates the fact that regardless of how the positive implications of parental infidelity may manifest themselves in an individual's life, it may be a crucial piece of the puzzle when it comes to the process of healing. Whilst parental infidelity can be a dark, traumatic time, the current study suggests that there may be restorative elements of the experience and it may be important, particularly for clinicians to understand, that recognising, acknowledging and reflecting on these elements may be an effective way to re-frame this experience.

Furthermore, it may be helpful for clinicians and/or parents to encourage offspring to intellectualise the infidelity; to explore thoughts about why the unfaithful parent may have behaved in this way. This certainly does not suggest that offspring should avoid the affective response elicited by the infidelity, but rather, to take various perspectives in order to gain a deeper insight which may aid the process of understanding, acceptance and empathy to some extent.

In addition, the current study highlights how painful and traumatic having to maintain topic-avoidance and secrecy thus internalising emotions, can be for

children and as a result, the negative implications this can have for their mental well-being. Therefore it may be important for clinicians and/or parents to hold in mind that honesty is fundamental. Creating a space in which open, honest conversations about the infidelity and its' potential subsequent ramifications can be had, without imposing rules on children about keeping secrets or upholding topic avoidance, can relieve children of negative emotions and/or protect children from the negative impact infidelity may have, in the absence of this honesty. It is also be important to note, that this honesty and openness should be thought-out, to ensure it is always in the best interest of the children and not being used as a tool to relieve the parent(s) of distress, or manipulate children's loyalties toward either parent.

4.4.5 Training

This research may have implications for the training of counselling psychologists as it elucidates the importance of understanding an individual's subjective experience and personal context in the exploration of their emotional difficulties. This provides support for the philosophical roots of the counselling psychology discipline; the humanistic value base promoting holisticism, viewing the individual in context and whilst working with symptoms, biological bases and diagnoses of mental health problems, placing fundamental value on formulation, in order to understand the underlying issues which might be driving them.

4.5 Limitations of the current study and suggestions for future research

There are a number of elements important to consider, with regard to the limitations of this research and how this research may be extended and built upon by future studies.

Firstly, I recognise that all participants in this study are Caucasian and the majority of participants are female. It would be interesting, perhaps for future research, to explore whether participants from other cultural backgrounds or a sample with a larger number of male participants, may or may not have made sense of their experiences differently.

Next, it is important to acknowledge that there are varying definitions of infidelity and despite having limited this research to sexual infidelity in order to ease the process of defining infidelity, it still remains an exploration of participants' subjective perceptions and beliefs about what constitutes an unfaithful sexual behaviour; different participants may hold different meanings.

Another limitation of the study may be the characteristics of the participants, as a group. According to Rozmovits and Ziebland (2004) the motivation of individuals who volunteer to take part in research, may differ from the motivation of individuals recruited in differing ways. Volunteers may have a specific motivation, for example, the topic in question may have been an experience which holds particular significance in their lives, perhaps a particularly enjoyable or particularly difficult experience for example, and therefore eliciting a strong need or desire to talk about it. Reassuringly, to some extent, the participants in the current study presented a number of different reasons for volunteering. However, one element which may be worth noting is that all participants had some form of educative experience in counselling, psychology or research in

the social sciences field. This may have had an impact on the findings, as this may have increased the participants' willingness to discuss the topic or partake in psychological research, or further, may have increased participants' knowledge of counselling and psychotherapy and/or the emotional processing of traumatic events, which may have influenced the way in which they were able to discuss and reflect upon their lived experience of parental infidelity. This, in particular was elucidated by several of the participants who discussed the impact they perceived the parental infidelity to have had on their siblings, but described their siblings as unable or strongly unwilling to take part in research exploring this topic. Thus, in future, researchers could perhaps utilize a stratified sampling method in order to deliberately ensure a more representative sample of individuals who have experienced parental infidelity.

Moreover, a limitation which reflects perhaps a methodological challenge, the IPA methodology has been critiqued for being highly dependent on participants' use of language; their ability to articulate the meanings they have attached to their lived experiences (Willig, 2001). Therefore, there may have been elements of participants' experiences which they were unable and/or unwilling to articulate. Thus, this research could perhaps be extended by adopting multiple methodological approaches; triangulating the parental infidelity phenomenon.

Another aspect which was not focussed upon in this study is whether or not participants' parents became divorced after the discovery of the infidelity. In the current study five out of the six marriages did end as a result of the infidelity but the impact of this was not explored. Future research could perhaps explore the role this specific variable may play in influencing the lived experience of parental infidelity.

Another interesting element was the existence of children, i.e. participants' half siblings, who were a product of the infidelity or a product of a relationship with whom the unfaithful parent had engaged in infidelity with. This aspect of the lived experience was explored in the current study with participants who raised it because they had experienced it. However, it appeared to be an important factor for these participants and therefore may be an interesting idea for future research; perhaps an exploration of how the existence of half-siblings who are the product of infidelity may influence the lived experience of parental infidelity, or specifically an exploration of the relationship between half-siblings, one of whom was a product of infidelity.

A further idea may be building upon the master theme 'the pathway to healing'. As our knowledge in this area is particularly limited, future research could extend this perhaps by exploring in greater depth, each of the individual sub-themes elucidated within this master theme in the current study, or by designing research which specifically aims to elucidate more factors which may be important to the process of healing.

Personal concluding reflections

To conclude the discussion, I wanted to take a moment for some personal reflections about how I feel now that my research has come to an end.

As I described in my introduction, I was unsure if I wanted to explore this topic in great depth; I was concerned about the emotional response I would have to revisiting my own experience in an honest way and to hearing the stories of others who have experienced parental infidelity too.

Now as I come to the end, I can be certain that this has been one of the most important and one of the most valuable decisions I have ever made. Conducting this research has been validating; it has validated my pain and my experience of deep emotional turmoil following my own discovery of parental infidelity, in a way that nothing else has managed to. I have gained deep comfort and strength from hearing my participants' stories. As I moved through my transcripts, in some moments I felt as though I was reading my own story, I related so deeply. In other moments, I was struck by deep surprise at my response to elements of this experience I had never experienced, never even considered.

One of these surprises which has left its' mark on me, is one sub-theme in particular: 'restoration through destruction'; the importance of recognising the positive that may have come out of this painful experience. Prior to this research, I had not considered for a single second, that there had been any positive elements of this experience, or that this would be important in any way. Now as I reflect, I can think of many and recognising this has been invaluable for me. In fact, one of the most important positive implications of this experience is the conducting of this research. As I reflect further, I think about the courage, the strength and the determination it has taken for me to use one of the most painful experiences of my life in order to carry out this deeply personal research. I had never taken the time to reflect on how proud I am of myself and I am thankful to this research, for creating the path for me to do just that.

When I started this research, my goal was to generate the knowledge and understanding I would have hoped to have had many years ago and which may now help others in that position. Hearing from my participants how useful taking

part in this research has been for them is hugely rewarding in itself and my hope is that this research continues to reach those who may benefit from it.

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Appendix A

Advertisement poster

Department of Psychology
City University London

Are you over 18?

Have you had an experience of parental infidelity?

We are looking for volunteers to take part in a study exploring the lived experience of parental infidelity.

You would be asked to take part in an interview discussing your experience of parental infidelity. The study is recruiting males and females over the age of 18, who discovered their parental infidelity at least 10 years ago.

Your participation would involve 1 interview, which will last approximately 60 - 90 minutes. Your time will be greatly appreciated and any travel costs will be compensated.

For more information about this study, or to take part, please contact:

Lutfiye Salih
at
Lutfiye.Salih@city.ac.uk,

Supervisor: Dr Sara Chaudry

Psychology Department

sara.chaudry.1@city.ac.uk

This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through the *City University* Research Ethics Committee, City University London: PSYETH (P/L) 16/17 40

If you would like to complain about any aspect of the study, please contact the Secretary to the University's Senate Research Ethics Committee on 020 7040 3040 or via email: Anna.Ramberg.1@city.ac.uk

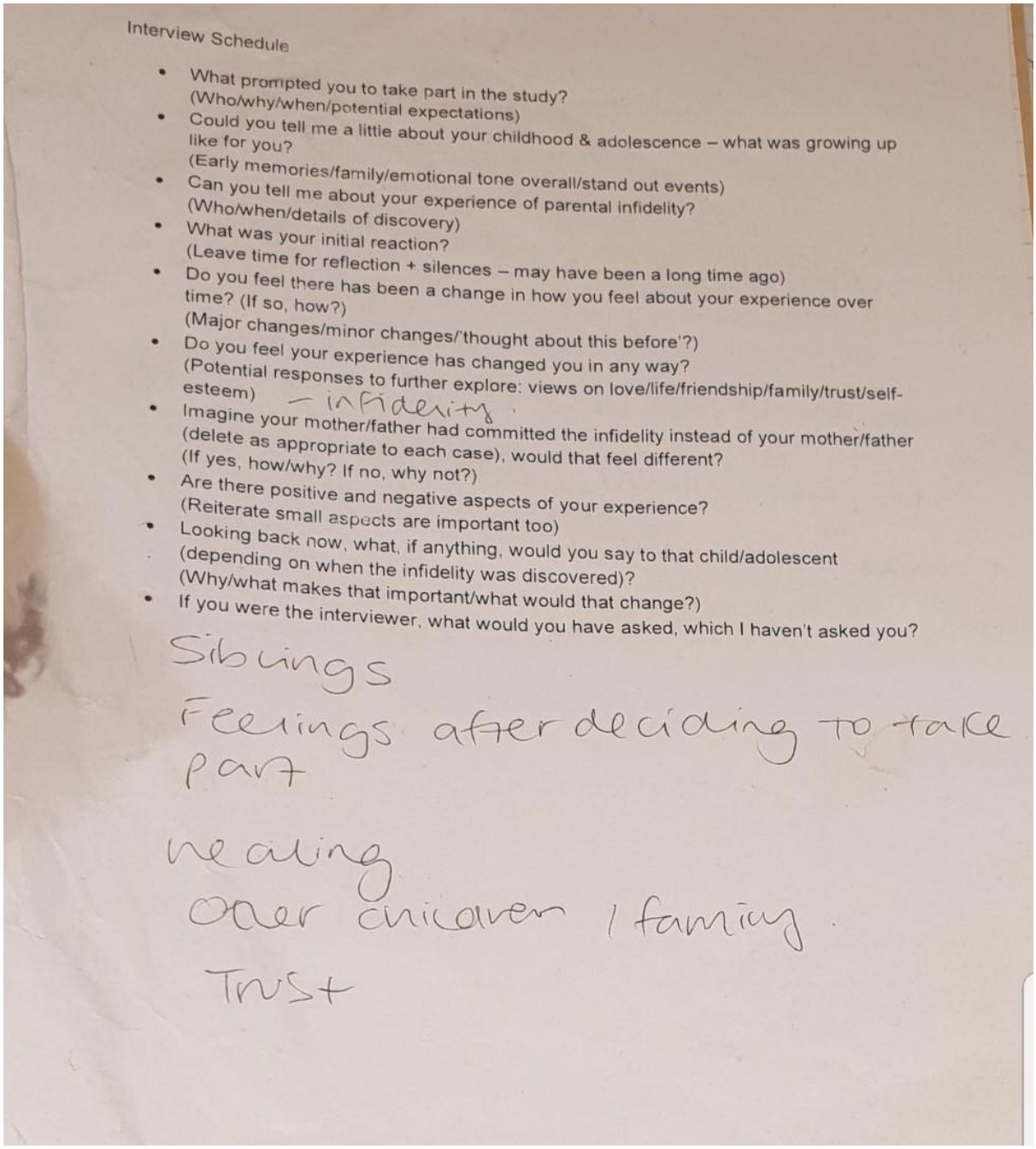
Appendix B

Initial interview schedule

- What prompted you to take part in the study?
  (Who/why/when/potential expectations)
- Could you tell me a little about your childhood & adolescence – what was growing up like for you?
  (Early memories/family/emotional tone overall/stand out events)
- Can you tell me about your experience of parental infidelity?
  (Who/when/details of discovery)
- What was your initial reaction?
  (Leave time for reflection + silences – may have been a long time ago)
- Do you feel there has been a change in how you feel about your experience over time? (If so, how?)
  (Major changes/minor changes/'thought about this before'?)
- Do you feel your experience has changed you in any way?
  (Potential responses to further explore: views on love/life/friendship/family/trust/self-esteem)
- Imagine your mother/father had committed the infidelity instead of your mother/father (delete as appropriate to each case), would that feel different?
  (If yes, how/why? If no, why not?)
- Are there positive and negative aspects of your experience?
  (Reiterate small aspects are important too)
- Looking back now, what, if anything, would you say to that child/adolescent (depending on when the infidelity was discovered)?
  (Why/what makes that important/what would that change?)
- If you were the interviewer, what would you have asked, which I haven't asked you?

Appendix C

Revised interview schedule



Interview Schedule

- What prompted you to take part in the study?
  (Who/why/when/potential expectations)
- Could you tell me a little about your childhood & adolescence – what was growing up like for you?
  (Early memories/family/emotional tone overall/stand out events)
- Can you tell me about your experience of parental infidelity?
  (Who/when/details of discovery)
- What was your initial reaction?
  (Leave time for reflection + silences – may have been a long time ago)
- Do you feel there has been a change in how you feel about your experience over time? (If so, how?)
  (Major changes/minor changes/'thought about this before'?)
- Do you feel your experience has changed you in any way?
  (Potential responses to further explore: views on love/life/friendship/family/trust/self-esteem) – infidelity.
- Imagine your mother/father had committed the infidelity instead of your mother/father (delete as appropriate to each case), would that feel different?
  (If yes, how/why? If no, why not?)
- Are there positive and negative aspects of your experience?
  (Reiterate small aspects are important too)
- Looking back now, what, if anything, would you say to that child/adolescent (depending on when the infidelity was discovered)?
  (Why/what makes that important/what would that change?)
- If you were the interviewer, what would you have asked, which I haven't asked you?

Siblings

Feelings after deciding to take part

Healing

Older children / family.

Trust

Appendix D

Participant information sheet

Title of study: Exploring the lived experience of parental infidelity

We would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether you would like to take part it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

What is the purpose of the study?
This study is being undertaken for a research thesis, as part of the City University, Counseling Psychology Professional Doctorate programme. There is currently a paucity of research exploring the experience of parental infidelity for adult offspring. The existing research has focused solely on the relationship between parental infidelity and romantic relationships. The current study aims to build on this research and expand upon it by exploring how adults view themselves, others and the world following such an experience, in an attempt to generate knowledge which can have clinical implications in the therapeutic work carried out with such individuals who are experiencing emotional and psychological difficulties. The duration of the study in entirety is anticipated to last three years, with data collection taking place over several weeks.

Why have I been invited?
The researcher has recruited 8 individuals who have experienced parental infidelity, which was discovered at least ten years ago. In this study, parental infidelity refers to unfaithful sexual behaviours, of either/both parent(s) outside of the monogamous marital relationship. All participants are over the age of 18 and are of both sexes and of a diverse range of ethnicities, religions, and sexual orientations. Participants have been selected on the basis that researchers do not anticipate the arousal of psychological or emotional distress.

Do I have to take part?
Participation in the study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any stage without providing reason and without penalization and you have the right to request withdrawal of the data you have provided for up to six weeks, once data collection has been completed. You have the right to refrain from answering any questions which you feel are too personal or intrusive, without being penalized or disadvantaged in any way. If you are a student at City University, taking part in this research will not impact your grades in any way.
It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be asked to sign a consent form.

What will happen if I take part?

You will be involved throughout the data collection process of the research, which will take place on one day at City University. The participants will meet with the researcher face to face on one occasion. The aims and the procedure of the study will be outlined and you will have the opportunity to ask any questions you may have. Next, a semi-structured interview, which will last approximately 60 - 90 minutes, will be conducted by the researcher to explore your experience.

This is a qualitative study, using an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) methodology. The study is concerned with the exploration of the subjective individual experience.

The research is taking place at City University London and will formally end once the doctorate, of which this research is a part, is completed.

Expenses

- Travel to and from research location: City University London

What do I have to do?
You are expected to meet with researchers on one occasion to take part in a semi-structured interview about your experience of parental infidelity. Costs of your travel to and from the university will be covered by the researcher. You are expected to raise any concerns you may become aware of during the course of the study.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?
The researcher is aware that the topic being explored is of a sensitive nature. Discussing the experience of parental infidelity may raise some emotional or psychological distress. Participants are able to omit questions they feel may have such effects.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?
Participants in qualitative studies often report gaining from the experience. The semi-structured interview will be conducted in a way, which hopes to aid this. In addition to this, the participant will be taking part in a study which hopes to contribute knowledge to a wider community and will potentially have significant clinical implications for the counseling psychology field; by way of developing therapeutic interventions and educating mental health practitioners, for the benefit of future clients.

What will happen when the research study stops?
During the study, participant data will be anonymised, encrypted and safely stored. If the project is stopped prematurely, all data will be destroyed. Otherwise, data will be kept for 5 years following publication, in accordance with the BPS guidelines.

Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

The study will follow the BPS privacy and confidentiality guidelines. Interviews will be digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. The researcher and supervisor of this research will have access to the data before it is anonymised. If the data is published or shared in any capacity, all personally identifiable information will be removed, no future use of this information will take place and participants will have access to any publications. Data will be securely stored at City University, whilst the research is being undertaken. If the project is stopped prematurely, all data will be destroyed. Otherwise, data will be kept for 5 years following publication, in accordance with the BPS guidelines. Researcher-participant confidentiality will only be breached in cases where there are concerns about the safety of participants, safety of others

who may be in danger as a result of participant behaviours or as a result of the researcher's statutory obligations.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The results of the research study will be included in the current thesis, for which this study is being conducted. Future publications are also possible and should the results be further published, anonymity will be maintained. Researchers will ask for participant contact details prior to data collection and participants will be asked to indicate whether they would like to receive a copy of the summary of the results and any future publications. If so, these will be disseminated via e-mail.

What will happen if I don't want to carry on with the study?
You have the right to withdraw from the study, at any stage, without providing an explanation and without penalization. Once interviews have been conducted, you have up to 6 weeks to request data withdrawal.

What if there is a problem?

If you have any problems, concerns or questions about this study, you should ask to speak to a member of the research team. If you remain unhappy and wish to complain formally, you can do this through the University complaints procedure. To complain about the study, you need to phone 020 7040 3040. You can then ask to speak to the Secretary to Senate Research Ethics Committee and inform them that the name of the project is: Exploring the lived experience of parental infidelity.

You could also write to the Secretary at:
Anna Ramberg
Secretary to Senate Research Ethics Committee
Research Office, E214
City University London
Northampton Square
London
EC1V 0HB
Email: Anna.Ramberg.1@city.ac.uk

City University London holds insurance policies which apply to this study. If you feel you have been harmed or injured by taking part in this study you may be eligible to claim compensation. This does not affect your legal rights to seek compensation. If you are harmed due to someone's negligence, then you may have grounds for legal action.

Who has reviewed the study?
This study has been approved by City University London Research Ethics Committee, [PSYETH (P/L) 16/17 40]

Further information and contact details

Lutfiye Salih - Lutfiye.Salih@city.ac.uk

Dr Sara Chaudry - sara.chaudry.1@city.ac.uk

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

Appendix E

Informed consent form

Title of Study: **Exploring the lived experience of parental infidelity**

Ethics approval code: [PSYETH (P/L) 16/17 40]

Please initial box

1.	I agree to take part in the above City University London research project. I have had the project explained to me, and I have read the participant information sheet, which I may keep for my records. I understand this will involve • being interviewed by the researcher • allowing the interview to be audio-taped	
2.	This information will be held and processed for the following purpose(s): To answer the research question I understand that any information I provide is confidential, and that information that could lead to the identification of any individual will not be disclosed in any reports on the project, or to any other party. No identifiable personal data will be published. The identifiable data will not be shared with any other organisation. I also understand that this confidentiality will only be breached where there are concerns regarding my safety, the safety of others or in cases where the researcher is	

	statutorily obliged.	
3.	I understand that my participation is voluntary, that I can choose not to participate in part or all of the project, and that I can withdraw at any stage of the project without being penalized or disadvantaged in any way. Whilst I can withdraw from the study at any stage, I understand that I can request my data be withdrawn from the study, for up to six weeks after data collection has been completed.	
4.	I agree to City University London recording and processing this information about me. I understand that this information will be used only for the purpose(s) set out in this statement and my consent is conditional on the University complying with its duties and obligations under the Data Protection Act 1998.	
5.	I agree to take part in the above study.	

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Signature	Date
Name of Researcher	Signature	Date

When completed, 1 copy for participant; 1 copy for researcher file.

Note to researcher: to ensure anonymity, consent forms should NOT include participant numbers and should be stored separately.

Appendix F

Debrief form

Exploring the lived experience of parental infidelity

DEBRIEF INFORMATION

Thank you for taking part in this study. Now that it's finished we'd like to tell you a bit more about it.

This research aims to explore the lived experience of parental infidelity, understand the meanings individuals have attached to their experience and explore how individuals make sense of this experience. Participants were asked to attend interviews as researchers felt this was an effective way to gain insight into each individual's subjective experience, in a way that was meaningful and in-depth. The researcher selected a diverse group of participants in order to understand this experience from different perspectives but also to determine common themes which may appear to arise for a majority of individuals, regardless of factors such as: ethnicity, religion, sex and sexual orientation. A better understanding of the emotional difficulties which can emerge for individuals experiencing parental infidelity can have significant clinical implications, as mental health practitioners can work with these individuals in an empathetic, knowledgeable manner and may develop more effective therapeutic interventions.

If the study has raised any concerns for you, please enquire for further support. Below are the contact details of local support services:

- Mind – Islington: http://www.islingtonmind.org.uk/ - 02033019850
- iCope Psychological Therapies Service, Islington: http://www.candi.nhs.uk/services/icope-psychological-therapies-service-south-islington
- Camden & Islington NHS Trust: http://www.candi.nhs.uk/

If you are not local to the area, you may want to contact your GP. Alternatively, below are the contact details of some national support lines:

- SANE: http://www.sane.org.uk/home - 03003047000

- Samaritans: http://www.samaritans.org/ - 116123

We hope you found the study interesting. If you have any other questions please do not hesitate to contact us at the following:

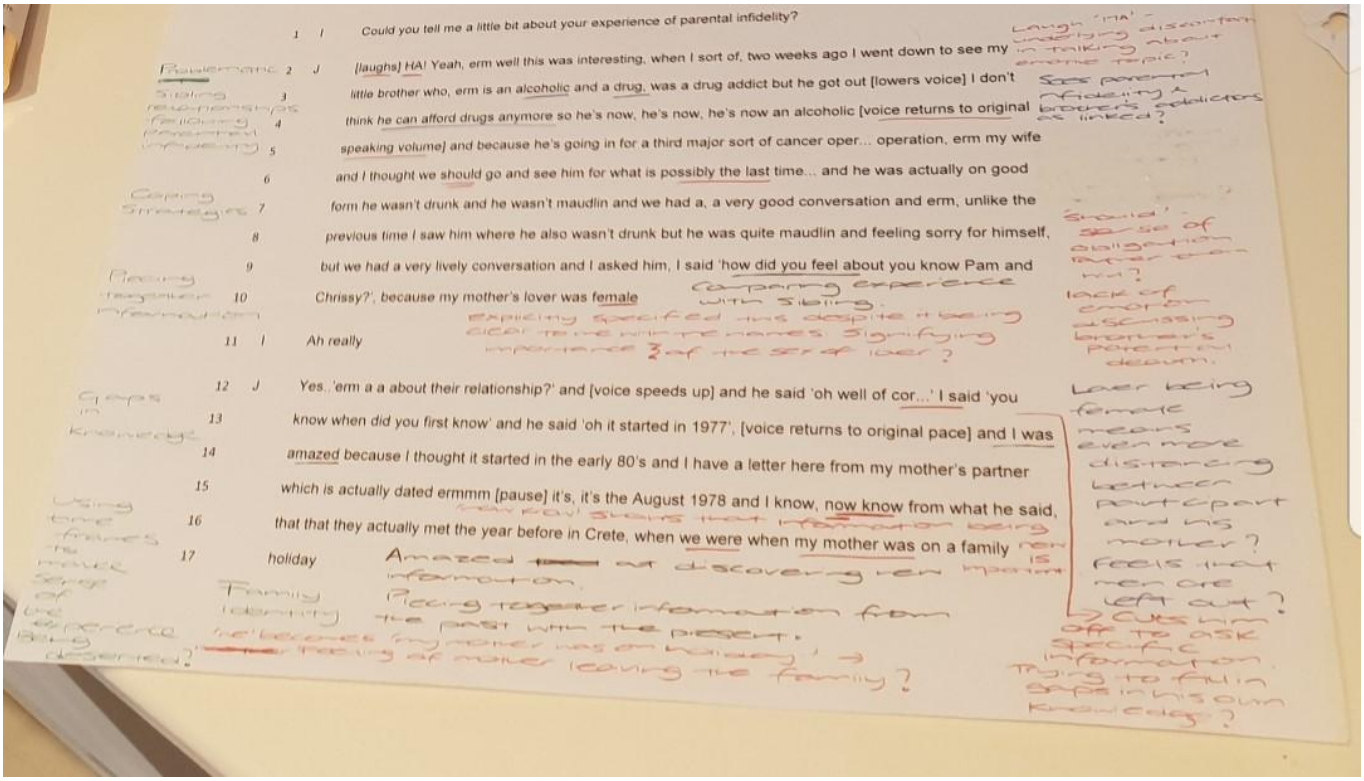
Lutfiye Salih - Lutfiye.Salih@city.ac.uk

Dr Sara Chaudry – sara.chaudry.1@city.ac.uk

Ethics approval code: [PSYETH (P/L) 16/17 40]

Appendix G

An example of annotated transcript



1 I Could you tell me a little bit about your experience of parental infidelity?

2 J [laughs] HA! Yeah, erm well this was interesting, when I sort of, two weeks ago I went down to see my

3 little brother who, erm is an alcoholic and a drug, was a drug addict but he got out [lowers voice] I don't

4 think he can afford drugs anymore so he's now, he's now, he's now an alcoholic [voice returns to original

5 speaking volume] and because he's going in for a third major sort of cancer oper... operation, erm my wife

6 and I thought we should go and see him for what is possibly the last time... and he was actually on good

7 form he wasn't drunk and he wasn't maudlin and we had a, a very good conversation and erm, unlike the

8 previous time I saw him where he also wasn't drunk but he was quite maudlin and feeling sorry for himself,

9 but we had a very lively conversation and I asked him, I said 'how did you feel about you know Pam and

10 Chrissy?', because my mother's lover was female

11 I Ah really

12 J Yes. 'erm a a about their relationship?' and [voice speeds up] and he said 'oh well of cor...' I said 'you

13 know when did you first know' and he said 'oh it started in 1977', [voice returns to original pace] and I was

14 amazed because I thought it started in the early 80's and I have a letter here from my mother's partner

15 which is actually dated ermmm [pause] it's, it's the August 1978 and I know, now know from what he said,

16 that that they actually met the year before in Crete, when we were when my mother was on a family

17 holiday

Appendix H

A list of emergent themes in chronological order for one participant

John - Emergent themes

Piecing information together

Problematic sibling relationships

Alcoholism

Drug addiction

Gaps in knowledge

Using time frames to make sense of experience

Shock

Changing family identity

Being abandoned

Discovering the 'new' parent

Withholding emotional responses

Confusion

Perception of strong emotion with a lack of information

Lack of acceptance

Loss of maternal closeness

Identity

Feeling excluded

Feeling at fault: self-blame

Understanding causality of infidelity

Bones of contention

Picking a side

Feeling put down

Intellectual vs emotional dichotomy

Loss: A painful separation

Loss of confidence

Seeking to prove self-worth

Loss of power

Loss of self-esteem

Pain

Siblings as rivals

Taking on adult responsibility

Emotional abandonment

Differentiation: differentiating the self from the parent

Infidelity = Destruction

Caring for siblings

The first name parent: disconnection

Drinking to 'blot out reality'

Coming to mother's defence

Siblings as sources of information

Awareness of parental sexuality

Anger

Becoming mother's confidante

Confirmed suspicions

Disregarded (dismissed) pain

The unknown

Positive impact of infidelity

Intergenerational transmission of infidelity

Difficulty expressing emotions

Betrayal

Therapy as a coping tool

Exposure to parental conflict

Fear of becoming like one's parent

Seeking information

'Keeping the hive together'

Intellectualising the infidelity

Appendix I

Clustered sub-themes for one participant

John – Clustered emergent themes and labelled sub-themes

Putting the pieces together

Piecing information together

Gaps in knowledge

Confusion

Confirmed suspicions

The remaining unknown

Seeking information

Complicated sibling relationships

Problematic sibling relationships

Siblings as rivals

Siblings as sources of information

Caring for siblings

Becoming the adult

Taking on adult responsibility

Awareness of parental sexuality

Becoming mother's confidante

Coming to mother's defence

Coping mechanisms

Alcoholism

Drug addiction

Therapy

Drinking to ‘blot out reality’

The emotional experience

Shock

Being abandoned

Anger

Pain

Dismissal of pain

Feeling put-down

Emotional abandonment

Feeling excluded

Feeling at fault: self-blame

‘Bones of contention’

Withholding emotional responses

Difficulty expressing emotions

Betrayal

Infidelity = Destruction

Lack of acceptance

Who are we now?

Identity

Changing family identity

Discovering the ‘new’ parent

Teams

Picking a side

Picking teams

Sense-making process

Intellectualising the infidelity

Understanding causality of infidelity

Intellectual vs emotional dichotomy

Using time frames to make sense of experience

Loss

Loss: A painful separation

Loss of confidence

Loss of maternal closeness

Loss of power

Self-esteem

Impact on self-esteem

Seeking to prove self-worth

Positive outcomes

'Keeping the hive together'

Positive impact of infidelity

Differentiation

Fear of becoming like one's parent

The first name parent: disconnection

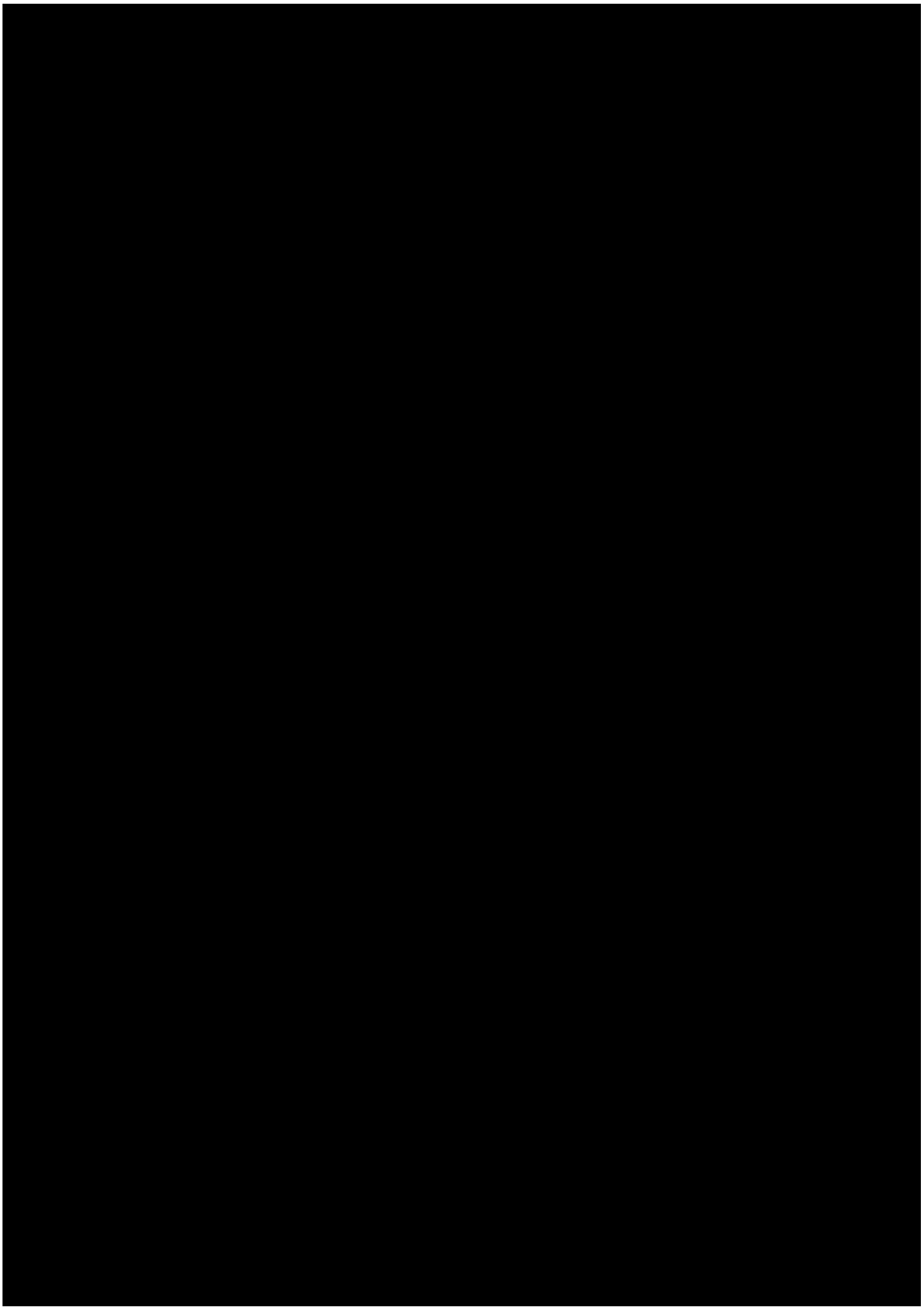
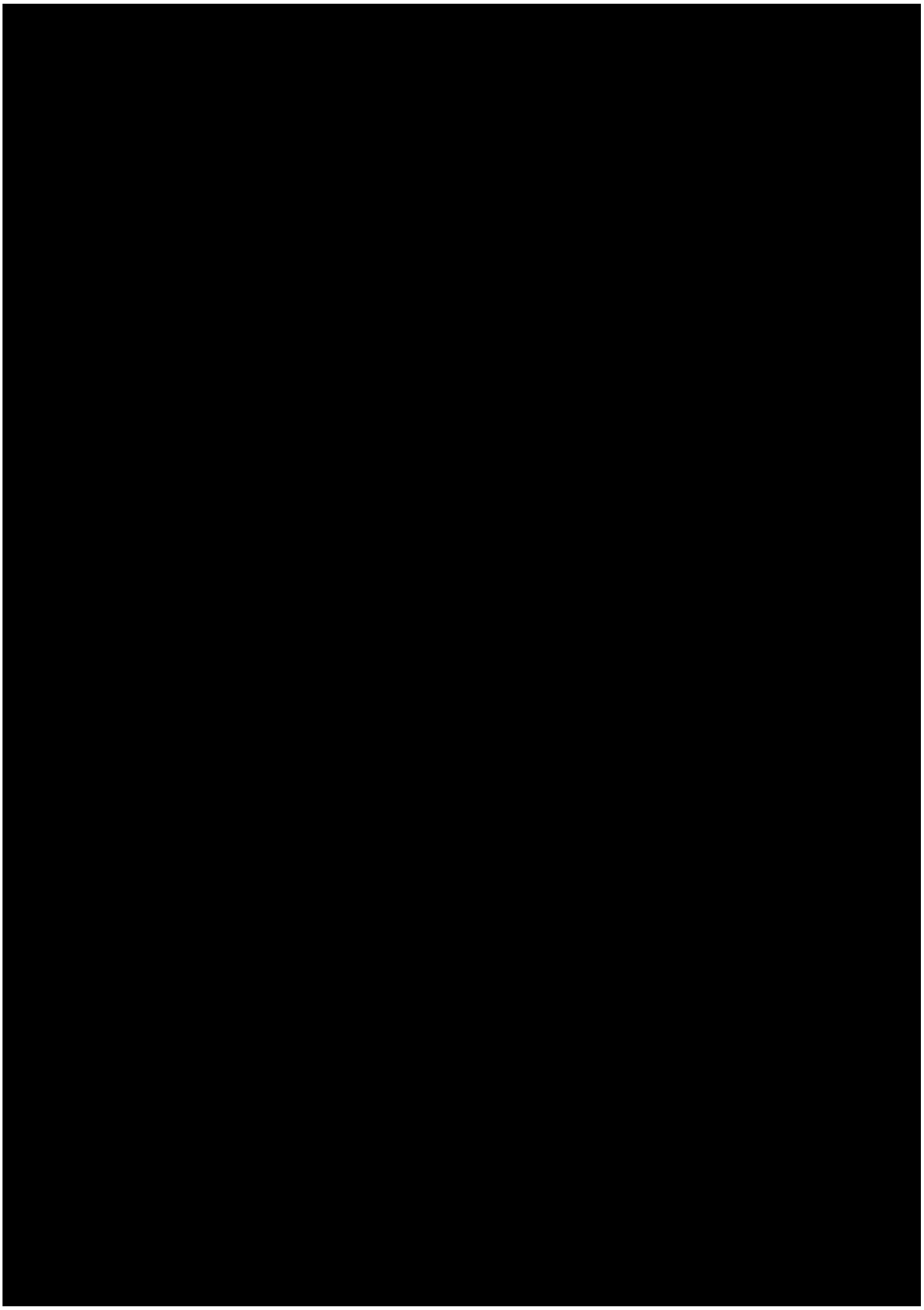
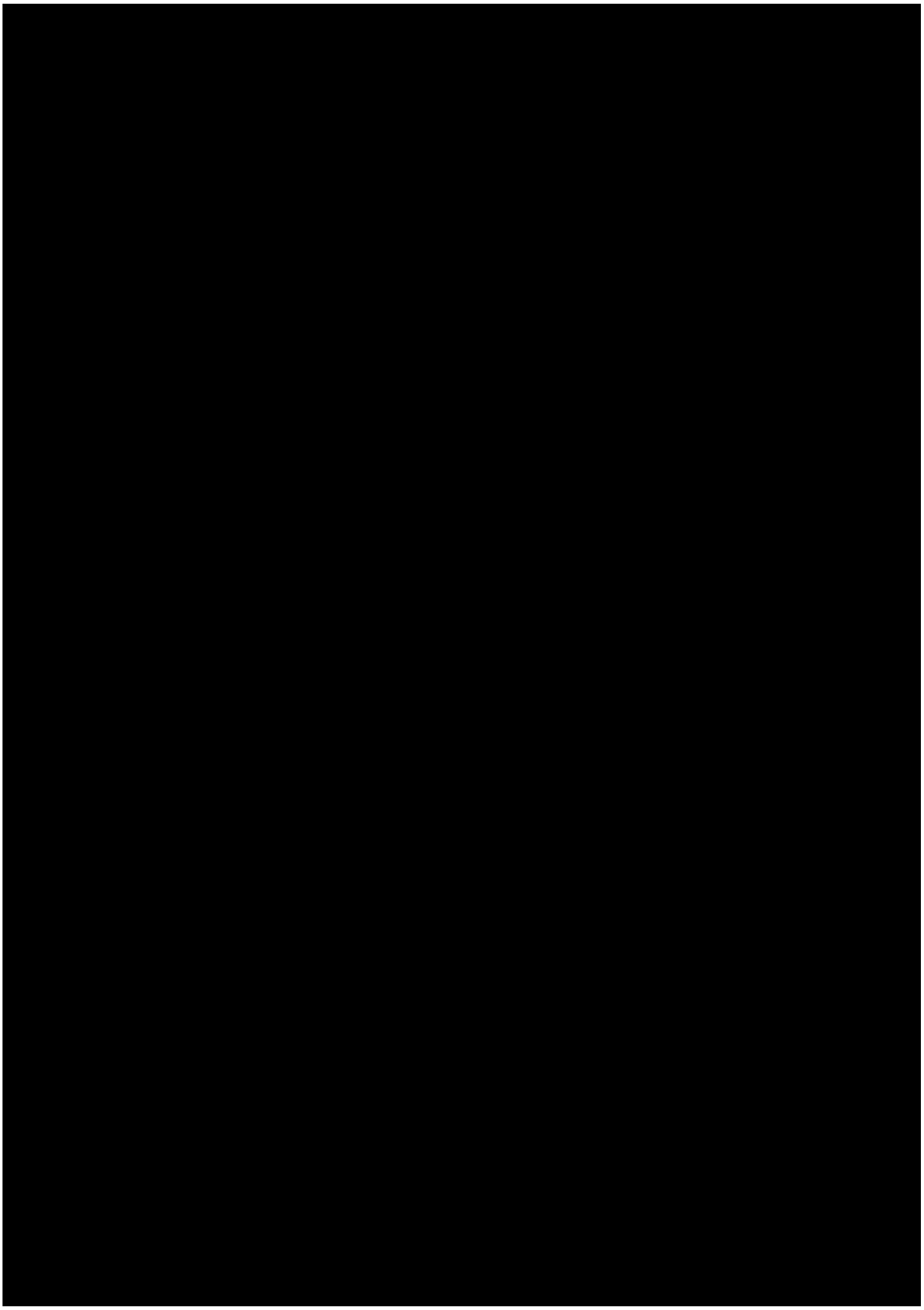
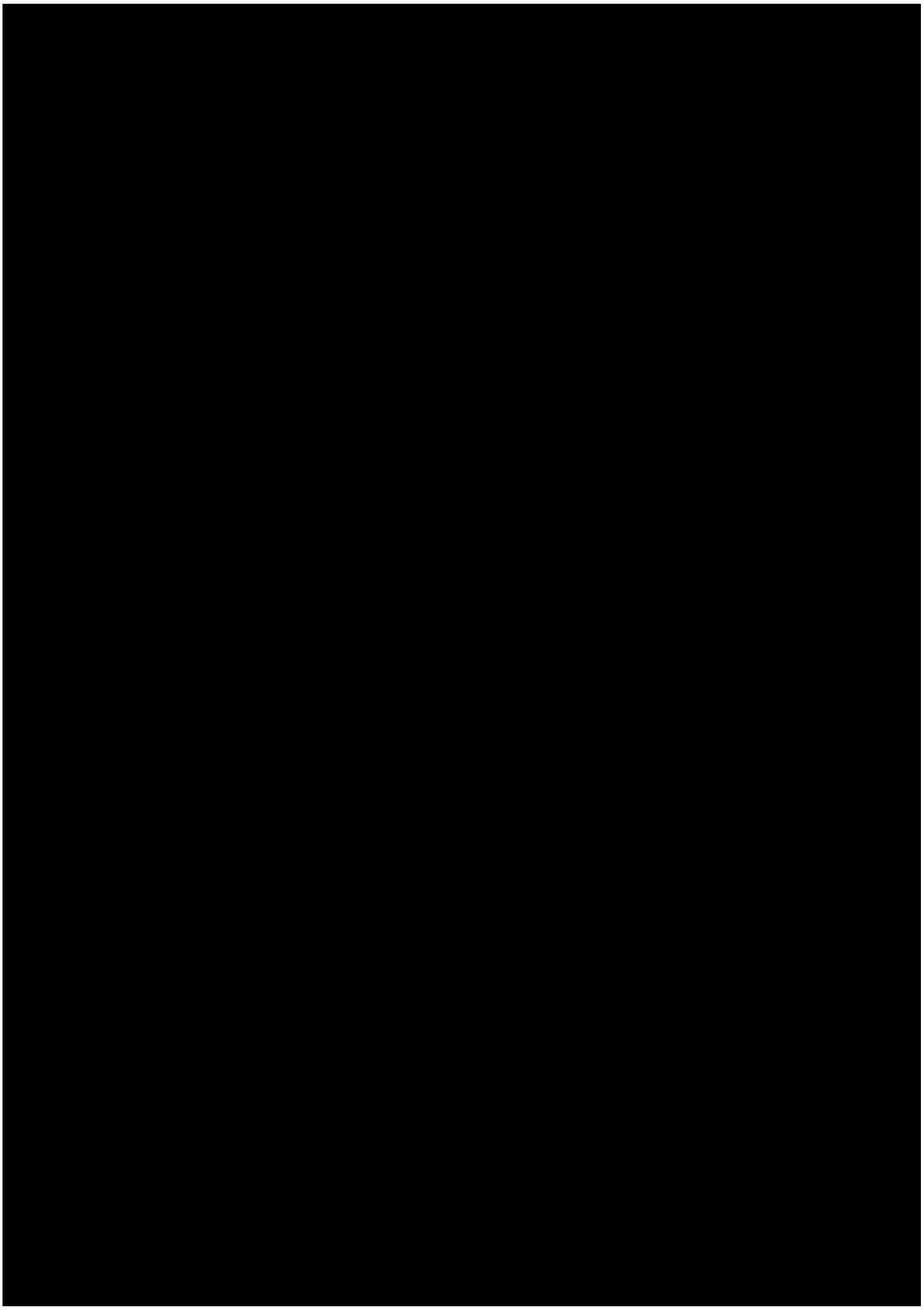
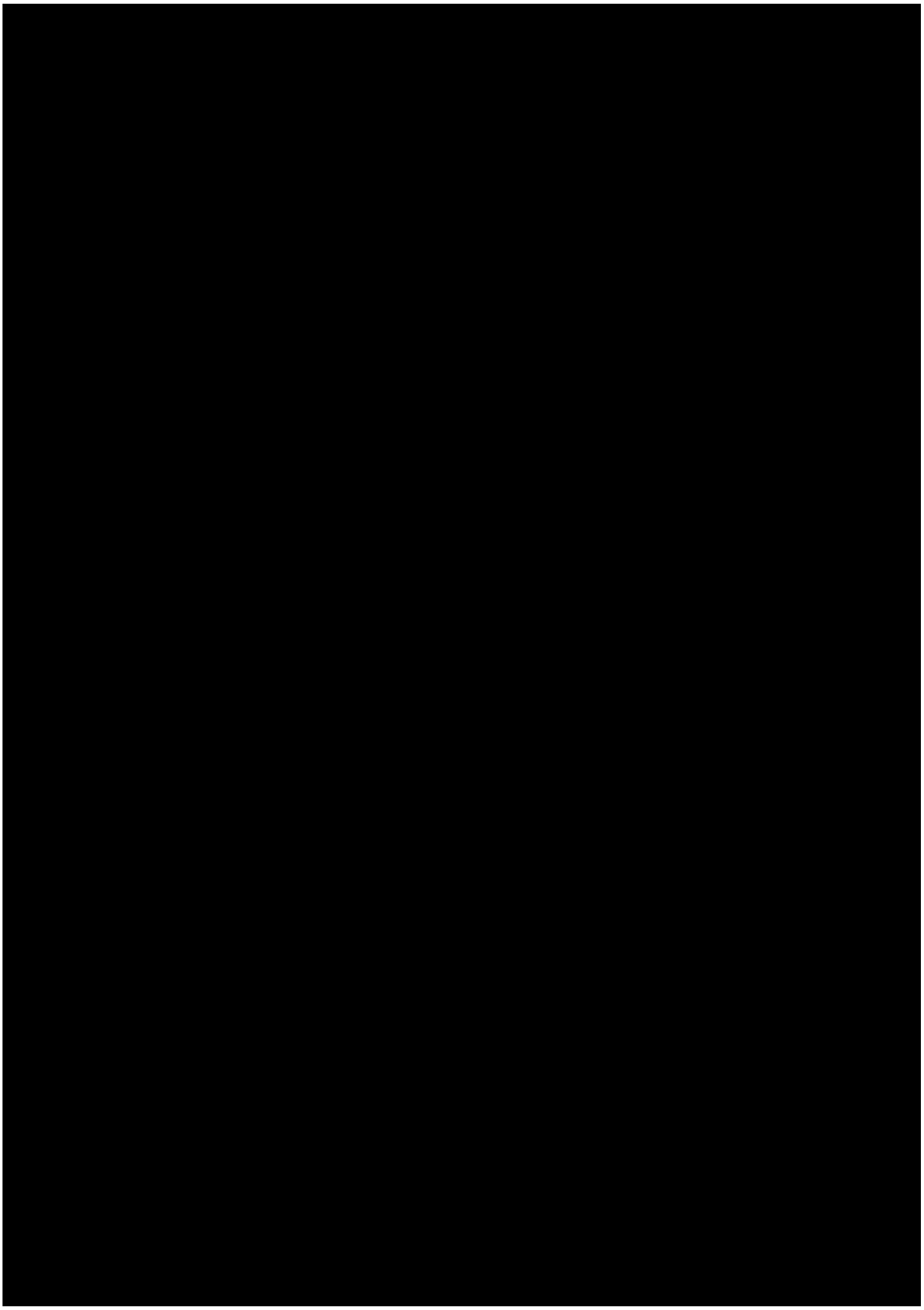
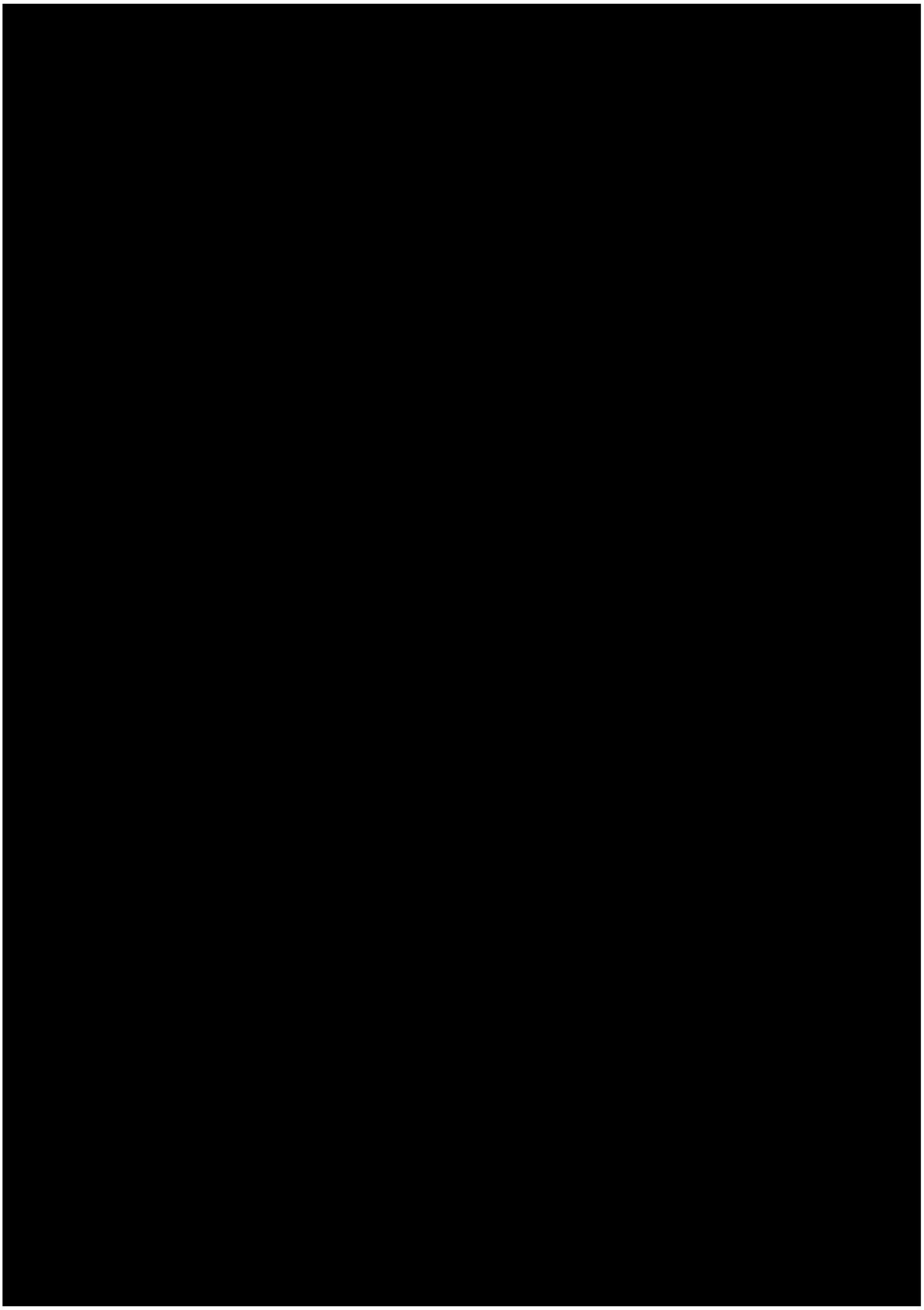
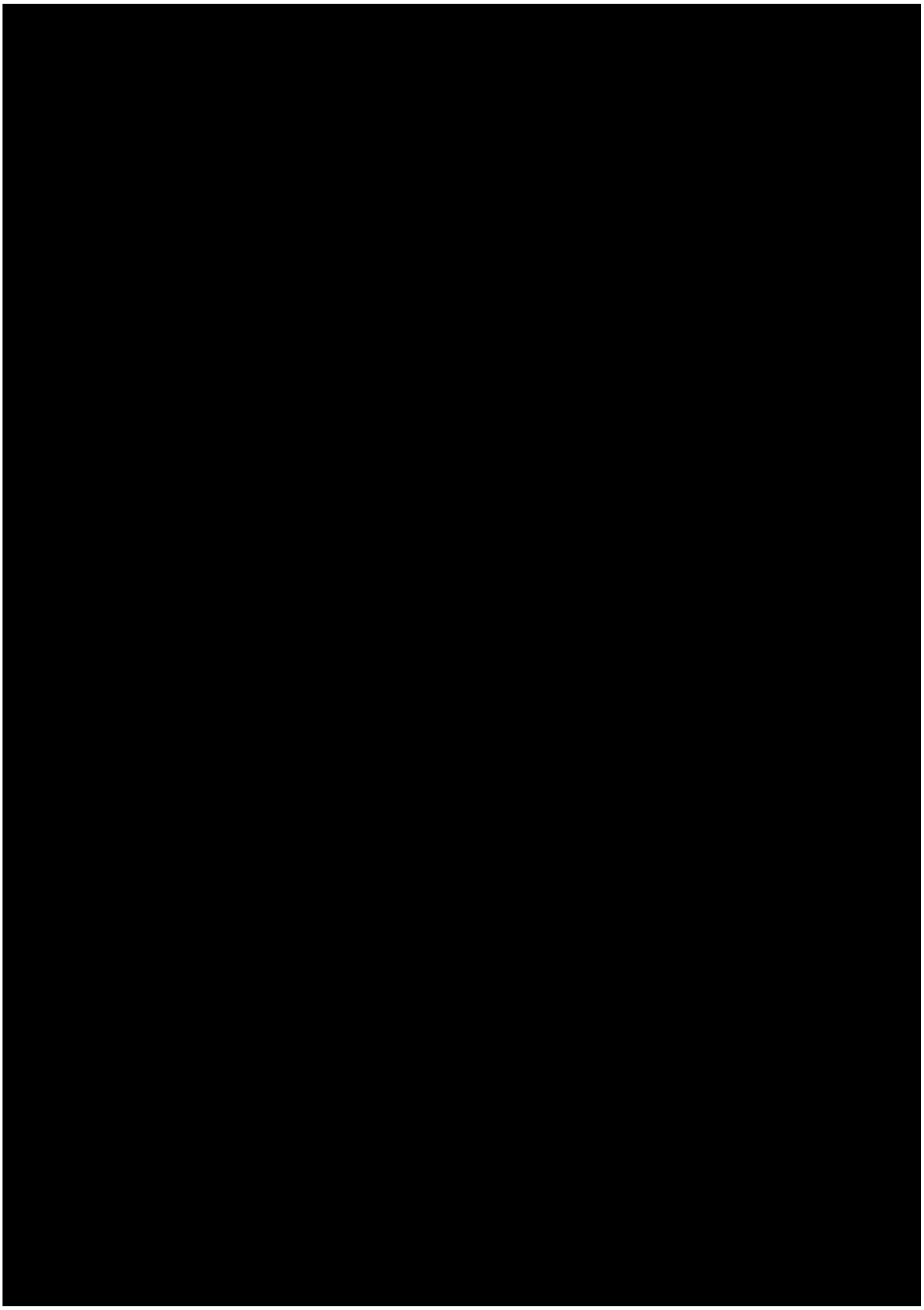
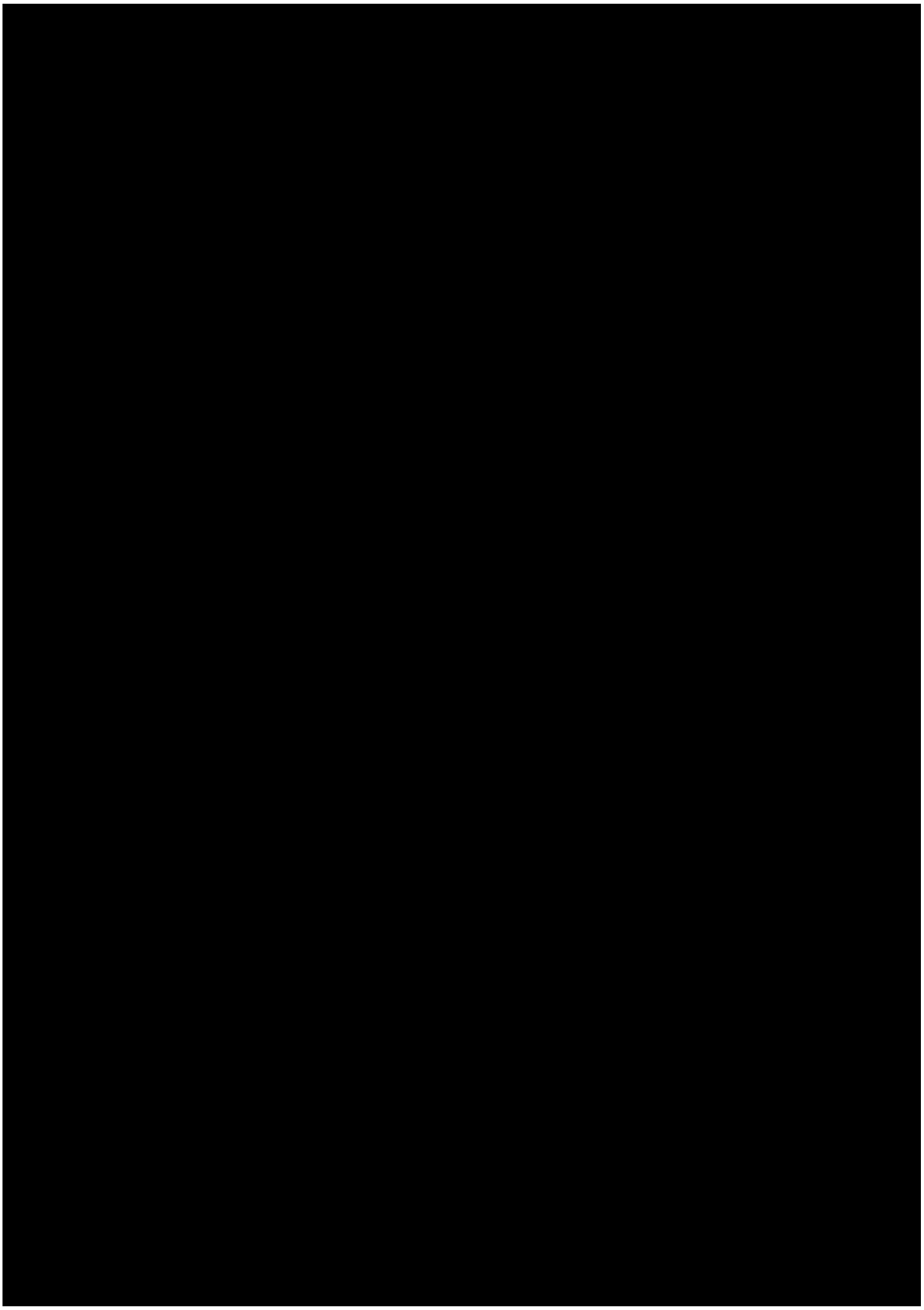
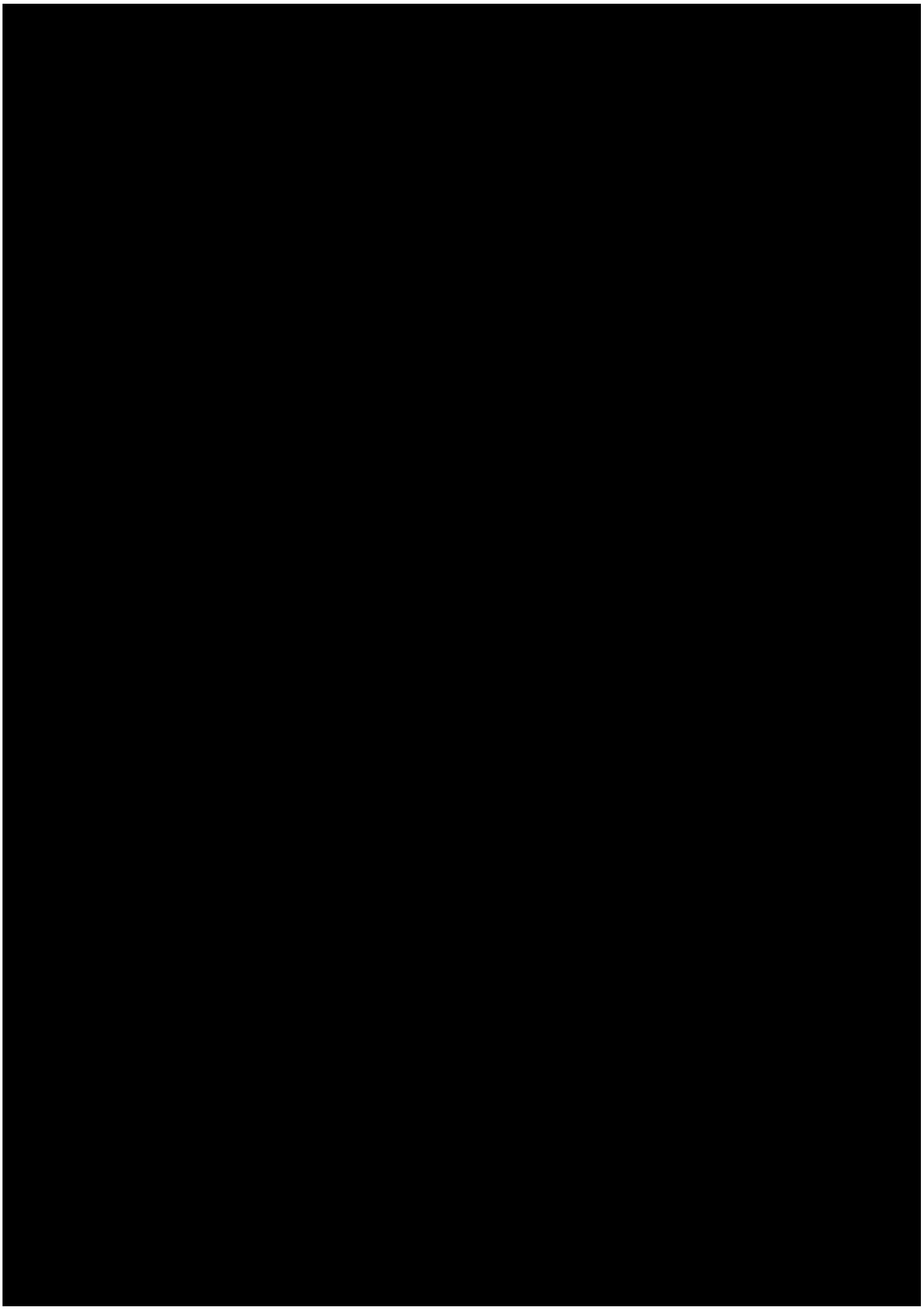
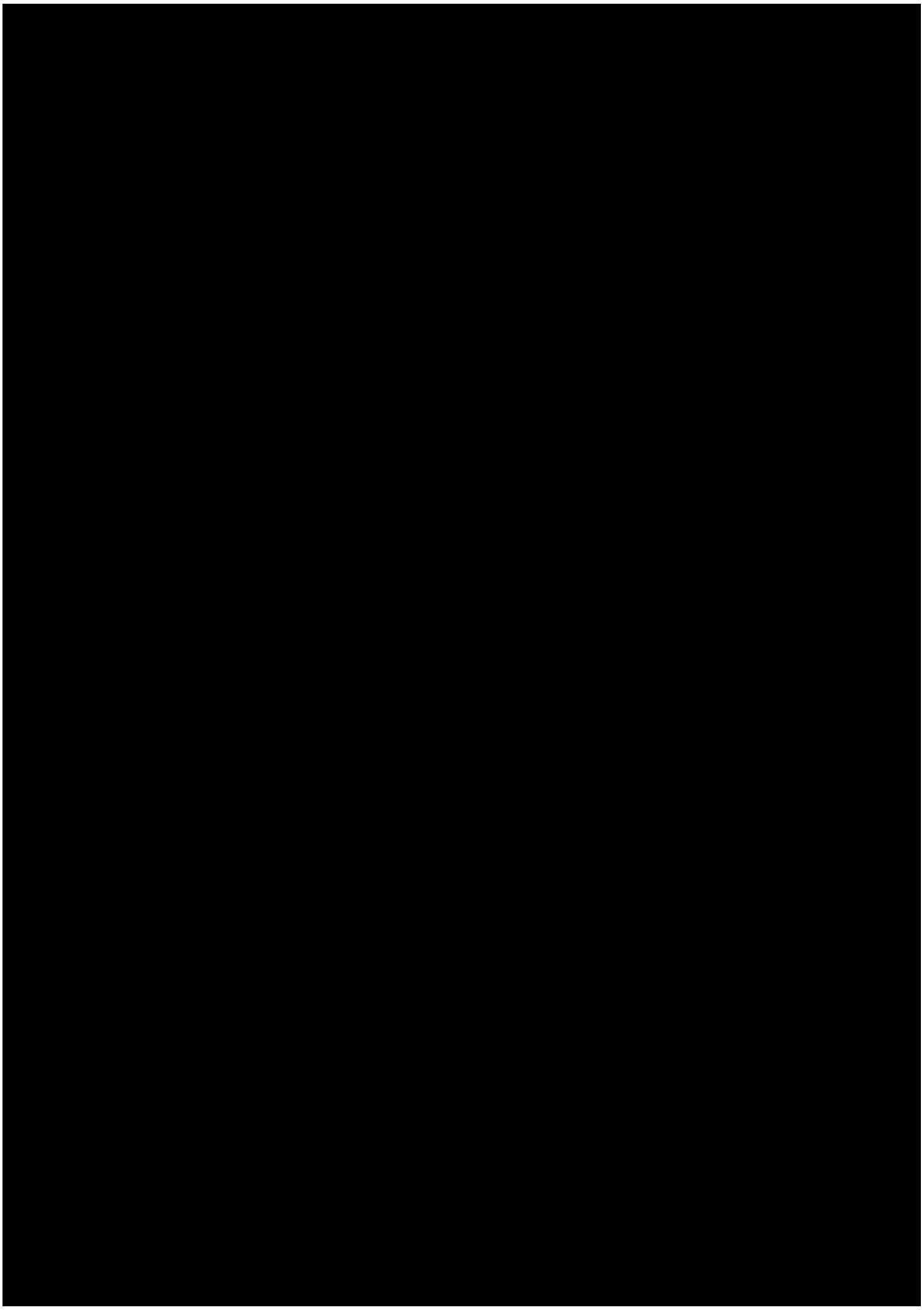
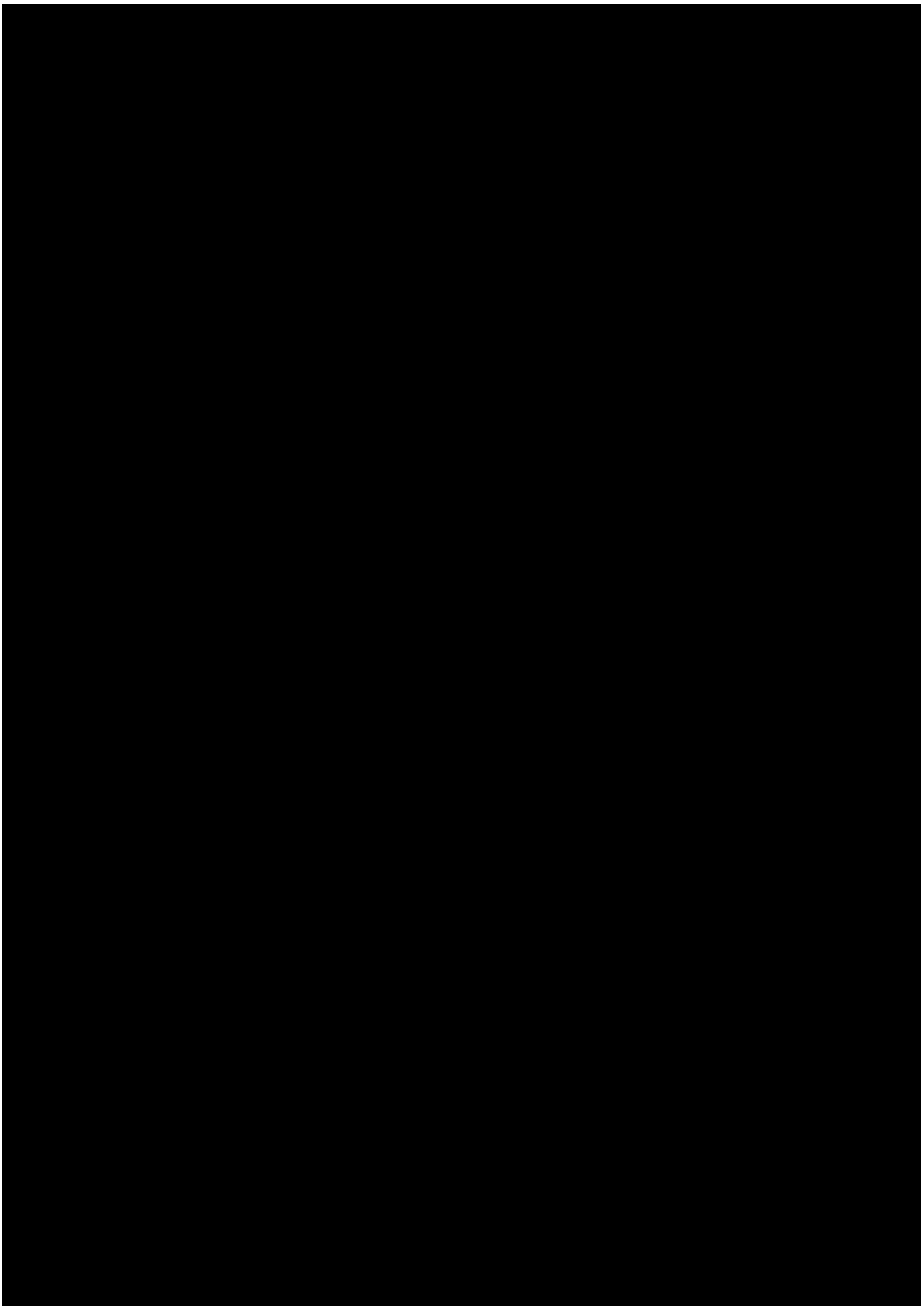
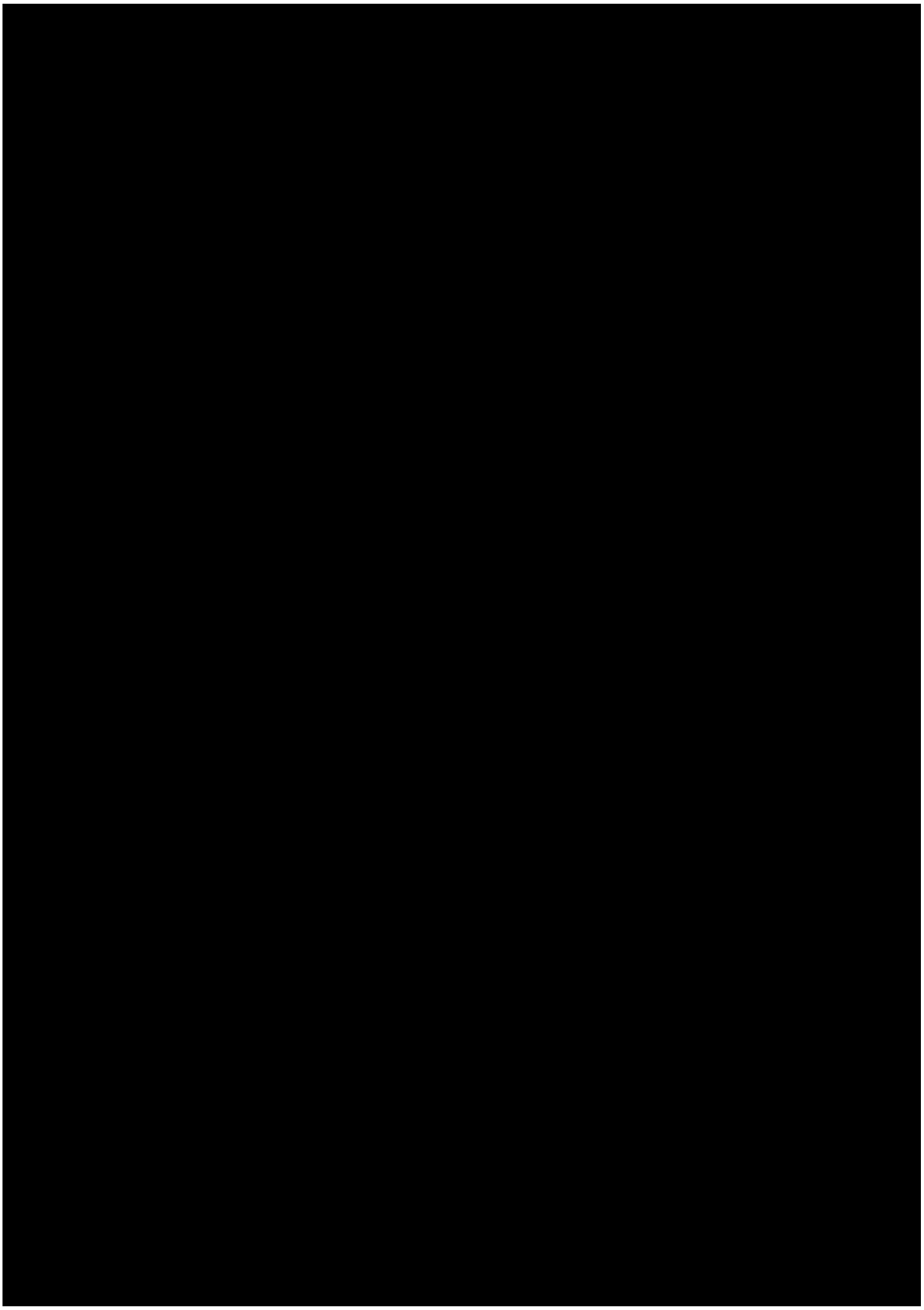
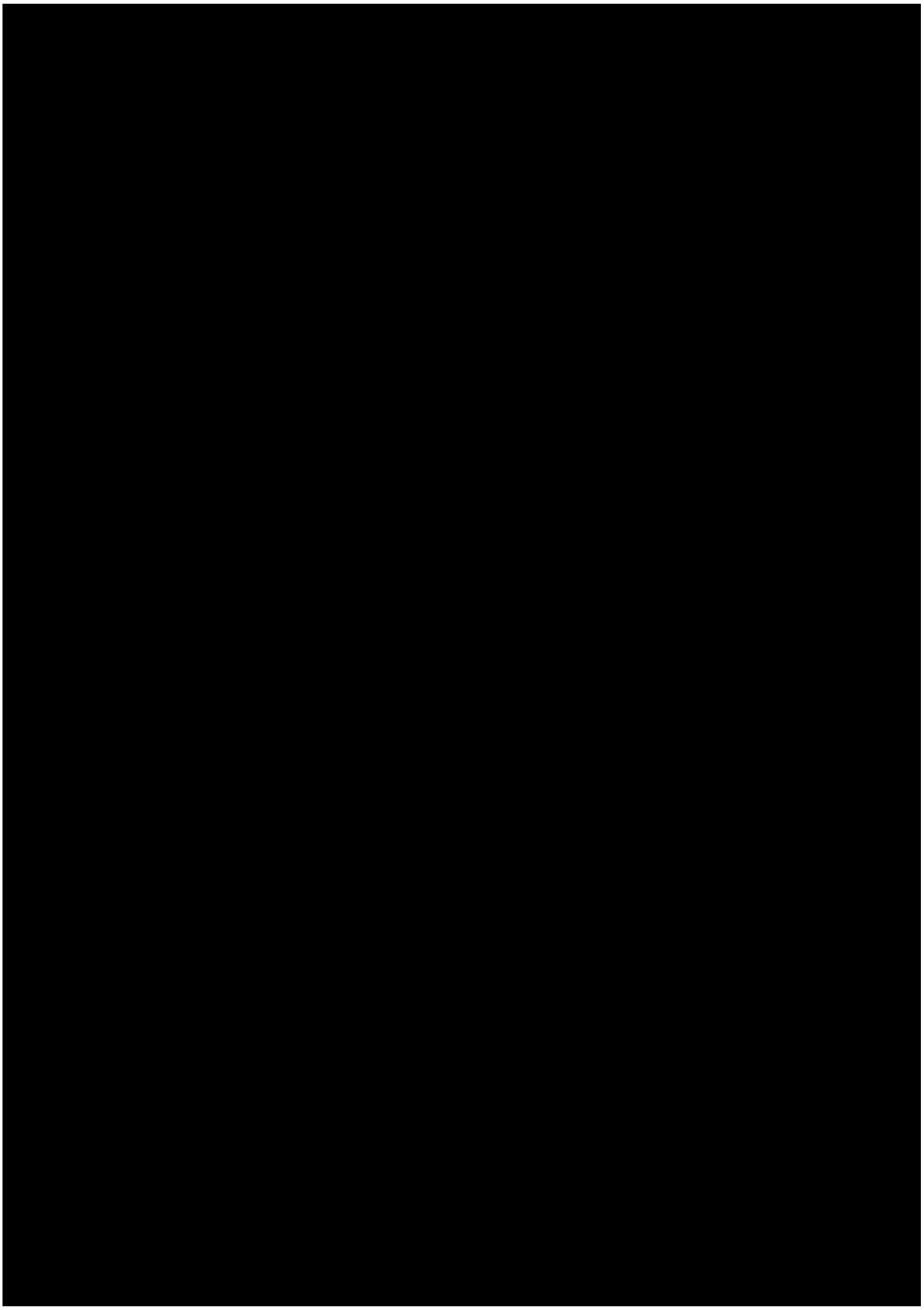
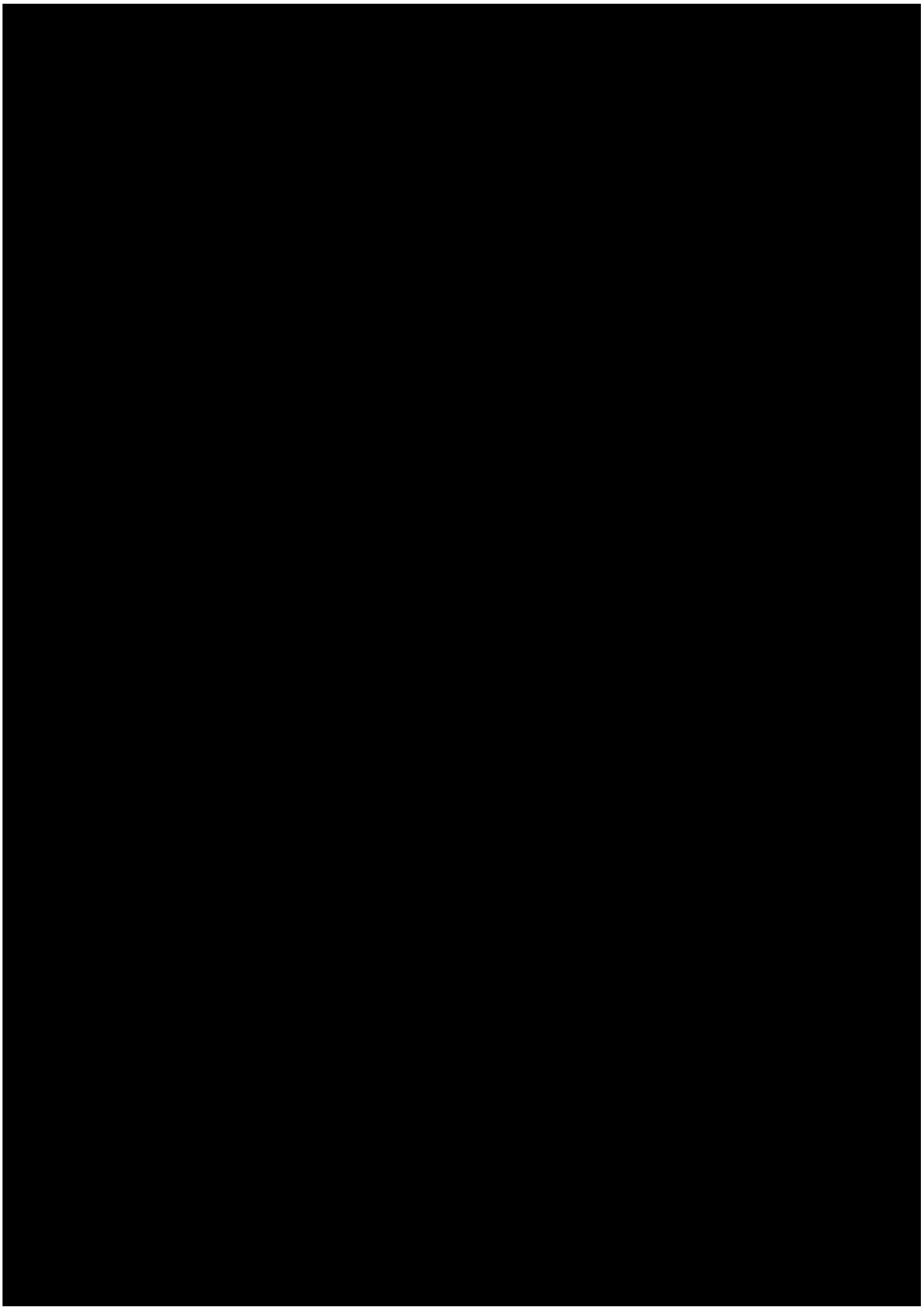
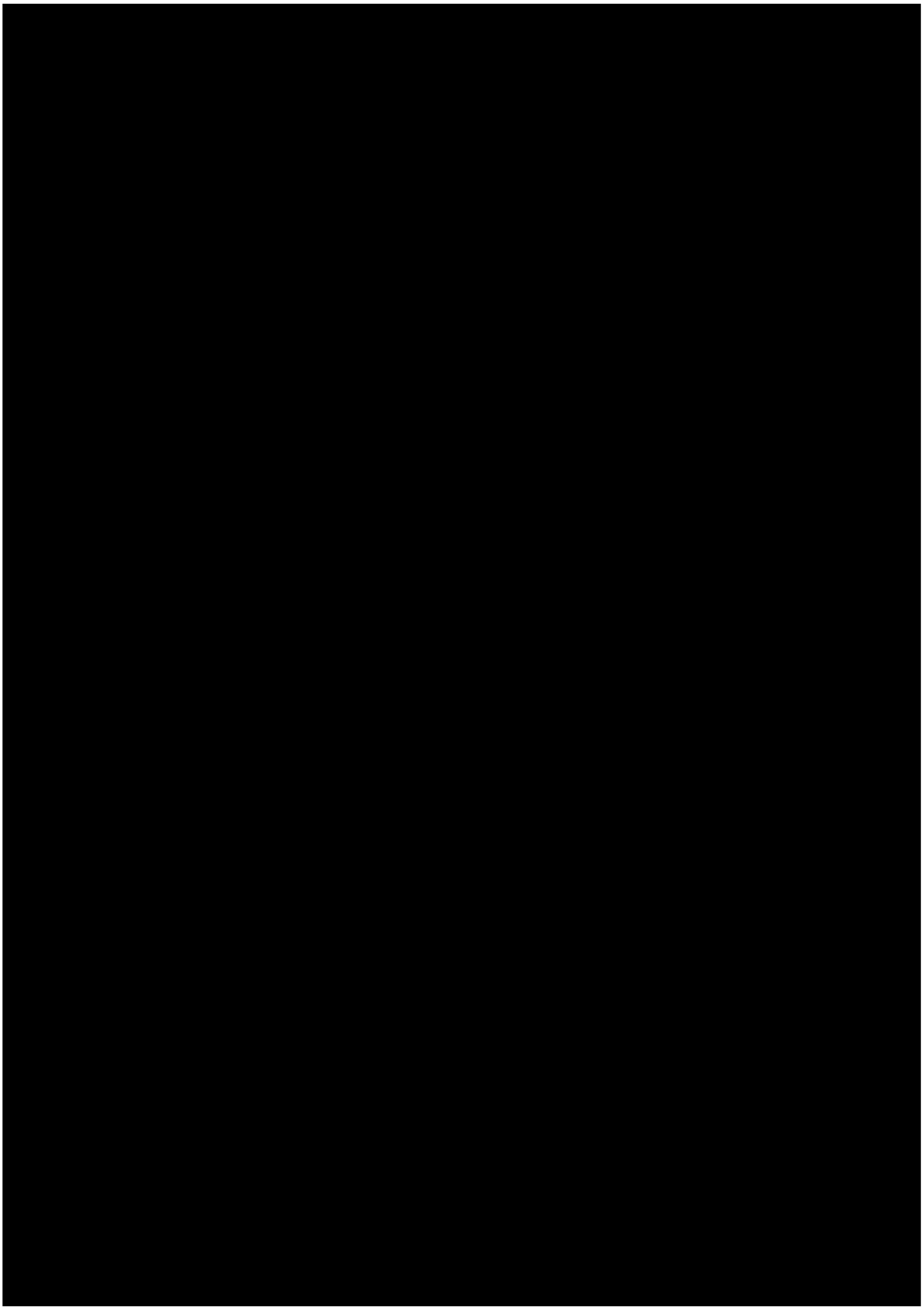
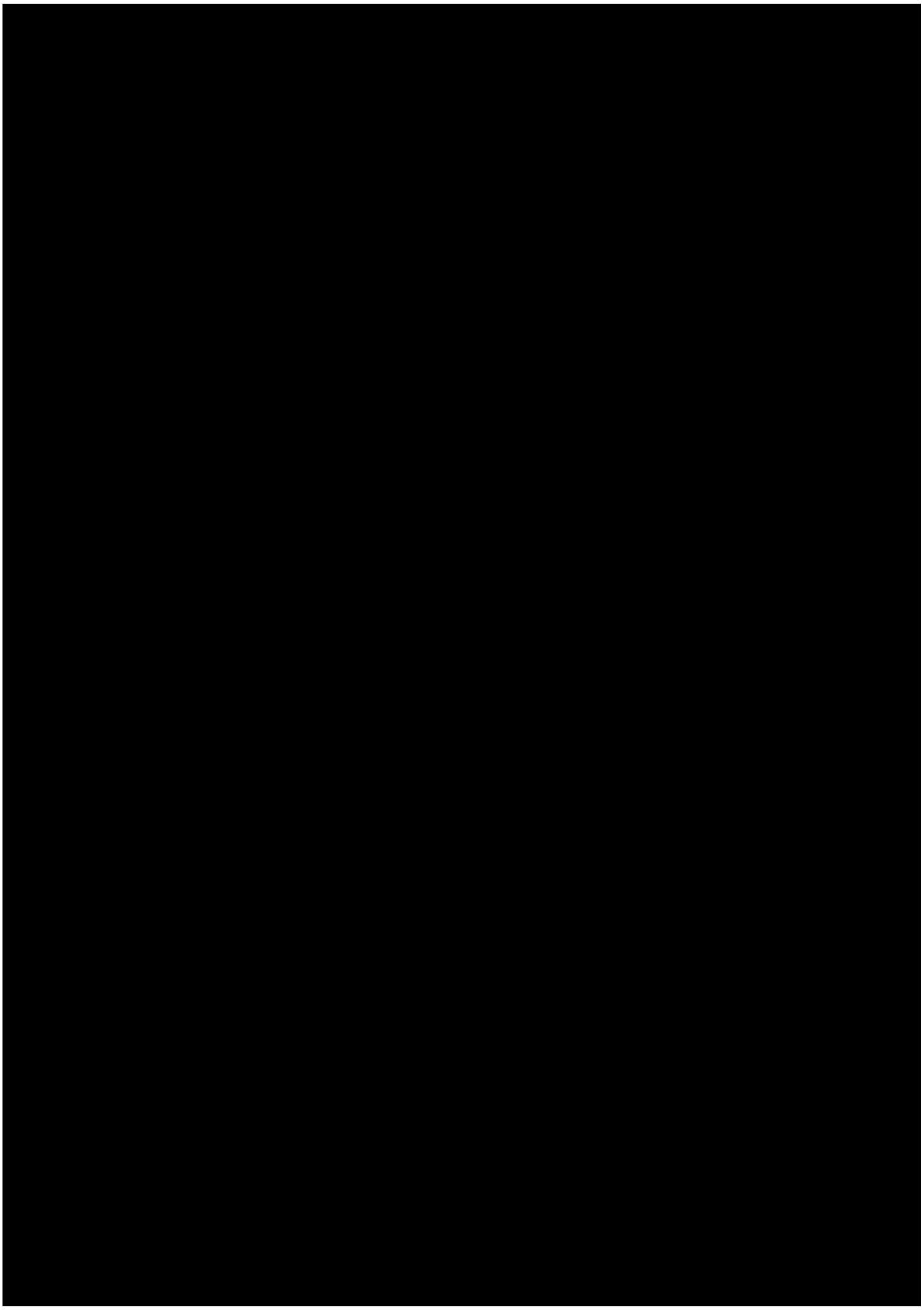
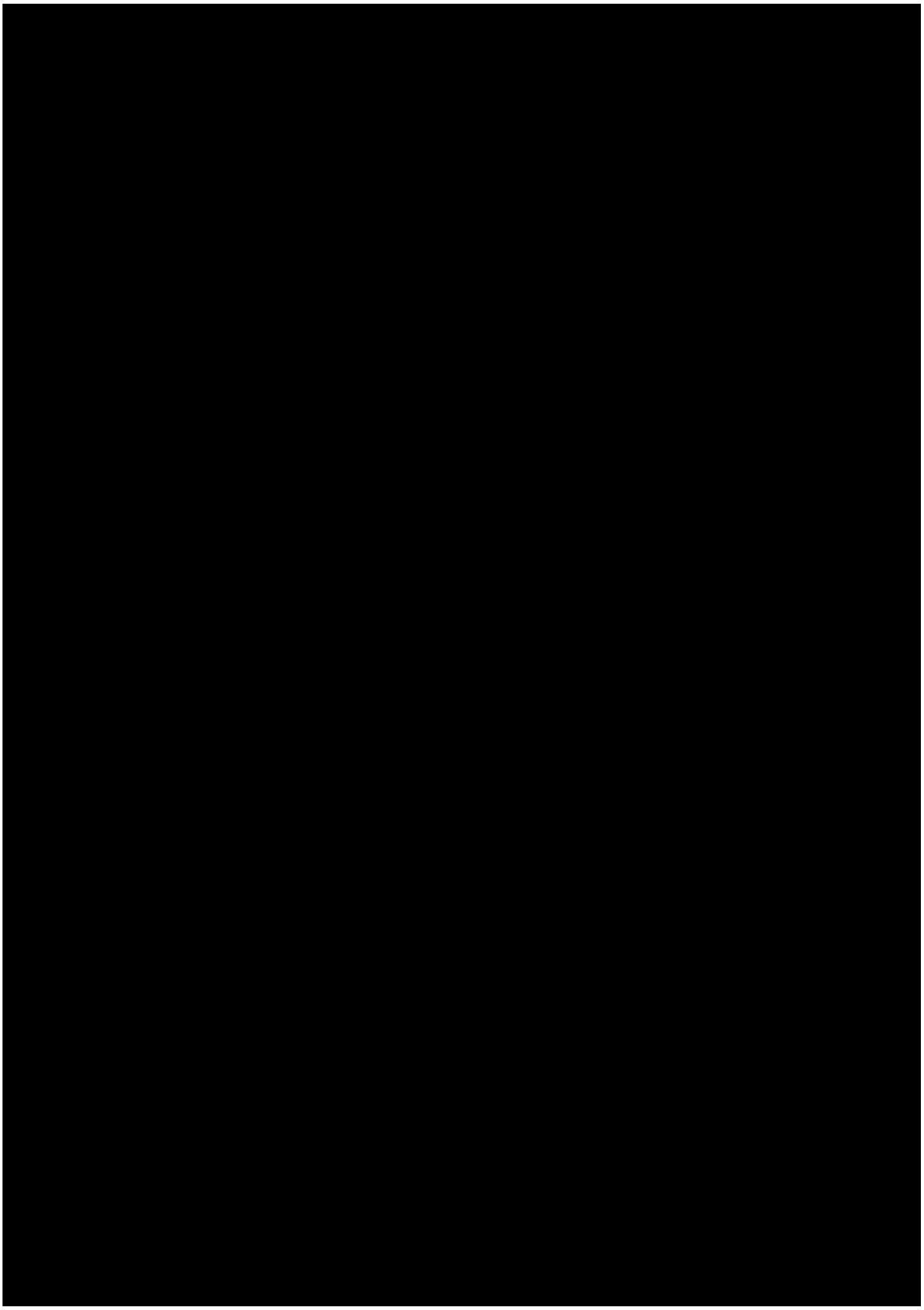
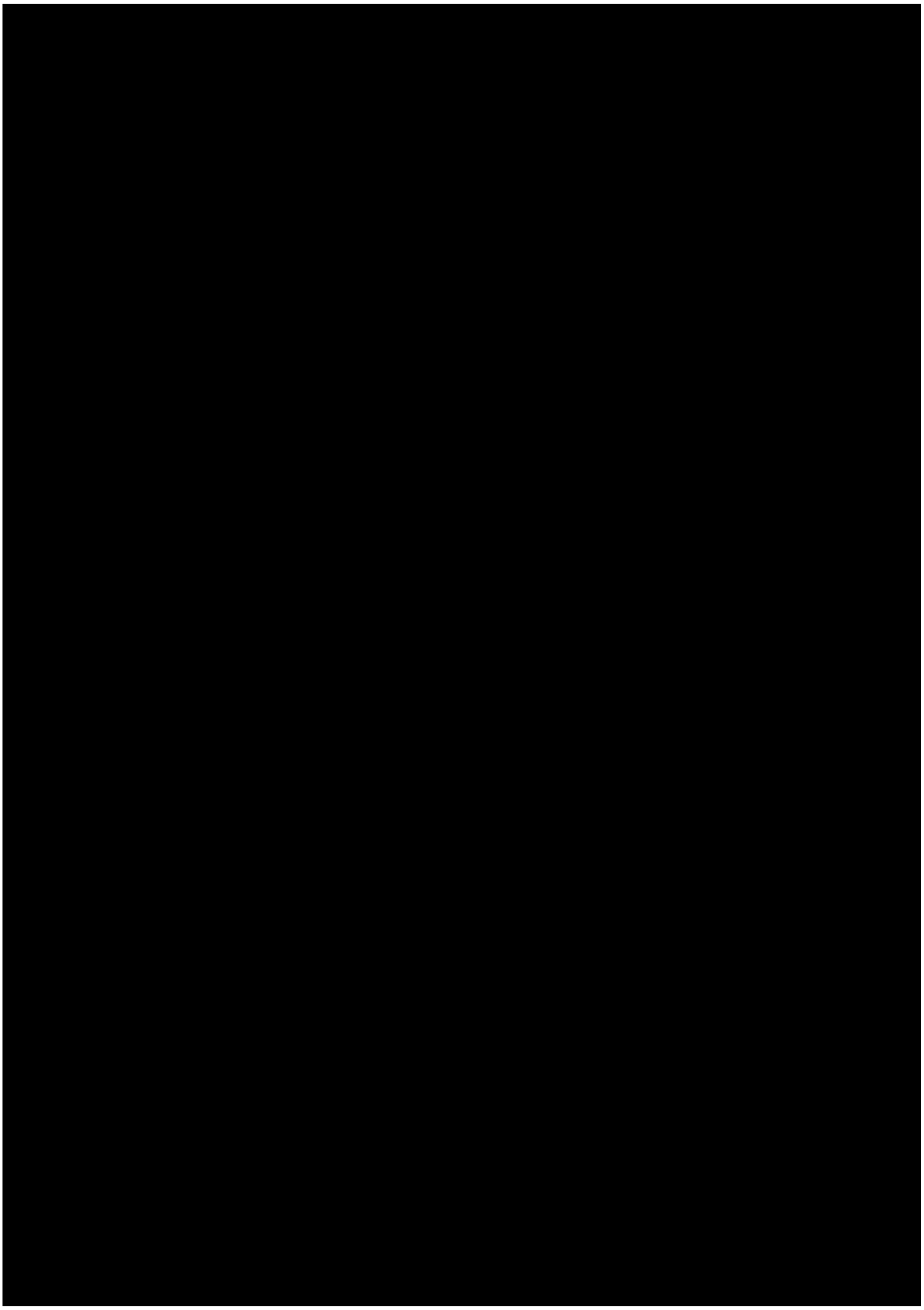
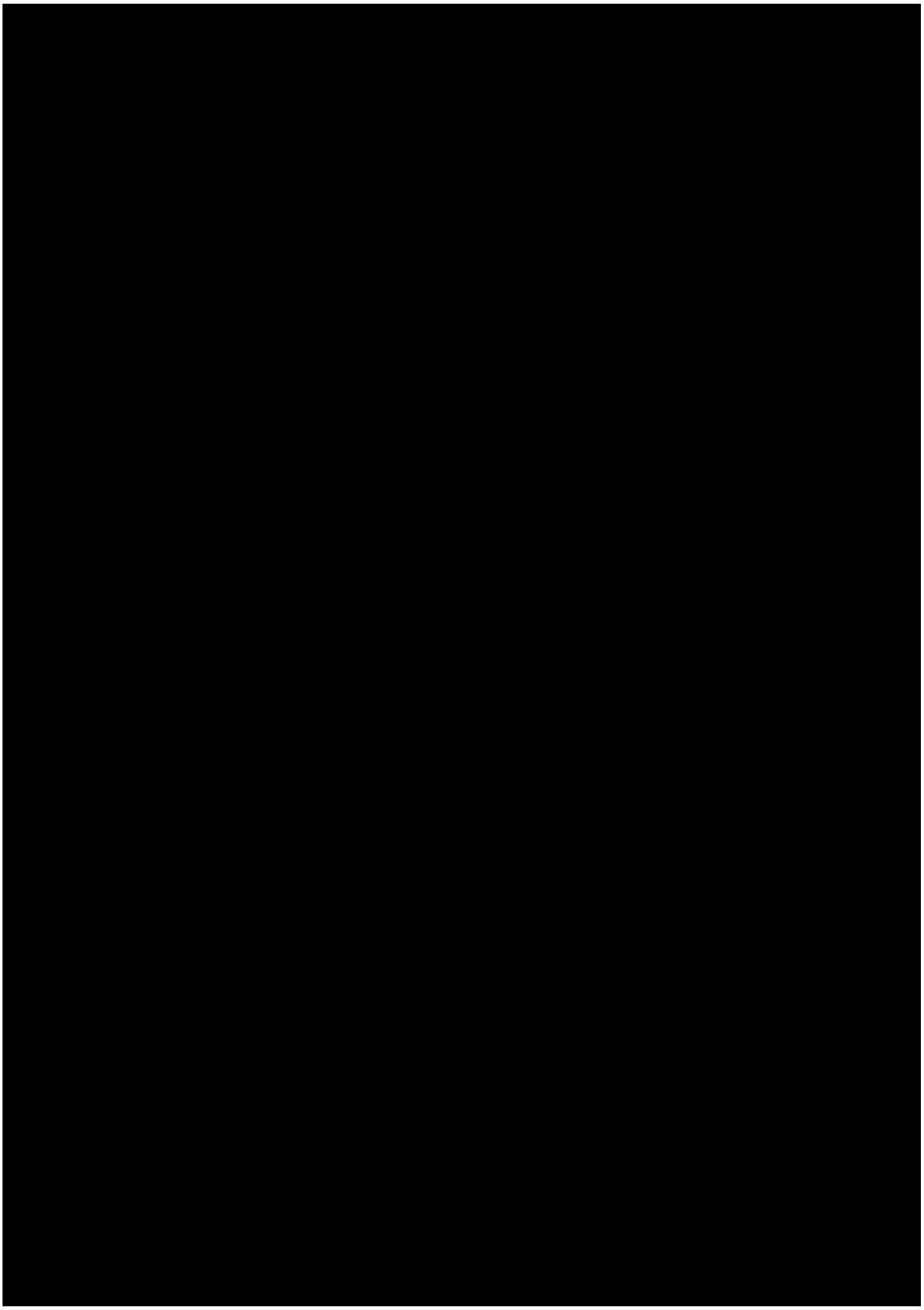
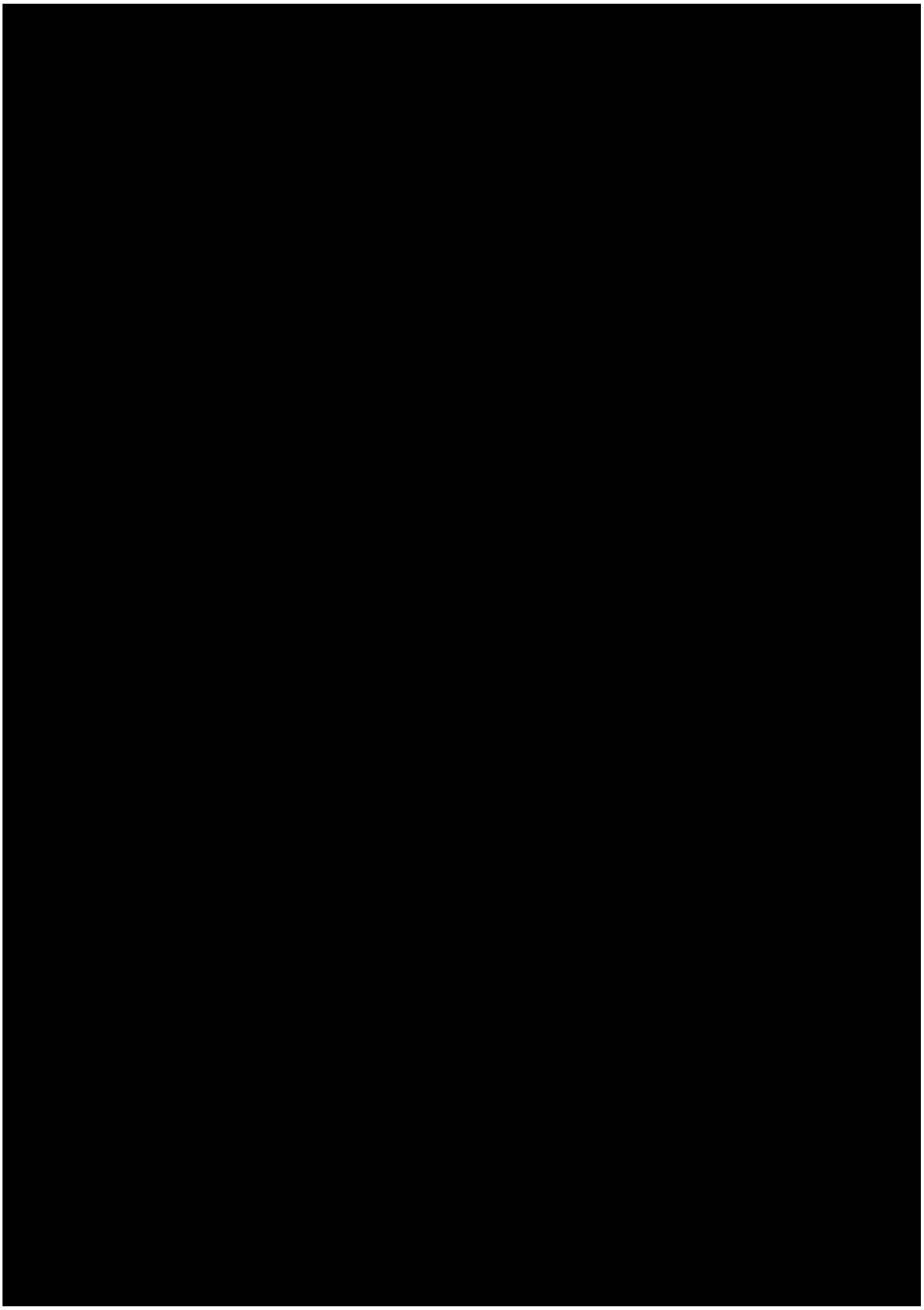
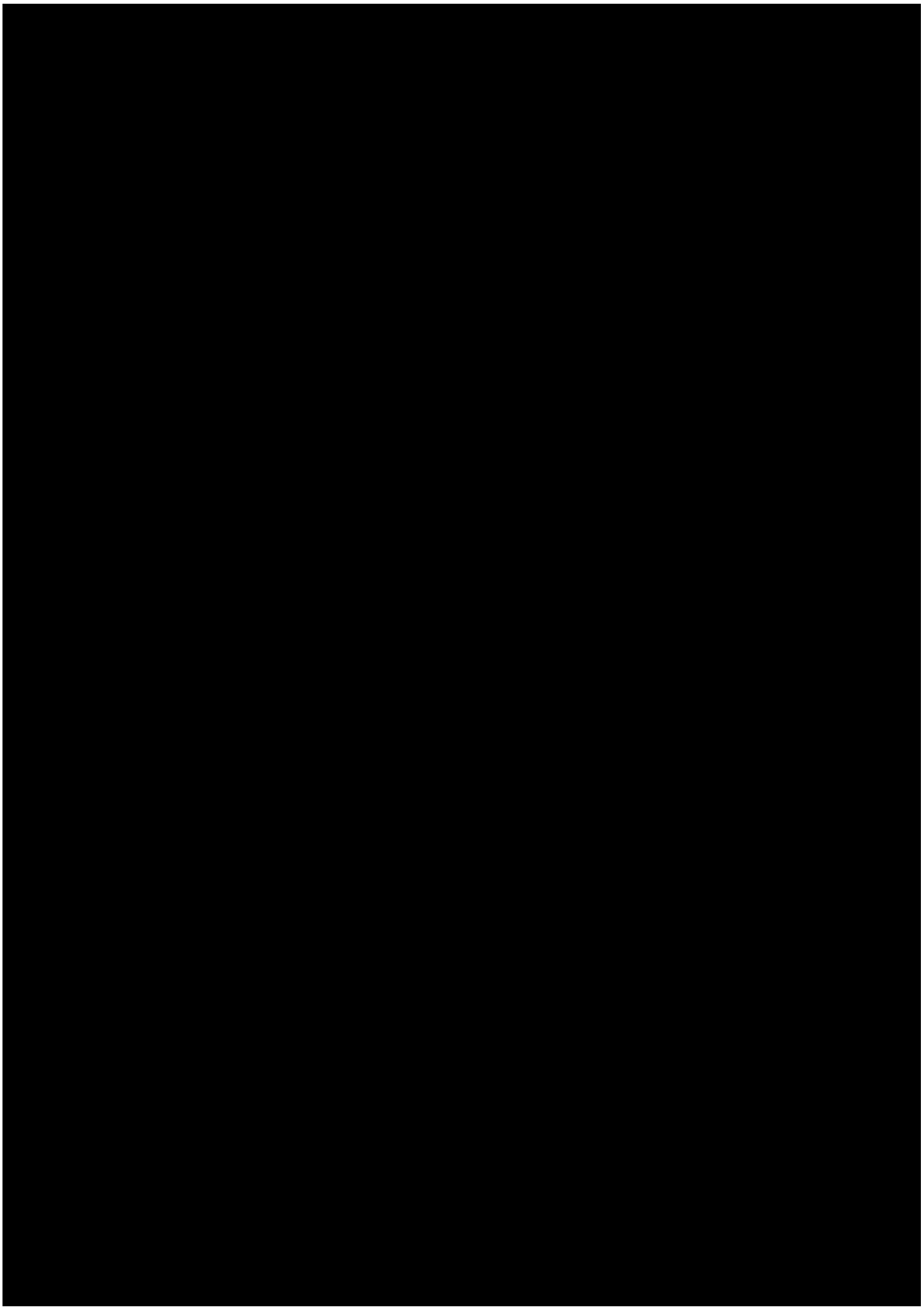
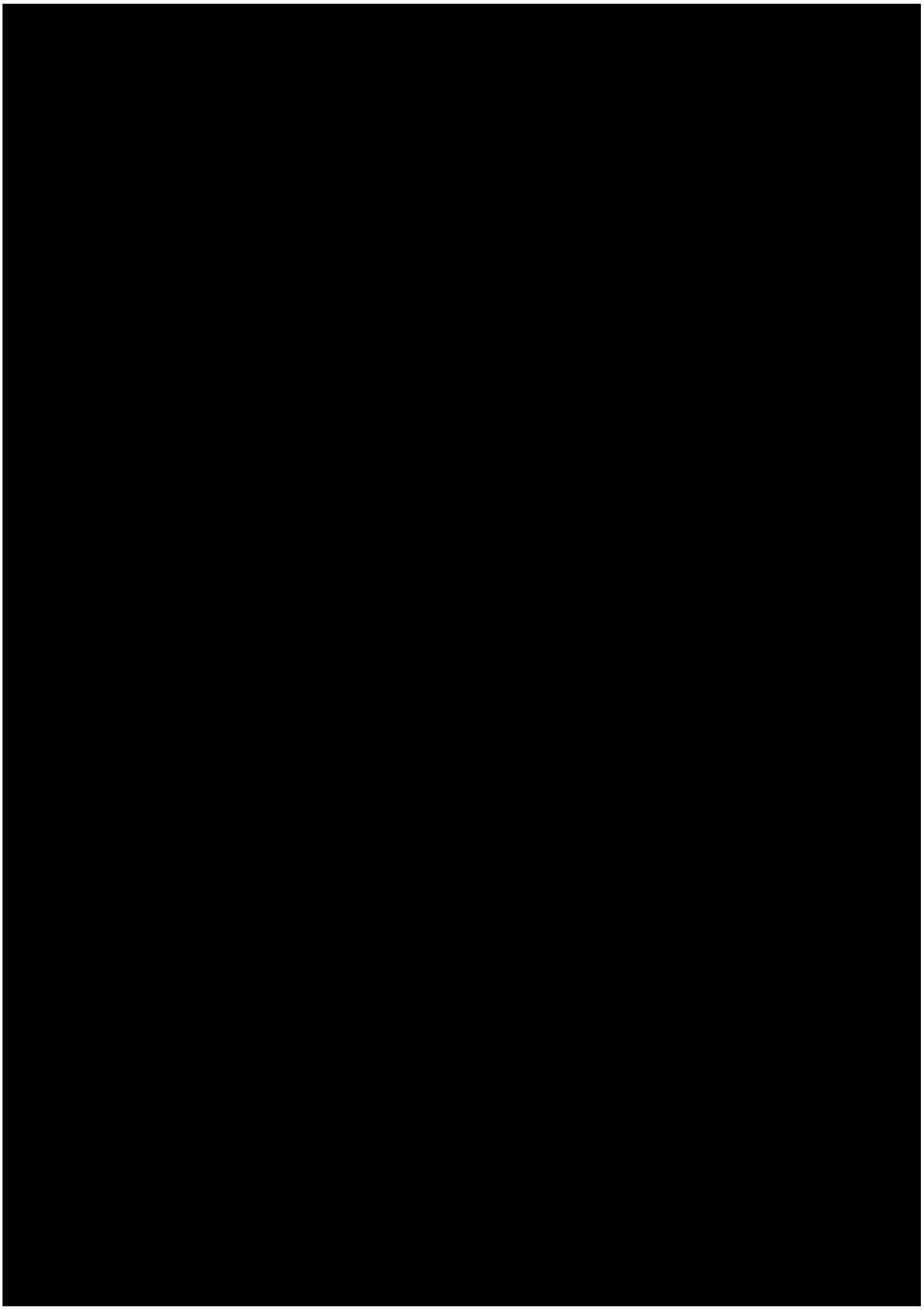
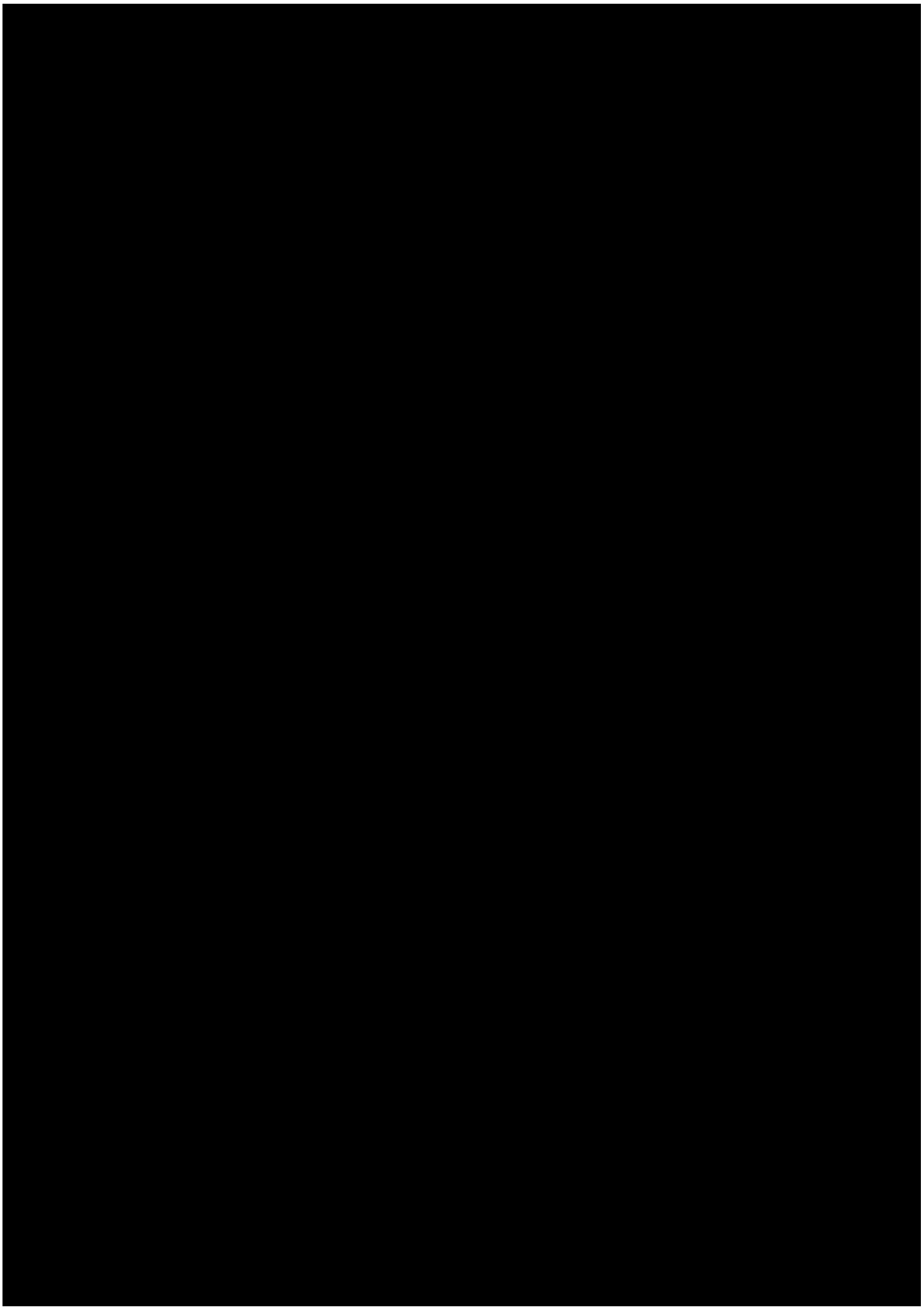
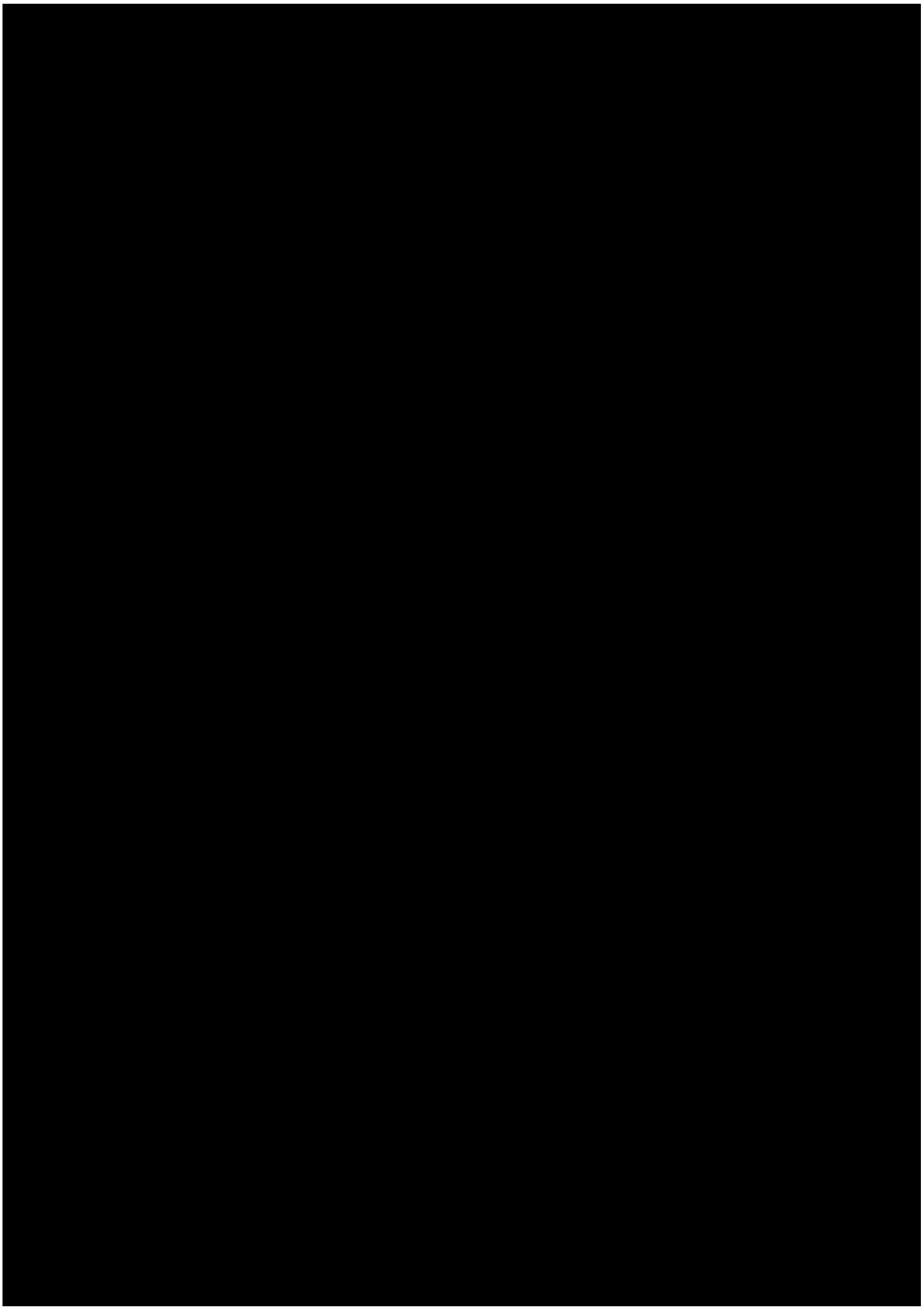
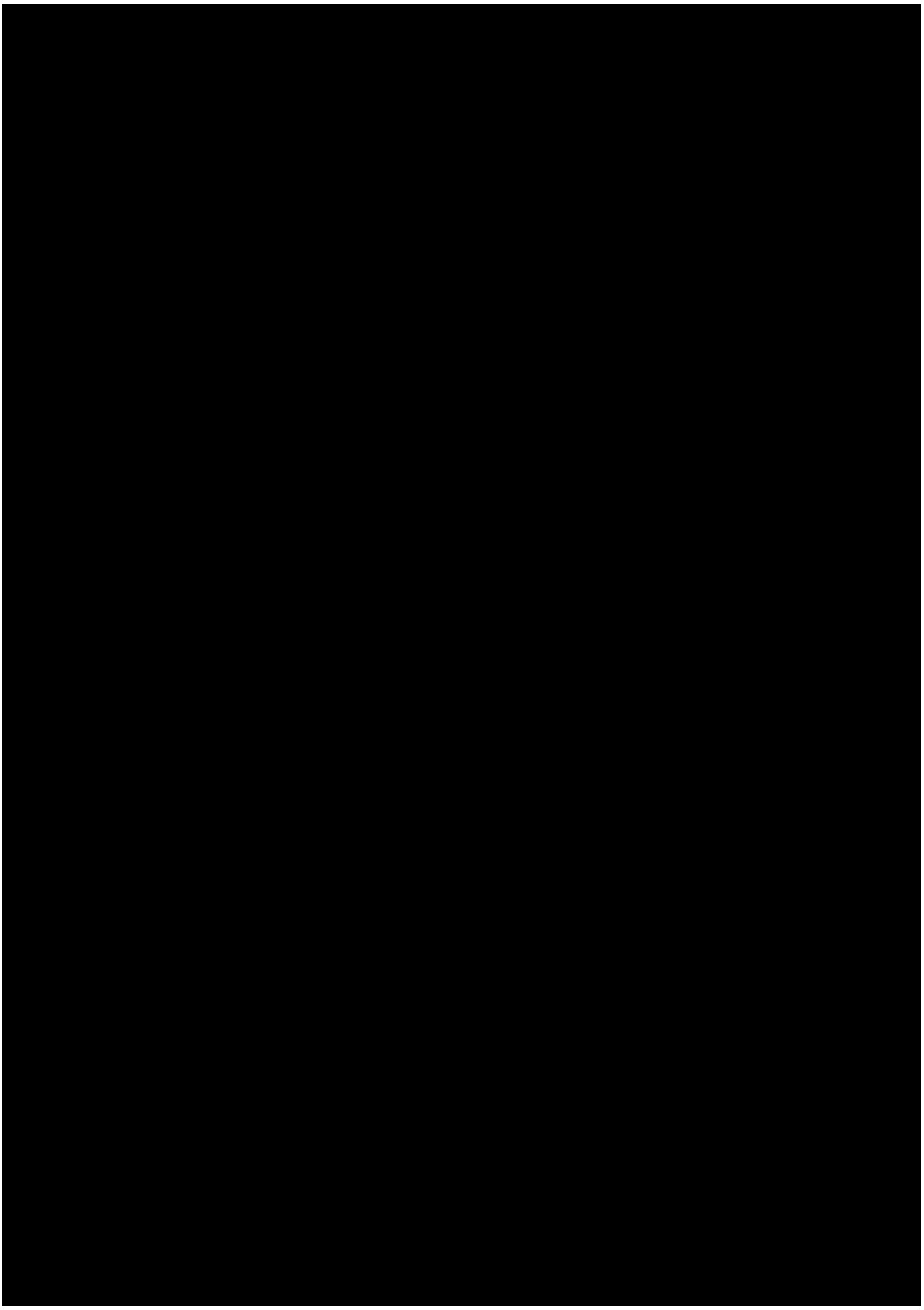
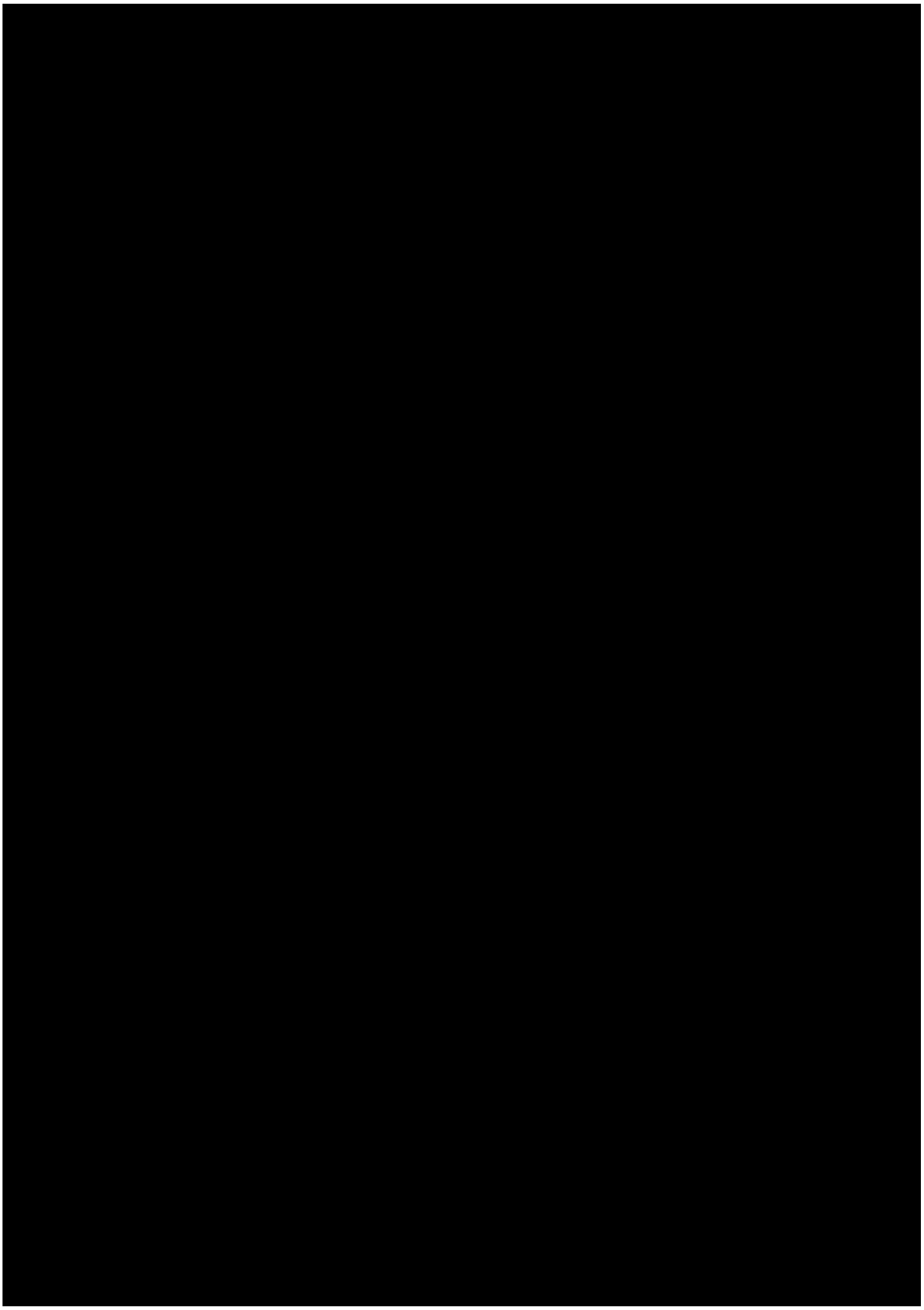
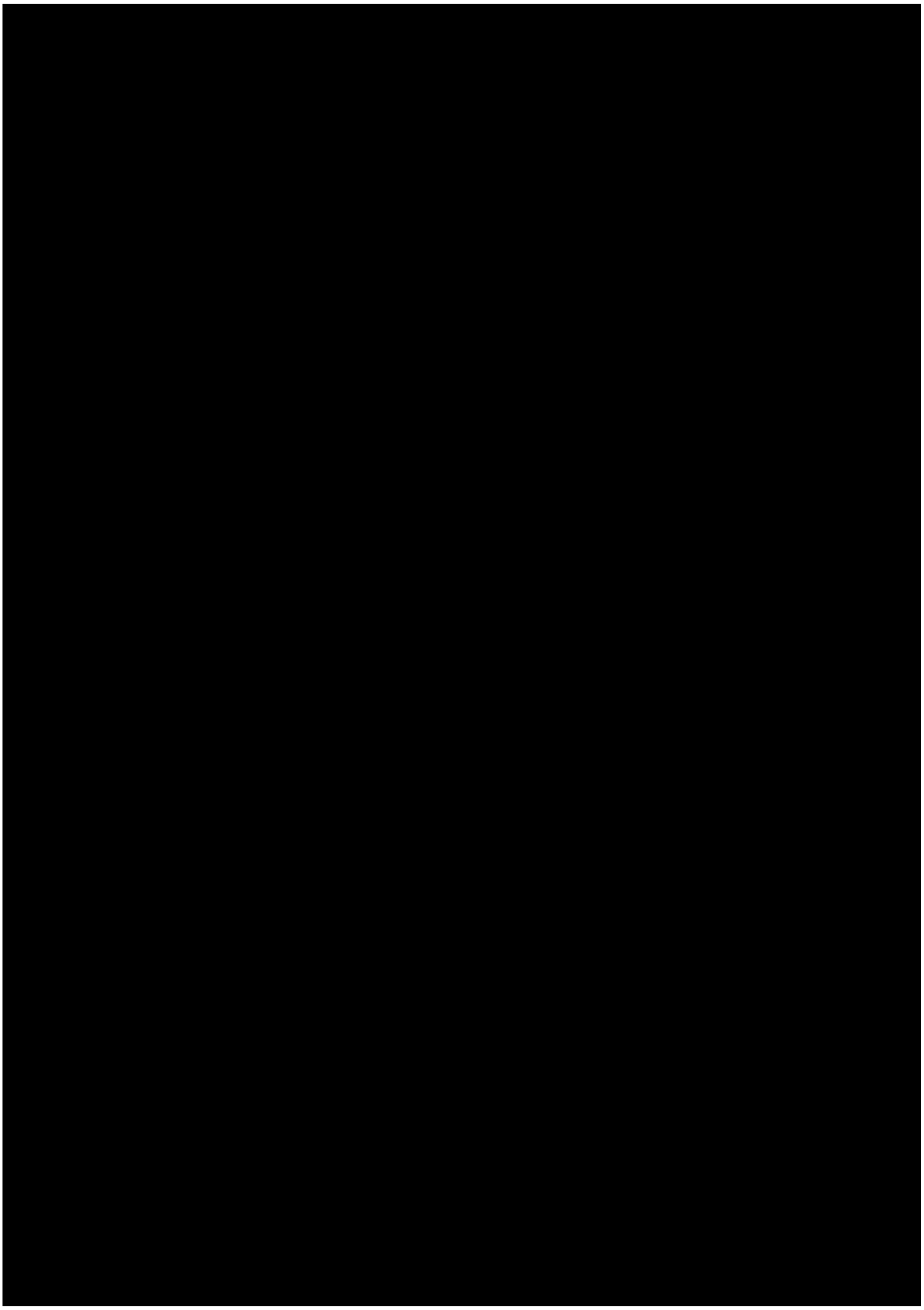
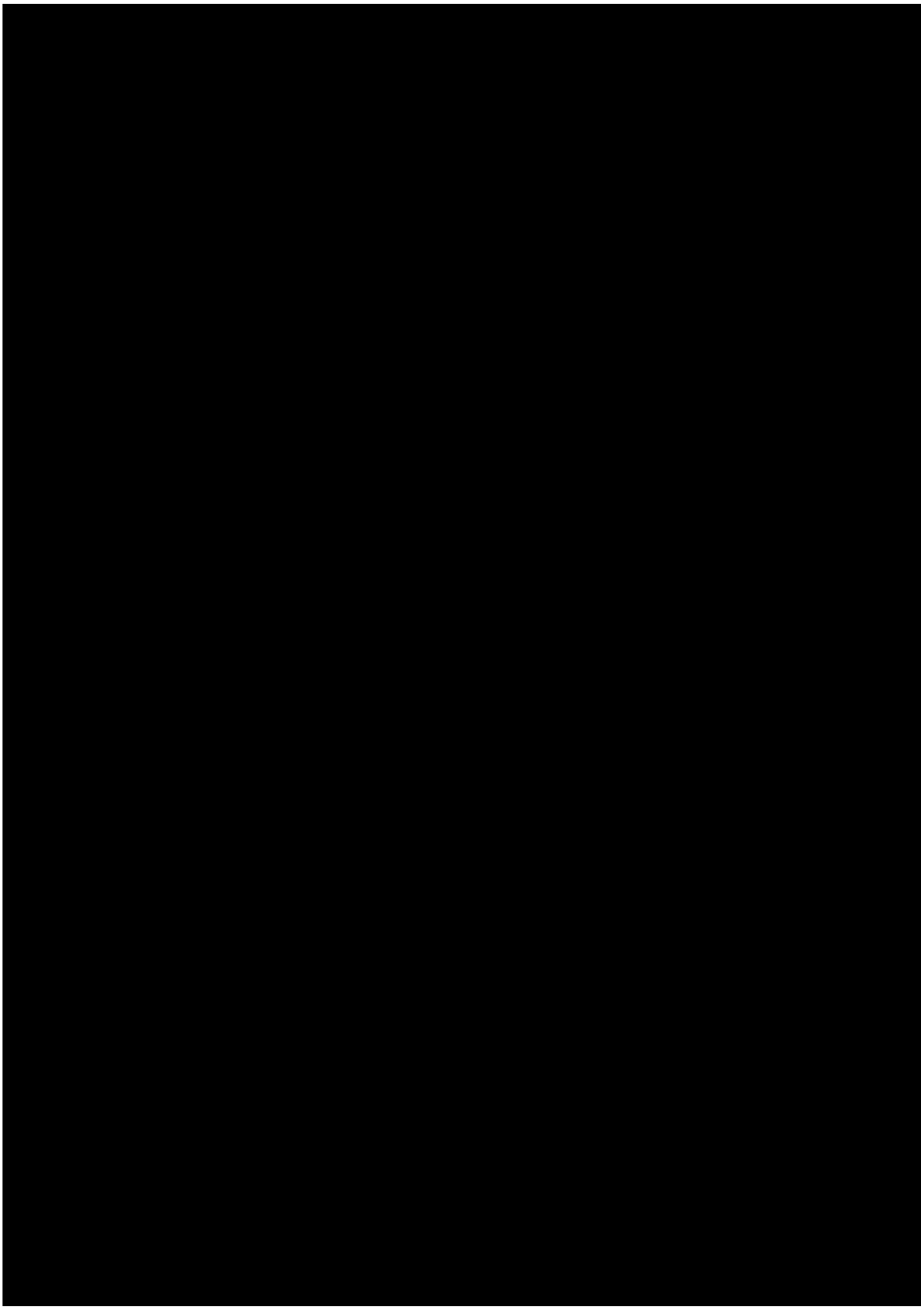
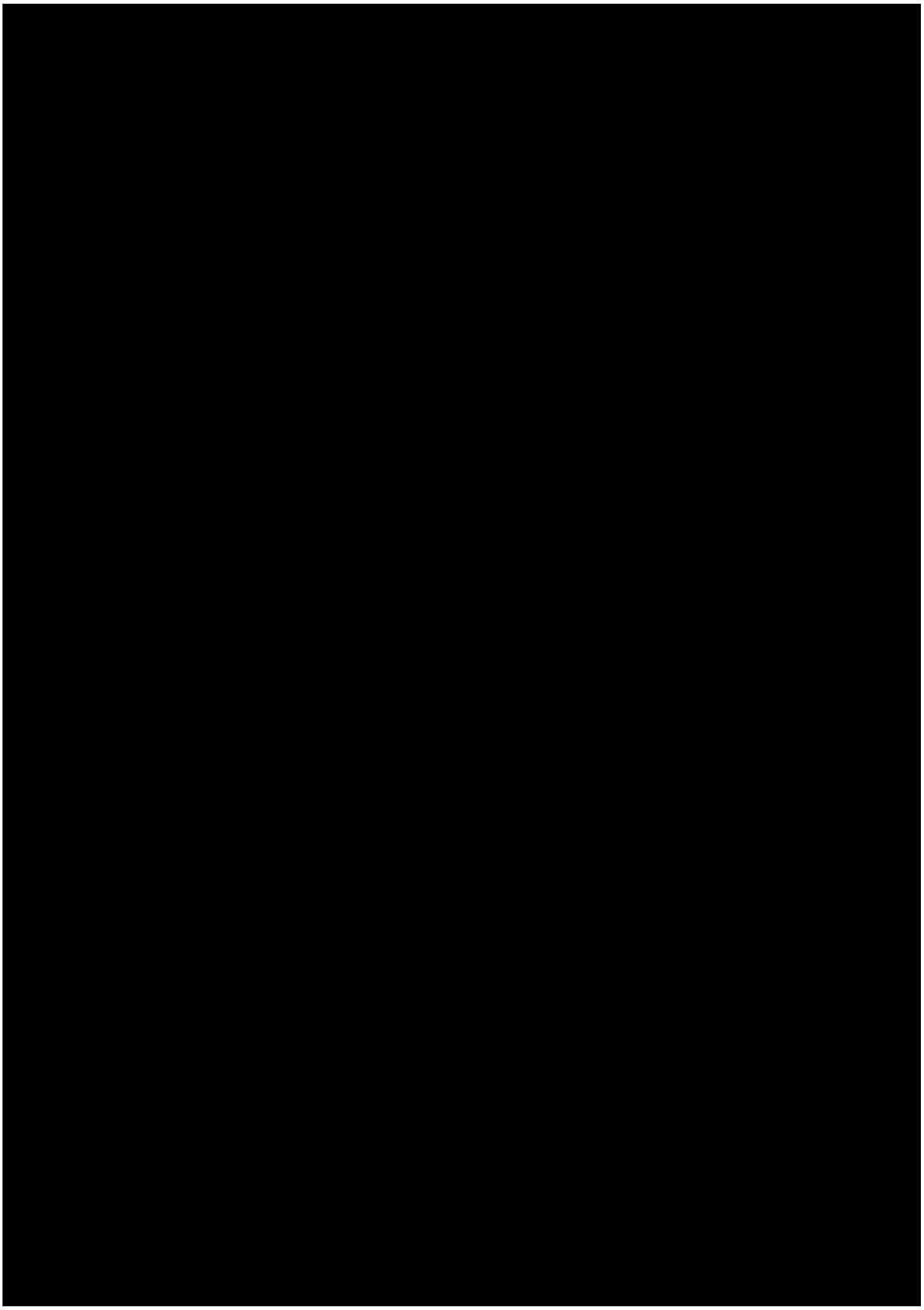
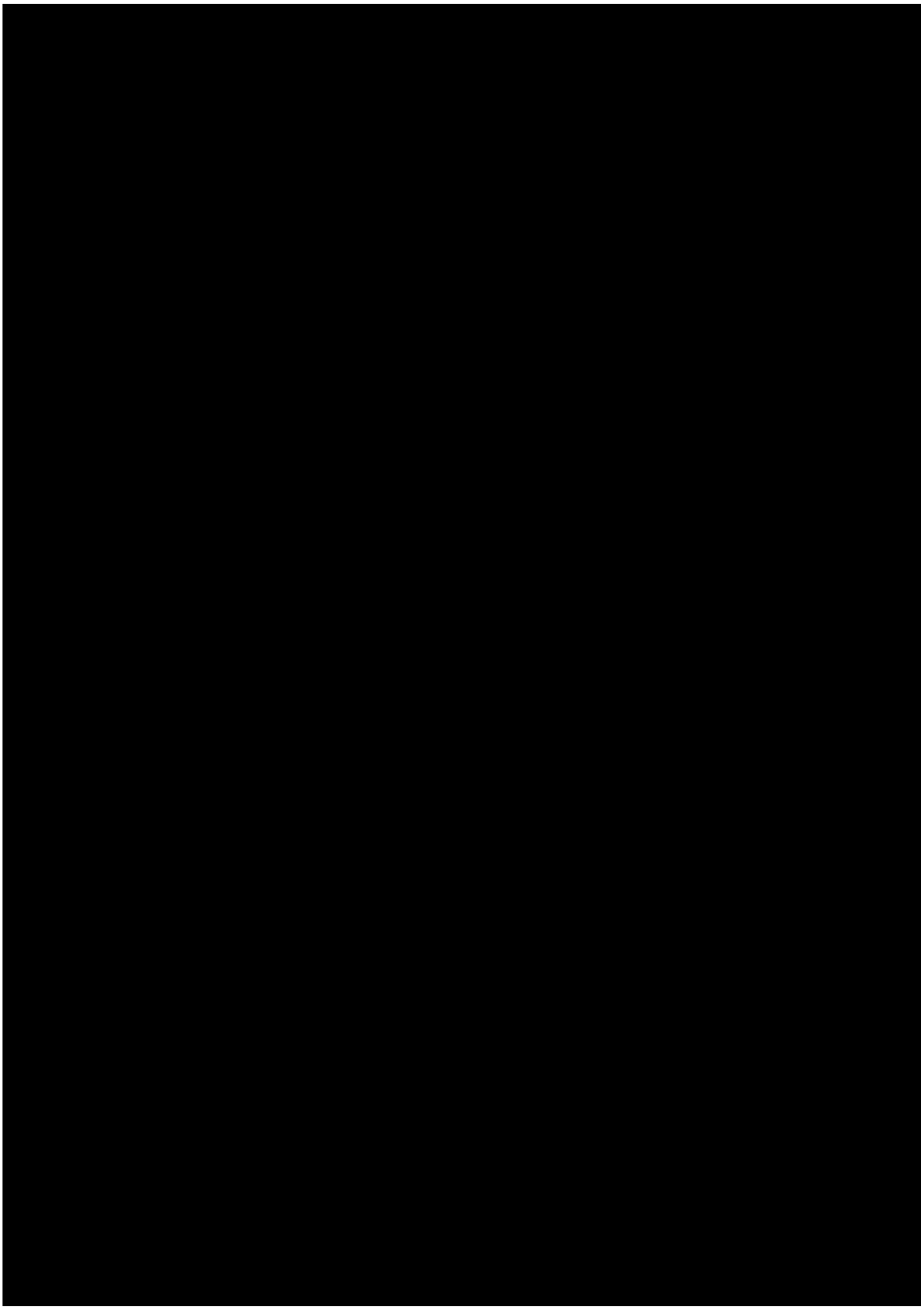
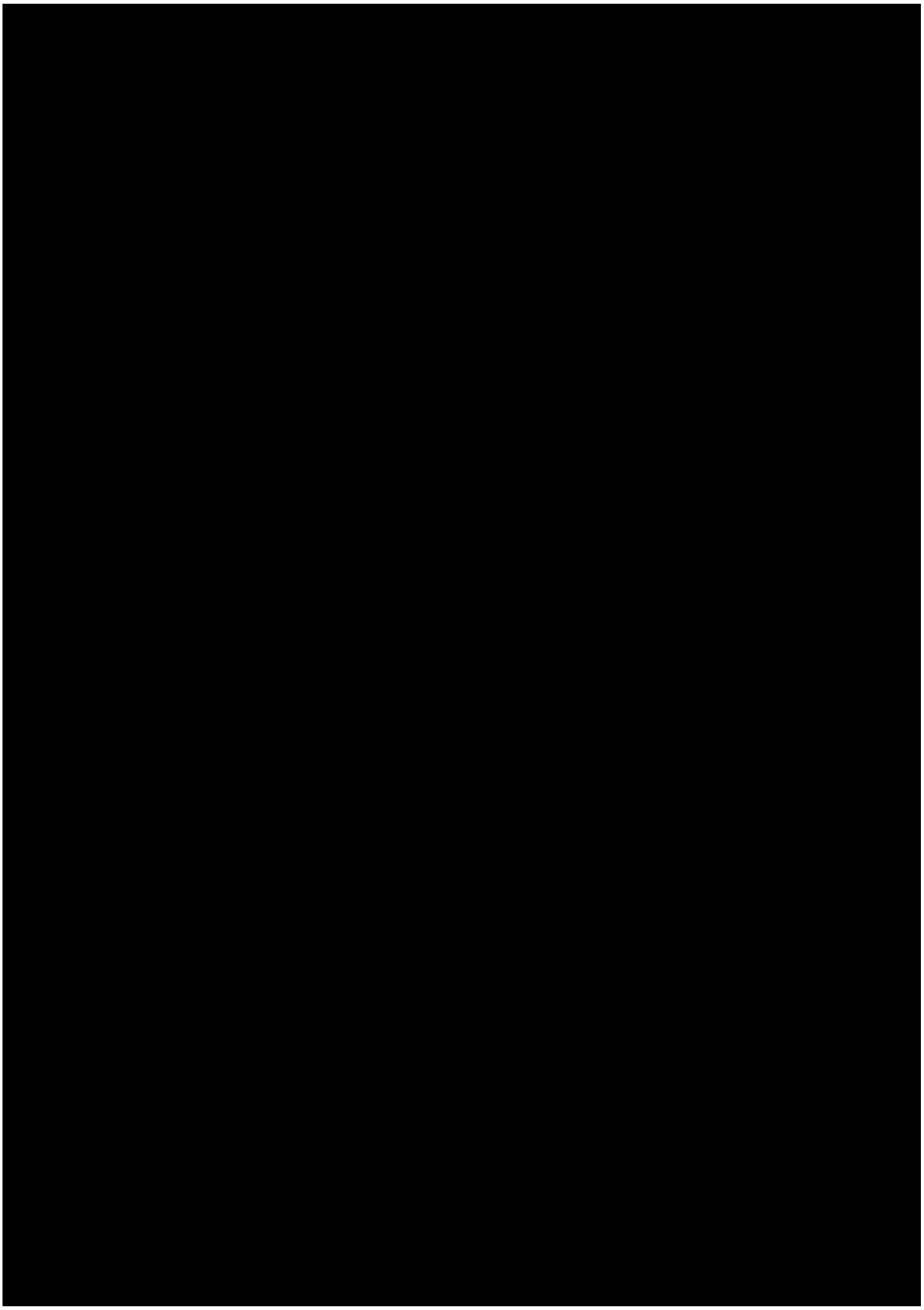
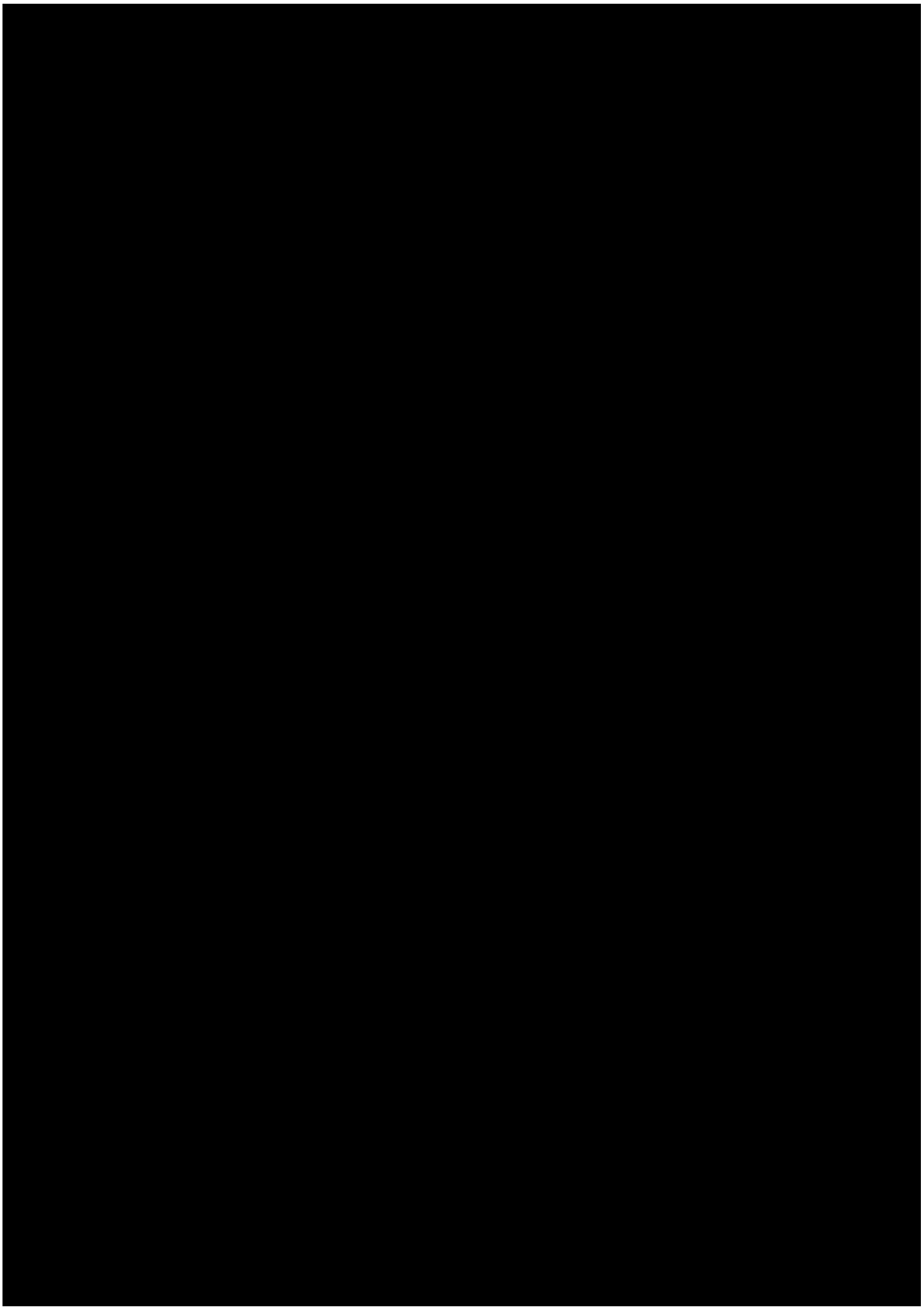
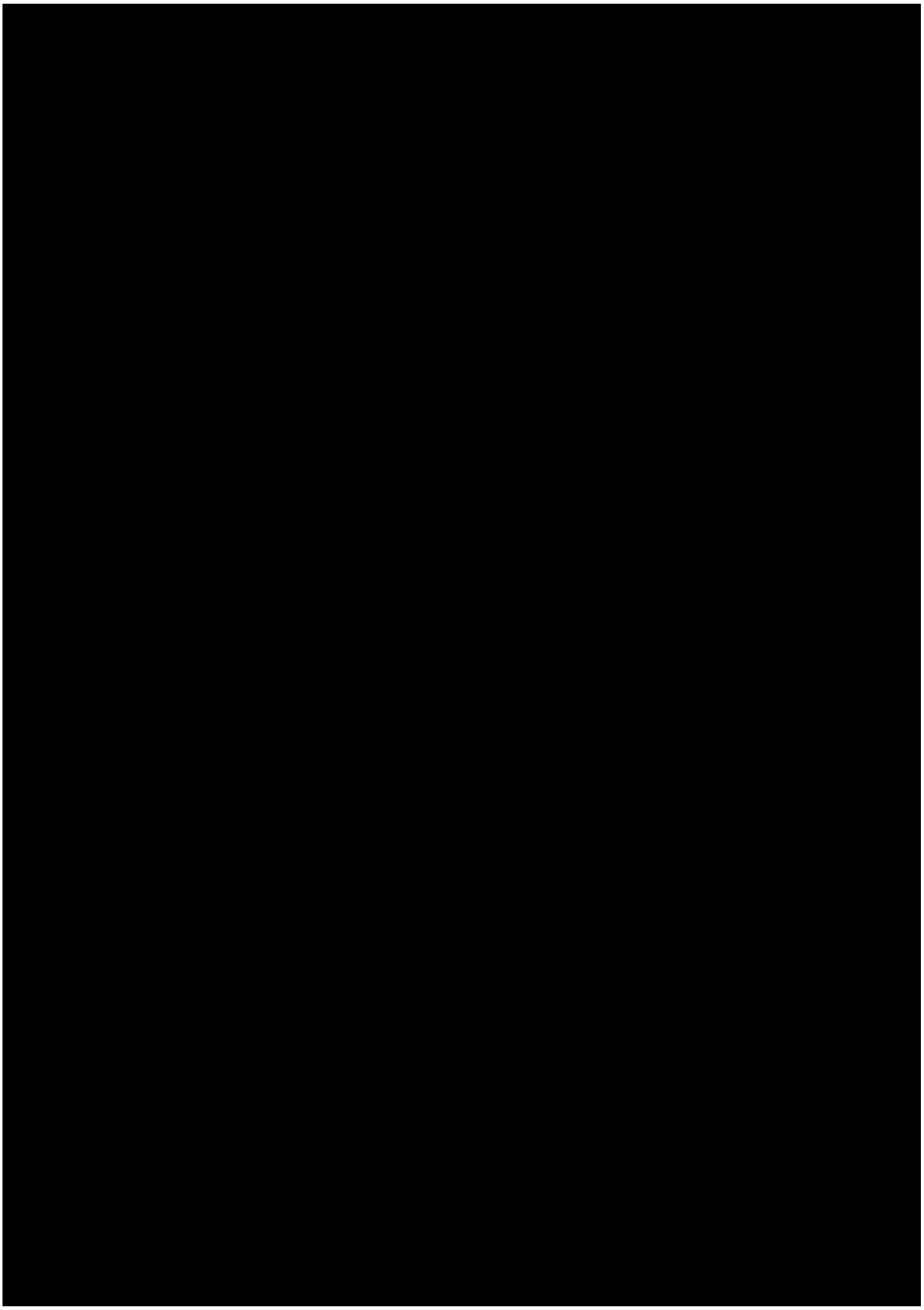
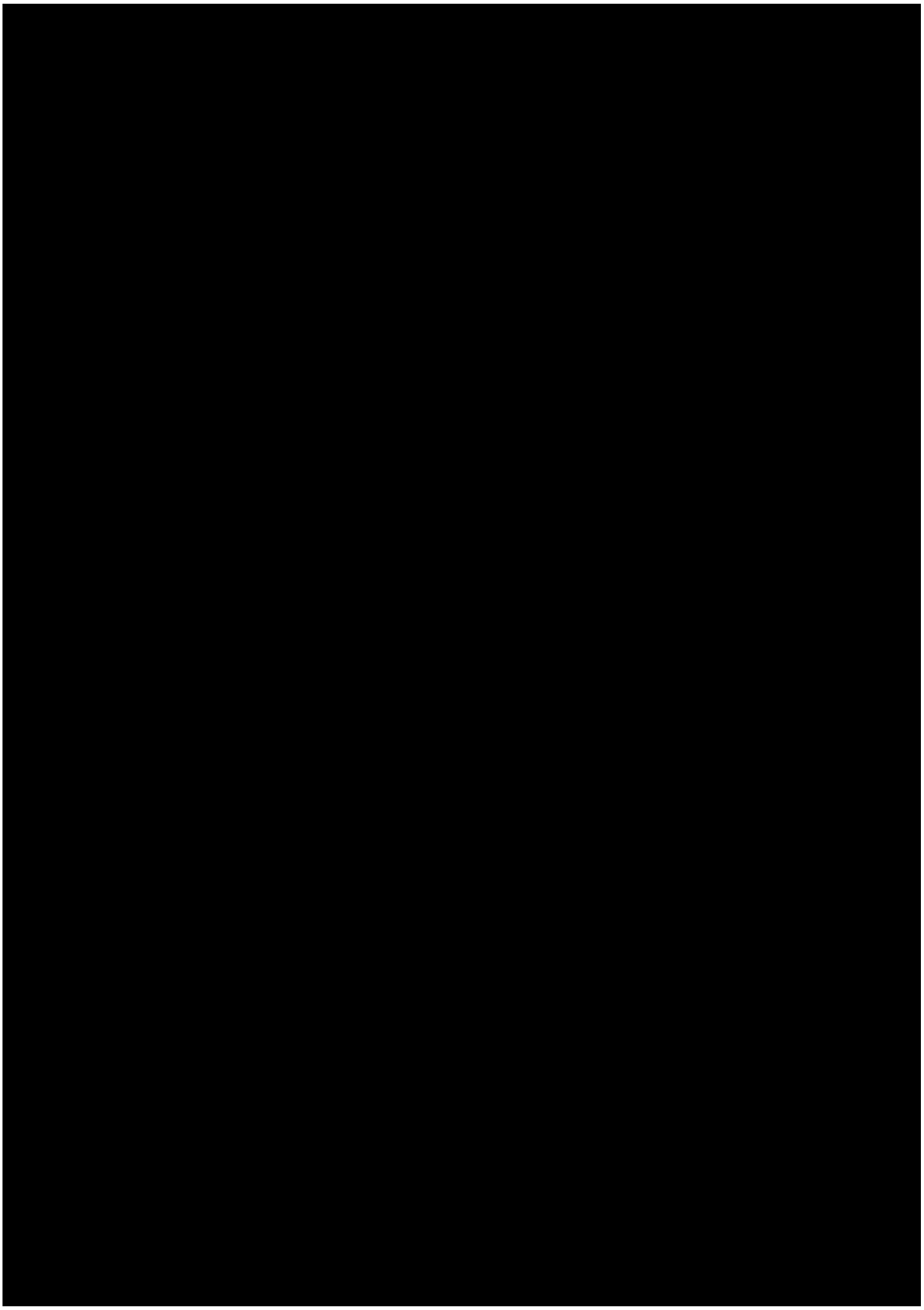
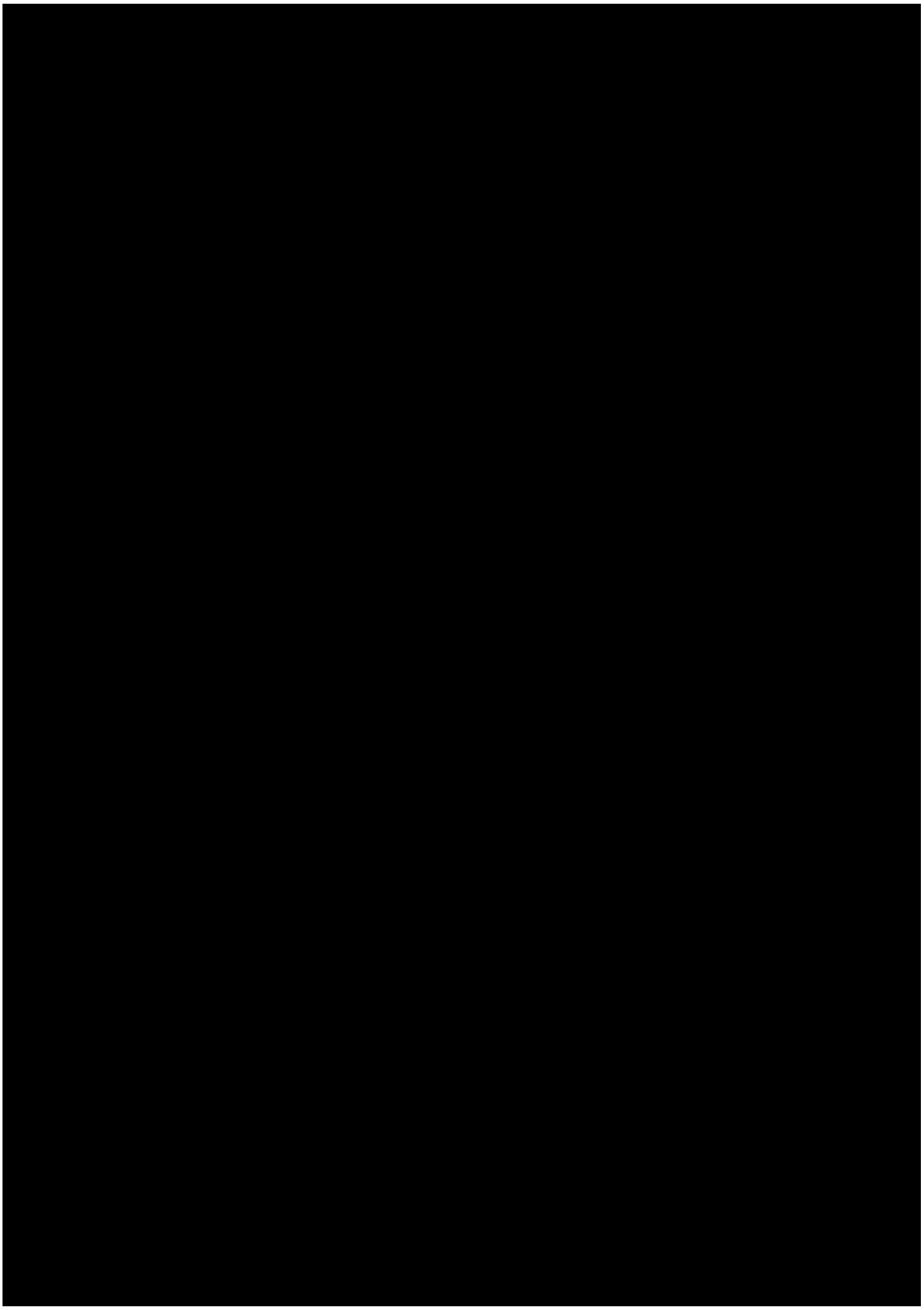
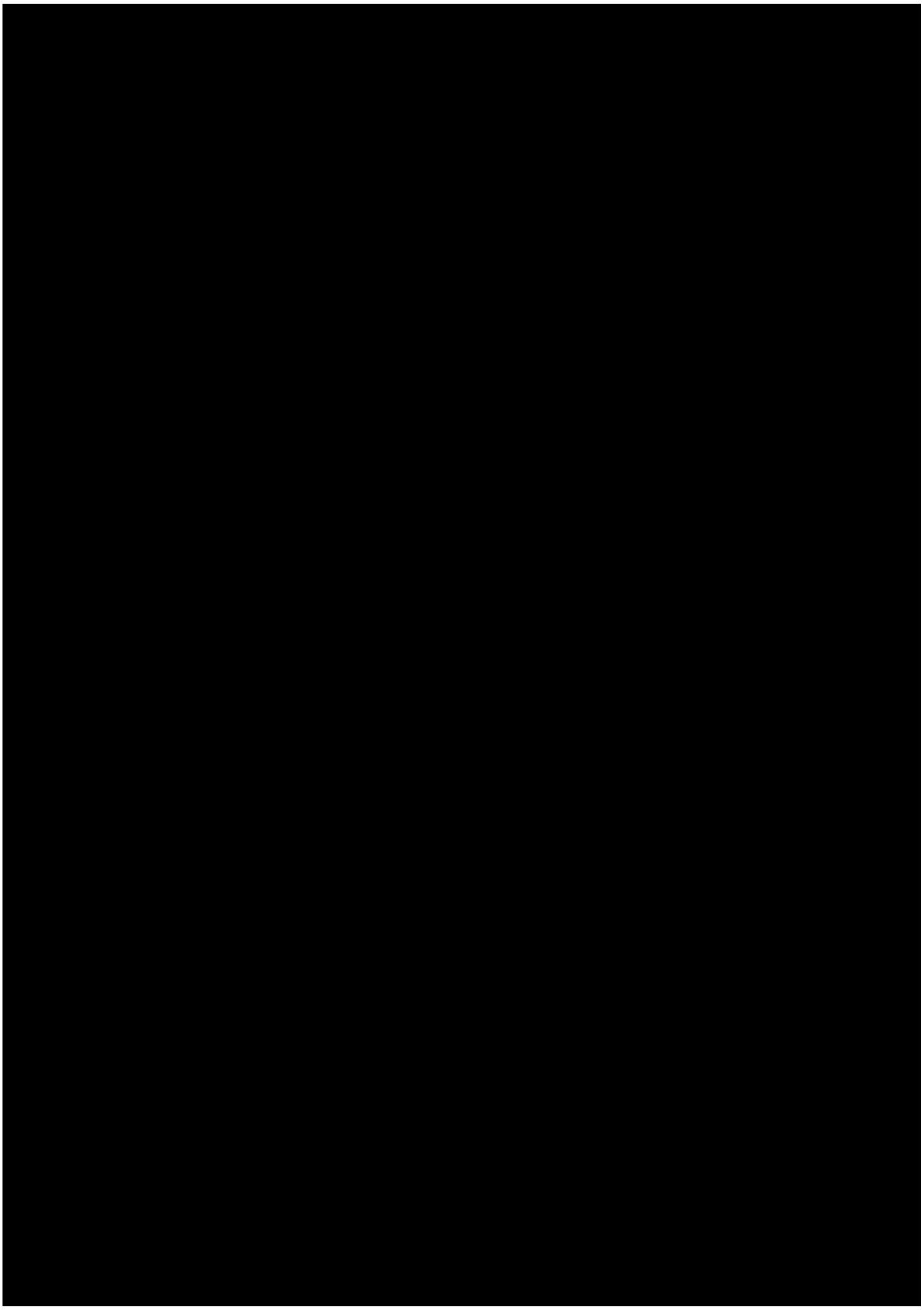
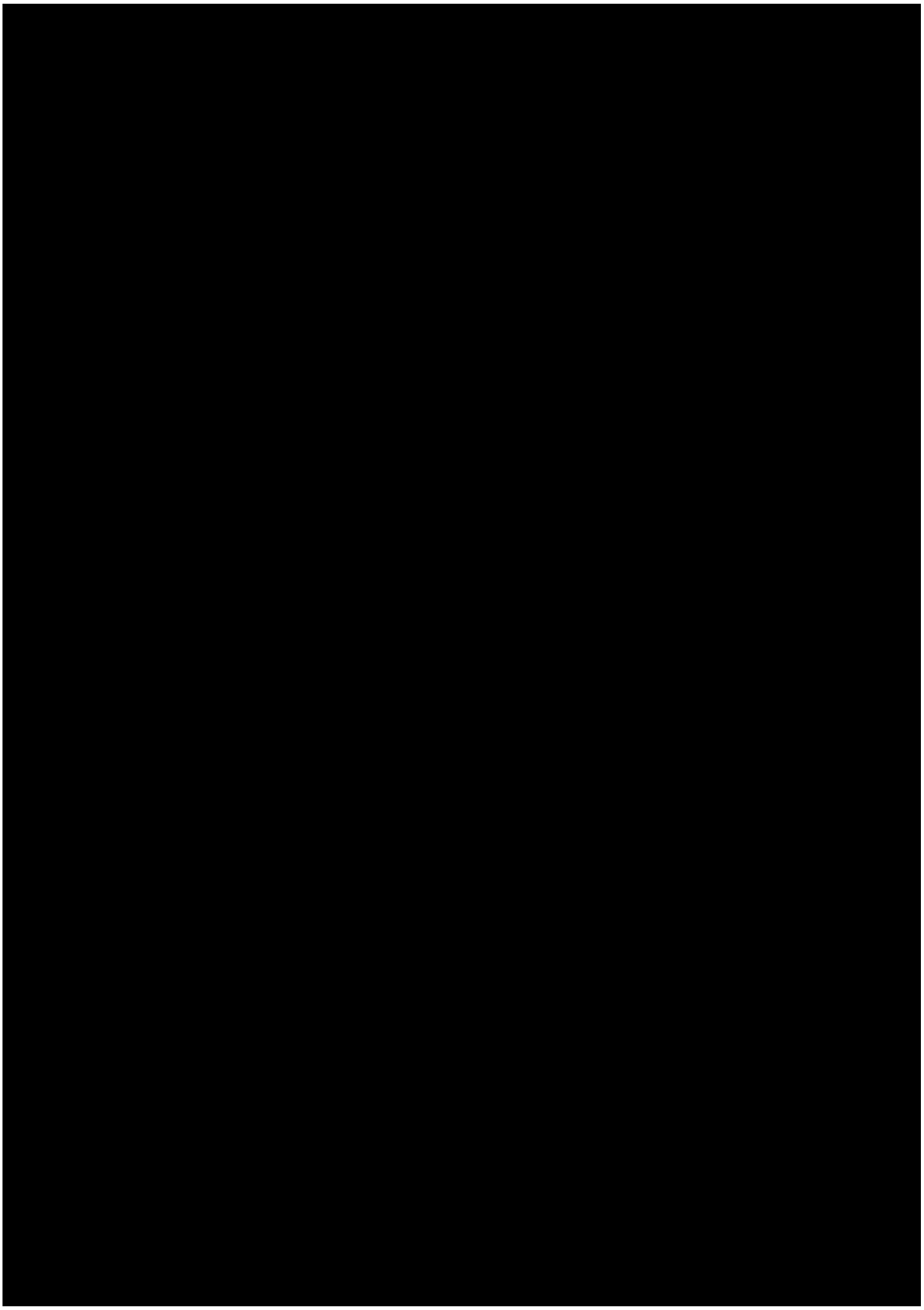
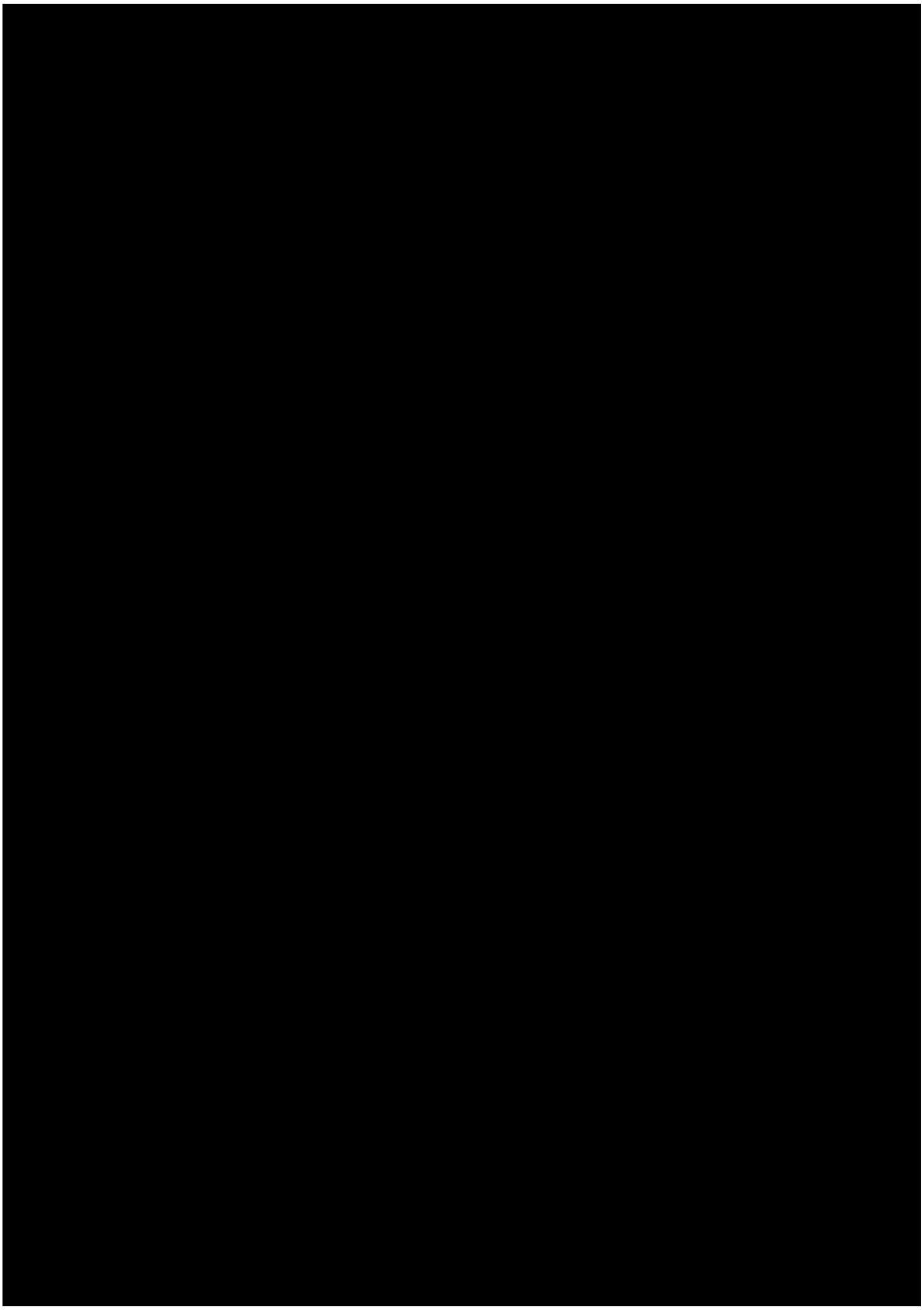
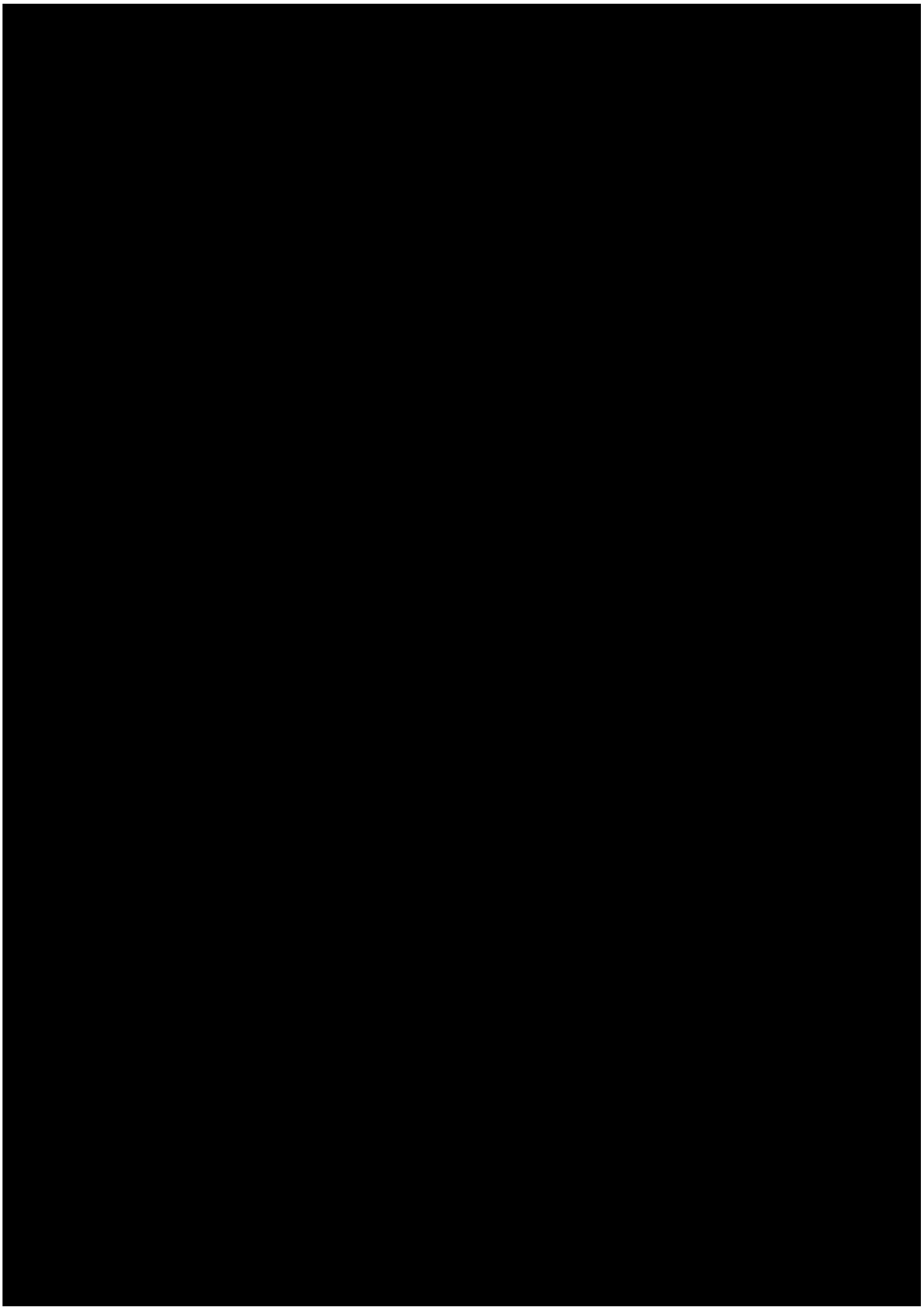
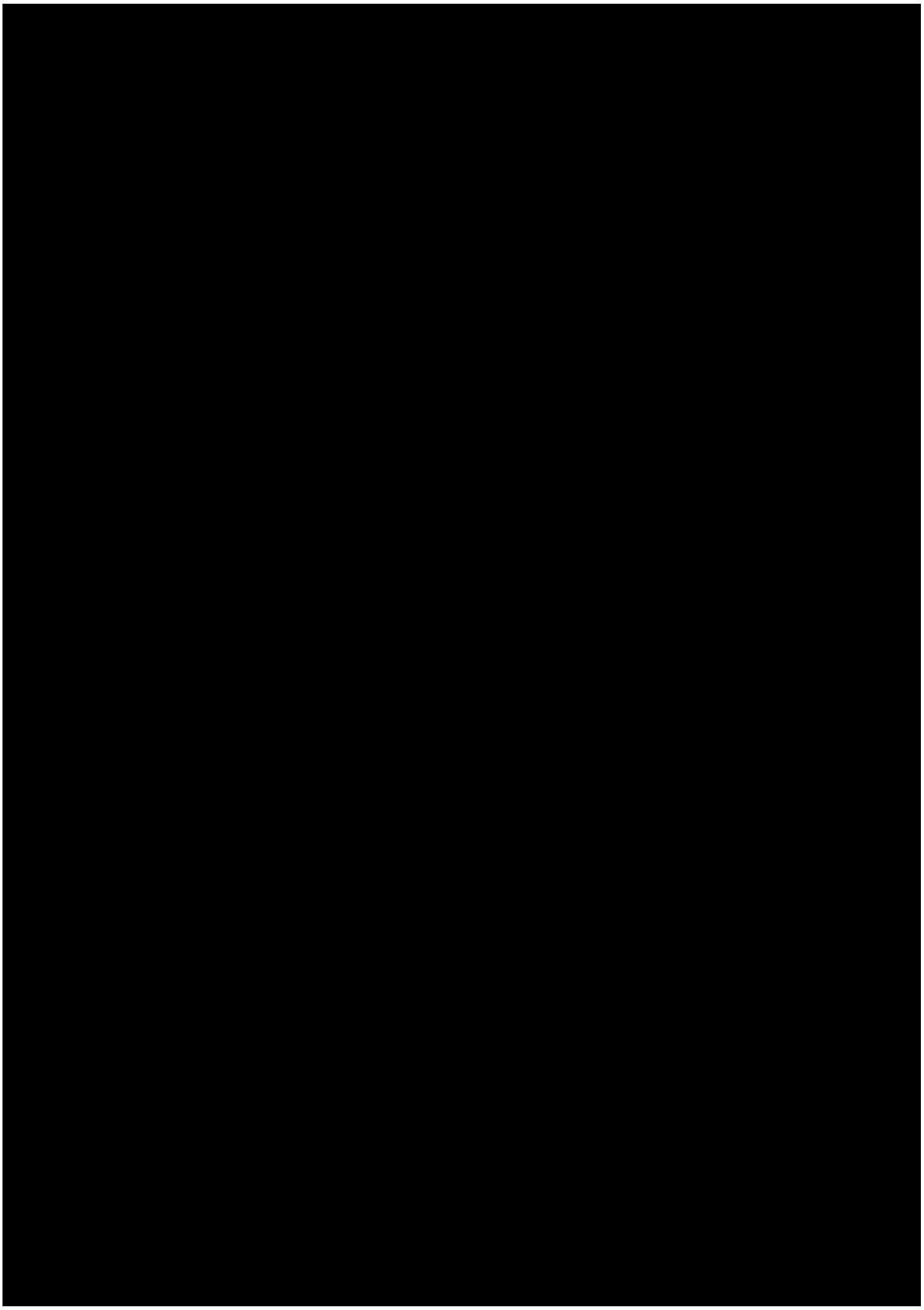
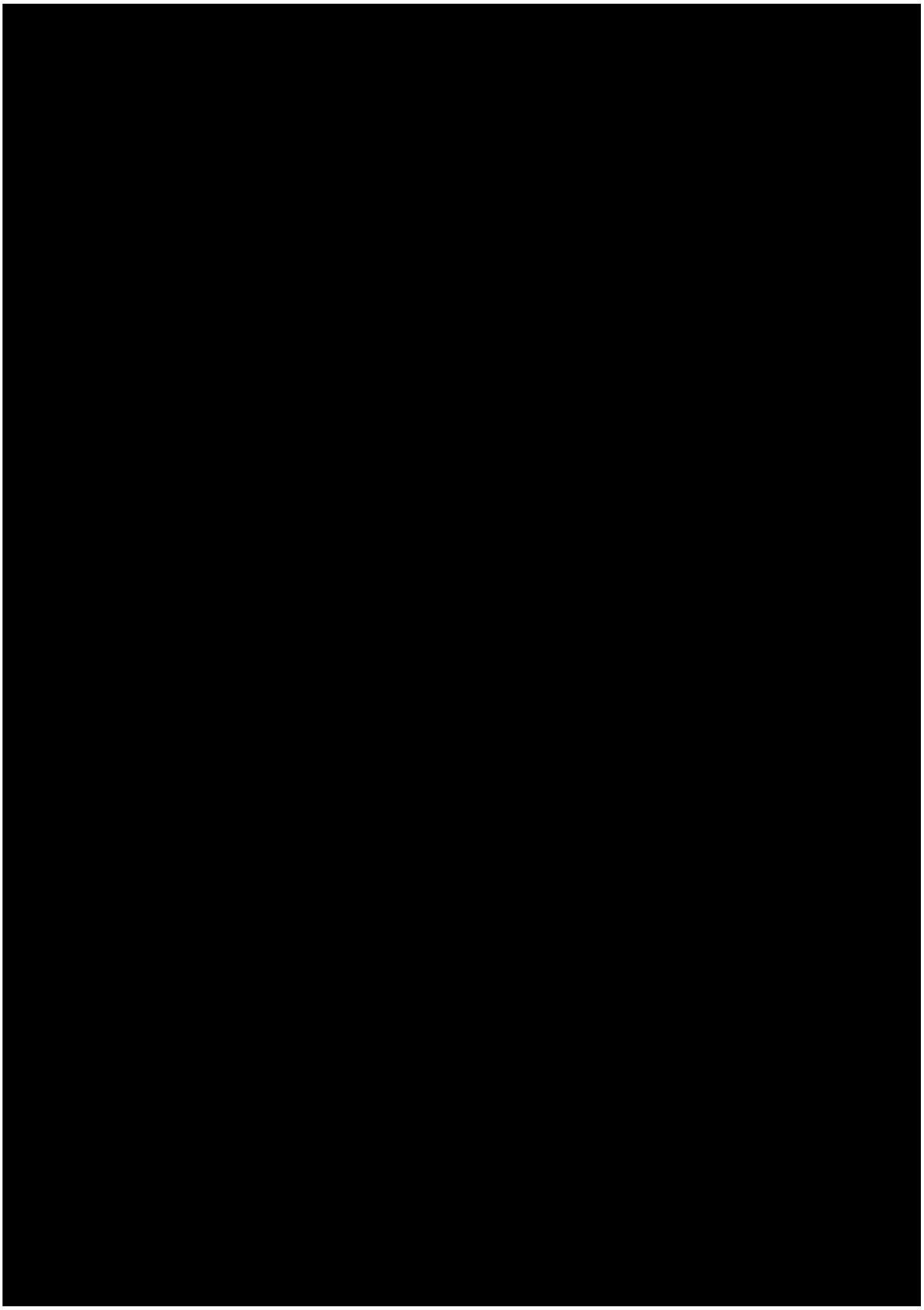
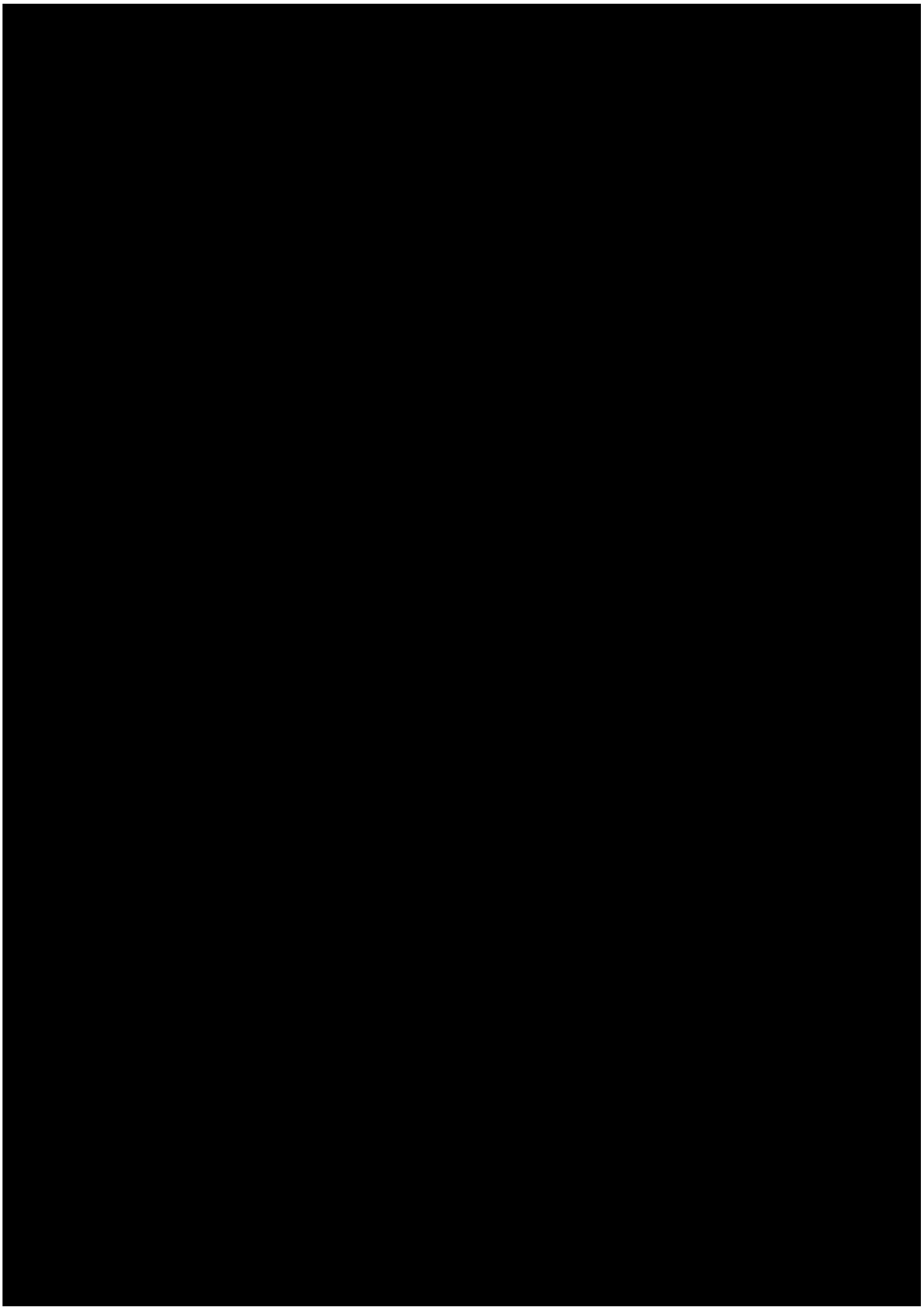
Differentiation: differentiating the self from the parent

Intergenerational transmission of infidelity

Precursor to infidelity

Exposure to parental conflict

Appendix J

All sub-themes – the process of creating master themes

Section C: Publishable Manuscript