

**EXPLORING CONSTRUCTIONS OF INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS**

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study is to explore how people construct their intimate relationships, and to describe the patterns of connection and disconnection and their meanings within the social and cultural contexts of these relationships. It attempts to describe how the participating couples' relationships may or may not have changed due to the research process consisting of reflections and joint story telling, and the interventions of the researcher.

Social constructionism is the epistemological framework of this study and in-depth unstructured interviews with a cohabiting and a married couple were conducted. Hermeneutics was the method used to analyse the data.

The participants' stories were recounted through the researcher's lens in the form of themes characterising their relationships. A comparative analysis was undertaken between the common themes identified in the two participating couples and literature.

The information gained could assist couples and professionals in respecting heterosexual intimate relationships in their specific contexts.

*Key Words: heterosexual, intimate, relationships, marriage, cohabitation, meanings, social constructionism, hermeneutics, qualitative research, stories.*

I declare that,

## EXPLORING CONSTRUCTIONS OF INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### ***General Introduction***

*We can never describe or define love completely, as it is as complex and mysterious as life itself. Love is material, spiritual, animal and cosmic – a cultural and social phenomenon as well as an emotional and psychological one. It is an invisible web of kinship that connects us and creates society, and the source of new life. It has inspired art, music and literature in every culture. Yet how much do we really know how love works (Geraghty, 2007)?*

The above quote illustrates how love is what connects us to other people, yet it is something which is difficult to define completely. This study does not answer the question “*Yet how much do we really know how love works?*” but instead, illustrates how our meanings define our relationships.

### **Explaining the Title: Exploring Constructions of Intimate Relationships**

Intimate or committed relationships can take several different forms. Among heterosexuals, the focus of this study, the most common intimate relationship is marriage (Etaugh & Bridges, 2004). Nevertheless, for many younger couples in current Western society, cohabitation serves as an alternative to, or a trial marriage. Initially I wondered how different a married couple’s constructions of their intimate relationship would be from a cohabiting couple and I therefore chose to include a married and a cohabiting couple to take part in this study. As the title demonstrates, this study attempts to explore these couples’ constructions of their intimate relationships. By using the term ‘exploring’ I hope to highlight how I am exploring the different meanings and realities connected to intimate relationships.

The epistemological framework of this study is social constructionism. Social constructionism regards reality as co-constructed between interacting individuals in specific contexts and considers that since no two persons have the same experience, each co-constructed reality is different from any other (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). Social constructionism therefore believes in the existence of multiple realities and the possibility of many truths. In the present study, the participants each face a different reality within which they operate and live their lives. Each partner brings their individual reality into their interactions with each other, and together they co-create another reality that characterises their relationship. Although there may be similarities between the married and cohabiting couple - the two relationships explored in this study - each intimate relationship is regarded as unique within the specific context where it exists.

By exploring the different realities and meanings connected to intimate relationships, this study attempts to describe the interlinked, interdependent dynamics and balances, as complex as any ecosystem, present in relationships. It hopes to unravel some of the mystery of intimate relationships by describing the complex interplay of various contributing influences underlying each unique connection between two unique individuals. It attempts to explore alternative ways of perceiving partners as individuals and in a relationship. It highlights the ambivalence and inevitable paradoxes present in intimate relationships: As this study will show, the balancing act between independence and connection, power and vulnerability, past and present, and closeness and distance fundamentally characterises intimate relationships and appears to be the source of most conflicts. Contributing to this balancing act described, is the powerful impact of men and women's expectations connected to traditional gender roles. This study shows how men and women possess different roles in their relationships, and as a result have specific expectations of their partner and also of themselves. It appears that even in the supposedly equal society of today, men are expected to hold the ultimate power and authority in their relationships. This discourse is

likely to be a product of our traditionally patriarchal society, and highlights the societal expectation that requires men to be the breadwinner and work outside the home, whilst women work within the home. Such an expectation has been a historical one, but nonetheless still pervades our present society (Hsu, 2005).

The discussion above, attempts to illustrate the complexity of intimate relationships impacting on the constructions or meanings being explored in this study. Owing to the in-depth nature of the enquiry undertaken in this study, and its aims, a qualitative research methodology that focuses on the analysis of two couples' lived experiences, is considered appropriate. The qualitative research design is consistent with the theoretical framework of this study as it enables the researcher to enter into the participants' worlds and together with the couples, co-create new meanings and understandings of their relationship for both the participants and the researcher.

### ***Aim and Rationale of the Study***

The literature review in Chapter 2 demonstrates that a large amount of literature on intimate relationships in Western culture exists. Traditionally, research has tended to perceive intimate relationships as involving two intra-psychic systems. It did not take into account the different contexts in which each system affects and is affected by the other. Much research has focused on the intimate relationship as a situation where two people coexist in their separate personal worlds and minimal research exists that attempts to view the intimate relationship in its broader socio-cultural context. There are only a few studies, which seem to include the voices of both partners in providing an integrated representation of how the relationship is experienced by both the man and the woman. Furthermore, only a limited number of studies have made observations and comments on how intimate relationships evolve owing to intervention and facilitation. From the available literature, it appears that research studies have provided couples with little opportunity to reconstruct their realities through

facilitation and intervention and thus enable them to deconstruct the discourses that may be limiting their relationship.

The aim of this study, therefore, is to tell the stories of the participating couples in an attempt to explore how people construct their intimate relationships. In doing so, the patterns of connection and disconnection and their specific meanings within the social and cultural contexts of these relationships are described and explored. In addition, how the participants' relationships may or may not have changed or shifted as a result of the research process as an intervention, will be highlighted.

It is hoped that this study will make a valuable contribution to the understanding of intimate relationships, by including both partners' voices, and that it will add to the literature by emphasising the process-orientated nature in these relationships and how they can be enhanced or facilitated. It is hoped that this study will benefit professionals who work with couples, by increasing understanding of the different complexities which emerge from the combination of two unique selves. In addition, this study hopes to capture the intimate experience and resonate with couples in providing them with alternative ways to view, and thus interact in their intimate relationship. As couples see beyond the societal expectations that may limit their relationships, they may gain a deeper understanding of, and become empowered in renegotiating their relationship.

As the researcher, I join with the couples in this study to tell their stories and acknowledge that these relationships have evolved over time and contain established patterns of interaction. It is hoped that the couples will benefit from this research process, and gain a greater insight into their respective relationships. In addition it is hoped that this study will assist professionals working with couples and their relationships, to increase understanding of intimate relationships in their specific contexts.

### ***Design of the Study***

The design of this study is qualitative in nature. A large number of studies on heterosexual intimate relationships have used a quantitative framework. Such traditional quantitative research methods seem too restrictive to capture the complexities in intimate relationships and do not allow for an in-depth description of interactional patterns and processes in relationships. It is for this reason that a qualitative research design has been selected as it allows the participating couples to recount their stories, and in this process, construct and re-construct their realities with the researcher and with each other. Furthermore, the qualitative approach allows the context of the relationships to be taken into account, and for the underlying grand narratives and societal discourses to be explored.

The research design selected for this study allows for awareness to be raised and leads to personal growth in both the researcher as well as the participants. Subjective realities and meanings are shared and new realities and meaning become possible when the researcher and the participants join in story telling and co-create more beneficial and empowering stories. Although my own experiences with my partner have coloured the lens through which I look at the relationships, the participants as individuals and as an intimate pair are regarded as experts in their own experiences and processes. This design views the participants as co-researchers, where the researcher is not the expert, but rather a learner, and the participants are the experts.

The design of this study involves identifying and discussing themes and patterns unique to each individual participant as well as common to the intimate relationships. The themes will offer insight into the processes involved, which shape these relationships. It is hoped that the research design will provide the participants with the opportunity to gain a different understanding of the

processes present in their relationship, and highlight alternative possibilities and options, which are perhaps effective in bringing about positive shifts.

### **Sampling and Selection**

In this study, sampling will be purposive in that unique-case and convenience selection will be utilised. Participants who are willing to discuss their intimate relationships openly and who are able to express their experiences in their relationship as partners will be selected. The sample will consist of two couples – one cohabiting and the other married – who are interested in discussing their relationships, and feel that their stories will contribute to and generate further and alternative understanding of intimate heterosexual relationships.

### **Data Collection**

Unstructured interviews or conversations will create a platform for participants to recount their stories. Questions will be open-ended and exploratory in nature in order to obtain information from the perspective of the participants. The participants will also be requested to reflect on their experience of the research process, and these reflections will form part of the data to be analysed.

### **Data Analysis**

The technique, hermeneutics, a methodology that values the discovery of meaning through interpretation, will be used to analyse the data. The data analysis process will take the following form:

- The four participants (two females and two males) will be interviewed individually. These interviews will be audio-recorded and no specific time limit will be imposed.

- The individual interviews will be transcribed and a summary of each individual's interview will be compiled. Each participant will receive a copy of their own summary and once their partner has given permission will be given a copy of their partner's summary. These summaries can be found in the appendix, and will form the participant's biography, recounted from my perspective.
- The participants will be asked to read through their summaries and make notes of any interpretations that they disagree with. The couple will be asked not to discuss the summaries with one another, until the joint interview.
- While the partners review their own as well as each other's summaries, I will listen to the individual interview recordings one at a time, and immerse myself in each participant's story, taking note of themes and patterns that emerge as I gain a sense of the participants' experiences.
- Joint interviews with the couples will then be conducted where the individual summaries will serve as a point of discussion for their relationship. These interviews will also be recorded.
- The joint interviews will be transcribed. Like the individual summaries, I aim to immerse myself in each relationship, taking note of unique and common patterns and styles of interactions.
- I will then write two stories for each couple in the study. In these stories, I will identify themes pertinent to each particular partner, and their relationship, and will consider how the research process may or may not have impacted on their interaction in the relationship.
- Finally a comparative analysis will be undertaken, where I will attempt to integrate the themes found in the two intimate relationships of this study, with previous research.



### ***Format of the Study***

This study will consist of both a literature review and a practical component.

The literature review provides a context within which to perceive intimate relationships. Various perspectives within the existing body of knowledge of heterosexual intimate relationships will be explored, and dominant themes in the literature will be discussed. An overview of the different literature sources will provide the readers with a broader perspective of the shifting conceptualisations of intimate relationships. Although the literature review is offered as an alternative voice, with which the stories from this study will be compared, its purpose is not to validate the themes identified in the couples' stories. Rather, a both/and perspective is supported where the literature is included as an additional voice, highlighting the existence of multiple realities.

The purpose of interviewing couples both individually and together, is not only to elicit themes, but also to provide the couples with the opportunity to tell their stories and relate their experiences as women or men in relationship with one another. In addition, this research process will allow me to explore how intimate relationships can be enhanced and whether changes can occur through interventions. These conversations between participants and researcher will provide a different and alternative reality to that which is provided in the literature review.

The following chapters will comprise this study:

**Chapter 2** contains the literature review. An overview of literature and research in the area of intimate relationships will be provided, and various different theoretical viewpoints will be explored.

**Chapter 3** contains the theoretical approach of this study. This chapter discusses social constructionism as the epistemology chosen for this study. The implications of this particular epistemology will be outlined. In addition, a comprehensive explanation of the research methodology utilised in this study - the qualitative research design and hermeneutic data analysis method - is provided.

**Chapters 4 and 5** contain the researcher's interpretations of each couple's stories. Individual themes relating to the female partner, then the male partner, relevant to the relationship, will first be discussed, followed by themes emerging from the relationship itself.

**Chapter 6** contains the comparative analysis between the common themes found in both couples' stories, and the literature.

**Chapter 7** is the concluding chapter, providing an evaluation of the research study as well as recommendations for future research.

### ***Conclusion***

Although intimate relationships have received a great deal of attention in the last years, the investigation has often not included the context within which intimate relationships occur. A focus on culture and societal discourse has tended to be neglected, and little research has been dedicated to actively searching for and observing process changes in intimate relationships. In employing a qualitative research method, this study will attempt to capture the complexity and the evolving nature of relationships. In addition, this study attempts to influence relationships positively, by providing couples with alternative meanings and possibilities within their relationship.

## **Chapter 2: Exploring Constructions of Intimate Relationships**

### ***A Brief Overview***

In this chapter, the literature pertaining to intimate relationships will be explored, with the aim of providing a more comprehensive backdrop against which to view this research study. An outline of this chapter and how it explores the constructions of intimate relationships is provided below.

The chapter is divided into two broad components. The first component involves a discussion of intimacy in relation to the self. The different definitions and theoretical orientations toward identity and their implications regarding intimate relationships will be presented. The second component involves a discussion of intimate relationships where themes connected to intimacy in heterosexual relationships are explored. An overview of relevant research relating to intimate relationships will be provided, and the implications of these studies and the different epistemological orientations toward intimate relationships will be discussed.

### ***Introduction***

Relationships with others lie at the very core of human existence. Humans are conceived within relationships, born into relationships, and live their lives within relationships with others (Kelley, 1983).

Many view intimate relationships as basic to human interaction and survival. The form of intimate expression varies widely within and across cultures. However, the need to be accepted and loved – to have intimate relationships – is basic to all social beings (Eshleman & Clarke, 1978).

Intimacy in a more general sense refers to any close association or friendship that involves informal warmth, openness, and sharing (Eshleman & Clarke, 1978). In terms of the aforementioned definition, intimacy implies a relationship. In this study, the construct intimacy is therefore used interchangeably with the construct, intimate relationships at times. However, the constructs are also used independently where intimacy refers to a quality of a relationship whereas intimate relationships refer to the relationship itself.

Not all intimate relationships occur within a marital or premarital context and could occur in any close relationships between men and women, or among same sex partners and friends. The focus of this study however, is on intimacy in the context of heterosexual relationships.

The importance of finding love, of forming intimate relationships is exemplified in Western societies in the ocean of information about love and intimate relationships pumped out in books, TV shows, plays, movies, newspapers, magazines and so on (Berscheid & Peplau, cited in Fletcher, 2002). One could claim that the attention to love, sex, and intimate relationships is a function of Western society. It has been argued, however, that romantic love exists in all known human societies, and marriage, courtship, and sex, play pivotal roles in all cultures (Berscheid & Peplau, cited in Fletcher 2002).

Intimate or committed relationships can take several different forms. Among heterosexuals, the focus of this study, the most common intimate relationship is marriage (Etaugh & Bridges, 2004). Marriage can be defined as a legal relationship between spouses: a legally recognised relationship established by a civil or religious ceremony between two people who intend to live together as sexual and domestic partners (Flanagan & Williams, 2007).

As an institution, marriage is constantly changing. In the 1950s, 96 percent of all people of childbearing age were married and believed that it would last forever

(Carr, 1988). Getting married represented the transition to adulthood, and therefore, was expected of young people. Eager to leave home and become adults, many young people got married. The goals of marriage were security, stability, loyalty, togetherness, and permanence (Carr, 1988). Husbands were breadwinners; wives, housekeepers and mothers. Through mass media, young women learned that marriage not only brought adulthood but also a beautiful home, wonderful children and 'happiness-ever-after' (Carr, 1988). In the 1960s and 1970s many of the postwar baby boomers came of age and they rebelled against many of the past values associated with marriage. A popular slogan of this generation became "you do your thing and I'll do mine" (Carr, 1988, p.16). 'Swinging' (partner exchange), open marriage, child-free marriage, homosexual relationships and so on, were actively campaigned for during this time, in order to gain increased social acceptance (Berscheid & Peplau, 1983). Today, a shared, egalitarian relationship in marriage is the stated goal of most Western people (Berscheid & Peplau, cited in Fletcher, 2002). In addition, it appears that most Western people believe all they have to do is find the 'right' man or woman to fall in love with; then marriage will automatically bring happiness (Carr, 1988). Perhaps as Westerners, having been exposed to media, fairytales, movies, books and so on, we believe that marriage is traditionally seen as the answer to getting the happiness that we want.

According to a recent survey, 90 percent of teenagers want to get married someday (Etaugh & Bridges, 2004). These statistics come from young people who have watched their own or their friends' parents go through divorces. Such statistics demonstrate how marriage and family have been and will doubtlessly continue to be high on the Westerners' list of values. According to Carr (1988) when a large sample of brilliant, successful, middle-aged men and women were asked to look back on what was most satisfying in their lives, the vast majority said their families had been the most fulfilling and satisfying – more so than their professional accomplishments, community status, and financial success.

On the other hand, being single is more accepted in Western society today than in the past. Today, we accept that many unmarried people are single by choice and we now recognise that there are more lifestyles to choose from. Western people are staying single for longer and getting married later than ever before. Still, most of us will marry at least once (Etaugh & Bridges, 2004).

For many younger couples, cohabitation serves as an alternative to, or a trial, marriage. Cohabitation can be defined as the state in which an unmarried couple lives together in shared living quarters and engages in premarital sexual intercourse (Kelley, Berscheid, Christensen, Harvey, Huston, Lvinger, McClintock, Peplau & Peterson, 1983). I have chosen to include unmarried heterosexual cohabitants in this study because, as previously mentioned, cohabitation between men and women has steadily become a common phenomenon within Western society today. In the U.S., one third of women age 25 to 34 are currently living with a partner and about half of young adults cohabit at some time (U.S Census Bureau, cited in Etaugh & Bridges, 2004). This phenomenon reflects the general trend toward a changing structure of families within Western society. More and more people appear to be experimenting with alternative life styles – ‘alternative,’ that is, to traditional marriage (Yankelovich, cited in Kelley et al., 1983). People are getting married at a later age, and with that, cohabitation between men and women has increased.

From a feminist perspective, it is possible that some women may be attracted to cohabitation because it provides freedom from traditional marital gender roles (Etaugh & Bridges, 2004). Although cohabitation is a move away from a traditional way of life, and possibly the traditional gender roles of being male and female, it is debatable whether these roles have really given way to ‘unisex’ roles within heterosexual relationships in current Western society. Furthermore, despite its popularity, not all people are in favour of cohabitation. Perhaps this is because cohabitation is counter to the teachings of many religions. According to Huffman (cited in Etaugh & Bridges, 2004), women who hold more liberal sexual

views and less traditional gender attitudes have more positive views of cohabitation. This lifestyle is inconsistent with traditional views about premarital chastity for both men and women and appears less likely than marriage to enable fulfillment of traditional gender roles.

Cohabitation, the rate of divorce, as well as the number of single parent families have risen. These variations in family patterns and the increase of alternative relationship forms, make it useful for researchers to expand their focus from 'the family' to a more general examination of close relationships (Berscheid & Peplau, 1983). Therefore, within the context of the current social change taking place in Western society, including unmarried cohabiting couples in this study of intimate relationships is considered relevant.

### ***What is Intimacy in Heterosexual Relationships?***

The word *intimacy* has many meanings depending on the context in which it is used. In the study of relationships among people, "the word *intimate* pertains to close personal relations characterised by warm friendship; private or closely personal" (Carr, 1988, p. 6).

In heterosexual relationships, it is possible that an intimate relationship may sprout suddenly from a chance meeting with a stranger, but it must be nurtured over time for it to grow. A chance meeting can develop into the kind of intimacy which occurs in romantic relationships where we share the most inner, personal, deep, intrinsic parts of ourselves with those innermost parts of another. The most intimate romantic relationships include a joining of bodies, minds, feelings and spirits (Carr, 1988).

## **A Construction of Intimacy and the Self**

Intimacy within heterosexual relationships requires the presence of two selves. When two people come together as a couple, they bring their unique realities; their own lived experiences, their own context and constructed meanings (their unique identity) into their interactions with each other. Together they then co-construct their relationship – a unique combination of the two selves. It is therefore relevant that exploring intimate relationships begins with the self. To experience an intimate relationship, understanding the fundamental nature of the self is essential (Carr, 1988).

Most human beings hunger for closeness with others (Carr, 1988). As infants, most people experienced feelings of warmth and caring, and they want to re-experience those safe feelings of their early life. Usually, life begins in close association with others. We all learn how to be human among other humans, and we learn to be intimate with the self (Carr, 1988).

People construct their personal reality largely from their culture and family. Piaget (cited in Carr, 1988) stated that children construct reality from perceptions created through the process of socialisation. Thus self image and the needs allied with it are learned from others.

The consciousness of self is learned as a child develops. A child constructs a self-image through interaction with others in a world structured by language (Carr, 1988). Self-concept is mainly a product of our past communications and relations with others in our family. As people, we create ourselves largely from what others have perceived of us and although our self-image is forever changing, its greatest development occurs in childhood.

From childhood to adulthood, the 'self' is not a static entity but can be viewed as a multi-faceted concept, which is always shifting. For each of us, our self consists



of multiple roles in life: child, student, friend, lover, spouse, parent and so on (Carr, 1988). At times the 'self' consists of several roles simultaneously. Although people's roles are boundless and always in transition – often with those whom one loves and lives with - one gets locked in, stereotyped in ways that prevent each person from genuinely seeing each other. Every new relationship has the potential for reflecting back to us, the facets of ourselves that we do not know (Carr, 1988). The self is mirrored back to us through the perceptions of a new and unique person who sees us as no one has ever seen us before (Carr, 1988). In intimate relationships people are often attracted to someone who exhibits those parts of themselves that they have rejected. People often let their partner play those roles that they do not acknowledge in themselves (Carr, 1988). Later, if people marry or choose to live with this other person, they often criticise them for the very qualities they found attractive (Carr, 1988). It seems therefore, that time spent exploring the self, even those parts in conflict, can help us better understand relationships.

The changing kaleidoscope of the self can never be fully grasped. People construct their personal reality from their culture and family and every person is perpetually constructing and reconstructing a self-image (Carr, 1988). Although exploring intimate relationships begins with the self, it does not stop there. I have chosen to include in this chapter, a discussion on the self, as self-intimacy is perhaps the bedrock for intimacy with others.

Erikson's theory on psychosocial stages of personality development has contributed to research and understanding of adult intimate relationships from a psychoanalytic perspective. His theory is extremely useful in contributing to our understanding of the development of self and then intimate relationships within different contexts. In the following section, an overview of Erikson's work with regard to identity and intimate relationships is explored.

## **Erikson and the Development of Identity**

Erikson was among the first to acknowledge how people's development across their lifespan may impact on their identity and then relationships. For Erikson, identity is a structure, with an organised set of values and beliefs about oneself, expressed in views on occupation, politics, religion, and relationships (Wrightsman, 1994). The process of forming an ego identity takes place in different stages across a person's lifespan, although mainly in the adolescent years, and requires that one compare how one sees oneself with how significant others appear to expect one to be (Engler, 1995). Erikson maintained that intimacy cannot be achieved unless one's Ego identity has been developed.

Erikson's theory on the development of identity built on Freud's psychosexual stages of personality development by making explicit the social dimension implied in Freud's work (Engler, 1995). While he believed that a person's earliest life experiences may impact on one's identity development, unlike Freud, he did not attribute all influence on a child to the family alone. Instead, Erikson maintained that a child's social environment such as his school (which includes relationships with friends and teachers), may have just as much impact on his or her development as the family relationships. His theory was aimed directly at establishing developmental norms across a person's lifespan and has therefore had a widespread influence in schools and other societal institutions (Murphy, De Bruin, Venter, Qveiroz & Lotter, 2005).

While Erikson's theory is indeed useful on one level, Murphy et al. (2005), maintain that like Freud, Erikson's theory has aided in the reinforcement of women as developmentally inferior in the creation of typically 'male' characteristics as a developmental ideal. Traditionally in Western, male-dominated societies, to possess a healthy and mature identity, means to achieve autonomy and become self-sufficient, unique, integrated and complete (Cross & Gore, cited in Hsu, 2005). This typically Western view is echoed in Erikson's

work, where the developments of the various psychosocial stages culminate in a unique, self-sufficient and integrated individual. Indeed it may be possible that Erikson's views have been influential in the development of this Western dominant discourse regarding identity. In addition, the notion of developmental norms implies the notion of universality. Although context is taken into account on one level, the subjective component, belonging to the individual context is ignored in Erikson's theory. The implication of this view with regard to the role of identity in intimacy is that the context of the specific relationship (the combination of two specific identities) is not taken into account.

Each of Erikson's psychosocial stages centres on an emotional polarity or conflict that children and adults encounter at certain critical periods (Engler, 1995). New environmental demands create conflict for the emerging person. If the conflict is satisfactorily resolved, the positive component of that conflict will be reflected in a person's identity to a higher degree. If the conflict persists or is not adequately resolved, the negative component of that conflict will predominate (Engler, 1995). For example, in the first stage, *trust versus mistrust*, trust represents the positive component of the conflict and mistrust represents the negative component. The ego quality of hope will develop when there is more of the positive than the negative pole.

According to Erikson's theory, each successive stage is not only qualitatively different, but is discontinuous with the previous stage. A crisis or critical choice in each, leads eventually to an abrupt termination of each period, even though transition to the next stage or period may take several months or years. The stages build on each other, and the way in which each crisis is resolved affects the person's ability to resolve the conflicts of the next stages. From Erikson's perspective then, personality development proceeds by "critical steps – critical being a characteristic of turning points, of moments of decision between progress and regression, integration and retardation" (Erikson, cited in Wrightsman, 1994, p. 14). However, it is important to note at this stage that according to Erikson, if a

crisis is not successfully resolved, it can be resolved in subsequent stages. In this way, Erikson's theory is more positive than Freud's.

The stages of personality development, proposed by Erikson, are outlined below:

*Stage 1: Trust versus Mistrust: Hope*

Erikson saw this stage as the foundation, and hence the most important stage (Dacey, cited in Wrightsman, 1994). The basic psychosocial attitude to be learned at this stage is whether or not you can trust the world. Acquisition of trust meant not so much a belief that the world is safe as that it is orderly and predictable. Hence, trust involves negative as well as positive expectations. Acquisition of trust, in this context, means learning that a dangerous person can be trusted to be dangerous, just as it means that a caregiver can be trusted to reappear, to provide (Dacey, cited in Wrightsman, 1994). According to Erikson, if infants receive unreliable, inadequate, or rejecting care, they will perceive their world as indifferent or hostile and they will develop a high degree of mistrust. An appropriate balance of trust and mistrust leads to the development of the ego strength 'hope', a basic human virtue without which we are unable to survive. Hope represents a persistent conviction that our wishes can be satisfied in spite of disappointment and failures. Hope is the basis of faith, reflected in mature commitments (Engler, 1995).

*Stage 2: Autonomy versus Shame and Doubt: Will*

Erikson's second psychosocial stage arises during the second and third years of life. The task for children at this stage is to gain mastery and control over their bodies. Dacey (cited in Wrightsman, 1994) notes that Erikson agrees with other psychoanalysts that toilet training has more important consequences in one's life than just control over one's bowels. If children are encouraged to explore their bodies and their social and physical worlds, some degree of self-confidence develops (Dacey, cited in Wrightsman, 1994). If on the other hand, they are consistently criticised for their inability to control their bowels, they feel ashamed

and come to doubt themselves. They become reluctant to test themselves. Erikson has stated, “if in some respects you have relatively more shame than autonomy, then you feel or act inferior all your life – or consistently counteract that feeling” (Evans, cited in Wrightsman, 1994, p. 65.) Successful resolution of Stage 2 leads to accomplishment of the virtue of self control and will. Will is defined by Erikson (1964) as a natural outgrowth of autonomy from which a mature sense of will power emerges. Will is an unbroken determination to exercise freedom of choice and self-restraint and forms the basis for our subsequent acceptance of social laws (Engler, 1995).

### *Stage 3: Initiative versus Guilt: Purpose*

Building on whatever degree of competence children have acquired in Stage 2 to control themselves, children in this stage now discover they can have some influence over others in the family and that they can be successful in manipulating their surroundings (Dacey, cited in Wrightsman, 1994). Children may ask questions in order to develop knowledge and skills; initiative results as they feel more comfortable in responding. But parents and others can make them feel inept, and hence guilt results (Engler, 1995). As opposed to shame in the earlier stage, guilt is perceived by Erikson as an internally generated response to failure, and its importance at this stage, as a response, is that it denies the child the resources to deal with a crisis later on.

It is at this age that the superego emerges; family members serve as role models for the acceptable actions. If these role models are capable and effective people, the child will develop a sense of personal initiative (Wrightman, 1994).

For Erikson, acquisition of a sense of purpose is the ideal accomplishment at Stage 3. Children will have learned that they have to work to achieve goals (Engler, 1994). The virtue that emerges out of the duality of initiative versus guilt is purpose, a view of the future giving direction and focus to our mutual efforts.

Purposefulness thus slowly enables one to develop a sense of reality that is defined by what is attainable (Engler, 1995).

#### *Stage 4: Industry versus Inferiority: Competence*

Erikson believed that during latency certain passionate and imaginative qualities of earlier years calm down so that the child is free to concentrate on learning (Engler, 1995). He also added that it is at this stage that society intervenes in a more formal manner to develop the child's capacities and potentials. Children are expected to master the technology of their culture in order to earn the respect of their teachers and peers. Their ability to conform and master the tasks of this level depends on how successfully they have resolved the preceding stages. If potentialities have been permitted to develop fully in the earlier stages, the child is in less danger. The peril during this period is that feelings of inadequacy or inferiority will develop. Children begin to make comparisons between themselves and others and to perceive themselves in a more or less favourable light. Children at this stage are ready to learn to work and need to develop a sense of competence, the ego strength or virtue associated with this stage. Competence entails the ability to use one's intelligence and skill to complete tasks that are of value in one's society (Engler, 1995).

#### *Stage 5: Ego Identity versus Role Confusion: Fidelity*

For Freud, the hallmarks of the genital stage were '*lieben*' and '*arbeiten*,' to love and work (Engler, 1995). Erikson agreed with the importance of these accomplishments, but he further divided Freud's final stage into four sub-stages to underscore the point that genitality is not a goal to be pursued in isolation (Evans, cited in Engler, 1995). In doing so, Erikson greatly enriched our understanding of adolescence and the adult years.

Erikson invented the term 'identity crisis' to signify the crucial importance of ego identity for entrance to adulthood. We are all aware that people strive for identity, for a coherent self-image or "persistent sameness within oneself" (Erikson, cited

in Wrightsman, 1994, p. 67) in which beliefs and values are all of one piece. As mentioned earlier, identity from this view, is thus a structure, with an organised set of values and beliefs about oneself, expressed in views on occupation, politics, religion, and relationships (Wrightsman, 1994).

The primary duality during adolescence is ego identity versus role confusion. The process of forming an ego identity requires that one compares how one sees oneself with how significant others appear to expect one to be (Engler, 1995). Ego identity results in a sense of coherent individuality that enables one to resolve one's conflicts adaptively. Adolescents must answer the question "Who am I?" satisfactorily. If they fail to do so, they will suffer role confusion, the inability to conceive of oneself as a productive member of one's society (Engler, 1995).

The virtue or ego strength developed at this time is fidelity; the adolescent is ready to learn to be faithful to an ideological point of view. Fidelity consists of "the ability to sustain loyalties freely pledged in spite of the inevitable contradictions of the value systems (Erikson, cited in Engler, 1994, p. 164). Without fidelity, the young person will either have a weak ego and suffer a confusion of values or search for a deviant group to be loyal to (Engler, 1994).

#### *Stage 6: Intimacy versus Isolation: Love*

This stage is most relevant to this study. It demonstrates how intimacy is part of a developmental norm, and only emerges from the successful resolution of the preceding developmental stages forming identity.

Young adulthood (eighteen to twenty four years of age) is marked by the emotional duality of intimacy versus isolation. Moving beyond identity, individuals within this stage face the task of developing intimate relationships with others (Wrightsman, 1994). Erikson defines intimacy as "the ability to fuse your identity

with someone else's without the fear that you are going to lose something of yourself" (Erikson, cited in Wrightsman, 1994, p. 66).

Isolation entails self-absorption and an inability to develop deep, committed relationships. Having grown beyond the beginnings of establishing an identity, the young adult is able to overcome the fear of ego loss and form a close affiliation with another individual. At this stage, an individual's dedication to work should not be such that she or he loses the capacity to love. At this point, the virtue of love emerges as ego strength. This is not to deny the involvement of love in previous stages, but in young adulthood the individual is able to transform the love received as a child and begin to care for others. Love further represents a mutual devotion that is able to overcome the natural antagonism involved in any relationship between the sexes (Engler, 1995).

The last two stages of Erikson's psychosocial stages are not entirely relevant to my focus on intimate relationships and therefore will not be discussed. They are *Stage 7: Generativity versus Stagnation: Care*, and *Stage 8: Ego Integrity versus Despair: Wisdom*.

It is clear that Erikson's theory has played a large role in the development of Western research on identity and intimacy. His theory implies the importance of early experiences in the development of personality or identity, and the formation of identity is considered essential in the formation of intimate relationships. His work has preceded much of the later research on intimate relationships, for example, research exploring the effects of family of origin attachment styles on heterosexual couples' relationships.

### **The Self in Context**

As general thinking has begun to shift, more emphasis is now being given to the context in which human behaviour occurs, including a focus on how identities are



embedded in culture and social discourse (Brothers, 1995). Although it was acknowledged that a person's identity did not develop or exist in isolation, but was also influenced by the person's surrounding environment such as his or her culture or family, these were traditionally not perceived as central. The shift in the conceptualisations of identity to include social relations, cultural context, and social discourses suggest major implications for intimate relationships and the way in which they are viewed.

According to Satir (cited in Brothers, 1991, p. 5) "there is no such thing as an individual; we could hardly find a more artificial concept!" Human beings exist in relation to other human beings. Human contact is both physically and emotionally essential for survival. Moreover, as we develop, we soak up attitudes and ideas around us so that long before we reach adulthood, our inner recesses are virtual choirs of internal dialogues. For this reason, a theory that speaks only to individual dynamics is only going to provide a partial picture. It is therefore surprising that much research has focused on intimate relationships as a situation where two people coexist in their separate personal worlds and very little research attempts to view intimate relationships in their broader socio-cultural contexts.

Satir (cited in Brothers, 1991) maintains that autonomy is, of course, necessary for integration, but it is not possible to be an autonomous human being who does not need other people. The existence of genuine autonomy is therefore inextricably interwoven with intimate relationships. Such a notion is echoed in Gilligan's (cited in Hsu, 2005, p.16) words, which speak about the paradoxical truth of the human experience:

*We know ourselves as separate only insofar as we live in connection with others, and that we experience relationship only insofar as we differentiate other from self.*

Satir (cited in Brothers, 1991, p. 5) defines intimacy as the mutual sharing of inner experience in a spirit of mutual respect, free of those inhuman rules that say, “don’t feel,” “don’t cry,” “don’t express anger,” “be this way; don’t be that way.” According to this definition, intimacy therefore presumes a courage to allow a transparency between two selves with the hope of being valued rather than judged. It allows us the space to be vulnerable.

In addition, according to Satir (cited in Brothers, 1991, p. 7),

*[it] is in acknowledging the value and needs of the self as one approaches and shares with another self doing the same thing that wholeness comes about. Reality meeting reality equal ‘wholing’; only congruence allows for this meeting of reality. One does not become ‘whole’ except in intimacy, but one must first begin to be real – congruent – for intimacy – true intimacy to be possible.*

### **Gender Identity and Possible Impacts on Intimate Relationships**

For Social Constructionists, identity does not involve an intra-psychic process belonging to the individual. Rather, identity arises from social interchange and is mediated through language (Hoffman, 1993). According to this approach, an individual is defined in terms of an ongoing flux of social activity, and his or her self and thoughts are actually social processes (Babbie & Mouton, 2002). Social constructionism believes that there are certain dominating discourses in society that are embedded in our language, which influence our perceptions of the world, and in turn, influence our sense of identity in relation to the world. For example, a dominating discourse in the traditionally Western culture is that within intimate relationships, men are the breadwinners and women are the homemakers.

Social constructionist viewpoints declare that gender is most likely a myth of historical context, constructed and constituted by a series of motives and

objectives by the dominant power structures of each successive historical time period (Murphy et al., 2005).

Gender controversy originally arose from the age old assumption that 'difference' means 'unequal' (Murphy et al., 2005). The feminist movement of the 1970s rose up as a result of the restrictive, negative views of the roles of women in professional categories and in society in general (Murphy et al., 2005). Humanity however, seems to be stuck on a seesaw between male and female superiority. Feminists argued that apart from their reproductive dissimilarities men and women are the same. All gender variations were attributed to socialisation. Femininity was of little value for feminists, and to achieve any worth women had to become like men in their interests as well as in their appearance. As a result, the feminine viewpoint aided in the reinforcement of male superiority by setting male characteristics as the ideal to which they should aspire (Murphy et al., 2005).

The consequences of the feminist movement have led to many problems in society relating to gender identity and roles. Although the feminist movement has succeeded in gaining respect for the minds of women in academic and professional circles as well as in heterosexual relationships, men and women are currently experiencing much confusion related to their identity. This has a large impact on heterosexual intimate relationships (Murphy et al., 2005). For example, many women are often in equally demanding jobs as men and yet are still expected by society, by their partners, or even themselves as 'women' to perform traditionally 'feminine' roles in the home, such as the cooking and cleaning or caring for children. On the other side, many men may feel inadequate when their partners are earning equal or higher salaries because their traditionally 'male' role of being the provider or the breadwinner has been usurped. In an era where intimate relationships are supposedly equal, many difficulties connected to the notion of equality arise. Are relationships in the 21<sup>st</sup> century *really* as equal as many people like to think? Are relationships free from traditional gender

stereotypes and roles? It is possible that if gender characteristics were rooted in biological preferences, I wonder whether the challenging and reconstruction of gender roles would not create more damage than good in the structures of society. It is possible that the challenging of gender roles may maintain distance between men and women and further entrench the notion of inequality in heterosexual relationships, rather than the celebration of natural strengths and differences associated with gender.

Many people in Western society nevertheless aspire to be equal partners. This desire reflects a regard for individuality – maintaining one's own strong identity within a close relationship (Sager & Hunt, 1979). Research shows, however, that men continue to hold more interpersonal power relative to women. Studies have demonstrated that men tend to have more control over a couple's activities on dates and more influence in marriage (Murphy et al., 2005). Such views emphasise that women would benefit by having a greater voice in their intimate relationships, and shared interpersonal power would go a long way to reducing male dominance.

Although historically feminine qualities such as caring for others, emotionality, and passivity have been acknowledged as important in women's roles as caregivers, these qualities are traditionally, not valued. Society has tended to attribute greater importance to the more valued male characteristics such as assertiveness, independence and ambitiousness. Rather than turning the tables by discarding masculine qualities and celebrating feminine traits, Gilligan (cited in Hsu, 2005) indicates that both male characteristics and female characteristics are equally important and significant in people's lives. This perspective could represent hope to end the pursuit for artificial equality, and instead, allow us to embrace our natural selves. It is hoped that the emergence of a new relationship between men and women, where difference is celebrated, becomes possible.

## ***Connecting Selves: The Intimate Relationship***

### ***Research from a Historical Perspective***

An overview of relevant research demonstrates that there are many different theoretical perspectives and conceptualisations relating to intimate relationships. The different disciplines have each contributed a particular perspective and emphasis to the growing body of literature (Kovacs, 1983).

It appears that historically, an extensive amount of the research on intimate relationships originates from a psychoanalytic perspective. The focus of the psychoanalytic approach tends to rely on an intra-psychic frame of reference, informed by the medical model. From a psychoanalytic perspective, therefore, the individual is viewed as the locus of all problems or phenomena, and behaviour of individuals is never viewed within the context of relational patterns and processes in family systems. Within the area of intimate relationships, the focus of psychoanalytic research therefore tends to be on individual personality dynamics and the role of attachment within intimate relationships.

### ***A Psychoanalytic Perspective on Intimate Relationships***

Barelds (2005) maintains that research on intimate relationships has been marked by two major developments. First, there has been an explosion of work concerned with understanding the effect of individual difference variables on the quality of intimate relationships and the role that personality and emotions play in intimate relationships. Second, there has been interest in how attachment and bonding processes contribute to adult romantic relationships.

There exists, however, a vast amount of diverse literature on intimate relationships. Up to the 1970s, it appears that research into relationships

concentrated on what factors lead people to be attracted to one another at the initial stages of relationship development. This research tends to read like a shopping list of variables that influence attraction such as similarity, proximity, physical attractiveness and so on (Berscheid & Peplau, cited in Fletcher, 2002). Little consideration of context seems to have been taken into account. In the 1980s, the psychological 'zeitgeist' shifted toward the study of the greater complexity inherent in the development, maintenance, and dissolution phases of dyadic romantic relationships. The aim of such research was to find out what behavioural interaction patterns predicted marital satisfaction (Berscheid & Peplau, cited in Fletcher, 2002). This research influenced the idea that dyadic interaction can be profitably observed in relatively controlled settings, and soon after, reliable scales were developed that could measure the concept of love. The focus of such research implies that love and intimacy are measurable and exist 'out there' as a single fixed entity. This is very different to the constructionist perspective, which views love and intimacy as value-laden concepts, subjectively experienced within different contexts.

In the following section, I will first discuss the role of individual differences and personality on intimate relationships and will then go on to outline the role of attachment in intimacy.

### **Personality and Intimate Relationships**

Personality theory maintains that personality characteristics and differences between people have generally been found to be important factors in forming and maintaining an intimate relationship. Much research has proclaimed that personality characteristics seem to be especially important in mate selection (Prager, cited in Barelds, 2005). Several studies, for instance, have found that people tend to select mates with similar personality characteristics to themselves (Luteijn, 1994). In addition, these studies have demonstrated that traits such as shyness and social anxiety may interfere with forming an intimate relationship,

whereas traits such as agreeableness, emotional stability, and openness have been shown to be characteristics that people desire in a potential mate (Botwin, Buss, & Shackelford, cited in Barelds, 2005). The research which focuses on personality variables within intimate relationships seems to offer us the perspective that personality is stable and not easily changed. It fails to consider the wider cultural and socio-political contexts which play a large role in intimate relationships. From the perspective of personality theory, it is assumed that stable characteristics of individuals make or break relationships, and people would need to choose their partners extremely carefully. An extension of such a stance could be that preventative interventions should be targeted at young people – before they are married – so that they may concentrate on how to select a ‘good’ mate. Qualities of people who make ‘good’ partners (e.g., conscientiousness, kindness, low anxiety) could be discussed, and qualities of ‘good’ relationships (which have been described as frequent and mutual provision of attachment, reassurance of worth, reliable alliance, guidance, social integration, and the opportunity to provide nurturance) could be examined (Cutrona, 2004). This terminology implies a linear epistemology where the dualism ‘good’ versus ‘bad’ becomes part of the language, and with that, the expert judgmental position of researcher is assumed. In addition, this view implies that relationships are static entities rather than dynamic, emerging systems.

From the perspective of personality theory, personality characteristics, among others, influence the way partners perceive each other, interact with each other, and determine how marital events are appraised and explained (Barelds, 2005). With regard to marital quality, it has, for instance, been found that personality characteristics such as neuroticism and low self-esteem, affect the quality of intimate relationships negatively (Karney & Bradbury, cited in Cutrona, 1994). It is generally found that the higher the neuroticism score of a person, the more dissatisfied one is with one’s intimate relationship (Luteijn, 1994). There are several possible explanations for the negative effect of neuroticism on the quality

of intimate relationships. For instance, neuroticism may predispose a partner to distort relationship events and/or overreact to negative relationship events (Bradbury & Fincham, cited in Barelds, 2005).

The associations between personality characteristics and marital quality are shown in the literature not to be very consistent, and in some cases contradictory results have been reported (Barelds, 2005). A consistent (negative) association with marital quality is in fact found only for neuroticism (Karney & Bradbury; Luteijn, cited in Barelds, 2005).

Previous studies examining the influence of personality on marital quality have generally focused on either a) the influence of the spouses' personality characteristics or b) differences between spouses' personality on the intimate relationship. As previously mentioned, most research on intimate relationships represents a traditionally Western scientific endeavour. It is within this framework therefore, that many of the studies have been criticised. For example, the sample sizes are relatively small and homogenous with regard to demographic variables, and only a few studies have used 'valid' and 'reliable' questionnaires for the assessment of both personality and marital quality.

Although personality is a useful context in which to consider behaviour, it is not, from my perspective, necessarily an inevitable determinant of marital outcomes. As already mentioned, the literature which focuses on personality variables within intimate relationships seems to offer us the perspective that personality is stable and not easily changed. This implies that relationships are static entities rather than dynamic, emerging systems; a view which is inconsistent with the perspective of this particular study, which regards relationships as always evolving and emerging. Nevertheless, personality variables are important to consider when studying the impact of individual difference variables on intimate relationships. In this regard, the role of attachment is also important to consider,



and therefore a brief discussion of attachment and intimate relationships will be provided below.

### **Attachment and Intimate Relationships**

Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory, dealing with the attachment between children and their principal caregiver, has also been applied to adult relationships (Hazan & Shaver, cited in Grau & Doll, 2003).

Attachment theory argues that love and attachment between adults in some ways mirror the bonds that tie adult and child together.

Attachment theory affirms that recurring patterns of interaction become encoded as principles which unconsciously determine the child's subsequent relational experiences. Adult attachment styles derive from these unconscious organizing principles.

In their 1987 article, Hazan and Shaver initially developed self-report measures of three attachment styles (secure, avoidant and ambivalent styles) derived from the work of Bowlby and Ainsworth. Participants were instructed to simply choose one of the three paragraphs under each of the styles, that best described themselves in terms of their feelings typically experienced in romantic adult relationships (Eliot, cited in Fletcher, 2002). Results from this pioneering research provided plausible preliminary evidence for this approach. For example, Hazan and Shaver (1987) found that secure people reported more positive relationships with their partners than did avoidant or ambivalent participants.

The Hazan and Shaver measurement method assumes that people fit into either one attachment style or the other. From my perspective, it appears that attachment theory attempts to offer a linear, causal direction between early experiences and intimacy and does not take into consideration the cultural or

environmental influences impacting on intimate relationships. Furthermore, although attachment theory maintains that people's mental models of love relationships have the potential to be influenced or revised by new experiences, it nevertheless emphasises that these mental processes are fairly stable. This may imply then, that we exist in a vacuum, independent from context. Furthermore people may interact differently depending on the particular relationship they are in, and perhaps even the stage at which the particular relationship is at, impacts on the couple's interaction.

The barrage of research that followed Hazan and Shaver's article (1987) has replicated their findings, and in addition, researchers have extended Hazan and Shaver's scales to include multiple items to assess attachment styles.

Although attachment theory does not necessarily take the social and cultural context of intimate relationships into account, research within this domain has been useful in extending the possibilities with which to understand intimate relationships. For example, studies have demonstrated that different attachment styles are often associated with different meanings surrounding love. In a study by Carnelley and Bullman (cited in Huyck, 2003) for secure respondents, love was experienced as happy, friendly and trusting, whereas for avoidant respondents, it involved emotional extremes, jealousy and fear of intimacy. For anxious/ambivalent respondents, love involved obsession, jealousy, emotional extremes, and desire for union and extreme sexual attraction.

Another interesting research finding has indicated that an important factor that marks children who are securely attached is the capacity for self-reflection (McMahon, 1999). In addition, Ainsworth discovered that insecure attachment styles tend to engender both ambivalent and dependent, or avoidant and compulsively self-reliant self-protective strategies. It is therefore not surprising to attachment theorists that partners who are securely attached seem to have greater similarities in their styles of relating, whereas insecurely attached

partners seem to show opposite, complementary, or contradictory styles of relating (McMahon, 1999). It is generally found that securely attached individuals report higher levels of marital satisfaction, intimacy, and commitment than, for example, avoidantly attached individuals (Tucker & Anders, cited in Barelds, 2005). Individuals with an avoidant attachment style tend to use fewer relationship maintaining behaviours, such as talking about problems and coming to an understanding (Guerrero, cited in Barelds, 2005) and are less likely to seek social support from their mate (Farrell & Bush, cited in Barelds, 2005).

Grau and Doll (2003) explored the effects of attachment styles (secure, anxious and avoidant) on a person's experience of equity in intimate relationships. They maintain that attachment style exhibited in any current relationship depends on early experiences in childhood, as well as later relationships in adolescence, and specific characteristics of the current relationship. In their experimental study they found that while partners with a secure attachment style tend to describe their relationship as equitable (they give and take extensively), partners who feel anxious about their relationship generally see themselves as being in a disadvantaged inequitable position (they receive little from their partner). The results of the experiment indicated that avoidant partners generally see themselves as being treated equitably, but that there is less emotional exchange than is the case with secure partners. Avoidant partners were shown to give and take less than secure ones. These results support a typically modernist approach which attempts to describe a general and causal interpretation of the impact of attachment style on the perception of equity. While overall, it was shown that attachment style is an important determinant of equity perception, this study highlights how researchers very often reach the conclusion they initially set out to find. It is possible that even in the so-called objective, value-free and neutral stance of modernist researchers; they too are biased in their starting points, thereby affecting their research methods, results, discussions, interpretations and conclusions.

### ***A Systems Perspective on Intimate Relationships***

A conceptual shift from focusing primarily on the intra-psychic workings of the individual to the study of the dynamics of intimate relationships began to be undertaken in the field of marital therapy. This shift constituted a novel way of observing and interpreting individual behaviour in context and became a part of the systemic/cybernetic paradigm that heralded a new epistemology.

From a systemic or cybernetic perspective, we see people and events in the context of mutual interaction and mutual influence. Rather than examining individuals and elements in isolation, we look to their relationship and how each interacts with and influences the other (Becvar & Becvar, 2006).

In line with a systemic perspective, Ackerman, (cited in Kovacs, 1983) a pioneer in the field of marital and family therapy, viewed the marital relationship as a social unit and more than the sum of two personalities. He viewed marriage as a shared, complementary process with acceptance of differences and concern about the growth and development of spouses as a couple as well as individuals in the marital relationship (Kovacs, 1983).

Dicks expanded on Ackerman's views, and became one of the first clinicians and investigators to use an interactional framework to focus on marital relationships (Kovacs, 1983). He perceived marriage as a complex social system as well as a system of interpersonal relationships and interactions that became an integrated dyad. The stability of this dyad was dependent on a balance of satisfactions over dissatisfactions (Kovacs, 1983).

Thus Ackerman and Dicks expanded the boundaries of psychoanalytic theory because in addition to the intra-psychic structures they included environmental, social, cultural and interpersonal factors in their study and treatment of intimate relationships (Kovacs, 1983). Other clinicians and researchers have continued

this trend by exploring other complex issues involved in working with couples (Kovacs, 1983). Some of these issues explored include: differentiation of self within the family context; separateness and connectedness; and transference within the marital relationship (Kovacs, 1983).

The focus of this study, exploring constructions of intimate relationships is consistent with a systems approach to intimate relationships and as already mentioned, reflects the epistemological principles of social constructionism to be discussed in the following chapter.

From a systemic perspective, intimacy can be defined as a relational process in which partners come to know the innermost subjective aspects of one another (Chelune, Robison & Kommor, cited in Derlega, 1984). Intimate relationships are based upon the assumption that both partners are engaged in a joint venture. Both work, share, interact, and come to know one another in great depth. Intimacy therefore, does not lie within a person or in a situation, but emerges out of their interaction. It is a characteristic of a system, which influences and is being influenced by its components (Chelune, Robison & Kommor, cited in, Derlega, 1984). La Gaipa (cited in Derlega, 1984, p. 25) notes that, "in a systems approach, the parts of a system cannot be identified except with reference to the whole which functions as a whole by virtue of the interdependence of its parts."

It is within the Systemic epistemology that Elkaim (1990) proposes a new model to approach troubled intimate relationships. Reference is made to troubled intimate relationships in this section, in an attempt to highlight a systemic or constructionist approach to how individuals may attach meaning to their intimate relationships and define intimacy within the context of their current relationships at the various highs and lows of the relationship. In this study, however, a relationship is not necessarily viewed as 'troubled', but rather as always evolving.

The model uses the notion of reciprocal double binds; two persons, part of the same system, ask for something that they are not prepared to accept as possible. Elkaim (1990) uses an example to highlight this conceptualization. Suppose a husband wants his wife to love him but at the same time he fears that love is always followed by abandonment. On the verbal level he will say "Love me," but on the non-verbal level he will be saying, "Don't love me." Whatever the wife does to satisfy one of the demands will be unsatisfactory because it addresses only one level of the double bind. For such a pattern to continue or get worse, it has to have a function not only for the individual but also for the couple system (Elkaim, 1990). Historical factors do not automatically lead to current behaviours. This is in line with Systems theory and its here and now focus. One person's behaviour will continue or get worse only if it confirms the partner's world view and plays a role in the larger systemic context. In couples who come to therapy, the double bind is reciprocal. Each of the members is caught in a parallel paradox and neither can satisfy the other's demands.

To understand Elkaim's (1990) model of reciprocal binds that can be applied to troubled intimate couples and families; I will review the characteristics of a double bind (Bateson, Jackson, Haley & Weakland, cited in Elkaim, 1990):

- When the individual is involved in an intimate relationship, that is, a relationship in which he or she feels it is vitally important that he or she discriminate accurately what sort of message is being communicated so that he or she may respond appropriately.
- And, the individual is caught in a situation in which the other person in the relationship is expressing two orders of message and one of these denies the other.

- And, the individual is unable to comment on the messages being expressed to correct his discrimination of what order of message to respond to, i.e., he cannot make a meta-communicative statement.

This type of double bind communication is not necessarily contradictory, but in fact, responds to the internal logic of the system in which it arises. It is the price the system pays to maintain its stability, given apparently contradictory rules (Elkaim, 1990).

Elkaim (1990) regards intimate relationships in therapy as more than just two people who cannot break out of their reciprocal bind. The couple have helped each other to create a system which, governed by its own laws, imposes rigid rules and seemingly unbearable cycles of interaction on them. The functions of their behaviours are to be found not just in the individual motivations but also in the context of the couple's system. What each seems to be doing to torment the other can also be described as a way of confirming the other's beliefs and helping the other avoid the risk and pain of change.

From this perspective, the dynamics of a couple cannot be reduced to dyadic terms, particularly if a hypothesis about a couple is developed within the therapeutic system, in which there are three people, namely the therapist and each member of the couple, and no longer two (Elkaim, 1990). This notion is consistent with one of the aims of this particular study; to join with the participating couples, and to describe how their relationships may or may not have changed as a result of the research process and the interventions of the researcher.

As soon as we study a couple's behaviour in the context of their families of origin, it becomes apparent that one of the main functions of their conflict is to maintain the rules of a system that includes these families of origin. The couple is simply the visible part of a larger system, which encompasses broader socio-cultural

and political elements (Elkaim, 1990). Each individual member of a relationship brings his or her own set of rules and ways of being in a relationship with them. In their new relational system, new rules have to be negotiated.

Watanabe-Hammond (1990) elaborates on Elkaim's (1990) perspective on intimacy by examining relationships in context through the creation of a powerful metaphor of dance to describe and explore the couple's behaviour in the context of the family of origin. In her article, *Family Dances and the Rhythms of Intimacy* (1990), she describes how each couple evolves its own repetitive, rhythmic patterns of loving, fighting, etc. over time. This 'dance' is picked up by the couple's children and becomes knowledge of how to be in an intimate relationship. For each new generation of couples, making one dance out of two is the unspoken challenge to a marriage or an intimate couple. Often mates do not fit into each other's dance, do not know the 'right' moves, and thus remain rhythmically unfamiliar with one another, making it difficult to live in comfortable intimacy. From the dances of the family of origin to the current dance of a couple, the impact of the rhythmic patterns of intimate relationships can be seen (Watanabe-Hammon, 1990).

From a systemic perspective, intimate relationships have at their centre a mutual process like finely choreographed dancers in which a balance of movement and of sharing occurs. Using the analogy of the dancing pair, we can visualise how sometimes partners dance side-by-side using identical, parallel actions, and sometimes face to face using differing, complementary actions. This interweaving creates a complex and mutually satisfying 'dance,' or relationship.

Levinger and Snoek's (cited in Derlega, 1984) conceptualisation of intimate relationships, includes mutuality as the most important quality. Mutuality implies joint, shared interaction. In addition, it does not require highly similar or identical interaction patterns (Chellune et. al., cited in Derlega, 1984). Intimate relationships involve reciprocal patterns which can be described from a systemic



perspective as being characteristically symmetrical, complementary and/or parallel (Lederer & Jackson, cited in Kovacs, 1983). A symmetrical intimate relationship is one in which the partners need to state to each other behaviourally, "I am as good as you are." In other words, the relationship is characterised by an equal distribution of power. A complementary relationship is one in which at the extreme, one partner is in charge and the other obeys. Thus, it is a relationship characterised by dominance and submission. Finally, in a parallel intimate relationship, the partners alternate between symmetrical and complementary relationships in response to changing situations (Kovacs, 1983). Even though there may be conflicts pertaining to certain areas, each partner feels equal to the other and each can be supportive and competitive without fear, knowing that neither will win all issues at the expense of the other (Kovacs, 1983).

Using the metaphor of dance to describe the patterns in which couples relate provides us with a different way of viewing relationships and the focus is shifted from an intra-psychic perspective toward an interpersonal one. In the section above, the focus has been interpersonal and I have attempted to explore different interactive behaviours and patterns within heterosexual relationships. In the following section, I will expand on the theme of intimate relationships existing in patterns and will endeavor to describe the possible meanings of such patterns and behaviours from the perspective of the cognitive interactional model. In addition, by describing the model, I will attempt to explore how these meanings may change over the course of time and contribute to relational development.

### **Patterns of Relating**

Patterns of relating between partners emerge within the cultural and social environments in which the partners and the relationships exist. Levinger and Snoek (cited in Derlega, 1984, p. 42) note that "the relationship emerges as

personal, uniquely tailored (vs. normative and role bound) and intimate in the kinds of personal exchange and emotional investment of both parties.”

One of the most outstanding features of any relationship is its dynamic nature. An intimate relationship is continually growing, changing, developing and thus emerging over time (Chelune, Robison & Kommor, cited in Derlega, 1984). This view is consistent with Auerswald’s (1985) descriptions of relationships as “relational connections in the ecological domain” (p. 30). According to Auerswald (1985) relationships do not exist in linear time. Relationships are thought of as relational differences that expose shifting, emerging, receding, patterned shapes of events in a time-space terrain.

Chelune, Robison and Kommor (cited in Derlega, 1984) have outlined a cognitive interactional model which attempts to preserve the vitality and evolving nature of intimate relationships. This model is relevant to the social constructionist epistemology underlying this study.

From the cognitive interactional perspective, intimacy is defined as a:

*subjective appraisal that emerges out of a relationship process between two individuals in which each comes to know the innermost aspects of the other, and each is known in a like manner. Over time, these appraisals in turn give rise to higher-order appraisals of relational qualities (trust, commitment, interdependence, caring etc.) that influence the path of the relationship itself (Chelune, Robison & Kommor, cited in Derlega, 1984, p. 35).*

There are three key premises to this model: the first is the belief that all interactive behaviours have a connotative (meaning) aspect. Recognition of this connotative aspect allows us to explain why behaviours that are considered intimate by one couple may not be intimate for another, or even by the same couple at a different point in time. The second premise is that each individual has

his or her own unique ways of taking in and processing behavioural information within a changing environment. The meanings of this information are continually evaluated against the accumulation of past experiences, and they affect future expectations and behaviours. The third facet of the cognitive interactional model is its systemic view of intimate relationships. A dynamic model of intimate relationships must take into account that “relationships influence the nature of individuals, and individuals influence the nature of relationships they enter” (Hinde, cited in Fletcher, 2002, p. 36).

Neither the relationship nor the individuals can be studied without consideration of the other. Relationships as dynamic entities are constantly redefining themselves as they occur across time and social-situational contexts. Each redefinition changes the relational system and affects how the individuals will encode and decode future interactions.

The cognitive interactional model provides a different way of viewing relationships, and also extends a challenge to researchers to approach the study of intimate relationships in new ways. Rather than focusing on interactive behaviours per se, this model suggests that there may be something useful to be learned by looking at the meanings of such behaviours, and how these meanings change over the course of time and contribute to relational development.

Meanings emerge as each couple brings their individual realities into the interactions with each other, and together they co-construct another reality which characterises their relationship. Partners can have different views or constructions of the same relationship, and these views may reflect stereotypical gender differences as often depicted in the media and academic sources. These differences in socialisation could presumably lead partners to have different mental models of their relationships and to behave differently in close relationships as well (Acitelli & Young, cited in Fletcher & Fitness, 1996).

From the perspective that partners can have different views or constructions of the same relationship, so too, can they have different expectations of each other, as well as the relationship itself. Below is a discussion of how expectations, which emerge from various constructions, impact on intimate relationships.

### ***Expectations and the Crisis in Intimate Relationships***

Although our relationships are personal, they must be understood in a social context that exists within a particular culture (Carr, 1988). Today, we find many people in a state of confusion and disillusionment about relationships. Feelings of discomfort, disenchantment, and alienation have reached epidemic proportions, and in our relationships we are experiencing a crisis (Carr, 1988).

Carr (1988, p. 2) defines a crisis as “occurring at a social or personal turning point, an emotionally significant event, or a radical change of status.” At a time of crisis, a pivotal decision must be made to travel in one direction or another. Marriage, children leaving home, divorce, loss of job, and retirement can all be described as crises.

A crisis is not a catastrophe like an earthquake or a tragedy, like the untimely death of a loved one. A crisis is a time of confusion connected with some change that does not have a design, pattern or single ‘right’ path to follow.

Carr (1988) suggests that the crisis in intimate relationships is partly the result of illusions and fantasies about what relationships *should* be. Expectations, both learned and chosen, often destroy human relationships. We can instead, become more aware of the pervasive contradictions and paradoxes occurring within ourselves and our own culture.

The crisis in intimate relationships often stems from male-female differences, ambivalence and fear of change (Carr, 1988). To welcome change as an

opportunity is difficult in the Western culture that teaches us to avoid danger and play it safe. In addition, we have great difficulty understanding and coping with ambivalence – the coexistence of opposite feelings about the same person or object. Our education system, based on logic, does not help us when we both love and resent a person. Ambivalent feelings are incomprehensible when we try to understand them through traditional logic (Carr, 1988).

Our culture provides us with a setting for our assumptions, expectations and values about relationships. By developing an openness to change, an exploration of paradox and an awareness of new possibilities, we are possibly creating a new foundation on which to build relationships with the self and with others. Our thoughts and feelings are rarely our own, but we can learn to catch ourselves acting out old assumptions. We can create new self-definitions and values by becoming more aware of our patterns with others and the ways we use language. We can learn to create new possibilities, to enhance rather than impede our relationships.

From the perspective that our expectations and therefore our constructions of intimate relationships are embedded within our socio-cultural context, it is relevant to include the feminist approach as yet another context in which expectations and constructions regarding intimate relationships are entrenched. A feminist perspective on intimate relationships will therefore be discussed in the next section.

### ***A Feminist Approach to Intimate Relationships***

An overview of the research on intimate relationships shows that there are only a few studies, which seem to include the voices of both partners in providing an integrated representation of how the relationship is experienced by both the male and the female. Consequently, this study includes the constructions of both men and women in their interpersonal relationships, as an attempt to place value on

both partners' experiences. The notion of inclusion and therefore a 'both-and' perspective implies that not only feminism punctuated from a woman's voice is applicable, but the inclusion of a male perspective and voice is necessary.

According to Spence and Hahn (cited in Etaugh & Bridges, 2004), although young adults' beliefs about appropriate behaviours and roles for women have become more egalitarian over time, females and males still have traditional expectations about heterosexual relationships. We see the operation of societal stereotypes in people's construction of appropriate dating behaviour. For example, consistent with the stereotype of male agency, studies have demonstrated that many college students expect males to play the more active role by planning the date and carrying out the plans, and many believe men should pay for the date (Laner & Ventrone, cited in Etaugh & Bridges, 2004). These views about appropriate dating behaviours reflect not only the stereotype of the male 'leader', but suggest that heterosexual romantic relationships are characterised by a power imbalance between women and men. Research on male power in close relationships seems to show wide variations in respondents' perceptions of the distribution of power in their heterosexual relationships. However, it is consistent with males' greater power in society, that couples are more likely to view males than females as the powerful partner.

Although there are only a few studies with the specific research focus on how gender-based views of self may be associated with different views of relationships, the results consistently indicate that women think more about relationships and in a more complex fashion than men do (Acitelli & Young, cited in Fletcher & Fitness, 1996). In addition, Feminist theories regarding the development of women emphasise the importance of connection in women's identity (Hsu, 2005).

It is possible that gender differences in relationships stem from differences in the way that men and women view themselves (Acitelli & Young, cited in Fletcher,

1996). This proposition is followed by theory and research which indicates that the development of the self is different for boys and girls. In general, it is argued that women develop their sense of self primarily through relationships with others, whereas boys develop a sense of self through becoming independent from others. Not only is there empirical evidence that demonstrates how these different selves might develop, but there are also indications that these different types of self-concepts are related to different ways of thinking or viewing relationships (Acitelli & Young, cited in Fletcher, 1996).

These findings imply that what is normal for females is not normal for males. It seems then, that in the Western culture, a balance needs to be found that incorporates both male and female norms, since both genders need to psychologically individuate as well as connect. It may therefore be useful to re-define concepts such as relationships, autonomy, and identity, or incorporate other concepts such as interdependence and mutuality in order to integrate both male and female psychological health (Hsu, 2005).

Duck (cited in Fletcher, 1996) emphasised the importance of discovering how relationship partners come to share similar meanings of their relationships. Presumably, as two relationship partners experience the same events and interact over long periods of time, they begin to form similar views or co-constructions about their own relationship. However, we also know that couples can build and retain remarkably incongruent constructions of their relationships (Acitelli & Young, cited in Fletcher, 1996). Studying gender differences in relationships provides one way of furthering our understanding of both similarity and disparity in relationship thinking among couples, but at the same time entrenches the constructed roles and differences between men and women.

Some of the most profound influences on human experience came from interpretations and myths about the meaning of biological gender (Murphy et al., 2005).

It is evident that many psychology theorists have greatly influenced society's views of gender and sexuality, as well as the enforcement of gender norms through societal institutions. For example, as previously mentioned, Freud's theories have been primary in the creation of gender stereotypes and the pathologising of female sexuality due to the widespread application and fame of his viewpoint across time and context. Jung who was a great follower of Freud, received as much attention and societal effect through his dualistic notions of sexuality and his negative approaches to women and female nature (Murphy et al., 2005). Horney is a good example, however, of humanity's tendency to swing from one extreme to another by replacing all dominant male ideals with ideas of female superiority (Murphy et al., 2005). Horney therefore influenced the ideals of feminism by encouraging the idealistic notions of superiority of women over men instead of searching for a balance. Erikson's theory, because of its widespread influence in schools and other normalizing societal institutions, has aided in the reinforcement of women as developmentally inferior and the creation of male characteristics as a developmental ideal (Murphy et al., 2005). As a result, although the feminist movement was influential in professional and academic circles, Erikson's theory had a greater effect on the construction of gender identity because it was aimed directly at developmental norm expectations in homes and schools.

Feminism, although it created a new perceived freedom for women and allowed them to control their own lives without patriarchal restrictions, still perpetuated male superiority as an ideal to aspire to due to its rejection of feminine qualities.

It is not possible to state whether gender is a function of biology or environment, but it is evident, due to the historical succession of gender trends, that gender is closely related to the constructs of society and culture (Murphy et al., 2005). Kendall (cited in Murphy et al., 2005) states that culture does not supersede biology; culture completes biology! The question, however, is whether a society without well-defined gender roles is desirable or whether a unisexual society will



not result in a universal gender identity crisis. Should there not rather be a focus on how the natural partnership of men and women, which relies on the strengths of both, can be beneficial to the strength of society? Warne (cited in Murphy et al., 2005) states that instead of focusing on issues of equality and superiority, humanity should aspire to a fuller awareness and acceptance of difference in a non-hierarchical and non-alienating community. We can hope for a move toward a celebration of difference in the relationship between men and women.

### ***Implications and Suggestions***

This chapter has attempted to explore traditional views of intimate relationships as well as different and new understandings of intimate relationships. It attempts to highlight the various perspectives and descriptions of intimate relationships, all of which express a different focus and emphasis and contribute to the growing body of research. The majority of the research on intimate relationships has been traditionally 'scientific' or modernist in its approach. The implication of this has meant that relationships have often been viewed as observable entities, outside the context of relational patterns and processes within family and broader socio-cultural systems. Much of this work has been concerned with understanding the effect of individual difference variables on the quality of intimate relations and the role that personality and emotions play in the relationship. The focus has therefore been largely intra-psychic.

A growing amount of research however, operates within a social constructionist systemic framework, perceiving family relationships as being contextualized within a sociopolitical, cultural context while simultaneously focusing on individual and relational experiences of connection. The current study embraces this constructionist perspective as it involves eliciting the individual stories of partners and bringing them together to create a new narrative that is interwoven with both their stories. A third story is thereby formed; that of their unique relationship. The study seeks to focus on intimate relationships on the relationship level rather than

on the individual level (Walters, cited in Hsu, 2005). In addition to providing a therapeutic experience for the participants, it is also the aim of this study to offer a more inclusive and extensive account of an intimate relationship experience by incorporating both partners' voices first separately and then together.

A theme which surfaces in much of the literature is the role of gender identity and power in relationships. From a feminist perspective, minimal attention has been given to females throughout most of the history of psychology, which not only devalues women's experiences, but often leads to incorrectly generalising men's experiences to include women. An overview of the research on intimate relationships shows that there are only a few studies, which seem to include the voices of both partners in providing an integrated representation of how the relationship is experienced by both the male and the female. Consequently, this study includes the constructions of both men and women in their interpersonal relationships, as an attempt to place value on both partner's experiences.

### ***Conclusion***

This chapter has attempted to highlight the various contexts within which to view intimate relationships and focuses on the context of current social changes which influence our constructions of intimate relationships. The chapter points to the many theoretical perspectives of intimate relationships in an attempt to portray the vastness and complexity of the topic. This chapter also places emphasis on the social contexts and cultures in which relationships are embedded and discusses culture in terms of a setting for our assumptions, values and expectations about relationships. The perspective that each couple system is unique is also highlighted. Thus, it is after an exploration of the relevant literature that I conclude this chapter with the following statement: the story of an intimate couple relationship involves at least two stories: of two different lives in their different contexts, of two different people, although separated by gender and

expectations, yet remaining connected in a joint venture where both partners come to know the innermost subjective aspects of one another.

In this study there are three stories in each intimate relationship: the story of the man, the story of the woman and the story of the relationship shared between them.

## **Chapter 3: Research Paradigm and Methodology**

### ***A Brief Overview***

This chapter outlines the epistemological paradigm for this study and presents the methodology chosen for this research. Firstly, a brief explanation of postmodernism as an ontology, which prescribes the nature of reality, will be provided. Social constructionism as an epistemology, which specifies the nature of the relationship between the researcher and the study, will then be described. This will be followed by a discussion of how social constructionism informs this research. The methodology will then be described, highlighting the epistemological assumptions of the current study. In this discussion, the research paradigm, namely qualitative research, will be presented. The principles of qualitative research will be described, and how these principles relate to the present study will be clarified. A discussion on reliability and validity, sampling and selection, data collection, and the data analysis methods undertaken in this study will be included.

### **From Modernism to Postmodernism**

The modern era is characterised by empirical scientific investigation, which traditionally, has focused on discovering and disseminating truth (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). This era ascribes to a view of the world as being 'knowable', out there, and governed by universal laws, which can reveal absolute 'truths' about the world. Furthermore, the modernist philosophy maintains that the world can be understood, controlled and predicted (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). Thus, the aim of scientific research is to discover the truth by generalising findings and thereby creating scientific laws to explain and predict behaviour.

From this perspective, we 'know' what to do to effect change in a certain direction, as everything has a cause and effect, the direction of which is linear without any reverse or circular impact (Becvar & Becvar, 2006).

Over time, it became clear that psychological investigation was unsuccessful in generating a collectively accepted account of human behaviour (Durrheim, cited in Henning, 2005). Different people claimed to possess this 'truth', and it became clear that there could not be just one single 'truth' but many interpretations are possible. In addition, the idea that not all interpretations are equal as some interpretations tend to dominate others, developed. This led to a shift from the modern to the postmodern perspective, where the presence of multiple 'truths' became accepted.

Postmodernism complements modernism and does not replace it. It rejects the notion of universal and objective knowledge (Lynch, 1997). Knowledge, or what we believe, is instead seen as "an expression of the language, values and beliefs of the particular communities and contexts" in which we exist (Lynch, 1997, p. 353).

Thus, the message of postmodernism is to be wary of any account that claims to offer the sole explanation or interpretation, as many alternative accounts, descriptions, or meanings, may be possible (Doan, 1997). In recognising the presence of perspectives, postmodernism challenges the dominant authorities of knowledge, those "singular, totalising accounts that claim to contain the whole truth and nothing but the truth" (Doan, 1997, p. 129).

Postmodernists assume that no universal laws exist. Predictability is not possible, because we cannot know enough about the present to make a prediction about the future. There will always be variables that we cannot know about or control (Zukav, cited in Hsu, 2005). Furthermore, circular causality replaces the notion of linear causality. For example, A does not only cause B, but B has an effect on A as well, and both A and B impact on their environment, which also impacts on them (Hsu, 2005). The search for objectivity and a single reality is replaced with a search for meaning. For postmodernists, reality might exist 'out there,' however we cannot 'know' it because our minds can only grasp the ideas we hold about

the reality and not the actual reality itself. Something is more true to us if it is more consistent with our experience, regardless of how close it is to the absolute truth (Zukav, cited in Hsu, 2005). This notion applies to the present study in that as the researcher, I am not relying on the 'expert' voice regarding intimate relationships but on the lived experience of the participants and the meaning they attach to it. Furthermore, I am unable to predict the relationships of the participants and I need to remain open to the multiple accounts, explanations and meanings that emerged during my interaction with the participants. Thus, the ideas and interpretations in this study are but one view and do not claim to be the only way of seeing.

Within the philosophy of postmodernism, lies the epistemology of social constructionism. The principles of the chosen epistemology for this study and how these principles are incorporated into the study, will be discussed in the following section.

### ***Social Constructionism***

Social constructionism as a postmodern approach is founded on the belief that "we socially construct reality by our use of shared and agreed meanings communicated via language; that is, that our beliefs about the world are social inventions" (Berger and Luckman, cited in Speed, 1991, p. 400). Reality therefore, is not 'out there,' but is created by the observer who gives meaning to it. This meaning is informed by the cultures and societies in which we exist and knowledge evolves in the space between people, in the realm of a 'common world' (Hoffman, cited in Gergen, 1992). Thus, reality is subjective, in that what we observe we give meaning to and our view of the world is influenced by the lenses bestowed on us by our culture (Henning, 2005). In other words, the way in which a person perceives or makes sense of his or her world, is informed by his or her social and cultural context (Dean & Rhodes, cited in Henning, 2005).

The recognition of the constructive role of the observer in any process of observation, description, or knowledge represents a turning point in the broader scientific domain, and specifically in the social sciences (McNamee & Gergen, cited in Gergen, 1992). This turning point is actualised in the social constructionist approach which rests on the basic principles outlined below.

### **The Basic Principles of Social Constructionism**

- **Multiple realities** are possible since 'reality' is subjectively constructed and language is the medium of construction (Becvar & Becvar, 2006).
- **Knowledge is value-laden and subjective**, and objective neutrality is not possible. Knowledge is viewed as an "expression of the language, values and beliefs of the particular communities and contexts" we live in (Lynch, 1997, p. 353). Social constructionism is critical of knowledge that is taken for granted, as knowledge is sustained through social processes which are constantly shifting (Doan, 1997).
- The exchange of **language** becomes a symbolic interaction where we exchange and learn social conventions and rules. An individual, according to social constructionism, is therefore defined in terms of an ongoing flux of social activity, and his or her self and thoughts are actually social processes (Babbie & Mouton, 2002).
- The **self is viewed as relational** rather than individual.

It can be seen from the basic principles outlined above, that social constructionism is consistent with postmodern thinking in many ways. The similarities and consistencies within social constructionism and postmodernism will be compared in a brief discussion in the section below and the basic principles will be explored further.

### *Multiple Realities*

The social constructionist view that multiple realities are possible is consistent with the postmodern idea of a multiverse, in that if reality is socially constructed, multiple constructions are possible as well as multiple perspectives of this constructed reality (Henning, 2005). Both social constructionism and post modernism are thus concerned with understanding, which is created through the meaning that is generated from lived experience.

### *Knowledge is value-laden and subjective*

Social constructionism is critical of knowledge that is taken for granted, and this fits with the postmodern view which is wary of accepting knowledge presented as the ultimate truth (Doan, cited in Henning, 2005), and which results then in the suppression of alternate perspectives (Henning, 2005). Social constructionism, like Postmodernism, does not view all interpretations as equally valid. It believes there are certain dominating discourses in society that are embedded in our language, which influence our perceptions of the world. Social constructionists challenge those stories that are not respectful of differences amongst people such as race and gender (Doan, cited in Henning, 2005). White and Epston (cited in Speed, 1991, p. 400) state that,

*The particular meanings we impose on behaviour are dictated and organised by whatever 'dominating analogies or interpretive frameworks' are currently available.*

A social constructionist perspective is therefore especially interested in the normative narratives, or grand narratives, which are formed by and in turn influence people, and against which people measure themselves (Rapmund, 2006). It is partly through identifying the dominant discourses prevailing in our society and challenging them, that new meanings and understandings can emerge. Social constructionists believe that meanings and interpretations change over time, and these meanings are constantly negotiated and reconstructed.



Social constructionism challenges grand narratives positing that they form the context for the development of problems (Dickerson & Zimmerman, cited in Doan, 1997). People's personal stories are frequently denied in favour of the dominant belief system which tends to pathologise those who do not meet its expectations. Social constructionism is therefore in agreement with postmodernism in cautioning against singular accounts, whose power tends to further silence and marginalise those whose stories fail to fit. Both approaches prefer stories based on a person's lived experience rather than on expert knowledge (Doan, 1997, p. 130).

### *Language*

Both social constructionism and postmodernism are concerned with meaning which is generated from lived experience. According to Terre Blanche and Durrheim (1999, p. 149), "language helps to construct reality." It is through our interactions and conversations with others, in other words, through language, that individuals come to know their world. Thus, our language directs us in how we see the world and assists us in generating the meaning we attach to experiences (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992).

Language is essential in the negotiation of understanding, where the study of knowledge becomes the study of the active use of language in human behaviour (Gergen, 1992). Language is not unbiased and can have different meanings for different people. In addition, the meaning of words and actions are contextually bound against an inherited social background (Shotter, cited in Henning, 2005). Meaning is therefore generated in context, and as no two contexts are the same, meaning is not static. Furthermore, since meanings are developed through social interaction, the generation of new meanings is possible through the interactions and the relationships we hold with each other (Gergen, cited in Henning, 2005).

The possibility that realities can be shifted through interactions between individuals highlights the notion that reality is co-created between people in

relation to each other within a particular context (Gergen, 1988). The emphasis on understanding shifts from the individual to the process of co-constructing understanding (Henning 2005).

### *The Self is Viewed as Relational*

The social constructionists, consistent with the postmodernists, recognise that the self is not an isolated, autonomous being, but rather is constructed in relationships. From this perspective, our realities are constructed in relationships with others. In the social constructionist world, the self is a manifestation of relationships, thus placing relationships in the central position rather than the individual self which has occupied this position for the last several hundred years of western history (Gergen, cited in Becvar & Becvar, 2006). The self, being predominantly relational, is therefore multiple, in that it is comprised of the connections we create and sustain with the people, experiences, and places that give our lives meaning (Harre, cited in Henning, 2005).

It has been argued that the view of the self-in-relationship eradicates the self; however, a response to this argument is that the postmodern stance brings with it the potential to enrich the self through accounts that acknowledge the 'reality of relatedness' (Becvar & Becvar, 2006).

In the section above, the basic principles of social constructionism have been explored and compared to postmodernism. To conclude this section, a brief summary of the social constructionist principles are outlined below.

Social Constructionism is "interested in accounts that honour and respect the community of voices inherent in each individual and how these accounts can be respected within a particular system" (Doan, 1997, p. 131.) In addition, social constructionists are interested in helping individuals whose stories have gone wrong or no longer work (Doan, 1997, p. 131). In any culture, certain narratives become dominant over other narratives, which specify chosen ways of believing

and behaving within the culture (White & Epston, cited in Speed, 1991). Thus, the dominant or grand narratives influence us to ascribe certain meanings to certain experiences and to treat others as relatively meaningless. Therefore, the focus of social constructionism is on the meaning of knowledge that is created against the backdrop of socially shared understandings, which become institutionalised as the norms “against which people measure and judge themselves” (Doan, 1997, p. 129). Social constructionism cautions against stories or voices that are traditionally silenced in favour of grand narratives, which can lead to the denial of lived experiences, resulting in lost meanings.

### **Social Constructionism and the Present Study**

Social constructionists prefer stories that are based on a person’s lived experience rather than rely on ‘expert’ knowledge (Doan, 1997). The present study is focused on partners’ lived experience in their intimate relationships and their constructions of intimate relationships. Through their own descriptions, I aim to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences, than was previously possible through studies which were informed by the modernistic epistemology. Their stories are not intended to challenge or substantiate the findings of previous studies but to illustrate the richness of their experiences. Such information may have been lost in previous studies in their quest for scientific ‘truth’. The emphasis is therefore on human experience, and not on what is claimed to be the ‘truth’ or ‘expert’ knowledge.

It is assumed that I as the researcher, and the participants, possess our unique ways of perceiving and creating reality based on our culture, social environments, and personal experiences. The participants and I bring our own understandings of intimate relationships into the research context. Through conversation about the participants’ relationships, both the participants and I are able to exchange our understandings and re-evaluate our preconceived ideas of intimate relationships. This allows us to question our underlying beliefs and assumptions

and, together, co-create new meanings and understandings of their intimate relationships.

Using social constructionism to study intimate relationships has therefore allowed me to analyse the manner in which intimate relationships are constructed. It has also enabled me to explore the discourses or grand narratives which underlie meaning-making amongst men and women in intimate relationships. Furthermore, I acknowledge that the relationships and the meaning they make of the relationship are embedded within a larger social system and culture.

An example of a grand narrative which is challenged in this study, is that marriage is the norm. In addition, gender roles in heterosexual relationships are challenged. Traditionally men and women fulfilled certain roles. The man was the 'provider' and the woman stayed at home and was dependent on her husband financially. For many reasons, traditional roles within the family have shifted; with women having careers and being financially independent, no longer staying at home while men go out to work. Despite these changes, the man being the financial 'provider' continues to be viewed as the norm by Western society. As a result, those men, who are not able to provide adequately for their family, may be viewed by society as weak and inadequate. However, the possibility does exist that these men, who are not the financial providers within their intimate relationships and families, can 'provide' in other ways leading to fulfilling intimate relationships.

Another dominant perception within the Western culture, that is relevant to this study, is that success is measured by one's material wealth. This belief does not exist in an objective sense but is socially constructed and adhered to as if it was the 'truth.' As a result, we are influenced by the grand narrative: wealth equals success, to the extent that other areas of success are treated as meaningless. The result is that those who do not necessarily possess material wealth and therefore are not successful (according to the grand narrative), become

marginalised. Furthermore, other successes become subjugated in favour of material success.

The social constructionist notion of multiple realities is brought forth in this research in the expression of each participant's experience and the meaning that each creates from his or her experiences within their intimate relationship. Each story is entrenched in a particular context, as a distinctive relationship that contributes to shaping his or her perceptions of intimacy and what it means to be in a heterosexual intimate relationship. It is the differences and similarities in these stories that give them equal authority with other 'expert' stories and highlight the presence of multiple views of reality.

To achieve the aims of this study, the appropriate research paradigm that fits with the epistemological principles which guide the researcher, needed to be selected.

### ***The Qualitative Research Paradigm***

Paradigms are systems of interrelated ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). Paradigms act as perspectives that provide a rationale for the research and commit the researcher to particular methods of data collection, observation and interpretation (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). Therefore, the research paradigm reflects the nature of and assumptions made about reality, the relationship between the researcher and what can be known, and how the researcher can discover what there is to known about reality (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). There are two basic research paradigms that can be utilised, namely quantitative and qualitative research paradigms. Qualitative and quantitative research paradigms are examples of the fundamental dichotomy of the epistemologies existing in social science research (Bernard, 2000). For example, in modernist, positivist, and empirical research, the researcher is expected to take an 'outsider' perspective, which is believed to be objective and unbiased, and strictly adheres to the rules

and laws of scientific research. This corresponds with the quantitative research paradigm which is concerned with objectivity, measurement, outcome, and generalization of outcomes (Wassenaar, 1987). It therefore relies on the assumptions from the modernist approach to science, which emphasises universal laws of cause and effect and is grounded in the belief that reality consists of a world of objectively defined facts (Henning, 2005).

Since it was not the intention of the researcher to study cause-effect or linear causality connected to intimate relationships, it is evident that the quantitative research paradigm is unsuitable to achieve the aims of this study. For this reason, the researcher has chosen the qualitative research paradigm, as this is more consistent with the postmodern framework. According to Terre Blanche and Durrheim (1999) there has been a rise to prominence of qualitative research, which is associated with the postmodern movement and has therefore been accompanied by a shift from the universal and general toward the local and particular (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999).

The data in qualitative research as opposed to quantitative research is characterised by words rather than statistics. Williamson, Karp and Dalphin (1977) describe qualitative data as a source of rich descriptions and explanations of processes. For qualitative researchers, the issues are not how to convert qualitative data into reliable, objective numbers, but rather with capturing and discovering meaning once the researcher has become immersed in the data (Neuman, 1997). Words, especially organised into stories, have a meaningful flavour that often is more convincing to the reader than pages of neutral statistics (Neuman, 1997). Such vivid thick descriptions have potential for revealing great complexity. In addition, Miles and Huberman (1994) note that qualitative data with their emphasis on people's lived experience are fundamentally well suited for locating the meanings that people place on events, processes, and structures of their lives: Their perceptions, assumptions, prejudgments and presuppositions. Thus, the qualitative paradigm argues against the reductionist approach that

quantitative research has toward human experience, and “attempts to capture aspects of the social world for which it is difficult to develop precise measures expressed as numbers” (Neuman, 1997, p. 329). The information in qualitative research is given meaning through the researcher’s interpretations, which is informed by the participants’ interpretations of the world, their definitions and meanings of their experiences as well as the researcher’s (Stiles, cited in Henning, 2005). Qualitative research thus has the goal of describing and understanding, rather than explaining and predicting social behaviour.

Qualitative researchers like postmodernists and social constructionists, emphasise the importance of social context for understanding the social world (Neuman, 1997). Researchers want to make sense of feelings, experiences, social situations or phenomena as they occur in the real world, and therefore want to study them in their natural setting (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). They hold that the meaning of a social action or statement depends on the context in which it appears. When experience is removed from the social context within which it occurred, the meaning and significance are distorted. This implies that the same experience can have different meanings in different contexts, which is consistent with the notion of multiple realities within social constructionism (Henning, 2005).

Whereas in quantitative research, one can rely on tried and tested assessment instruments to collect data, and on proven statistical techniques to analyse the data, in qualitative research, it is the researcher who is the primary instrument for both collecting and analysing the data. Furthermore, the researcher immerses him- or herself into the data, giving the researcher an intimate familiarity with people’s lives and cultures (Neuman, 1997). Thus, to acquire meaning, researchers develop close relationships with participants. They do not place importance on objective observation, as do quantitative researchers. As a result, meanings are co-created in the research relationship between the researcher and participants, which are further co-created within a reality constructed by the

researcher and participants. The participants are thereby transformed from being subjects of the inquiry to co-researchers of their own meaning (Henning, 2005).

### **Qualitative Research and Social Constructionism**

Qualitative research corresponds with social constructionism. In postmodernist, interpretive, and social constructionist research, researchers co-construct realities with research participants and actively acknowledge their impact as researchers on the research process (Rennie, cited in Hsu, 2005). The emphasis falls on mutually-agreed upon meanings and how these meanings or discourses shape individual constructions. This approach fits with the qualitative research paradigm which attempts to understand people from their own frames of reference and how they make sense of lived experiences through the creation of meanings. Thus, qualitative research, like social constructionism, is concerned with interpretation and meaning (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). It reflects social constructionist principles in the assumption that meaning can only be generated through the expression of language in a dialogue with others. Meaning also emerges within a context, and so participants need to be viewed in the context of their past and present. Furthermore, social constructionism maintains that reality is co-created in the relationships we hold with others. This then includes the participants' relationship with the qualitative researcher.

In this study, the participants lived experiences and the meaning that they have created of their intimate heterosexual relationships are co-created in the context of the research interview in the form of a dialogue. As the researcher, my understanding of their experiences is reflected in my reconstruction of their stories, which takes into account the social context from where the participants' experience comes from and the relationships they hold with their partner in the context of intimacy.



I have provided a brief description of the qualitative research paradigm, and will now go on to provide a more in depth outline of the characteristics of a qualitative research design.

### **Characteristics of a Qualitative Research Design**

Moon, Dillon and Sprenkle (1990) describe the specific characteristics of qualitative research designs. These characteristics include the role of the researcher, reliability and validity, sampling and selection, data collection and data analysis. They will be outlined below, and how they pertain to this study, will be discussed.

### **The Role of the Researcher**

The role of the researcher is more active and participatory than in quantitative research. In addition, the participants are also actively involved in the research process as they share their stories with the researcher, thus allowing the research data to emerge. Research participants can therefore be viewed as collaborators in the research process.

According to Ely (cited in Hsu, 2005), qualitative research is an intensely recursive, personal process for the researcher. In every aspect of a qualitative study, the researcher must be constantly aware of his or her own values and biases and how these may be influencing the research process. Therefore, the researcher or observer can never be neutral or removed from the subject. This is consistent with the constructionist perspective where the observer is included in his or her observations. Levine (cited in Hsu, 2005, p.56) states,

*We will never be entirely free of our own preferred ways of viewing situations and our own biases. We can however be more aware.*

Qualitative researchers need to be aware of their biases and be conscious of their personal relationship to their research. In addition, the researcher needs to acknowledge his or her values and beliefs connected to his or her own community and culture. Such awareness is essential as the qualitative researcher is described as the major data collection instrument in the research process (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999). His or her presence is necessary to establish trust and develop rapport. He or she fosters the flow of conversation between the participant and the researcher, and observes details in the context or setting. By being aware of one's own biases or values and beliefs connected to one's own culture, the researcher acknowledges his or her specific view of the phenomenon or experience being studied. This is important because the qualitative researcher cannot contaminate the participants' stories with his or her own ideas and beliefs or experiences. The researcher therefore needs to clarify his or her own role in the research process.

In the present study, I defined my role in the research process by introducing myself as an investigator interested in exploring intimate relationships. I informed the participants that I was aware that the nature of enquiry was of a personal nature and the participants were assured of confidentiality, and of my ethical practice. Rubin and Rubin (1995) indicate that the researcher must work to define a mutually acceptable research role, and to achieve this, the researcher's empathy, sensitivity, humour and sincerity are essential tools.

The researcher should maintain the belief that the participants are the experts on their own experiences, and that they know a great deal about the research topic. According to Sciarra (1999), qualitative research is an interactive rather than a controlling process and it is only through relinquishing control (yet at the same time taking responsibility for the process), that the researcher is able to enter the frame of reference or world of another. It is therefore important that the researcher maintains a learning attitude where the participants are teachers (Hsu, 2005).

Part of the researcher's role, is to ensure the trustworthiness of a study. This includes clearly stating the purpose of the study before the project begins. In this study, I informed the participants about the purpose of the study to ensure clarity about their involvement with the study, as well as ensuring the trustworthiness of the research. In addition, I informed the participants of my interest in heterosexual intimate relationships, and that I was hoping to learn from them and their subjective perspectives of their intimate relationships. I described my exploration into the studies already conducted on the various aspects of intimate relationships and how these studies are largely quantitative, often reducing relationships to variables, thereby losing complexity and therefore the possible richness of data. Furthermore, past studies have seldom included both partners accounts, and I informed the participants that it was my wish to provide a more comprehensive and holistic view on the subject, by including both voices, thereby providing a double description of the relationship. The participants were also told that their own relationships may be enhanced as a result of the research process. In addition, it was highlighted how their stories of their intimate relationships could add to the literature on heterosexual intimate relationships, and provide deeper understanding and knowledge of the dynamic processes within these relationships.

In this study, my role as researcher was coupled with a therapeutic role. The role of the therapist is similar to the role of the researcher in that in both roles, the role of therapist and researcher are a part of the system in which I interact. For example, I sometimes made therapeutic interventions in an attempt to enhance the intimate relationships explored. My therapeutic orientation is also consistent with postmodernism in that I believe in multiple realities and in the client as the expert on his or her worldview and life story. Many of the qualities required of a qualitative researcher are consistent with the role of a therapist in this study. Like the qualitative researcher, the therapist attempts to create a context for openness and trust through empathy and sincerity.

Therefore, by including the therapist's role, my goals as the researcher are shifted slightly. Not only is the subject of interest explored, but I now purposefully intervene, with the goal of positively influencing the intimate relationship. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the very act of participating in a research study, telling one's story, may be in itself therapeutic, without any purposeful therapeutic intervention (Babbie & Mouton, 2002). It is therefore possible that therapeutic effects may have occurred in the participants in this study, owing to the research act itself, and not to my intervention as therapist.

### **Reliability and Validity**

In both qualitative and quantitative research, the quality of the study needs to be addressed. Nevertheless, qualitative research approaches conceptualise reliability and validity differently from quantitative research approaches.

In quantitative research, reliability questions the data or observations and is defined as the degree to which the results are repeatable (Durrheim & Wassenaar, 1999). However qualitative or constructionist researchers do not assume that they are investigating a stable and unchanging reality and expect that individuals, groups and organizations will behave differently and express different opinions in changing contexts (Durrheim & Wassenaar, 1999). In addition, in a qualitative study, researchers themselves impact on every step of the research process in that they bring in their own subjectivity (Hsu, 2005). Therefore it has been proposed that in qualitative research, the aim of consistency present in quantitative research be disregarded as there is no one 'truth' and all knowledge is perceived as constructed (Merrick, cited in Hsu, 2005, p. 82).

Validity in quantitative research refers broadly to the truthfulness of a measure (Neuman, 1997). However in qualitative research, truth or accuracy cannot be scientifically proven. According to Ricoeur (cited in Hsu, 2005), the validity of an

interpretation is not a matter of empirical verification and proof, but rather the result of a rational process of argumentation and debate. The aim of qualitative research is therefore not to accurately reflect the phenomenon being studied but to provide interdependent and continuously modifiable interpretations. The interpretation validates itself and credible intersubjectivities are generated (Babbie & Mouton, cited in Hsu, 2005).

From the social constructionist perspective, which includes qualitative research as a methodology, accurate reflections of reality are impossible to attain since reality is constructed and perspectival (Durrheim & Wassenaar, 1999). It is from this perspective that the traditional concepts of reliability and validity are challenged as they are incompatible with the paradigm.

Nevertheless qualitative researchers have an ethical responsibility to assess research since it is a representation of people's lived experiences (Henning, 2005). Furthermore, the research contributes to the knowledge basis that is gained regarding the topic of inquiry. Thus, any misrepresentation can lead to misunderstanding of the knowledge and people it represents (Henning, 2005). For these reasons qualitative researchers should not disregard the importance of reliability and validity and Janesick (cited in Henning, 2005, p. 83) suggests that the concepts of validity and reliability as used in quantitative research be replaced with "language that more accurately captures the complexity and texture of qualitative research".

Therefore, in qualitative research, reliability is replaced with *dependability*, which addresses the trustworthiness of the observations or data, and validity is replaced with *credibility*, which involves the trustworthiness of the interpretations (Henning, 2005).

Dependability refers to the degree to which the reader can be convinced that the findings did indeed occur as the researcher said they did (Terreblanche &

Durrheim, 1999). Dependability is achieved through rich and detailed descriptions that show how certain actions and opinions are rooted in and develop out of contextual interaction (Terreblanche & Durrheim, 1999).

Stiles (cited in Henning, 2005, p. 83-84) lists the following guidelines for attaining dependability:

**Disclosure of the researcher's orientation** in the study, which refers to making clear the researcher's expectations of the study, preconceptions and values that, may have an impact on the research and its findings.

In this study, postmodernism informs my particular orientation to the research process, thus impacting on my expectations. From a postmodern perspective, I do not rely on the 'expert' voice regarding intimate relationships, but on the lived experiences of the participants and the meaning they attach to it. Therefore, I do not expect to predict relationships, or discover the 'truth' by generalising my findings. Rather my expectations include exploring meaning that is generated from lived experience. However, it is not only postmodernism as an ontology, which informs my orientation to this study, but also my particular background. At this point, I wish to provide a brief description of my background in order to make explicit some of my personal expectations, preconceptions and values that may impact on this study.

I am an English speaking female and am currently cohabiting with my partner with whom I have been together with for six years. I have had two long term intimate relationships in my life. In both relationships, I have experienced joys as well as difficulties, which have led to a great deal of self-reflection in an attempt to understand myself in relationship. My current relationship seems to oscillate between being secure and connected, and at other times, being more distanced, and disconnected. The insecurities which emerge are further highlighted by my current stage of life, where most of my friends and colleagues of my age, are

getting married and making life-long commitments. This has led to feelings of confusion and being stuck in a dilemma of wanting to be my own person, yet be connected at the same time. Trying to make sense of my relationship, my own needs and expectations, the expectations of those around me, and intimate relationships and marriage in general, has led me to explore the meanings connected to intimate relationships in both a cohabiting and a married couple.

**Making the social and cultural context of the researcher of the researcher and the participants explicit.** In addition, clarifying the reasons for conducting the research, since this influences how the participants and their stories are viewed.

In this study, one of the main reasons for conducting the research was to offer an alternative to the more traditional ways of viewing intimate relationships, as discussed in the literature review. As previously mentioned, my interest in this study of intimate relationships was born out my experiences in my relationship, and led me to desire to find out how other couples experience their relationships. I wished to gain a better understanding of the dynamics and processes underlying intimate relationships and of how such a relationship can be enhanced. In addition, I wanted to explore the differences and similarities between the meanings constructed in married versus unmarried cohabiting relationships. I hope that this study will not only provide further insight into intimate relationships in general, but also assist in my own understanding and interpretations of my own relationship with my partner.

**Description of the internal processes of investigation** which entail the researcher's internal processes or the impact of the research on the researcher. In this study, this process is achieved by including my reflections on the investigation process for each story as well as the impressions which were made on me.

**Intensive and prolonged engagement with the material**, which includes the researcher's development of trust and rapport with the participants. It is essential that the researcher establish a relationship of trust in which to understand the world from the participants' experiences. In addition, the researcher is required to immerse him or herself in the material in order to gain an understanding of the world from the perspective of the participants.

In this study, I established rapport with my participants by attempting to create a context of warmth, trust and acceptance. Once the interviews were transcribed, I immersed myself in the material by reading and re-reading the transcripts, identifying themes and patterns, extracting key passages and continually moving back and forth between the themes, extracted quotations and full interview texts.

**Grounding of interpretations** by linking the context and the content of the interviews or stories to the interpretations. In this study, this has been done by linking the themes that were identified from the transcripts with examples or excerpts from the transcribed data.

**Cycling between interpretation and observation** which entails a process whereby the researcher is continually a part of and apart from the process of interpretation.

Linked to *dependability*, is the concept *credibility*, which refers to the trustworthiness of the research data. Below is an outline of guidelines suggested by Stiles (cited in Henning, 2005, pp. 84 - 85) for ensuring credibility:

**Triangulation**, which involves the use of multiple perspectives against which to check one's own position (Kelly, cited in Henning, 2005). This has been achieved in this study by the use of multiple data sources, and including the perspectives of each participant as well as the researcher and supervisor.



**Coherence**, which relates to the quality of fit of the interpretation with the experiences of the participants, as well as between the interpretations and the intentions of the research (Henning, 2005). In this study, I have discussed my findings with my supervisor and research participants, thereby validating my interpretations and their appropriateness. This links with the next point, pertaining to credibility, namely 'testimonial validity.'

**Testimonial validity** refers specifically to the participants' perspective on the researcher's interpretations of their stories. In this study I provided the opportunity for the participants to comment on the summaries and themes obtained from the interviews. This enabled certain meanings and interpretations to be renegotiated.

**Catalytic Validity** refers to the meaningfulness of the research to the participants. In this study I aim to describe how the participants' relationships may or may not have changed as a result of the research process and the interventions of the researcher. It is hoped that the couples have benefited from this research process, and have gained a greater insight into their respective relationships. In addition it is hoped that this study will assist professionals working with couples and their relationships, to increase understanding of intimate relationships in their specific contexts.

**Reflexive Validity** refers to the way in which the data has influenced and changed the researcher's way of thinking. In this study, my perspective on intimate relationships has shifted from a more linear and somewhat traditional view to a richer way of viewing and understanding intimate relationships.

### **Sampling and Selection**

Sampling is defined as a process of systematically selecting cases for inclusion in a research project (Neuman, 1997). In qualitative research, researchers

usually deliberately select small samples which fit the research aims. Researchers prefer to look intensively at a few cases which highlight individual context and differences. Furthermore, a large number of participants is not important since generalisability is not a goal of qualitative research, and is not a goal of this study.

Researchers such as Brink (cited in Papaikonomou & Nieuwoudt, 2004) indicate that the intention of the sampling process in qualitative research is to identify participants who fit the requirements of a specific study. They should also be able to give a rich and comprehensive description of the topic under study. Thus, the selection of the participants for this study is guided by the focus of the study, which is to explore the constructions of intimacy in the context of heterosexual intimate relationships. The criteria for selecting participants for this study include:

- Fluency in the English language and an ability to express themselves comprehensively.
- Both partners should agree to participate in the research and be willing to be interviewed individually as well as together.
- The couples need to have been intimately related for at least two years and both should be 21 years of age or older. This is to ensure some level of consistency in the accounts of the intimate relationships.
- Out of the two sets of couples, one couple was required to be married, while the other couple needed to be cohabiting, rather than married.

In this study, the sampling method used was that of purposive and convenience selection. Therefore, after the identification of the criteria for selection, I made contact with people whom I knew had contact with couples who fulfilled the criteria. The two people contacted, each suggested a suitable couple who they thought would be willing to be interviewed. Locating participants was therefore not difficult, even though I did not personally know the couples. I contacted each couple telephonically to introduce myself and briefly discuss the aims of the

research. These participants expressed their willingness to discuss their intimate relationships openly and to have their relationship analysed. They also agreed to the interview method and committed themselves to participate in the research process.

Thus, the sample selected comprised two intimate couples who are interested in discussing their relationship and feel that their stories will contribute to the general understanding of intimate relationships. One couple has been married for seven years, and the other couple has been cohabiting for two years.

Consent was obtained from the participants to tape record the interview sessions and to use the information solely for the purposes of research. Although participants were given the option of anonymity, all four participants chose not to alter their identities for the research report. However, to protect the participants' identities and privacy, only their first names are used. The participants were also informed of the intended time expectations of the interview.

### **Data Collection**

In qualitative research, information is usually visual or verbal rather than statistical. Information is collected by means of interviews, observations, or by means of document analysis, and can be in the form of field notes, video tapes, and audio tapes. In the present study, data was collected by means of interviews, which were recorded onto audiocassettes. The researcher is thus the human instrument who collected and analysed the data personally. Merriam (cited in Papaikonomou & Nieuwoudt, 2004) comments that the advantage of researcher as instrument is that he or she is able to be responsive to the context, can process data immediately, and can clarify and summarise as the interviews evolve by exploring responses.

Once the consent forms had been completed by the participants, the interviews took place. Personal data, such as name, age, address, family background, occupation and education level was gathered throughout the interview, but was not deliberately collected. I felt that important and relevant information would emerge as the conversations took place.

An unstructured interview format was used to allow for a natural flow of conversation and dialogue. I did, however, gently direct the interview towards topics relevant to the research. I allowed the participants to speak freely, and did not use a set of predetermined questions.

The nature of the interviews was therefore unstructured and in-depth. This particular interview style avoids deliberately formulated questions as, according to Guba and Lincoln (cited in Hsu, 2005), participants' subjective experiences and 'insider' perspectives cannot be pursued using a set of predetermined questions that are based on the interviewer's 'outside' construction.

Open questions were used during the interviews as a means of not restricting the participants' responses. 'What' and 'how' questions were therefore mainly used, rather than 'why' questions, which can be restricting (Stiles, cited in Henning, 2005). I constantly checked participants' meanings and my understandings with them. The participants and I were therefore engaged in an exploration of shared meanings and were co-constructing a specific reality applicable to the interview context. The interviews therefore relied on the active participation of both myself as researcher and participant.

The interviews focused on the participants' experiences within their intimate relationships. This included the current structure of the participants' relationships, how the relationships are organised around these structures, and the interactional styles and patterns.

The interviews were initially not fixed in terms of length and time, and the only criterion was that there would be three interviews per couple; one with the male partner, one with the female partner, and one with both partners together. The interviews were conducted at venues convenient for the participants, which were mostly at their own homes.

During the individual interviews the participants were requested to reflect on their relationship with their partner and describe it as they perceive it. They were asked to discuss the transitions that the relationship had gone through as well as the strengths and weaknesses they saw in their relationships. Furthermore, they were prompted to recount significant experiences in their relationships, and during their lives, and describe how these events impacted on their relationships. I also explored how marriage and cohabitation had influenced their relationships. The participants were then asked to provide contextual information surrounding their relationships and to discuss how they viewed their own parents' relationship, as well as their own relationships with their parents.

After the completion of the individual interviews, summaries were compiled and first given to each individual to check and then to the partner once the other partner's permission was given. The summaries served as a point of discussion for the joint interviews, in which the issues raised in the individual interviews formed the initial focus. The main aim of the joint interviews was for the partners to come together, interact actively, and co-construct alternative realities of their relationship.

In essence, the aim of the interviews was to gain rich descriptions of what the participants have experienced and their understandings of their experiences. In addition, I also offered reframes during the interviews to provide the participants with alternative versions of their stories. According to Rapmund (1996) since relationships in families tend to operate in fixed and entrenched patterns, it is the therapist who can offer alternatives that may shift these interaction patterns. It

was therefore important that I did not accept the intimate relationships at face value or as the ultimate truth of the relationship. This would block alternative perspectives and ways of understanding, and therefore the possibilities to the relationships become limited.

### **Data Analysis**

In general, data analysis means a search for patterns in data (Neuman, 1997). According to Rapmund (1996, p.118), the “analysis of information is the process whereby order, structure, and meaning is imposed on the mass of information that is collected in a qualitative research study.” In qualitative research, the analysis of data can occur in various ways and the choice of analysis method depends on the goal of the research. When the goal is subjective understanding and exploration of meaning and insights, the more interpretive styles are preferred (Crabtree & Miller, cited in Henning 2005).

Interpretive research places emphasis on how participants understand their worlds and how they create and share meanings about their lives (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Interpretive understanding sees the world in terms of what is meaningful to human life rather than as a collection of objects (Hsu, 2005). It therefore emphasises the interpretation and description of experiences within the contexts that they occur. In this way a reflection of the experiences being studied emerges and a fresh perspective is generated (Terre Blanche & Kelly, 1999). Thus, the interpretive approach acknowledges that individuals are social beings and can only be understood in context. This view is shared by social constructionism, the epistemology consistent with this study.

The data analysis method chosen for this study was that of hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is coherent with the interpretive approach and can be defined as a methodology that values discovery of meaning through interpretation

(Terreblanche & Kelly, 1999). Hermeneutics is based on the following assumptions (Addison, 1992, p. 112):

- People give meaning to what happens in their lives which is important if others are to understand their behaviour.
- Meaning can be expressed in different ways, not only verbally.
- The meaning giving process is informed by the immediate context, social structures, personal stories, shared practices, and language.
- The meaning of human action is not a fixed entity. It is constantly being negotiated, and changes or evolves over time, in different contexts and for different individuals.
- The process of interpretation enables a person to make sense of his or her world. However, these ideas are informed by the interpreter's values and therefore the notion of 'truth' or correspondence to an objective reality, are not important issues in this approach which does not adhere to the belief in an objective reality.

From the abovementioned points, it is clear that hermeneutics takes into account that humans are historical cultural beings and cannot be understood unless viewed within their social and historical contexts. Therefore to understand a person's experience, one must first understand the cultural constructs it originates from and the language that represents it (Henning, 2005).

The researcher is a member of his or her own community with its own values and beliefs and therefore enters the world of participants with those beliefs (Henning, 2005). Any interpretation of experience by the researcher is thus informed by the interpreter's own beliefs. Nevertheless, through the interpretation and the gaining of understanding, the interpreter is able to expand those beliefs. Thus, hermeneutics allows for two perspectives to connect in a way that current understanding is enriched by the historical and social contexts of both, and both perspectives are enabled to shift or transform (Henning, 2005).

Hermeneutics, a methodology which aims to discover meaning of experiences and to achieve understanding within context, corresponds to the theoretical framework of this study. Through the use of hermeneutics, I attempted to interpret and arrive at an understanding of intimate heterosexual relationships. The methodology allowed me to become a part of as well as stand apart from the data and gave the researcher both an insider's view as well positioned the researcher to identify and discuss discourses from a different perspective.

The methodology was employed to reach a shared understanding between partners, and between the participants and researcher herself, through the co-creation and co-construction of their stories and finding themes in them. Furthermore, dominant societal discourses relevant to intimate relationships were uncovered. Thus, the use of hermeneutics as a data analysis technique is not only appropriate to the qualitative research paradigm, but also to the epistemology of social constructionism chosen for this study.

As already referred to, the information obtained in this study comes from the interviews with the participants, which create a story stemming from the researcher-participant interaction. The analysis of the data has led to a reconstruction of the story. Van Maanen (cited in Papaikonomou & Nieuwoudt, 2004) notes that re-authoring a story from the researcher's point of view, involves second-order concepts, whereas first order concepts come from the participant and reflects his or her point of view.

In this study, I re-author and recount from my own perspective, and so the process of interpretation is influenced by my values.

The steps that were taken in the data analysis were guided by the hermeneutic circle. According to Kelly (1999, p.406):



*the idea of the hermeneutic circle prescribes that, in the interpretation of a text, the meaning of the parts should be considered in relation to the meaning of the whole, which itself can only be understood in respect of its constituent parts. This is usually conceived of as a circular movement between part and whole.*

The use of the hermeneutical circle as a means of interpreting data means that the smallest statements must be understood in terms of the largest cultural contexts. It also implies that all contexts, such as the person, family and community must be taken into account (Henning, 2005).

The process of the research involved the following steps of analysis of the data obtained from the interviews:

Step 1: Familiarisation and Immersion: In this phase, I worked with the transcribed individual interviews one at a time, and immersed myself in the world created by the text, so that I could make sense of that world. I read and re-read the original transcriptions.

Step 2: Thematizing and Coding: I inferred themes which underlie the research material. After reading through the transcripts, I grouped units of information under a particular theme. Different sections were marked according to the relevant themes that they belonged to. I used coloured highlighters to mark the sections of the text, so that for example, all units in the text relating to one theme were marked in red and so on. The coded material was then clustered under the heading of the theme.

Step 3: Elaboration: The themes were explored once more and the headings that overlapped were scrapped in order to arrive at the final list of themes for each participant. This involved exploring the generated themes more closely, to gain a deeper understanding than was possible from the original coding system.

Step 4: Interpretation and Checking: The final account or narrative that relates to the focus of this study: how people construct their intimate relationships, was created, and the story of each of the participants and their patterns of connection and disconnection within their intimate relationships were recounted from my own perspective.

Below is a brief outline of the overall process which was followed during the research:

- I interviewed the participants and then transcribed the audio taped interviews. The researcher developed an intuitive understanding of the data.
- A summary was formulated from each transcribed interview and then forwarded to each individual and once approved was sent to their partner to read prior to the joint interview. I highlighted to the participants that I had constructed these summaries and so they did not represent the ultimate truth. It was emphasised that my summaries colour the way individual stories were told, by my perceptions, experiences, values and beliefs. I did, however, attempt to reflect these stories as accurately as possible. The participants were asked not to discuss the summaries with one another, until the joint interview.
- A joint interview was conducted with the partners together. These interviews were also transcribed. The partners were offered an opportunity to correct any misinterpretations of their worldview and to express them to each other.
- I analysed the data obtained in the two joint interviews. The main focus here was placed on the interactional style between the partners during the

combined interview, and themes and patterns related to their interaction as well as their relationship were elicited.

- A comparative analysis was created which involved a comparison of the themes identified in this study with the literature on intimate relationships in heterosexual couples. I then evaluated the study and discussed future recommendations.

### ***Conclusion***

This chapter has attempted to describe the epistemology that guides this study. It has also attempted to illustrate the manner in which the epistemological assumptions inform the choice of the research paradigm and methodology utilised in this research.

The discussions demonstrate how postmodernism, the epistemological framework of social constructionism, the qualitative research approach, and the hermeneutical data analysis technique appear to correspond with each other and share similar underlying premises: namely, the importance of language, meaning making, and context.

In this chapter, I began with a brief presentation of postmodernism, shifting the concept of one reality or truth to one possibility amongst many realities or truths. I then highlighted how the epistemology, social constructionism, fits with the ontology, postmodernism. Briefly, the fit between postmodernism and social constructionism is highlighted by the following points (Henning, 2005, p. 96): that context informs meaning, reality is a social construction; reality is co-created between individuals and society and is therefore multiple; that language is the primary tool in the creation of reality; that knowledge can never be true and objective, since it is co-created through the use of language and is thus a subjective perspective of reality. Furthermore, both social constructionism and

postmodernism do not accept all stories and voices as equally valid and are especially interested in the normative narratives, or grand narratives upon which society and individuals measure themselves. From this perspective, the individual voice can be silenced in favour of the 'truth.'

In addition to highlighting how postmodernism and social constructionism fit, this chapter attempts to demonstrate how the qualitative research paradigm is connected to the epistemology of the study. The chapter attempts to highlight how both the qualitative approach and social constructionism emphasise meaning created through lived experiences and the importance of context.

The characteristics of qualitative research and how they were applied to this study were then explored. The specific data analysis technique of this study, hermeneutics, was then outlined. It was illustrated how hermeneutics strongly correlates with the theoretical framework of this study, in that meaning is viewed as emerging in context.

The chapters that follow will focus on the meaning generated from the interviews with the participants and will be presented in the format of the themes that emerged from the stories from the researcher's frame of reference. The stories presented and the themes identified in each couple relationship do not imply that these experiences are the absolute truth or the only truth. The themes and stories are meant to add to what we currently know and have experienced in intimate relationships, and are viewed in this study as another description of possible patterns providing alternative ways or more possibilities in viewing intimate relationships in our society.

## **Chapter 4: My Perceptions of Michelle and JP's Relationship**

### ***Introduction***

This chapter is based on the transcribed interviews conducted separately with Michelle, the wife, and JP, the husband. Each participant's background will be sketched, followed by a description of the interview setting and my impressions. This will be followed by a discussion of the themes that emerged from each interview. The combined interview will subsequently be considered in terms of the themes emerging from it as well as the general themes to be perceived in this marital relationship. Finally, my reflections of my participation in the process will be included.

After the completion and transcription of the interviews with Michelle and JP individually, summaries of each of their interviews were compiled and given to each one first, and then to both husband and wife to read and as a point of discussion for their joint interview. These interview summaries are provided in Appendix 1 and Appendix 2.

The themes identified and discussed were arrived as a result of in-depth analysis of the individual interviews and the single joint interview. In the role of researcher, my own lens coloured the way I interpreted Michelle and JP's stories.

### ***Michelle, the Wife***

#### **Background**

Michelle grew up in the small town of Nelspruit. Her parents divorced when Michelle was a small child and after her mother remarried, her stepfather adopted

her. During her high school years, Michelle was sent to boarding school. Although Michelle does not have happy childhood memories, she has very fond memories of her years at boarding school. Michelle had a difficult and distant relationship with her mother, but enjoyed a good relationship with her stepfather until she was 18 and had finished school. After having completed school, the relationship she had with her stepfather deteriorated, for reasons that Michelle still does not really understand today.

Michelle met her husband, JP, when she moved from Nelspruit to Johannesburg to further her career in the 'IT' (information technology) industry. They had an intimate relationship for one year, before becoming engaged. Michelle married at the age of 27 and had her first child (a son) one year later. A year after that, her second child (a daughter) was born.

Michelle worked throughout both her pregnancies and started work again soon after having given birth to each child. She was successful in her career and worked extremely hard. This meant that she was able to spend very little time with her family, however. As a result, together with her husband, she decided a little over a year ago, to give up her career in the corporate world and relocate from the city to the small town of George, so that she might be able to enjoy a quieter lifestyle and have more time with her family. Michelle and JP opened their own coffee shop in George. Unfortunately, the business was not successful and Michelle and JP found themselves in a very difficult financial situation. They struggled to find employment and so resorted to waitering and waitressing to earn extra money at night. After a year in George, Michelle and JP made the decision to return to Johannesburg in an attempt to regain financial stability. Michelle was able to find a job quickly, back in the corporate world as an IT consultant, whereas JP took a little longer to find employment. The financial difficulties as well as JP's business disappointments and unemployment placed strain and pressure on their marriage.

Currently, Michelle is 31 years old, and is living in Johannesburg with her husband (now employed), and her son of four years old and daughter of two years old.

### **The Interview Setting and My Impressions**

The interview with Michelle took place in the living room of my town house in Johannesburg. Michelle chose this venue because it was close to her work and therefore convenient for her to get to. She opted not to do the interview in her own home because she felt that her children might be disruptive and she would not be able to give me her full attention.

Michelle seemed a little apprehensive at first. As this was the very first interview that I did, I too was a little apprehensive, and so expect that this might have contributed to Michelle's initial feelings of anxiousness. I explained the research aims and goals to her and asked if she had any questions for me at all. I reassured her that I would maintain confidentiality and that I was there to learn from her.

As the interview progressed, Michelle seemed to relax, as did I. As she relaxed, it was noticeable how she talked more freely and easily. Michelle was very friendly and laughed generously. She was extremely eager to help and was open and friendly throughout the interview process.

### ***Themes Emerging from Michelle's Interview***

The following themes were identified from Michelle's interview.

## **Loss and Hurt leading to Self Protection**

This theme attempts to highlight how experiencing loss and disappointment in one's life can result in a determination to protect oneself from further hurt in various ways. It appears that for Michelle, hurt from her past has led to her protecting herself by being self-reliant and independent, determined not to be dependent on others. In addition, it seems that she protects herself from much of the hurt she suffered as a result of the lack of a close relationship experienced with her mother, by immersing herself in her relationships with her children.

While Michelle's independence has always been effective in achieving her goals and moving forward successfully in life, it may also become an obstacle to openness and sharing. Furthermore, having suffered hurt and pain, she seems to have protected herself by separating from her emotions. This can result in her being unable to acknowledge her own feelings to the extent that the tendency is to place a huge amount of pressure on herself to cope and be successful, and to focus on success, rather than experience her pain and emotional intensity. Independence, self-reliance, and a persistent striving for success may be ways to protect her vulnerable self.

Michelle comes from a divorced family and does not have happy childhood memories. In fact, she tries hard *not* to think back to her life as a child. She also talks about having a difficult and hurtful relationship with her mother. In particular, she describes her mother as never having shown her love.

These experiences seem to have taught her to be extremely independent and self-reliant. This has possibly contributed to her anxiousness or need to achieve and be successful.

It seems that the hurt from Michelle's past continues to lurk in Michelle's



marriage. She talks about not being able to respond to JP as lovingly as she would like, or as lovingly as JP responds to her. She feels that it is difficult to be receiving such love and affection, and at the same time, she finds it difficult to give in this way. Experiencing emotional intensity and closeness is possibly not permitted by Michelle, as a way to protect herself from the hurt, which she associates with close relationships. It could also be that she cannot receive love as she feels unworthy of being loved.

The loss that Michelle has felt in not having a close relationship with her mother seems to be compensated for in Michelle's relationship with her own children. She seems to strive to be a perfect mother and places great importance on forming close relationships with her children. The following extract highlights how the relationship she builds with her children is influenced by her past:

*...I think that is why I am so crazy about my kids because I never want them to have that relationship that I had with my Mom.*

It is possible that Michelle not only protects herself by fostering close and perhaps healing relationships with her children, but also wants to prevent them from experiencing the hurt that she endured when she was a child. She would not want her children to have the same feelings of hurt and anger towards her that she has had towards her own mother.

The priority Michelle places on never hurting her children and being available to them emotionally, appears to block a certain amount of privacy and intimacy in her relationship with her husband – perhaps this has become a part of the pattern of self-protection in Michelle's life. It serves the function of protecting herself from hurt that she perceives as being connected to close relationships. The paradox is that Michelle is able to form a close bond with her children, but at the expense of

a close relationship with JP. It is possible that this is because in her relationship with her children, Michelle is in a greater position of power and feels in control, whereas in an intimate relationship, there is more equality, which for Michelle, may result in feelings of powerlessness.

From the above discussion, it seems therefore, that the losses that Michelle has experienced in her childhood are being healed through her relationships with her children. As already mentioned, this appears to be at the expense of intimacy within her marital relationship.

Michelle describes how since the children have come into the picture, her priorities have changed, impacting on her marriage to JP. This is highlighted when Michelle relates the following recent incident:

*...when I came home from work, I heard Cammy (daughter) crying – and I get upset when I hear Cammy cry – so I came in and first consoled her, then greeted my son and only then greeted JP. So my priorities are a little backward...*

Perhaps Michelle comforts Cammy in a way she would have liked to have been comforted as a child. This need to give what she did not receive as a child highlights the many levels of loss which seem present in Michelle's life.

Loss can be described in terms of the loss of a happy childhood, or the loss of a close relationship, but in addition to this loss, is another significant loss in Michelle's story: the recent financial loss.

For Michelle, it seems that being able to provide financially for her children is a

priority, and represents an important aspect of being a good mother as well as being independent, self-reliant and successful. Providing financially can therefore be viewed as maintaining her self-protecting style of interaction.

The loss of financial security was extremely difficult in many ways and symbolises other significant losses in Michelle's life. It appears that lack of financial stability means a loss of a sense safety for Michelle and the children, a loss of self respect and in addition, disappointment in herself. Without financial stability, she feels vulnerable as she is stripped of her independence. Feeling vulnerable appears to have impacted negatively on her relationship with JP. Michelle states:

*...All the life insurance policies that I took out for the kids, I had to cash up to help us out. I am trying very hard not to hold any grudges, but it is very difficult. You have to put yourself in my shoes – I pay for my children because especially today, they need to be financially ok – you need to provide for them, and you just haven't been able to. So in one year, things just got messed up. Very scary...*

The above statement implies that Michelle holds JP responsible for the financial loss that they have both experienced over the last year. This serves on one level to protect herself from blame. It is possible that the anger she seems to feel towards him, masks her fear of not being good enough as a mother and wife as well as not being successful or independent enough as a person. Her anger is therefore another means to protect her vulnerabilities and represents a part of the frustration that she feels toward herself.

Michelle seems to put a lot of pressure on herself and feels an enormous responsibility to maintain the financial stability in the family. It seems that

although she relies on JP to fulfill the expectations that she has of him (such as to find a job and contribute financially) she seems to put greater pressure on herself to be successful and achieve. She says:

*...JP always needs a push. And I am not very good with that. With myself, I have my job and my expectations of myself – which is to be successful in what I do, to balance being a mother and being in a corporate world (which is very difficult – especially since I decided to leave the corporate world for my kids and it didn't work out) and for my husband to lead the way.*

It seems that when Michelle experiences loss and hurt, she takes control as a form of self protection. Therefore, armed with financial stability, she seems to sustain the pattern of being self-reliant and independent as a way to protect herself from past and present hurt. When she can provide, when she is in control, she is able to define herself as successful. She is able to focus on success, rather than experience pain or emotional intensity which she then does not have to confront. Financial stability takes a great deal of her own pressure off, and this in turn takes the pressure off her marital relationship. The expectations she has of JP, as well as the frustrations she has often felt at him not taking the lead, seem to reflect her focused determination to be a 'perfect' mother, provider, and successful career woman. She explains:

*...I think I am actually a bit selfish. As long as I am making good money, and I can provide, I don't have a problem. The problem came in when I could no longer provide.*

The paradox which becomes evident here is that although Michelle wants JP to take the lead, she herself needs to take the lead and be in control. The impact of

such a paradox is that JP is placed in an impossible position, and he is 'damned' if he does take the lead, but 'damned' if he does not.

The theme *protection* does not only pertain to Michelle protecting herself in various ways, but also extends to Michelle protecting those close to her – for example, she puts enormous pressure on herself to provide for her children. She protects them from future financial stress by ensuring she takes out policies for them while they are still children. She also protects them from the hurt that she experienced growing up, by giving them the mother that she did not have. She also shows protectiveness toward her husband. However, being protective of JP implies that she perceives him as weak, needing someone strong. Thus, her protectiveness may serve the function of disguising the criticism that she actually feels toward her husband. She states:

*...he (JP) is always busy with something – he's Mr Fix It. And that's what makes me so cross about everything that has happened to him in his business experience. People just take advantage of him. He's gullible. He trusts people. I am very skeptical. I am not as trusting as what he is.*

The above statement demonstrates how Michelle tends to criticise JP because he is not like her: He is trusting of the world and is not skeptical like she is. As a result, Michelle seems to look down on JP, but her protectiveness towards him conceals her condescending attitude.

In conclusion, although Michelle's determination to be self-reliant and successful may have assisted her in achieving all that she has achieved, it is possible that this very need to be so independent and self-reliant becomes an obstacle to closeness and openness in her marriage. Michelle does not want to make herself vulnerable and by being in control she protects herself. However, this has

adverse effects on her marital relationship as one is required to make oneself vulnerable in an intimate relationship.

### **Need for Control vs. Need for Dependence**

This theme is closely entwined with the previous theme. It attempts to highlight the paradox that Michelle seems to be caught in. It refers to the pattern of being dependent on her marital relationship which then serves the function of sustaining her independence and sense of control. Punctuating from Michelle's perspective, it seems that the way that the relationship is organised in certain contexts is the following: Michelle maintains a one up position by being independent and JP's dependence further maintains her sense of control, and therefore sense of safety in her marriage.

Although Michelle appears to wish for her husband to take the lead, she is threatened by his independence, and her feelings of insecurity within her marriage start to emerge. The following excerpt may demonstrate Michelle's feeling of insecurity surrounding her husband's independence:

*I pray to God that in 10 years we will still be together. I think we will be. Because he had his own business in the past, he was always at home. Do you understand? He was home with the maid and the kids. He was always there. But now, he is going to find his own independence so to speak. And nobody can say what will happen in the future.*

Michelle recalls a psychologist's words regarding their relationship. These words perhaps highlight the co-dependent pattern in Michelle and JP's relationship. While Michelle may overtly appear independent and in control in many areas, and JP appears dependent on Michelle in many areas, Michelle's independence and sense of control is highly dependent on JP needing her. Without JP's

dependence, Michelle feels insecure. Below is Michelle's explanation of how the psychologist described their relationship:

*... she said that we are a very co-dependent couple. She described it as a relationship in which I am in charge and JP needs me, and then something happens which swops it around again so that he is then in charge and it goes around in circles. I lean on him for whatever reasons and then him on me and it goes round and round...*

On one level, Michelle is in control, yet on another level, JP actually holds the control: Michelle needs him to depend on her in order to feel secure. It appears that Michelle's need for control is masking deep feelings of insecurity. She is uncomfortable depending on someone else, and is uncomfortable with being loved. It seems as if she feels undeserving of the commitment that her husband shows her. She explains almost incredulously:

*...You know, it's been seven years, and still, every morning when I wake up, I get my cup of coffee. I mean, you would think the honeymoon was still over? But every morning I get my cup of coffee.*

Michelle's feelings of insecurity are further highlighted by her following words:

*...JP has never had high expectations of me. If anything, he has always told me that I am the greatest. I don't believe that though – I don't think that I am the best, I really don't. But that is also a part of my upbringing. The fact that he is still here after all the 'shit' that I have given him. It's quite amazing!*

The above comments demonstrate her own acknowledgement of the insecurity she feels, even though these feelings are mostly hidden by the independent image that she portrays. While she hopes for togetherness and is faithfully

committed to keeping her marriage together, she seems afraid that it will fall apart. It is possible that she links the growing independence that she sees in her husband in the working environment, with a loss of control and loss of togetherness. The independence in her husband changes the organisation of the relationship, and takes away her sense of safety. While talking about JP going to find his independence, she says:

*Well, I come from a divorced couple. That is probably what I am scared of. It is my way of protecting myself.*

It seems that only Michelle can be in control, and this means being in control of JP. The paradox is, that she might 'lose' her marriage in any case as control hinders intimacy as well as JP's independence might.

### **Blanketing Guilt and Blame with Admiration**

The theme of blanketing guilt and blame with admiration embodies Michelle's burden that she seems to carry with her in her marriage. It seems that Michelle's guilt is maintained by her sense of inadequacy in terms of reciprocating her husband's love and warmth. When she receives her husband's love and attention, and feels unable to give back to him in such a manner, Michelle feels guilty for not being a 'good enough' wife to JP in this way. At the same time, not only does Michelle feel guilt, but also contrasting feelings of blame toward her husband. Although she tries hard not to, to a great extent, she blames JP for the financial losses that they recently suffered. It is possible that her feelings of blame toward her husband further generate her feelings of guilt in terms of not being good enough as a wife. The guilt and blame therefore seem to form a part of a cycle and she is able to partly disguise the feelings of guilt and blame with open admiration of her husband. By openly admiring him, she contrasts his strengths with her own perceived weaknesses, thereby highlighting her own shortcomings to soften the uncomfortable feelings of guilt and blame.



Michelle's guilt is demonstrated in her description of herself as a selfish person in their relationship compared to her husband whom she describes as always "accommodating the family, wherever he can." Michelle looks up to her husband in that he seems to represent many qualities that Michelle feels she does not have and does not give. The following statement illustrates this belief:

*JP knows me much better than I know him; if you understand what I am saying? He is more receptive to my feelings than I am to his. I don't know if it is about my upbringing or what it is, but I find that I am actually quite a selfish person – I concentrate on my needs, and when the kids were born – on their needs...*

It appears that Michelle believes that she does not acknowledge JP *enough* – or as a *good* wife should acknowledge her husband:

*...you can imagine it...when someone worships you – well it is like being a spoilt child actually. You know, and I don't worship him back – in the manner that I should, or in the manner that he would like.*

Michelle seems to feel responsible for often being blind to JP's giving, and her sense of guilt is maintained by her belief that although she knows he does everything he can for her, she does not show him her acknowledgement. She blames herself for being too involved in her own thing and with the children, so that she often does not notice her husband. It seems that Michelle is emotionally needy as a result of her needs not being met as a child. As a result, she tends to be egocentric in the context of her relationship with JP and appears to be blind to the possibility that JP may also have emotional needs.

It is possible, that Michelle's guilt serves a function in the relationship. While she

often feels that on an emotional and intimate level, she is inadequate, on a financial level, Michelle feels more in control and responsible as the provider in her marriage. This tends to put her in a one-up position in the marriage. Her guilt, however, allows her to maintain a one-down position in certain aspects of the marriage, thereby restoring her status on a covert level, to being more supportive of his contribution. It seems that Michelle is both supportive of his contribution to the marriage and unsupportive in not appreciating what he does.

Michelle's awareness of JP's contribution is evident in her admiration of JP's ability to give love and affection in their marriage.

*JP is a very loveable person. He loves to touch – he gives me a lot of attention. He wants me to reciprocate and I don't know how.*

This example shows how although JP provides a lot of love and attention, Michelle perceives the condition attached to this act of giving, as having to give back. This puts pressure on Michelle and she then feels guilty when she does not give as much warmth and affection to JP in return. Nevertheless, Michelle is able to do this with her children. It seems that by maintaining the one down position in this area of the relationship with JP, Michelle is exonerated from having to change or do something about her inability to reciprocate the love and warmth that JP provides.

In terms of blame, Michelle does not openly blame JP, but nevertheless, blame toward JP is subtly conveyed in Michelle's words. For example, she says:

*...He must know what is expected from him. I need from him is to bring his part. He can't expect me to pay his debt and to pay everything else...*

Michelle is aware that she makes JP feel guilty. Furthermore, she acknowledges

that the priority she places on financial stability hurts her husband. She says:

*...JP said that he can't believe that the fact we haven't got any money has affected my feelings for him. But there is a saying that says 'if there is no money, love flies out of the window.'*

Michelle feels guilty for blaming her husband and seems to take on a great deal of blame in the relationship. For example, she talks about going to therapy with her husband and explains that the reason they were going to therapy as a couple was because of *her* problem. She states:

*...we went to therapy for the first time because I had problems with intimacy.*

It appears that Michelle feels largely responsible for the 'problems' that she and her husband may experience with sexual intimacy. Again, she hints at the feeling of guilt and self-blame, when she says:

*...At night, you get tired. You get home, you just want to relax and there is no intimacy really. I mean, JP holds me in bed; he keeps me warm - you know he gives me love. It must be really difficult because – well I would hate to say that I am an ice-queen – I am just not as warm as what he is.*

From the excerpts discussed under this theme, it appears that there are many levels of guilt, blame and admiration which have a reciprocal effect on the marriage. It seems therefore that Michelle and JP's relationship is characterised by a cycle of blame, guilt and open admiration. Michelle's voice of admiration seems to serve the function of silencing the blame and guilt within this relationship.

## **Separateness vs. Faithful Connectedness**

This theme refers to the sense of disconnection and separateness that comes with Michelle's independence. This 'separateness' is however reframed as independence. Being a successful career woman, she feels as if the financial pressures and responsibilities to provide rest largely on her shoulders. This belief appears to be a burden on Michelle on one level and emphasises, and maintains her separateness from her husband:

*...With myself, I have my job and my expectations of myself – which is to be successful in what I do...and to balance being a mother and being in the corporate world...*

It is interesting to note in the above extract, that Michelle refers to being a mother, but does not refer to her being a wife. In addition, her use of pronouns, which include the many references to 'myself', 'I', and 'my' imply that the emphasis is very much on her, and Michelle does not see an 'us' in what she says.

The separateness that Michelle feels in her marriage is not only reframed as independence, but also difference. For example, she talks about the way in which she was brought up and the way that JP was brought up, and describes their upbringings as being extremely different. One of the reasons for such a difference is the fact that JP grew up in an Afrikaans home, whereas she grew up in an English home. It seems that for Michelle, she and JP are separated by culture and upbringing. Yet, not only does the 'difference' lie in the discrepancy between cultures, but also in the discrepancy between relationships they have both shared with their respective mothers. This appears to be significant for Michelle and is highlighted in the following statement:

*...JP's mother is very loving – she's got this undying love for her kids. I am*

*not saying that I didn't have that – my mom just didn't show it.*

Michelle's sense of separateness and disconnection is also highlighted in her explanation of the difficulty that she and JP experience with intimacy at times. In addition, that Michelle is unlovable in her eyes comes to the fore once again:

*...When you reach your 30's and your body starts changing shape – and you are not what you were in your 20's – you don't feel sexy and you don't want to be touched. And after your kids, your body changes a lot...it is not that JP has ever stopped touching me. It is just me, but ultimately that affects everything else, doesn't it? It is like a chain reaction.*

While Michelle and JP are connected by love and vows, they are separated by difference, independence, guilt and conditions. However, although there is 'separateness', Michelle is faithfully committed to her husband and seems to yearn for connectedness. The sense of responsibility that Michelle feels as a life partner or wife, to maintain connection is illustrated in the following comment:

*...I have given JP my word, that I will try and be more – I am not sure what the right word is – but I will try and be more affectionate. More giving of myself and more open to receiving from him.*

The determination and faithful commitment that Michelle has in her marriage is clear in the following words:

*...we are trying. We are working on it. I don't want to get divorced. We never got married with the idea of getting divorced. Most people don't. But I want to be together with him, when I am 70 or 80 years old.*

Michelle's work ethic, her determination to succeed and the hurt she has suffered in her past: her own story, is reflected in the realistic view that Michelle holds

about marriage:

*...You know, marriage is just a formality, and it's up to you. Seriously, marriage is hard work, it's not a given. It is definitely not: "okay, we are married, we are going to be happy for the rest of our lives." Things change. You change one thing – like your job – and it's a chain reaction. In a marriage, you always always work. It is not a given that you are going to love each other for the rest of your lives – or that you will be committed forever. You have to continually give each other that re-affirmation, and you have to make sure that the goals you have for the rest of your lives, are in tune, and stay the same. It is possible to live past each other.*

To conclude, separation and connection is a predominant theme in Michelle and JP's relationship. The separateness which is reframed as 'independence' contrasts starkly with the meaning Michelle attaches to marriage and her constant striving to work at her marriage and remain committed. She seems to be caught in a conflict between wanting independence and separateness as well as connection and interdependence. Intellectually, she knows what to do in her marriage, but in reality, she seems to maintain distance.

### ***JP, the Husband***

#### **Background**

JP comes from an Afrikaans background. He was the youngest of three children. The age gap between him and his two older sisters was about ten years. His older sisters therefore moved out the home while he was still growing up, and he grew up almost as an only child.

JP's family was conservative, religious and very strict. His father was a sales representative and so was hardly at home. JP's mother was always at home, and was very loving to her children.

JP grew up in the small town of Kimberley and after having completed school, came to Johannesburg to pursue his career. He has always worked within the construction industry. He met Michelle in Johannesburg and asked her to marry him, one year after dating.

### **The Interview Setting and My Impressions**

I interviewed JP in his own home in the early evening. JP had just returned from work and was dressed in smart-casual attire. The house was bustling with the activity of children's bath time and supper time. It was obviously a family home, and was warm and friendly. Michelle took the children away into another room after their supper, and got them ready for bed. This gave JP and I the chance to do the interview in private.

JP and I decided to conduct the interview in the lounge, where it was quiet and away from the children. He was approachable and softly spoken. He was very thoughtful before answering questions and showed an openness and eagerness to be helpful.

### ***Themes Emerging from JP's Interview***

The following themes were identified from JP's interview.

### **Hiding behind the Rationalising**

This theme refers to the use of rationalising as a way to cover hurt and disappointment. By rationalising, JP is able to distance himself from his hurt. This leads to an avoidance of negative feelings as well as conflict, and a lack of acknowledgment of his own struggles. In addition, it leads to a denial of negativity in the relationship. Nevertheless, perhaps it is this very quality, which allows the marriage to grow, despite the difficult obstacles encountered along the way.

JP describes his relationship with his wife as very open, very honest and very equal. For JP, the marriage has gone through difficulties, and in particular, one major difficulty, which he refers to as “deep waters.” Yet, despite these difficulties, JP believes that he and Michelle have stuck together, have grown closer together, and have learnt a lot. It seems that JP is able to positively reframe problem situations as a way of coping and at the same time, this lessens the impact of difficulties experienced.

It seems that JP often tends to apply or compare some of the unique difficulties or challenges within his marriage, to the ‘general’ as a way of rationalising what is going on. For example, while acknowledging that his marriage has its ups and downs, he will immediately put that into context by referring to marriage in general, implying perhaps that that is not a problem, because “all couples have their ups and downs.” His use of social comparison is a very useful strategy in this case, as it helps JP cope with hurt and disappointments arising from his marital relationship.

Communication is also described by JP as one of the weaknesses in their marriage. Again, he shifts the discussion from their unique marriage to marriage in general. This strategy of using the general allows JP to distance himself from the pain of the specific. He states:



*...The weakness is probably communication. That is such a big problem for I think, 80% of all marriages. At times, we just jump to conclusions, but I think if we just relax and listen to what your partner is saying, that can solve a lot of problems.*

JP believes that due to the difficult financial situation that they found themselves in, had he not found a job, he and Michelle would have been very close to divorce. This is difficult for JP to accept, and yet he is able to rationalise his near divorce:

*...It was very tough for me. Very tough. But I knew what I had to do, and I knew it wasn't unreasonable – threatening me with divorce if I didn't get a job. So ja, through all of it, we stuck together. I don't think it could get any worse than what it did. It taught us a lot.*

The theme, hiding behind rationalising, highlights how JP is able to faithfully avoid negative issues in his marriage. It seems that for JP, lack of sexual intimacy is one of his unmet needs in his marriage. His rationalising and positive reframing, never allow him to define lack of sexual intimacy as being an unmet need however. Before moving to George, and before having been through the “deep waters,” JP describes his relationship with Michelle as not being sexually intimate. However, he goes on to rationalise this by saying that the being together and supporting each other, mean a lot more than the sexual side of the relationship. As their financial situation worsened, so too, did their sexual intimacy. JP denies that this is really a serious problem. It seems that JP is able to disguise the hurt and disappointment surrounding their sexual intimacy, by distancing himself through denial as well as rational words. The following excerpt demonstrates this:

*...It is not really such a big deal for me. I believe we are grown-ups. It is not about that for us anymore. It is obviously important, but as long as you*

*feel that the love is still there, and you still have commitment and support from your partner. It is not like you live separate lives, and you are still sharing everything, sex is just a small part of it. Obviously it did bug me, but I tend to put my mind around it.*

Hiding behind rationalising also seems to disguise JP's disappointment in his realisation that "sometimes love is not enough." Because of the experience of having lost money and being unemployed, JP has come to recognise that financial security is necessary for their marriage to work:

*For us, success means being financially secure. We have never wanted to be rich; I just want to be comfortable. Yes, financial security is necessary in our marriage. Unfortunately. Love is there – there is a lot of love there, but I think the balance between love and realism about money also needs to be there - and is there. There is a song that says 'sometimes love is not enough.'*

It appears that optimism for JP is also a way of rationalising and distancing himself from any negative aspects of his marriage and also from discussing them. For example, he maintains that he trusts Michelle 100 percent, and strongly believes that he has one of the closest, perfect marriages that you can get. In addition, even when he describes the not-so-great times, he explains that there are still parts of those times that are great. Furthermore, he points out that there is no hate in their marriage, and this for JP, seems to outweigh the fact that there is a "little bit of blame on both sides." He explains:

*Well, in the last bad patch, I didn't blame Michelle from my side, but before going to George, I had a problem with Michelle's work and I blamed her for that – for never really being home. On her side, she blames me for the financial side of things. But through all of that, we still had great times together.*

In summary, although JP admits to blaming Michelle on one level, he seems to rationalise and positively reframe what he blames, serving the function of dissolving or negating that expressed blame. In addition, he seems to shift the focus of the blame away from Michelle and toward himself. The impact of this is that their relationship problems and difficulties are often not acknowledged by JP, and the tendency is for him to ‘sweep things under the carpet.’ Perhaps by taking the blame, JP takes control – much like Michelle does – but in another way.

### **Traditional vs. Modern Roles**

This theme attempts to highlight the pattern of contradictions that JP seems to be caught between in terms of the contrast between traditional views and roles within marriage, and the more modern views and roles pertaining to a marital relationship.

Like Michelle, JP places a lot of importance on his marriage, and emphasises the seriousness of taking vows and the seriousness of marriage. His beliefs about marriage and his dedication to the institution of marriage, demonstrate a very traditional perspective. JP says:

*...When we took our vows, we took them seriously. For us, the option to divorce – I don't think is there – even though it has been mentioned in the past. I think, that if it really boils down to actually doing it, I don't think we would. For me, and Michelle knows that, the option for divorce is not really there.*

Traditionally, a husband is the provider or primary breadwinner in a marriage. JP seems to be caught in a struggle between wanting to be the provider in the family as tradition dictates that a man *should*, and accepting that in his family, this is not always so.

During the time when JP and Michelle were struggling financially, JP remembers thinking that it would be easy for a rich and attractive man to sweep Michelle off her feet. This thought was not so much related to a distrust of Michelle, but rather, connected to the difficulty he was experiencing in reconciling the fact that he was a man and not able to provide for his family. It appears that JP's sense of pride and self-respect is connected to his sense of manhood. The following extract illustrates how JP's traditional perspective of a man's role having to provide impacted on his sense of self:

*...It was really tough. Especially as a man...it is difficult to explain how it feels to be unemployed. That feels terrible already, but on top of that, I still had children to worry about, and a wife to worry about – and a house, and car, and policies and R35000.00 a month overheads.*

JP grew up in a very traditional household. He describes his mother as always being subservient to his father who is perceived in the household as the 'boss.' JP explains that his mother is very religious, and believes that the bible says that the wife is there to serve the man. From JP's perspective, his parents, coming from such a conservative era do not understand his marriage with his wife, which is characterised by an equal relationship as he sees it.

Although JP describes his relationship as equal, it seems that JP takes pride in maintaining his position as the man of the house. Therefore, although on an overt level, Michelle and JP's marriage appears more modern and therefore very different to JP's parents, perhaps on a covert level, certain similarities regarding traditional roles do exist. JP states:

*I am still the man of the house. And I am still respected as the man of the house. It is definitely not as strong as in my parents' house, but ja, I will be asked sometimes for permission to do something Even if it is just for the kids to do something. And when it gets to the handy man stuff – well,*

*that's what I do.*

While JP does the traditionally masculine handy work in the house, and is regarded as the man of the house thereby possessing authority, he acknowledges that he is definitely not the breadwinner. It seems that JP's usual coping style of rationalisation helps him to acknowledge this and yet still maintain his sense of pride as the man of the house. It is possible that by rationalising as to why he is not the breadwinner, he distances himself and hides the sense of inadequacy that he may feel as a man. The following extract may highlight this point:

*...We both know that I will never be the breadwinner. Because of the industry that I am in, and the industry that she is in. Also in South Africa, being a white male is not a good thing. So, me not being the breadwinner is not a problem for us. Luckily Michelle knows that I am doing the best that I can, and I am bringing in whatever I can. That is the best I can do. She might earn three times what I earn, but that is not a problem – as long as I am bringing in, and am working – then it is not a problem...Michelle has always earned more – I don't think I have ever earned more than she has...most men have an ego problem. I don't. I really don't. I have accepted that a very long time ago. I have realised that I am fighting a losing battle.*

It seems within Michelle and JP's marriage, many traditional gender roles are reversed. For example, JP describes himself as generally being more of the communicator, and is more affectionate, (traditionally viewed as more feminine qualities) whereas Michelle tends to bear the sense of responsibility in terms of finances and is described as the breadwinner in the household (traditionally masculine qualities). Despite this, the traditional gender roles are still evident in their marriage. JP seems to value his position as the man of the house, and feels respected by Michelle as the man. The fact that Michelle earns more (which

traditionally would not have happened) has therefore not impacted on the more roles in the marriage as such.

### **Optimistic View on Life**

This theme illustrates that despite various disappointments in the marriage, JP is still hopeful of even better and closer connections in the future. These disappointments include a lack of sexual intimacy, wanting more affection, as well as the strain that the marriage took due to financial pressures. Nevertheless, JP is certain that through their difficulties they have learnt a lot as a couple and have become stronger in their commitment toward each other. JP's optimistic view of their relationship seems to reflect a generally optimistic view and orientation towards life.

JP's optimism is demonstrated in his generous giving of love to Michelle, even when their relationship is going through a difficult phase. It is possible that through giving, he hopes to receive, thereby maintaining a strong connection and closeness. JP says:

*Our love has had to be very strong. And it has to have been the real thing. Otherwise, we never would have made it. There is nothing in the world that I would not do for Michelle. She really is my life. She knows that and I keep on telling her that. That's one of those things. We have gone through all of this, and from here it can only get better.*

For JP, communication is a priority in his marriage. It is here that he takes the lead. The importance he places on communication is another indication of his need for closeness as well as his hopeful and optimistic attitude. He describes himself in the relationship, as the one, who nine times out of ten, approaches Michelle to discuss an issue, rather than she approaching him. He would really like Michelle to communicate openly with him, and not to have to ask her what

the problem is. It appears that for JP, understanding Michelle and being open is about closeness. JP explains:

*...I can't cope with the silent treatment. If there is something wrong, I need to discuss it, I have to. Michelle can leave it, but I just can't. For me, I just can't go to bed angry. I just can't do it. Ja, so I always try to and resolve it. But now, it is definitely better.*

Although JP may be disappointed with the communication between him and Michelle at times, he nevertheless hopes for this to improve, and so hopes for more closeness. His hope is reflected in the following statement:

*Apart from the financial problems that we have had, there is not really anything else that is a problem. Every now and then we disagree on a few things about the kids, but that won't be a fight...*

It seems that JP needs closeness and a sense of connection in his marriage. It is possible that to maintain this closeness, not only does he give of himself emotionally, but he accepts the disparities between him and Michelle and is able to reframe difference positively. For example, he states:

*...Michelle is not an easy person – well, she's a red head! She knows what she wants in life and nothing will stand in her way. Being reasonable obviously. She has got her head screwed on right. She's very independent. She is not very affectionate, and that is something that, yes, I would want. But all the other things that come with her, make up for that!*

The optimistic attitude is also evident in the way in which JP talks about marriage. He says that for him divorce is not an option and he describes him and Michelle as being very committed. In addition, he describes the companionship between him and Michelle. He says:

*Our great times are just being together. It is just being together and enjoying and enjoying each other's company. Having conversation. We can talk a lot. Both of us. About lots of things. We can watch sport together – we do everything together – we can even shop together!*

The theme, an optimistic view on life, is summed up when JP reflects on the process of the interview. He said that he was used to this process because they have done it before. He describes how they have been to therapy before, and that for him is important because it is about realising that there is a problem, and wanting to work on it. He explains that as a couple, they have no problems with being open and facing things. This sentiment demonstrates how although there are disappointments for JP, there is also a great hope and determination for closeness and connection.

### ***The Coming Together of JP and Michelle***

#### **Introduction**

After providing JP and Michelle with a summary of each other's interviews, a combined interview was conducted to discuss the summaries and their marital relationship together. The main goals in this last interview were to clarify and confirm the summaries of the individual interviews, to correct any misinterpretations or misunderstandings in the individual summaries, and for JP and Michelle to create their own narrative of their relationship together.

#### ***The Interview Setting and My Impressions***

This last interview took place at Michelle and JP's home. We agreed to start the



interview in the early evening, once both Michelle and JP were back from work. We sat outside on the veranda while the children stayed indoors and watched TV.

Both Michelle and JP seemed a little nervous before the interview. The interview began with some hesitation from both Michelle and JP and as the interview progressed, Michelle became quite emotional, while JP maintained a calm and comforting presence.

### ***Themes in JP and Michelle's Relationship***

The following themes were identified in the joint interview with JP and Michelle.

#### **Acknowledging Complementarities and Connecting through Difference**

This theme refers to a coming together in acknowledging differences and being able to find compassion and understanding in one another by reconciling the differences. Coming together in discussing differences seems to facilitate an understanding for each other's different ways and has allowed the couple to find a connection through these differences. In discovering their connection, both parties have been able to furnish each other with mutual acceptance and affirmation. This has brought about a process of arriving at a complementary narrative of the marital relationship.

JP and Michelle appear to have very different styles of approaching life and have different perceptions of their relationship. According to JP, their relationship is characterised by openness and almost perfection. He appears to have nothing but positive things to express about their relationship and does not foresee any major problems emerging. Although he acknowledges some difficulties, he minimises their importance.

Michelle however, views their relationship as characterised by many challenges and difficulties. Whereas JP minimises issues, Michelle seems to exaggerate them and describes them with a sense of impending doom, difficult to resolve.

JP thus approaches life with an optimistic and positive attitude, whereas Michelle tends to approach life with a more realistic and perhaps pessimistic attitude. The following interaction between Michelle, JP and I, involving a discussion regarding the difficulty of their current financial situation, illustrates this:

**Michelle:** *The most frustrating thing is the fact that we are both making good money, but we have nothing to show for it and we can't even afford to go out.*

**JP:** *There are people in much worse situations though. I always see that part of it. I think that is why it is a little bit worse for Michelle than what it is for me.*

**Lindsey:** *In what way is it worse for Michelle?*

**Michelle:** *I just can't see myself in this situation. I have started over three times now financially. The other times I was alone and younger, and now I am not saying I am old, but I am older and I have kids and responsibilities so it is worse this time.*

JP's more optimistic view on life, means that he remains always hopeful, and he is able to give of himself generously to Michelle. Michelle's more pessimistic attitude means that she is less hopeful and is more conserving of herself. Both JP and Michelle's attitudes can be viewed as strategies which allow them to cope with disappointments in life and their relationship and which allow both of them to maintain a subjective sense of control. JP's optimism allows him to deny negativity in the relationship, avoid tackling the emotional issues and focus on the

positive. It is perhaps this quality which allows JP to maintain control in the relationship, but in a different way to Michelle: he has tended to take on the role of being the emotional provider, and in doing this, has maintained a certain position of control in the relationship. Michelle's pessimism on the other hand, means that she does not want to make herself vulnerable and so has a need to maintain control as a way to protect herself. Taking on the financial responsibility within their relationship, therefore seems to be a part of Michelle's need to be in control as a way to protect herself from hurt, disappointment and blame.

Through discussion during the joint interview, it appears that JP and Michelle have come to acknowledge and accept their different attitudes, roles and areas of control. Furthermore, they seem to be attempting to 'close the gap' in terms of difference, by acknowledging what each other brings to the relationship. For example, in the previous interview with Michelle, she seemed to blame JP for most of their financial difficulties, however, in the joint interview, she actively acknowledged JP for his financial contribution by explaining that they are both "pulling their weight." JP also affirms Michelle in her ability to give emotionally - the area of the relationship that she feels inadequate and vulnerable - by stating:

*I think Michelle makes it bigger than what it is. It is almost as if she makes out that she does that (think of only herself and the children) all the time. And, it is really not like that. She is also very considerate when it comes to me. I think she may not realise it.*

It appears that the discussions during the joint interview contributed to an acknowledgment and appreciation of each other's differences. Ironically, this has resulted in both parties attempting to be more like the other, thus closing the gap in terms of difference. JP has attempted to show his support to Michelle by taking on a job that will allow him to contribute financially. Michelle's appreciation for this has enabled her to show her support to JP by attempting to interact with him in a more loving and appreciative way, almost reinstating him as the man of the

house. By being appreciated, JP may feel more worthy as a man within their relationship. The following extract demonstrates the process outlined above:

**Michelle:** *We are now more co-dependent on each other – it isn't unbalanced, we are working together. That is actually the biggest thing that has changed since we last spoke.*

**JP:** *Ja, I think that really has changed since our individual interviews with you.*

**Michelle:** *Our roles have swopped completely.*

**JP:** *Ja, they definitely have. Look I am still not the provider. I don't think I ever will be.*

**Michelle:** *But you are providing more than you used to.*

The financial demands facing the couple seem to have mobilised them into approaching life and each other, as a team where both partners are on the same side. The couple seem to have pulled together in that now it is not only JP who takes on a supportive and reassuring role within his relationship, but also Michelle. By both taking on emotionally supportive roles, the strength of the relationship is enhanced, and both Michelle and JP's sense of helplessness seem to be contained:

**JP:** *It just makes us stronger. That's all. We are a lot better off than what we were. That is how I feel anyway. Michelle doesn't – but that's how I feel. Purely because Michelle doesn't have to waitress, um, we don't have to keep going to the bank. All the cards are being paid – we might be in overdraft, but at the end of the month, there is still 'x' amount coming in and everything gets paid – or most of it!*

Although the roles appear to have shifted, and the distance between the differences between Michelle and JP seems to have closed somewhat, guilt and blame still seem prevalent in the relationship. Nevertheless, the guilt and blame is acknowledged and was discussed during the interview. This seems to have been a cathartic process for JP and Michelle. In the following exchange, Michelle and JP speak openly about what they want from each other. Such open and direct communication demonstrates a significant shift from the more evasive or avoidant style of communication, which seemed to be characteristic of past interactions between the couple.

**JP:** *I just battle with it a little bit (the job), because I am away from home a lot and I am not used to it. It is almost like I feel guilty – being in the situation we are in right now, and at the same time, I am not home.*

**Michelle:** *Do I put you under pressure for that?*

**JP:** *No, you always reassure me not to stress about it.*

**Lindsey:** *Do you feel you are not supporting Michelle by not being home much?*

**JP:** *Yes*

**Michelle:** *But he's supporting me by having work. It is not that I don't want him at home. Believe me, I would much prefer him to be home. But right now we can't. We have to take it in our stride.*

It seems that the open communication between JP and Michelle during the joint interview evoked an appreciation of their complementarities. It is hoped that this will continue and will contribute to JP and Michelle being able to function effectively as a couple. By acknowledging their differences, and by adopting

more flexible roles, they have been able to connect on a different level. This is highlighted by their reaction to their current experiences of helplessness in terms of their financial situation. It seems that both partners are reassuring, and it is no longer JP alone but both of them who are supportive. I see their relationship as having moved from where they each did something different for the other: Michelle provided financially, whereas JP was there in a supportive role. Now they both do the same things for each other. This demonstrates how when it is needed, they both support one another financially and emotionally.

The following excerpt demonstrates a relationship characterised by complementarities which brings about wholeness and facilitates a sense of coping:

***Michelle:** You know, I can't say more, than say that JP completes me.*

***JP:** I can't see life without Michelle...*

In the past, the apparent pattern existed, where JP would ask for intimacy and closeness, and Michelle would reject this request by presenting herself as self-reliant and pushed him away in various ways. It seems that now, each partner is trying to meet the other half way and despite the difficulties that they are currently experiencing, they have found common ground and acceptance, allowing the relationship to stay alive. Acceptance has therefore enabled the couple to connect through their differences, rather than be separated by them. Connecting through difference has provided the relationship with the hope that the difficulties both internal and external to the relationship can be overcome, and that things have a chance to improve in the future.

### **Confronting Issues vs. 'Sweeping under the Carpet'**

This theme attempts to illustrate the hesitation and fear which seem apparent in

the couple when the necessity of confronting issues as well as their differences becomes imminent. Although both JP and Michelle are aware of these issues, they seem to fear that their issues would surface during the joint interview and therefore would need to be confronted. This may have contributed to their initial hesitation in the final interview where they had to confront and acknowledge these differences. At first, this hesitation resulted in both parties shifting the conversation away from the relationship as well as resorting to humor as an avoidance strategy. Nevertheless, although humour was often used to lessen the impact, certain issues were confronted. The following excerpt which took place while discussing the impact of reading the individual summaries on each partner, demonstrates this:

***Michelle:** Well, JP's summary is actually very nice. It is spot on. What I thought was um – well it was just about his little insecurity of me cheating, which I – well – it was sort of surprising and I want to say to you (turning to JP) that I will never cheat on you. It is not necessary for you to be insecure about that.*

It seems that Michelle worries that because of their lack of intimacy and because JP is now away from home a lot, he might cheat on her. This insecurity prompts her to make the above sincere statement to JP. Nevertheless, immediately after Michelle disclosed her vulnerability and initiated emotional intensity between her and JP, the couple then laughed and this topic of conversation was abruptly changed. This illustrates their discomfort in confronting issues. This discomfort impacts on the couple's tendency to avoid or sweep certain issues under the carpet.

It seems that JP tends to sweep issues under the carpet to a greater extent than Michelle does. Although he tends to take the lead in terms of communication within the relationship, it appears that his open communication style has limitations. This is consistent with his optimistic view on life, where he tends to

cope by focusing on the positive at the expense of confronting the negative. He denies that there may be anything wrong in their relationship, and denies conflict and disappointments. He appears to have created a world in which he believes that his relationship is perfect. Ironically, although he facilitates communication in the relationship, this avoidant style may block authentic communication and internal realisations that would possibly assist the relationship to move forward. When talking about the individual interview summaries, JP explains:

*Well, I can say that from my side, there was absolutely nothing in Michelle's summary that I didn't know...Nothing struck me because it has all been discussed. It has all been discussed and it's all open in the clear. It is not like there have been any secrets. Everything that is in there, I knew.*

On the other hand, Michelle seems to confront issues in the relationship in a more open manner. This is perhaps consistent with her more realistic views on life in general. The contradicting styles of approaching the relationship became evident in Michelle's very different response to how the interview summaries struck her:

*The truth hurts, you know. When you talk and then see it on paper. It's actually quite difficult...*

Nevertheless, it seems that for both Michelle and JP, avoidance as a coping style is easier than confrontation. Becoming so involved with their financial difficulties, and their new life in Johannesburg, has allowed them to shift their focus from their relationship to the external demands present in their lives. Furthermore, the entire joint interview, revolved around their financial situation, rather than themselves, further illustrating their avoidance strategy. Michelle admits to this avoidant style within their relationship through the following words:



*If we were still in George still, it would probably have been very different. There, we had a lot more time on our hands and a lot more time to think and mope about it all. In Joburg, the pace is much faster, you are concentrating on your work environment and when we get home, we try and make the most of it.*

In conclusion, sweeping issues under the carpet seems to be blocking a certain amount of self-reflection and authentic communication. This is likely to impact on the couple's experience of intimacy in that when issues, such as their lack of sexual intimacy, are joked about and not confronted sincerely, feelings of insecurity and fear seem to seep into the marriage.

### **Blame and Guilt: Seeking Forgiveness and Acknowledgement**

This theme iterates the blame which seems to be a part of Michelle and JP's marriage. The blame leads to a cycle of guilt and seeking forgiveness on various levels. Furthermore, recognition and acknowledgement seem to be important aspects of this relationship.

It appears that Michelle feels guilty for not being as emotionally available to her husband as he is to her, while JP feels guilty for letting Michelle down by not meeting her expectations in terms of providing financially and not being there to support her in her times of need. This guilt appears to have been kept alive by blame on both sides. Furthermore, the blame seems to be more covert than overt, creating a context where guilt and self-blame can flourish in a world of assumption and that which is *not* said.

It seems that Michelle is seeking forgiveness from JP as a way to forgive herself and ease her self-blame for perhaps not living up to her own expectations of being a perfect wife. She seems to be seeking forgiveness in various ways such as being more willing to communicate and provide reassurance and

understanding to JP. This allows her to take on the role of a more supportive wife and it is by connecting with JP, that Michelle is able to forgive herself. In addition, Michelle appears to need acknowledgement from JP, that she is good enough as a wife, and that his perception of her is more forgiving than her own perception of herself. Predictably, JP gives Michelle this acknowledgement when he says:

*Michelle tends to shoot herself down. Very quickly. I think that is why she sees herself as selfish, and she sees it worse than what it is.*

For JP, not being able to provide for his family financially, has been a great source of guilt. The worry that their unstable financial situation generates within Michelle appears to have resulted in an escalation of guilt and self-blame within JP. Nevertheless, it is by taking on more responsibility financially through actively taking on a job that he seems to be seeking forgiveness and acknowledgement from Michelle. Furthermore, not only does he need to be acknowledged on a personal level, but also as the man of the house which traditionally implies taking control. Michelle's reassurance and support currently serves the function of affirming his role as a man.

In addition to the acknowledgement of each other on a personal level, there currently seems to be a need for the acknowledgement and recognition of the relationship as a whole. This affirmation made from both sides appears to serve the function of reducing the insecurities and anxieties which have filtered into the relationship and seems to have dissolved much of the blame. Michelle's description of their getting together illustrates the affirming style of communication which is currently characteristic of Michelle and JP's relationship:

**Michelle:** *When we first got together; those were simple times. But there was commitment. In December one year I said to JP "This is it. Either you want this to go somewhere or you don't." And JP then made a very big decision. And that showed me his commitment to our relationship. I have*

*got a gem.*

In conclusion, acknowledgement and forgiveness seem to be tools which have allowed the relationship to be taken to a deeper level of connection and understanding. Currently both Michelle and JP seem satisfied with their relationship and appreciate each other's support through this challenging time. Although unspoken issues may exist, Michelle and JP are nevertheless glad of the mutual support that the relationship provides, and although their situation is not viewed as ideal, they are both grateful for the connection and understanding.

### ***Summary of Themes in JP and Michelle's Relationship***

Michelle and JP's relationship can be characterised by paradox and double messages. There seems to be a push and pull element in the relationship which can be immobilising to both husband and wife. While Michelle communicates a need for more independence and responsibility from JP, his emerging independence is threatening to Michelle who then feels insecure within the relationship. JP appears to receive double messages from Michelle, and is caught between them. For example, he seems caught between wanting to be independent and successful in the workplace, but also being at home with the family for a lot of his time, and supporting his wife. The paradoxical communication that JP receives is therefore: be independent/self-reliant but do not be independent or self-reliant. Furthermore, in terms of emotional and sexual intimacy, Michelle seems to be communicating a need for love and connection versus a need for separateness and independence. The resulting paradox or double message to JP is: closeness and distance.

Both parties are expecting their partner to fulfill unmet needs in their relationship. While Michelle expects more from JP financially, he expects more from Michelle in terms of emotional and sexual intimacy. Although these needs do not seem to be explicitly communicated to each other, a general sense of unmet needs

appears to have fuelled feelings of guilt and blame on both sides of the relationship. It is possible that the cycle of guilt and blame has had a reciprocal impact on both partners and has resulted in a sense of inadequacy in each person's role. Contributing to this sense of inadequacy is possibly the reversal of traditional gender roles. This highlights a contradiction which seems to be present in the relationship: Where marriage is viewed extremely traditionally, yet the traditional gender roles within an intimate relationship are reversed. This appears to impact on the push and pull element in the relationship.

Despite the challenges in their relationship, both JP and Michelle, through their interaction, demonstrate that the relationship is important to them and neither of them want to lose it. Husband and wife desire to be closer to one another, yet display different perceptions of their relationship and different ways of approaching their relationship. During the joint interview, JP and Michelle seemed able to communicate their feelings of insecurity, and commitment and were able to reconcile towards the closeness they both wish for. By communicating their needs and confronting issues which have been previously swept under the carpet, JP and Michelle were able to close the gap in terms of their differences, and seemed able to find common ground on which to build their connection.

Michelle and JP also seemed to have made an effort to shift their avoidant communication style and become more direct with each other. This invited more open and authentic communication. Rather than being stuck between double messages, the couple were able to express their needs through direct communication and a sense of hope for the future emerged from the joint interview.

### ***My Reflections on my Participation***

JP and Michelle, were asked to provide written reflections of the research

process, once the individual and joint interviews had been completed, and were asked to email their reflections to me. The reflections however were never received, and when I followed up with the couple at a later stage, they explained that due to their busy lives, they had not been able to find the time to write their reflections and send them. I did not pursue the issue further. As a result, I am unable to include the couple's reflections of how they subjectively experienced the research process. Nevertheless, in the section below, I have provided my reflections of my participation with JP and Michelle during the research process.

I was looking for a married couple as participants to interview as a part of my exploration of intimate relationships and was very appreciative when a friend of mine's, business colleague volunteered to participate in my research; also enlisting the help of her husband. I knew nothing about their relationship, and was both apprehensive and excited to begin the interviews.

In the individual interviews with JP and Michelle, I did not prompt or lead the interview in any way, but mainly listened and reflected, asking questions for clarification, while attempting to discover the specific meanings behind what was being said. What strongly emerged for me was how JP and Michelle have very different perceptions of their marriage. They both tend to cope with hurt and loss using different strategies, and they both take control, yet in different ways. Nevertheless, a strong sense of commitment and dedication to each other was evident, and despite often not tackling the emotional issues, and the many paradoxes present in the relationship, the marriage seems to work.

After writing up the summaries, I was a little worried about conducting the joint interview, because of the seemingly large discrepancy in the way in which both parties viewed their relationship and partner. This became evident in the summaries. I was not sure how I could approach these discrepancies and felt the need to make it 'ok' for the couple. This resulted in me putting a lot of pressure on myself to take on a 'perfect' therapist role and reflects my own needs as an

emerging therapist as well as the needs within my own relationship with my partner.

On the day of the joint interview, it seemed as though we were all a bit anxious and this resulted in me taking on a very cautious interviewing style. This possibly maintained the initial avoidance of issues. As the interview progressed, we all relaxed somewhat and a space was created for the risking of more direct communication. I was particularly struck by Michelle's courageousness in communicating directly with her husband and confronting issues head on. Considering her previous description of herself as generally avoiding communication within the marriage, I felt that this process of direct communication was particularly meaningful to their relationship. Nevertheless, it seems that some issues were still avoided and as previously mentioned, it is perhaps this very quality which allows the marriage to survive and grow.

I found this last interview particularly challenging as I not only facilitated the conversation but attempted to intervene therapeutically by providing positive reframes and clarifying or reflecting ideas. I hoped to provide Michelle and JP with different perspectives on their relationship. I felt that this process was effective in that a strong sense of hope and connection seemed to emerge from the discussion.

From the interview, I gained the sense that JP and Michelle's relationship is characterised by cautiousness and a deep need to be connected. It seems that the interviews provided a space to not only acknowledge each other, but accept and appreciate each other's roles and strengths brought to the relationship. In addition, the double messages and contradictions in the relationship could be brought to surface. The impact of this was a feeling of relief and the insecurities and fears caught up in the double messages could be tabled. This allows for new ways to approach the relationship and each other, and more open and direct communication is achieved.

The interviews conducted with JP and Michelle remained very much with the here-and-now of their relationship and worked through their current difficulties, focusing particularly on their current financial struggles, rather than reminiscing about their interactions with each other. Nevertheless, the discussion allowed process to emerge, and highlighted the commitment to each other as well as to the well-being of the relationship as a whole.

### ***Conclusion***

There are several themes that occur consistently and persistently throughout the interaction between JP and Michelle: that of hurt and disappointments leading to avoidance and indirectness, control, a push and pull between independence and dependence, and insecurities resulting in a need for acknowledgement and expressed commitment. These themes seem prominent in both JP and Michelle's individual interviews, as well as in their combined interview.

Avoiding issues or the expression of emotions results in many underlying insecurities that remain unspoken in the relationship. This seems to create tension between JP and Michelle. While JP attempts to communicate openly and honestly, his rationalising and overly optimistic view on life seems to block openness and honesty, and leads to a distancing from or avoidance of any negativity in the relationship. Furthermore, owing to Michelle's difficult childhood experiences and lack of close relationship with her mother, she may have become afraid of close relationships which for her have been associated with hurt. She therefore appears to protect herself through emotional detachment and an avoidant interactional style and also tends to view life more negatively than JP.

The push and pull in the relationship highlights the contradictions and conflicting needs present in both parties. While Michelle needs independence and a sense

of control, she also needs her husband to take the lead so that she may depend on him and feel safe in the relationship. His independence is both encouraged and dreaded by Michelle. JP is caught up in a paradox where if he succeeds in his job *too much*, Michelle feels threatened by his independence and lack of neediness, yet if he succeeds *too little*, Michelle also feels threatened or vulnerable as a result of financial instability. Furthermore, if he does not fulfill the expectations placed on him as the man in the relationship, his manhood and sense of self is threatened and a cycle of blame and guilt ensues.

Both Michelle and JP feel insecure, yet are committed to the institution of marriage and to an open and close relationship. Continuing in their current interaction only seems to encourage separateness, rather than connectedness. It was from this point of view that the interview process was particularly helpful for JP and Michelle. The last interview seemed to have provided a space for them to confront each other directly and acknowledge each other's strengths and differences. Having a facilitator in the process enabled positive reframes of their interaction and relationship, as well as containment of emotions.

In general, the interviews appear to have created a space for risking direct and congruent communication. Both JP and Michelle also seem to have been perturbed in their perceptions of their interaction with each other as well as in how they have perceived themselves in relation to each other, as well as their relationship as a whole. Husband and wife may therefore have embarked on a journey of self-reflection that will allow them to be more aware of the impact of their interaction and their own processes on their relationship.



## **Chapter 5: My Perceptions of Chantal and Andy's Relationship**

### ***Introduction***

This chapter is based on the transcribed interviews conducted separately with Chantal, the female partner, and Andy, the male partner. As in the previous chapter, each participant's background will be sketched, followed by a description of the interview setting and my impressions. This will be followed by a discussion of the themes that emerged from each interview. The combined interview will subsequently be considered in terms of the themes emerging from it as well as the general themes to be perceived in this relationship. Chantal and Andy will each provide reflections on their experience throughout the research process. Finally, my reflections of my participation in the process will be included.

After the completion and transcription of the interviews with Michelle and JP individually, summaries of each of their interviews were compiled and given to both partners to read and as a point of discussion for their joint interview. These interview summaries are provided in Appendix 3 and Appendix 4.

The themes identified and discussed were arrived at as a result of in-depth analysis of the individual interviews and the single joint interview. My own lens coloured the way I interpreted Chantal and Andy's stories.

### ***Chantal, the Girlfriend***

#### **Background**

Chantal was born and raised up in Johannesburg. She lived in Johannesburg until finishing school, whereafter she then moved to Cape Town to study medicine. During the latter years of school and after, Chantal had been involved

in a five year relationship. She had just broken up with her boyfriend when she met Andy. Chantal met Andy during her fifth year of studying medicine. She was initially not at all interested in having another relationship, but very quickly, she and Andy became close. They have been together as a couple for four years now, and have lived together for two and a half years.

After finishing her studies, Chantal decided to apply to do her internship in Johannesburg. Andy readily agreed to come with her back to Johannesburg where they then bought their house together and moved in. Currently Chantal works as a general practitioner in private practice in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg.

### ***The Interview Setting and My Impressions***

The interview took place at Chantal and Andy's home in the early evening. I had never met the couple before, but had spoken to them a few times on the telephone and we decided that it would be easiest if I came to their home in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg to conduct interviews with both partners, separately.

Chantal arrived home from work a little before Andy, so we decided that Chantal would be interviewed first, to give Andy time to unwind from his day at work. Andy went upstairs to allow Chantal the space to talk in their living room. Their home is quiet and peaceful. It is relatively new and decorated in a modern and stylish way. It is also very tidy. After being offered something to drink, Chantal and I settled down on two couches and started to talk.

### ***Themes Emerging from Chantal's Interview***

The following themes were identified from Chantal's interview.

## Yearning for Individuation and Connection

This theme attempts to illustrate Chantal's need for independence, which has been necessary for her to connect to Andy. Chantal knows her own mind, which has served her well as a doctor and in mapping out her path forward. It has also been necessary in facilitating connection. In addition, however, her independence is linked to wanting to be in control and it is this aspect which seems to hinder her relationship. Chantal's independence and need for control has led to her pressurising Andy to get married – something which impacted negatively on the relationship. Furthermore, Chantal seems to want to take control indirectly through her “grouchiness”. By being grouchy, she is hoping to elicit a certain response from Andy, thereby maintaining a sense of control.

It appears that by being her own person, Chantal is able to connect, yet at the same time, this hinders connection. Even though Chantal emphasises her need for connection, it appears that she finds it easier to be independent than connected. The process of connection, separation and individuation is inextricably intertwined: For Chantal to feel connected, she needs to experience herself as differentiated, and to be able to connect she needs a clearly differentiated representation of her self.

Chantal's sense of individuation is manifest in the clear boundaries within the relationship as well as her assertiveness in relating to Andy. Her communication style is unapologetic, honest and direct and reflects a clear representation of herself, her needs and desires. Below is a brief extract of how Chantal describes herself in the relationship, highlighting her strong sense of an individuated self:

*...I am very organised. I am very much like: these are the lines, and these are how the lines are drawn...*

Chantal's approach to conflict within the relationship also demonstrates the importance that she places on independence and individuation. She explains:

*Even if we didn't agree, we agreed to disagree, and we understood the other's point of view.*

Chantal truly recognises both her and Andy as separate individuals and it seems that she has a strong need to see herself as different from Andy. She respects Andy's differences as well as her own, and although she makes certain compromises for him – such as socialising more than what she would normally do – she appreciates their differences in opinion and enjoys the “symbiotic” nature of their relationship. In describing their relationship as “symbiotic”, she is not only acknowledging the benefits that ‘being different’ bring to their relationship, but is also acknowledging her experience of being connected to Andy.

Chantal's independence seems to have developed in reaction to her mother's lack of independence. She has separated and distanced herself from her mother by not identifying with her mother's less independent ways. She wants to be different to her mother and wants a marriage that is different to her parents' marriage. The impact of her parents' less than ideal marriage has led to Chantal consciously distancing herself from her mother and forming her own ideals and perceptions, about marriage, independent from her experience of her parents' relationship:

*...I think I am a lot more strong headed than my Mom. If I ever got into the position that my Mom was, I would have said: I am not tolerating this, and I would have got out. But my Mom is such a softy – she would never do that...*

Chantal's style of approaching her own difficulties in life also highlights her independence and individuation. When explaining how she dealt with her

feelings of distrust in the initial stage of her relationship she describes how she relied on herself through self talk. The following extract demonstrates her reliance on herself:

*I actually had to sit myself down and say: 'listen Chantal, you actually need to wake up and realise you can't be like this'.*

Although Chantal has a strong sense of self, she also has a need for closeness. This need is highlighted by her pressurising Andy to get married and prove that he is utterly committed to her and their relationship. As a little girl, she always dreamed of getting married and explains how at this stage in her life, it is something she really wants. She talks about it being every girl's dream to get married, which demonstrates a belief, entrenched within our society that women desire commitment, perhaps more than men do. Such a belief is further emphasised when she describes the initial pressures of moving in together:

*Andy's friends were giving him lots of tension about moving in with me; telling him how that is just going to mean pressure and marriage – la, la, la – you know how guys can be!*

Chantal seems to attribute her desire for commitment and connection to being a woman. Her following comments emphasise her need for connection as well as her need to be recognised as being attached to a man:

*I want to show the world that I belong to somebody. And I want to get on with starting a family. I don't want to wait and suddenly be thirty, having to think about a family.*

Chantal's description of wanting to belong to somebody, hints at a need to be recognised by others as a woman, who is wanted by a man. However, it also possibly implies that she defines her relationship with Andy as complementary:

by wanting to belong to Andy, she assumes a one down position simultaneously placing Andy in a one-up position. By belonging to him as his partner, she seems to see him as being responsible for her as a woman. Such an implication is contradicted however, by her strong need for independence and control. Her explanation of the equality in their relationship in terms of financial contribution, demonstrates her need to feel independent rather than be dependent on Andy:

*When we first started going out, we split everything down the middle. It was very equal. Now it is whoever is first in taking out their card. He also gets paid earlier in the month than I do, so we'll use his card until I get paid, and then we switch to mine. It is not even thought about generally, and our money gets pooled together.*

Although in her description above, there is a sense of togetherness and team work, her independence has not been lost.

In terms of closeness, Chantal appears to manoeuvre for closeness both directly and indirectly. Her direct manoeuvres for closeness include actively organising time together. The following excerpt demonstrates this:

*Every now and then, we'll go through phases when it is a little bit slow, and we haven't been together much, or had sex for ages, or been romantic. And then one of us will generally say this is too much and we actually need to do something about it.*

Furthermore, Chantal describes how she and Andy celebrate their anniversary each month. This shows how for Chantal, it is important to continually re-establish connection. Chantal describes the reasons for celebrating their monthly anniversary:

*Once a month we are doing something for each other. Because you know, sometimes life takes over. And when you live apart, you make the effort, but when you are living together, you are always around and so you don't make much of an effort. And sometimes you have to make the effort to keep the romance going.*

While Chantal seems to proactively seek and maintain connection, she also manoeuvres for closeness in less direct ways, perhaps indicating a difficulty in connecting, which possibly comes from her parents' relationship. She talks about going through phases which she describes as being "grouchy." By being "grouchy" she is possibly positioning herself as less assertive and therefore more child-like in communicating her need for closeness. Chantal reflects on this and seems able to see that this more child-like and indirect manoeuvre is perhaps ineffective in the context of her relationship with Andy. Although Chantal acknowledges the ineffectiveness of her manoeuvres on one level, she does not change this behaviour, thus maintaining her distance rather than closeness in the relationship. She states:

*When I am in a foul mood, he sits back – he never gives me love and attention – if anything, he is like 'snap out of your mood!' And don't do that with me. I would love him to give me attention if I was grouchy. But he doesn't do that. Unfortunately.*

In conclusion, it seems that Chantal's independence has enabled her to be effective in many areas of her life - such as her being a successful doctor - yet has also been an obstacle to connecting with Andy. Thus, although Chantal's strong sense of selfhood and identity is necessary for connection, it also maintains her distance in the relationship. Nevertheless, a major part of being in this relationship involves her differentiation from Andy and recognising their similarities and differences. This allows both of them to grow as individuals in their own right, and not become enmeshed and over-involved with one another.

Thus the respect for both herself and Andy allows her to acknowledge themselves as separate from each other, but intimately connected at the same time.

### **From Difficulty Trusting to Openness**

This theme refers to Chantal's difficulty with trust which initially was a barrier to intimacy and over time, led to her becoming more open by sharing her feelings of distrust and insecurity with Andy.

A difficulty with trusting often develops from a past characterised by hurt. Chantal describes a past relationship where she was hurt and let down by her partner who repeatedly cheated on her. The distrust that surfaced from such an experience was then brought into her relationship with Andy.

Chantal's feelings of distrust toward men, coming from her previous relationship, served as a barrier to the beginnings of a relationship forming between Andy and Chantal. Her distrust became a way to protect herself against the hurt that she had experienced and associated with men. She recalls her feelings of resistance to intimacy with Andy, highlighting her initial difficulty to trust:

*When we met, I probably wasn't in a good place in my life. I had just come out of a five year relationship and I wasn't interested in boys. The boys I did meet, I just wanted to use and abuse. And then Andy and I met a couple of times through mutual friends we know – I didn't like him in the beginning, I thought he was an idiot... both times I met him, he was drunk, and he was in my personal space. He was over-friendly, and I was like 'stay away, leave me alone.' I didn't like him then at all.*



Chantal goes on to describe how her initial feelings of distrust continued to impact on the development of her and Andy's relationship:

*In the beginning, I didn't trust Andy as far as I could see him. But he knew where it came from, and most of the time he spoke me through it. I realised I have actually got to get over it. The more I grab on, the more I cling, the more he is going to pull away. By being over-protective, or over-jealous – or whatever the case may be, you actually push the other person away.*

Chantal's feelings of distrust as well as her reflections on these feelings, spurred Chantal to openly discuss them with her partner. This openness about her distrust seemed to be a catalyst to the development of openness and trust within her relationship with Andy. The paradox is that through the naming of the distrust, trust was actually enabled to emerge in the relationship. This is illustrated in the following comment:

*When the feelings did come up, I did speak to him about it. Then he'd sit me down and talk to me...*

The openness that Chantal has brought into the relationship is evident in the way she describes her style of interaction with Andy. The following extract demonstrates how Chantal is open and upfront, and does not attempt to hide behind empty reassurances. When she decided to relocate from Cape Town to Johannesburg to do her internship and Andy decided to move to Johannesburg with her. Her words of warning to Andy, one he had made this decision, embody her openness:

*I was coming back home, and Andy was moving to a brand new place. And a 'Capetonian' to Joburg isn't easy. I did warn him, and sat him down saying: 'listen, people are different. Joburg is not Cape Town. Life is much*

*faster. You might hate it, but you look like the type of person who would love it.'*

Not only does Chantal reframe his chances of liking the move to Johannesburg positively, but she also shows an appreciation of Andy's openness to change. Furthermore, she describes Andy's openness as always "keeping her in the loop." For example, when he goes out at night with his bachelor friends, he continually stays in contact with her, letting her know where he is, and what they are doing. It is this which has allowed her to let go of her distrust and embrace trust and openness within her relationship.

### **Control and the Determined Commitment to Ideals**

This theme attempts to highlight Chantal's need to feel in control as well as her determination and commitment to her ideals. For Chantal, being objective and making the 'correct' decisions that are in line with her ideals of how her life *should* be (considering her age), are important and serve as her way of controlling her environment. It appears that her sense of self is also often arrived at through objective reflections and rationalisations. In comparing herself to Andy, Chantal speaks of herself in the following objective and rational manner:

*...Well, I am very controlling, and I am very organised...Andy is very much a go-with-the-flow type of guy; I am more picky and choosy with my friends – I am not this huge socialite...*

Chantal's determination to stick to her life plan and remain in control contributes to her success and allows her to remain focused and be both assertive and demanding in meeting her needs and desires for their life together. She is ambitious and seems to have mapped her life through careful planning and controlling. She seems to have a clear vision of how she wants her future to be

and is loathe to allow anything to come in the way of her plan. When talking about her hopes and vision for their future she states:

*I hope we have nice kids and we earn good money. I hope we choose career paths that we love...*

*We both want to live nice and comfortable lives and we will do what is required to. We both want to send our kids to private schools and we need money to do that type of thing. Obviously it is nice to be rich, we are not going to get jobs where we earn next to nothing and we have to sacrifice our lifestyle. Because we like our lifestyle, and we don't want to give it up.*

From the excerpt above, it is interesting to note how although Chantal is independent and in control as a person, she thinks in terms of 'we' rather than 'I'. This implies a strong sense of connection and compromise. Nevertheless, Chantal's tendency to want to stick rigidly to her plans rather than trust the process, means that she often is inflexible and unwilling to compromise. Furthermore, this may negatively impact on her ability to cope with the unexpected in the context of her relationship as well as in life in general. Such inflexibility and unyielding pursuit of her goals, seems to contribute to her frustration in currently not being engaged to Andy. She seems to understand and know that pressurising Andy will not help, yet she continues to pressurise him. According to her plan, engagement *should* be on the cards, in order for the rest of her life to unfold in the way that she has imagined. The following excerpt serves as an example:

*We won't have kids without being married. We have both agreed on that. And we also have both agreed what age we want to have kids. We said we would like to have kids around 28. And that is why I get stressed. I mean kids do take nine months, weddings do take a year. And I feel like saying to Andy, okay, let's do the Maths.*

It seems that the getting married is the only area of the relationship Chantal cannot control, and this lack of being in control is experienced as extremely frustrating and immobilising. This appears to be a blind spot for Chantal in that the more she insists on marriage, the more Andy becomes obstinate and holds onto the one area of the relationship that he can control. For Chantal, lack of control is perceived as threatening which results in an escalation of her controlling behaviour:

*...I am pushy and he gets like really defensive. He feels he is still too young, and why must he feel he is being pushed into it and we live together so isn't that enough? Does that not show commitment – you know that type of thing.*

From the above extract it seems that Chantal's need for control in her relationship as well as being in control of keeping her life on track, has contributed to the impasse in the relationship. The more she manoeuvres for control, the more she is met with resistance, and the less control she has. Furthermore, her unwillingness to compromise results in helplessness and immobilization. Although she is able to acknowledge that her perspective is different to Andy's, she does not seem willing to understand and accept his views. She therefore feels quite stuck and weary about their interaction, since it appears as if nothing can change the situation. Chantal says:

*...Our fights these days seem to be about the same thing: getting married... that is what we fight about now. And at the moment, it is one of those topics that isn't really getting solved. It usually ends in us dropping it. We are never going to see the same side of the argument at the moment...*

Chantal appears determined to mould her life according to her ideals by careful planning, organising and controlling. Her ideals reflect her ambitions as a family

woman as well as a career woman, where she aims for perfection. While her determination to uphold these ideals allows her to be effective in these areas of her life, they may also result in frustration and immobilisation when her plans do not necessarily materialise in the way she had imagined. Thus, it appears that Chantal's need to be in control of her ideals are a large source of her frustration and feelings of immobilisation regarding not getting married.

### ***Andy, the Boyfriend***

#### **Background**

Andy is the oldest of two children. Together with his younger sister, he grew up in Cape Town and lived with his parents until the age of eighteen. After completing matric at Bishops high school, he moved into a house share with friends and studied a media degree at the University of Cape Town. He then decided to study further and completed a one year course at Red and Yellow, in Advertising. He had a number of intimate relationships during his years as a student, none of which were perceived by Andy as particularly serious, however. It was during his year of studying Advertising that he met Chantal who was completing her fifth year at medical school. Soon after meeting, and after Chantal had completed her degree in medicine, Andy readily agreed to join Chantal in moving to Johannesburg. It was the first time he was leaving Cape Town on a permanent basis and describes welcoming the change of scenery that moving to another city would bring. In Johannesburg, together with Chantal, he bought a house and the couple have been cohabiting ever since. Currently Andy owns his own business which specialises in Information Technology and Advertising.

### ***The Interview Setting and My Impressions***

The interview took place at Andy and Chantal's home early one evening. Chantal was interviewed first and while we were busy, Andy went upstairs to give us some privacy. Once Chantal's interview was over, he came down to the living room so that we could talk and Chantal went upstairs.

Andy appeared very relaxed and spread himself out on the couch of their living room during the entire discussion. He laughed easily and seemed eager and open to engage in conversation and share his perceptions of his relationship.

### ***Themes Emerging from Andy's Interview***

The following themes were identified from Andy's interview.

#### **Rebelling Against the System and Conforming**

This theme, *rebelling against the system versus conforming*, refers to Andy's tendency to want to 'go against the grain' or in other words, to not conform to the various systems within which his life is embedded. At the same time however, he appears to need acceptance within various systems in which he is entrenched. 'The systems' refer to the many contexts in Andy's life, which seem to elicit both a non-conforming and a conforming response from him.

Andy seems to react to his parental system in a non-conforming way, and seems determined to create a system or context for himself, which is very different from his parents' current context. Andy's determination not to be like them, almost defines Andy's style of interaction, which is characterised by stubbornness and confidence. He describes himself as being extremely social and therefore

opposite to his parents in every way. He reflects on how his home environment has impacted on his way of being:

*I want to go out and do things. Probably as a person I have got this strange – maybe it is the way I grew up – my folks had tons of friends and then they all left the country, and they never bothered to make new friends. So they have sat there for the last ten years, literally with their own parents as their best friends – and only one is left. So I suppose growing up in that kind of environment, (as an older teenager) I went completely the opposite way. I always try to surround myself with massive amounts of friends and connections and people that I know. It is extremely important to me and it is not important to Chantal.*

The extract above highlights the pressure that Andy feels to interact and surround himself with others – in other words, to be different from his parents by embracing a different life. Although Andy seems disapproving of his parents' ways, it is interesting that he has nevertheless, chosen to be with Chantal, who he describes in a very similar way as his parents. He talks about Chantal as being private and not needing to surround herself with people, which is remarkably similar to the description he provides of his parents. It seems therefore, that although Andy has reacted to his parents' social isolation, by being almost desperate to stay connected with people, he has chosen a partner which represents the very qualities of his parents. It appears that he has not entirely succeeded in creating a context so completely different to his parents', as the very system that he has rebelled against, by being outgoing and social, is reflected in his partner's qualities.

Another system which Andy appears to be rebelling against is marriage. Andy seems to feel that should he agree to getting married, he is agreeing to be a subservient man who has given in to the perceived dominance of his partner who has initiated the idea of marriage. Chantal is the cue who is initiating wanting to

get married, yet as a man, Andy feels that that is what *he* should do - in this way, being more traditional in his ideas. Therefore, Andy is putting up a fight against being forced into marriage, and although he regards himself as liberal and progressive in his outlook on life, he is also embracing more traditional ideas connected to marriage.

When talking about what is stopping him from giving in to getting married, he explains:

*Because I am being stubborn! I don't know, maybe it is because people of my generation grew up where – well I grew up where the man in the household had to make all the decisions and that is so antiquated. And I am completely not like that. I am very liberal. But when it comes to marriage, I still feel that it is the guy who should ask. I don't know why. I just do. I am probably being stubborn more than anything else.*

It seems that in this context, Andy's stubbornness is related to the traditional role of men. He does not want to propose under Chantal's pressure as this implies weakness – a quality not traditionally associated with a man. In addition, Andy feels that he will need to initiate the asking, which as previously mentioned reflects his ideal of the traditional man's role. The following extract highlights how although Andy describes himself as liberal and not concerned with ideals such as the man having to be the head of the house, his 'manly' role may be compromised should he give in to marriage now:

*...I am worried that once marriage is achieved and that goal is conquered, and I am a submissive man on the floor, then it'll be baby time!*

While Andy seems to be conforming to traditional ideals on one level, he is also conforming to more modern ideals on another level. For example, traditionally people tended to get married at an earlier age than the age that people tend to get married at today. Andy believes that he is too young to get married now,



which reflects his more modern life beliefs. The following comment illustrates his more modern belief system as well as his need to conform to his social system or peer group:

*...I still feel that these days 25 is too young to be getting married. I have to be at least 26! Because I am so young, it might affect the whole social group. People might look at me differently now because you know, 'Andy is married' ...*

It seems that Andy is caught between contradicting ideals in terms of marriage and is immobilised by these conflicts. His peer group and their acceptance are important in this stage of his life and he is not yet prepared to relinquish them. Nevertheless, he also agrees with Chantal's long-term vision of wanting to get married earlier rather than later, so that they can be young parents and still enjoy life once the children are out of the house. Although this vision may seem a good idea, in reality, it seems that Andy is not yet ready to give up his single life and commit to marriage.

To summarise this theme, it seems that Andy's obstinate response to Chantal's pressuring for marriage can be viewed in a number of ways. It seems that Andy is caught between his own conflicting ideas about marriage, and whether or not it is appropriate at this particular stage of their lives and relationship. In addition he seems to need to hold onto the one area of the relationship that, traditionally, men are in control of, and thereby maintain his sense of manhood. Furthermore, his not giving in to getting married yet can also be viewed as a counter-manoeuvre to Chantal's manoeuvres for control in this particular context. The impact of both parties wrestling for control, is an escalation of conflict, immobilisation and frustration.

### ***Respect, Acknowledgement and Veiled Criticism***

This theme refers to the strong sense of respect in Andy where he actively acknowledges Chantal – almost to the extent of being awed by her qualities, yet at the same time, he is also quite disparaging of Chantal. This however, is covered by his use of humour.

Andy speaks about Chantal in a very respectful way, which is particularly affirming and empowering, yet it also seems that in acknowledging Chantal he feels inferior to her and counter-acts this feeling of inferiority, by jokingly putting her down and simultaneously affirming himself. The following excerpt taken from Andy's description of Chantal highlights his tendency to put her down on the one hand, yet on the other hand, also acknowledge her:

*...Her kind of obsessive-compulsiveness really complements my ridiculous over-ambition.*

Nevertheless, the respect that Andy has for Chantal is clearly communicated by Andy and is demonstrated in the following excerpt:

*...She's got an aura about her. If you see her interact with our friends' group; they all treat her as a pedestal like organised person who is ten years ahead of them in everything.*

Andy describes Chantal as an 'enabler' in that her organisational skills allow things to happen. He therefore openly acknowledges her organising qualities and respects how these qualities also 'enable' or complement him. This can be seen in the following statement:

*She is so good at what she does. I mean, she will do something in ten minutes that would take a normal person four hours to do. She is*

*ridiculously good at admin. So I have no problem in backing off and letting her run the finances and do the budgets. That is her thing.*

The respect that Andy has for Chantal, allows him to acknowledge her as an individual, separate from him, and yet intimately connected at the same time. The sense of respect and individuality is evident in the following comment:

*...We can still be our people and yet be together. Hopefully we'll never lose that. If I had to become too much like her, it wouldn't work. I am always going to be more social, always want to go out with the boys and want to do exercise wherever I can. I am always going to leave the dishes out because I am just a messy person. Whereas Chantal is always going to be organised. She is an enabler. She can just get things done. Like I am at work.*

The above statements highlight how not only does Andy recognise how Chantal's qualities complement him, but it seems that in acknowledging those qualities which are so different to his, he is determined to maintain a sense of individuation, self acknowledgement and self respect. Although he appears to need to be seen by others, as well as himself, as an individual in his own right, he also seems to need to affirm his own self worth in relation to Chantal. The paradox is that he often does this by emphasising how many of his qualities (which he describes as emerging at work) are in fact similar to Chantal's. Thus, although he seems determined to emphasise the differences and maintain his sense of individuation, he also seems determined to highlight the 'sameness' between him and Chantal, serving the function of further maintaining his sense of individuation and self-worth.

The following statement illustrates how Andy openly respects and idealises Chantal, yet simultaneously devalues her strengths by implying that his organising and leadership abilities are just as good as hers. Therefore, Andy

almost implies that he is actually in control in that he consciously steps back and allows Chantal to take control in the home – perhaps because running the house is regarded as not as important as his role at work.

*...Because Chantal is so good at that type of stuff, she loves to take over. I have to perform that role every day at work so I am quite happy to let her run the house.*

Andy is ambitious and determined to succeed. His attitude is perhaps slightly arrogant in that he believes that he is more successful than most of his friends. His arrogance is diluted however, when he attributes his success to the fact that he is with a partner who is as ambitious as what he is. For Andy, it seems that Chantal's ambition and drive not only enable things to happen, but enable him to maintain his own ideals, ambitions and goals. Chantal's qualities thus enable him to acknowledge himself and maintain a sense of self worth. In addition, it seems that Andy needs to be viewed as successful by those around him, and it is important for him, that Chantal complements his successful image. The following extract highlights how being with Chantal adds value to his sense of self and self worth:

*I am extremely proud of her. That is why I shove her into the limelight constantly – which she doesn't like. Hugely proud of her. I mean, it's great to be dating a doctor! It is like a big status boost and an ego boost. And it's great to have a professional person around you all the time. And all our friends look up to her in awe.*

It is possible that while Chantal's image complements his own self image, the respect and acknowledgement that Chantal has earned from others, as well as from Andy himself, means that he feels that he has to fight to maintain his selfhood. This seems to contribute to him refusing to be pressured into marriage.

In summary, it seems that Andy has a need to define the relationship as complementary, by maintaining a one-up position. Although there are times when his huge admiration and awe for Chantal appear to result in him feeling inferior, he covers his sense of inadequacy through veiled criticisms of Chantal. This is achieved through the use of humour and serves the function of putting Chantal down, and maintaining his sense of being in a one-up position.

### **Fear of the Mundane and Boredom**

This theme attempts to highlight Andy's fears which he connects to marriage. It is possible that his definition of marriage or long term commitment includes ideas of boredom and imprisonment. In addition, for Andy, the stability of marriage may be associated with a mundane way of life, and a loss of excitement. It seems that these ideas impact on Andy by igniting feelings of fear which then immobilise Andy in terms of making a commitment to marriage.

Andy's fears associated with the commitment of marriage are highlighted in the importance he places on light-hearted banter in his relationship with Chantal. He explains:

*If you don't have banter, you know relationships would be quite boring. There was an advert I once saw – two old people sitting at the table, and all they could say was 'pass the peas, pass the salt...' That is terrible! If you have nothing to talk about and you can't make jokes – well to be able to make jokes and have friendly banter, is extremely important.*

In addition to the teasing and banter that protect Andy from his fears of the mundane associated with commitment, Andy needs always to be planning for something different from the routine of everyday life. For example, working on projects can be viewed as his way of protecting himself from boredom. The

following comments illustrate Andy's seeking novelty or change as a reaction to his fear of boredom:

*You know, once the marriage goal is conquered, now what is there to tease on? I suppose projects are important. Like our overseas trip now. She's organised most of it because she likes to organise, but you know we had to save for it, get organised, sort out friends to stay with – it's going to be great. So ja, we need things like that: like the house was a project, and coming to Joburg was a project.*

Andy's openness to change – possibly a reaction to a fear of boredom - is demonstrated in Andy's story of moving to Johannesburg. Although he was born and brought up in Cape Town, when Chantal wanted to move to Johannesburg, Andy was open to the change. In addition, he has not committed to settling in Johannesburg permanently, illustrating his need for novelty and aversion to settling down. He explains:

*...Being with her was a hundred percent better than not. I thought I was a person who would have kicked and screamed about staying in Cape Town. I was born in Cape Town, raised in Cape Town. But ya, I was like 'fine, let's go to Joburg!' I don't think I kicked and screamed once. Maybe once, but that was partly more in jest. But maybe I also needed a change and it kept the relationship interesting. Still part of me, in a year or two – once I have achieved what I want to achieve, I still think about upping and going somewhere else.*

While Andy's fears of boredom may be an obstacle to his decision to get married, these fears also mobilize him to maintain an active and creative role in the relationship. He tends to initiate many romantic and fun activities for both he and Chantal and is always seeking new ways to keep the relationship exciting. His fears of marriage, which seem connected to his fears of boredom and the

mundane can be viewed in a positive light in that they result in efforts to keep the relationship alive and stimulating.

### ***The Coming Together of Chantal and Andy***

#### **Introduction**

It was easy to arrange an interview with both Chantal and Andy as when I phoned Chantal to make the arrangements, she was very obliging and seemed motivated to continue the process. After providing Chantal and Andy with a summary of each other's interviews, a combined interview was conducted to discuss the summaries and their relationship together. The main goals in this last interview were to clarify and confirm the summaries of the individual interviews, to correct misinterpretations or misunderstandings in the individual summaries, and for Andy and Michelle to create their own narrative of their relationship together.

#### ***The Interview Setting and My Impressions***

This last interview took place at Andy and Chantal's home. We agreed to start the interview in the early evening, once Chantal and Andy were back from work. We sat in the same lounge, where we had done the individual interviews a few weeks earlier.

Andy and Chantal were in very high spirits. They had recently become engaged and had just got back from a holiday overseas. Not only were they excited about becoming engaged, but also about the individual summaries that they had read earlier in the week. They described feeling affirmed that they seemed to have had very similar perceptions of their relationship and of each other. The interview began in a relaxed manner, and both Andy and Chantal spoke rapidly, often

completing each other's sentences, and laughing and teasing each other frequently.

### ***Themes in Andy and Chantal's Relationship***

The following themes were identified in the joint interview with Andy and Chantal:

#### **Actively Respecting and Undermining**

This theme refers to the strong sense of respect in the relationship where each party is actively acknowledged and recognised for their strengths and individual differences which are brought to the relationship. As a result, the relationship becomes characterised by a sense of equality, which is particularly affirming and empowering. However, although active respect and acknowledgment is a consistent theme in the relationship, there is also an element of undermining from both parties which may serve to hamper further growth in the relationship in the future.

Throughout the interview, a strong feeling of respect between Andy and Chantal was evident. Their respect is shown in their acceptance of each other's differences and uniqueness, which allows both Chantal and Andy to acknowledge each other as individuals, as separate from each other, but intimately connected at the same time.

Nevertheless, it seems that while Andy openly acknowledges and respects Chantal, he also undermines her by persistently criticising her through the use of humour. For example, during the joint interview, he jokingly referred to her as "anally obsessive" on a number of occasions. Chantal does not seem to become offended or defensive, but seems to respond to Andy in a self-assured and sometimes self-righteous style. The impact of this seems to be undermining to Andy as Chantal's self-assured style of interaction, means that she takes on



more of a mother role, both in their social relationships as well as in relation to Andy. It is possible that Andy feels trapped in a child-like role and this may be frustrating as he feels he has to fight for equal respect and acknowledgement. The following interaction demonstrates this:

**Lindsey:** *What was it like for you (to Chantal), reading in Andy's interview summary about how all his friends are so in awe of you?*

**Andy:** *Ja, did you know that (to Chantal)? You probably did, you arrogant thing! (He laughs jokingly)*

**Chantal:** *That's horrible. (She laughs). I do know that they look up to me. Sometimes I don't want to be that person...but other times, I enjoy being mommy. I enjoy having the sense of responsibility that nobody else has, being on a pedestal sometimes...*

When Chantal was asked whether Andy respected her in a similar manner to his friends, the following interaction occurred:

**Chantal:** *I think Andy does respect me. I think for lack of a better word – he does have a bit of awe about what I do.*

**Andy:** *For lack of a better word! Awe is a very strong word! Pride or even fascination is better than 'awe'.*

The above interaction is a sample of one of the cycles or patterns of interaction, characteristic of Andy and Chantal's relationship: Andy undermines Chantal through humour, Chantal does not respond to this directly, but maintains a sense of self-righteousness and self-assuredness, which in turn undermines Andy who then feels compelled to undermine Chantal further, as a way to maintain his sense of self. Although the cycle continues and is maintained in the relationship,

it is not in the forefront of the relationship and the sense of true respect and acknowledgement from both parties still remains clearly evident.

While the relationship is characterised by complementarities such as their different interests, different approaches to life, and different ways of relating, it seems that it is these very differences, which maintain the energy and excitement in the relationship. Their enjoyment and acceptance of each other's differences is evident in the following extract:

***Chantal:*** *I must say, one of the things that I really love about Andy, is that he is not a doctor and he doesn't know about medicine. If he was a doctor, life would become very boring...*

Nevertheless, although Andy is not a doctor, and so cannot necessarily talk 'medicine', the couple is able to engage on an intellectual level and debate social or other issues as equal partners with similar values. One such value that they share is to make a difference in the world. This is evident when the couple describes their plan to start a 'blog' (an online diary) as a way of commenting on the medical industry. To do this, they both pool their individual strengths and interests which enable them to work together towards making a difference in society:

***Andy:*** *We are starting a 'blog' – it's a huge fad at the moment. I can write really well, and Chantal has got the cool stories. It is going to be some kind of diary or expose on the medical industry.*

As the couple discuss their views of the current issues within the medical fraternity, their general working together as well as Andy's respect and acknowledgement of Chantal becomes clear through his description of her profession:

***Andy:** They (doctors) can't go on strike like the rest of the country because then people die. And it is just that. No mincing words. They die. So it's a hell of an industry. And also I think there is so much room for improvement from a technological point of view in the medical industry...*

In light of the fact that Andy is technologically inclined, the above excerpt demonstrates how Andy enters Chantal's world of medicine, but nevertheless, incorporates his own interests, experience and perspectives. Although each partner may share aspects of the other's world, each party maintains their own distinct identity.

Andy and Chantal therefore appear to truly recognise and see each other as individuals in themselves. Although they undermine each other at times, possibly as a defence against feeling threatened by the other, and as a way to maintain their sense of individuality, neither seems enmeshed with the other. Clear but intimate boundaries are maintained and it is possible that this may contribute to the stable and close relationship.

### **Working through Conflict leading to Changing Patterns of Communication**

This theme attempts to illustrate the pattern of conflict as well as the couple's effort in trying to negotiate an interaction style that is acceptable to both, as a way to work through their conflict.

As mentioned in Chantal's individual interview, her style of relating when angry is to be expressive and almost explosive. This overt style of communication is very difficult for Andy to relate or respond to, as he seems to feel uncomfortable with such open acknowledgement of negative emotion. Therefore he tends to minimise Chantal's feelings by defining her anger as immature, and denying its importance or significance. Chantal is almost forced to respond by minimising her

own feelings and finding other ways to deal with her emotions, which impose less on Andy.

**Chantal:** *I am so angry and so frustrated and all I want to do is vent. And the way for me to vent is to raise my voice and bash a wall – just release anger. And it is not that he doesn't allow me to do it. But it has become a thing that I mustn't do it, because it is irrational or immature or whatever. So I maintain it, and maintain it to a point where I am going to explode. And thinking about it, because I am a rational person, I think when I am angry, I decide not to throw the anger out, but rather to walk away. And I walk away.*

Walking away from the situation is also difficult for Andy, and the reasons for this were tabled during the interview:

**Lindsey:** *Andy, is Chantal's walking away something you can respect, as a way of compromising for you, or do you struggle with it?*

**Andy:** *To a point. But let's put the shoe on the other foot. The next time there is a massive fight, then I walk out – let's see how she feels. I mean, you don't know where the person has gone...it's not cool...*

Although Andy expects Chantal to understand what it is like for him in his shoes, he does not seem to attempt to put himself in Chantal's shoes and understand her way of coping and dealing with anger. He responds to her style of coping or her expressiveness of emotions with a condescending attitude and disapproval. As previously mentioned, it is possible that Andy finds such an open expression of negative emotions threatening, and so his attempts to minimise her emotions are a way of protecting himself through avoidance of emotions.

Nevertheless, it appears that as the joint discussion continued, a space was created for open and direct communication where both parties could reflect on their own typical pattern of interaction during conflict and the impact that it has on the other. Rather than minimising emotions, Andy was able to acknowledge and show more understanding of Chantal's style of coping with conflict. In addition, an understanding from both parties toward the other became apparent and it seems that new possibilities of interaction began to emerge. The process of self reflection and the considering of different possibilities is illustrated by Andy's following words:

***Lindsey:*** *How would you prefer for Chantal to deal with it?*

***Andy:*** *Well, we don't fight that much – Maybe she should slam doors and then go sit in the car and not drive it. The thing I am more worried about is that she has an accident or something, and she always forgets her phone. Not knowing where she is – well, I find it stressful. But I have no better suggestion so maybe it is a bit unfair to criticise...*

To summarise this theme, both Andy and Chantal desire to be understood and accepted by one another. This theme attempts to illustrate their effort in trying to change both their styles of coping with Chantal's anger which seems to result in conflict between the two of them. Their efforts are demonstrated by their reflecting on themselves, being more explicit in their communication and negotiating an interaction style that is acceptable to both. Chantal's concern about the impact of expressing her emotions means that she tends to minimise them, possibly because of an underlying premise that she will be rejected and disconfirmed otherwise. Andy, following Chantal's pattern, also minimises Chantal's feelings by disapproving and undermining their importance. At the same time, Andy seems similarly afraid of expressing his emotions, and showing his own vulnerability. Nevertheless, during the interview, both partners seem to negotiate a different communication style and more open and rational

communication in terms of handling conflict. This was achieved by Chantal and Andy communicating to each other the impact of the other's respective styles of interaction and clarifying reasons for the impact.

### **Openness vs. Closedness**

It has been noticed that the relationship between Andy and Chantal is characterised by polarities in terms of openness and closedness. Both also demonstrate preconceptions about what the other can or cannot tolerate or accept in terms of openness. It appears that for Chantal openness is about sharing everything - from the most mundane to the more personal and emotional issues – as a way to achieve understanding of the other. This allows Chantal to be open about her emotions and weaknesses and be comfortable with exposing them. For Chantal, openness is therefore the bedrock of intimate relationships and this seems to be the philosophy by which she lives by in terms of her intimate relationship:

***Chantal:** ...when you are headed into a long-term relationship, openness is a huge part of it. Even the most stupidest mundane thought. If Andy can hear my thoughts sometimes, and see the way my brain is thinking, as mundane as things sometimes are – it is a way for him to understand me...*

In certain situations, Andy finds it difficult to tolerate such openness from Chantal and at the same time does not express his emotions as openly and honestly as she does. In addition, when talking about openness, only Chantal's position is discussed, whereas Andy's position in terms of openness is not even commented on. The excerpt below demonstrates this:

***Andy:** ...but it has taken a long time (to achieve understanding) though. Because all of her thoughts – like the first half of our relationship were*

*about trust issues and those 'niggly' girl issues – and then I didn't want to hear them and we'd have a fight. So it's taken a while to get that stability and understanding...*

Andy seems to desire a relationship that will allow him to grow and be independent, yet also feel acknowledged and accepted. It seems that Andy is confused about what he wants from his relationship: while he appears to desire independence and perhaps more privacy and boundaries than Chantal, he is also caught in the conflict of wanting to please Chantal by showing her understanding and openness. His discomfort with openness about emotions means that he tends to play down his feelings by employing a playful and humorous style of communication. As previously mentioned, the impact of this is not only an avoidance of his emotions but also a minimising of Chantal's feelings.

Nevertheless, although Andy seems to struggle with confronting his own emotions as well as Chantal's emotional expressiveness, it appears that he is open to listening to Chantal. This allows him to take on a supportive and understanding role in relation to Chantal. In the following excerpt, Chantal touches on an aspect of her family life which she finds difficult, and it is clear from this discussion that Chantal perceives Andy as being open and supportive towards her:

*...There are things with my sister – which I am not going to go into at all – that I know is stupid the way I let it hurt me – yet I can't stop myself. ...and every now and then, I will cry and talk to Andy about my sister. And it is stupid I should never let it get to me like this.*

Chantal does not seem to perceive Andy as 'closed' and it therefore does not seem to get in the way of the couple openly confronting conflict or other issues. Chantal's openness appears to dominate the relationship, endowing it with flexibility. Furthermore, it has been integral to the couple's ability to reflect on

their relationship patterns and ongoing negotiation and shifting of patterns. Open communication therefore gives the relationship a dynamic and constantly shifting nature as well as a strong sense of mutual support.

### **Pride and Vulnerability**

This theme links to the discussion in the previous themes. It highlights the need to conceal one's feelings and vulnerabilities as a way to maintain a sense of pride and self-affirmation. The theme attempts to illustrate how one's external presentation of control, strength and independence can often prevent one from acknowledging a more vulnerable side to oneself and an unwillingness to recognise one's weaknesses. The focus of this theme tends to be more on Andy's vulnerability than Chantal's, whereas in previous themes, such as 'working through conflict, leading to changing patterns of communication', the focus tends to be more on Chantal's style of coping with anger. As discussed in previous themes, her open expression of anger seems to have generated vulnerability within the relationship as Andy is threatened by this, leading him to undermine Chantal's emotions.

Within this relationship, vulnerability tends to be countered by using strategies to deny weaknesses or feelings of helplessness. These strategies include humour, intellectualisation, and emphasising one's own philosophy regarding how a person or life should be. It seems therefore, that these strategies are employed to maintain a one-up position in the relationship as well as a façade of independence and success.

From the individual interviews, it seemed that Chantal felt extremely vulnerable that Andy had not yet proposed to her. It appeared that this impacted on her pride, and although she was open about this, she tended to conceal her vulnerabilities by generalising and intellectualising how intimate relationships



*should* be, and hypothesising about when marriage is appropriate within a long-term relationship.

During the joint interview, given that it took place after recently becoming engaged, it was very noticeable how Chantal felt more affirmed in her relationship, now that she was officially getting married to Andy. Her vulnerabilities were no longer as exposed. This contrasted to Andy, who attempted to conceal his more vulnerable feelings throughout the joint interview. The joint interview actually began with Andy hinting at possible feelings of hurt after having read the summary of Chantal's interview and then concealing this hurt by confronting Chantal in a joking and mock-incensed manner. He does this by describing his reaction to parts of the summary as "taking exception" and yet simultaneously denies this by framing his "taking exception" as a joke. This served the function of minimising the potential moment of intensity and confrontation of Andy's feelings during the interview.

In addition to concealing his feelings, Andy also seems to feel embarrassed by showing his true feelings of admiration and awe to Chantal and seems to need to maintain a one-up or equal position in relation to her. It is possible that although Andy is proud of Chantal being a doctor, he also feels secretly inadequate to her. He therefore seems to have the need to maintain his pride through means such as giving double messages which convey respect, but at the same time negate his compliments, subtly putting Chantal down. This leads to a contradicting style of communication. In the extract below, Andy's contradictions and double messages are highlighted:

*The other thing that was a bit over done (in the individual summaries) – which I know I said, but didn't mean as strongly as this – is the whole 'awe' thing: you know, about my friends being in awe of Chantal. I think awe is a bit strong - and it was my word, so I am not blaming you (the researcher) ...so although I know I said this, that is way, way over-exaggerated.*

Andy then further negates his compliment in terms of people being in awe of Chantal, by going on to explain how his flamboyant style of communication perhaps resulted in him exaggerating what he really meant. Then he contradicts himself again by admitting that in fact, he wasn't exaggerating but points out that if he were in her shoes, he would find this admiration which he speaks of, annoying. This results in minimising his compliment and also protects his one-up or equal status in the relationship:

*...But they (the friends) do still put her on a pedestal. I mean you can see it. It would piss me off if I was you (to Chantal) – but they look at her almost as a mother figure...*

It appears that while Andy admires Chantal, he also competes with her by often jokingly pointing out her weaknesses, while at same time, highlighting his own strengths and abilities. He often gives Chantal lectures as to how she should respond to others or behave in certain situations. This allows Andy to prove himself in relation to her. Chantal on the other hand appears to have a strong sense of self in that she acknowledges her weaknesses and often jokes with Andy about them. For example, during the interview, Chantal laughs and joins in the discussion about how “ridiculously unfit” she is! She does not seem to need to highlight her strengths, although she is aware of them. In addition, she openly admires Andy, and appears unashamed of her vulnerabilities.

Andy's position of awe implies a one down position, and although this is not openly acknowledged, Chantal seems aware on one level of Andy's sense of vulnerability in openly acknowledging this position of awe and respect. During the joint interview, Chantal protects Andy from the discomfort he experienced in discussing “awe” in relation to Chantal by shifting the focus from her, to the field of medicine. In this way, Chantal, like Andy, has minimised the intensity in the interview, as the focus is shifted away from Andy's true feelings, toward a more intellectual discussion of the field of medicine.

### ***Summary of Themes in Andy and Chantal's Relationship***

Andy and Chantal's relationship seems characterised by connection and closeness as well as a strong sense of individuation and independence. The couple interact respectfully and playfully, in a way that upholds each other's individuality. However, although the couple connect through playfulness, it seems that humour and banter are also employed to disguise criticism of the other party. Criticising the other, yet hiding behind humour, seems to serve the function of covering feelings of vulnerability or inadequacy, avoiding intensity and the emergence of authentic or more negative feelings and emotions.

Andy's avoidance of openly expressing himself in situations of conflict as well as his minimising of Chantal's emotions, feeds into his avoidance of showing his vulnerable feelings and emotions, perhaps as a way to maintain his sense of selfhood and security. Chantal's outbursts of emotion during conflict allow her to express herself, and like Andy, maintain her sense of selfhood and security.

The openness of the couple was necessary in the interview context for both Chantal and Andy to explore their disagreements and impact of their interaction styles on each other. As the interview progressed they were able to reflect on themselves, be more explicit in their communication and negotiate an interaction style (specifically in the context of conflict) that is acceptable to both.

Both Chantal and Andy manoeuvre for control in the relationship and are determined to remain in control of their own ambitions and life plan. However, they both acknowledge the contribution of the other in terms of their own success. This links to the affirming of roles which emerges as a strong theme in the relationship. Affirming each other's roles, leads to an acceptance of differences between both parties as well as a taking of responsibility for oneself and one's impact and contributions to the relationship. In the joint interview, Andy

and Chantal were provided with the space to enter into a new arena of understanding and connection with one another.

### ***Andy and Chantal's Reflections***

As previously mentioned, the other participating couple, JP and Michelle, were asked to provide written reflections of the research process, once all three interviews had been completed. The reflections however were not received, and when I followed up with the couple at a later stage, they explained that due to their busy lives, they had not been able to find the time to write their reflections and send them to me. As Chantal and Andy were interviewed after Michelle and JP, I had learnt from this experience with JP and Michelle and consequently asked Chantal and Andy to reflect on the process of their participation in the research process during the joint interview. I chose not to burden them with the task of taking more time out of their busy careers to provide written reflections. Below is an extract from an interaction during the joint interview, which provides a reflection on the impact of the research process on the couple:

**Lindsey:** So how has the process been for you both? The interviews, the summary and then this joint interview?

**Andy:** Well, I totally enjoyed it. I really did.

**Chantal:** I think it was great. And a nice couple exercise. We said very similar things and it was really nice to see that we did. We were on the same page. Some of the things I read were so funny – I laughed out loud! It was just so true! But you can tell from my interview that I was getting quite down about not being engaged – very frustrated

**Andy:** I am sure this is like couple's therapy but it is couched in friendly research.

**Lindsey:** Does it feel like therapy for you?

**Andy:** No but it feels like the kind of warm 'fuzzy' feeling you get from it. But you don't have to feel embarrassed because you went to therapy.

**Chantal:** It sort of like feels like everything is out on the table in one go and it is very nice to see them and confront them.

**Andy:** It would have been nice if an issue had come up to see how we both reacted. But our interviews were so similar, there was no issue.

**Lindsey:** Has the process influenced your relationship in any way?

**Andy:** Well, Chantal got very touchy feely after reading my summary. But seriously, our relationship hasn't changed as such, but it endorsed the engagement decision for me.

**Chantal:** And after our interviews, Andy was much more 'lovey'. After you left we shared some of the things we had told you, and after this, Andy became a lot more – well it felt like to me, he became more secure knowing we were on the same page. It almost felt like he had some reassurance, and he was feeling better about it.

**Andy:** I think you know you are on the same page, but sometimes it is nice to be told it. You knew it all the time, but the best way to describe this, is that it just reinforced it for me.

### ***My Reflections on My Participation***

I was looking for an unmarried yet cohabiting couple to interview for my research study. A colleague of mine from Unisa suggested friends of hers to participate in my study. She thought that this particular couple could be ideal candidates for my

research study as she described them as being very open and articulate. After being given their phone number, I contacted the couple at their home one evening and discussed my research with them before asking if they would be interested in being participants in my research. The couple agreed to take part in the interviews and so the necessary arrangements were made to start the process. As I had never met this couple, I was anxious to meet them, but also looked forward to being able to start the interviews from a place of not knowing.

Once the process began with the individual interviews, conversation flowed easily. It soon became clear that many similarities in terms of perceptions of each other and core beliefs surfaced, which were then reconfirmed in the last combined interview. As Andy and Chantal themselves noted, there were not many discrepancies or disagreements in how they viewed themselves as well as each other. Even Andy's concern over the possible misinterpretation of his intended meanings were simply accepted good-naturedly by Chantal.

During both the individual interviews, as well as the joint interviews, I did not need to prompt nor lead the interviews very much, but mainly listened and reflected, asked questions for clarification, and summarised ideas, while attempting to discover the specific meanings behind what was being said.

After writing up the summaries, I looked forward to the joint interview with the couple because of the many similarities between what each party had separately expressed. Furthermore, during the time that had lapsed between the individual and joint interviews, the couple had become engaged. This exciting news, made the anticipation of the joint interview even more positive.

On the evening of the joint interview, the mood between the couple was noticeably elevated and the excitement was almost tangible. This allowed me to take on a less active role in facilitating the interview and gave me the opportunity to observe the interaction between Andy and Chantal together. Although the

conversation flowed easily, I nevertheless attempted to intervene therapeutically by providing positive reframes and clarifying or reflecting ideas. I hoped to provide Chantal and Andy with different perspectives on their relationship. I felt that this process was effective in that the couple seemed to reflect on themselves a great deal during this interview, and it was noticeable how the couple negotiated different patterns of communication that would perhaps be more effective within their relationship.

From the interview, I gained the sense that Andy and Chantal's relationship is characterised by respect as well as a deep need for affirmation and a concealment of one's vulnerabilities. It seems that the interviews provided a space to affirm each other and also confront these vulnerable feelings. In addition, the double messages and contradictions in the relationship could be brought to the surface. The impact of this was a feeling of relief and the insecurities and fears caught up in the double messages could be tabled. This allows for new ways to approach the relationship and each other, and more open and direct communication is achieved.

The interviews conducted with Andy and Chantal involved a lot of reflection and reminiscing about their interactions with each other. The discussion allowed a lot of process to emerge, and highlighted the commitment to each other as well as to the well-being of the relationship as a whole.

One of my personal challenges, while reflecting on Andy and Chantal's relationship, and creating themes that would capture the wholeness of the relationship, was my identification with Chantal. I found it easy to connect to her and relate many of her experiences to my own. My situation is also very similar to Chantal's in that I am of a similar age, am currently cohabiting with my partner, and like Chantal expressed in her individual interview, would also like to get married. I could therefore understand Chantal's frustrations around this particular topic. The result of my identification with her led me to often having a blind spot when considering Chantal's contribution to and impact on the relationship. This

made it difficult for me to attempt to capture Chantal's themes with the same 'objectivity' as Andy's.

### ***Conclusion***

Incorporating the themes discussed in this chapter are themes of independence, connection, control, vulnerability, avoidance, and the interplay between traditional and modern gender roles. What struck me about Andy and Chantal's individual interviews were the similar perceptions of themselves. They both seemed to have very clear understandings of themselves as individuals as well as each other within their relationship. Thus, a strong sense of individuation and differentiation was evident, as well as a respect for each other's differences.

In Chantal's interview, vulnerability was evident. Her vulnerability was more openly expressed than Andy's and seemed connected to her feelings of helplessness and sense of being out of control in being able to move the relationship forward in terms of getting married. Feeling helpless makes Chantal feel vulnerable, and contributing to this, is the perceived lack of affirmation from Andy in his refusing to ask her to marry him.

In Andy's interview, a strong theme of vulnerability also emerged, which was disguised by his use of humour in both criticising Chantal as well as avoiding openly expressing his more vulnerable feelings and emotions. By using humour, he seems to minimise both his and Chantal's feelings as a way to avoid confronting weaknesses and preserving his sense of pride.

The theme of control is prevalent in Andy and Chantal's relationship and can be viewed in terms of their individual needs in combination with each other, as well as in terms of traditional gender roles. It seems that Chantal's almost urgent need to marry Andy is not only about needing to be in control, but is also about her identity as a woman. Desiring closeness and connection is traditionally associated with women, and as a woman, not only does Chantal desire



commitment and connection, but also wants to start a family, which she feels she can only do once she is married. Her lack of control in being able to get Andy to ask her to marry him is connected to Andy's traditional views on marriage. He believes that as a man, it is his role and responsibility to initiate the asking. By not giving in to her pleas, he seems to maintain control of the one area of the relationship which is associated with his manhood. Consequently, when he eventually did ask Chantal to marry him, he ensured that this was done on his terms, again maintaining his sense of manhood, as well as a sense of control.

It appears that both Chantal and Andy value their relationship, and view it positively. They enjoy having a close and intimate connection and both actively ensure that the closeness and novelty of their relationship is maintained. However, avoiding conflict and the open expression of emotions tended to be encouraged by Andy, and has led to sweeping issues under the carpet and the creation of tension between Andy and Chantal. This tension appears to be released in ways such as Andy undermining Chantal and Chantal having to repress her emotions and then privately "explode". Nevertheless, the couple's openness during the interviews allowed them to reflect on their current interactional processes and unspoken issues so that they began to reach a compromise and understanding. In the past, it seemed that Andy struggled to acknowledge and confront difficulties and negativity in the relationship, and tended to minimise emotions or patronise and blame Chantal for her ways of handling herself in conflict. During the joint interview, Andy was willing to acknowledge the impact of his criticisms of Chantal's emotional expressiveness on the relationship. This resulted in both him and Chantal being able to take responsibility for their influences on each other. A shift from an apparent 'stuckness' in resentment and blaming, to self-reflections and a negotiation of other possibilities or ways of relating, was enabled.

Even though some challenges exist in Chantal and Andy's relationship, they both embrace each other's differences and show a willingness to commit completely

to each other. While they actively ensure that their connection is maintained and is able to grow even stronger, they have also not lost their sense of autonomy and individuation in their connection. Thus, a separate but interdependent relationship characterised by clear but connected boundaries, and a future filled with potential and possibilities, exists for Chantal and Andy.

## **Chapter 6: Comparative Analysis**

### ***Introduction***

This chapter will offer a comparative analysis between the common themes identified in the interviews of the two couples, and the literature on intimate heterosexual relationships. The themes identified in this study share similarities with, but also differ from, findings in previous research. It must be emphasised that these themes are not considered static, but merely capture a moment in time. This is consistent with the view in this study, that intimate relationships are always shifting and evolving, and are not static entities. The inclusion of the literature is not for the purpose of validating the themes, but to include the many voices on the topic.

The following themes emerged in the interviews of the two couples, and seemed to characterise their intimate relationships:

- How the Past Shapes Meaning in the Present
- Independence and Connection
- Power and Control: Masking Vulnerabilities
- Making One Dance out of Two
- Strategies to bring closeness and distance

### ***Themes Characteristic of the Relationship***

The themes listed above, will be discussed in the following section, and will be related to the relevant literature. The themes were dominant throughout the participants' interviews, in the narratives of their relationship, and in my observations and analysis of their interaction. They characterise both intimate relationships studied – a married couple and a cohabiting couple.

## How the Past Shapes Meaning in the Present

It seems that for all four individuals interviewed the past impacts on the meaning which is given to the present. All participants linked their pasts in some way, to their behaviour within their current relationship and the meanings that they attach to intimacy. Simpson, Tran and Haydon (2007) concur with this finding by stating that the way in which individuals think, feel, and behave in romantic relationships is governed not only by factors in their immediate surroundings, but is also a direct result of their past relationships and personal experiences which extend back to childhood.

It appears that each person's contribution to and understanding of their intimate relationship in this study, reflects their own history or story. As both relationships are strongly influenced by each partner's past experiences, the past provides the couples with a context in which to make meaning or make sense of that which happens between them. This is consistent with the social constructionist perspective, which states that people construct their personal reality largely from their culture and family. Furthermore, Piaget, cited in Carr (1988) stated that children construct reality from perceptions created through the process of socialisation. Thus, one's self concept develops in this process, and the meanings and realities that we create are products of our past communications and relations with others in our family and broader socio-cultural environment.

**JP and Michelle's** relationship seems strongly influenced by both Michelle and JP's past. Michelle's childhood, which was characterised by a lack of love and a sense of security, seems to have impacted on her sense of self in that she regards herself as 'unlovable' in others' eyes. The distant and rejecting relationship she experienced with her mother continues to play a particularly significant role in Michelle's life. For example, in terms of her relationship with JP, it appears that closeness or intimacy in general is associated with feelings of hurt that she experienced in the intimate mother-child relationship. In addition, she

does not feel worthy of the love that JP gives her, and often feels unable to reciprocate the love and warmth that he provides. According to Erikson's first stage of personality development the basic psychosocial attitude to be learned is whether or not you can trust the world (Engler, 1995). Michelle's lack of a sense of security as a child, appears to have impacted on this stage of her development in that she learnt that she could not necessarily trust the world around her. In addition, her past experiences appear to have contributed to the difficulty she experiences in feeling worthy of love and reciprocating love. This links to Erikson's argument that if infants receive unreliable, inadequate or rejecting care, they will perceive their world as indifferent or hostile and they will develop a high degree of mistrust (Dacey, cited in Wrightsman, 1994). Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory is also relevant here and although it does not necessarily take the social and cultural context of intimacy into account, research within this domain has been useful in extending possibilities with which to understand intimate relationships such as those presented in this study. Michelle describes insecure and distant attachment relationships as a child as well as a difficulty receiving and reciprocating love in her current intimate relationship. This finding is in line with attachment theories which maintain that adult romantic relationships can be related back to a person's attachment during earlier social development (Simpson et al., 2007). Punctuating from this perspective, the way one interacts in early life will reflect the way one interacts with a romantic lover in later life (Cardillo, 2007). Research findings suggest that individuals with an insecure attachment style tend to use fewer relationship maintaining behaviours, such as talking about problems, and are less likely to seek support from their mate (Farrell & Bush, cited in Barelds, 2005). Therefore, Michelle's insecure childhood attachment relationships may have contributed to the difficulties she describes with giving and receiving love in her relationship with JP.

It appears that while the past has negatively impacted on Michelle in the context of her relationship with JP, it has also served a function, in that it has allowed Michelle to relinquish her responsibility to give emotionally to the relationship.

Paradoxically, while Michelle perceives herself as being independent and in control, she seems to perceive the effects of the past as something she has no control over, and becomes the victim. Perhaps both JP and Michelle use her past as a way to reason and make sense of the lack of intimacy that Michelle often provides, protecting both partners from facing the many influencing factors on the lack of intimacy in the here and now. The hurt which Michelle experienced in her past therefore continues to play a role in JP and Michelle's present, and the impact of the past can create an obstacle to their intimacy. Nevertheless, from a systemic or cybernetic perspective, we see people and events in the context of mutual interaction and mutual influence (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). From this perspective, Michelle's past attachment relationships and experiences are not necessarily an inevitable determinant of her marital outcome. This is because, intimacy emerges out of a unique interaction and is characteristic of a system, which influences and is being influenced by its components (Chelune, Robison & Kommor, cited in Derlega, 1984). This means that JP's and Michelle's relationship emerges and shifts over time and Michelle's role in the relationship does not remain static as a result of her past.

JP's past has involved a more loving and secure home than Michelle's. In a study by Hazan and Shaver (1987) it was found that securely attached people reported more positive relationships with their partners than did avoidant or ambivalent participants. This is consistent with JP's positive perceptions of his relationship with Michelle. It seems that his conservative and stable upbringing and close relationships with his parents have engendered a more positive and trusting attitude to life than Michelle. In addition, he is more open to providing emotionally and does not appear as threatened as Michelle by intimacy and closeness. This finding concurs with a study on attachment styles being associated with meanings given to love, where it was found that the more securely attached respondents experienced love as happy, friendly and trusting, whereas for the more anxious/ambivalently attached respondents, love involved obsession, jealousy and emotional extremes (Carnelley & Bullman, cited in Huyck, 2003).

JP's more conservative and traditional upbringing has also contributed to the emergence of a more traditional perspective on gender roles. This contradicts some of the current literature which states that today, a shared, egalitarian relationship in marriage is the stated goal of most people (Berscheid & Peplau, cited in Fletcher, 2002). Like most people today, JP overtly states that his relationship with Michelle is equal, nevertheless it seems, that he takes pride in maintaining his position as the man of the house. Traditionally, this implies that he is considered an authority in the relationship and family, and should be the main breadwinner, while Michelle should take on the role of home-maker (Carr, 1988).

Michelle and JP's relationship is characterised by both traditional gender roles as well as more modern roles. Michelle tends to be the breadwinner, rather than home-maker, and JP's role seems to be connected to a more stereotypically female role, in that he shows qualities of compassion and caring – qualities often associated with women. Although it appears that Michelle and JP's relationship is more modern in that traditional gender roles do not seem to be adhered to, many difficulties arise, as the couple are not able to break free from the gender roles and expectations created by our society. This corresponds with the observation by Murphy et al. (2005) that men and women are currently experiencing much confusion related to their identity. For example, many women are often in equally demanding jobs as men and yet are still expected by society, by their partners, or even themselves as women to perform traditionally feminine roles in the home, such as cooking, cleaning, or caring for the children. Furthermore, many men may feel inadequate when their partners are earning equal or higher salaries because their traditionally male role of being the provider or breadwinner has been usurped. In Michelle and JP's relationship, it seems that much guilt and blame has been generated in the relationship as a result of both parties blaming the other for not fulfilling their expectations as a man or a woman. Michelle has been blamed for not being home as much as a wife and mother *should*, and JP has been blamed for not providing financially, as a man *should*, the result of

which is an escalation of guilt and insecurity in the relationship. The relationship between JP and Michelle is therefore not as free from gender stereotypes as it appears. This is evident in JP's need to maintain his sense of manhood, in that although he acknowledges that he is not the breadwinner, he still considers himself as the 'man' of the house, thereby possessing authority and control.

In terms of the past influencing the present, it was noticeable how it was not only JP and Michelle's individual pasts which have impacted on their relationship as a whole, but also the past that JP and Michelle have experienced together as a couple, which has impacted on their relationship at present. This became particularly apparent in the joint interview, after some time had lapsed between the individual interviews, when a slightly different picture of the relationship emerged. It seemed that the responsibilities associated with JP and Michelle's phases of life – particularly their financial pressures and responsibilities as parents, have contributed to certain shifts in the relationship. For example, JP and Michelle seem to be working together more as a team than they have previously, and are both contributing and supporting each other in ways that they have not necessarily done in the past. This will be discussed further at a later stage in this chapter.

**Andy and Chantal**, like JP and Michelle also make meaning of their relationship in the present by referring to the past. For Chantal, her upbringing and exposure to her parents' marriage has meant that she has consciously chosen to take on a different role to her mother in the context of an intimate relationship. This means that she has chosen not to follow her mother's lack of independence and subservience to her husband. Chantal wants to be different from her mother and have a different marriage from that of her parents. Thus, her past exposure to her parents' relationship seems to have resulted in a strong reaction and determination to be independent and maintain a strong sense of self. Linking this to Bandura's idea of counter-imitation (Mischel, cited in Maddi, 2006), Chantal



has chosen not to follow or imitate her mother's example because she perceived it as unrewarding.

In addition to her exposure to her parents' marriage, Chantal's previous heterosexual relationship impacted on the development of intimacy between her and Andy. As a result of the hurt and betrayal experienced within her previous relationship, Chantal found it difficult to trust or even be open to wanting a relationship with Andy at first. This correlates with the view that relationships formed during various stages of life serve as a prototype for interactions in later stages (Cardillo, 2007). For this reason, there exists a continuum of relationships throughout a life-time that shape and mould specific relationship behaviours.

Andy's past has also had a significant effect on his relationship with Chantal. Like Chantal, he too has a strong sense of autonomy and has reacted against his parents by attempting to lead a very different life to theirs. Andy is disapproving of his parents' socially isolated life and so places importance on not being like his parents and leading a more social life. This need to be around others impacts on his relationship with Chantal in that he may be less available to her, yet it also adds to the relationship in that it provides external stimulation and keeps the relationship alive.

Andy's upbringing is also described as more traditional than modern in that many traditional ideals have been ingrained in him from his family. Although Andy, like JP aspires to a shared and equal relationship with Chantal, he does however, demonstrate a traditional perspective on some aspects of their relationship, such as insisting on initiating the proposal to get married. However, Andy and Chantal's relationship appears free from traditional marital gender roles, in that Andy and Chantal describe their relationship as equal and in addition, are cohabiting before getting married – an arrangement which makes them less traditional as a couple than Michelle and JP, who got married so that they could live together.

In terms of cohabitation before marriage, more and more people, such as Chantal and Andy appear to be experimenting with alternative lifestyles – ‘alternative’ that is, to traditional marriage. According to Brown (2000), there are many possible reasons why people choose to cohabit: for some, cohabitation is a prelude to marriage, for some, an alternative to it, and for others, simply an alternative to living alone. More broadly, the rise of cohabitation in Western society can be attributed to the sexual revolution which has revoked the stigma against cohabitation (Brown, 2000). Premarital sex has become widely accepted, and cohabitation is no longer associated with sin (Brown, 2000). This is evident in Andy and Chantal’s relationship, where the couple do not perceive any stigma being attached to them, and are completely comfortable with the living arrangement and opinions of others around them.

Another reason for the rise in cohabitation is that the institution of marriage has changed, leading to an erosion of confidence in its stability. Aware of the new fragility of marriage, people are taking cautionary actions, and the attitude is to try a relationship out first, to make sure it will work (Brown, 2000). This point is evident in Andy and Chantal’s perception of their cohabiting arrangement as not being an alternative to marriage, but rather a trial period in which to confirm their compatibility.

Chantal’s insistence on marriage with Andy suggests that although she is a modern and successful woman, contributing equally financially, she still has a more traditional perspective on marriage. Therefore, Chantal and Andy’s relationship highlights how although cohabitation is a move away from a traditional way of life, it is debatable whether these roles have really given way to ‘unisex’ roles in heterosexual relationships. Even though Andy describes himself as liberal, and not being concerned with matters such as being the head of the house, he was nevertheless resistant to Chantal’s initiations to get married, possibly because of his need to maintain a sense of manhood in the relationship. As a man, Andy feels that that initiating marriage is what *he* should do. In this

way, Andy is more traditional than liberal in his ideas connected to marriage. He does not want to propose under Chantal's pressure as perhaps this implies weakness – a quality not traditionally associated with a man. In addition, Andy feels that he will need to initiate the asking, which as previously mentioned reflects his ideal of the traditional man's role. Chantal's very traditional expectations of Andy further entrench Andy's need to hold onto his sense of manhood. Her need to belong to somebody within a relationship links to her need to be asked for her hand in marriage. In this way the couple are very traditional, which contradicts the other less traditional aspects of their relationship.

It appears that both JP and Michelle, and Chantal and Andy's relationships have been moulded and shaped over time. Time therefore, is central to intimate relationships in that the past unites with the present and future, contributing to the emerging shape of the relationship. Our past experiences also exist in the context of a broader socio-cultural history, and the unique combination of each partners' unique history, reciprocally influences the here and now.

One of the contributions that history makes to intimate relationships is evident in the traditional gender views and roles which are maintained in certain areas of both of the relationships studied. Andy and Chantal cohabiting before marriage, implies a move away from tradition and history. In fact, cohabitation is often associated with the rise of feminism (Etaugh & Bridges, 2004). Traditional marriage typically involved male leadership and for some women, cohabitation may avoid the legacy of patriarchy and at the same time provide more personal autonomy and equality in the relationship (Brown, 2000). Nevertheless, traditional roles and expectations are still maintained within Andy and Chantal's relationship.

In both couples it was the men in particular, who seemed to have the need to live up to the roles which tradition dictates. Although both men aspire to a shared and equal relationship with their partners - an aspiration characteristic of more

modern times - they nevertheless demonstrate very traditional perspectives, in that they seem to need to maintain their sense of manhood in the context of their relationship. This highlights the strong influence of one of the dominating discourses in our Western culture that men need to be associated with control and authority. The social constructionist viewpoint – that gender is most likely a myth of historical context, constructed and constituted by a series of motives and objectives by the dominant power structures of each successive historical time period – is thus demonstrated in both couples' relationships (Murphy et al., 2005).

As both couples studied are young and exist in an era where intimate relationships are supposedly equal, and yet they adhere to many traditional gender stereotypes, I question whether relationships in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are really as equal as many people like to think? Furthermore, perhaps challenging gender roles and aspiring to so called equality, merely maintains distance between men and women, and further entrenches the notion of inequality in heterosexual relationships. Murphy et al. (2005) argue that in the past and even in the present, we tend to view difference in terms of inequality. For the future, we should hope for a move toward celebrating difference in the relationship between men and women, rather than viewing the differences in terms of inequality.

To summarise, from both the relevant literature as well as the findings from the two couples interviewed in this study, it is clear that intimate, romantic relationships are largely shaped by past experiences and relationships. This notion is highlighted by Erikson's stages of development, Bandura's ideas of imitation and counter-imitation, by attachment theories suggesting that adult intimate relationships are related back to a person's attachment during earlier social development, by social constructionist theories and by the impact of traditional gender stereotypes which continue to exert an influence on intimate relationships today. Nevertheless, an encouraging finding in a study conducted by Simpson et al. (2007) suggests that the past does not unalterably determine

the future course of later intimate relationships. Individuals therefore need not be the victims of their past, and although influenced significantly by history, they have the capability to be their own narrators of their future, and develop and sustain the relationships that they desire. According to Huyck (2003), this may mean that individuals need to revise their internal working models of attachment by exploring the assumptions that they are making about closeness and intimacy, testing these assumptions against these current realities of their relationship, and working to modify their own behaviours and interpretations so that they can experience more positive interactions. In this study, it seems that JP and Michelle in particular, were able to explore their assumptions that they were making about intimacy and over time, have worked to modify their own behaviours and interpretations. The research process seems to have enabled the couple to develop and experience more positive interactions than in the initial stages of the research. This may be due to the longer duration of the relationship than for Andy and Chantal. It seems that it is the duration of the relationship, rather than the marriage itself, which has allowed for the perturbation to be integrated into the couple system. Perhaps this study achieved one of its greatest challenges - to intervene therapeutically, in a way which may have led to more positive, empowering interactions and meanings within the intimate relationships while also honouring the cultural, historical, and personal traditions of each individual.

### **Independence and Connection**

Both couples seemed to express a strong need to be separated from, yet connected to their partners; to be independent and individuated, and yet interdependent and connected. This process seems to be crucial for the intimate relationship and impacts significantly on both partners as well as on the relationship itself. The negotiation of independence and connection also appears to be a continuous process that is dynamic and constantly evolving.

As discussed in the previous theme, many people in Western society aspire to be equal partners. This desire reflects a regard for individuality – maintaining one’s own strong identity within a close relationship (Sager & Hunt, 1979). Carr (1988) proposes that to experience intimate relationships, understanding the fundamental nature of the self is essential. This is in line with Satir’s (cited in Brothers, 1991) view that autonomy is necessary for integration, but it is not possible to be an autonomous human being who does not need other people. The existence of genuine autonomy is therefore inextricably interwoven with intimate relationships. Such a notion is echoed in Gilligan’s (cited in Hsu, 2005, p.16) words, which speak about the paradoxical truth of our human existence:

*We know ourselves as separate only insofar as we live in connection with others, and that we experience relationship only insofar as we differentiate other from self.*

Erikson maintained that intimacy in the context of heterosexual relationships cannot be achieved unless one’s identity has been developed. Traditionally in Western societies, to possess a healthy and mature identity means to achieve autonomy and become self-sufficient, unique, integrated and complete (Cross & Gore, cited in Hsu, 2005). Therefore, for Erikson, intimacy emerges from the successful resolution of individuation. Erikson defines intimacy as “ability to fuse your identity with someone else’s without the fear that you are going to lose something of yourself” (Erikson, cited in Wrightsman, 1994, p. 66).

For the couples in this study, it appeared that healthy individuation and independence was necessary for meaningful connection and in turn, that intimate connection facilitated successful separation. Both couples in this study seemed to exhibit balances between individuation-separation and connection in their relationships.

**Michelle** and **JP** seemed to be connected on one level, yet also separate on another. Connected by vows and friendship, they are also separated by differences such as gender, expectations of the other, guilt and blame. The differences however, do not necessarily need to be viewed as negative and do not always facilitate distance. Differences also allow for closeness and connection. Michelle is fiercely independent of JP in many areas of the relationship, such as financially, yet she is also dependent on JP for emotional support and affirmation. While JP may be more dependent on Michelle financially he is at the same time not helpless and it appears that his more positive sense of self allows him to be independent yet connected to Michelle at the same time.

Michelle and JP have different ways of approaching life and their relationship, and although their different styles of being have often been difficult for each partner, and hindered connection, their relationship seems to work by each partner bringing their strengths which compensate for the other's weaknesses. Such a description of JP and Michelle's marriage corresponds to Kovacs' (1983) view, which conceptualises marriage as a shared and complementary process with acceptance of differences and concern about the growth and development of each spouse as a couple as well as individuals in the marital relationship.

It appears that Michelle does not have a strong or positive sense of self and this comes in the way of being connected to JP. This is consistent with research on personality characteristics and intimate relationships which has found that with regard to marital quality, personality characteristics such as low self-esteem and neuroticism, affect the quality of intimate relationships negatively (Karney & Bradbury, cited in Cutrona, 1994). Although Michelle presents herself as strong and independent, her negative sense of self means that she is insecure and uncomfortable with her individual identity. For Michelle, interdependence is threatening as being dependent on another opens herself up to the familiarity of hurt. Her independence is therefore a part of her self-protection against the possibility of hurt and rejection. By disconnecting, Michelle may be hoping to

affirm her own identity and sense of self worth. She has possibly not achieved emotional independence and as a result, experiences herself as a victim: helpless and afraid. She relies on a false front to hide her feelings of fear and inadequacy and this inhibits Michelle from connecting with JP on a genuine and intimate level.

JP and Michelle have managed to maintain their connection, despite their challenges, differences, and their often denial of issues. Their relationship is important enough for them to keep it alive, regardless of the frustrations. It seems that over time, the commitment and connection has grown. It is possible that the relationship has allowed for a corrective emotional experience in that for both JP and Michelle, the development of healthy independence and a more positive sense of self have grown out of their commitment, contributing to a stronger connection between both parties. Such a statement, implying a shift in one's sense of self or identity, contradicts a more traditional view of identity, which regards the self as relatively coherent and consistent across time and context, and is bounded and autonomous (Cushman, cited in Hsu, 2005). However, as general thinking has shifted, more emphasis is given to the context in which human behaviour takes place, including focusing on how identities are embedded in cultural and societal discourses (Artus, cited in Hsu, 2005). Gergen (cited in Hsu, 2005, p. 3) offers a definition of identity which takes context and time into account:

*One's identity is continually emergent, reformed, and redirected as one moves through the sea of ever-changing relationships.*

This study demonstrates such a shift in the conceptualisation of identity in that even as adults, both JP and Michelle seem to be shaping their identities, which in turn, impacts on the emerging relationship which is continually developing and shifting over time. According to Cardillo (2007), adults are continually confronted with the challenge of moulding an adult identity and relationships provide the



context for this. Such a notion is further highlighted when Schnarch (cited in Cardillo, 2007) proposes that intimacy involves the willingness to confront oneself about one's own issues and self-disclose to one's partner, without expecting validation or reciprocity from the other. This implies that while validation from one's partner may be useful, it can actually hinder self-development if one relies solely on one's partner, rather than on oneself, for validation.

**Chantal** and **Andy** seem at first to be more individuated and connected than JP and Michelle. Both partners appear more content with their own individuality, and describe a relationship that is supportive and interdependent. Nevertheless, Chantal and Andy are not as far along in their road together, as Michelle and JP. By not being married yet, not having children, and not having the same financial pressures, they have not had the same responsibilities and obstacles to encounter. Although they are supportive of one another, they are in fact more able to follow their own paths at this stage in their lives. It is possible therefore that Andy and Chantal's relationship is characterised more by individuation than connection as a result of the particular phase of life that they currently find themselves in.

Chantal is dependent on Andy for emotional support, but is also quite independent of him in terms of her career and her interests. On an intellectual level, Chantal is able to take personal responsibility within the relationship and acknowledge both her negative and positive contributions. She appears quite comfortable with her sense of self, which allows her to relate to Andy respectfully, thereby facilitating connection. In addition, however, her independence is linked to wanting to be in control and it is this aspect which seems to hinder the connection. Perhaps, Chantal uses control as a defence to protect herself from the aggravation of being controlled. It is possible that this may have developed from childhood experiences with controlling or authoritarian parents. Nevertheless, for Chantal to feel connected, she needs to experience herself as

in control and differentiated, and to be able to connect she needs a clearly differentiated representation of her self.

Andy also seems to strive to be different and separate from Chantal. He seems determined to maintain a sense of independence and self-acknowledgement and appears to need to be seen by others, as well as himself, as an individual in his own right. This leads to a tendency in Andy to inflate his self worth. It is possible that he uses the defence of exhibiting greatness to protect himself from the pain of feeling diminished in relation to Chantal. He is determined to emphasise the differences and maintain his sense of individuation, possibly because he is threatened by Chantal's strong sense of self.

Nevertheless, Andy and Chantal seem to relate to one another without over-identification, and appear comfortable with their individual identities. While, their independence enables connection, it can also disrupt their connection, in that for both parties, independence is often linked to wanting to take control. The relationship is therefore characterised by a certain struggle for power. It is for this reason, that the next theme pertaining to power and control will now be discussed.

### **Power and Control: Masking Vulnerability**

Power issues are very important in intimate relationships, especially when imbalances in power exist. It is useful to study the imbalances of power to have a greater understanding of intimate relationships (Sharp & Stitzinger, 2007). In the two couples of this study, both partners take control. It appears that power is mostly utilised in the relationships to mask individual vulnerability. Being in control means that each partner achieves a sense of independence and a positive sense of self. Taking control not only conceals one's vulnerabilities, but can also communicate the message: *I am as good as you are*, thereby maintaining one's self-esteem as well as an equal distribution of power in the

relationship. In a study conducted by Harvey, Beckman, Browner and Sherman (cited in Sharp & Stitzinger, 2007) power was described by the couples who were interviewed, as control over one's partner and having decision making ability. Both males and females agreed on this definition, but most described their relationships as egalitarian, claiming that in a true loving relationship, power should not exist. This is consistent with the finding from this study, that although it appears that each partner takes control in their specific way, they all described equal relationships, and did not specifically refer to imbalances in power.

In **Michelle** and **JP's** relationship, control and power tend to be communicated through paradox and double messages creating an element of push and pull. Michelle takes control as a form of self-protection and while she wants control, she also wants JP to take the lead - as a man traditionally does. However, when he does take the lead, by being more independent and less dependent on Michelle, she feels threatened and her need for control as a form of self-protection becomes stronger. Thus Michelle's need for control can be viewed as masking feelings of insecurity and inadequacy. The paradox described links to Elkaim's (1990) model of double binds; two persons, part of the same system, ask for something that they are not prepared to accept as possible. Applying this model to Michelle and JP's relationship highlights the following interaction pattern: Michelle wants her husband to love her, but at the same time, she fears that love is always followed by abandonment or hurt. On the verbal level she will be saying to JP: "Love me," but on the non-verbal level she will be saying: "Don't love me." Whatever JP does to satisfy the demands will be unsatisfactory because it addresses only one level of the double bind (Elkaim, 1990). Like Michelle, JP also provides incongruent messages. On one level, he will communicate to Michelle that he wants to communicate openly and honestly, yet on another level he communicates that it is perhaps safer to sweep the negativities under the carpet, rather than confront them openly and honestly. According to Elkaim (1990) the double bind is reciprocal and each of the members becomes caught in a parallel paradox and neither can satisfy the

other's demands. For JP and Michelle, this pattern has not necessarily continued or got worse, but seems to have lessened. This shift in the relationship is consistent with the notion that historical factors do not automatically lead to current behaviours and one person's behaviour will only continue or get worse if it serves a function within the larger systemic context (Elkaim, 1990). Paradoxical communication may have served a function in the relationship and may have helped each partner to avoid the risk and pain of change, but with time, the couple's system has given way to new ways of communicating and more flexible ways of being.

In the individual interviews, Michelle seemed to exercise power more overtly than JP. While she attributed blame to JP, JP tended to soften complaints and minimise their importance. Michelle's power is maintained in a number of ways: by leading financially, by not reciprocating JP's affection equally, by dictating the terms of their sexual intimacy and blaming her past. By not reciprocating JP's affection equally, Michelle may be communicating to JP on a non-verbal level that she does not care about the relationship as much as JP does. It is this non-verbal communication which gives her enormous power in the relationship. This is consistent with the principle of least interest, which maintains that the person who cares less about maintaining the relationship has power over the person who seems to care more (Waller & Hill, cited in Sprecher & Feilmlee, 1997). This principle is supported by a study by Sprecher and Feilmlee (1997), which demonstrated how the person who was less emotionally involved had more power. Michelle's power is further fuelled by her blaming her past for her not being able to provide equally in terms of love and emotion. By blaming the past, Michelle is exonerated from taking responsibility to change as she has no control over the experiences she was subjected to as a child.

JP and Michelle have very different perceptions of their relationship. This is consistent with many findings which have suggested that although two partners experience the same events and interact over long periods of time, they can build

and retain remarkably incongruent constructions of their relationship (Acitelli & Young, cited in Fletcher, 1996). While JP's perceptions are almost too positive, Michelle's perceptions tend to be too negative. Their different attitudes and approaches to their relationship seem to maintain a subjective sense of control on both sides. Michelle's more negative and distrusting attitude means that she does not allow herself to be too comfortable, and she takes control as a way to protect herself. JP's more positive attitude conceals his fears and vulnerabilities and means that he often avoids the more negative aspects of the relationship which allows him to maintain a sense of control. This links to Stambor's (2006) notion that optimists feel that they receive greater support from their partners than non-optimists and they also tend to perceive their relationships more positively. It is the focus on the positive which seems to give JP a sense of control in the relationship. JP also takes control in more direct ways however. On the one hand, he seems to hand over power and responsibility to Michelle by allowing her to be the main breadwinner and allowing her to dictate the terms in connection with their sexual intimacy. On the other hand, he maintains his control and power by holding on to his sense of manhood and therefore authority in the family, taking the lead in terms of communication, rationalising and positively reframing the more negative aspects of the relationship. JP's power is further enhanced by his and Michelle's unique combination: Michelle's fears of intimacy stemming from the past, endow JP with power over Michelle as she perceives him as being capable of withdrawing his love and rejecting her in the future. This could force her to have to lobby for closeness. Although JP does not seem aware of this possibility or this power that he has, Michelle is aware of his position and this seems to result in her insecurities and feeling of being one-down to JP.

Guilt and blame tend to be a large part of Michelle and JP's relationship, and are closely linked to the issue of control and vulnerability. Both partners seem to experience considerable guilt in attributing blame to their partner, but also induce guilt in their partner. For example, Michelle can induce guilt in JP by blaming him for not contributing sufficiently in terms of finances. It appears that JP tends to

take control of the blaming game in the relationship by placing a lot of the blame on himself. However, he also possibly has the power to induce guilt in Michelle, by not communicating his feelings of hurt and rejection, but rather sweeping them under the carpet. While this may conceal JP's vulnerabilities, it serves to highlight Michelle's who feels guilty and afraid that by not giving back to JP emotionally, she will ultimately lose him.

As previously discussed, with time, and the challenges that the couple have had to face, it appears that a more equal distribution of power has developed. The couple seem to have developed similar approaches to their relationship and each partner seems more equal in what they contribute, allowing them to be more supportive of one another. Although they may not be completely secure with each other, they acknowledge that although they may continue to encounter difficulties, they have learnt and continue to learn to approach life's challenges as a team. This links to Cardillo's (2007) idea that adulthood is not a time for complete security in one's intimate relationship. Throughout life there are plenty of ups and downs, and even adults must learn how to deal with new people and new situations in their lives, while still keeping track of the old ones (Cardillo, 2007).

In **Chantal** and **Andy's** relationship control switches between both partners and seems to serve the function of concealing both partners' vulnerabilities. The relationship is characterised by alternating power, where at times there is an equal distribution of power, and at other times, one partner is more in charge while the other tends to obey. From a systemic perspective, such a pattern of interaction and control is described as a parallel relationship (Kovacs, 1983). Chantal seems more assertive than Andy, yet during the joint interview, Andy's power and control became apparent when he jokingly, yet aggressively consistently put Chantal down. It seemed that Chantal and Andy constantly engaged in a power struggle, with both parties refusing to take on a subordinate position and yet at times, one party having to do so. Their strong sense of selves

and independence suggests that both Andy and Chantal are struggling for individual understanding and acknowledgement.

For Chantal, a lack of control in general, is perceived as threatening and is immobilising. She maintains control in her relationship through various direct ways such as by being independent, organised and mapping out her goals or life plan, as well as less direct ways, such as being “grouchy” to get her own way. Chantal’s more indirect manoeuvres for power are consistent with findings from a study by Johnson, (cited in Sprecher & Felmlee, 1997) which showed that women tend to be more likely to use indirect strategies such as pouting. Chantal’s power in the relationship comes largely from her status as a doctor, earning respect from Andy. Huston (cited in Kelley et al., 1983) describes this type of power as ‘expert power.’ Expert power is based on one’s attribution of superior knowledge to the other. Andy attributes great knowledge and expertise to Chantal, giving her an almost omnipotent role within the relationship.

Like Chantal, Andy manoeuvres for control in both direct and indirect ways. In a study by Johnson, (cited in Sprecher & Felmlee, 1997) men were found to be more likely to use direct forms of power, such as asking their partners to do what they wanted. Although Andy maintains control in direct ways, such as actively insisting that Chantal join him at certain social occasions, he also uses indirect manoeuvres to maintain his power. It seems that he has the need to fight to maintain his sense of self, and this he does more indirectly than directly. Although he admires Chantal, thereby giving her power he also seems threatened by her strong sense of self and her prestige as a doctor. By maintaining a strong sense of self, Andy does not give his power away. He achieves this by often putting Chantal down and affirming himself in relation to her. According to Huston (cited in Kelley et al., 1983) this type of power can be classified as coercive in nature. Coercive power is defined as being present when one can mediate punishments for the other (Huston, cited in Kelley et al., 1983). Punishments could include disapproval, verbal abuse and even physical abuse

(Huston, cited in Kelley et al., 1983). In Chantal and Andy's relationship, although framed as a joke, Andy puts Chantal down by being verbally disapproving of many of her characteristics. In exercising this type of power, Andy is communicating subtly, that Chantal should be more like him, and if she does not comply with this subtle demand, she will be punished by his disapproving remarks.

Nevertheless, for Andy and Chantal, the manoeuvres for power and control are met by counter-manoevres by both partners, resulting in an escalating struggle. This also serves to balance the power in the relationship however. Although at one time, one partner may have more control than another, it continually shifts between the partners so that they both influence each other. Huston (cited in Kelly et al., 1983) maintains that power has to do with a person's ability to change another individual in a particular way. According to this definition, both Andy and Chantal have power in their relationship. Andy has changed Chantal in ways such as influencing her to become less introverted and more extroverted. Similarly, Chantal has changed or influenced Andy to becoming more of an introvert and less of an extrovert.

Having similar goals and values, as well as respect for the other on both sides contributes to the balancing of power in the relationship. Furthermore, both partners have a strong sense of self and independence maintaining a sense of mutuality and being in control. Nevertheless, as already mentioned, control is not always balanced and does swing disproportionately between the couple. Adding to the imbalance of power in Andy and Chantal's relationship, is the impact of society's expectations of men being the dominant partners in heterosexual relationships. It seems that Andy is influenced more by this expectation than Chantal is, in that he seems to need to adhere to certain traditional behaviours and beliefs as a way to maintain his sense of manhood and therefore, a sense of control.



Both relationships are characterised by different manoeuvres and counter-manoevres for control. It seems that the position of power continually shifts within intimate relationships and operates in unique and complex ways. The vulnerabilities and uncertainties associated with intimate relationships mean that power and control are utilised extensively and are a necessary part of the process of an intimate relationship.

### **Making One Dance Out of Two**

Everyone dances to their own tune. Each individual has their own way of being, influenced, among others, by their unique past experiences, families, culture, gender, stage of life and perhaps particular personality style. As time goes on, individuals learn their own dance and make their own tunes. The challenge in intimate relationships, is the bringing together of two individual dances, to make one, which although not necessarily perfect, works. Thus, each couple evolves its own repetitive, rhythmic patterns of loving, fighting, and so on, over time (Watanabe-Hammon, 1990).

**Michelle** and **JP** seem to have developed their mutual dance by learning and compromise, which comes from a deep understanding of the other, over time. This finding concurs with a study which found that the longer the length of the marriage, the more accommodative the strategies were. This is thought to be due to the fact that two people adjust to each other's tactics (Jepsen & Snell, 2002).

Michelle comes from a family characterised by conflict and divorce. The dance between her parents was very different to the dance between JP's parents, whose relationship was characterised by traditional dominance and submission between husband and wife, and stability and faithfulness. Although JP and Michelle have learnt to perform very different dances in life by being exposed to the different 'moves' of their parents, they have nevertheless managed to fit into

each other's dance and create their own complex and mutually satisfying 'dance' or relationship.

On her own, Michelle's dance seems characterised by negativity and self-protecting moves such as seeking and providing financial security. Her moves tend to be less of a 'homely' nature and more assertive and independent – highlighting a perception of needing to 'fight' to survive. JP's dance is guided more by positiveness, wanting connection and seeking and providing emotional stability. His moves tend to be more homely than assertive or independent – indicating his need to provide and be a part of a home characterised by love and nurturing.

In Michelle and JP's relationship, it has been difficult to understand the different moves, governed by different needs. For a while it seems that the couple have remained rhythmically unfamiliar with each other and so have danced around blame and guilt, in a space of little understanding.

It seems that marriage has been an important punctuation in JP and Michelle's relationship, as it provided the couple with the commitment to continue to work at their dance, even though it has not necessarily been ideal. Marriage has provided the couple with the symbol of a profound union where 'oneness' as husband and wife is emphasised (Flanagan & Williams, 2007). Although they do not have identical patterns of interaction or dance, they have adapted their individual moves to be more in tune to their partner's. This compromise has allowed the couple to create mutually satisfying rhythms within their intimate relationship. This is consistent with Levinger and Snoek's (cited in Derlega, 1984) conceptualisation of intimate relationships, which includes mutuality as the most important quality. Mutuality implies joint, shared interaction and according to Chelune et al. (cited in Derlega, 1984) does not require similar or identical patterns.

In the past, JP and Michelle contributed very differently to the relationship. While Michelle provided financially, JP provided emotionally. Now, it seems that both partners provide in similar ways, thereby providing more support to the other. While Michelle continues to provide financially, she also provides more emotionally, and is home more than she was in the past. Furthermore, while JP continues to provide emotional support, he also contributes more financially, in this way, supporting Michelle.

Not only has marriage served as a significant punctuation in this relationship, but also having children. It seems that having children has strengthened the sense of responsibility and commitment to working hard to establish a dance that works for Michelle and JP as a couple, but also as parents.

In comparison to Michelle and JP, **Chantal** and **Andy** still seem to be doing more of their own shuffle than dancing in mutual synchrony. This is possibly because Michelle and JP's relationship has involved a longer process of time, and marriage has served as an important punctuation within the process of their commitment. While marriage vows serve as a punctuation in the same way that engagement has been a punctuation in Chantal and Andy's relationship, the process of the commitment seems less far along the line. Cardillo (2007) supports this notion in her discussion of intimate relationships across a person's lifespan. According to Cardillo (2007), human development is a product of a complex interplay of forces that reside within the individual and the environment by which he or she is surrounded. Based on this idea, intimate interactions and relationships are affected and also affect the changing needs and stresses which evolve with each stage of development throughout one's lifetime. Although Andy and Chantal's life stages have meant that they have fewer responsibilities than Michelle and JP, they are learning to combine their single shuffles and together create a mutually beneficial 'dance'. While Chantal's style tends to be that of 'dancing' alone, Andy prefers 'dancing' in groups involving many others. These different styles of being mean that the couple uses complementary moves, which

can be difficult at times, but nevertheless falls into a harmonious pattern. This has meant that Chantal has given up much of her solitary time to join Andy in his social activity; while by the same token, Andy has given up much of his social activity to join Chantal in her more solitary or quiet times. Creating one dance out of two is also evident in Chantal and Andy's handling of conflict, and more specifically handling of Chantal's anger. It seems that Chantal's Portuguese heritage and her family's typical style of handling conflict has been passed on to Chantal who has learnt from her family, to express her anger openly and freely. This contrasts to Andy's upbringing, where such open and explicit expression of negative emotion such as anger is not encouraged. As a result, Andy has learnt to avoid this type of confrontation. The two differing styles of handling conflict reflect two different pasts which continue to impact on the couple in the present. This demonstrates the notion that a 'dance' is often picked up by the couple's children and becomes knowledge of how to be in an intimate relationship (Watanabe-Hammon, 1990).

To summarise, it seems that the pattern or dance plays out differently for each couple and depends not only on the individual's dances brought into play, but also on the various punctuations within the relationship. For JP and Michelle, marriage vows and having children, have served as important punctuations which have impacted on their particular pattern of dance. For Andy and Chantal, cohabitation and engagement have both served as an important punctuation. Nevertheless, it seems that despite the challenges and imperfections faced, JP and Michelle, perhaps as result of their marriage vows are dancing closer together than Andy and Chantal who are in a different stage of life.

### **Strategies to Bring Closeness and Distance**

Both couples seem to use strategies which bring both closeness and distance in their relationships. Using strategies to bring closeness as well as distance appear to enable partners to cope with the unique emotional demands and challenges

which emerge from being in a unique intimate relationship. It is in this way that the intimate relationship is maintained and continues to work. Again using the analogy of the dancing pair, we can visualise how sometimes partners dance side-by-side using identical parallel actions, and sometimes face to face using differing, complementary actions. This interweaving creates a complex and mutually satisfying 'dance' or relationship, characterised by strategies which bring both closeness and distance.

According to Carlson and Buskist (1997), whom one marries, has little to do with the satisfaction experienced in that relationship, and personality traits are not the underlying cause of relationship satisfaction or distress. In addition, the notion that different genders have different needs is also debunked as a myth. Carlson and Buskist (1997) maintain rather, that it is how couples manage their differences and the strategies they use to bring about closeness and distance which are important.

In terms of closeness, both couples refer to "love not being enough" and so it is in addition to love, that various strategies are used to bring about closeness. These include affirming or reassuring one another, sweeping issues under the carpet and using humour as a way to avoid tackling emotional issues, respecting and acknowledging each other's differences, being flexible in roles, forgiving the other, honouring marriage vows and actively organising romantic time together. In terms of distance, various strategies include needing control, self-protection and a masking of one's vulnerability, presenting oneself as independent to such an extent that the other is not needed, communicating conflicting needs by using double messages and contradictions, blaming the other, and highlighting each other's differences.

**Michelle** and **JP** use various strategies simultaneously which serve the function of bringing both closeness and distance between one another. While they each need to be in control in various but different ways - which may distance

themselves from one another - they also affirm and reassure each other, bringing them closer. In addition, the couple tends to avoid tackling certain emotional issues by sweeping issues under the carpet. While this could impact on the couple by bringing about distance, it also allows the couple the 'space' for their marriage to grow, rather than be held back by the difficult obstacles encountered along the way. In this way, closeness and intimacy is brought about. Another strategy which results in emotional issues being avoided, is the use of humour. Both Michelle and JP use humour as a way to avoid having to confront intensity and difficult issues or emotions.

Michelle and JP have had very different perceptions of their marriage and very different ways of coping with their difficulties. They also have different perspectives on life in general. While JP is more trusting and assumes a more positive orientation to the world, Michelle is less trusting and tends to assume a more negative attitude in general. Their different upbringings and cultures may have contributed to their differences, all of which have created obstacles for both parties to overcome. For example, while JP is more trusting of the world, he also does not have the need to 'arm' himself with financial security as Michelle does. This difference means that Michelle has tended to blame JP for not being as financially ambitious as she perhaps is, while JP has blamed Michelle for being judgemental of him. In the past, he has also blamed Michelle for not being at home as much as a mother and wife should. The blaming has led to an escalation of guilt and self blame in both JP and Michelle. While these differences may have wedged a distance made of blame and guilt between the couple, the acknowledgement of the differences, and the respect for each other, and their unique strengths brought to the relationship, has brought closeness. Acknowledgement of the differences has allowed both JP and Michelle to accept the other with less judgement and furthermore, affirm each other and their differences. Such affirmation brings about closeness, but also allows for more flexibility within their roles. It seems that over time, and as a result of having to work together through adversity, the couple have become less rigid in their roles

and appear to give to the relationship equally. As already mentioned, Michelle's role in the past was that of the financial provider, while JP's role was more of the emotional provider. Now, it seems that Michelle not only provides financially, but also emotionally, and not only does JP provide emotionally, but also financially. The flexibility of roles has allowed each partner to show more support to the other and has therefore brought about closeness.

In the past, Michelle in particular has protected herself from the hurt which she has associated with close relationships, by presenting herself as independent and self reliant, and not showing her vulnerability. JP has also disguised his vulnerability in various ways such as rationalising and denying any negativity in the relationship.

Over the past years, Michelle and JP's interaction patterns have become familiar and entrenched, so that they appear to be masters of indirect communication and disguising one's vulnerability. Nevertheless, with time, it seems that showing their own vulnerability through more open and direct communication, and letting go of certain guises such as Michelle's need to present herself as always strong and in control and JP's need to avoid confronting negativity, have led to a general acceptance and allowance for vulnerability. Showing vulnerability has been an essential manoeuvre to bring about closeness as well as a working together for JP and Michelle. Marriage vows can also be viewed as a strategy or a punctuation which has accentuated closeness. For JP and Michelle, the marriage vows in particular, have served to keep the couple committed to maintaining a connection and continue working at their closeness. Furthermore, it is not unlikely that JP and Michelle's needs for connection were mobilised in the joint interview and shifted their previous more indirect communication style, that could have led to disconnection rather than independence and connection.

**Andy** and **Chantal** use similar yet different strategies to Michelle and JP which bring about closeness and distance. While they are not connected by marriage

vows yet, their decisions to move in together and then to become engaged have meant that each partner has openly and more formally 'declared' their commitment to the other, and it is this which has brought about closeness. Like Michelle and JP, Chantal and Andy are very different people, with different ways of being in the relationship. Nevertheless, they share similar views and it is this very sharing of similar perspectives on their relationship that has led the couple to feel that they are "on the same page", and a strong sense of closeness emerges.

Andy and Chantal highlight their differences – Andy is described by both as being social, while Chantal is described by both as being more of a 'loner'. Furthermore, Chantal expresses her anger overtly, whilst Andy tends to be less expressive of his anger, and disapproves of the way in which Chantal deals with her anger. Not only does Andy highlight the differences between him and Chantal, but he also criticises these differences. It seems that by criticising Chantal, he is actually affirming himself because the qualities which he admires in Chantal, also undermine his own sense of self, and his criticisms serve to protect his sense of inadequacy in relation to Chantal. While Andy criticises Chantal, forging a distance between him and Chantal, he also openly admires and respects Chantal for the different qualities which she has. Chantal also criticises Andy at times, for perhaps being too social or not responding to her in a way which she would like. These criticisms contribute to bringing about distance, in that each partner is conserving him or herself, rather than connecting with the other. Yet, it is the very naming of the differences and the respect and appreciation that each partner has for the other's differences that allows for closeness. Both Andy and Chantal acknowledge how the other's different qualities complement them as individuals, and also bring a 'wholeness' to the relationship. By appreciating each other's differences, the couple affirm each other and the relationship, and become closer. Another strategy that Andy and Chantal employ to maintain closeness, is actively organising romantic time together, and making an occasion of the anniversary of the day they first got



together as a couple. It is Chantal in particular who makes the effort to keep the anniversary date free, yet Andy is enthusiastic to continue this tradition and initiates many romantic and fun activities, keeping the relationship alive, exciting and close. Andy's initiating of fun activities is also consistent with the stereotype of male agency, and concurs with a study which demonstrated that many college students expect males to play the more active role by planning the date and carrying out the plans (Laner & Ventrone, cited in Etaugh & Bridges, 2004).

While Chantal actively uses strategies to bring closeness, she also maintains distance in various ways. Her strong need to be in control and independent hinders closeness. Furthermore, her indirect manoeuvres for closeness, such as her "grouchiness" maintain the distance rather than bringing the closeness that she overtly desires: although Chantal knows that Andy does not respond to her grouchiness in a loving manner, she continues to use this strategy, thus maintaining distance rather than closeness. Like Chantal, Andy also uses strategies which bring distance in various ways. He too manoeuvres for control and as previously mentioned his criticisms of Chantal seem to protect his sense of self by allowing him to be an individual in his own right. His need to fight for his own sense of self means that closeness and connection is hindered somewhat. Furthermore, Andy appears to protect himself from a sense of inadequacy by masking his vulnerability in various ways. Typically, Andy uses humour to mask his criticisms and avoid expressing authentic and more vulnerable feelings. This maintains distance between the couple.

Both relationships discussed demonstrate how patterns and strategies of relating between partners emerge within the cultural and social environments in which the partners and the relationship exist. Nevertheless, the emerging strategies are not only influenced by the social and cultural contexts, but also by the unique combination of two people, giving rise to the unique relationship. Levinger and Snoek (cited in Derlega, 1984, p. 42) maintain that "the relationship emerges as personal, uniquely tailored (vs. normative and role bound) and intimate in the

kinds of personal exchange and emotional investment of both parties”. Hinde (cited in Fletcher, 2002) proposes a dynamic model of intimate relationships, which takes into account that relationships influence the nature of individuals and the various strategies used by the individuals, and individuals influence the nature of relationships they enter.

### ***Conclusion***

It is evident from the above analysis of the two couples, that an intimate relationship between two partners is a complex one, influenced by both internal and external contexts. The themes identified in this chapter relate to the processes and patterns of interaction between two couples and highlight the paradoxes inherent in intimate relationships, such as the need to be connected, yet independent. In addition, the on-going evolving nature of intimate relationships is highlighted. The progression of the intimate relationships studied paralleled the phases of life of the partners and demonstrated the importance of time in shaping one’s identity and connection in the present. According to Schnarch (cited in Cardillo, 2007), all relationships have a natural system and ecology that is predictable – that is, all important relationships eventually lead towards distance and conflict, and that conflict signals an opportunity for growth, rather than something going wrong. Personal development is enabled in the context of relationships, and involves managing oneself and how one interacts. Schnarch (cited in Cardillo, 2007) proposes that this process of ‘differentiation’ creates opportunities for learning new skills and ways of interacting. It was observed from the two couple’s stories, that it takes time and is a process to learn the necessary skills for that particular relationship, to learn to dance together in synchrony and form one relationship. The patterns of interaction allow the process of development to occur within the relationships.

The patterns identified as impacting on the process of the intimate relationships include the negotiation of independence and connection, the need for

acknowledgement, the struggle with power, and the need to disguise one's vulnerability. Other patterns of interaction include various manoeuvres for closeness and distance identified in this chapter.

Several themes have therefore been identified in this chapter that characterised the relationships of the participating couples. These themes are a result of an in-depth analysis, coloured by my own experiences and perspectives, and different observers would most likely identify different themes. Furthermore, although the themes are characteristic of intimate relationships, they are uniquely expressed in the different couples in the study. Although the themes identified were often similar to the other couple, they nevertheless form their own distinct pattern.

## Chapter 7: Conclusion

### *Introduction*

This chapter attempts to evaluate the present study by highlighting its strengths and limitations. It will also provide recommendations for possible future research in the area of intimate heterosexual relationships.

### *Evaluation of the Study*

This study provided a space for each individual to tell his or her story of their intimate relationship, and then jointly as a couple. This process enabled them to reflect on their intimate relationship and together co-construct a different and possibly more empowering narrative about their relationship. I believe that this aim was achieved for both couples. This study highlighted the uniqueness, complexity, and vulnerability of these relationships, and the necessity to respect the wisdom of the relationship system just as it is; the unique patterns, and diverse and complex ways in which each relationship works.

The following themes emerged from the two relationships studied:

- **How the Past Shapes meaning in the Present:** This theme illustrated the huge impact of the past in shaping our identities in relationship with another, as well as the influence of time on the relationship itself.
- **Independence and Connection:** This theme illustrated that independence and connection are mutually inclusive and form a circular pattern where one cannot occur without the other. Intimate partners need to be connected to be independent, and healthy independence in turn allows for intimate connection. Partners are confronted by the challenge to integrate the needs of the self with those of the other – how to be both

- separate and together. This can be particularly challenging in our Western culture, which emphasises the rights and freedom of the individual far more than the responsibilities and interdependencies of community.
- **Power and Control: Masking Vulnerabilities:** This theme attempted to highlight the use of power in both relationships, and indicated that intimate partners exercise forms of power in different ways, but it is most often exercised as a way to conceal vulnerability and maintain a sense of control and therefore safety. Intimacy involves letting go of control, and becoming more open and thus vulnerable. It is something which is longed for, yet something which individuals are often afraid of, as loving someone makes one vulnerable to another person who one cannot ultimately control.
  - **Making One Dance out of Two:** This theme demonstrated the challenge inherent in intimate relationships – the joining of two individuals with different pasts, different ideals, and different ways of being, to make one relationship that is harmonious in its own way, and works. When two people come together in a relationship, two worlds, not only two persons become connected.
  - **Strategies to bring closeness and distance:** This theme described the often indirect manoeuvres used by couples to facilitate both closeness and distance. It was emphasised how through facilitation, these indirect manoeuvres can be shifted to include other possibilities, and more open and direct interaction and communication. In addition, this theme highlights the different patterns and unique experiences of intimate relationships.

### **Strengths of the Study**

Consistent with the social constructionist framework within which this study is embedded, the construction of stories about intimate relationships was emphasised and analysed. Since social constructionism maintains that

knowledge is a product of social interaction and processes (Speed, cited in Hsu, 2005), the partners in this study interacted with one another as well as with the researcher to create new knowledge and meanings. The themes which emerged from this study were further embedded in the cultural context at a specific point in time. This means that the themes identified are not fixed and stable, may change as the relationships unfold across time.

Each participant comes with their different cultural and social background that shapes his or her experiences, and meaning making system. Thus the accounts of the intimate relationships are unique to each participant or partner within the relationship. Although common themes emerged, highlighting certain similarities between all the participants' experiences, differences were also evident, supporting the social constructionist notion that multiple realities exist (Becvar & Becvar, 2006).

This study adds another voice to understanding intimate relationships and contributes to the numerous perspectives thereof. It however does not claim to be the ultimate authority how all heterosexual intimate relationships are experienced. Therefore, the stories provided in this study do not represent and cannot be generalised to all other romantic relationships. According to Owen, (1992) such a view would presume the existence of a single 'truth' which would subsequently eliminate the possibilities of discovering alternative ways of understanding and being in a relationship. Thus, this study attempts to enrich our understandings of the complexity of intimate relationships. It highlights how each relationship is unique, unlike any other, and every relationship has archetypal aspects that are the same for us all. This makes intimate relationships profoundly universal and impersonal, as well as intensely intimate and personal. As a consequence relationship experiences are rich, fulfilling, complex and creative, but also often confusing, turbulent and difficult.

By joining with the participants of this study, I became a part of their social interaction system. I therefore experienced the participating relationships as closely as possible from the participants' worldviews and I have tried to remain true to these worldviews in my interpretations. I recognised that the participants were the experts on their own experiences, and I therefore assumed a position of 'not knowing' by not imposing my own subjectivities onto the participants and attempting to be aware of my own biases. In addition, I acknowledge that no objective observation is possible, since the act of observing is in itself a subjective process.

The interpretive research process chosen for this study means that the relationships were seen in the context of mutual interaction and mutual influence, and the individuals and relationships were not examined in isolation. In addition, the influence of time on the emerging processes was emphasised. The relationships in this study were explored and observed for changes over time by means of reflection and by means by observing and describing the changing patterns of interaction present in the relationships in the time between the individual interviews and then the later, joint interviews.

This study has further attempted to offer alternative reframes for the participants' perceptions, thus co-creating new realities and new possibilities of interaction and meaning making. The social responsibility of the qualitative researcher is thus taken into account by working together with the participants so that they may be empowered and made aware of new possibilities within their relationships.

This study has achieved trustworthiness in that I have disclosed my orientation as the researcher and have explained the social and cultural context of this investigation. By engaging intensively with the participants, and persistently observing and conceptualising each couple's interaction, I was able to enter the participants' worldview, but also not ignore the contribution of my worldview on my conceptualisations. By checking my interpretations by providing each

participant the opportunity to read a summary of their interview and then comment on or rectify those interpretations that they disagreed with, consensus was attained regarding most of the interpretations made. In this way, triangulation was achieved as multiple checks with various parties, such as the participants in the study as well as my supervisor, were made. In addition, multiple data sources were used since each couple's story was related three times, by each partner individually, and then together. Furthermore, the interpretations gained from these conversations were grounded by linking them to excerpts from the original interview data.

### **Limitations of the Study**

As already mentioned, my perceptions and interpretations are informed by my worldview and my subjective values, biases and experiences. The interpretations and meanings constructed in this study are therefore not the only constructions that could exist, and would most likely be very different to another researcher's perceptions. I have attributed meaning that correlates with my worldview and have selected specific data that would confirm the meanings which I identified.

Researchers can never really be 'fair' as that which they see is coloured by their subjective lens through which they view the world. Nevertheless, although my interpretations of the participants' stories may be influenced by my personal values and beliefs, I have attempted to remain faithful to the participants' worldviews and uphold the reliability of this study.

An additional limitation of this study is the possible impact of my personal interviewing style on the interview process. Firstly, the use of the tape recorder and of open ended questions may have made the participants feel vulnerable, although open ended questions allow the person interviewed to give more of his or her story rather than limit him - or herself with specific questions. In addition, although the questions were open-ended, my worldview will have contributed to



my line of enquiry, influencing the specific course of the interview. Lastly, a level of trust and rapport is necessary between the participant and researcher. Because establishing rapport depends on the specific combination of individuals, and is sometimes easier than other times, it is only inevitable that with some participants, I found it easier to establish rapport than with others. Furthermore, being a female, I seemed to establish rapport more easily with the women than with the men in the study. The rapport established would have contributed to the level of trust formed in my relationship with each participant. While a high level of trust may have impacted positively on this study, less trust may have impacted negatively.

Due to the in-depth and time-consuming nature of this research, only two relationships were included in the sample. This however fits the aims of qualitative research which prefers small samples where rich information can be obtained. The data gained in this study is considered valid, as the information gathered is applicable to the intimate relationships in this study at the particular time they were studied. According to Moon, Dillon, and Sprenkle (cited in Hsu, 2005) this type of research gains validity at the expense of generalisability. The themes identified in this study can serve as guidelines for viewing and conceptualising intimate relationships and cannot be used as a formula for how relationships should be perceived and enhanced (Hsu, 2005).

### ***Implications for Clinical Practice***

Although this study does not claim to be the ultimate authority on how all heterosexual intimate relationships are experienced, and the stories provided do not represent and cannot be generalised to all other romantic relationships, this study adds another voice to understanding intimate relationships and contributes to the numerous perspectives thereof. It therefore has various implications for working with intimate relationships in clinical practice. These are outlined below:

This study demonstrates the importance of considering the relationship itself and the meanings attached to the relationship, rather than whether it is defined as married or cohabiting. Although a relationship existing over many years, and involving more responsibilities, may differ from a relationship which is at a different stage in the process, it does not necessarily differentiate between a married and a cohabiting couple, though it can. It seems that there are more similarities than differences between the two types of intimate relationships. The emphasis is therefore more on the relationship than how it is defined. Regardless of whether the relationship is defined as married or cohabiting, it is commitment and the meanings attached to the commitment, which is the glue.

From this study, it is clear that it is important to take each unique couple and the individual differences into account. Within the clinical or therapeutic context, each relationship needs to be approached and perceived as different, and therapeutic interventions need to be guided by the unique needs and unique combination of each couple.

It is important to consider the complexity of each intimate relationship, and acknowledge that it is more than two individuals who have come together, influencing the relationship, but also two worlds, consisting of culture, language, family, past experiences, and so on, which have an impact on the relationship in the here and now.

When working with couples, it is important to unpack the grand narratives which often go unnoticed, yet impact significantly on the relationship. For example, an individual's expectations of their partner and their self in the relationship, is often influenced by gender stereotypes existing in our society. A respect for the expectations of one another and oneself needs to be emphasised within the therapeutic context.

### ***Recommendations for Future Research***

From the relevant literature, it appears that there is little research on individuals' stories of intimate relationships. In addition, it appears that the research is invariably slanted toward the psychology of the individual. By focusing on the individual level, it seems that the research has often ignored the levels and complexities emerging from the relationship as a whole. Little emphasis is given to context and the patterns which reveal themselves in the space between partners – in each unique relationship. As a result, research tends to imply that love and intimate relationships exist as a single fixed entity, rather being subjectively experienced within different contexts. Although the present study focuses on the context and the relational level of intimacy, more research which emphasises the improvement and enhancement of such relationships at a relational level will be helpful in facilitating an understanding, and in providing higher levels of conceptualisation of this relationship.

Current research shows that very little literature exists on intimate relationships across a lifespan and most especially in later life. Individuals come to middle and later life with diverse and complex histories of loving, and the desire to be in an intimate relationship seems to persist throughout life (Huyck, 2003). A possibility for future research therefore, is to explore intimate relationships across the lifespan, and in particular, look at older more frail couples, to provide guidelines for managing intimate relationships with the intense dependency of later life frailty (Huyck, 2003).

Another area for future research is to focus on looking beyond the traditional gender stereotypes and to gain a deeper understanding of the impact of traditional views and expectations on contemporary relationships between men and women. As discourses shift in society, and there is a move away from male dominance, meanings around roles and relationships in general may change. Although the way in which societal discourses and stereotypes impact on

intimate relationships was discussed in this study, this was not the full focus of the exploration. Furthermore, the changing nature of intimate relationships, such as the rise in cohabitation as an alternative, or as a pre-requisite to marriage, needs more attention. It would be useful to track the changes in relationship dynamics in relation to the changes in society's expectations of marriage and cohabitation.

### ***Conclusion***

This study has provided valuable information regarding the complex interplay of processes and dynamics at work in the relationship between the two specific couples studied. The themes identified were not only helpful in describing the emerging complexities and processes present in the relationships but also demonstrated the paradoxical nature of intimate relationships. In addition, the significance of allowing both partners to co-create their stories, taking into account the context within which they exist was emphasised. The qualitative research method employed in this study was effective in obtaining the in-depth data required, even though certain limitations were present. An outline of possible areas for future research was also provided. These included shifting the focus away from the traditional and more individualistic notions of intimate relationships towards an inclusion of context and a focus on the relational level, rather than individual level. In addition, looking at intimate relationships in the context of one's lifespan was recommended, and exploring intimate relationships in the later and more physically frail stages of life was proposed. Deconstructing stereotypes and social discourses that are limiting to the intimate relationship was highlighted as necessary, as well as investigating experiences of contemporary relationships, including cohabitation as another possibility to marriage.

Initially I wondered how different a married couple's constructions of intimate relationships would be from a cohabiting couple. Although a relationship

spanning many years and involving more responsibilities may differ from one that is at a different stage in the process, it does not necessarily differentiate between a married and cohabiting couple, though it can. Generally speaking, it seems that there are more similarities than differences between the two types of intimate relationships. The emphasis therefore, is more on the relationships than whether it is defined as married or cohabiting. However, if one sets great store by marriage, then the relationship will be different, as it is the commitment which makes a difference.

Therefore, this study illustrates that no relationship is the same, and no story can be applied to all contexts. It demonstrates that it is our meanings which define relationships, rather than marriage and cohabitation per se. There is no comprehensive theory to explain the intricacies of the male-female relationship, but it is rather the meanings we attribute to our relationships which explain or highlight these intricacies. No relationship – whether that of a cohabiting or married couple – is static and exists between people who are constantly evolving. An intimate relationship, defined by meaning, is a journey that begins in the ecstasy of attraction and meanders through a rocky stretch of self-discovery, and culminates in the creation of an intimate union (Hendrix, 2005).

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### ***Appendix 1: Michelle's Interview Summary***

Michelle describes her relationship as still being young, and so she and her husband, JP, continue to learn new things about each other every day. They have been married for seven years now, and were engaged after one year of knowing each other. She describes her and JP as being very committed to their relationship and explains that their relationship is one in which the control continually switches between the two of them. Michelle might be in charge at one time, with JP leaning on her, and then something might happen, when JP then takes charge and Michelle leans on him.

Michelle feels that JP knows her much better than what she knows JP. She feels that he is more receptive to her feelings than what she is to his, and she describes herself as a selfish person. She feels that she concentrates on her own needs and their children's needs, whereas JP is continually trying to accommodate the whole family wherever he can.

Michelle looks up to her husband in many ways. She talks about him as a very loveable person. He loves to touch and gives Michelle a lot of attention.

Recently Michelle and JP have moved back to Johannesburg after having moved to George for one year to open up their own coffee shop and to be able to spend more time with the children. Unfortunately, the coffee shop did not work out, and Michelle and JP lost all their money during that one year in George. Because of financial difficulties, the couple had to move back to Johannesburg. While Michelle found a job quickly, JP did not, and during this brief period of unemployment, he would try to compensate by always making supper for the family and would basically do everything for Michelle.

Michelle feels that she does not always know how to reciprocate JP's warmth and affection. Furthermore, since the children have come into the picture, she

describes her priorities as being a little backward. This was highlighted by Michelle when she described the example of coming home from work one evening, and greeting the children first, before greeting her husband. Having children therefore, has changed everything in the relationship. Michelle feels that they no longer have much privacy. In addition to children, work also plays a role in their intimacy. When Michelle gets home from work, she just wants to relax and has no energy for much else. Michelle reflects that it must be difficult for her husband because she is not as warm as what he is.

In terms of upbringing, Michelle and JP had very different childhoods. JP is from an Afrikaans family whereas Michelle is from an English family. According to Michelle, they are culturally from very different backgrounds. In addition, JP's father was never at home much, whereas his mother is very loving. Michelle explains how this contrasts with her situation because although she acknowledges that her mother did love her, her mother did not show her much love. It is for this reason that Michelle is so dedicated to her children because she does not want them to have the relationship with her that she had with her mother. Michelle does not like to refer back to her youth often. Her parents got divorced when she was two years old, and her stepfather then adopted her. She had a reasonably good relationship with her stepfather until she left school. Michelle does not really know what happened to their relationship after that, but speculates, that he thought that now that she was eighteen, he did not need to be there for Michelle like he had been in the past.

Michelle's stepfather did not want Michelle to marry JP. His reason being, that Michelle and JP had had a fight and JP had become physical. Alcohol was the major problem. JP promised Michelle that it would never happen again, and he has kept his word. Michelle has given JP a second chance, whereas her stepfather could not live with that. This saddens Michelle because JP went to her stepfather to apologise and she acknowledges how difficult it is for a man to try

and fix something that he has done wrong. Michelle has not been in contact with her stepfather since, and her mother passed away nine years ago.

Michelle and JP have been to couple's therapy on two separate occasions. The first time they went was after their first child, Jonathon, was born. Michelle explains that they went for therapy because she was having problems with sexual intimacy. In addition, she wanted a second child, whereas JP did not. Michelle feels that for her, intimacy became a baby-making thing rather than an intimate thing. The second time they went for therapy, it was also about intimacy.

Michelle recognises that the difficulties they experience with intimacy at times, has underlying factors. For example, when Michelle went to see a psychologist after her second child was born, the psychologist said that Michelle was about to have a nervous break down and was suffering from post-natal depression. Michelle was working, keeping everything going, and had just had a baby. Pressures at work were continually mounting, and Michelle did not speak to anybody about how she was feeling at the time. In addition, Michelle describes how after turning thirty, and after having had children, her body has changed shape. Subsequently, she has often felt 'unsexy' and has not wanted to be touched. Michelle admits that this feeling comes only from her and although JP has never stopped touching her, this feeling ultimately affects everything else in their relationship – like a chain reaction.

Before moving to George, the house was in JP's name, and he had his own company - although there was not a lot of profit. Michelle reflects on how she was probably the bread winner back then, but now describes her and her husband as being financially even.

Much of their conflict has been about money. For a time, JP considered himself the breadwinner, however, Michelle argues that if he was, he would not be in so much debt, and the family would not have been in the difficult financial situation



that they found themselves in. Although Michelle partly blames her husband for their financial situation, and holds him largely responsible for their financial troubles, she understands that he feels guilty for not being able to provide and she is trying very hard not to hold any grudges against him. In addition, she acknowledges that he feels bad about not being able to have his car or house in his name due to financial constraints.

When it comes to money, Michelle's main concern is providing for her children. She had to cash the life insurance policies that she had taken out for the children because they needed the money. Michelle worries about finances because she feels that in today's age, children need to be provided for – they need to be financially ok. In that one year in George, Michelle explains that they lost everything, and she feels responsible that she has not been able to provide for the children like she had planned to.

When Michelle and JP attempt to resolve their conflict, they go about it in very different ways. Michelle describes herself as the type of person who tries to ignore conflict, whereas JP is the one who confronts it and insists that they talk it out. Michelle feels that they balance each other in this way. Later Michelle contradicts her earlier statement and goes on to say that she does not keep quiet about anything and people usually know how she feels about everything. She describes her tactic when attempting to resolve conflict with her husband as taking him out – away from the kids, where they can have a drink, relax and then have it out.

Michelle admires how her husband can sometimes read her mind. She feels that he knows how she is feeling, before she even knows how she is feeling. She describes her husband as being unlike most men because he is very sensitive to her emotions. Michelle is grateful that her husband is still around, even after the many times when she has been so difficult. She describes JP as being lovable and it seems that Michelle always feels loved and accepted by him. She explains

that he has never had high expectations of her. If anything, he has always told Michelle that she is the greatest – something Michelle has difficulty in believing about herself. Michelle believes that she does not make it easy for her husband, especially with her high expectations of him. She maintains that she expects a lot of JP, and in this way, is hard on him. According to her, JP always needs a push – something which Michelle admits that she is not very good at. Michelle has pursued a corporate career and has balanced this with being a mother. This is what she expects from herself and is successful in doing this. She expects the same from her husband, and expects him to lead the way.

In terms of difficult circumstances, moving to George was not the only challenging event in Michelle and JP's relationship. After their first child was born, JP wanted to start his own business manufacturing toilet paper. Michelle describes how dedicated and motivated her husband was in getting started (a typical trait of his) only to find that one of the main stake holder's ran off with all of their money. They still have never been able to recover any of the money, and it was from then that their financial situation took a turn for the worse.

Michelle feels that because she was making good money herself at that stage, that particular event did not impact on their relationship as much as moving to George did. As long as Michelle is making money and is able to provide, she does not have a problem and does not put as much pressure on JP. As soon as she is no longer financially secure herself, Michelle feels very pressured. She explains that had she not had such a good relationship with her bank, she is not sure if the family would have had a roof over their heads. Michelle acknowledges that this upsets JP.

When Michelle and JP were in George, Michelle describes how JP could not believe that their not having any money, affected Michelle's feelings for him. Michelle related a saying to him: "if there is no money, love flies right out of the window." Michelle puts this in context by explaining how she feels that all the

pressure gets put onto her. Furthermore she does not want to lose everything. She indicated that many people get divorced over such financial pressure, implying that despite the difficulties that Michelle and JP have endured so far, they are a strong couple who are determined to continue working on their relationship. Michelle never wants to get divorced and maintains that she did not get married with the idea of getting divorced. She hopes that when she is seventy or eighty years old, she and JP will still be together. For Michelle, relationships are like sculptures, which need constant molding with tender loving care.

Michelle was initially attracted to JP's body, but in terms of their marriage, Michelle is attracted to the fact that JP has never given up. There is commitment from both sides which makes their relationship work. Michelle marvels at how her husband continues to do so many little things for her. For example, after seven years of marriage, he *still* brings Michelle coffee in bed each morning. The honeymoon is over, and yet every morning, Michelle gets her coffee in bed. Michelle also admires her husband for all the handy work that he is always doing around the house and how he is always busy with something.

Michelle admits to being angry about all that has happened to her husband in the business world. She feels that people generally take advantage of him because he tends to be gullible and trusts people. In contrast, Michelle describes herself as skeptical and not as trusting as what her husband is.

Michelle feels that JP really does try to please her in their marriage, although she does not always see it. She blames herself for being too involved in her own thing, and the children keep her busy. JP tries to please Michelle, by doing things like fetching the kids early to give Michelle the opportunity to work a bit later. Michelle admires his consideration and explains that not many people get to see how considerate he is, because as a typical Capricorn, he is more of an observer. Although Michelle will say "thank you" for what JP does for her, she feels that in JP's mind, this is not enough. She wonders if perhaps JP does not

feel acknowledged by her because he feels that she does not always show her gratitude. Nevertheless, Michelle feels acknowledged by JP, and every now and again, he will say something to reaffirm that for Michelle. This situation makes Michelle feel guilty – that he gives Michelle a lot of himself and she does not give back to her husband in the manner that she should, or that he would like.

Currently, Michelle feels that they are both equally in control within their relationship, although she does admit that they are on ‘cloud nine’ at the moment because they are earning money again. They no longer have to waiter or waitress for extra money, which is a relief.

In terms of the future, Michelle prays that they will be together forever. She comes from a divorced couple and admits to protecting herself and being afraid that her marriage will not last. She describes how for her, marriage is not a given. It is seriously hard work. Things change, and so she feels she cannot take for granted that they will love each other forever or will be committed forever.

Michelle believes that for their marriage to last, they have to continually give each other that re-affirmation, and make sure that their goals are in tune with each other's. She has come to learn that it is possible to live past each other, and get completely caught up in life.

## ***Appendix 2: JP's Interview Summary***

JP describes his marriage with Michelle as being characterised by an open and honest relationship. He feels that they are both very committed to each other, and share equal responsibilities. Although he recognises that their marriage is not perfect, he believes that they are not doing badly as all couples have their 'ups' and 'downs'.

From JP's perspective, they have been through what he describes as "very deep waters" in the past year. He maintains however, that they have grown closer together because of the difficult experience that they have endured together.

The difficult year for Michelle and JP began when they moved to George and then had to move back to Johannesburg because of their financial situation. JP describes how he didn't have a job, and really battled to get one. For both him and Michelle, this was tough.

JP feels that had he not gotten a job, they would probably have been very close to divorce. This is difficult for JP to accept, although he acknowledges that it was not unreasonable for Michelle to threaten him with divorce if he did not get a job. He knew what he had to do, and through all of it, they stuck together.

In terms of their financial situation in the past year, JP feels that it could not have gotten any worse. As a man, it was also especially tough, not being able to provide for his wife and children. However, although they struggled with finances, and as a result, their relationship, JP shows strength in his ability to reflect on the positive outcomes of their struggles. He believes that the experience has taught them a lot. For example, he now understands the value of money as well as the value of being committed in their marriage. In addition, he feels extremely grateful for that which he has, and hopes never to take anything for granted again. The financial struggle that both JP and Michelle experienced in George

has made the two of them stronger, and JP believes that he has also become a much stronger person in himself.

Before moving to George, JP describes his relationship with Michelle as not being sexually intimate. He explains that the being together and the supporting each other, means a lot more than the sexual side of their relationship. JP feels, however, that the sexual side of their relationship got worse as their financial situation worsened. He maintains that their sexual intimacy was the greatest change when going through the difficult time in George as he describes their sex life as “taking the biggest dive.”

Although JP admits that their sexual intimacy did “bug” him, it was not such a “big deal” for him. He feels that their marriage is not about sex – although it is important. He feels that he always has the support emotionally from Michelle, and he believes that in a marriage, if the love is still there, and you do not have separate lives, but you have commitment and support from your partner, then sex is just a small part of the marriage.

Generally, JP maintains that he does not let his marriage affect other parts of his life. Unlike many people who take their problems to work, JP separates the sexual side of his life completely.

In terms of conflict, JP explains that they typically deal with problems by talking them out and discussing the whole story. In the beginning, he describes them as having “screaming matches” but this is something that has changed in their relationship. JP describes himself as being very calm and he does not get upset easily.

Usually, it is JP who approaches Michelle first to talk about any issues. JP explains that Michelle has a problem with communicating because she gets very angry very quickly. For JP, if there is something wrong, he needs to discuss it. He

cannot go to bed angry and he feels that he cannot cope with the “silent treatment.” In contrast to JP, Michelle can leave it and so she does not always try to dissolve issues.

From JP’s perspective, apart from the financial problems that JP and Michelle have had, there is not really anything else that is a problem in their marriage. Every now and then, they will disagree on a few things regarding the children, but that won’t be a fight as such. Occasionally, when JP goes out with his friends and comes back late, there may be a disagreement, but that does not happen very often.

In terms of friends, JP believes that while some of them who are not married and do not have children may think that their marriage is boring (because they do not understand what it is all about), others silently may envy JP and Michelle’s marriage. They would envy the openness in the relationship; the fact that they do not need to lie to each other about going out for a drink, or just seeing friends.

For JP, when they took their marriage vows, they took them seriously. For him and Michelle, there is no option to divorce. Even though it has been mentioned in the past, JP does not believe that if it really boils down to actually doing it, that they would. For him, and Michelle knows this, the option of divorce is not there. JP feels that although they have had lots of ups and downs, they both understand the seriousness around marriage. They place great importance on their marriage. If divorce ever should happen, JP imagines that the only cause would be infidelity. Should that ever happen (although it is not an option), they would never stay together just for the sake of the children.

Having children has changed JP and Michelle’s marriage in that it has settled them down. JP describes him and Michelle as being “jollers” before children came into their lives. They used to go out a lot, and had no responsibilities besides their house. Nevertheless, both JP and Michelle were ready to settle

down when they did and had their first child very soon after getting married. Although the children are high maintenance and take up a lot of time, JP feels that it was their decision to have children, and they wouldn't have it any other way.

JP describes Michelle as not being an easy person. She knows what she wants in life and nothing will stand in her way. In addition, she is very independent. JP enjoys this about Michelle. What he would sometimes want more of however, is affection from Michelle. But he goes on to say, that all the other things that come with Michelle, make up for that.

When they first met, JP was attracted to the fact that Michelle is very pretty, as well as the fact that she is not pathetic. JP explains that you get these women that are pathetic and cannot do anything for themselves. You have to be there all the time, or else there is trouble. From JP's perspective, Michelle is not at all like this. Her independence and determination, as well as her strength in her career, were (and still are) aspects of Michelle that JP was initially attracted to.

JP and Michelle were engaged after one year of dating each other. After getting married, their relationship did not change whatsoever. The only change was after having children, and the biggest change after children, was their sexual intimacy. JP explains however, that their sexual intimacy is not such a serious problem, and not a problem that would spur him on to sleeping around.

JP feels that Michelle is insecure in that she finds it difficult to understand that he will not be unfaithful to her. He says that this is a big thing for her. Whereas JP occasionally also feels insecure, (for example, in the past when finances were bad, he would think it could be very easy for Michelle to be swept off her feet by a rich man) he is able to block the fear by affirming to himself that Michelle would never do that. He maintains that he trusts Michelle completely.



In terms of the future, JP hopes only for success for both him and Michelle. For him, success at this moment is about financial success. JP recognises that financial security is necessary in their marriage. Although love is necessary, it is not enough – for JP, love must also be balanced with a realistic attitude toward money for a marriage to work. As far as the children are concerned, JP believes that both he and Michelle are successful as parents. They both share the similar ideals and values about bringing up children.

JP talks about his own upbringing as being very conservative. His father was not at home very much, and he never really saw what his parents were like as a couple. He describes his mother as being subservient to his father. She believed that her husband was the boss, and that still today, she does what he says without any questions. JP thinks that his parents do not really understand his marital relationship with Michelle, and sometimes may feel that such an ‘equal’ marital relationship is not right. JP acknowledges though, that it must be difficult for his parents to understand – coming from such a conservative era. Over the years, however, they have come to accept the type of marriage that JP and Michelle share, and it is not a problem.

Although JP and Michelle share a very different marriage to the marriage shared between his parents, JP still recognises certain similarities between the two marriages. For example, even though he and Michelle are equal partners, JP is still respected as the man of the house. The meaning attached to being *a man of the house* is not as strong in JP’s house as what it is in his parent’s house. Nevertheless, JP feels that he is still often asked permission by Michelle – even if it is for the children – to do something. In addition, JP does all the ‘handy man’ work around the house.

JP does not believe that he will ever be the “traditional breadwinner” in his marriage with Michelle. Being a white male in the current political climate in South Africa, as well as the particular industry that he has chosen, counts against

him. JP feels that it is not a problem in their marriage; what is important is that he does the best he can, and that he is contributing. It has been like this for a long time in JP and Michelle's marriage – she has always earned more than him. JP is grateful that this has never been a problem for Michelle, and as a result, it has made it easier for JP to accept. He feels that he is not like most men who have big ego's and that has also contributed to it not being an issue for them. JP adds that it is not as if Michelle earning double his salary, now makes her the boss of their marriage.

For JP, the greatest strength of their marriage lies in their positive attitudes toward life. JP believes that a big reason for this is the children they have, who are always able to lift them up. JP goes on to describe their greatest weakness as a couple, as being communication. He explains that at times, they tend to jump to conclusions, rather than relax and listen to what the other is actually saying.

Ideally, JP would like for Michelle to talk to him when something is bothering her. He feels that he always has to drag the problem out of her. JP reflects that he is probably similar to his father, who also likes to confront issues. His mother is more like Michelle as she tends to put things under the table. Nevertheless, one of the biggest strengths in their marriage is realising that there is a problem, and then working on it. For example, JP and Michelle have gone for marriage therapy in the past. This for JP is important, because it shows that they do not have a problem with being open and facing issues.

JP's greatest fear in his marriage is to be cheated on. That would be the only way that their marriage could come to an end. He feels that he and Michelle have got one of the closest, perfect marriages that one can get. He explains that they have great times, and even when things are difficult, there are still parts of their relationship that are great. JP maintains that there is no hate between them, only sometimes, there is some blame.

In terms of blame, JP explains that before moving to George, he blamed Michelle for never really being home because of her work, and Michelle blamed JP for the financial difficulties they found themselves in. Even though there exists a certain amount of blame between them, they were and still are able to have great times together. For JP, just being together and enjoying each other's company counts as a great time. He describes him and Michelle as being able to talk a lot – about lots of things. In addition, JP appreciates that they can watch sport together – and do everything together – even shopping!

JP feels that he and his wife are best friends. That is why he does not go out very often. It has sometimes been hard for his friends to accept this, but now that many of them are also getting married, they are expressing more of an understanding of what marriage and children is all about. This is something that JP is really pleased about.

### ***Appendix 3: Chantal's Interview Summary***

Chantal and Andy have been together for four years now. They met in Cape Town while Chantal was studying. She describes herself as not really wanting a relationship when she met Andy – she had just come out of a five year relationship, and so her focus was certainly not on men.

Initially, Chantal did not like Andy very much. She remembers him as being drunk the first few times that she met him, as well as being in her personal space. She describes him as over-friendly. Nevertheless, it did not take long before Andy invited Chantal out and they had the opportunity to talk and get to know each other better. They discovered they had an enormous amount to talk about and had a great deal in common. This shocked their friends who believed that Chantal and Andy had nothing in common. They believed that Chantal and Andy were extremely different and they therefore did not have faith that the new couple were able to develop and maintain a close relationship.

In addition, because Chantal was not interested in having a relationship at the time, she also believed that her relationship with Andy would probably last a few weeks only, and that it would not develop into a long term commitment. She was not very invested in the relationship and she remembers not being too concerned whether it worked or not.

Chantal describes herself as being very controlling and very organised as a person. She describes Andy as spontaneous and social – everything has to happen sporadically. She sees them as being opposites. To Chantal, Andy is a 'go-with-the-flow' type guy whereas she is a lot more 'choosey' with her friends and does not enjoy going out to parties, doing small talk and socialising to the same extent that Andy does. Although the differences in personality between Chantal and Andy can be difficult for each of them at times, they strangely enough think in the same ways. Chantal explains that they obviously just put it

out very differently. They have the same ideals, they seem to want the same things in life, and they have the same thoughts about a lot of things in life. For Chantal, what is really good about their relationship is the fact that they have the same idea of where they are going in the future.

In describing how their relationship developed, Chantal feels she and Andy got close very quickly and although in the beginning, she was not too interested in a long-term relationship, it did not take long before they were very committed to each other. In fact, after about four months of being together as a couple, Andy's lease came to an end, and they both considered moving in together. Chantal describes this as a very sporadic thing, and so after rational consideration, they decided it was too soon to take such a big step together, and Andy moved over the road from Chantal in a flat opposite hers. Although they spent most of their time together, they still had the security of knowing that they did have their own places to go to, and so were able to keep it separate in that way.

Chantal was in her final year of medicine and had to make a decision as to where she should apply for internship. After careful consideration she decided that she was going to apply to do her internship to Johannesburg. She did not consult Andy before one day coming home and announcing to him that she was going to go back to Johannesburg – the place where she grew up. Without much deliberation, Andy agreed to come back to Johannesburg with Chantal, even though he was born and brought up in Cape Town. Chantal explains that she really did not expect this response from Andy. She believes that this was probably because of what she had learnt to expect from her previous relationship. For somebody to show such commitment so quickly was strange for Chantal. In addition, at that time, Chantal remembers being relatively 'happy-go-lucky' when it came to her relationship with Andy.

Chantal's previous relationship was characterised by distrust. She had repeatedly been cheated on, and as a result, in the beginning of their relationship, Chantal

felt unable to trust Andy. Andy understood where this came from however, and he spoke Chantal through it. Chantal remembers thinking that she has to get over her trust issues because the more she grabs on or clings, the more he will pull away. Chantal believes that by being over protective, or over jealous, one actually pushes the other person away.

From Chantal's perspective, Andy, being a very social guy, flirts with everybody all the time. This was difficult for her and she describes giving herself a "talking to" as a way to cope with this. Because Andy had given her no reason not to trust him, she decided she needed to give him the trust that she had once given somebody else. She decided that her coping strategy from then on, was to brush off her insecurities when she felt he was flirting, and only speak to him about her insecurities if she was very worried. At times, she did confront Andy with her insecure feelings, and yet he would always reassure her.

It is comforting for Chantal that Andy is open about what he does at all times. For example, he always lets her know what is going on if he goes out with his friends. Chantal maintains that there is nothing worse than those guys who go out with their friends, and one does not hear from them until they pitch up at three o'clock in the morning, and one has been worrying all night.

Chantal describes her relationship with Andy as being very open, and so she never has to hide how she is feeling. She appreciates Andy's consideration in always keeping her informed and Chantal shows him this appreciation, almost as a way to encourage him to continue doing what he does.

When Chantal and Andy moved to Johannesburg together they decided to cohabit. For Chantal, she was coming back to her home city, but for Andy, he was moving to a brand new city. Before moving to Johannesburg, Chantal remembers a lot of conflict in their relationship. She attributes this to the tension involved in moving, and in addition, she feels that Andy's friends were putting a

lot pressure on him because he was moving in with his girlfriend, telling him how it will result in a great deal of pressure to get married. Chantal and Andy were very worried about the move, concerned about fighting so much, and were uncertain as to what would happen should they have to break up and find themselves in a whole new city.

Nevertheless, after moving to Johannesburg, it took Andy about a month and a half to settle in. He met and started to make friends with some of Chantal's friends, and soon they realised that they were fighting a lot less. Chantal now advocates that everyone should live together before they get married. She has learnt that some people live together and they can't handle it. They can't handle each other's space – they can't handle socks lying on the floor or the toothbrush lid not being put back on...all little petty things get in the way. Other people, however, live well together, and that is the category that Chantal puts herself and Andy in. She remembers living in a small one-bedroom place with Andy, and yet even without much room, they were able to live together and give each other their necessary space.

In terms of conflict, Chantal feels that she and Andy seem to fight about the same thing over and over again – marriage. Chantal really wants to get married, and pushes for this. Andy on the other hand, gets defensive and feels that he is still so young and questions why he should be pushed into marriage when they live together. Chantal explains that Andy believes that living together shows enough commitment.

Marriage for Chantal is something she has always wanted when growing up. She recognises that perhaps it is every girls dream, and for Chantal it is important to get married and have children. In addition, Chantal looks at everything that they have together, and wonders what is stopping them from getting married? She believes that being too young is an excuse and is absolute rubbish. Furthermore, Chantal feels at times that she is being taken advantage of. To emphasise this

point, she quotes the following saying: “why buy the cow when you can get the milk for free?” Chantal explains that they cook together, clean together, do their finances together, Andy gets sex whenever he wants it and they live in a nice house together. She feels therefore, that there is little incentive to get married. According to Chantal, Andy disputes the fact that he is taking advantage of Chantal and as a result, their conflicting ideas regarding marriage have become the major source of conflict. Chantal feels frustrated because it is a topic that never gets solved; neither of them is able to see the other’s point of view and therefore it has become a topic which simply gets dropped. In addition, because it is a topic which seems to be “unsolvable” and repeatedly comes up as a source of conflict, Chantal feels that it is not worth discussing and for Chantal this is unpleasant.

Chantal and Andy have been cohabiting for two and a half years now. At present she would describe her relationship with Andy as comfortable. Generally they have the same routine – they come home from work and spend time together. Chantal is grateful that they have never lost the fact that they love each other. She describes how they still spend nights together at home, holding hands in front of the TV. It is those little things that make a difference for Chantal.

In terms of physical affection, Chantal describes herself as more affectionate than Andy. Affection seems to go through phases in their relationship. Sometimes, it seems to Chantal that she must just know that Andy loves her, without him having to be affectionate and having to touch Chantal. During other phases, Chantal describes Andy as very “kissy kissy.”

Perhaps it is because Chantal and Andy live together that they go through phases where there is not much touching. Chantal supposes that it is because their relationship is not new and exciting anymore, and they can have sex whenever they want. It is not like they have to have it every time they are together. During other phases in their relationship, Chantal describes their



relationship as sometimes being a bit slow, in that they haven't been together much, or had sex for ages, or been romantic. Inevitably one of them will then put a stop to the "slow phase" and initiate going out for dinner and talking, or perhaps plan a romantic evening. They will always make a plan. In addition to this, every month, Chantal and Andy celebrate their anniversary. Chantal explains that although it might seem a bit strange to others, they do it so that they have one day a month where they get to do something together, and "screw the rest of the world!" Chantal and Andy rotate who is responsible for organising the anniversary night each month. They might go to movies, go out for dinner, or simply bring home a little present or card for the other partner – it is just one day a month that belongs only to Chantal and Andy. Chantal maintains that life can sometimes take over, and when one lives apart, one tends to make more of an effort to spend time together than when one lives with one's partner. This is because living together means that one is always around, and the need to make such an effort is no longer there. For Chantal it is important to make the effort to keep the romance going.

Chantal's family live in England. Although they are far away, they seem to enjoy Andy and support their daughter's relationship with him. They are also supportive of Chantal and Andy cohabiting before marriage. At first, Chantal thinks that it was difficult for them to accept. When Chantal and Andy had first got together and would visit her parents, her parents would make them sleep in separate bedrooms. This would exasperate Chantal, and she feels that it was very old-fashioned! Now that her parents have come to stay with Chantal and Andy in their home, things are different. These days, when they go and stay at Chantal's parents' house, they share a double bedroom.

When it comes to the strengths of Chantal and Andy's relationship, Chantal believes that there is a lot of love in their relationship, although for her, love does not really count as a strength, but is rather a given. She explains that past relationships have taught her that love is not enough.

From Chantal's perspective, there are many other things that need to go with love. Trust has to be there with love, as well as respect, honesty, and mutual understanding. For Chantal, the main strength as a couple, is that they are so honest with each other, and mutually respect each other's opinion. It is important to Chantal that they can openly talk to each other and can understand that the other might have a different opinion. She believes that it is that which keeps them together – as well as the fact that they share the same ideals and same goals.

In terms of weakness, Chantal believes that their biggest weakness currently, is conflict resolution. For her, a lot is being put under the carpet – something which she does not enjoy. In addition, although there is a lot of respect, sometimes she feels that they can sometimes forget that the other person is so different. For example, sometimes Chantal forgets just how social Andy is, whereas she is happy to be at home and lie on the couch. In the same vein, Andy sometimes forgets how much Chantal does not enjoy making small talk to people in a crowd.

Chantal feels that for her, being social is a compromise. She thinks that Andy does not really understand that because he believes that everybody should be social! Every now and then, Chantal may feel like going out and being with people, but in general she would not describe herself as a social person. She feels that she talks to people all day in her job – the last thing that she wants to do is then do it at night too. From Chantal's perspective, Andy possibly needs to be "turned down" a bit, but she acknowledges that that is just because of her personality. She acknowledges that Andy has also made a compromise though, and for him, it is probably spontaneity. Nevertheless, overall Chantal feels that she and Andy make a good combination. He brings Chantal out her shell, and at the same time, she organises him.

Chantal describes the way that their friends see her and Andy's relationship. She explains that as a couple they banter a lot. It may seem very heated and their friends will think that they are fighting. Perhaps they see the relationship as rocky

because of the constant bickering. Chantal on the other hand, does not think that her relationship is rocky at all. For her, that is just the way that they talk. They enjoy banter and both understand that it means nothing. Chantal and Andy often wonder why people think that they are fighting, and sometimes after a friend has commented on their fighting, Chantal will even check with Andy that he was not really angry with her. Of course, he never is – that is just their style. They would normally never think of those bantering conversations again.

On the other hand, other friends would probably see Chantal and Andy's relationship as symbiotic. Chantal recalls how people around them say things such as "if it wasn't for Chantal, Andy would have never been able to organise the flights and if it wasn't for Andy, Chantal would never get out of the house!"

Once Chantal and Andy are married, Chantal does not believe that their relationship will change at all. They are doing exactly the same now, as if they were actually married. They share everything, except a ring and a piece of paper. Chantal recognises however, that this is her view and Andy probably feels different to her.

Chantal wants to show the world that she belongs to somebody and she wants to get on with starting a family. She is concerned about suddenly being thirty and only then thinking about a family. She explains that they have both made the decision to have children only once they are married, and they have both agreed that they would like to have children at around the age of twenty eight years old. That is why Chantal gets anxious – she explains (tongue-in-cheek), that children do take nine months, and weddings do take a year. She sometimes feels that she has to do the Maths for Andy! It is frustrating for Chantal that although there are plans, nothing is happening, and Chantal worries that it will never happen.

What annoys Chantal about men generally, is that they think that when they get married, they suddenly have a noose around their neck and they are not allowed

to go out. Chantal speculates that maybe that is what Andy is afraid of – that Chantal will stop him from going out at night. Chantal seems to understand Andy's reservations regarding marriage as she explains that Andy's parents are reclusive. They do not have many friends and also do nothing. She believes that Andy is afraid that he will be like his parents one day and he worries that if they get married, Chantal will tighten the strings. Chantal firmly believes that that would never happen and nothing will change once they are married.

Chantal describes her own parents as being very labile. Although she remembers them fighting a lot when she was growing up, this has never put her off marriage. She has been able to rationalise and has realised that she is very different to her mother, and is a lot more strong headed. She believes that if she had been in the same position as her mother, she would not have tolerated the marriage. Chantal describes her mother as being much softer than what she is, and so would never have left her marriage. Furthermore, Chantal believes that her sister influences her parents' relationship negatively. For this reason, her and Andy often talk about setting ground rules when they become parents one day. They never want their children to come between them and destroy their relationship.

In terms of finances, Chantal and Andy contribute equally and respect each other equally in terms of money. It is generally not even thought about, who pays for what. Rather, whoever brings out their card first, will pay. Now that Chantal is no longer a student and is working, there have been months this year, where she has earned more than Andy. This is not a problem for the couple, and every now and then, Andy will even joke with Chantal about him one day being a "house-husband" and her being the breadwinner. Every now and then, Chantal notices that Andy will insist on paying for something and sometimes he has given the reason that because he is the man, it is his responsibility to pay. For Chantal, this is absurd, but she realises that this may be a result of what our fathers have instilled in us.

For the future, Chantal hopes to have great children and for her and Andy to choose fulfilling career paths. In addition she hopes that they both earn enough money to maintain a comfortable life style; something which is important to them. One of their shared goals for the future is to send their children to private schools and they recognise that to fulfill goals such as these, one needs money. It is in this way, that money is important to both Chantal and Andy.

Chantal also hopes for her and Andy's relationship to stay the same. The one thing that she would enjoy more of, however, is outward physical affection from Andy. In addition, when Chantal is upset or in a bad mood, she would appreciate it if Andy could hold her, and not judge her crying or frustration as a manoeuvre for attention from him. Although Chantal would enjoy love and attention at times like this, it does not happen often that Chantal does not feel entirely supported by Andy.

The greatest hope that Chantal holds for her and Andy is that they grow in the same direction over time. She hopes that as they grow, they are able to maintain the similar ideals and goals, and therefore stay on the same path in life.

#### ***Appendix 4: Andy's Interview Summary***

Andy describes Chantal and himself as very different to each other. He describes Chantal as extremely organised and himself as completely chaotic. While she is very private, he is extremely social. He explains that she is quite happy to sit at home on the couch, whereas as he would rather be out. Over the four years of being together, Chantal and Andy have been able to work with these differences in their relationship and Andy and Chantal have become slightly more similar in their ways: Chantal has become a lot more social, and Andy feels that he has become more inclined to be at home and sit on the couch, enjoying more private time with Chantal.

When Andy first saw Chantal, he was very attracted to her and thought she was "hot." In addition, he felt that she appeared to be a "damsel-in-distress" type of woman. He explains that he has always had the tendency to be attracted to that type. He describes Chantal as radiating issues, and Andy, acting in his usual style, felt compelled towards her. Andy describes Chantal as having an aura about her. He often watches her interact with their friends group and has noticed how they all treat her as if she is on a pedestal; as if she is ten years ahead of them in everything. It was this aura that made Andy get hold of her number four years ago. Although Andy describes this move as being very hasty for him, and was not his normal style, he believes after four years of being together, he can safely say, that he made a good choice! Today Andy remembers the date of the anniversary when he and Chantal got together, much easier than what he remembers her birthday. With tongue-in-cheek, he states that this is probably because he gets reminded by Chantal every month!

In the beginning of their relationship, Andy describes Chantal as having a temper, and she often used to have tantrums. He attributes this to the fact that she is Portuguese, and describes the Portuguese as generally having volatile tempers. Andy found this difficult to handle and really did not enjoy her temper. He admires

however, how Chantal was able to completely turn this temperament around in about a year and a half. That has probably been the biggest change for Andy in their relationship. They are a lot less aggressive with each other these days. Andy describes how this, as well as the “conversions” they have both made in terms of becoming slightly more similar to each other in their ways, has meant that they have grown closer together.

In terms of now being “closer together” in their ways, Andy feels that he and Chantal are both equally ambitious. When he compares themselves to their friends, who are generally a few years older than the two of them, he realises that they are both further ahead in their careers than most of their friends. Andy believes that this is because he is with a partner who is as ambitious as what he is.

Andy describes his own ambitions as not being entirely concerned with gaining material things – although if he were not in a long-term relationship, this would be a huge goal of his. Andy wants to be at least an asset millionaire by the time he is twenty six, and he always wanted to go to Europe before turning twenty six: a goal which he has already achieved. He wants to succeed in all facets of his life, and although the material is a part of what he wants to achieve, it is not all of it. He wants to succeed everywhere, and Chantal provides the framework that makes it happen.

At the age of twenty five, Andy is the director of a company, and together with Chantal, owns the house they live in. In addition, they travel overseas every year. For Andy, these are achievements, and he aims to continue achieving in this way. Already, he is bored of the house they are both living in at present, and is eager to move on. Ultimately, they would both like a house in Bryanston, but they cannot quite afford that yet.

Andy explains that they both realise that because of Chantal's studying and because of his business, they did not travel enough when they were younger. They therefore have an agreement that wherever possible, they will travel overseas, but in such a way as it does not interfere with their careers. Furthermore, they have both spoken about having children early so that by the time they are forty five, they will be able to go around the world. Andy maintains that to set goals such as these, one has to have ambition. As completely opposite as what Chantal and Andy are, the biggest similarity they have therefore, is their ambition. In addition, they have the same values and the same goals.

Moving in together has not changed Andy and Chantal's relationship very much at all. Because he used to live opposite her in Cape Town, they have practically always lived together anyway! Andy describes Chantal as extremely organised, and admires how talented she is at organising. Andy is therefore quite happy to let her run the house and has no problem with backing off for her to do the finances and budgets and so on. That is her strength and her role. He feels that he has to perform that role every day at work, and so is relieved to be able to sit back at home and allow Chantal to take over.

Andy makes the more socially orientated decisions in the household, and Chantal makes the administrative decisions. Andy is in awe of Chantal's organisational skills. He describes how she can do something in ten minutes that would take a "normal" person four hours to do!

In terms of conflict, the relationship has changed a lot over the four years. They used to have screaming matches, but now they fight so much less. When they do fight, Andy explains that it is usually because he doesn't want to get married "tomorrow."



Another source of conflict tends to be around social issues: Andy wants to go out and do things, whereas Chantal would rather be at home. Andy believes that his need to be such a social being is probably influenced by the way he grew up. He describes his parents as once having many friends. The friends however, all left the country and they never bothered to make new friends. Now his parents' best friends are their own parents, only one of which is left. Andy maintains that growing up in such an environment has pushed him towards surrounding himself with massive amounts of friends and connections and people he knows. Sometimes, Andy acknowledges that he forces his need to be sociable onto Chantal. He knows, however, that she does not enjoy being with people all the time, and really does not enjoy being out late. In addition, he recognises that he pushes her at times to make friends and connect with people – because that is what he would do.

Andy and Chantal have now come to the compromise when they go out: she will go home early and he will stay on, and come home later. Although Andy maintains that it would be a lot more fun if she were there, he recognises that for them, it is a way to get around the issue of being so different in this way.

Nevertheless, it seems to Andy that a lot more of his friends are starting to experience similar situations with their girlfriends, and so sometimes they will organise a “guys night” where they can play polka and come home whenever they like.

Andy describes himself as very liberal and maintains that the notion that the man has to be the head of the household and make the decisions is a completely antiquated concept. Nevertheless, he still feels that when it comes to marriage, it is the man who should ask the woman to marry him. Although Chantal really wants to get married, Andy is not asking her for her hand in marriage yet. It might be that he is simply being stubborn, but he is anxious about certain aspects of getting married now. The first concern is that he feels he is far too young in this

day and age to be getting married. He would at least like to be twenty six! Andy would be the first to be getting married within his social group and is concerned that this would affect the group. In addition, friends might look at him differently, once he is defined as a “married man.” Secondly, he worries that once they did get married, Chantal would stop focusing on marriage and shift her focus to having babies. Even so, Andy completely agrees with Chantal about having children early. He does not want to be old and “croaky” and have to bring up a sixteen year old “brat.” His concern though, is that because Chantal always has to have a focus in life, once the goal of marriage is conquered, he might become a submissive man on the floor, and then it will be baby time!

Andy and Chantal are very different in terms of being social versus not social, but they are also different in terms of exercise. While Chantal hates exercise, and would never want to go to gym, Andy was extremely sporty before meeting Chantal and loves getting out and doing exercise. Since being in a relationship with Chantal, he feels that he has become a lot less active – something which Andy dislikes. He is however trying to get back into doing more exercise. For example, he wants to get back to enjoying activities such as action cricket once a week, or playing Frisbee or Squash. Andy feels that Chantal would not join him however, as she does not enjoy it. To highlight their differences, Andy relays the story of a hike they recently did together. He explains how Chantal hated it, and could hardly walk on the Monday after the weekend. Andy loved being outdoors and being able to work up a sweat.

Whereas there are many differences between the couple, Andy sees their opposite natures as complementing each other, and the weakness in their relationship (their difference) actually becomes their strength. For example, if they need to get something done, he is the strategic visionary, while she is more of the “numbers person.” If this were a business partnership, Andy would be the ideas and Chantal would make it all happen with numbers. Andy explains that her “obsessive-compulsiveness” compliments his ridiculous over ambition. He has

learnt that one cannot be over ambitious if one does not have the ability to keep up with oneself. In addition, Andy feels that they can still be their own people, and yet be together. He hopes never to lose that. If he had to become too much like Chantal, it wouldn't work. Andy explains that he will always be more social than Chantal and will always want to do exercise. He will also always leave dishes out because he is a messy person. On the other hand, Chantal will always be organised. Andy describes her as an "enabler" in that she will always just get things done. Andy feels that he is like that at work, but not at home. By the time he gets home from work, Andy describes how the last thing he wants to do, is be pedantic about a fork!

At work, Andy describes himself as a perfectionist. He was classically trained in music from the age of four years old. He then played for about sixteen years. Learning the technicalities of playing classical music and learning things off by heart has turned him into a real perfectionist at work, whereas at home, he slacks off. For example, he often does not stack dishes. While dirty dishes do not really bother Andy, they really do bother Chantal. She is extremely tidy and from Andy's perspective, perhaps even borders on being obsessive compulsive sometimes!

Chantal and Andy's style of being together is characterised by a lot of friendly banter and teasing. Andy maintains that he teases a lot! In fact, as a child, he used to tease people too much, and this became something that he had to change about himself. Nevertheless, between him and Chantal there is a great deal of light-hearted banter. If anything, Andy thinks that she probably takes 10% of the banter the wrong way, which she shouldn't. Andy believes that without banter, relationships would be boring. He remembers watching an advert where two old people are sitting at the table, and all they had to say to each other was "pass the peas" or "pass the salt." This would be terrible to Andy. To him, talking, making jokes and having friendly banter is extremely important. Andy believes that if Chantal took 50% of the banter in the wrong way, this would be a problem in the relationship, but how it is now, is fine.

In terms of deciding to move to Johannesburg with Chantal, Andy states that being with Chantal was 100% better than not being with her. He would have thought, having been born and brought up in Cape Town, and knowing himself, that he would have resisted moving to Johannesburg, but instead, he found himself eager for the change and it also kept the relationship interesting. Johannesburg is not the end destination for Andy. He thinks that once he has achieved what he wants to, he will most likely go somewhere else. He will never leave the country, however – he feels strongly about being a South African. Andy comments on how for Chantal, as a doctor, it will be easy to find work wherever she goes, but for him, it might be a bit more difficult.

Andy feels extremely proud of Chantal being a doctor. That is why he always tries to put her in the limelight, but she does not enjoy that. For Andy, it is great dating a doctor! It is like a big status boost and ego boost having a professional person around all the time. Also, all Andy and Chantal's friends look up to her in awe. Already they have "corridor consultations" with her. Andy believes that their friends view her as larger as life because she is so organised. Perhaps they even see her as a god sometimes, which Andy thinks is great. He goes on to describe how although Chantal is so young, she can cook when no-one else can, she can organise a holiday for everyone, and she even knows when to get a cholera certificate or a passport stamp for this and that, when everyone else would not have even thought of those things. In contrast to Chantal, Andy speculates that their friends see him as a lot more ineffective than what he is in reality. He feels that his friends must think that Chantal is very good for him. Andy states that he is hen-pecked. He gives two definitions of being henpecked: one definition is being completely crazy in love with someone, and the other is doting. Andy maintains that the first definition adheres to him.

Andy's mother had always told him that he needed to date a strong hard woman. They approve wholeheartedly of their son's relationship with Chantal and Andy thinks that they are probably hoping for them to get married.

In terms of cohabiting before marriage, Andy feels it is a good idea as one really gets to know someone. He maintains that until one has woken up next to someone for a year or two, one doesn't really know the other person: It is important to know whether one can work well together, organise a holiday or decorate a room together; make general decisions together, such as these. Andy is therefore happy that they live together and feels that he would be a lot less ready for marriage otherwise. From his perspective, a relationship will not go forward until two partners have lived together.

Andy describes himself as a romantic, although at times, when he gets stressed, he can tend to forget. He hopes that Chantal would agree that he is romantic. When he gets into the right mood, he gets what he refers to as "old-fashioned romantic," and he assumes that that is probably what is endearing about him. Every now and then, Andy will cook dinner – although he acknowledges that it is usually only one in fifty dinners – or he will come home with a present or take Chantal out for dinner. Andy feels that they do a lot more together than other couples. For example, they will both initiate going away together about once every three months. Although Chantal does the organising, they both come up with the idea together. Andy feels that they are busy people career-wise, and so it is important to organise times to get away and be together.

Andy regularly works twelve or thirteen hour days. In addition, Chantal has regularly done thirty six hour calls. This has meant, that often, every four or five days, Andy does not see Chantal for two days. This has given Andy a lot of space, and he recalls how when she leaves to go on call, he misses her already. In Andy's opinion, it works well, in that they both lead similar lifestyles, and both work very hard.

For the future, Andy hopes for the standard – the white picket fence and two and half children – but he also hopes for much more. He wants to be able to give his children a great education, and he wants to be able to enjoy life because of having a successful career. Being able to travel and being able to effect change. These are some Andy's ideals, and he states that he shares these ideals with Chantal, who is very much like him in this way. In addition he hopes that they will be the one "together" marriage, within the sea of divorce. He does not see how they could not be together forever.

So why not get married now? Well, maybe it is simply a principle issue!