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RESEARCHING RELATIONSHIPS: UNPACKING THE  
DISCURSIVE ORGANISATION OF INFIDELITY AND  
MONOGAMY IN PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of City  
University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## Abstract

This research employed a social constructionist paradigm and utilised discourse analysis to examine the discursive organisation of infidelity and monogamy in personal relationships. Twenty-five participants took part in this study, fifteen taking part in semi-structured interviews and ten participants taking part in group discussions (two groups of three, one group of four). The interviews and focus groups primarily explored participants' views and experiences of monogamy and infidelity in relationships. The focus group participants were also convened for second meetings, where participants discussed the results and analysis generated from their first group meeting. The discursive analysis employed in this research was guided by a Discursive Psychology approach (Potter & Wetherell 1987) and a methodology developed to explore 'discourse analysis in action' by incorporating principles from Action Research. The results presented explored discursive constructions of monogamy, infidelity, relationship break-ups and also several broader relationship discourses. The findings suggest that although there is a grand discourse of monogamy often informing participants' discussions of personal relationships, and participants draw on normative discourses in terms of labelling behaviour as in/fidelity. Participants also diversely rework discourses of monogamy and infidelity to present more contextualised accounts, varyingly constructed around their own lived experiences. The findings highlight the potential for confusion and interpersonal complications, as well as the complications for researchers, when negotiating and exploring the terrain of monogamy and infidelity in personal relationships. The findings further point to the theoretical importance of paying attention to the constructed nature of language and its role in constructing varying relationship realities. Further this thesis has contributed to a theoretical and methodological debate on the development of the use of discourse analysis as an appropriate methodology, the development of a framework to explore 'discourse analysis in action' posited the benefits of incorporating principles from action research into a discourse analysis method. This methodology component was theoretically interesting and also invaluable in terms of adding to the analysis and the understanding gained of infidelity and monogamy in personal relationships.

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For smelly cat, thanks for the distractions.



# Researching Relationships: Unpacking the Discursive Organisation of Infidelity and Monogamy in Personal Relationships

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# 1

## Preface

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### 1.1 Personal Reflections on a Topic

This section provides a reflexive introduction to this thesis, exploring the ‘stories’ I tell in terms of explaining my route into studying the topics of infidelity and monogamy in personal relationships.

The story people expect:

“Well there was this guy who cheated on me (.) [Laughter]”, the story ends.

The ‘objective, half-true’ story:

“Well, while I was doing my undergraduate degree at Staffs<sup>1</sup> there was a lecturer there who was researching the social constructions of love and also the ‘other women’ in relationships where infidelity had occurred (see Burns, 1999; 2000), and there was also quite a few other lecturers working from a critical social perspective, so that social constructionism and other ‘critical’ epistemologies were available to me, which enabled researching relationships or infidelity a valid possibility. I did my final dissertation project on infidelity, so doing this thesis was an extension of that really.”

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<sup>1</sup> *Staffordshire University*

The subjective 'true' story:

“When I was studying for my undergraduate degree I was in a relationship and when I went home one Christmas he cheated on me twice. I came back to uni none the wiser, and eventually found out after getting an inkling that something had happened while I was away and spent the night grilling him about what he had been up to – he then confessed to kissing a mutual friend at a party. I was incredibly angry, mainly because all my friends at uni had known, including my best friend at the time, and no one had told me. Friends took different sides, the majority agreeing that I should be very angry and mad, particularly at the mutual friend. It got to the point a few months later that I was very tired of being angry, and having my mood dictated to me by how my friends, and wider relationship norms, expected me to feel and behave after having someone ‘cheat’ on me. I had a personal and theoretical epiphany: infidelity being *the* worse thing that could happen in a personal relationship was a social construction. This social construction which I found myself positioned within afforded me particular ‘ways of being’ (Davies and Harre, 1999), and I was experiencing a tension between how I felt about the event and how my friends were positioning me and essentially encouraging me to feel. I felt like I was on the receiving end of normative constructions of infidelity that now did not tally with how I wanted to feel and behave. This personal realisation was very much encompassed and encouraged by studying social constructionism (see Gergen 1999) and Foucauldian discourse analysis (Foucault 1980, Rabinow 1984) at university, and being exposed to the work of Dr Angie Burns and the constructions of the ‘other women’ within discourses of infidelity. This personal experience of the effects of relationship norms and their consequences for my own feelings of agency coupled with an awakening of understanding a social constructionist epistemology led me to want to explore how infidelity is constructed in personal relationships and to try and understand why this relationship event is often constructed as the worse thing that could happen to you in a relationship. And further, how the discourses of infidelity afford particular (limiting) subject positions, I wanted to understand how discourses of infidelity held such explanatory and positionary power.”

These opening comments represent my attempts at reflexivity (Finlay 2002), firstly in terms of how and why I came to this area of study, but secondly, exposing the ways in which I attempt to manage the ways in which I am positioned when studying this topic. These stories are my attempts to expose that, particularly when studying 'private' or 'personal', people do many assumptions about why you are studying this. The most common being that people expect me to have a particular (unusual?) stance to the topic area, usually either as being someone who has experienced lots of infidelity in a relationship, or as someone advocating non-traditional approaches to relationships (e.g. advocating non-monogamy); people wonder 'about the potential skeletons in your own closet' (Reavey 1997:553; Braun 1999). Thus I am aware that I am positioned in relation to my research, based on which story I tell. It is hoped that by presenting the different storied accounts of how and how I came to this topic, it enables an explicit foregrounding of the role of the researcher within the research endeavour and attempts to reflect on my motivations for approaching this area of study; whilst also acknowledging this dilemma of presentation in terms of how my position will impact on the perceived validity of the research and that people will always wonder about my 'personal' position in terms of this area of study. It is hoped that this reflexive account highlights that it was not a simplistic personal or academic motivation that led me to this research area, but that it was a complicated intersection of personal and academic life that has led to and drives my research interest in monogamy and infidelity.

## **1.2. Thesis Overview**

*Chapter 2* The objective of this chapter is to present an overview of the existing research undertaken within psychology pertaining to infidelity and monogamy in personal relationships. The chapter reviews the findings from experimental psychological studies, posited as the dominant research tradition in this area, and presents an examination and critique of the research methods traditionally employed within experimental studies exploring infidelity and monogamy in relationships. The critique is then further developed through an examination of the norms and assumptions made about personal relationships and

employed within experimental studies. The literature review then moves onto consider the small sample of research undertaken from a critical psychological perspective exploring constructions of infidelity and monogamy, and therefore also explores related social constructionist work pertaining to personal relationships. This chapter works to develop the rationale for an in-depth qualitative exploration of infidelity and monogamy and situates the present project within the current research domain.

*Chapter 3* This chapter aims to explore explicitly the epistemological and methodological underpinnings of this research. It contains a discussion and debate of the uses of a social constructionist perspective, exploring both relativist and realist perspectives and discussing the discourse analytical methodology adopted in this present study. The design of study one is outlined – detailing the methodology employed to explore the discursive constructions of monogamy and infidelity in personal relationships. The chapter then moves onto a re-interrogation of a discourse analytical/social constructionist perspective, and posits a theoretical and methodological rationale for incorporating principles from Action Research within a discourse analysis methodology and sets out the aims for study two of this thesis – exploring the limits and possibilities of discursive constructions of infidelity and monogamy in personal relationships.

*Chapter 4* The first of five empirical chapters, chapter 4 explores the data gathered from conducting 15 individual interviews, and discusses the results and analysis pertaining to constructions of monogamy in relationships. The analysis presented in this chapter begins to unpack and understand the discursive organisation of monogamy in personal relationships, and explicates and deconstructs the centrality placed on monogamy in personal relationships. The chapter explores the varying ways and effects of the im/position of monogamy in personal relationships, discussing how participants relate to hegemonic constructions of monogamy but also work discursively to contextualise and particularise adherence to monogamy in relationships. Discourses of non-monogamy are also explored, which adds to the exploration of the varying ways participants relate to and construct extra-relational encounters.

*Chapter 5* Related to chapter 4, this chapter continues the analysis of the data gathered from conducting individual interviews, and discusses the results and analysis pertaining to constructions of infidelity in relationships. This chapter discusses how participants negotiate and position experiences and behaviours as infidelity in relationships, and explores the overarching discourse of sex and sexual activity in mediating definitions of infidelity. A continuum discourse of infidelity is also explored in this chapter, which is seen to complicate the binary distinction between emotional and sexual infidelity commonly employed within experimental psychological studies. This chapter also presents an examination of how participants negotiate and explain their experiences of engaging in extra-relational encounters, discussing ‘cheaters’ positionings and how participants necessarily draw on various discursive strategies to negotiate this negative subject position.

*Chapter 6* This chapter is the third empirical chapter and explores the analysis of data gathered from convening 3 focus groups, who met 2-3 times each, initially discussing their opinions and experiences of infidelity and monogamy, and the subsequent meetings being used to discuss the results and analysis generated after their first group meeting. This chapter explores the discursive constructions of monogamy and infidelity present within the group discussion data, exploring results from both the primary analysis (completed after the first group meeting) and secondary analysis (completed after the second group meeting, where participants discussed and explored the primary analysis of their first group meeting); thus this chapter also explores results generated through the interactive component of the methodological design. The hegemonic status of monogamy is further explored in this chapter, discussing monogamy as the ‘commonsense’ norm structuring personal relationships and how it is often left unchallenged or unpacked by participants within the group discussions. Discourses of infidelity are also explored in this chapter, with participants constructing infidelity with considerable variation and using a variety of terms and contextualisations when discussing this phenomenon. Monogamy and infidelity are discussed not as fixed, universal phenomena, but rather concepts that are variably defined and im/positioned within personal relationships.

*Chapter 7* This chapter continues the exploration of data gathered from the focus group discussions, and explores the results and analysis of discourses of relationship break-ups. As well as exploring the primary discourse analysis, this chapter also explores aspects of the secondary discourse analysis. This chapter explores the common relationship ‘scripts’ for experiencing relationship break-ups, particularly focusing on an exploration of discourses of being ‘dumped’ and being the ‘dumper’. Within this chapter there is also a discussion of the emotive language of relationship break-ups, and how the language used can be seen as both descriptive and prescriptive of relationship break-up experiences.

*Chapter 8* This chapter is the final empirical chapter, continuing from chapters 6 and 7 in that it focuses on discussing data gathered from the focus group discussions, and includes an exploration of both the primary and secondary discourse analysis conducted. This chapter focuses on two further relationship discourses – a shopping/consumer discourse of women shopping for relationships and sex, and a discourse of women’s involvement in sex - necessarily constructing a ‘passive’ position for women within sexual encounters. The latter of these discourses encouraging a lengthy discussion within the subsequent group discussion of the practice of faking orgasm during heterosexual, thus this chapter presents a complex examination of the multiple readings and multiple subject positions afforded within discourses of the relationship practice of faking orgasm.

*Chapter 9* This concluding chapter brings together the analysis presented within chapters 4 through 8 and draws out the central discussion points from the discourse analysis of monogamy and infidelity presented within this thesis. The central argument within this chapter being this discursive examination of the concepts of monogamy and infidelity in personal relationships has necessarily complicated our understanding of these phenomena and highlighted the integral role of language in constructing these concepts. The discussion also highlights the potential for interpersonal confusion and complications, stemming from the varying ways monogamy and infidelity are im/positioned within relationships, and the variation seen within and across individuals in terms of their constructions of monogamy and infidelity. This chapter also explores the implications for research practice, and highlights issues that need to be considered when exploring such

interpersonal phenomenon, such as explicating hegemonic conceptualisations used by researchers (for example, that monogamy is defined by sexual exclusivity) so as not to re-script and misinterpret data collected.

# 2

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## 2.1. Introduction - Literature Review

Approaches to the study of personal relationships have investigated a wide variety of aspects, for example what factors are important in long lasting relationships, what characteristics do individuals look for in a partner. Given the focus of this research project the following review will centre on those studies pertaining to infidelity and monogamy (further example of extensive reviews of the research literature pertaining to infidelity in relationship can be found in Allen et al 2005 and Blow and Harnett 2005). Within this literature review I will attempt an overview of traditional studies of personal relationships, followed by an examination of the research methods employed within such studies. I will then move on to an explication of some of the assumptions underpinning traditional approaches to the study of personal relationships and the various relationship 'norms' or 'versions' of personal relationships such research presents. Finally I will end this literature review section by focusing on an exploration of a critical psychological approach to the study of personal relationships. The terminology used within this review pertaining to personal relationships may vary; this is due to adopting the original terminology used by the studies covered. The particular language used by researchers when exploring personal relationships will be explored within certain subsections. Here and throughout this thesis I use the term 'personal relationship' to denote a commonsense understanding of a 'conventional' 'intimate' personal relationship, invoking such commonsensical concepts as 'love', 'commitment', 'trust' and generally 'fidelity'. A further exploration of such relationship discourses will be given in the analysis sections.

## **2.2 Researching Infidelity**

The review begins with an exploration of relationship circumstances and infidelity, moving onto explore the role of culture and religion in shaping attitudes and behaviours of infidelity. The discussion then continues with an exploration of personal variables that may be correlated within the occurrence of infidelity, such as age, sexuality and gender. The first part of this review then concludes with an exploration of the prevalent theories employed to understand and account for infidelity in relationships.

### **2.2.1 Relationship context & ‘mate value’**

One example of a comprehensive attempt to investigate the role of relationship circumstances in predicting or facilitating infidelitous behaviour is that by Buss and Shackelford (1997). Buss and Shackelford used a variety of measures to arrive at married couples own specific relationship ‘context’ definition and scores, measures included self reports of recurring areas of conflict and ratings of sexual satisfaction within the relationship, structured interviews and measures to assign a couple their relative ‘mate value’ – how desirable the partners are in the ‘mating marker’ (ibid, p195). Measures were then also taken to arrive at a score for each couples ‘susceptibility to infidelity’, through self-estimates and estimates for their partner. Susceptibility was arrived at via the probability that individuals would engage in six forms of extramarital behaviours – flirting, passionately kissing, going on a romantic date, having a one night stand, having a brief affair and having a serious affair (ibid, p199). The authors state that the relationship contexts most strongly linked to ‘susceptibility’ were those containing sexual dissatisfaction and specific sites of conflict within the relationship. Further concluding that jealousy and low sexual satisfaction makes a relationship susceptible to infidelity. Despite these conclusions, importantly the authors note substantial variance among each relationship context variable, and thus they may be lacking internal validity and the correlation between relationship scores may therefore also be weak. The researchers also report that there were no significant

gender differences in the scores and predictions obtained. The researchers further question their measures used, stating that their investigation into susceptibility may present weaker correlations because it is centred around measures of ‘anticipated’ infidelity, in comparison to studies focusing on ‘actual’ incidences of infidelity – which, as Buss & Shackelford state, usually find much higher correlations and reports of infidelity.

Further studies of the role of relationship context have included the attempt to tease out the relationship between infidelity and relationship dissatisfaction. Previti and Amato (2004) conducted a 17-year longitudinal study to investigate whether extramarital sex (EMS) caused marital breakdown. Participants were contacted via a random sampling measure and self-reports were collected via structured telephone interviews. The questions were used to obtain measures of marital happiness, divorce proneness, extramarital sex and actual incidence of divorce. The authors report that EMS lowers subsequent marital happiness and increases divorce ‘proneness’. They further conclude that infidelity is both a cause and consequence of relationship deterioration. Interestingly, within the data collection measures, infidelity in the relationship was ascertained as follows: ‘Have you had a problem in your marriage because one of you has had a sexual relationship with someone else?’ (ibid p223). This characterisation of infidelity is interesting for a number of reasons; firstly it may inadvertently miss other forms of infidelity not encompassed by ‘sexual relationship’, for example, there is often the distinction made within experimental studies of emotional and sexual infidelity (see later discussions of research exploring this distinction). Further, this measure may exclude participants reporting infidelity in the relationship where this has not caused problems. The researchers do assert that the incidence of infidelity may be underreported within their study and that this may interfere with the strength of the findings reported – although they do not discuss this in terms of the components I have just explored. Finally, it is interesting to note here the inconsistency of terms and conceptualisations of ‘infidelity’ within this particular study. ‘Sexual relationships’ with someone other than their spouse is used to obtain self-reports from participants for the incidence of infidelity in their relationship, this is quickly translated and reported as ‘extramarital sex’ by the authors, which is then further termed ‘infidelity’ within parts of the research

article. Such inconsistency of terminology may lead to, or be a consequence of, poor operationalisation of 'infidelity' within such studies. I will return to discussions of inconsistent terminology later within this literature review.

### **2.2.2 Sexual attitudes & social circle**

Further studies have explored the relationship between infidelity and sexual and intimacy variables, such that sexual permissiveness, early onset of sexual activity and an avoidant relationship style are significantly correlated with infidelity or 'betrayal behaviour' in relationships (Feldman and Cauffman 1999a). Zak et al (2002) broadened the study of the area of 'relationship context' further and investigated the role of immediate social context, in the form of family and friends, for the occurrence of infidelity in relationships. They investigated whether an inverse relationship existed between a) perceived friend and familial support and infidelity, b) romantic love and infidelity and c) trust and infidelity (2002:288). They found correlations consistent with their hypotheses, for both males and females, but found that a higher correlation existed between infidelity and trust for women than for men. It was thus concluded that females who do not trust their partners are more likely to contemplate committing infidelity than men who do not trust their partners. Finally, it was concluded that peoples who have social support for their relationship (from friends and family) and those who experience trust and romantic love in their relationships are less likely to commit infidelity. Relatedly, Treas and Giesen (2000) explored, among other factors, the effect of network ties and family on the incidence of sexual infidelity in cohabiting partners. Enjoying spending time with one another's family and friends was linked to low rates of infidelity in relationships. Similarly, higher rates of extradyadic involvement (EDI) has been shown to be related to having an EDI supportive social environment; where participants report higher rates of EDI in their immediate friends and social group and friends who are approving of EDI (Buunk 1987).

### **2.2.3. Cross-cultural**

Limited cross-cultural research has been conducted looking at infidelity in relationships. For example, one such study conducted by Abraham et al (2001) researched cross-cultural differences in responses to sexual or emotional infidelity. They investigated subjective distress amongst African American and white men and women, who were asked to imagine a partner being emotionally or sexually unfaithful. It was found that more women than men were distressed by imagining a partner forming a deep emotional attachment to another person and more men than women were distressed by imagining a partner enjoying passionate sexual intercourse with another person. It was concluded that there were gender differences in the distress experienced in response to emotional and sexuality infidelity, and that this finding did not vary across the cultures examined. Furthermore, Penn et al (1997) report the importance of interrogating multiple factors when exploring cross-cultural differences in experiences of infidelity, such as the political, social, economic and historic location of particular ethnic groups, for example, levels of economic disadvantage and gender imbalances may adequately explain differences in the rate of infidelity among different ethnic groupings. Although there is limited explicit cross-cultural research, there is also limited exploration of 'culture' or sociocultural factors within the corpus of infidelity research. There is often a lack of reflection on the role of such shaping factors and how they may have influenced participants' responses to and conceptualisations of infidelity, and indeed how such contexts may impact on researchers' own understanding of interpersonal phenomena; possibly because there is the assumption that researching white, English speaking, middle class individuals is somehow free from the mediating effects of culture. Therefore cultural understandings of infidelity in relationships are rarely interrogated.

#### **2.2.4 Cheating personalities**

Research has also been undertaken to investigate the relationship between particular personality and demographic characteristics in the occurrence of infidelity in relationships. For example, Wiederman and Hurd (1999) investigated the relationships between 'extradyadic' (ED) activity, defined as dating and sexual activity occurring outside of the primary relationship, and religiosity, sex-love-marriage association beliefs, narcissism, sexual sensation seeking, a 'ludic' or

game-playing orientation to romantic relations and a self perceived ability to deceive one's dating partner. Engaging in ED behaviours was found to be related to less adherence to sex-love-marriage association beliefs, increased sexual sensation seeking, a 'ludic' love style and a self-perceived ability to deceive one's dating partner. Wiederman and Hurd conclude that further research is needed to determine whether a desire for sexual variety drives the relationships between ED sexual activity and sexual sensation seeking, or whether this association is caused by underlying components of personality traits (1999:273). Wiederman and Hurd assert that a greater understanding of the factors related to ED involvement during dating has important implications for understating how adolescents and young adults balance exclusivity norms with conflicting temptations, impulses and desires. Furthering the debate of the involvement of personality factors, Schmitt (2004) conducted a large international survey of personality types and "risky sexuality" (p301) - relationship infidelity or sexual promiscuity. They state 'universal' findings for relationship infidelity being associated with low agreeableness and low conscientiousness, but no relationship to neuroticism and openness.

Using self reports, spouse reports and interviewer report methods, Buss and Shackelford (1997) also investigated the role of personality factors in the susceptibility to infidelity in the first year of marriage. They found the personality factors of low Conscientiousness, high Narcissism and high Psychoticism were most closely linked to 'susceptibility'. Similarly, Egan and Angus (2004) investigated the relationship between personality, particularly the factors of social dominance, manipulativeness and openness, and psychopathy and infidelity. They found an interaction between social dominance, sex and infidelity, reporting that males who had committed infidelity were higher on a social dominance dimension than similarly unfaithful females. Furthermore, manipulativeness predicted the number of affairs, and their emphasis on sexuality, whereas social dominance did not. Egan and Angus report that their results suggest male and female infidelity is underpinned by differential personality types as well as differential sexual strategies. Sheppard et al (1995) found a relationship between self-esteem and dating infidelity, reporting that measures of self-esteem were higher in individuals who did not engage in dating infidelity. They argue that if self-esteem is raised during adolescence then unfaithful behaviour may be circumvented. Little

attention has been paid to the role of religious beliefs and infidelitous behaviours, although the majority of studies reporting a negative correlation between extramarital involvement and religiosity (Allen et al 2005). Further areas that have received attention for their role in infidelity are educational levels (Atkins, Baucon and Jacobson 2001; Forste and Tanfer, 1996), where higher education levels are correlated with more accepting attitudes towards extra-relational encounters, but generally there is mixed evidence for the relationship between educational levels and infidelitous behaviours (Allen et al 2005); income (Atkins et al *ibid*) where they reported a positive relationship between income levels and likelihood of infidelity in the relationship, once income exceeds '\$30,000' a year (£15,400 as at 11/2/08); and attachment styles (Brennan and Shaver 1995; Allen and Baucom 2004), Brennan and Shaver (*ibid*) reporting a relationship between 'dismissive' and 'preoccupied' attachment styles and prior instances of extra-relationships [attachment styles were related to reports of past behaviour].

#### **2.2.5. Gender**

A huge body of research studying the phenomenon of infidelity within personal relationships has focused on investigating gendered characteristics, either in reported reactions to infidelity or gender differences in the occurrence of infidelity in relationships. Sheppard et al (1995) state that women and men approach the idea of being monogamous differently, men viewing monogamy and commitment negatively and women placing a positive value on relationship fidelity. Blow and Harnett (2005) state that although a large proportion of the experimental research investigating infidelity has focused on gender differences, no clear, consistent differences have been found. In contrast, Atkins et al (2001), in an overview of previous research into gender differences, state that it is clear that gender plays a central role in infidelity, but assert that the joint impact of age and gender on infidelity should be further examined. Evolutionary theory is often used to drive the predictions of gender differences in infidelity, and indeed Allen et al (2005) present a large, synthesised review of studies of infidelity and report that one of the main theories utilised to explain and examine infidelity is evolutionary psychological theory. For example, Harris (2000) reports the evolutionary hypothesis that men should necessarily be more upset by sexual infidelity, due to

the threat of cuckoldry, and women should be more upset by emotional infidelity, due to the fear of loss of a mate's resources (see also Abraham et al 2001; Dijkstra et al 2001 for a similar evolutionary explanation of gender differences). Therefore the main focus of gendered investigations has been to research gender differences in responses to sexual and emotional infidelity in relationships. It is proposed that sexual fidelity in relationships guarantees that a woman's children are the biological progeny of her husband, and that a husband is not responsible for children born to women other than his wife (Previti and Amato 2004). Pinel (2003) further develops an evolutionary approach to relationship patterns, arguing that monogamy is thought to have evolved in those mammalian species in which each female could raise more young, or more fit young, if she had undivided help. In these species any change in the behaviour of the female that would encourage a male to bond exclusively with her would increase the likelihood that her heritable characteristics would be passed on to future generations. Such strategies would include females driving other potential female mates away, not copulating with a male until he had been with her for a long time. Such strategies have been directly applied to understanding human relationship patterns of monogamy/infidelity, Burns (2002) states that evolutionary theory is often now used to explain what is taken as 'normal' gendered behaviour.

#### **2.2.6. Types of infidelity**

Partly because of the different evolutionary strategies assumed, research has focused on a distinction between sexual and emotional infidelity and an expectation of gender differences. Such a comparison has been a dominant thread within studies of infidelity and monogamy in relationships (e.g. Abraham et al 2001, Atkins et al 2001, Bailey et al 1994, Barash and Lipton 2001, Boekhout et al 1998, Buss and Shackelford 1997, Buss et al 1992, Buss et al 1999, Cramer et al 2000, Dijkstra et al 2001, Harris 2000, Harris 2003, Harris 2004, Harris and Christenfeld 1996, Shackelford, Buss and Bennet 2002, Sheets and Wolfe 2001, Wiederman and Kendall 1999, Wiederman and Lamar 1998; to name but a few). Many researchers report gender differences in the types of infidelity undertaken and gender differences in responses to various types of infidelity. Typically women are reported as being more distressed by emotional infidelity and men by

sexual infidelity (e.g. Abraham et al 2001, Boekhout et al 1999, Harris 2000, Pedersen et al 2002, Sagarin et al 2002, Yarab, Cregan and Allgeier 1998). Wiederman and Hurd (1999) investigated 'extradyadic' (ED) involvement, which was defined variously in terms of different 'emotional' or 'sexual' behaviours. Although they found no gender difference in the incidence of ED dating or ED kissing, men were found to be more likely to engage in ED fondling, oral sex and vaginal intercourse (all classified as extradyadic sexual behaviours).

Harris (2003) further tested an evolutionary prediction for gender differences in reactions to emotional and sexual infidelity. Harris specifically investigated jealousy responses to a mate's infidelity, using a forced-choice hypothetical measure. In line with predictions, more men predicted that sexual infidelity would be worse than emotional infidelity. Sabini and Silver (2005) further sought to investigate hypothetical infidelity using a scenario method; three components to an incident of infidelity were storied – their partner went to a brothel and was involved in a sexual or emotional encounter, the 'affair' then ended and the partner returned to the primary relationship. Findings were contrary to the evolutionary prediction, generally, females were more hurt and angry in responses to infidelity than males. Both genders were equally more upset by the imaginary sexual encounter than the emotional one and females were more upset at the storied termination of the affair than males. Similarly, Nannini and Mevers (2000) used scenarios of sexual, emotional and sexual/emotional infidelity. Participants' reactions were categorised in terms of 6 cognitive dimensions of emotion and a score of emotional upset. Women reported more distress over all situations, for both men and women those involving sexual component most upsetting. Differences have been noted in terms of asking participants about real, as opposed to hypothetical, experiences, where there was no gender difference found in reactions to sexual or emotional aspects of a mate's betrayal (Harris 2003). Harris (2000) examined physiological responses to imagined infidelity, attempting to replicate previous studies reporting gender differences in responses to emotional and sexual infidelity. Within this study, the gender difference in responses was not replicated. Harris therefore states that the present research does not provide unequivocal support for asserting gender differences in responses to emotional and sexual infidelity. Further, one methodological issue with the use of

scenarios is stated by Nannini and Meyers (2000), “as romantic relationships are far more complex than any short scenario or vignette can relay, it is important to explore further issues of infidelity, responsibility, and jealousy in the real life relationships in which they occur” (p121). Nannini and Meyers also state the importance of cognitive appraisals of infidelitous experiences, as there is individual mediation and interpretation of different acts of infidelity.

These contradictory findings with the area of gender difference and infidelity point to a complexity surrounding this relationship practice that does not seem to be captured through the experimental methods traditionally employed to study infidelity. Studies generally reproduce a sexual/emotional binary, which underestimates the complexity of these components within personal relationships and individual accounting practices. Within such a research paradigm, sexual infidelity is often defined as having ‘sex’ with someone else other than the primary partner, whereas emotional infidelity is characterised as falling in love with someone other than the primary partner. A clear, unproblematic distinction between emotional and sexual behaviours, and hence emotional/sexual infidelity, is one that is commonly invoked within infidelity research. This either/or distinction between sexual and emotional infidelity may not correspond to how infidelity is viewed and experienced in relationships, the distinction perhaps being artificial. As Dijkstra et al (2001) found, participants cited a belief in the co-occurrence of sexual and emotional infidelity, even when the scenarios employed constructed these behaviours as mutually exclusive. Furthermore, DeSteno and Salovey (1996) report gender differences in responses to sexual and emotional infidelity are easily replicated using forced-choice methods, but when continuous scales or open-answer questions are used the results have not been replicated. Relatedly, Feldman and Cauffman (1999b) report that a gender difference was absent in the incidence, motives and experiences of “sexual betrayal”, their study used questionnaires where participants answered questions about their ‘real’ experiences.

### **2.2.7. Sexuality**

Sexuality has further been investigated as a variable mediating responses to, and occurrences of, infidelity. Harris (2002) investigated sexual and romantic jealousy

within a sample of heterosexual and homosexual adults. Heterosexuals' responses to a forced-choice question about hypothetical infidelity, detailing which type of infidelity was most distressing (emotional or sexual), did yield a gender difference. Heterosexual men were more likely than heterosexual women to choose sexual infidelity as more upsetting than emotional infidelity, although this gender difference was not found when participants were asked to recall and answer the question based on personal experience. Overall it was found that, regardless of sexual orientation, men and women focus more on a mate's emotional infidelity rather than sexual infidelity. Dijkstra et al (2001) also investigated gender differences in the events that elicit jealousy amongst homosexuals, specifically focusing on whether a mate's emotional infidelity or sexual infidelity was more upsetting. It was found that gay men more often than lesbian women chose a mate's emotional infidelity as more upsetting. Also lesbians more often than gay men chose a mate's sexual infidelity as the most upsetting, which is usually the reverse when heterosexuals are sampled. Heterosexual men are usually reported as choosing sexual infidelity as the most upsetting/distressing and heterosexual women are usually reported as choosing emotional infidelity as the most upsetting/distressing. Therefore it was asserted that homosexuals resemble heterosexuals of the opposite gender when choosing which type of infidelity is the most upsetting. Importantly, it was further concluded from the study that the effect of gender on infidelity choice was also mediated by beliefs with regard the co-occurrence of sexual and emotional infidelity, the belief that if one type of infidelity has occurred (e.g. sexual) then the other has also (e.g. emotional). This begins to complicate the clear binary distinction between sexual and emotional behaviours often invoked within experimental psychological research.

The mediating effects of sexuality on reactions to types of infidelity was also examined by Sagarin et al (2002), further employing evolutionary theory to explain the results. Using both a forced-choice scenario and a 'continuous' measure of jealousy (i.e. a ten-point scale ranging from 'not at all jealous' to 'extremely jealous') they investigated responses to infidelity; in terms of the effects of gender, past experiences of infidelity and the sexual orientation of the infidelity. Male participants are again reported as responding with greater distress to sexuality infidelity, although gender differences disappeared when considering

a partner becoming involved with a same-sex lover. These results were explained due to infidelity with a same-sex lover not involving any risk of conception or the 'loss of resources' if a male partner begins to "divert resources to the children of rival females" (ibid p22). These results are in contrast to Williams (2003), who states that there may be a heightened shock-value of same-sex infidelities, leaving a partner who feels sexually inadequate and further spurned, which may be further problematised if the partner has homophobic views.

### **2.3. Methods of Study**

The use of certain methods and the study of behaviours in particular methodological ways assumes certain epistemological positions. Such assumptions/positions are often not explicated by the researcher, and as such traditional research in this area often relies on the 'taken for granted' positivist assumptions about what we can 'know' about behaviour. Methods are usually offered by researchers as a transparent, unconstructive way of revealing results (Edwards et al 1995). The methods used to investigate relationship behaviour will be explored in this section, followed by an exploration of the particular 'versions' of personal relationships that are presented, taken for granted, and as essentially 'constructed' within experimental psychological research adopting these approaches.

#### **2.3.1. The questionnaire**

The questionnaire method is a self-report measure, which is used in abundance, often because it is a convenient sample measure when attempting to sample a large population. This method is usually employed to investigate trends and patterns of behaviour within a given population. As such, this method has been widely used to investigate many different components of infidelity and relationship behaviour. Some questionnaires will be psychometric in character, which consists of a range of statements each to be scored, which are then used to assess an underlying psychological dimension. Within this area of study this

format is often used in combination with a measure of opinions or frequency of particular behaviours. For example, Wiederman and Hurd (1999) used a questionnaire to sample 299 men and 392 women on their relationship behaviours and attitudes. They investigated the relationship between certain attitudes, traits and behaviours (for example religiosity, narcissism and sexual sensation seeking) and 'extradyadic' (ED) involvement during dating relationships. Thus the questionnaire combined a measure of narcissism and religiosity with specific behaviour questions about ED activity. The individual components under investigation are believed to be relatively enduring traits across time and situations, such as the reference to 'personality traits' measured by subscales on the 'Narcissistic Personality Inventory' (ibid p268). Closed questions are often employed, in that the participant responds to a fixed set of options. Closed questions can increase the likelihood of a questionnaire being completed because this format is easy to self-administer and quick to complete (Clark-Carter 1997), although such questions do restrict the response options and presuppose that the participants' responses will fit the given categories.

The questionnaire method employed within these experimental studies invariably employs a positivistic approach to the objects under study, where using the 'right' methods one can access a 'true' measure of ones enduring personality traits, for example; employing such methods ensures that psychological phenomena and interpersonal behaviours can be transformed into constructs that are "definable and measurable" (Stainton-Rogers et al 1995). Stainton-Rogers et al (ibid) discuss how experimental social psychology by using questionnaires and other experimental methodologies have reified the concepts under study, for example transforming the 'self' into 'personality', an object that can be theoretically and objectively studied and measured (p46-47). Participants will have implicit knowledge and ideas about the objects and behaviours under study, for example, generally (or specific) normative ideas about the un/acceptability of infidelity in relationships. Participants know how to tell a cohesive 'story' about themselves and their behaviours (Stainton-Rogers ibid), and report that for a questionnaire to be 'reliable' all participants have to do is reply 'consistently' (p50). A further important, well noted feature of questionnaires is that "the 'factors' obtained depend entirely on the questions you ask" (ibid p50). The specific questionnaire design, the specific questions asked and the measurement

scales used, reflect entirely the researchers pre-conceptualisations of the topic; and therefore will often by necessity limit the participants scope for freely defining and describing their behaviours and intentions.

### **2.3.2. Forced-Choice Questions**

Although many of the questionnaires inevitably employ a forced-choice format, in that often there is a limited set of response options, this section refers to those questions laid out in an either/or format. This is where a sliding scale of response alternatives is not available, but where the participant has to stipulate one response over another; for example, which type of infidelity is more upsetting emotional or sexual? The assumption is that the constructs under investigation are mutually exclusive and that a choice between the two scenarios/experiences can be made unproblematically. Abraham et al (2001) employed this method when they tested the gender-linked hypothesis regarding distress to emotional and sexual infidelity. Each participant completed a five-item 'Relationship Dilemmas Questionnaire (RDQ)', which involved choosing between two relationship scenarios, labelling one as the most distressing. Again, Dijkstra et al (2001) employed a similar format using a forced-choice questionnaire to investigate the differences in response choices of homosexuals and heterosexuals as to whether emotional or sexual infidelity was the most distressing. These limited choice responses, 'forced-choice' format allows no room for the individual to introduce the 'context' of the experience, or to relay any of the (possibly contradictory) emotions surrounding the event. There is no freedom for the participants to replay which aspects of the event they found most upsetting and for what reasons. Rather these reasons and context are imposed on the data and responses by the researchers' own concern and theoretical position. When covert measures are used to record infidelity behaviours, when such questions are couched in a larger health survey for example, there is a particular problem of researchers imposing outside interpretations/classification of infidelity in relationships. Although this covert method of gathering information is recommended as a way of combating the

sensitive and private nature of infidelity to obtain a representative sample (Allen et al 2005).

### **2.3.3. Hypothetical Scenarios**

The use of a hypothetical scenario within a questionnaire is quite common within this area of study and usually involves an elaboration of the forced-choice questions. Harris (2000,2002) uses a hypothetical scenario to investigate participants' responses when faced with different types of infidelity. The following is taken from Harris (2000, p1084)

‘Please think of a serious committed romantic relationship you’ve had in the past, currently have, or would like to have. Now imagine that the person with whom you’re seriously involved becomes interested in someone else. [Imagine you find out that your partner is having sexual intercourse with this other person] vs. [Imagine that your partner is falling in love and forming an emotional attachment to that person.] Try to feel the feelings you would have if this happened to you.’

This is then followed by a forced-choice question, asking which scenario is the most distressing. By using this elaboration method it is hoped that by enabling participants to personalise the experience, and directly relate it to their relationship experiences, a ‘truer’ response will be obtained. Harris (2002) used the same hypothetical scenario, although with some wording alterations and asks questions about participants’ specific experiences of infidelity. Between these two measures obtained Harris states that there was ‘no hint of a correlation...suggesting that responses to the hypothetical scenario have little to do with participants’ reactions to a mate’s real infidelity’ (p10). Harris (2002) further goes on to conclude that although participants were encouraged to draw on personal experience, they must not spend much time truly trying to conjure up an actual relationship (p10). Harris concludes that the employment of this method and the subsequent results may bear little resemblance to how individuals ‘really’ behaved when they experienced the event. The problem of such studies is therefore located within the method used, rather than seen as a problem with the study of relationships in this theoretical way. Lovering (1995) states that we could question whether attitude tests and questionnaires simply report individuals’ beliefs or whether they actively produce them. Furthermore, when reviewing studies of extramarital relationships, Allen et al (2005) actually excluded those studies employing hypothetical

scenarios or questions, reporting that these paradigms have not been established as good models of actual extramarital relationships.

## **2.4. Versions of the World**

As partially explicated, in the coverage of the previous research findings and research methods, the research reviewed so far has emerged primarily from a positivist research framework. This research on relationships has sought to obtain ‘objective’ truths about relationships. Studying personal relationships from a particular perspective presents certain assumptions about the world and what we can know. The following section pays closer attention to what ‘versions’ of relationships are invoked as the ‘norm’ within this framework of study and further unpacks the inconsistencies and variations in the terminology used within this domain.

### **2.4.1. Relationships**

There is a wide variety in the terminology used within the study of personal relationships. Firstly there are those terms used to refer to the primary relationship which are often invoked when researchers talk about infidelity occurring outside of this primary relationship. For example, ‘committed sexual relationship’ (Harris 2000), ‘committed relationship’ (Blow and Hartnett 2005) ‘romantically involved with’ (Harris 2002), ‘marriage’ (Allen et al 2005, Diblasio 2000, Sheppard et al 1995), ‘dating relationship’ (Rolloff et al 2001, Roscoe et al 1988, Afifi et al 2001, Sheppard et al 1995 Yarab et al 1998), ‘serious dating relationship’ (Wiederman and Hurd 1999), ‘committed dating relationship’ (Sheppard et al 1995), ‘romantic relationship’ (Afifi et al 2001, Cole 2001), ‘intimate relationship’ (Boekhout et al 1998, Zak et al 2002, Cameron et al 2002), ‘relationship’ (Drigotas and Barta 2001) ‘your partner’ (Abraham et al 2001, Dijkstra et al 2001, Sagarin et al 2002), ‘monogamous relationship’ (Feldman and Cauffman 1999) and there is often inconsistency within research reports as to the terms used to denote this ‘primary

relationship' in which infidelity has occurred or might be predicted. There are multiple terms available socially to describe relationships and relationship practices, and this is reflected by the variety of language used when studying personal relationships. Often these terms are used interchangeably by researchers and without acknowledgement that the terms could be interpreted inconsistently (see Atkins et al 2001 and Sheppard et al 1995 for exceptions). Allen et al (2005) cite this as a methodological problem within the majority of relationship research - there is a lack of clear conceptualisations or operationalisation of relationship constructions used, leading to possible ambiguity for the participants involved. Without conducting a form of discourse analysis at this point, it will hopefully become clear within the analysis chapters of this thesis that any relationship terminology can be, and is used in a variety of ways and drawn on to mean different things contextually and interpersonally. Therefore such language does not present neutral, objective conceptualisations of personal relationships but rather subtle differences and variability.

Furthermore, although the definitions and attributions of a 'serious dating relationship' or a 'romantic relationship' may vary considerably between individuals, it is assumed to mean at least one thing by researchers, that the relationship is 'monogamous'. As such, any sexual/emotional activity occurring outside of the primary relationship is taken to be 'cheating' or 'infidelity'. This becomes problematic within this research area when say, in a polygamous relationship, 'acceptable' behaviour is now being redefined by the researcher as infidelity, and as something that is unacceptable within a 'serious dating relationship'. Participants in such studies are rarely asked to qualify or offer an interpretation of the relationship terms by researchers, or asked about their monogamous/polygamous approach to relationships – which is of course something that could vary across relationships for the same individual. Assuming that being in a primary relationship is synonymous with sexual and emotional fidelity is commonly assumed and invoked by researchers studying primary relationships. This perhaps denotes a hegemonic assumption concerning the arrangement of personal relationships within Western Culture, 'monogamy', 'trust', 'security', 'love' have become intertwined within this dominant construction (see also Jackson and Scott 2004). This dominant conceptualisation has become to represent a 'common-sense' understanding and way of doing

personal relationships that is used by relationship researchers and often goes unacknowledged or challenged. For example, Panati (1998) reported the position of 'monogamy without fidelity', which further confuses the normative conceptualisations of monogamy utilised within experimental research.

The study of relationships as a form of 'mating' is also a commonly invoked norm within this area of study (for examples see Harris 2000,2002; Pedersen et al 2002; Dijkstra et al 2001). When talking of relationships or 'primary relationships' where infidelity has occurred, the individuals involved are often referred to as each others 'mate's'. Rather than talking about relationships in terms of friendships, this is used to denote and further an evolutionary approach to the functions of personal relationships. This is particularly seen when the reasons for infidelity occurring are often hypothesised to be due to 'mating strategies', such as the fear of cuckoldry. This terminology induces an assumed cultural norm that all relationships are necessarily a form of 'mating' and reproduction, and also assumes that all heterosexual/homosexual relationships can be reduced to some form of mating strategy, that is usually assumed to be monogamous in nature (at least from a female perspective). This conceptualisation of personal relationships involves a reductionist approach to understanding the responses/reactions to relationship transgressions, in terms of them being accountable by drawing on evolved mating strategies.

#### **2.4.2. Infidelity**

The terms to denote relationship transgressions or 'infidelity' are also used inconsistently within and across researchers. For example, 'unfaithful' (Abraham et al 2001, Drigotas and Barta 2001, Yarab et al 1998, Zak et al 2002), 'extradyadic dating' (Wiederman and Hurd 1999, Yarab et al 1998), 'infidelity' (Afifi et al 2001, Atkins et al 2001, Blow and Hartnett 2005, Diblasio 2000, Dijkstra et al 2001, Drigotas and Barta 2001, Egan and Angus 2003, Harris 2000, Sargarin et al 2002, Sheppard et al 1995, Zak et al 2002), 'sexual betrayal' (Feldman and Cauffman 1999), 'transgression' (Afifi et al 2001, Cameron et al 2002), 'extramarital involvement' (Allen et al 2005) are just a few of the terms

used interchangeably. Blow and Harnett (2005) comment within their research review that the studies they reviewed used the term infidelity differently and it is often applied to a diverse set of behaviours and relationships. Allen et al (2005) are some of the few experimental researchers who acknowledge that terms used within studies of personal relationships often lack, and need, further explication by researchers, stating that “even the term ‘sex’” (p123) requires explication, as this is open to individual interpretation by participants. The terms used by researchers are potentially subjectively definable, and open to individual interpretation, yet are treated as uncomplicated, objective labels. Again, although these concepts may be universally understood, they may not be employed in the same way, to mean the same thing universally and will therefore be subjectively interpreted. These predefined concepts, such as ‘cheating’ and ‘infidelity’ are assumed to mean universal things within experimental psychological research.

Yarab et al (1998) aimed to identify behaviours other than those that were explicitly sexual or romantic that men and women defined as unfaithful in the context of ‘committed dating relationships’. The authors argue that the range of terminology used within this area of study may obscure the “exact definition of the behaviours that are under investigation” (p46), they point to that fact that there may be individual differences in what behaviours constitute unfaithfulness, infidelity, extradyadic involvement etc. They state that there is a need for a comprehensive list of behaviours that people consider as unfaithful, unfortunately this still misses the role of contextual factors in defining infidelity, and the role of language in constructing accounts of infidelity. A growing amount of literature demonstrates that individuals do consider a broader range of behaviours as infidelity (Allen et al 2005). For example, Whitty (2003) investigated attitudes towards ‘online’ and ‘offline’ acts of infidelity. Whitty reports three components to infidelity (both online and offline varieties), being sexual infidelity, emotional infidelity and pornography and concluded that online infidelity does not fall into a discrete category removed from other offline activities. Further reporting that views of online infidelity were mediated by participants’ age, gender, and relationship status. This study is a useful example which complicates what behaviours and interactions may or may not be considered as ‘infidelity’.

The methods employed by researchers do not allow for individual expression, perhaps involving an inclusion of context, personal experience and narrative for their definitions or reactions to 'infidelity'. For example, Afifi et al (2001) excluded respondents from their analysis and subsequent discussions when they either failed to complete the 'discovery' section (how the infidelity was discovered), or those who selected the 'other' category, representing a form of discovery that was not specifically covered by the available responses. Despite the variety of experiences and conceptualisations of relationship transgressions and indeed the number of terms available for use, research participants often have to respond to or use a very limited set of responses. Therefore, participants may be unable to reflect the specific circumstances involved, for example, the 'discovery' of a relationship transgression and are unable to reflect the possibility of complex decisions and feelings experienced after the event. As such, the methods employed are restrictive – 'forced-choices' and often the results of such studies only appear to reproduce cultural norms, 'truisms', regarding the issues investigated, for example that monogamy is desirable, 'sexual infidelity' can occur in isolation from 'emotional infidelity', and that infidelity is extremely undesirable in 'committed' relationships.

Limited attempts have been made to formulate less emotive or value-laden language when researching infidelity, as in contrast to criminal language often invoked such as 'victims' and 'perpetrators' (for example Cameron et al 2002). Diblasio (2000) when discussing treatment for marital infidelity re-terms the 'unfaithful' spouse as the 'participating spouse' and the 'betrayed' spouse the 'non-participating spouse' (p151). This use of terminology is interesting because it is also stressed that the participating spouse is often not the only 'offender' in the relationship, in that the non-participating spouse may have contributed to the marital dysfunction. It is interesting because although this terminology may represent a move to use more neutral labels, such terms as 'offences' and 'unfaithfulness' are still employed when talking of this relationship behaviour and these are value-laden terms that carry with them particular implications. As will be seen within the data analysis chapters of this thesis, there are always multiple ways of reading or deploying particular relationship terms, and this can not be escaped. Unfortunately, the use of language and its constructive nature is not acknowledged within traditional studies of relationship transgressions and

‘personal’ relationship issues, and hence the language employed by such researchers will continue to reproduce common-sense accounts of the phenomenon which they seek to examine.

### **2.4.3. Distinctions – sexual and emotional infidelity**

As stated previously, one of the common research paradigms employed by researchers in this area is to make a distinction between ‘sexual’ and ‘emotional’ infidelity (Abraham et al 2001, Boekhout et al 1999, Dijkstra et al 2001, Feldman and Cauffman 1999, Harris 2000,2002, Roscoe et al 1988, Sagarin et al 2002, Wiederman and Hurd, 1999, Yarab et al 1998). This distinction is often used when trying to investigate which aspects of the infidelity are more distressing (emotional or sexual). Firstly, by employing such distinctions it is assumed that making such distinctions are valid and unproblematic, that these components are separable when people think about relationship behaviour. When people are responding to these distinctions it is often in an either/or capacity and there appears to be no allowance made within the analysis that participants may be inferring emotional aspects when sexual aspects are reported and vice versa (although this is beginning to occur in some discussion sections, see Dijkstra et al 2001). The researchers take for granted that these concepts are mutually exclusive and separable, whereas this may not be how these concepts are dealt with individually, interpersonally or socially. For example, Kippax (2002) examined how the meaning(s) of ‘sex’ were produced interpersonally and dependent on particular micro/macro contexts. Kippax emphasises the social production of such practices, and even though common-sense accounts might define ‘sex’ as penis-in-vagina practices, how ‘sex’ is defined and constructed varies considerably. Such analysis helps to highlight how ‘sexual’ (and ‘emotional’) infidelity will not have a consistent interpersonal meaning, in contrast to how these behaviours are used within psychological studies of relationships. As noted previously, one experimental review which did acknowledge this complexity of meaning was that by Allen et al (2005), but such acknowledgement within the experimental paradigm is definitely the exception rather than the norm.

### **2.4.4. Infidelity bad/monogamy good**

The idea that infidelity is wrong is assumed within practically all experimental approaches to the study of personal relationships. Monogamy is assumed to be the norm (as well as heterosexuality in many studies) and is therefore something to be deviated from, “emotional and sexual infidelity are recognised as serious and potentially dangerous violations-of-trust” (Abraham et al 2001 p340). This ‘widespread condemnation’ of infidelity is seen to reflect the fact that sexual fidelity is a central norm regulating and maintaining relationships and the institution of marriage (Previti and Amato 2004, Nock 1998). This conceptualisation is rarely challenged and alternative constructions of the behaviour investigated are not formulated. Such normative interpretations and presentations of ‘infidelitous’ behaviour do not provide scope for a fine-grained individual contextualisation and personal mediation of such norms within participants own personal relationship circumstances. Infidelity is assumed to be something that is to be forgiven and to be gotten over, “the emotional pain caused by betrayal is often magnified because the behaviour is typically enacted by someone in whom the victim had full trust” (Afifi et al 2001 p301). Furthermore, as Kitzinger and Powell (1995) state, it is presented that the realisation of sexual infidelity by a partner often serves to expose emotional vulnerability in heterosexual relationships.

This following quote from the research article by Diblasio (2000) exemplifies the common construction of infidelity as necessarily damaging and causing extensive harm “given that intimacy is built on love and trust, the sexual dishonesty tears at the fabric of the relationship bond and disturbs the core identity of both partners. The once exclusive and sacred bonding of body, mind, and spirit has been broken, producing significant anger, resentment, and bitterness” (p149). Similarly, Blow and Hartnett (2005) discuss infidelity as a confusing and heart-wrenching experience. No space is given within these constructions for monogamy *not* being a defining feature of personal relationships, or infidelity *not* being the most damaging form of betrayal within a relationship. Authors are thus presupposing this within their participant population and their own specific and possibly varied personal relationship circumstances. Allen et al (2005) acknowledge that some ‘EMI’ (extramarital involvement) may have been incorporated into a satisfying open marriage, yet this is a possibility commonly ignored with experimental psychological research into infidelity. Further there is

often little clarification given to participants, or ‘readers’, as to what is explicitly meant by the term ‘infidelity’ when employed within the research paradigm. Therefore researchers’ own assumptions as to the meaning of such behavioural terms are inherently prevalent and affect any subsequent analysis or interpretation of reported behaviour. There is a lack within experimental studies of awareness of individual interpretations of behaviours classed as ‘infidelity’, whereas in the context of some relationships (e.g. those operating with non-monogamy as a defining component) such conceptualisations do not make sense. Whether these behaviours are actually viewed as infidelity within the context of participants’ own relationships, past or present is not questioned or qualified further. To introduce a different conceptualisation of ‘monogamy’ briefly here, for example, the stance reported by Panati (1998) of ‘monogamy without fidelity’, where individuals in a monogamous relationship may open up their relationship to occasional affairs. This in itself can begin to problematise the uncomplicated use of ‘monogamy’ within experimental studies.

Emotive language is used, such as ‘betrayal’ and ‘victim’, and is invoked and deployed unproblematically by researchers and without concern for the version(s) of relationship behaviour and consequences that are hence substantiated. Within the research article presented by Feldman and Cauffman (1999) ‘betrayal’ is used without qualification within their abstract to denote infidelity. It is only further in the article that they define ‘relationship betrayal’ as ‘sexual betrayal’, involving physical intimacies –“petting and sexual intercourse” (p228) and thus constitute a rather emotive construction of sexual transgressions in personal relationships. Additionally, such language does not allow for a complexity of experiences or responses to relationship transgressions, the language employed by researchers being loaded with negative emotionality. Such presentation does not allow for multiple constructions of ‘infidelity’ or provide a space for the expression of relationships where ‘openness’ has been agreed. There is rarely an acknowledgement that certain behaviours may have been deemed as acceptable within particular relationships (see Buunk and van Driel 1989 for an exception). Often ‘extradyadic behaviour’ is treated as infidelity, as ‘cheating’, which is then not assessed in value-neutral terms. Zak et al (2002) conclude within their study of predictors of infidelity in relationships, that “unfaithfulness is a widespread problem” (p289), yet there is no evidence from their report that this is

how the participants involved in their study viewed what the authors term 'infidelity' or 'unfaithfulness' within their specific interpersonal relationship context. The researchers therefore treat infidelity as a 'problem' without questioning the truth-value of such statements, as Kitzinger (1994) examines, the choice of terminologically used within any kind of research practice is not value-free, but rests upon particular prior assumptions about the nature of reality – in this case, the nature of relationship reality.

#### **2.4.5. Heteronormativity**

A sexuality bias is often implicit within this area of research. For instance, within Wiederman and Hurd's (1999) study investigating extradyadic involvement, sexual intercourse is defined as "penis in vagina" (p269), homosexuals are excluded from, or not recognised by this definition. Such research also reproduces patriarchal conceptions of sex. Kippax (2002) states that people do not engage in these sexual behaviours (penis-in-vagina) but rather they enact 'sexual practices' because each behaviour is laden with social meanings – such as 'making love' or a 'one night stand'. Thus such a normative definition of sexual practice not only excludes certain individuals, but also ignores the social context that imbues such an act with meaning. This can also be seen to occur when certain behaviours are labelled as emotional or sexual infidelity, such labels can be interpreted to mean a variety of different things socially/contextually. In this way peoples' behaviours may be the same, they have had 'penis-in-vagina' extra-relational sex, but their practice may be quite different (Kippax 2002). How meaning is allocated to this event and how individuals interpret such behaviours may vary considerably and researcher employing an experimental paradigm do not typically attend to such interpersonal variations. Feldman and Cauffman (1999) eliminated participants who did not list their sexuality as heterosexual, although there is no other explicit mention within their article that they are specifically investigating heterosexual attitudes to betrayal. The exclusion of homosexuals/bisexuals in such research projects may represent the extent to which heterosexuality, in general, is the embedded norm within current society (Freedman and Lips 2002). This may either occur implicitly, through the use of

exclusionary terms (such as penis-in-vagina sex) or explicitly when choosing participants. Harris (2002) specifically included sexual orientation as a possible variable that may influence jealousy, but those participants reporting a bisexual orientation were excluded from the analysis. Similarly Dijkstra et al (2001) asked their participants to rate their level of homosexuality using a 7-point scale (1 equalled complete homosexuality, whereas 7 equalled complete heterosexuality), those who scored 4 were classed as bisexual and were 'discarded' from the subsequent analysis. This further indicates a marginalisation of bisexuality as well as homosexuality within relationship research.

## **2.5. The Social Construction of Personal Relationships**

Very few researchers acknowledge a qualitative research paradigm for investigating relationships, or expose the benefits that such an approach may bring. When qualitative research is used, it is recommended that this be in tandem with quantitative ratings and control groups (Allen et al 2005). Although, within a substantive review of infidelity research, Blow and Hartnett (2005) recommend the need for more qualitative studies of infidelity, as it was reported that previous qualitative studies gave important in-depth explanations of the processes related to infidelity. Barker (2005) further points to the complexity by which people conduct their relationships, and therefore the complexity of language employed to negotiate personal relationships would be an invaluable site of research. This review has so far centred on a discussion of the experimental approaches to the study of personal relationships and the knowledges such studies have produced regarding aspects of personal relationships. This section now moves on to cover social constructionist and discursive approaches to the study of personal relationships. Therefore the focus shifts from the experimental paradigm to a critical social paradigm, generally employing a more social constructionist approach to studying personal relationships (see Stainton-Rogers 2001 for a useful discussion of these two differing approaches employed within social psychology). Attention is now focused on the constructions or discourses made relevant during interactions or within a given text. For example, investigating what differing constructions are employed when people discuss infidelity or monogamy in their

personal relationships, or how participants variously construct their 'personal' relationships and how these constructions are deployed during interpersonal interactions.

Potter et al (1990) provide a useful discussion about the nature of discourses and 'interpretative repertoires'. Their paper highlights that there is often some discrepancy between researchers as to the definition of such terms. Potter et al assert that discourses must be reported as they are constructed in localised contexts, the actual specific working of the discourse as a constitutive part of social practices. Therefore a discursive analysis is seen as examining, in a detailed manner, how talk is made effective on each specific occasion. Potter et al assert that when discourses are defined as regulated systems or sets of statements which construct objects (referring to the approach adopted by Parker 1989) there is a potential for a reification of discourses. It is argued that this can occur when sets of statements (what constitutes the 'discourse') are taken to do the 'object construction' in the abstract, rather than as a part of locally situated practices. Another popular term used by researchers within this arena is 'interpretative repertoires'. Potter and Wetherell (1987) define these as a lexicon or register of terms and metaphors drawn upon to characterise and evaluate action and events. Potter et al (1990) add that interpretative repertoires are abstractions from practices in context, these could be seen as generalisations from data, broad themes perhaps, rather than a detailed contextualised account of talk in action and they are viewed as flexible resources that are artfully and knowingly invoked by people (Potter et al 1990). This following section does report to explore 'discourses' and 'interpretative repertoires' as reported by researchers, this brief discussion perhaps highlights that there can be much variation between researchers as to what is meant by these terms and how they are employed empirically.

### **2.5.1. Infidelity**

Kitzinger and Powell (1995) employ a story completion task, a similar method to the 'hypothetical scenario' previously explored. Participants had to complete a story that featured an 'unfaithful heterosexual partner'. Although limiting the

story to a heterosexual context, participants own sexuality was not disclosed during the study. The researchers analyse the completed stories using a non-essentialist framework, rather analysing the stories for how the participants draw on 'contemporary discourses' to make sense of their experiences (p349). The specific story used mentions 'seeing someone else'. 'Seeing' was specifically used to imply infidelity but to be necessarily ambiguous so that participants could bring their own interpretations of this extra-relationship. Kitzinger and Powell (1995) report clear differences in the construction of the primary relationship in which an extra-relationship might have occurred, where female participants 'romanticised' the primary relationship and male participants 'sexualised' the relationships (p355). This is seen as representing the different discursive resources women and men are able to draw on from the wider sociocultural context. Drawing on the story completion method utilised by Kitzinger and Powell (ibid), Whitty (2005) explored participants' representations of 'internet infidelity'. Whitty reports that the majority of participants discoursed this as problematic and potentially damaging to the primary relationship, and as such similarly constructed as 'offline' infidelity. Further, Kitzinger and Powell (1995) report gender differences in the explanations given by their participants for infidelity occurring in a relationship, which varied in terms of whether they were explaining male or female infidelity in a relationship. Male participants tended to construct the female's storied infidelity as being a consequence of the male primary partners' lack of sexual skill within the relationship; in contrast to female participants more varied and more detailed accounting of the scenario and often drawing on emotional difficulties or inadequacies within the primary relationship. Similarly, Burns (1996) discusses female participants using 'elaborate double accounting' when discussing experiences of their own infidelity, such as being out of control and also drawing on 'problematic' constructions of the primary relationship, for example, it being boring. This was in contrast to when female participants discussed the reasons for a male partners infidelity, where his infidelity was not explained by problems in the primary relationship but rather discoursed as something likely to happen given the 'opportunity'. Burns discusses this as a taken-for-granted expectation of male infidelity in relationships, and therefore little explanation is needed. Male infidelity may be constructed in this way to enable participants to cope with or minimise the negative effects of a partners'

infidelity or anticipated infidelity within a relationship. Relatedly, in accounting for male infidelity and relationship breakdowns, women constructed the 'other woman' as responsible. Burns (1999) concludes that this has implications for power between women and in interpersonal relationships, inasmuch as it reproduces male privilege within intimate personal relationships. Women are positioned as responsible and accountable for male infidelity, and male infidelitous behaviour is normalised, it is to be expected. These can be seen as gendered discourses, not because they are produced by women, but because they construct different accounting practices for male and female infidelity in relationships. This is clearly different to the gender difference concluded within experimental studies on infidelity.

### **2.5.2. Monogamy**

In their study examining gay men discussing love and their intimate relationships, Worth et al (2002) begin to unpack the normalisation of monogamy as the defining feature of personal relationships. Monogamy was constructed as being taken for granted within relationships, and to question whether the relationship should be monogamous was positioned as necessarily questioning love and the relationship itself. Discourses of romantic love and monogamy were employed by participants to justify and account for unsafe sex practices (which has been explored elsewhere, see Willig 1997). Worth et al note that participants also constructed monogamy as unsustainable and unrealistic, yet because of the position of monogamy as an implicit foundation operating within personal relationships, participants discourse 'infidelity anxieties' coupled with an avoidance of negotiations, lack of disclosure and a mutual silence about sexual activity outside of the relationship. Worth et al discuss how the ideal of monogamy was constructed as a relationship ground rule attesting to sexual exclusivity within the relationship and that this works to construct commitment, monogamy is therefore positioned as '*the* article of trust' (italics in original, ibid p243). In contrast to this centralising of monogamy within personal relationships, there was also a reworking of a monogamous relationship as sexual fidelity. In

mutually agreed upon 'open' relationships participants were able to construct a monogamous commitment operating within their relationships, by making reference to 'emotional fidelity' where such an emotional bond is seen as cementing the relationship and defining it as monogamous (Worth et al 2002)

There is a growing body of research exploring polyamorous relationships from a social constructionist perspective. For example Barker (2005) explored how participants discursively managed a polyamorous identity (see also Barker and Ritchie 2004; Lano and Parry 1995). Barker (2005) asserts that there are three main discursive structures mediating sexual relationship in western culture, heterosexuality, monogamy and an active-male/passive-female dynamic. These hegemonic relationship strategies therefore position anyone practicing a polyamorous<sup>2</sup> relationship as outside of the norm, as 'other'. Barker discusses how a polyamorous approach to relationships necessarily challenges the dominant relationships practices, especially heteronormativity, because polyamory is centred on multiple relationships, possibly with different genders, simultaneously. Some of the specific discursive constructions explored within the study include polyamory being positioned as different and threatening to monogamy, and as being the honest way of having relationships and as more 'realistic' than monogamy. This is in contrast to when polyamory was constructed as normal and similar to monogamy, and being 'just' like any other relationship or family structure. Otto (2006) discusses a gender bias in discourses of non-monogamy, suggesting that they are often used by men to justify acts of adultery and dishonesty. Burns (1995) explores an interesting discourse of fidelity, where, regardless of actual behaviours, women are constructed as being faithful and men constructed as necessarily unfaithful. Such that even when female participants had been unfaithful within a relationship, they worked to construct and position themselves as faithful, this was achieved by drawing on particular disclaiming practices to account for their infidelity. Such studies highlight the complexity with which individuals practice their interpersonal relationships, and the complexity involved in discussing and researching 'monogamy' and 'infidelity'.

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<sup>2</sup> A polyamorous relationship is defined as the practice of maintaining multiple love relationships, often involving 'primary' partners and 'secondary' ones (Barker 2005).

Due to the dearth of critical social empirical studies investigating monogamy and infidelity in relationships, this review now moves onto discuss related interpersonal concepts. It is hoped that by reviewing critical social conceptualisations of gender, gendered relationship discourses and general relationship discourses a fuller appreciation of the discursive complexities encompassing relationship negotiations will be achieved.

### **2.5.3. Gender**

When working from within an experimental research perspective researchers can be seen to invoke gender as an analytic category, something that can be assessed independently of other variables, rather than something that is worked up during interactions and given meaning contextually (Stokoe 2000). From a social constructionist perspective gender is located in interactions; it is something that is made relevant and constructed interpersonally. Therefore people can be seen as 'doing gender' (Stokoe 2002) because of the active constructional process. There is always the potential for a renegotiation of meanings, such constructs as 'gender' are given meaning interpersonally and hence can be continually reconstituted interpersonally (Willott and Griffin 1997). For example what constitutes 'being feminine' will be dependent on the context in which 'femininity' is enacted. As Wetherell (1995) states femininity is a negotiable category, which takes its shape as a particular type of identity within contrasting discourses. Therefore relationship discourses (any discourses) can be seen as being saturated with normative, genderising assumptions that require unpacking and making explicit (Warner 2000, cited in O'Dell and Reavey 2001). Sexuality and relationship discourses can be seen to work as normalising concepts and as such include issues of regulation, exclusion and inclusion (Beckmann 2001) Some sense of what is viewed as 'normal' or 'abnormal' behaviour is implicit when people draw on dominant discourses encompassing gender and relationship discourses. Connell's relational approach states that certain discourses are hegemonic only in relation to

subordinate or marginal constructs (Connell 1995). As such hegemonic masculinity and other dominant male discourses can be seen to only obtain their hegemonic status with reference to, and reliance on, the 'other', in this case, women. This can also be seen in the heterosexual privilege within psychological research, heterosexuality only maintains its hegemonic status with reference to the homosexual/bisexual 'other', the 'heteropatriarchy' (O'Dell and Reavey 2001). Gilfoyle et al (1992, p210) assert that 'institutionalised heterosexuality helps to maintain male dominance and ensures that women cannot easily define their own sexuality', as such the cultural ascendancy of hegemonic discourse is seen to be supported by specific structural and discursive patterns that need to be examined (Willott and Griffin 1997). It is important to continually situate talk and texts within their inter-textual social context (Wetherell 1995), to examine the wider social/political context that may be substantiating or constituting particular ways of construction/discursive patterns. For example, Jackson (1993) states that the pervasiveness of love as a representational theme is related to its institutionalisation in marriage and family life. Vice versa, it is important to examine the social and political implications of such discursive patterns (Willott and Griffin 1997) because such discourses will have implications, for example, social policies and what types of relationships are recognised politically; homosexual marriages have a long history of being marginalized, although the recent introduction of civil partnerships for same-sex couples may now result in a shift in social perceptions of gay 'marriages'.

Hegemonic masculinity is achieved within personal relationship discourses, and continues to ensure that women's discursive status is achieved with reference to dominant male discourse. As Crawford et al (1994) state, the domination of male culture over female ensures that women continue to see themselves through men's eyes. Crawford et al (1994) assert that women have no discourse with which to speak about female sexuality and female desire, the discourses that are available within the social/cultural community within which we speak are geared to articulating men's interests and account of sex and sexuality (Gilfoyle et al 1992). Perhaps this also relates to researchers' common distinctions between emotional and sexual infidelity, where it is commonly thought that men easily can separate these components more than women. Furthermore Wetherell

(1995) asserts that 'romance' is usually gendered, in that women typically are supposed to want it and men reject it, and men are often represented as the initiators of romance and women, the receivers. This idea is encapsulated further by Burns (2000) when she discusses discourses of romance and 'working at relationships'. Within these discourses men are continually represented as the central figure or the 'romantic object' and as such these discourses are seen to constitute the centrality of men's involvement in heterosexual relationships, women carve out their destiny in relation to men (Whelehan 2000). Jackson (1993) states that because gender differences are crucial to our understanding of romance narratives, it is also important to acknowledge the material power differences between men and women (for example, in terms of economic dependence, emotional and physical labour exerted in the home), because these dynamics also shape our understanding and production of romantic discourse and 'romantic relationships'. Although, this position allocated to women within the romantic love discourse is and can be contested, Pearce and Stacey (1995) state that women no longer accept their place within classic narrative trajectories; rather than asserting that this is something that women 'no longer do' it is perhaps of value to look at the discursive and situated value of when women (and men) do and do not accept such positionings.

As I have asserted above, hegemonic discourse when drawn upon often systematically imply an 'other'. This can be seen in the following exploration of male/female 'discourses', when one is invoked the other is systematically implied.

#### **2.5.4. Gendered Relationship Discourses**

Hollway (1989) explores the 'Discourse of Male Sex Drive'. This discourse is seen as encompassing the idea that men are driven by the biological necessity to seek out (heterosexual) sex, and relies on the more general claim that sex is natural and not mediated socially. This discourse relies on the sociobiological myth that in the animal kingdom the male has the imperative to pursue and procreate, and the females role is to be acquiescent and receptive (Crawford et al 1994). Within this discourse women's sexuality is seen as being governed by the biological need to reproduce, this discourse can be seen to be inherent within

much of the literature discussed earlier. Similarly Stenner (1993) explores a 'laddish' construction of sexuality, where sex is positioned as the primary concern of men during relational encounters. Stenner asserts that when participants drew upon this construction the tension between the laddish privileging of sex and the alternative, female, prioritisation of companionship and friendship was clearly evident (Stenner 1993:124). Such discourses work as 'commonsense accounts' because they are associated with dominant assumptions about sexual behaviour and men's sexual needs, Kitzinger and Powell (1995) assert that the 'male sex drive' discourse has entered popular culture and has become a powerful stereotype. Burns (1999) explores the ways in which this discourse rationalises male sexual behaviour as being driven by a normalised, biological need to reproduce and seek out sex. After being used within traditional psychological literature and media texts when referring to and accounting for male infidelity it is not surprising that this manner of accounting for male sexual behaviours is part of common discourse. Because of such dominance, it is often the male understanding of sexuality and heterosexual relationships that gets privileged and the female voice is barely heard (Crawford et al 1994).

This exploration of male dominance similarly relates to Gilfoyle et al's (1992) discussion of the 'pseudo-reciprocal gift' discourse. Within this discourse men are seen as requiring heterosexual sex to satisfy their sexual urges, women are therefore viewed as passive receptacles who relinquish control over to men (1993:217). Hollway (1989) also identifies the 'Permissive' relationship discourse. This discourse holds many of the properties of the male sex drive discourse. Within this discourse women are seen as equal participants and no longer viewed as objects. Within this discourse sex is again seen as something that exists asocially and therefore it has the right to be expressed, the biological nature of the male sex drive has been encompassed, rather than challenged, by the permissive discourse. These discourses highlight some of the multiple positionings available to men and women when they talk about and necessarily construct aspects of 'personal' relationships.

Burns (2000) discusses how some relationship discourses are inscribed with gender differences, for example the construction that there is the emotionally literate woman and the emotionally inexpressive man. Duncombe and Marden (1993) state that many women express unhappiness primarily with what they

perceive as men's unwillingness or incapacity to 'do' emotional intimacy, which appears to them necessary to sustain close heterosexual couple relationships. Duncombe and Marsden suggest how research findings on heterosexual relationships can be linked to work on the social regulation of emotion, the argument being that there is a 'gender division of emotion work' where it is assumed that women will take responsibility for the management of emotion in the private sphere (1993:221). Similarly Kitzinger and Powell (1995) in their study examining representations of 'unfaithful' relationships conclude that their findings indicate male sexualization and female romanticization of heterosexual relationships. Similarly, Jackson (1993) in a discussion of 'love' reports that women invest far more in love and that they give far more affection to men than they receive in return. From a feminist perspective love can be seen as an ideology which legitimises women's oppressions and which traps them into exploitative heterosexual relationships (ibid). Furthermore Burns (1999) explores the practice of blaming the 'other woman' for male infidelity and relationship breakdowns. It is asserted that this practice instantiates and reproduces male privilege in intimate heterosexual relationships. (For a fuller exploration of 'love' and the subject positions made available through the discourses of love see Jackson 1993).

Finally, while investigating unfaithful relationships, Kitzinger and Powell (1995) report that men tended to depict the primary relationship as relatively uncommitted and sexually focused, whereas women depicted a deeply loving and trusting relationships. It was seen that men and women constructed contrasting pictures of a heterosexual relationship (of one year), again indicating that women tend to construct relationships in a romanticized way whereas men construct them in sexualised ways. Within such discourses of emotional work, women are often positioned as being responsible for monogamy and stability in relationships (Burns 1999). Women are seen as being assigned the 'emotional labour' in relationships (Hochschild 1983, cited in Kitzinger and Powell 1995). Again these representations of men and women have become part of popular discourse and have become powerful stereotypes in Western culture (Kitzinger and Powell 1995) and as such they hold 'cultural currency' (Seu 2001, Stenner 1993) in that when they are drawn upon to explain relationship issues, especially those of infidelity and monogamy, they require little, if any, further elaboration.

Sobo (1993) reported an underlying 'monogamy' narrative in a study of non-condom use. Within this narrative there was a recognition that many men cheat but there is a general 'trusting-to-love' rationale which idealised trust and faithfulness in relationships and hence lead to non-condom use. Admitting that a partner could be unfaithful meant a necessary move away from the emotional comfort and security offered by the monogamy narrative.

#### **2.5.5. Relationship Discourses**

Hollway (1989) explores a number of relationship discourses, one being the 'Have/Hold' discourse. This discourse is seen as being linked to Christian family values, in that sex should take place within a framework of a lasting relationship. Heterosexual relationships are seen as long standing in that the couple will stay together, marry and probably have children. This discourse is seen as being 'gender blind', although the notion that sex should only take place within a committed relationship is in practice applied more stringently to women than men (Hollway 1989:55); in this way the 'Have/Hold' discourse can be seen as being complementary to the discourse of 'male sex drive' and the 'reproductive/nurturing' female. Kitzinger and Powell (1995) also explore how women's understanding of sexual relationships may be bound in discourses of love and personal relationships, and throughout their developmental years women learn to associate love and sex. Similarly, Lawes (1999) when exploring discourses pertaining to marriage discusses the 'romantic repertoire'. Within this repertoire, marriage is developed as something involving commitment and involvement with the 'right' person. This discourse was seen to work as an explanatory device when participants expressed their beliefs in the permanence and exclusivity of marriage in terms of 'commitment' (Lawes 1999:8). Parallels can be drawn between Hollway's discussion of the 'Have/Hold' discourse and Lawes' discussion of the 'romantic repertoire', in that both these discourses/repertoires centre issues of commitment, fidelity and permanence in relationships. Similarly Stenner (1993) explores the 'pro-monogamy' discourse, which sees an extension of issues of companionship and friendship to include a notion of exclusivity in personal relationships. These discourses represent the notion that issues of sexual/emotional exclusivity are intrinsically bound up with

issues of commitment and love in relationships. Kippax (2002) explores a discourse of 'love/coupledom' and how it was employed when participants talked about unsafe sexual behaviours, in that issues of love and absolute trust were invoked to account for 'risky behaviours' engaged in whilst in relationships. In relationships with regular partners, trust and honesty are often depicted as part of the taken-for-granted backdrop, in this way we can see how peoples' understanding of their relationship behaviours is mediated by the context in which they see these behaviours as occurring. It should also be noted that such discourses of 'love' and the 'right' person can be employed to account for instances of infidelity in relationships and relationship break-ups, where love may be given as a reason for changing partners (Lawson 1988, cited in Jackson 1993).

In contrast to the 'romantic' repertoire, Lawes (1999) also explores the 'realist' relationship repertoire. This repertoire is drawn on to dispel notions of permanence and fidelity in relationships, holding both to be unrealistic. Relationship success is attributed to 'luck' and therefore issues of 'credit' and 'blame' are also not applicable for understanding relationship problems or success. This repertoire works to rationalise and account for relationship failure, failure is to be expected. It is worth noting here that both romantic and realist repertoires could be, and often were used by the same participants dependent on the interpersonal context and the rhetorical effect to be achieved (Lawes 1999:10), again highlighting the flexibility and fluidity with which discourses can be deployed. These relationship discourse should not be thought of as being 'about' relationships, or 'reflective' of emotions, but rather they should be viewed as constructive of relationships, productive of contradictions and generative of emotional experiences (Stenner 1993:131). Within an exploration of relationship discourses it is possible to see how these discourses are interpersonally managed and the contradictory and competing nature of discourse and the subsequent meanings that are generated when people talk. A discussion of such aspects is also able to highlight how psychological concepts such as 'jealousy', or indeed 'infidelity' should not be thought of as existing asocially because they are generated and given a flexibility of meanings interpersonally. This conceptualisation of language and discourse will be further explored within the methodology chapter, where there is further discussion of social constructionism and discourse analysis.

Related to discussions of accountability and blame, Crossley (2002) when discussing health-related research explores three moral position discourses. These are termed the 'positive mental attitude', 'genes and luck' and the 'rebellion' discourses. When participants drew on the discourse of positive mental attitude they were referring to someone living a good life, someone who would 'fight' despite facing hardship and thus taking quite an active role in their own well-being. In contrast, when participants drew on the genes and luck discourse they were referring to an ultimate lack of control in the face of a genetic predisposition. This discourse also worked to exempt the individual from any responsibility for their situation or behaviour. The rebellion discourse was seen as representing a freedom of spirit and independence and also in contrast to the personal sense of control invoked by the positive mental attitude discourse. The discourse of rebellion is seen as quite complex in terms of its moral connotations, in that it was usually employed to represent a lack of moral responsibility for one's own actions and a rebellion against safety. These moral position discourses can be seen as being related to relationships narratives, because often relationship discourses and the subject positions made available within them also imply moral positions and issues of responsibility. Sue (2001) states that often issues of morality and accountability are interpreted differently by males and females, often the 'morality' accorded an individual will depend on the subject positions taken up and allocated during an exploration of relationship discourses. Edwards (1995,1999) provides worked examples of how emotional states and an individuals' character can be seen to be constituted discursively when couples talk about their relationship problems. Although Edwards does not provide specific discourses pertaining to how relationship problems may be constructed, he does explicate the active ways in which such talk is used. For example, when a speaker discourses an (relationship) event as normative, something that their partner does frequently (get angry and refuse to speak for hours, say), this positions the event as part of an external 'objective' worldview, which works to protect the speaker from seeming biased. Edwards further states that when accounts of a partners' behaviour are emotionally loaded, contain evaluations and 'blame', they also work to protect the speaker from being positioned as self-serving and biased (see Edwards 1995 p324-325 for detailed worked example of such positioning). Edwards points to the various ways participants managed positions of interest and

constructed 'objective' accounts of interpersonal events. Through such a discursive analysis it is made visible how specific discursive constructions can be used to attend to, refute and reciprocate counterstories and counterformulations (Edwards 1995:320); the active rhetoric of relationship discourses.

## **2.6. Conclusions - Where now?**

Blow and Harnett (2005), in their substantive review of empirical studies of infidelity, state that there is a need for qualitative studies of infidelity. They state that this research paradigm is needed to give "important in-depth explanations" (p230) of the processes involved in infidelity. A fully contextualised account of infidelity, and an understanding of 'infidelity' itself is lacking within experimental studies and further there is a lack of critical reflection and interrogation of the role of language in shaping peoples' understandings of infidelity and personal relationships. Furthermore, a large amount of experimental research reports a disparity between reported attitudes and values pertaining to infidelity and the amount of 'infidelity' actually engaged in, reporting discordance between attitudes and behaviours. This perhaps further points to the need for a different methodological paradigm that will enable complexity and contradictions to be fully reported and explored. The aim of this thesis is to explore social constructions of 'infidelity' and 'monogamy', in an attempt to gain an in depth understanding of how these concepts function and how they are negotiated within interpersonal contexts. It is hoped that by using a qualitative research paradigm, the consistencies, contradictions and complexities of interpersonal relationships will be able to be explored; in order to achieve a fuller 'mapping' of relationship discourses than would be possible when operating within an experimental paradigm. The following chapter will explore the methodological reasoning and the explicit methodological approach adopted within this study researching relationships.

# 3

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## 3.1 Methodological Review

This chapter aims to review the epistemological foundations of the present research project, moving on to specifically detail the analysis, design and procedure involved in study one using individual interview data. The discussion then moves on to re-examine a discourse analysis/social constructionist approach to research design and analysis, with a view to formulating the rationale for conducting study two involving group discussions.

As explored within the previous literature review section of this thesis, the experimental psychological approach to the study of interpersonal relationships is thought to constrain and limit understandings of personal relationships, particularly when studying infidelity and monogamy. The methods used necessarily restricting participants elaboration and contextualisation of their views and experiences of infidelity and monogamy in relationships. The following discussion here aims to explicate and debate the possible epistemological positions available when rejecting a positivist, experimental methodology as suitable for the study of interpersonal relationship phenomena. This is done in two parts, the first centring on social constructionism and a relativist ontology, and discussing the methodology of discourse analysis suitable for providing a detailed exploration of infidelity and monogamy. Secondly, exploring social constructionism and a critical realist perspective, further debating the possibilities of ‘action’ within a social constructionist epistemology with a view to offering a perspective and methodology from which to explore discursive limits and possibilities of discursive change within discursive constructions of infidelity and monogamy.

This first section aims to briefly discuss the theoretical debates encompassing social constructionist, relativist and realist positions adopted within social psychological research. It is hoped that these theoretical positions are explored in enough detail to grasp the basic premises related to each position, as I am aware that a full and complete discussion of these epistemological standpoints is beyond the scope and aim of this thesis. The theoretical debate as to what can be 'known' and what we can assert to know will continue to surface throughout this thesis, and it is hoped that the arguments covered in this section will frame the material subsequently examined and will also help to explore and ground the current project within an epistemological perspective.

## **3.2. Epistemological & Methodological Debates – Part 1**

### **3.2.1. Social Constructionism**

'Postmodern' theorization provided the theoretical foundations for discursive and social constructionist research (Edley 2001). If it is accepted that everything exists as a socially constructed reality the investigation shifts to how reality is brought into being during interactions, language becomes to be viewed as being productive rather than reflective of reality and hence reality is not mirrored in talk and texts but rather constituted by them (Edley 2001). A systematic, reflectively applied constructionism therefore accepts that everything has the status of being socially constructed and nothing is viewed as being safe from deconstruction (Potter 1998). Social constructionism provides researchers with a tool to tackle the positivist assumptions of 'traditional' psychology. Burr (1998) states that social constructionism provides researchers with the liberatory promise of its anti-essentialism, 'constructive alternativism', because within this framework there is a potentially infinite number of alternative constructions that can be explored, which enables the possibility of re-constructing issues (objects, themes, ourselves) in ways that could be more facilitating. Social constructionism cautions us against assuming that 'we' (as researchers) can legitimately speak on behalf of 'them' (the researched), the 'othering' that is commonplace in traditional psychology

research; thus challenging the universality previously assumed and attempting to disrupt the 'expert' experimenter position. The potential of research from within a social constructionist framework is that it is now possible to conduct broad-scale political and moral critique of existing authority structures (Gergen 1998) and also offers the freedom to transcend hegemonic discourses. Many researchers in a variety of research arenas have grasped these premises, for example, Connell (1995) examined masculinities and patriarchal structures, Lyons and Willot (1999) conducted research investigating representations of men's health and also Shotter and Gergen (1989) examined identities. Specifically related to the current research project several researchers have used a social constructionist framework, for example, Jackson (1993), Kitzinger and Powell (1995), Lawes (1999) and Burns (1999,2000) have conducted research revolving around constructions of personal relationship issues, romance and love. Crawford et al (1994), Willott and Griffin (1997) and Stokoe (2000) have conducted research pertaining to gender constructions and discourse (this and other research related to the study of personal relationships has been explored in more detail in the previous literature review chapter).

Social constructionism when pushed to its 'logical' conclusion appears to warrant any version of truth and no account appears to be seen as any more valid or true than another. This conclusion that a social constructionist position necessarily leads to a relativist position has been challenged and resisted. There is debate as to the extent to which social constructionism should be taken, the practicality of its everyday use and how useful such a theory is for assisting 'political' action; these debates are conceptualised and explored in the following relativism section, and a later section on realism (see 3.3.1). It should be noted that there obviously are disputes and overlaps within and across these theoretical positions.

### **3.2.2. Relativism – the Un'real'**

A 'relativist' position to epistemological questions can be seen to arise from a social constructionist approach (although this is often resisted, for example, see Liebrucks 2001). There is the concern that full-blown social constructionism can be seen as theoretically parasitic and politically paralysing, i.e. a thoroughly

enveloping relativist position to knowledge and reality (Edley 2001). The assertion is that from a relativist position we cannot question or disprove accounts. As there is no external referent we are unable to access the accuracy of what we have been told (Nightingale and Cromby 1999). Because it is not possible to decide between alternative perspectives, without a foundation by which to judge accounts there is no possibility of judging the 'truth-value' of accounts and justifying social action. Parker (1998) raises the risk of 'value-neutrality', as although deconstruction shows us how things could be different there is the problem of reifying alternative constructions and therefore researchers remain observers and commentators, wary of making recommendations for social change (Burr 1998).

Parker (1998) states that within a relativist position many varieties of truth are constituted and the position hinges on the refusal to take existing forms of knowledge for granted. Attempting to comprehend a 'reality' is seen as a fruitless activity because the only way we have access to reality is through discourse. As Potter (1998) states, to give an account of something is to transform it into a discursive event and therefore you cannot access any one 'true' account of reality. The role of language is that it constitutes rather than reflects reality, so the focus should be on the everyday accomplishments of reality in the course of social relationships and interactions (Potter 1998). It is not necessary to believe in an underlying reality to see the power of discourse to alter and challenge social practice. An interrogation of what is at 'stake' when people talk should be undertaken because discourse can be seen to be as much about communication of motive as it is a presentation of reality. Epistemic relativists state that claims regarding what exists are relative to the individual, social group or culture (Nightingale and Cromby 1999), any statements about truth or reality are functions of locally and historically contingent norms. A useful distinction is made between an ontological and epistemic social construction (See Edwards 1997, Edley 2001). Edley (ibid) states that epistemic social construction orientates around the notion that any attempt to describe the nature of the world is subject to the rules of discourse. Talk involves the creation or construction of particular accounts or stories of what the world is like. Therefore from an epistemic point of view language can be seen as operating as the medium through which we come to understand and know the world. Potter (1998) states that the focus of research

should not be the truth or falsity of accounts of reality, but rather the different language games in which the word real is used to do particular tasks. Speaker's use talk strategically to accomplish their purposes in particular settings (Miller 2000). Edley (ibid) discusses that it is from an epistemic social constructionism perspective that there is no way to investigate or comprehend a 'reality' outside of language, and hence the study of language becomes the main area of focus for the ways in which it is both constructed and constructive of the social world (Potter and Wetherell, 1987 and Potter 1996). From such an epistemic perspective we cannot get at a world beyond language, so we investigate the different ways in which the world is made 'real' through discourse. This is an epistemological position regarding how we can develop knowledge about the world, rather than an ontological social constructionism positioning – which would be that there is nothing beyond language, no extra-discursive (Edley ibid). It is often this ontological claim that is levied as informing a relativist epistemology. Accounts of reality and truth serve real purposes locally, the objects, practices etc spoken of appear real because of how these concepts work discursively.

An ontological social constructionism, when pushed to its 'logical' conclusion appears to warrant any version of truth, and no account is seen as any more valid or true than the other. If the notion of a reality, one that can be known, is abandoned then we are left with a multiplicity of perspectives, all constituting an alternative version of reality (Burr 1998); which ultimately ends in (research, social, truth) paralysis. Without one truth or reality how can we justify social action? This problem has resulted in a reluctance by the majority of critical psychologists to suggest appropriate forms of social action based on their research, for fear of being criticised of trying to speak for all of the people (or women or unemployed etc) all of the time and hence of misrepresenting or marginalizing alternative groups. The subject area tackled by psychologists all warrant a rapid response as to how things could be made better, how practice could be improved, and frustrations have properly arisen at the hesitancy with which this obligation is met (Stenner and Brown 1998). Unfortunately then this liberating standpoint now faces the danger of failing to liberate anyone. Once social researchers have tackled and explicated the epistemological foundations underpinning their research, such an epistemic social constructionism becomes possible and it is this position that informs the use of discourse analysis to unravel

and contextualise constructions of infidelity and monogamy in this research thesis. Debates of political action and change will be returned to in part 2 of this epistemological and methodological debate chapter.

### **3.2.3. Discourse Analysis**

Discourse analysis is employed in this study to investigate the ways in which personal relationships and personal relationship practices are built up and made sense of during conversations and texts. By using this form of analysis the ways in which personal relationship issues are rhetorically constructed and deployed within interpersonal contexts can be explored and how these relate to the management of certain conversational and narrative constructional dilemmas (Speer 2001). The research questions are developed to centre on the construction and function of relationship discourses and how discourses are put together and used during interactions. The particular research questions developed are also seen as active and constructive, they are not attended to as being passive and neutral (Potter and Wetherell 1987) as they function to constrain the object of study in particular ways and mediate what aspects of the texts are attended to. Within this present thesis the aim is to explicate accounts of infidelity and monogamy in interpersonal relationships, because of the epistemological position adopted the research enquiry is constrained to investigating infidelity/monogamy in contexts that would allow for an unpacking and complex analysis of constructions of infidelity/monogamy in practice. Thus an important starting point and assumption within this research endeavour, is that conceptualisations of infidelity and monogamy will vary within and across interpersonal contexts and that discourses of infidelity and monogamy are socially constructed; this research approach is itself constructed and constructive (cf Potter and Wetherell 1987, Potter 1996) of these objects of study. As such the research enquiry can also be seen to be broad in focus, because the focus is on the concepts of infidelity/monogamy in general, rather than investigating them in relation to other concepts – for example, any of the other ‘variables’ employed within experimental social psychology which are investigated as impacting on the occurrence of or reactions to infidelity, say relationship contexts, gender, religion etc. This more generally investigative

framework is further evidenced in the specific questions put to participants (see appendix 1), these questions within the interview transcripts are seen and analysed in the same way as dialogue, for their active and constructive components. The constructive nature of the research questions will again be attended to within the analysis chapters where relevant.

When employing a discourse analytical method, discursive patterns in language are not viewed as being pointers to underlying cognitive structures or representations of 'attitudes', but rather as regularities in spoken and written text (Willott and Griffin 1997). Texts are examined in their 'own right' and not as a secondary route to things beyond the text (Potter and Wetherell 1987). For an account, or any discourse examined, to 'make sense' it is dependent on a shared understanding or agreed 'convention of realism' (Stenner 1998) regarding the subject matter. An interrogation of what is at stake when people talk should be undertaken because discourses can be seen to be just as much about a communication of motives, as they are a presentation of 'reality'; thus the discourses examined also position the speaker/reality in particular ways. One of the functions of a text is to bring to life a network of relationships and by using discourse analysis I can begin to map the different versions of the social world that coexist in a text (Banister et al 1994).

The ways in which discourses are viewed and analysed within this study is also guided by the theoretical distinctions made by Gergen (1999). Gergen breaks down the discourse analysis process into three components, firstly focusing on *discourse as structured*, which examines discourse as a set of conventions, habits or ways of life that are stable and recurring; *Discourse as rhetoric*, which emphasises the ways in which conventions or structures of language are used to frame the world and achieve certain social effects; and finally interrogating *discourse as process*, which is concerned with the particular flow of the social exchange, the conversations, negotiations, arguments and other processes by which the text is constituted (Gergen 1999, p64 italics in original).

The particular form of discourse analysis utilised in this project is primarily guided by the approaches detailed by Potter and Wetherell (1987) and Parker (1994). Potter and Wetherell (1987) suggest two phases of analysis, firstly searching for patterns in the data. This is both in terms of consistency, the identification of features shared by accounts, and variability, which is the

identification of difference in either the content or form of accounts. The second phase involves paying attention to the function and consequences of particular discursive constructions; which involves forming hypotheses about the functions and effects of particular constructions and then searching for the linguistic evidence to support/or reject the hypotheses. Potter and Wetherell (ibid) state that these analytic claims should give coherence to the body of data and the explanations should cover both the broad patterns and accounts for many of the micro-sequences and that any exceptions to the sequences can be very informative and interesting.

As explored within section 2.5.3. a social constructionist perspective on gender also informs the overall ethos of this research endeavour and the analysis of 'gender' within the data collected. I was heavily influenced by the work of Stokoe (2002) and her treatment of 'gender' within a conversation analysis approach, particularly in wanting to avoid invoking gender as an analytical category existing outside of discourse. And further by the radical feminist perspective outlined by Muscio (2002), who explores the cultural and historical factors shaping women's understanding of their behaviour and bodies. Gavey (1989) explores the compatibility of discourse analysis and a feminist poststructuralist perspective, as opposed to discovering reality, revealing truth or uncovering the facts, feminist poststructuralism would be concerned with disrupting and displacing oppressive knowledges (ibid p463). Rather than approaching women's and men's retelling of their relationship experiences as something pure and essential, and deriving from them as gendered beings, the analytic approach adopted within this study was to examine gender and power relations in line with a social constructionist, discourse analytic epistemology (see also Burr 2003a). That language constructs and constitutes gender rather than reflecting a 'true' essence that can be attributed to the gender of the speaker. Thus the form of 'feminist' theorising informing this research project, is one that aims to avoid positing essential, fixed qualities for women and men (Gavey 1989, p462), and thus avoids using the gender of the speaker as an overarching, free from construction, category of analysis. Francis (2000) offers a useful summary of 'power' within gender constructions, in that the dichotomous nature of normative gender constructions results in an imbalance of power relations in favour of the male. Francis highlights the importance of attending to this power differential

within discourse analytical studies, and the approach explicated through this research has been useful in informing my examination of ‘power’ dynamics within relationship discourses (see also Connell 1987, Davies 1989, Francis 1997).

Furthermore, my research attempted to incorporate poststructuralist approaches to knowledge, language and discourse (as debated in sections 3.2.1., 3.2.2. previously and section 3.3. subsequently) and as outlined by Gavey (1989), whilst acknowledging that through the very nature of poststructuralist thought there is not one unitary position to adopt here. These were used as generally guiding epistemological principles informing the practice and analysis within this research project. For example, one that contests the idea of ‘knowledge’ being universal, ahistorical or ‘neutral’. Further being guided by the epistemology utilised by Williot and Griffin (1997) and their employment of a feminist poststructuralist perspective to examine discourses for their complex and contradictory constructions of power relationships (ibid, pg 108) and Burns (2002) and the treatment of gender and gender differences from a social constructionist and feminist approach. The compatibility of a purely discursive study within a feminist epistemology will be further explicated during the discussion of employing principles from action research, below, and will be returned to again within the discussion chapter exploring whether it is enough to focus on language and language only. Further details of the specific analysis procedure adopted within this study can be found in sections 4.1.1 and 6.1.

#### **3.2.4. Study One - Design**

In order to gather a body of data suitable for the above described discourse analysis, individual interviews were selected as one primary source of data collection. It was thought that individual interviews were most suited to discuss in detail experiences and views of infidelity and monogamy in personal relationships. The talk elicited being an important resource for gaining insight into how people construct and relate relationship events. Due to the focus of this research, the interviews would be semi-structured, containing open questions to prompt participants to discuss and relate their views and experiences of monogamy and infidelity. Appendix one contains a list of research questions

given to participants prior to the interviews so they could give informed consent to take part, and which were used to offer some structure to the interview process. A second source of primary data deemed to be suitable for this research project was focus group discussions, this is a further data collection method suitable for eliciting views and experiences of infidelity and monogamy in relationships, and as such, adding further breadth to the study. Focus groups are also useful because they contain a further interactive component, where the interaction between participants, the conversational component, becomes a further source of data to discursively analyse (Willig 2001) and where unexpected topics and related issues may arise during the course of the group discussion (Berg 2007). The main criteria used to seek participants for this study was a willingness and ability to talk about their own interpersonal relationships and their views and opinions of monogamy and infidelity in relationships. It was not a requirement that participants had experienced infidelity or monogamy in relationships, but rather that they were able to share their opinions regarding issues of infidelity and monogamy in personal relationships. Theoretical sampling (see Willig 2001) was kept in mind, a methodological procedure usually employed within Grounded Theory studies, where data are continually sought throughout the research process that might elaborate or challenge emerging ideas within the analysis. In this research context this was applied to continue sampling to ensure participants were included in the research process that could add particular experiences, depth and breadth to the coverage of relationship experiences. The primary aim of these interviews and group discussions was to generate enough detailed data to explore discursive constructions of infidelity and monogamy, to achieve a contextualised understanding of how these concepts are constructed and deployed by people in interpersonal settings.

### **3.2.5. Participants – Interviews**

Opportunity sampling and snowball sampling were selected as suitable sampling methods. Many friends and colleagues were opportunely approached with the aim of them passing on the request to friends and colleagues to take part in an informal interview discussing personal relationships. Friends were not directly approached

to take part in interviews, as through past interviewing experience it was thought that interviewing acquaintances or strangers would generate less artificial conversations regarding relationships. Such that interviewing friends may merely reproduce conversations and knowledge previously informally discussed. A participant information sheet (see appendix 2) was produced and sent to interested parties, as well as an information sheet containing the questions I hoped to cover during the interviews (see appendix 1). Through opportunity sampling 15 individuals were interviewed, 5 males and 10 females. Opportunity sampling was able to include participants with a range of relationship experiences relevant to the topic of study. Thus participants ranged from never having experienced infidelity in a relationship to having multiple extra-relationships, and participants who adopted a non-monogamous approach to personal relationships. This opportunity sampling was capable of yielding a good diversity in terms of the experiences and opinions represented by participants, further explicit theoretical sampling may have been necessary if that had not been the case. Participants included in the study also reported different sexualities. Exploring the relationship between sexuality and discursive constructions of infidelity and monogamy was not an aim of this study, but I did not want to include only 'heterosexual' participants, to avoid reproducing the heteronormativity present within experimental research studies explored within the literature review chapter of this thesis. Due to the open-ended nature of the interviews they lasted between 1-4 hours. This generated a huge amount of data and the number of participants was capped at 15 to enable the analysis to be manageable and completed. The interviews generated data relevant to this research project and enabled a thorough examination of discourses drawn on by people when they talk about their interpersonal relationships, infidelity and monogamy.

### **3.2.6. Participants – Group Discussions**

Similarly, participants were recruited through opportunity sampling to take part in the group discussions. I approached friends and colleagues with the aim of them then approaching a small group of friends that would be willing to take part in an informal group discussion discussing personal relationships. Again, the only

requirement for participants to take part in the group discussions was the ability and willingness to talk about issues of infidelity and monogamy in relationships. Possible participants were again supplied with the participant information sheet (see appendix 2) and a list of possible topics that would be covered during the group discussions (see appendix 3). Through this opportunity sampling, three groups of friends were recruited as participants for the group discussions. Two groups containing three participants plus myself and one group containing four participants plus myself. All participants in the group discussions were female and participants did not all identify as heterosexual. Due to the open-ended and informal nature of the first group discussion (group participants met more than once, see 3.3.4), they lasted 1 to 2.5 hours. Due to the amount of data generated from the group discussions the number of groups was stopped at three to allow the data analysis to be completed in full and remain manageable and within the scope of this thesis. The corpus of data gathered from the group discussions further enabled the analysis of social constructions of infidelity and monogamy and further facilitated a more detailed exploration of how relationship issues are constructed interpersonally and how meanings are worked up and made relevant during group interactions.

### **3.2.7 Ethical Practice**

Throughout the development of this research project and specifically within the data collection phases, ethical guidelines were followed ensuring ethical treatment of the participants involved. This involved following standard ethical practice to ensure no harm to the participants taking part within the interviews and focus groups and respecting participants' rights throughout. Following those set out in the Research Studies Handbook, all aspects of the research process were discussed and approved by my supervisor, and also following those set out by The British Psychology Society (Code of Ethics and Conduct 2006), and as recommended by several methods handbooks (see Willig 2008, Banister 1994, Berg 2007 for example). Explicitly this meant ensuring participants were fully informed as to the nature of the research and their participation in it. This was achieved through verbal and email dialogue with participants and through supplying them also with a written information sheet (see appendix 2) and interview questions prior to

taking part (see appendices 1 and 2), there was no deception involved within this study so participants were fully able to give their informed consent to take part. Participants were also informed of their rights in taking part, such that they had the right to withdraw at anytime without explanation, they had the right not to answer or discuss any aspects they did not wish to, without any further explanation, and they had the right to ask questions throughout each stage of the research process. Participants were also further debriefed after each interview and group discussion, participants were again told as to the purpose of the research and what would happen to the transcripts of the data and the completed thesis. Participants were also ensured of confidentiality throughout. Their names and any names of people they discussed have been changed (participants were invited to choose their own synonyms if they wished, so they could identify themselves in any written work) and any identifying features were also changed or removed from the written transcripts, such as when the participant mentioned place of work, occupation or geographical locations.

### **3.3. Methodological and Procedural Limitations**

The use of discourse analysis inevitably constrained how the topic could be and was studied, particularly in the emphasis on language and language only and therefore not making claims about the ‘reality’ of participants’ experiences of monogamy and infidelity. This could be seen as minimising or trivialising experiences, as to an extent they become ‘abstract’ only examined in language, and not the ‘material’ ‘reality’ of lived experience. Burr (2003) states that the study of the psychology of the individual has been moved to the social realm, and hence the focus on language. Burr (ibid) examines this quite succinctly and posits this perspective challenges many of the foundations of modern western philosophy, and experimental psychology, because it rejects the need to focus on the individual or self in terms of their ‘essential’ nature, i.e. ‘their thoughts, feelings and behaviours’ (p54). For a useful discussion of a theoretical and methodological framework incorporating discourse analysis but expanding the focus to also study the ‘material’ ‘reality’ of experience, see Sims-Schouten, Riley and Willig (2007), also the debate presented by Hollway and Jefferson (2005,

2055a), Spear (2005) and Wetherell (2005) in examining the limits of discourse analysis and what could be examined beyond discourse. This debate is also returned to in part in section 9.5.3.

I am aware of how utilising other methodologies may have added to the depth and breadth of this research endeavour. For example, an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Eatough and Smith 2006, Smith, Jarman and Osborn 1999, Willig 2001) may have accomplished an interesting examination of the 'experiences' of monogamy and infidelity in relationships, which may have provided a deeper and more experiential account of these relationship practices. Similarly, if a Grounded Theory approach (Charmaz 2006, Strauss and Corbin 1994, Webster and Beech 2000) had been utilised this may have afforded a more detailed explanatory framework to be developed to account for participants varying accounts of infidelity and monogamy in relationships. The ontological and epistemological assumptions form the foundations upon which research and theory can be developed. They will inevitably dictate how the research is conducted and how the results of such research are presented, disseminated and evaluated (see for example, Cohen et al 2008; Staunaes & Sondergaard 2008). But ultimately the choice of theoretical and methodological framework lies with the researcher and their own theoretical and methodological preferences and skills (see 9.7 for further reflexivity on this issue). And indeed Fink (2000) states that every consideration and decision will be based on entirely personal grounds (online). Therefore discourse analysis was seen as the most suitable methodology given the stated aims of this study (see 1.1.) and the choice of this methodology then in turn constrained the paradigmatic elements of the research practice.

Some of the practical elements to consider here in terms of the methodological context and limitations would be my choice of constructs to examine, the selection of participants and the style of interviewing adopted. I could have expanded my analysis beyond gender to include a consideration of sexuality, ethnicity, age and cultures as these equally could have influenced the constructions of infidelity and monogamy. For example, Francis (2000) highlights the role of social class, ethnicity, sexuality and (dis)ability in the study of gender differences and power relations. These would not have been utilised as pre-existing categories of analysis but rather could have been adopted within the study to further explicate the constructions of personal relationships. This was beyond

the scope of this present study, but may provide useful avenues for future research. The selection of acquaintances and strangers for the individual interviews has previously been discussed in section 3.2.5, such that the use of friends was avoided because it was thought this could lead to ‘artificial’ conversations of their relationship experiences. Having said this it may have been beneficial to utilise friends to enable a deeper and more collaborative exploration of their views and experiences where we could have worked together to unpack theirs and mine socially constructed ideals. Using friends may also have worked to minimise the power dichotomy present between the researcher and the researched, for example in that the friends used would have had knowledge about my own relationship background and experiences of infidelity and monogamy. In relation to this however, as stated above, the researcher inevitably chooses the various practical facets of their research (including theory, methodologies, methods, analysis and dissemination) and therefore the researcher-researched power dichotomy is unavoidable (see Francis 2000, Denscombe 1995). This decision was taken based on my prior experiences of interviewing friends as part of a research project (Nicholls 2001). This was also further informed by my overall aims of the interviews and group discussions and the type of data I hoped to generate. In that I wanted to explore, in line with the stated aims in 1.1., the general, normative understandings of infidelity and monogamy in relationships, in order to examine the hegemonic constructions of these present within ‘everyday’ accounting practices and discourse. Rather than, say, an in depth understanding of individual narratives and experiences that may have been facilitated more conclusively through the use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (as above) and a different style of interviewing. In short, I refrained from challenging participants’ accounts or using possibly intrusive questioning that may have encouraged more in-depth answers and following up contradictions. Such a style may have been appropriate had I used friends for the research, and again may have yielded alternative data outside of my initial research objectives.

### **3.4. Epistemological & Methodological Debates – Part 2**

So far within this methodological chapter, social constructionism and a relativist epistemology has been explored as a preface for the discourse analytical methodological adopted within study one of this research thesis. This epistemological debate now continues with a discussion of social constructionism and realist epistemology, further exploring and debating the possibilities of 'action' within a social constructionist epistemology. This discussion is offered to explicate the methodological foundations from which the second study developed, offering a perspective and methodology from which to explore discursive limits and the possibilities of discursive change within discursive constructions of infidelity and monogamy. I assert that researchers should seek to find a framework of action that will encourage suggestions about improving (social or individual) policy, this argument is now developed in the following section.

#### **3.4.1. Realism – Getting *Real***

Traditional branches of realism would appear to be in direct opposition to the states of knowledge implied by a social constructionist perspective, and indeed 'naïve' realists could be said to have an unquestioning faith in the reality of what we perceive (Wetherell and Still 1998). The risk of reification (Parker 1998) is a common complaint against many 'traditional' research positions, for example Stokoe's (2000) explication of traditional gender research, which is accused of perpetuating stereotypes and presenting a reification of a gender dualism position. The customary ways of categorising and ordering are reified and interest driven rather than reflections of reality (Willig 1998). Therefore any 'realist' account of reality risks reifying the investigated qualities. The realist position that has developed within the social constructionist movement has affiliated itself with the 'critical realism' perspective (see Bhaskar 1989). A critical realist perspective accepts that scientific inquiry operates in a climate of 'epistemic relativism' (Parker 1998, Willig 1999). Knowledge is seen as provisional and open to challenge, but realism is still grounded in social practice discourse where underlying political and material effects, structures and relationships can be investigated (Parker 1998). Collier (1998) also states that (critical) realists acknowledge that values and beliefs are historically and culturally located and produced, but that these 'facts' can be examined critically and then informed

judgements can be made about the appropriateness of our values based upon our knowledge of the reality that lies behind social phenomena.

Nightingale and Cromby (1999) state that our social constructions are always mediated in and through our embodied nature, materiality of the world and pre-existing matrices of social and institutional power. The task that critical realists now face is attempting to comprehend conditions of change (Parker 1998) that facilitate certain, rather than other, discourses. So although this position acknowledges the impossibility of knowing objects except under particular descriptions (Bhaskar 1978 cited in Willig 1999), the assertion is that there are underlying structures that will mediate social practices and the discourses produced. The (more) traditional concept of reality invoked by critical realists, for example, that there are particular forms of knowledge that can be obtained, could be seen as an attempt to counter the political paralysis invoked by accepting a (thorough, all encompassing) social constructionist approach. The problem with attempting to facilitate any political action from such a foundation is, how can researchers ever do more than acknowledge the possible influence of material factors? Is it possible to interrogate material conditions independent from discourse? As the material realm seemingly becomes intangible when you remove discourse from the equation.

Collier (1998) establishes this position further by attempting to restrict the amount of emphasis placed on the constitutive effects of language. Collier asserts that there is a material reality which pre-dates language and experiences, language is seen not to constitute reality or subjective experience; language and experience are seen as contingent upon the nature of reality. From within this perspective the focus shifts from concentrating on language to a focus on practice, because practice is viewed as an engagement with the world that exists outside discourse, which constantly reveals the nature of reality. It is hard to imagine how people would understand and make sense of practice without the use of cultural discourses, because practice is only made sense of within some system of cultural meaning that is situated in discourse. Potter (1998, cited in Burr 1998) states that when people talk of reality it enters the discursive realm and therefore it is impossible to access reality because to give any account of it is to transform it into a discursive event. Furthermore theoretically chasing reality and asserting a 'real' creates a privileged position for the knowledge generated, this has the danger of

positioning an 'other' and resisting challenge from alternative constructions of reality. The sincerity, feelings of rightness and the aura of 'truth-telling' that emanates from a realist position can be an oppressive and dangerous effect (Wetherell 1995).

Again the attempt to shift the focus away from discourse and focus instead on practice, or the conditions of change, can be seen as responses to the claims of 'moral relativism' that are invoked if a relativist position is taken to its ultimate conclusion. Parker (1992, cited in Willig 1999) states that there are material constraints upon discursive change, achieved through direct physical coercion and the material organisation of space, and therefore to achieve any kind of political action these material realities need to be investigated and challenged. It is asserted that to repoliticise social inquiry we need the firm ground of an extra-linguistic standpoint which only realist models of language can offer (Smith 1997, cited in Miller 2000). Willig (1999) states that because we can attempt to explain events as the specific realisation of structural possibilities, discursive positionings can be explored and, because of the added material dimension the implications for practice and experience can also be traced. If a dominant or 'problematic' discourse can be located or particularised to its specific social structures it can be challenged and the call for a material change in reality can occur, hence achieving 'political' action. Brown et al (1998) take a slightly different approach to the relationship between discourse, material reality and political action. They state that by acknowledging the relationship between discourse and material reality, what they call the 'assemblage', it is possible to challenge or resist social reality through discursive changes. By acknowledging the very real effects that discourse does have on practice it is therefore no longer necessary to try and interrogate some 'material' reality. This positioning has quite serious consequences for any political action, where such political action would then perhaps only be seeking to address the 'effects' of material realities, through discourse, as opposed to the 'causes' or underlying mechanisms. Such a position can then be seen as in opposition to any revolutionary political movement, radical feminism for example. This again points to the previous questioning as to whether it is enough to study language and language only; and whether a purely discourse analytical study can be seen to address any issues of feminist concerns (as set out as an aim within the previous exploration of the discourse analytical method used within this

thesis). Edley (2001) states that we should see that the realms of the material and the symbolic are inextricably bound up with one another and it is a futile task to try and tease them apart.

Potter (1998) asserts that politics need to be done and that they do not simply flow from a theoretical position and therefore political interventions should come from political arguments and commitments. As the 'critical' realist position is still hoping to base judgements on facts about reality these can always be questioned and challenged (undermined theoretically), and hence political action should rise from personal commitment to particular beliefs, because theoretically we will never develop a universal way of 'judging' the validity of accounts. If political action is explicitly stated as coming from personal (subjective) motives the process of deciding between accounts is far more transparent and open to challenge and change, than a political position that seeks to operate from a position of 'truth'. Hall (1988a,b, see also cited in Wetherell 1995) explores a 'politics of articulation' which sees political positioning as about an 'opening' and 'closing' of positions, at particular moments it becomes relevant to mobilise around some identities and some, rather than others, in the hope of achieving political action. In part, the subjective, theoretical and political aims were explored and explicated in the introductory chapter to this thesis, in order to explicitly position the author theoretically, politically and subjectively. This theoretical debate now moves onto explore in depth the theory and methodological considerations underpinning the second aim of this research thesis. Holding in mind the previous debates of social constructionism, relativist and realist positions, this section explores action research and the principles taken from action research that can be applied to a discourse analytical study.

### **3.4.2. A Need For Action**

The social constructionist movement provided a liberatory alternative to traditional psychology, with no boundaries on what could be reconstructed and its promise of anti-essentialism (Burr 1998).

“I suspect many people embarking on postgraduate research are dissuaded from pursuing ‘real world’ topics based in political conviction (unless their researching under the auspices of ‘action research’) because it would constitute polemics, it wouldn’t be ‘real’ science” (Peel 2001 p1)

Working within the setting of ‘action research’ the emphasis is on practical improvements and changes (that are directly applied) rather than investigating a particular phenomenon. Action research is essentially practical and applied; it is driven by the need to solve practical, real-world problems (Denscombe 1998). Action research involves abandoning the idea that there must be a strict separation between science, research and action (Taylor 1994), as research in itself has little influence on practice (Robson 1993). There should be an intrinsic link between social theory and the solving of immediate social problems (Denscombe 1998). This is why examples of action research are often found within educational and occupational settings, because these direct ties already exist; here research and theory are inextricably intertwined in practice (Taylor 1994). As the emphasis is on the practical and applied features of research it follows that such research should be based on real-world problems (as opposed to those dreamt up in laboratories). Action research aims to solve ‘pertinent’ problems of major importance (Greenwood and Levin 1998), which have first been identified by those directly affected in the immediate context. Rather than abstracting a ‘problem’ from its immediate social context to be investigated, researchers collaborate with participants in an effort to seek and enact solutions to problems; action and change are initiated at the ‘ground’ level, and as such theory and action are not separated. Actively involving the participants in the research process, assisting them to ‘own’ the research by whatever means (Robson 1993) will ultimately decide the success of the project at the ‘local’ level –the extent to which practical improvements are taken on board and used by the participants.

Kagan and Burton (2000) examine what they term ‘prefigurative action research’ (PAR). PAR is orientated to social change, and is about attempting a social innovation in a social context (Kagan and Burton 2000:74). Furthermore PAR is seen as the process of simultaneously creating images of what could be possible while exploring and documenting the actual limits imposed by the current system (Burton 1983, Kagan and Burton 2000). This form of action research is

seen as more progressive in that it explicitly addresses social relations and forces that may be constraining progressive social reform (2000:76). It can be said then that action research is driven by the situation and by the participants immediately involved, the participants must be able to use the knowledge that emerges; any theories generated have to be useful and improve the current situation. Action research in this sense is not about making suggestions for further action or policy changes (not as a first priority), it is about implementing changes and measuring their effectiveness. Action research is a way of trying out changes and seeing what happens (Taylor 1994). Although change in itself is not the same as improvement or progress (Robson 1993), which means some kind of evaluation of the researches' success has to take place. Defining concepts and developing procedures for assessing what is actually accomplished by change is difficult and challenging work (Hall 1975), in that what has been 'effective' will be subjectively determined and the initial aims of a project may vary dramatically when interpreted by the participants involved.

Hall (1975) suggests a 'levels of use' framework for analysing the success and level of adoption of an 'innovation'. Within the context of Halls' writing 'innovation' is taken to be any practically implemented programme, policy or structure, for example, a new form of teaching practice within the classroom. I have taken Hall's level of use framework and now apply 'innovation' to any intervention, discursive or otherwise. Within this measurement framework there is an emphasis on the 'function' of the innovation for the individuals involved. I think this is relevant for an evaluation of a discourse analytic approach in that it is important to assess what is actually *done* when particular discourses are in use, and to what purpose. Furthermore as Hall (1975:52) states an 'innovation adoption is not accomplished in fact, just because a decision maker has announced it', this relates very clearly to the identification of alternative discourses as although it is often stated that discursive constructions are open for challenge and can be negotiated, it is often not made explicitly clear how and what these discourses are that could be formulated and used in a specific interpersonal interaction. Asserting that a particular discourse can be challenged interpersonally is not the same as people actually discursively challenging it and formulating alternatives. Therefore by measuring the 'success' of a particular intervention, or the effects of such a research project we can assess whether people are actually able to challenge and

*use* alternatives discourses in the suggested ways. This highlights the presumption that discourse analysis provides a 'liberatory' framework for researchers and the individuals participating in such research, because within this framework all aspects of life can be deconstructed, and reconstructed in more facilitating ways.

In the traditional sense action research is about implementing a direct change and then investigating/measuring the effectiveness of that change. Research tends to be localised and small scale and as such usually focuses on change at the micro level (Denscombe 1998). Another form that action research can take is 'demystification'; central here is the belief that the very act of obtaining knowledge creates the potential for change (Taylor 1994). This fits nicely with critical discourse analysis, because this is about identifying common discourses and then offering a position by which to challenge them, creating alternatives. This also relates to Freire's (1972) concept of 'conscientization' (cited in Taylor 1994), which involves a deepening awareness of the participants' own sociocultural identity and their own capacity to transform their lives. Rappaport and Steward (1995) also talk about conscientization, which they define as to critically engage the world, questions and knowledge. They suggest that academic work should be about creating a public language that is deacademicized, compelling and most of all useful. Goodley and Parker (2000) assert that critical psychology needs to move from the sphere of academic argument into the methodological process and into, what they term the 'realm of praxis'. This is where theory is practice driven, and any practice has already been theorised (2000:6); or at least understand that these processes should be mutually dependent. Kagan and Burton (2000) discuss 'first and second order' learning; first order learning is seen as creating knowledge about the change process in its local context (micro level). Second order learning is creating knowledge about the meaning of the change process for the wider community or society and an awareness of the wider implications of the implemented changes (Macro level). Again by assessing the differences in the impact and meaning of change at both these levels we can seek to understand the constraints and wider influences acting on change at the micro level.

I think the general principles of action research are important. They help to remind us, as researchers, why perhaps we are undertaking research. It centres the research process on the participants involved and their own judgements of the

situation; how they make sense of and use cultural discourses. By examining, highlighting and instigating localised, small changes in discourse, we can investigate how alternative versions are mobilised; and how these in turn will have 'real' effects on people and how they view their circumstances. It is important to acknowledge that discursive practices are in place that prevent us from thinking and acting in particular ways and that if people can reflect on these limits, they, themselves can effect progressive change (Goodley and Parker 2000:14). Also by interrogating and formulating alternative discourses it is possible to challenge the 'larger power' structures by challenging them at the micro-level discursively. This exploration of action research principles and the subsequent examination of how these principles are of importance within discourse analytic research is able to highlight some of the broader theoretical aims of this present research project.

### **3.4.3. Existing Possibilities: Examples from within Psychology**

The purpose of this section is to introduce previous research that has covered aspects of resistance or alternatives to dominant discursive practices. It is hoped that this coverage will help provide further rationale for the particular research method used in this research project and situate this methodological approach within the wider research community usage of discourse analysis and social constructionist frameworks.

Gavey et al (1999) conducted research investigating heterosexual accounts of intercourse, within this article they cite a number of ways alternative/resistance discourses can be fostered. Firstly, they comment that existing tensions and inconsistencies created by competing discourses may offer a space to destabilize taken-for-granted discourses. For example, the tension (i.e. inconsistencies) between the discursive construction of intercourse as being the pinnacle of pleasure for heterosexuals and the construction of sex as being centred on 'pleasure' may help shift intercourse from being the inevitable goal and endpoint of heterosexual. Therefore intercourse could be re-scripted to be seen as being one sexual possibility among many. This shows how inconsistencies between discursive resources drawn on by participants may be utilised to foster 'new' ways

of scripting behaviour. Gavey et al also note the necessity of participants possessing a 'critical awareness' (p44/45) in terms of language use, for creating alternative discursive practices. Some participants were found to talk with a critical awareness of the norms and expectations they themselves fostered when talking about heterosexual intercourse. This involved participants acknowledging socially prevalent ideas by using such terms as 'normally', 'normality' or 'society's expectations' in contrast to the behaviours that the participants would like to do. Thus showing a critical awareness of dominant ways of acting/talking that are in tension with preferred ways of being, therefore opening up sites of resistance. For example, participants talked of norms governing women's sexuality and highlighted times of resistance to such norms when they were not consistent with their own desires.

Similarly, Allen (2003) examines young (17-19year olds) peoples' accounts of themselves as sexual, in relation to dominant discourses of (hetero)sexuality. It was found that participants regularly drew on dominant constructions of female sexuality when discussing sexual intercourse. For example, constructing young women as objects of sexual attention and positioning them as the recipients of male desires (further discussions of the reciprocal discourse can be found in subsequent chapters of this thesis, and see also Gilfoyle et al 1992). Allen asserts that despite the prevalence of dominant discourses in accounts of sexuality, some participants did draw on discourses that resisted dominant meanings of female sexuality. Again, as with Gavey et al (1999), this was in part evidenced by a critical awareness of the language used. Such as when participants made reference to or explicitly explored 'stereotypes' and then further drew on discourses that recognised and legitimised women's sexual desire as normal. Allen further reported some possible factors that enabled the use of resistance discourses by the participants. The women were seen as located in a supportive environment and had access to counselling and advice; in sum, they were enabled by their social location in a facilitating environment (Allen 2003:222).

Gavey et al highlight the difficulty in resisting discourses that draw on 'naturalistic arguments'. These arguments may be particularly hard to disrupt or challenge because there is a strong justificatory logic within such terms of argument (1999:45). Weedon (1987, cited in Tunariu 2003) suggests that because

of the very nature of hegemonic discourses (or any discourse) as well as offering a dominant way of being, they simultaneously offer sites for resistance. As any discourse offers/constructs particular subject positions, they also offer 'other' subject positions that are there by implication. It is therefore suggested that resistance to particular discourses can be fostered when a space has been created between the subject position traditionally on offer through reliance on the dominant discourse and an individuals' interest in the subject that the discourse seeks to define. Tunariu (2003) asserts that because sexuality is more than a monolithic set of practices, our understanding of sexuality would benefit from recognising that resistance and compliance to normative figurations are possible simultaneously within heterosexual relations. Within the theoretical perspective utilised by Weedon (1987), an individual could be seen as having to verbalise or somehow experience a tension between their usual positioning within, say the 'romantic love' discourse, and their own particular interest or desire. Thus 'resistance' when theorised in this way appears to be fundamentally individually driven. Accordingly, this approach does not seem to facilitate wide scale resistance by a 'cohesive' group (say feminists), or for the fostering of alternative discourses prior to any 'tension' being experienced or verbalised as such within individuals/groups.

What I assert previous researchers have done is to examine the research data (i.e. the texts of reference such as interview/discussion materials) for (already existing) points of resistance and any examples of alternative discourses that subvert the perceived hegemonic/dominant discourses or often in a more decontextualised sense, discourse analytical research through the very nature of a social constructionist position, it is seen theoretically possible to challenge any discursive structure. What this 'challenge' or resistance actually looks like in discursive practice can be somewhat unclear. By incorporating principles from action research and being informed by the 'existing possibilities' examined above, I aim to formulate the use of discourse analysis that furthers the examination of change and the construction of alternative discourses within the research process. Gavey et al (1999) posit that the tensions and inconsistencies created by competing discourses and alternative constructions may offer a space to destabilize the taken for granted normality and naturalness of particular discursive constructions. Within studies of personal relationships, sites of resistance may be

theoretically explored in research, but what do these alternative look like when people talk? I believe there is a lack of conversational or interactional explorations of such resistance; and I think it is this specific grounded, 'discursive' resistance that is needed for people to actively resist or mobilise alternatives in their everyday lives. Hence, incorporating some of the principles of 'action research' into what is predominately a discourse analytic study of personal relationship discourses, may help explore the possibilities and limits of alternative discursive constructions. As Holloway and Jefferson (2005) state, social psychology, which can be seen to bridge the understanding of the individual and the social, should be seen to address the question of how individual subjects can act as agents within social constrains. It is hoped that by drawing on participants' own skills of critical reflection, this thesis may more fully develop a contextualised understanding of the limits of discursive change and further map the discursive possibilities of hegemonic and 'other' discursive constructions.

#### **3.4.4. Study Two – Design**

Continuing on from the design of study one, exploring social constructions of infidelity and monogamy, this second study aimed to utilise the group discussions used in study one to explore the limits and possibilities of discursive constructions. My aim within the group discussion phase of this research project was to take an active role in creating alternative/resistant discourses, i.e. exploring such possibilities in practice. This was grounded in my assumption that for any alternative or challenging discursive construction to be effective it has to be first grounded in language/interpersonal interactions and must be able to be mobilised conversationally. Incorporating a longitudinal study was beyond the scope of this thesis, but as stated the aim was to accomplish the first criteria of grounding such alternative discourses in interpersonal interactions/conversations. I believe this will overcome the previously stated problems of researchers stating that resistance is possible, or that a given discourse could present a challenge to dominant ways of talking, yet not giving worked examples of how such discourses would be mobilised (*used*) in practice when people talk. The design of this second component aimed to explore this. The participants who were recruited to take part

in group discussions to explore the topics of infidelity and monogamy were further asked to take part in a second group meeting to reflect on the content of their first group meeting. As stated previously, to explore the social constructions of infidelity and monogamy that are drawn upon during interactions and to examine this interactive component within interpersonal, group discussions were thought to be a useful medium for collecting suitable data. As detailed previously, the first group meeting covered a discussion of experiences and opinions of infidelity and monogamy and was facilitated in an open and semi-structured way (discussion topics are listed in appendix 3). Drawing on the same discourse analytical procedure detailed previously (and further in 4.1.1 and 6.1), these initial group meetings provided extensive data to examine the social constructions of infidelity and monogamy. The first group meetings were transcribed and an initial discourse analysis completed. This first analysis aimed to identify discursive constructions and how these were actively constructed and used within the group discussions. The group participants then met again, approximately two weeks after the first group meeting, or whenever was convenient for the participants. Short guidance notes were developed, based on the research discussed above in 'existing possibilities', to enable the participants to reflect on the discursive constructions and the subject positions afforded within them, they were given a brief outline of the discursive approach adopted within this study, some prompt questions to ask of the discursive constructions, and the initial group analysis (a sample pack containing these details, and that which was given to group 2, can be found in appendix 4). The emphasis within the second session was to explore alternative ways of thinking and talking about the topics and experiences previously discussed, so to explore the limits of the presented discursive constructions and how they may be differently constructed. Each group would therefore have a minimum of two sessions. If the group would like to have more than two sessions to discuss the material this would be accommodated. The second group meetings would then be further transcribed and analysed using discourse analysis and would be incorporated into the analysis of the discourses initially presented. The aim of this second stage of group meetings and second component of discourse analysis was to explore in situ the possibilities of reconfiguring dominant or otherwise discursive constructions, and to explore conversationally, within language, the possibilities of challenge and resistance to discursive constructions.

### **3.5. Where now?**

Having explicated the methodological underpinnings and procedural framework of this thesis, the discussion now moves on to explore the results and analysis gained from studies 1 and 2 presented within the subsequent chapters.

# 4

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## Analysis

### 4.1. Introduction – Individual Interviews - Monogamy

This chapter begins with a discussion of the analysis procedure adopted when analysing the individual interviews, and moves on to an exploration of the data gathered within study one and the individual interviews conducted to explore opinions and experiences of infidelity and monogamy in personal relationships. Chapter four presents the discursive analysis of ‘monogamy’ and how this was talked about and related to during the individual interviews. Many researchers cite the importance placed on monogamy in relationships (see Allen et al 2005, Wiederman and Hurd 1999) or rather the distress caused by or undesirability of extra-relational transgressions in personal relationships, which by implication informs the assumption and importance of monogamy in relationships (see Abraham et al 2001, Allen et al 2005, Blow and Hartnett 2005, Boekhout et al 1998, Diblasio 2000, Drigotas and Barta 2001, Egan and Angus 2003, Feldman and Cauffman 1999, Lieberman 1988, Roloff et al 2001, Wiederman and Hurd 1999). Monogamy is rarely discussed explicitly by authors’ examining infidelity in relationships, yet this norm is used to inform researchers’ understandings of the behaviours they term as ‘infidelity’. Researchers employ a norm of monogamy to denote behaviours occurring outside of the primary relationship as necessarily infidelity (see ‘Versions of the World’, chapter 2). Within this section, ‘monogamy’ as a discursive construction will be examined. I will explore how participants talked about monogamy and how this discursive construction was used rhetorically during the interviews

#### 4.1.1 Analysis Procedure

As explored within section 3.2.3, the form of discourse analysis adopted for the purposes of this research study was particularly informed by the approaches set out by Potter and Wetherell (1987), Parker (1994) and Gergen (1999). The specific analysis procedure adopted was an amalgamation of the guidelines discussed by these authors, and further informed by the procedural guidelines for the analysis of discourse set out in Willig (2001). As guided by Willig (ibid) the first step was to read and re-read the transcripts with the aim of becoming familiar with the conversations contained and also to “experience *as a reader* some of the discursive effects of the text” (ibid, p94). For example, this was useful when approaching the transcript of Mel’s interview, where I noted sections ‘read’ like speeches to a larger audience. This was the first stage in noting, with all the transcripts, what I felt the text and talk was ‘*doing*’ (ibid, pg 94) and how I responded to it (both within reading, and during the recorded transcript), before moving on to more detailed coding and annotation of the texts. The first stage of coding undertaken was more like ‘open coding’ (Berg 2007), utilising some of the guidance for an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Willig 2001), where notes are wide-ranging and unfocused and are used to highlight the analysts’ initial thoughts and observations (ibid p54). I found open coding to be useful at this stage to avoid missing sections of the transcripts that I may have omitted having solely focused on coding in relation to my specific research questions. Once I had fully annotated the transcripts with my initial thoughts, I then moved onto a more focused analysis, analysing the texts and my notes for instances of particular relationship talk relevant to the aims of this thesis. Identified instances and sections of text were then examined in terms of ‘consistency’ to identify patterns within and across texts (Potter and Wetherell 1987) in terms of how monogamy and infidelity were discussed and related. Subsequently, attention was then paid to ‘variability’ in the form and content of participants’ talk (Potter and Wetherell 1987). I then gave considerable thought and speculation as to the identification of particular discursive threads and ‘discourses’, with reference to the ‘seven criteria for distinguishing discourses’ set out by Parker (1992, pg 6-21). I then moved onto examine the ‘consequences’ and ‘functions’ of these discursive

structures within the immediate micro conversational setting, in line with the guidelines set out by Potter and Wetherell (1989), and also making use of Gergen's (1999) discussion of the constructive components of narratives. Once attention had been paid to the 'micro' context I then moved onto consider the 'macro' context informing participants talk and how broader discourses and relationship 'norms' impacted how the participants spoke about relationship concepts and ideas. This was guided by research already existing in this area, for example Hollway (1989), Lawes (1999) and further research previously explored in section 2.5. In terms of the impact of a 'feminist' approach to the analytical procedure, the guiding principles have been outlined in 2.5.3., 2.5.4 and discussed further in 3.2.3. This primarily guided the analysis procedure in two ways: attempting to avoid the use of gender as an analytical category operating outside of discourse, rather 'gender' being seen and analysed in accordance with the idea that this is socially constructed and worked-up during interactions (Stokoe 2000). Secondly, the attendance to issues of 'power' within discursive constructions, particularly those drawing on 'gendered' categories of meaning (following Burns 2002, Williot and Griffin 1997). Further analytical procedures used for examining data gathered from the group interviews are discussed in section 6.1.

#### **4.1.2. A note on terminology**

As stated within chapter 2, the term 'personal relationship' is used throughout this thesis to denote a commonsense understanding of a 'conventional' 'intimate' personal relationship, invoking such commonsensical concepts such as 'love', 'commitment', 'trust' and generally 'fidelity'. I use apostrophes here and within the thesis to denote terms where the meaning is necessarily contested and is seen as variably constructed, the commonsense connotations necessarily problematised from a social constructionist, discourse analytical perspective. Even when apostrophes are not used, it is assumed throughout this thesis that such relationship concepts are always contested and not necessarily denoting an unproblematic concept, such that when the terms monogamy and infidelity are used throughout they are always, already being read as contestable categories, and in the readers mind should hopefully always be viewed as 'monogamy' and

‘infidelity’. As noted within the literature review, there is often a variety of terms used to denote infidelity in personal relationships, consideration has been given to the impact of the different terms I employ within this thesis to denote the relationships and behaviour that I discuss, and variability is not something I have been able to avoid. When discussing data and participants’ conceptualisations, I try to retain the terminology they employ. I also use the term ‘infidelitous’ to denote any behaviours that are talked about as being like ‘infidelity’. As an explicit attempt to move away from reliance on the discursively loaded terms of ‘infidelity’, ‘cheating’ and ‘affairs’ when discussing interpersonal relationships. I also employ the terms ‘extra-relational encounter’, ‘extra-relationship’, ‘extra-relational transgression’ and variations thereof, with the hope of enabling more ambiguity with respect to how these relational events are viewed – e.g. as not necessarily constructed or positioned as ‘infidelity’ through the use of my terminology. The term ‘primary’ relationship is used to denote the central, ‘personal’ relationship participants refer or allude to, and hence any behaviours or relationships occurring outside of this parameter are termed ‘extra-’.

## **Monogamy**

### **4.2. Monogamy = a proper relationship**

Fidelity was often used as a marker to denote a ‘real’ or ‘proper’ relationship, participants often stating that it would not be a ‘relationship’ if it were not monogamous. Monogamy was therefore positioned as *the* defining feature of personal relationships. This position is exemplified in the following extract:

#### **Extract:**

Kate: is monogamy important to you?

Clare: Um, yeah definitely.

Kate: Why?

Clare: Because (.) I don’t think we’d be having (.) a proper relationship if you couldn’t (.) um well, if the other person was going off all the time with other people. It wouldn’t really be a relationship. (Clare 3-8)

Within this exchange monogamy is positioned as the defining feature of the relationship, if the relationship was not monogamy they wouldn't "be having a proper relationship". The importance of monogamy hinges on its ability to denote a relationship as serious, as 'proper'. So here it is not monogamy per se that is important, but rather what this has come to signify within normative relationship culture. This was a recurring theme within participants' discussions and is explored in more detail within the group-discussion data chapter.

Monogamy is the point:

**Extract:**

- Kate: ok then so would you say that monogamy is an important part of a relationship for you?
- Alan: yes, generally speaking yep, yes it its (.) that's the point of being with one, you know someone
- Kate: yes?
- Alan: is to be with that person, rather than saying 'well I want to be with that person but there might be times when I want to sleep around' its like one or other, its not both (Alan 3-9)

Both the former and latter extracts are organised in such a way as to undermine alternative constructions of personal relationships, for example, a non-monogamous but 'serious' relationships. Both exchanges draw on 'offensive rhetoric' (Potter 1996, Billig 1987) in that they are organised around possible counter arguments - of wanting to be with more than one person whilst in a serious relationships - and therefore work to create a justifiable and credible position of monogamy being the defining feature of important/proper relationships. Within the latter extract monogamy is again positioned as 'the point' of having a personal relationship. Being in a relationship with someone negates wanting to 'sleep around', these are constructed as mutually exclusive - "its like one or other, its not both". Monogamy becomes the organising principle of personal relationships, the defining principle of what can be classed as a relationship. Both extracts draw on idealised norms of personal relationships, i.e. the normative pattern of monogamy being a defining feature of personal relationships.



#### 4.2.1 The Only One

Implicit within the above discussion of monogamy denoting a ‘proper’ relationship is the idea that this also represents only two people being involved in the relationship. When questioned further as to why monogamy was important, participants often constructed an account of the importance of being the ‘only one’ in a relationship. Prior to the following exchange, we had been talking about monogamy and had established that monogamy was part of Cara’s current relationship, at this point I am trying to establish why:

##### **Extract:**

- Kate: so would you think um (.) I know you’ve said you’re both a bit jealous, but is monogamy an important part
- Cara: yes
- Kate: the fact that it is just the two (Cara: yes) and that’s something that is established
- Cara: yeah I would {say so}
- Kate: {yeah} why do you think its an important part
- Cara: um because you want to be, well I want to be, because >I’m speaking from my point of view< I want to be the most important person in his life and so if therefore I say it’s ok for him to go and be intimate with somebody else, I would feel like I wasn’t the most important person in his life (Kate: right) basically I guess (.) even though (.) as an adult it’s important and inevitable that you fancy other people and that you kind of find them sexually attractive or whatever I think, I don’t know probably due, due to our society rather than to anything else, that its important to us that even though we can go ‘phoaw’ at somebody that we can still go ‘but I cant I mustn’t because of respect for my partner’ sort of thing (Kate: yeah). (Cara 281-297)

Within this and the previous exchange between Cara and myself, there was an initial lack of expansion as to why monogamy was important. This lack of immediate exploration of monogamy was a regular occurrence within interviews, and I think this may be symptomatic of monogamy’s hegemonic status within participants’ understanding of personal relationships. The concept of monogamy is so ingrained as to be somewhat invisible and hard to explicate initially. When Cara does begin to explore why monogamy is important there is repeated personalisation of her statements, shown through the use of ‘I’ throughout and

also explicitly stating “because I’m speaking from my point of view”. Such personalisation works to ground comments in participants’ own experiences and may be used to pre-empt any criticism or counter argument. This personalisation may be in response to my probing and exploring specifically why monogamy was important to Cara in her relationship. Within this extract monogamy is constructed as representing being “the most important person in his life” and related to exclusive intimacy in the relationship. Therefore being the most important person in your partner’s life negates them from being intimate with someone else - presumable sexually intimate - although this is not explicit. Monogamy works to ensure this exclusive intimacy within the couple and here has become a carrier variable (Seu 2001) for being ‘the one’ and signifying the importance of the individual and the relationship. Such that monogamy carries with certain socially ascribed characteristics and further connotations than just sexual exclusivity in relationships. This position is qualified further by acknowledging as an adult that it is “important and inevitable that you fancy other people”, but it is constructed as “respect” for your partner that this would not go any further; which works to present a more realistic consideration of attraction. Being ‘the one’ is a powerful explanatory device attached to romantic love narratives, a romantic narrative necessarily involving the search for and attainment of the one, usually constructed as Mr Right (Di Mattia 2004, Kamins and MacLeod 2004,).

#### **4.2.2. Monogamy = grand relationship narrative**

Within discussions of monogamy and relationships in general was the positioning of monogamy as of primary importance within interpersonal relationships, which was often not unpacked by participants and was somewhat intangible. Within the following analysis, the relationship between monogamy and trust in personal relationships is explored.

#### **Extract:**

Kate: so obviously, I mean you say you’re married, so is monogamy an important part of that relationship?

Nita: yeah urm we’ve urm, we’ve been faithful the entire time we’ve been together, three years (Kate: yeah) we’ve been married for a

year and a half now, we trust each other implicitly, I think that that's the secret to (Kate: yeah) faithfulness. (Nita, 99-104)

At the beginning of this extract, with my question, I particularise and change my initial positioning of monogamy as “obviously” a part of a married relationship, which could silence other accounts of monogamy within a married relationship but shows the commonsense assumptions about monogamy and marriage. The terms “monogamy” and “faithful” are then used interchangeably, using ‘faithful’ to denote monogamy in relationships shifts the concentration from specific behaviours, i.e. sexual fidelity, to a wider discourse of ‘loyalty’ and remaining ‘true’ within personal relationships. Trust is then discourses as the cornerstone of “faithfulness” in Nita’s relationship, “we trust each other implicitly” and that is the “secret to faithfulness”. Adhering to a monogamy norm in relationships again appears to become more than about specific behaviours not occurring in relationships, but rather signifying further, implicit, relational concepts. This is also explored within the infidelity analysis section, where similarly, infidelity becomes to signify more than specific extra-relational behaviours, but also the breaking of trust etc.

Monogamy as signifying interpersonal relationship attributes is explored further within the following extract:

**Extract:**

Kate: is monogamy important to you in a relationship? Is staying with one partner important?

Bess: yeah it is to me um

Kate: would you like to elaborate on that?

Bess: um it is ‘cos if you (.) shag about you kinda don’t feel very secure and um I don’t think you can actually, I don’t know, you need to actually trust someone to be with them you need to (.) I could never be with someone that messed about because I just wouldn’t feel (.) loved or wanted (.) I’d just be a bit of bum for a shag (Bess, 1-9)

Within this extract Bess is asked to expand on her affirmation that monogamy and “staying with one partner” is important. Non-monogamy or ‘shagging about’ is discourses as stemming from insecurity in self, or insecurity in the primary

relationship, and that one needs to “trust someone to be with them”; this insecurity could be seen as the cause or the effect of ‘shagging about’. Monogamy again becomes linked with particular interpersonal emotions; trust in a relationship, and also feelings of being “loved and wanted” within a relationship. Monogamy becomes synonymous with interpersonal emotions, and without monogamy in relationship there would be a lack of such ‘emotional connections’. Without monogamy relationship encounters are reduced to relationship practices devoid of emotional attributes, being a “bum for a shag”. Here monogamy is intrinsically encompassing more than just relationship behavioural practices and is connected with grand relationship narratives such as ‘security’ and ‘love’.

### **4.3. Negotiating monogamy**

Within the interviews as well as asking about the importance of monogamy I also asked about whether monogamy was something participants talked about in their relationships. The first three extracts in this section are discussions in response to such explicit questioning, the second two contain more general discussions about negotiating monogamy in relationships.

#### **Extract:**

Cara: yes actually quite a lot because er Robert had a previous relationship where his girlfriend was very unfaithful (.) often (Kate: right) (>) and um that completely did his head in so to begin with so pretty much straight away he was very much like ‘you either do or you don’t’ (Kate: yeah) sort of thing which is fair enough because I cant, I, I’m the same I don’t want anyone to kind of mess around behind my back (Kate: yeah) (Cara 211-216)

Past experience of infidelity prompted earlier, more explicit discussions of in/fidelity in Cara’s present relationship and an upfront positioning of fidelity in the relationship “you either do or you don’t”. Which echo previous comments by Alan above (p65), a relationship is either monogamous or there isn’t a relationship. Presumably here the relationship would have ended if Cara had not been able to agree to fidelity in their relationship. But Robert’s request for fidelity

in the relationship is constructed as reasonable and is supported by Cara, denoted by her assurance that she felt the same and that it was “fair enough”. This again helps to construct monogamy as the normative pattern in personal relationships, as requesting/performing fidelity in relationships is positioned as the only acceptable option and as the norm. This is in tension with alternative constructions discussed in the ‘no guarantees’ section later.

Further participants did present the normative pattern of monogamy in relationships but also constructed negotiations of monogamy in relationships as not the norm:

**Extract:**

Kate: [...] is monogamy something that’s negotiated at the start of a relationship (Rob: yeah) and obviously that perhaps wouldn’t occur in that kind of relationship because you know but

Rob: no not in an um affair no but with with proper relationships so to speak um (.) I don’t think I’ve ever had the conversation (Kate: yeah) in my life even even with a marriage or anything it was always assumed and understood (Kate: right) in the four or five relationships that I’ve had major ones I mean that it was a that it was always assumed this is a relationship and relationships are monogamous (Kate: yeah) but I’ve never had the you know the sit down contractual agreement or anything [Kate laughs] [laughter] I don’t think I have (.) no I haven’t (.) just understood just understood, that’s how it is (Rob 818-829)

Initially Rob states that monogamy would not be negotiated in an affair, but would be with proper relationships. He then goes on to discuss how he has never had such negotiations in any of his relationships. In the main relationships “it was always assumed and understood” that monogamy was part of the relationship. This furthers the understanding of monogamy as being the normative pattern in relationships, as it is constructed as implicit and not in need of discussion. Monogamy as a defining feature of relationships is further exemplified when Rob comments “it was always assumed this is a relationship and relationships are monogamous”, this draws on a commonsensical understanding of personal relationships that is always necessarily understood and hence defies explication within relationships. This is substantiated by drawing on an extreme case formulation of negotiating monogamy in a relationship, “I’ve never had the you

know the sit down contractual agreement”. This positions such negotiations as somehow out of place and silly, as such a ‘formalised’ agreement would not be in line with how relationships are ‘naturally’ or implicitly organised – which is in part confirmed by mine, and then joint, laughter on this parody of such relationship discussions. This works to position Rob as totally reasonable and justified in not discussing monogamy in relationships, as that is how relationships are, monogamous. In other interviews, having such discussions were also explicitly framed as “absolutely ridiculous” (Matt, 112) because such ‘rules’ do not need to be set in personal relationships as they are implicitly understood as involving monogamy. Such positioning of monogamy in relationships, as implicit and absolute, works to construct monogamy as part of a relationships’ very foundations and ingrained in participants understanding of relationship practices. This would be inline with the treatment of monogamy within the majority of psychological research, as something implicit and naturally assumed within a personal relationship. Yet, at other points in the discussions monogamy was not attributed a ‘natural’ place in relationships and participants negotiated its im/position on relationships. The following two extracts broaden the discussion of negotiating monogamy in relationships, and begin to highlight the variation and ambiguity with which this concept is applied.

**Extract:**

Nita: ... I I do think that it’s important to lay out expectations urm you have to know what, what faithfulness is (Kate: yeah) supposed to mean urm what the boundaries are, some, some women might consider er looking at another women as being unfaithful (Kate: yeah) but, in my relationship I’ve, I’ve found that to be unreasonable (Kate: yeah) I’ve, I’ve, I’ve tried that once but it, it wasn’t working, it kind of made, it, it made looking at other women all the more appealing, it was the forbidden fruit (Kate: yeah) (Nita, 76-82)

Within this extract Nita discusses the importance to “lay out expectations” within personal relationships, to discuss and unpack what “faithfulness” means within the specific relationship context. Here ‘faithfulness’, or ‘monogamy’ is not constructed as something inherently universal, and clearly understood as occurring within all relationships, but rather as something that has to be negotiated or at

least acknowledged in terms of the specific “boundaries” of the relationship. To substantiate this claim, Nita draws on an extreme case formulation of unfaithful behaviour, “some women might consider er looking at another women as being unfaithful”, such that “some women” might find that problematic within the context of their relationship. Nita discusses how in the past this behaviour (looking at another woman) has been positioned as problematic within the context of her relationships, but this conceptualisation become “unreasonable”, and “wasn’t working”, in that this made the behaviour (looking at other women) more appealing. When something is banned, constructed as “forbidden fruit” within the relationship, it becomes even more desirable. This extract contrasts with the construction explored above within Rob’s interview, here boundaries, and therefore what is ‘monogamy’ is to be explored within relationships. The positioning of monogamy as universal and as an inherent part of personal relationships is explored and challenged within the following extract.

Discussing whether monogamy is important in all relationships:

**Extract:**

- Ian: I don’t know, if you’re going out with someone and you’re seeing them quite often and you’ve spent the night together and stuff like that then you know, if you’re spending nights together well you wouldn’t consider that to be more than a casual, you know, one night standing, then if you would be spending time together (Kate: yeah) in the evenings or during the day you know stuff like that (.) well (.) I think that would be falling towards more of an exclusive type thing (Kate: yeah)
- Kate: do you think you would have to say that at the start of a relationship?
- Ian: I don’t know, I’ve been out with a couple of girls who said ‘so are we going out now?’ and explicitly said it (Kate: yeah) other times it’s just been understood you know that we were together (Kate: yeah) then I suppose, yeah, its, it depends how (.) well (.) a lot of it depends in (.) well (.) you know the person as well you you know you if you’re really quite similar people, a lot like the person you are going out with, then I I suppose you just understand things between each other (Ian 104-19)

Within the first half of this extract Ian constructs a casual relationship where monogamy would not necessarily be important. Here presumed night-time sexual

activity does not prescribe monogamy. This is founded on the generalised assumption that it would be viewed as ‘casual’, “well you wouldn’t consider that to be more than casual”. The importance of monogamy comes with spending more time together and then you would be “falling towards more of an exclusive type thing”. This statement constructs unclear boundaries between different relationship states/practices and hence perhaps when the concept of monogamy would begin to be significant is also unclear. Within the entire extract there is a sense of ambiguity and therefore a space for individual interpretations of the relationship situation particularly applies. It seems that what is left unsaid is as important as what is said, as assuming monogamy also rests on being ‘similar’ and on “understand(ing) things between each other”. Again this constructs a position of implicit monogamy or non-monogamy within relationships, and relies on individuals being able to deduce/infer similarities.

Interestingly, research by Lenoir et al (2006) bears out misperceptions in relationship monogamy and the occurrence of concurrent relationships. The researchers found low agreement between participants’ perceptions of relationship monogamy and concurrency and actual reported incidence of monogamy and concurrent relationships. For example, for males and females perceiving their partner as monogamous, 16% and 37% of those respective partners reported having concurrent relationships. Similarly, males and females who perceived their partners as having concurrent relationships, 80% and 39% respectively were not and were monogamous. This points to disparities between presumed and ‘actual’ behaviours in relationships. The authors state this has obvious implications for individuals’ who presume they are in a mutually monogamous relationship, especially in terms of their sexual health. This is relevant here because it obviously highlights the ‘flaw’ in implicitly ‘understanding’ what is going on in a relationship, particularly in terms of monogamy or ‘casual’ relationships. This is returned to further in later in this section, under the heading ‘one person’s non-monogamy is another person’s infidelity’.

As well as participants drawing on implicit understandings of non/monogamy, participants also constructed personalised positionings where individuals had to

‘set their own rules’ in terms of relationship norms, this is shown in the following extract:

**Extract:**

Kate: perhaps we could lead onto the a just the question about um monogamy (Dee: mm) maybe related to marriage or

Dee: well as far as I'm concerned other people have to set their own rules, I think its something that you negotiate between you or that you ought to negotiate between you (Kate: yeah) unfortunately I think a lot of people don't so that there's a lot of assumption that monogamy's going on, on one part and it isn't (Kate: yeah) um we've talked about it a lot and we both know that we couldn't, we've both been at the receiving end of, of somebody else (Kate: right) going off and neither of us could hack it from the other so we both know it's a total (Kate: yeah) non-starter (Dee 314-326)

In orientation to my opener about discussing monogamy in relation to marriage, Dee draws on a particularising approach to denote that “other people have to set their own rules” when it comes to monogamy in relationships. This is an alternative perspective to monogamy seen as implicitly occurring within relationships; rather monogamy is “something that you negotiate between you”. Or rather monogamy is something that you should be negotiating within your relationship because of the assumption that “monogamy's going on, on one part and it isn't”. This exchange is rhetorically organised to facilitate individual freedom for ‘other people’ to negotiate their relationship rules and to substantiate Dee and her partner's decision to discuss monogamy in their relationship. This helps position Dee as adopting a rational and sensible approach to relationships, in discussing in/fidelity and agreeing what is/n't acceptable within her relationship. This further constructs a position of individual choice in terms of monogamy and relationship ‘rules’, in opposition to being culturally ascribed. Again, therefore Dee is positioned as a responsible social actor who has adopted a sensible and justifiable approach to discussing monogamy in her relationship. This would be in line with Otto's (2001) remarks in an article exploring monogamous and non-monogamous approaches in relationships. Otto concludes the article by stating that for ‘healthy’ relationships it is important to explore and establish individual boundaries in terms of monogamy/non-monogamy and that decisions should be made and discussed between partners. This can be seen as the ‘rational’ approach to negotiating monogamy in relationships, which is in opposition to the ‘implicit’ understanding of monogamy commonly invoked when participants talked about their relationships. At different points in participants' discussions negotiating

monogamy was seen as sensible (as above) or as ‘silly’ and ridiculous. This highlights the variability with which monogamy as a concept was constructed by participants and the contextualisation needed to understand how monogamy can be im/positioned onto relationship practices for differing ends – to construct monogamy as natural and implicit, or to position monogamy as essentially negotiable and idiosyncratic

#### **4.4. Working at monogamy**

As well as participants variously positioning monogamy in relationships, participants also talked about monogamy being something to be worked at rather than something necessarily occurring ‘naturally’ within their relationships. An example of ‘working’ at monogamy is explored within the following extract:

##### **Extract:**

Bell: Simon is, I mean, so far we don’t have any problems (.) share like, we don’t share the same opinions about stuff but even though we are different we listen to each other (Kate: yeah) which I find quite helpful (Kate: yeah) and he is quite supportive (.) all kind of stuff I think that has helped me through the years (Kate: yeah) and I know that he has been faithful (.) and I know that the way he is actually like treating me helps me being faithful in the relationship (Kate: yeah) because I remember last year when I was living in X you know you can get easily tempted because you met all sorts of people (Kate: yeah) and there was some like a couple of people that I was really fond of (Kate: yeah) and then I was talking to all my girlfriends and then all of them were saying ‘but listen you’re in such a good relationship’ and I was like yeah yeah I know I know, I do appreciate that I know I know I want to be faithful but look at these guys if you don’t experience that now when are you going to experience that (Bell 39-51)

Within this dialogue the primary relationship context and supportive interpersonal communication are constructed as fostering monogamy in relationships. Rather than monogamy being guaranteed in relationships, here it is contextualised and positioned as something more actively arrived at and maintained. Particular interpersonal circumstances help monogamy to be achieved – listening, support

etc – and Bell’s primary partners’ behaviour, “I know that the way he is actually like treating me helps me being faithful in the relationship”. This also helps construct monogamy as a process rather than a simple behavioural choice or standpoint, and hence as ‘active’ monogamy. Some circumstances are constructed as fostering monogamy and others as more ‘testing’ of remaining monogamous. Thus monogamy is contextualised in terms of particular relationship circumstances. Towards the end of the extract, extra-relationships are discourses as rather tempting and again the maintenance of monogamy is something to be worked at. Extra-relationships are constructed as positive life experiences, which perhaps are to be grasped, “but look at these guys if you don’t experience that now when are you going to experience that”. This locates them in a more positive positioning of fostering self-development and enhancing life experience, and the constraint of staying monogamous within a primary relationship means missing out on other experiences. This substantiates the construction of working at staying ‘faithful’ within relationships, because this is not necessarily easily given because there are opportunities out there. Bell repeatedly acknowledges counter readings of the situation, “I know, I know”, that she has a ‘good relationship’ which should negate wanting to experience other guys. Bell should ignore the extra-relationship opportunities, her repeated affirmations also signal her dissent and her own opposing viewpoint that the discourse of ‘experience’ becomes a challenge and fidelity has to be actively sought.

#### **4.5. Re-scripting Monogamy**

As has been emphasised above, monogamy was a concept that varied when participants talked about their relationships. Within the following extract, different constructions of monogamy can again be seen:

##### **Extract:**

Mel: we did talk about it [being monogamous], but then he was totally besotted with this other woman the whole time (Kate: right) so how monogamous is that, ok he wasn’t shagging her but you know (Kate: yeah) that’s not monogamy either is it, so that was, that felt a bit fraudulent, I didn’t blame him....um John again, I think John’s position was that monogamy meant I didn’t shag any other

men (Kate: right) women was a different thing (Kate: right) and again I could go for that at the time... (Mel, 1224-1232)

This dialogue is again in response to a direct question about whether participants negotiated monogamy in their relationships. Monogamy had been discussed in the relationship, but Mel constructs these discussions as 'fraudulent' because at the time of her primary relationship with John he was "besotted with this other woman the whole time". This creates a 'grey' area of monogamy or fidelity in a relationship, as although Mel acknowledges the hegemonic status of sex to define infidelity, the relationship is constructed as not monogamous as such "that's not monogamy either is it", because of the partner being 'besotted' with another. This again does not draw on physical behaviours as such to define infidelity. Sexuality is also invoked here to re-script behaviours as monogamous (in terms of John's interpretations), John is reported as viewing the relationship as monogamous if Mel did not "shag other men", but "women was a different thing". Same-sex encounters here are scripted as supporting fidelity, and not positioned as infidelity, so individual perceptions of sexuality are also used to mediate what can be thought of as monogamy.

#### **4.6. Non-monogamy**

Within the individual interviews, two of the participants had a committed and 'open' relationship. These individuals further enable an exploration of alternative perspectives on the fidelity/infidelity binary and the hegemonic position of monogamy in dominant social/relationship culture. Mel has been discussing the factors that influence her approach to relationships; firstly discussing her family's relationship patterns, her bisexuality and then her approach to monogamy:

##### **Extract:**

Mel: ...and my approach to monogamy, which is that I think it is a complete load of old toss, I just don't believe in it, I don't think it exists, I think it's an article of faith, I don't think it's got anything to do with reality, I can understand the impulse to create security by

calling something monogamous and saying ‘yes I will forever, til death us do part, yes darling I will’ and really meaning it and really wanting that to be true um but I think its getting harder to do because people are deconstructing it, believing in it less, looking at alternatives (Kate: yeah) and that affects my approach to relationships... (Mel lines 67-76)

Within this extract Mel works to justify her approach to personal relationships, i.e. an approach that does not involve ‘monogamy’ and sexual exclusivity. On first impressions this dialogue reads like offensive rhetoric, undermining alternative descriptions of monogamy through a personalised account repeatedly using ‘I’ throughout (Potter 1996, Billig 1987). This personalisation, and explicit positioning of ‘ownership’ of her comments is perhaps indicative of a need to defend her personal, non-monogamous approach to relationships, because, generally speaking, such an approach is positioned as outside of and in opposition to the hegemonic norm of monogamy. This offensive rhetoric begins with a clear dismissal of monogamy as a “complete load of old toss” and then moves onto ‘reason over faith’ arguments against monogamy (Richards, 1992). A religious discourse is drawn on when Mel likens a belief in monogamy to an “article of faith” and not grounded in ‘reality’. This works to position monogamy as something that cannot be secured and proven as fact within a relationship. Further, that monogamy is something that cannot be ‘guaranteed’ for life in any relationship, so individuals need to necessarily have faith in relationships, and faith in marriage. This rhetoric constructs monogamy more as a blind leap of faith rather than a considered ‘risk’ in an individual to maintain monogamy in a relationship. This constructs a reason over faith argument in that it draws on ‘knowable truths’ and echo’s the intellectual revolution of science over religion seen in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. The dialogue then move onto a more individualistic ‘gamble’ on monogamy, relating monogamy to a belief in marriage or a long-term commitment through the echoing of marriage-type vows “yes I will forever, til death us do part, yes darling I will”. This is an extreme case formulation (Edwards 2000) constructing a commitment to monogamy as a life-long commitment to one person; this for example, is in opposition to ‘serial monogamy’ where a person may have multiple relationships during a lifetime, but each being monogamous. This formulation is able to construct monogamy as a life commitment to bring an

individual “security” yet which in turn may be hard to achieve and sustain. So overall within this extract monogamy is constructed as an idea, an ideal, that people create to enable security but which necessitates faith in a relationship. Here monogamy is an impulse, rather than a thought-through lifestyle choice, an impulse that has not “got anything to do with reality”. This ‘faith’ in monogamy, and in an individual to be monogamous, was constructed more positively in other accounts:

**Extract:**

Dee: [discussing her marriage] we had a registrar but they still made a thing about you know emphasising that you are still supposed to be forsaking all others you know (Kate: yeah) and all this kind of thing and there I think there is something very special to, to be standing there with someone else, you know looking them in the eye and saying I have no intention of ever going off with somebody else (Kate: yeah) I mean life may change things but I absolutely believe David has every intention of being faithful to me (Dee 394-402)

Within this extract there is some portrayal of what Mel was critical about in the previous extract, but here such intentions to be faithful are constructed as very important and worthwhile. Here, getting married and literally “forsaking all others” is positioned as very special, the belief and intention that they will stay together and not ‘go off with someone else’. This ‘intention’ is constructed as important because it is something motivated by choice, rather than say monogamy as something ‘naturally’ assured in a relationship. A qualifier is used here to acknowledge that “life may change things”, which works to resist the construction of a blind belief in monogamy and the inevitability of their relationship lasting, but rather ‘intentions’ and Dee’s belief in her partner is constructed as important. The acceptance that life may change things does not undermine the importance of trying and committing to fidelity, as challenged in the previous extract. Here there is also the recurrence of the importance of being the ‘only one’ and centring of an individual in your life.

#### 4.6.1. No guarantees

Following on from the above qualifier that ‘life may change things’ is the discourse of ‘no guarantees’, where an uncertain future is constructed more explicitly and used to justify a non-monogamous approach to relationships.

##### **Extract:**

Mel: I think from very early, I mean the whole Darren and Bella thing [early relationships] was at (Kate: yeah) that was explicitly not about exclusivity (Kate: yeah) and we didn’t really talk about monogamy or exclusivity come to that, but we talked about ownership and rights and bodies and people and (Kate: yeah) you know as one does at that age and none of that was exclusive in anyway and I don’t, I’ve ever had, I, I know I’ve never had a monogamous relationship in actuality, I don’t think I’ve ever had one in um in intention either...but I knew it wasn’t something I could sustain (Kate: yeah) um and having said that it’s entirely possible it is, it is something I could sustain for twenty-five years (Kate: yeah) but I cant guarantee it, there aren’t any guarantees and I wont guarantee it because I know I cant guarantee it (Mel 1041-1056)

Initially within this extract we see a discussion of the development/progression of a non-monogamous approach to relationships adopted by Mel. Firstly, I think it is important to note that you may often not see a similar parallel discussion of an individuals’ development of a monogamous approach to relationships, Mel’s exploration of this development perhaps further signifies the hegemonic status of the concept of monogamy. In that individuals rarely have to justify or account for such a relationship practice, in much the same way as the relationship between heterosexuality and homosexuality. It is common to see discussions of the development/realisation of homosexuality by an individual ‘coming out’, yet it would be unlikely to see a similar account of coming out as heterosexual. This is one way that hegemonic status can be seen within discourses – the distinction been visible/invisible narratives and accounting practices. Individuals adopting a hegemonic subject position are not explicitly made accountable for such a position because it is dominant and the ‘norm’.

Mel introduces a political discourse anchored in feminism and the sexual revolution, in terms of discussing “ownership and rights and bodies” in

relationship to sexual practices. The phrase “you know as one does at that age” constructs a sense of shared behaviours and experiences between Mel and myself which helps to normalise and generalise such practices. This helps to further locate Mel’s personal approach within a wider dialogue and within a specific sociocultural time of growing up and doing relationships. Mel then moves on to discuss whether monogamous behaviour would be personally sustainable. She states that it may be “entirely possible” to sustain for a long period (twenty-five years), which is somewhat in tension with previous comments about the rarity of long-lasting relationships, but in this instance helps give credit to the discourse of “no guarantees”. This discourse draws on a general life philosophy of there being ‘no guarantees’ and that life is uncertain. This creates a bottom line argument, what Edwards et al (1995) term the bedrock of reality, because you cannot refute this argument in principle – you cannot physically guarantee that monogamy will occur throughout the lifetime of a relationship. It would take an act of ‘faith’ in monogamy as a relationship practice, as explored previously in the ‘non-monogamy’ section above. By drawing on a position of ‘no guarantees’ Mel is able to use this discursive positioning to inform her relationship ‘practice’, or more generally her approach to non/monogamy. It becomes legitimate not to aim to practice life-long monogamy because this cannot be assured. Further implications for such a subject positioning are explored during the following discussion:

**Extract:**

- Mel: ...but also the whole monogamy thing just feels like too much to ask, too much to ask of myself too much to ask of somebody else, not real, not, not real. Its like staying together forever (Kate: yeah) that’s too much to ask. I might end up staying with Liam until one of us dies but I might not (Kate: yeah) I don’t know, I don’t want to make that commitment because then if it turns out not to be right then it would have been stupid (Kate: yeah)
- Kate: and also it’s the fact that its been characterised as a broken agreement then
- Mel: yeah yeah, not a change of mind (Mel 1863-1870)

How monogamy is constructed in this exchange is generally in tension with how ‘monogamy’ is generally handled socially - as something desirable in (long-term)

relationships and as something that is often ‘asked’ freely of partners in relationships. Mel refutes the im/positioning of monogamy on her relationship as something that is “too much to ask” of herself and her partner, and as something that is not ‘real’ [explored previously]. Monogamy here is not given the defining feature of a relationship in terms of how ‘serious’ or ‘committed’ the people involved are. Their relationship is ‘committed’ in several conventional terms, they have purchased houses together and they are involved in each other’s businesses. But Mel in this instance resists constructing this relationship as one that will necessarily last forever, and this in no-way diminishes the ‘emotional’ or ‘financial’ ‘investment they have both entrusted to the relationship. I would argue that this approach to relationships disrupts monogamy’s hegemonic status as the defining feature of ‘committed’ relationships.

In line with the previous discussions of non-monogamy above, not agreeing/committing to ‘monogamy’ in relationships is constructed as something that aids security and does not rest on predicting uncertain future behaviour, thus an ‘act of faith’ is not needed in this instance to commit to the relationship. Moving on to the second part of the extract above, Mel states that she wouldn’t want to make such a commitment because then “if it turns out not to be right then it would have been stupid” this does read as somewhat circular, self-fulfilling argument. Within the exchange in the interview, I reframe this slightly in my comments and state that such an act could therefore be seen as a “broken agreement” which would have different implications for the associated subject positions. If individuals do commit to fidelity in a relationship then this has consequences for how particular behaviours will be read, so a relationship transgression will necessarily be framed as infidelity or as being ‘unfaithful’ to the agreement. Such behaviours would then be positioned as damaging to the relationship commitment; Mel and Liam therefore take away the ability of ‘infidelity’ to occur within their relationship and for this to breakdown the relationship. It could be argued then that although such an approach may be ‘harder’, Mel acknowledges that there are still emotional challenges [explored further in un/safe section below], than monogamy it is constructed as facilitating more security in their relationships than a conventional relationship, where infidelity is commonly constructed as being able to destabilize and end a relationship.

#### 4.6.2. Monogamy & Morality

Discussions of monogamy are generally imbued with a sense of morality. Or rather instances of infidelity are constructed loosely as immoral/insensitive. This can obviously be seen initially in the language used, i.e. 'unfaithful' versus 'faithful'. There was an interesting characterisation of a non-monogamous relationship approach as somehow immoral [by a participant adopting such a relationship style]. This following discussion explores morality and the religiosity invoked by Mel when talking about non-monogamy:

##### **Extract:**

Mel: ...but for me that's what the, how monogamy non-monogamy thing is, its like no I'm not going to do the same, safe thing, I'm not going to play by the rules, I'm going to stand on the cracks and see if the bayers get me, oh I'm gonna you know its like my response to Catholicism really, which is well I'm going to have pre-marital sex and get divorced and take drugs and have an abortion if I get round to it, which I never did but if I had done I would have done (Kate: yeah) and I'm going to (.) do all these terrible and see if you know see what happens, see if I get damned to hellfire eternal, which I might be [Mel laughs]. (Mel 1121-1129)

Within this extract Mel constructs a non-monogamous approach as in opposition to a 'safe' monogamous position. Non-monogamy is positioned as not 'playing by the rules' and a rebellion against the safe and 'same' way of doing relationships, a construction of the socially ascribed nature of monogamous relationships. This 'not playing by the rules' relates in part to Crossley's (2002) exploration of health-related moral subject positions and discourses. Crossley details the 'rebellion' discourse, which is seen as characterised by a construction of a freedom of spirit and independence. This discourse is seen as quite complex in terms of its moral subject positionings. In Crossley's study it was usually employed by participants to represent a lack of moral responsibility for their own actions and also used to justify a rebellion against safety. Parallels with this 'rebellion' discourse can be seen in the above extract with the exploration of resisting 'safe' prescribed boundaries in terms of relationship behaviours, Mel is

able to establish a position of personal independence from the church and social norms.

Continuing with the above extract, a religious discourse is also invoked and Mel purposely positions her relationship behaviours in opposition to such a discourse. Here Mel presents some examples of there being a moral 'price to pay' for living a non-monogamous lifestyle. This is closely related to a religious doctrine asserting the importance of monogamy (e.g. Christianity), such a consequence being the 'bayers' getting her. A dictionary definition of 'bay' is offered here:

**bay** *verb* (*bayed, baying*) **1** *intrans* said especially of large dogs: to make a deep howling bark or cry, especially when hunting. **2** *intrans* said of a crowd, etc: to howl or shout loudly and with a deep menacing tone. **3** to bring (a hunted animal) to bay. **noun** (*bays*) the baying sound of a dog, etc. **at bay** said of a hunted animal: not able to escape, but forced to face its attacker or attackers. **bring something** or **someone to bay** to trap it or them; to get (one's prey or opponent) into a position that leaves them no way out. (Chambers Reference Online, 2008)

This extract offers an emotive sense of conflict and of being hunted. Barker (2005) states that those who position themselves outside of conventional/hegemonic relationship practices do run the risk of being problematised and demonised by society. Also in the previous interview extract Mel comments that she will see if she gets "damned to hellfire eternal" – the fire of hell or punishment in hell. This is clear religious symbolism in response to her relationships practices constructed as in opposition to Catholicism. The moral and personal costs are constructed as real or imagined 'religious' punishment for her lifestyle choices, through which Mel positions herself as rebellious and antagonistic. Drawing on the possible consequences of a non-monogamous lifestyle Mel is able to acknowledge and situate herself in an 'outsider' position within society and religion, which brings such things as 'hellfire eternal' – not 'light' consequences. These 'negative' consequences are managed as part of the rebellion discourse, signalling personal freedom and choice. From this discussion it is clear to see how particular relationship discourses open up different moral positionings, for the speaker and also those who are the 'other' in comparison to the hegemonic discursive positionings.

#### 4.6.3. Un/safe - Discourse of Extremity

Paradoxically this positioning of non-monogamy as 'unsafe' works to create relationship 'safety' by reducing the dependence on sexual fidelity and 'faith' in monogamy. Monogamous relationships are constructed as 'safe' but undesirable:

##### **Extract:**

Mel: I'm not sure whether its things that are worth doing tend to be difficult or things that are difficult tend to be worth doing but its something like that (Kate: yeah) if I challenge myself a bit more, then I'm going to learn more, if I just go safe and stay within safe boundaries then, its boring, its too boring, and it doesn't mean I want to go sky-diving or anything ...but my bungee-jumps have always been emotional ones... my bungee-jumps are the emotional sort (Kate: yeah) that's where I'll push myself, can I deal with this, can I cope with this and I think that's probably influenced the way I've dealt with relationships as well (Kate: yeah) and perhaps the non-monogamy thing because I'm determined to test myself, I'm not prepared to sit within prescribed safe limits (Kate: yeah), so called "safe", I'm doing a gesture here with my two index fingers of each hand [Kate laughing] because I don't think that's, there's nothing there for me... (Mel 1076-1106)

At the start of this extract Mel begins to explore the 'challenge' of non-monogamy which results in a sporting analogy. This direct reference to extreme sports - bungee jumping – and the language employed to construct a position of challenge and determination helps to position her approach to monogamy within a discourse of extremity and 'frontier challenge' (Palmer 2002). Such a discourse emphasises newness and the novelty value of activities, whilst simultaneously minimising the perception of risk. This discourse helps to construct extreme athletes as the 'sporting elite' (ibid) and a similar positioning could be applied to Mel's utilisation of the discourse in terms of relationship practices, in that non-monogamists become extreme relationship practitioners and hence the 'relationship elite'. Mel constructs a position of pushing boundaries and of taking relationships practices 'to the edge'. Monogamy is constructed as something 'safe', lying within safe boundaries and is necessarily constructed as easy and not

challenging. This is not ascribed a positive position when drawn upon, but rather something that is restrictive and boring. Previously 'monogamy as safe' was positioned as something that is not linked to relationship reality, but rather as an impulse to create something secure. Monogamy here is also positioned as part of "prescribed safe limits" and is constructed as restricting personal growth and development. The process of adding quotation marks and explicitly referencing this for the purpose of the recorded interview acknowledges and contests the nature of the word 'safe' when used in relation to monogamy. This is further able to emphasise that using the word 'safe' is used with reservation. By drawing on a discourse of 'difference' enables the construction of non-monogamy as different and potentially better than monogamy (Barker 2005). Positioning non-monogamy as different and as 'unsafe' is managed by drawing on a discourse of frontier challenge and hence manages the 'risks' involved by constructing non-monogamy as a learning experience and as a worthwhile and testing challenge. In line with the discourse of extremity where any chances of injury or death are downplayed, here risking personal safety i.e. bungee jumping is positioned as not as risky as say 'sky-diving' and refers to her pushing her relationship experiences to the limits.

Later on in the interview I ask Mel to talk further about what is 'unsafe' about a non-monogamous approach to relationships. She uses a sailing metaphor to construct the unsafeness as a lack of maps and guidance of how to 'do' these relationships. The unsafeness is not related to a lack of 'trust' or 'love' in her long-term relationship, as that "feels very safe" (Mel line 1157). But rather the unsafeness is constructed as like a voyage of discovery into 'uncharted waters' which is a positive metaphor of self and relationship discovery, in line with the 'frontier challenge' positioning discussed above. The 'explorer' discourse again constructs a position of a generator of knowledge and discovery, but is perhaps not imbued with the explicit 'risk' factor implied by the extreme sport analogy. This explorer discourse is also less personalised, the exploration and knowledge acquired is constructed as beneficial to anyone seeking to practice non-monogamous relationships – Mel will be mapping this relationship process for everyone. This is in contrast to the 'personal challenge' explored in relation to the discourse of extremity above.

Jackson and Scott (2004) offer a different interpretation of the 'safety' and monogamy in relationships. They interrogate the link between 'trust', 'safety' and 'monogamy', and state that trust in this instance centres on setting rules for the relationship and then trusting the other person not to break those rules, which they argue, somehow misses the point. They assert that promising monogamy and then assuming that the relationship will end if this promise or 'trust' is broken creates conditions for the "ultimate insecurity" (ibid p156).

#### **4.6.4 Non-monogamy ≠ promiscuity**

Mel has been discussing how she is 'up front' about her non-monogamous approach to relationships and goes on to talk about some people's reactions to this:

#### **Extract:**

Mel: ...but some people have been under the impression that if I am bisexual and not monogamous I will therefore shag anybody (Kate: yeah) who thinks that they might like to shag me, and that is not the case, I'm actually quite selective and I think some, there's been two reactions to it, there's been a reaction where people have been quite frightened I think and see me as dangerous and very predatory (Kate: yeah) because of that I'm, I'm likely to just you know pounce and go 'yes I'll add you to my notches on my bedpost' you know (Kate: yeah) whatever and the opposite where people have been themselves predatory and have thought 'ok, well she'll shag, obviously she'll anyone' er which isn't true either. (Mel 83-92)

Within this exchange Mel resists a positioning of her relationship or sexual behaviour as necessarily promiscuous or predatory. These statements are in response to 'real' reactions to her relationship stance, but can also be seen to resist general 'cultural' assumptions about non-monogamous relationships. Kleese (2005) states that due to the defining nature of gender in discourses of promiscuity, being positioned as bisexual and non-monogamous tends to have a particularly stigmatising effect for women. In Kleese's study bisexual women who identified as non-monogamous faced sexualisation irrespective of context and their relationships, this manifested in them being approached for sex in

inappropriate ways or in inappropriate social spaces. This promiscuity positioning is therefore something that Mel has to discursively manage, firstly within the micro, interpersonal context of the interview and also in terms of the wider, macro context of discourses of promiscuity and non-monogamy. This results in a challenge to such a promiscuous non-monogamous discourse that necessarily means you will have sex with anyone, Mel states “I’m actually quite selective” and resists being positioned as predatory.

#### **4.7. One person’s non-monogamy is another person’s infidelity (cf Jackson and Scott 2004)**

Ambiguity and possibilities of misunderstandings is conveyed in the following extract:

##### **Extract:**

Ian: now there we go, I’m back to the double standard now, like I was just saying with exclusive relationship, I we we’d seen each other about three or four times, four or five times, spent a couple of nights together (.) not seen each other too much er I took that to be just you know er er a continued one night stand only (Kate: yeah) for a couple of days and she thought it was something more and I ended up snogging someone else and she wasn’t too happy about it (Kate: yeah) but it wasn’t I didn’t do it intentionally, thinking I’ve got a girlfriend but I’m going to go out and try and get myself laid (Kate: yeah) or anything I didn’t think the relationship was as serious as she thought it was (Kate: yeah) (Ian 123-32)

In this extract Ian is discussing a ‘misunderstanding’ that occurred and led him to be positioned as unfaithful within a relationship. Ian works to build an account of this past ‘relationship’ as necessarily casual, “not seen each other too much” and that he viewed it as a “continued one night stand only”. Within this relational context monogamy is therefore not constructed as applicable. Yet the relationship, and Ian’s behaviour, was viewed differently by the girl involved in the ‘continued one night stand’, reported as taking it to be more “serious” than Ian did. This points to the ambiguity with which monogamy is attributed to particular relationships, and highlights different interpretations of particular behaviour dependent on how monogamy is im/positioned onto a relationship. Here, how the

actor interprets the situation is constructed as important, it is not the specific behaviours or events that define the relationship – for example, having seen each other “four or five times, spent a couple of nights together”. Ian has to mediate being positioned as a ‘cheater’ within the micro context of the interview and therefore disavows the relationship as involving monogamy. There is further discussion of how monogamy is im/positioned onto a relationship to re-script behaviour as infidelitous in the section on monogamy in the group data analysis chapter.

#### **4.8. Monogamy & extra-relational encounters**

One of the grand, overarching narratives of participants’ talk explored at the beginning of the section was how monogamy is positioned as the defining feature of personal relationships. If monogamy is used to define relationships as ‘relationships’, how does monogamy mediate the experience of extra-relational encounters? There was generally very little discussion of monogamy within extra-relational encounters, which in hindsight would have been an interesting avenue to pursue in the interviews. One instance of this did occur within the interview with Rob, who was currently separated from his wife. Within his marriage he had several ‘affairs’. I prompt the discussion of whether it was just understood within his extra-relational encounters that monogamy was not part of the relationships:

##### **Extract:**

Kate: then so with affairs is it just understood that that’s not how it is, just something implicit

Rob: um (.) I think with an affair of the two meaningful affairs that I had not the one offs I think it was even then it was understood (Kate: um) I’ve never thought this before, by them it was understood I’m married and I’m seeing them and that’s it nobody else so kind of (Kate: yeah) what would you call that dual-ogamous [laughter] but even then there was an assumption that it was ‘ok, you’re married and you’re sleeping with your wife but you’re sleeping with me and that’s it’ you know if I’d have said oh ‘I’m also seeing someone else’ they’d have gone berserk probably (Kate: right) and I think I had the same assumption if they’d said to me ‘I’m seeing someone else’ I’d have gone mad they would have said ‘well you’re seeing your wife’ I would have said ‘I know but that’s

different' and so actually it's quite a strange thing (Kate: yeah) the affair was almost you know exclusive oh except for the marriage (Kate: yeah) crazy but yeah the affair also was um the two that I had you know emotions emotional attachments to them were er it was never articulated clearly but it was I think it was understood (Kate: yeah) but yeah this was exclusive I suppose (.) I think monogamy is really important just that I haven't lived by it but you know within, for me anyway, within a loving relationship it's important (Rob, 830-848)

Rather than concentrating on monogamy not being a feature of extra-relationships, within the above extract Rob works to construct monogamy as a necessary part of his affairs. In the 'meaningful' affairs Rob states that it was understood that he was married and "I'm seeing them and that's it nobody else". It was the assumption of both parties that the affair was monogamous, stating that Rob himself would have gone "berserk" and his partner would have gone "mad" upon finding out otherwise. Drawing on commonsense understandings of monogamy, this statement might appear oxymoronic, however Rob tries to mitigate this and comes up with a name for this paradox, 'dual-ogamous'. This then presents a position of having tandem monogamous relationships. Although the 'affairs' may undermine the monogamous characterisation of his marriage, he works to construct a position where his marriage does not necessarily undermine the monogamous characterisation of his tandem relationship; "the affair was almost you know exclusive oh except for the marriage", through this statement Rob acknowledges the irony of treating the affair as monogamous although this is how he viewed it, as "exclusive". This construction of tandem 'monogamous' relationships works to maintain the importance of monogamy as a concept and as a defining feature of Robs' relationships. The use of multiple voicing within the extract – where Rob narrates in terms what his partner might say, "well you're seeing your wife" and what Rob himself might say, "I know but that's different" – works as a conversational device to add credibility and authority to Robs accounting. This corresponds to what Potter (1996) describes as 'footing', a device of attributing speech and comments to other sources than the speaker. Footing is seen as important resource for building up factual accounts and also for managing accountability for claims. Similarly, the multiple voicing in the above extract can be seen as an attempt to build a credible account of how monogamy

was viewed in the tandem relationship, and that the view was not solely Rob's but rather shared by his partner.

#### **4.9. Monogamous forever vs sad pair of losers**

Inherent within all the discussions thus far is the variability with which participants employ and construct relationship discourses. To highlight this variability more explicitly is the following discussion of discourses of 'love', which is used to illuminate the different rhetorical effects achieved when using relationship discourses.

Rob has been discussing what he hoped for in his personal relationships:

##### **Extract:**

Rob: ...and you know if you ask me what do I want then in terms of relationships and life... I think what I'd say was I'd love to find a relationship where I was just in love with the woman and she with me and we're monogamous forever and that's it I would that, that's what I think is great you know and it could happen but I don't know, so I believe in it (Kate: yeah) you know I want it (Rob, 849-856)

This exchange is in response to justifying the importance of monogamy in relationships, and works to stress this relationship style in terms of Rob's aspirations for his personal relationships. Fidelity is positioned as a continuation of a romantic love discourse, and flows quite simply from a love for one another, "I was just in love with the woman and she with me and we're monogamous forever". This is discourses as Rob's idealised relationship narrative, he believes in it and 'wants' it within his relationships. This helps to mediate Rob's positionings within the interview as someone who perhaps does not commit to the monogamy norm in relationships – as he discusses his multiple affairs whilst married. This exchange works to position monogamy within personal relationships, and within Rob's relationship ethos. Approximately 5 minutes later in the interview is this discussion of a romantic love discourse:

##### **Extract:**

Rob: ... you know the relationships and the marriage particularly I feel like oh you know fuck why didn't I you know what's wrong with me that I couldn't (.) but the other side of it that I think is so what's so special about being with one person forever (Kate: yeah) what's the big deal about that (Kate: yeah) and so you see someone who says oh we've been married for fifty-five years and I think well what a sad pair of losers you two must be (.) so I don't admire people like that anymore (Rob: 878-884)

This second extract presents a counter construction of life-long fidelity and romantic love, which comes in response to Rob positioning himself as someone who has necessarily failed at that. Rob has discussed how he 'failed repeatedly' to sustain his marriage and also relationships since then, and initially locates this as something "wrong" with him – Rob previously stated he should come with a government health warning because he has been unable to sustain a relationship. Rather than reside in such a negative subject position, Rob counters the desirability of long-lasting relationships by undermining and critiquing the love/permanency discourse. "...so what's so special about being with one person forever (Kate: yeah) what's the big deal about that (Kate: yeah)", this works to minimise this 'ideal' relationship and Rob's counter discourse is validated within the interview context by my repeated 'yeah's'. This working to manage Rob's subject position of failed monogamy, monogamy is no longer aspired to and people engaging in long-term relationships are constructed as a "sad pair of losers" who Rob does not admire. This characterisation of a permanency discourse is in direct contradiction to the discursive construction within the former extract, where the romantic ideal is held up as *the* ideal relationship and wanted by Rob. This juxtaposition of these two extracts from the same individual discussing monogamy and relationships helps fully illuminate the rhetorical nature of talk and how participants construct and deploy relationship discourses, and within this analysis, how different relationship discourses are employed to mediate participants' subject positions within discussions.

#### **4.10. Conclusions**

This chapter has focused on exploring the discursive organisation of 'monogamy' within personal relationships. The first three discourses examined in this section

began to unpack the constructed features of monogamy, monogamy being constructed as *the* defining feature of personal relationships and being used to mark relationships *as* relationships. The hegemonic status of monogamy was seen through the lack of expansion of this relationship feature within the interviews, which tallies with the treatment of monogamy within experimental psychological research – often going undefined or unchallenged and taken as a ‘commonsense’ organisation of relationships. This hegemonic status of monogamy can begin to be understood when we consider monogamy as a grand narrative which positions monogamy as being synonymous with wider discourses of ‘loyalty’, ‘trust’, ‘security’ and ‘love’. Monogamy is not defined or organised around specific relational behavioural practices, but rather monogamy is ascribed as signifying more than just sexual exclusivity.

Despite monogamy’s hegemonic status, these were not static discourses but rather were varyingly constructed and orientated to, as was seen in the analysis of participants negotiating and ‘working’ at monogamy. Assuming and performing monogamy in a relationship was at times positioned as acceptable and the norm, where often there would not be a need to discuss or negotiate monogamy in a relationship because monogamy was constructed as a natural and implicit part of interpersonal relationships, therefore defying explication in relationships. Whereas at other points, monogamy in relationships depended on contextualised definitions of ‘faithfulness’ and how this applied differently to differing types of relationships, and where constructions of working at monogamy in part also undermined the ‘naturally’ given status of monogamy in relationships. There was also some ambiguity constructed in terms of when a relationship was ‘casual’ and not deemed as necessitating monogamy and how a relationship would be marked as ‘serious’ and hence requiring monogamy. Highlighting the potential for misunderstandings between individuals when they employ different frames of reference for defining relationships as serious/casual.

Varying constructions of monogamy were further seen when examining discourses of non-monogamy, where monogamy was not given the hegemonic status of defining relationships as ‘serious’ or ‘committed’. Monogamy was varyingly constructed as, for example, not grounded in reality, as an act of faith and also something that cannot be guaranteed. Further, at times monogamy was positioned as un/safe because it relies on such a ‘faith’ and is therefore inherently

problematic because exclusivity or monogamy is always unable to come with a lifetime guarantee. Often non-monogamy was positioned as reducing such uncertainty in relationships and the dependence on sexual fidelity as a hegemonic marker of the seriousness of a relationship; non-monogamy becomes safer because it does not rely on an act of faith. Further, monogamy was also at times constructed as 'safe', but as so, also boring, unchallenging and restricting personal growth and development. Non-monogamy became the relationship elite, being constructed as positively challenging and facilitating learning and self-growth.

Exploring the varying ways and effects of the im/position of monogamy when discussing personal relationships explicitly highlights the constructed nature of the concept of 'monogamy' and how the meanings of monogamy are contextually dependent. Although discourses of monogamy draw on hegemonic positionings of the concept, this was still seen as varyingly constructed and something that was negotiated within the immediate micro interpersonal context of the interview and also as part of a wider macro context of relationship narratives and norms. This analysis and discussion of discourses of monogamy now informs the presented analysis in the chapter that follows, which moves on to examine the discursive constructions of infidelity presented within the individual interviews.

# 5

## Analysis

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### 5.1. Introduction – Individual Interviews – Infidelity

This chapter continues the analysis of the data gathered from the individual interviews, moving on from the discourses of monogamy to a discussion of the ways in which infidelity and extra-relational encounters were constructed during the course of the interviews. Within the interviews participants were often asked directly what they defined as infidelity and in response to such direct questioning there were several discourses that were drawn on to particularise their definitions. Firstly, a distinction between ‘sexual’ and ‘emotional’ behaviours was constructed and indeed the defining power of ‘sex’ to characterise behaviours as infidelity was a recurring theme. Participants also relied on discussing individual ‘agreements’ in terms of what is or is not acceptable within specific relationships, although this was also in tension with a discourse of assumed monogamy within relationships. A further mediating device drawn on by participants when discussing infidelity was ‘opportunity’ - the possibility of particular behaviours actually occurring, for example, discussing when ‘fantasies’ might become problematic and defined as infidelity. The following section presents the analysis of participants’ comments in relation to infidelity.

### 5.2. What is infidelity?

The following discourses explore the varying ways participants constructed behaviours as in/fidelity.

### 5.2.1. Distinguishing Emotional versus Sexual Infidelity

When participants discussed what they deemed to be infidelity in relationships they often either explicitly or implicitly distinguished between ‘sexual’ and ‘emotional’ activities. In the following extract, Rob makes a clear distinction between sexual and emotional behaviours in terms of what he personally considers to be infidelity. It is a transgression from the voiced or assumed agreement to be sexually exclusive within a relationship:

#### **Extract:**

- Rob: right so sorry the question was how would I define infidelity (Kate: yeah) um well I suppose the word itself you know not faithful to the either, the voiced or assumed um understanding you have that you will be sexually exclusive to each other in a couple, so being sexually active outside of that (Kate: right) your partner
- Kate: so sexually not emotionally
- Rob: yeah when I think of infidelity yeah that’s what it means to me (Kate: yeah) I know you can be, I know, I know (Kate: yeah) you know there can, although I don’t know that there is, no I wouldn’t, I wouldn’t call that infidelity. [Rob, 143-151]

Rob centres his discussion of what is classed as infidelity on the “the word itself you know not faithful”, which draws on the hegemonic understanding of the word ‘infidelity’ as meaning sexual behaviours occurring outside of the primary relationship. This is how the Cambridge dictionary defines the word, “infidelity: (an act of) having sex with someone who is not your husband, wife or regular sexual partner”. This is the normalised construction of infidelity, as sex with someone outside of the primary relationship, or as Rob discusses, being “sexually active outside of that”. This is positioned as a commonsense construction because such an understanding of monogamy or sexual exclusivity can either be voiced or just ‘assumed’ within the context of a relationship. This implies that personal relationships have assumptions of sexual exclusivity that do not have to be explicitly set out, but can be used to frame behaviours as unfaithful within the context of that relationship. Of course this ‘assumed understanding’ is not something that is universally applicable or constructed, but one that shifts and is constructed by participants to substantiate their particular claims. Such variation

was explored previously in chapter 3, within the Monogamy analysis section, where statements from Ian were analysed for their different im/positions of monogamy in interpersonal relationships. Within the above extract Rob's construction of an understanding of sexual exclusivity which can be assumed, helps to substantiate his positioning of sexual activity outside of the primary relationship as 'infidelity'.

Rob and I invoke a commonsense understanding of a distinction between sexual and emotional behaviours, and hence of a distinction between sexual and emotional infidelity. I introduce this with my questioning "so sexually not emotionally". Rob goes on to assert that it is only sexual behaviours that qualify as infidelity and personalises this definition "that's what it means to me". This personalisation continues with Rob's acknowledgement of the possibility that emotional behaviours may be included under the umbrella of infidelity, "I know you can be, I know, I know (Kate: yeah) you know there can...". This works to repeatedly acknowledge awareness of an alternative definition of infidelity as including emotional behaviours. This alternative construction is also dismissed by Rob using personalisation, as although he recognises such an inclusion of emotional behaviours, this is not something he considers as infidelity - "although I don't know that there is, no I wouldn't, I wouldn't call that infidelity". This personalisation works to counter any further intersection by me of emotional behaviours being included or 'outside' definitions being included and resists being undermined by using stake and interest (see Potter 2004) in this position, i.e. personalisation.

Rob's exchange continues with an expansion of the sexual-emotional infidelity distinction:

**Extract:**

Rob: no I wouldn't I wouldn't call that infidelity, (Kate: right) in friendships with somebody else, because if you did then it would have to be with your preferred gender (Kate: yeah) the gender you're sexually attracted to, so you couldn't be unfaithful with a male friend if you're getting very emotionally close to them (Kate: right, yeah) to me its its, I understand it, sex is the element in it (Kate: ok) [Rob 151-6]

Within this extract Rob clarifies why ‘emotional’ behaviours cannot necessarily be included under the umbrella of infidelity. Here, any behaviour which could be classed as infidelity (emotional or sexual) would have to occur with your “preferred gender, the gender you’re sexually attracted to”. This presents a loop-hole [Catch 22?] in the emotional-sexual infidelity distinction. It is not that behaviours can be categorised in terms of whether they are ‘emotional’ or ‘sexual’ behaviours, but whether these behaviours necessarily have the capacity to become sexual. Behaviours can be read differently in terms of how sexuality is invoked and drawn on to make sense of particular behaviours. Sexuality is constructed as being a distinct identity, which involves being attracted to one gender, “so you couldn’t be unfaithful with a male friend if you’re getting very emotionally close to them”. Bisexuality is not really part of this distinction and is not acknowledged as a possibility (this was also seen within similar accounts within the group discussions conducted). This constructs a closed account of sexuality and works to exclude particular ‘emotional’ behaviours from definitions of infidelity. Sex or sexual activities are used to underwrite what relationships, external to the primary one, may be positioned as infidelitous. Here there is an explicit understanding of the role of sexuality in determining what behaviours can be classified as infidelity. This may highlight the onerous distinction between emotional and sexual behaviours often employed within experimental psychological research. ‘Emotional’ behaviours may necessarily already be imbued with a sexual component to enable them to be classified as infidelity. There is almost no discussion of this within experimental work, with one exception being Dijkstra et al (2001) who found that participants cited a belief in the co-occurrence of sexual and emotional infidelity, even when the scenarios employed within the study positioned these behaviours as mutually exclusive. Thus participants infer further sexual or emotional components when researchers present these categories distinctly. The defining power of sex or sexual activity within discussions of infidelity is further seen within the next three analysis subsections.

### 5.2.2. Sex as Signpost



As touched on above, ‘sex’ or ‘sexual activity’ was used by participants to mediate definitions of infidelity and exclude particular behaviours from such definitions of infidelity in relationships. Continuing this centralisation of sex within discourses of infidelity, participants also used sex as a marker or signpost to help include or label other behaviours as infidelity. This is explored in the following extract from Dee, who discusses behaviours “heading that way” towards sex:

#### **Extract:**

- Kate: yeah (.) and then perhaps when it turns into infidelity is, do you think when it gets sexual it gets taken that step further
- Dee: (.) yes I think it does 'cos I've (.) I mean it (.) it's a bit difficult because you could be kind of seeing somebody you know (Kate: yeah) having lunch or something (Kate: yeah) and it's not really sexual at all but I do know people who've found themselves in a very difficult position who've been doing that kind of thing (Kate: yeah) um I don't think it does count as infidelity (Kate: yeah) but it's a bit of a blurred edge (Kate: yeah) I think I think in my mind it's kind of got to get physical may be not full blown sex but someone's sort of groping away (Kate: yeah) and you're heading that way then I would say it is kind of getting very close (Kate: yeah) but I guess sex is probably the defining thing (Kate: yeah) in my mind (Dee 460-71)

I initially set up the ‘sex as signpost’ construction by questioning whether an encounter “turns into infidelity...when it gets sexual”. An encounter becomes problematic if it ‘turns’ sexual because this is seen as taking things “that step further”. This draws on a continuum of behaviours which at some point cross over into being viewed as infidelity, and one marker for this boundary is sexual activity. Dee initially agrees with this conceptualisation but then problematises it by positing that there might be more of a “blurred edge” in terms of what behaviours can be classed as infidelity. Behaviours that are “not really sexual at all” could be deemed as problematic and impacting negatively on the primary relationship. This allows for some fluidity in terms of what behaviours may tip into the infidelity bracket. Dee further goes on to specify her own definition in terms of what counts as infidelity and this again constructs sex as a marker to

interpret particular behaviours as problematic and heading towards infidelity. Extra-relational encounters have to get physical before they can be classed as infidelity, not necessarily “full blown sex” but “heading that way”. Thus positioning sex as a signpost to determine infidelity and constructing sex as a ‘bottom-line argument’ (see Edwards et al 1995) to define infidelity, “but I guess sex is probably the defining thing (Kate: yeah) in my mind”. Dee uses personalisation to enable the move to a more specific definition, “I think I think in my mind”.

Looking at the example Dee mentions in the extract above, in terms of an encounter “not really [being] sexual at all”, Dee also draws on the distinction between emotional and sexual behaviours. Being in a position of building intimacy or opportunities for closeness (‘emotional’ behaviours) is not directly classified as infidelity or ‘emotional infidelity’, but rather as becoming problematic due to the possible progression towards sexual behaviours. This again highlights that perhaps a distinction between sexual and emotional infidelity is somewhat redundant, as it is the sexual content that comes to mediate and add meaning to experiences and helps to define such experiences as ‘infidelity’. Kitzinger and Powell (1995) point to this as perhaps being a function of gender differences in how men and women construct extra-relational encounters. In their research, Kitzinger and Powell found differences in how men and women constructed the event of ‘seeing someone’ outside of a primary relationship. Women were seen to construct stories that emphasised the emotional components of the relationship, both in terms of the primary relationship which was positioned as emotionally lacking in some way and in terms of the emotional offerings of the extra-relationship. Men in comparison tended to construct more sexualised versions of both relationships. In terms of my research here, it suggests that when individuals talk about their own and others relationships they tend to draw more on ‘sexual’ markers to mediate ‘infidelity’. This suggests that when individuals talk generally or specifically about their relationship it becomes an arbitrary distinction to separate out ‘emotional’ and ‘sexual’ behaviours. In support of this, Kippax (2002) discusses how particular acts become embedded in social meanings and contexts. Therefore such sexual practices as ‘sex’ are not just about ‘penis-in-vagina’ sex but rather the meanings people attribute to these behaviours. So when discussing infidelity and monogamy, sexual practices come to signify wider

issues, for example, the breaking of 'trust' and the crossing of boundaries. Therefore the distinction between 'behaviours' i.e. in terms of 'sex' or 'sexual activity' and 'emotional' behaviours becomes less relevant when exploring the meanings people attach to these behaviours and how they make sense of them within the context of relationships. Sex here becomes the marker of infidelitous behaviour and the signifier in terms of a relationship becoming serious.

### **5.2.3. Sex as the 'Bottom-Line'**

As well as sex being used as a marker to define and mediate behaviours in terms of their classification as infidelity, sex was also constructed and often positioned as the defining feature in terms of infidelity and personal relationships. As touched upon above, this presents sex as a 'bottom-line' argument in terms of what counts as infidelity during extra-relational encounters. Awareness of the normative construction of sex as the defining feature of infidelity is shown in the following extract:

#### **Extract:**

Nicky: I suppose it would be (.) depending on how you defined your relationship, if you're defining it as a relationship where there were just two people involved it would be one of those people um breaking that trust whatever way

Kate: so what is the breaking of trust

Nicky: I don't know, generally, like in your magazines and that it would be sleeping with someone wouldn't it, but for me it could just be having a a strong, say your partner having a strong connection to somebody else, a stronger, than you currently have at that time or I suppose for me to, which is something I have experienced recently as well feeling that I'm actually feeling a stronger connection with someone, not, nothing physical, but more than that with other people and that actually made me feeling like I was being unfaithful to Eric, well not, you know, theoretically I wasn't but it made me feel like that because it just changed how I felt about him and how I felt about my relationship so (Nicky 7-20)

Nicky initially draws on relationship parameters to contextualised what behaviours count as infidelity, "depending on how you define your relationship, if you're defining it as a relationships". The relationship context is drawn on and constructed as able to script behaviours as in/fidelity, it is not the specific

behavioural acts but rather the relationship context they stand in. This also draws on an idiosyncratic account of what can be defined as a 'relationship', rather than something which is mediated by external, social referents. Here relationships are constructed as being individually defined and constituted as 'relationships'. Infidelity is then the breaking of the necessarily agreed relationship parameters, "breaking that trust whatever way". This construction of infidelity in terms of the 'breaking' of relationship rules is explored further in a subsequent subsection. The concept of a 'bottom-line' argument is utilised by Edwards et al (1995) who discuss this as a concept or argument which is positioned as the "bedrock of reality" (p26) and where arguments are constructed with a 'bottom-line', a final position which cannot be shifted or moved beyond. I use this concept here to conceptualise how sex was positioned in discussions of infidelity, as the defining feature and the conceptual touchstone to mediate behaviours as in/fidelity. In relation to sex as a bottom-line argument, Nicky shows awareness of this construction as being an overarching commonsense discourse which is represented in cultural texts. This refers to a normative construction of sex-as-infidelity, "like in your magazines and that it would be sleeping with someone wouldn't it". The phrase 'wouldn't it' indicates here that the sentiments are shared and 'commonsense' agreements. This presents a cultural discourse in terms of it being sex which counts when defining infidelity – the bottom line in determining infidelity.

In the above extract, this instance of the centralising of sex as infidelity is positioned as too narrow and not encompassing the range of behaviours that may be construed as infidelity. Nicky expands this definition to include things like having a "strong connection with someone, not, nothing physical". Here sex actually gets minimised in terms of its hierarchical status, and infidelity could "just" be something not explicitly sexual, but "more than that". Under this broadened definition, Nicky positions herself as feeling as though she had been unfaithful to her present partner, through experiencing a stronger connection with someone other than her primary partner. Cultural discourses are then also drawn on to mediate this position of infidelity, "well not, you know, theoretically I wasn't". Thus a normative construction of infidelity, an external referent, is used to re-script Nicky's own classification of her behaviour, in this case as not being unfaithful 'theoretically' speaking. This experience is presented as problematic by

Nicky because it is viewed in relation to her existing relationship, this discussion does not draw on the ‘breaking of trust’ characterisation but rather interprets the actions in terms of their knock-on effects for how the primary partner and relationship is viewed. Here it is the ‘emotions’ and not the ‘physical’ that mediate feelings of discomfort and the possibility of unfaithfulness. This positioning of Nicky as possibility unfaithful in line with her own definitions also works to position Nicky as a considerate, moral actor, within the context of this discussion and within the context of her relationships.

The ‘obvious’ nature of sex as the defining feature of infidelity is presented in the following extract:

**Extract:**

- Kate: ..define sort of infidelity and what, what that means for you, you know
- Dee: well obviously there’s sex [laughs] but I, I, I often wondered about (.) run up to sex (Kate: right) you know if if (.) if you’re unfaithful, if you’re actively unfaithful in your mind with a real person does it count (Kate: yeah) [Dee laughing]
- Kate: that’s the question [laughs]
- Dee: yeah I mean if it’s a pop star or someone you’re never likely to meet I think that’s probably totally different (Kate: yeah) and very harmless but if its someone you actually know I wonder whether you’re sowing the seeds and rehearsing (Kate: yeah) for something which then becomes more likely because you’re doing that (‘Dee’, 433-447)

This extract begins with an expression of the commonsense discourse of sex being a defining feature of what is viewed as infidelity in relationships, “well obviously there’s sex”. The use of the word ‘obviously’ points to a taken for granted assumption that sex outside of a primary relationship equates with infidelity, and hence points to the socially accepted value of sex-as-infidelity. And hence the normalised construction of infidelity-as-sex. Dee uses this commonsense position to open up a broader discussion of further behaviours that might be viewed as infidelity. For example, asking if you are “actively unfaithful in your mind” does that count? Dee further particularises this to two scenarios, thinking about a pop star or someone you are never likely to meet versus someone you know, where

you may be “sowing the seeds and rehearsing” for infidelity. Here it is not necessarily the thoughts of another person which are constructed as problematic and as infidelity per se, but rather the contextualisation of these thoughts within the likelihood of them becoming reality. Thus being ‘actively unfaithful in your mind’ with someone you are never likely to meet is positioned as totally different and “very harmless”, compared to the same thoughts about someone you know, because as this may in turn translate into physically being unfaithful because the opportunity is essentially there. Thoughts-as-infidelity was drawn on at various points in participants’ discussions and is discussed further below. In the above extract, thoughts-as-infidelity is mediated by the likelihood of this behaviour being acted out in reality, fantasies become dangerous in terms of the possibility of actual physical action. This also links with the earlier comments from Rob in terms of sexuality. What behaviours count as infidelity here was mediated by the possibility of sexual activity.

The following extract begins with a discussion of the importance of ‘exclusivity’ within a marriage, within the context of Rob having talked about having multiple extra-relationships:

**Extract:**

- Kate: ...does it mean that to make a marriage work it has to be exclusive you know (Rob: yeah) for that to happen (Rob: yeah)
- Rob: yeah it has to be exclusive (Kate: yeah) yeah um (.) yeah I mean I have heard, I know people have open marriages and things but I I I don’t think I could do that but Rachel wouldn’t never ever do that much more than me no that would have been completely impossible but with me it wasn’t um it wasn’t the sex side of it that was the big issue by by the end (.) I just didn’t enjoy being with her I didn’t (Rob, 774-80)

This extract begins with me asking if a marriage has to be exclusive for it to ‘work’. Rob affirms that a marriage has to be exclusive and for his marriage to be anything but exclusive would have been “completely impossible”. This reaffirms the importance of exclusivity, and importantly centres ‘sex’ as the defining characteristic of an ‘exclusive’ relationship, exclusivity becomes synonymous with sexual exclusivity. Interestingly exclusivity is positioned as necessary, whilst

Rob then works to construct sex as unimportant and not “the big issue” by the end. This exchange continues further with a discussion of a lack of sexual jealousy towards his wife and the possibility of her extra-relationships. This constructs a bit of a paradox, where sex is simultaneously constructed as central to a relationship and positioned as unimportant and not the main factor in Rob’s consideration of his marriage and extra-relationships. This works to manage Rob’s positioning as someone who has had multiple extra-relationships whilst also disagreeing with ‘open’ marriages. Sex here is used to show that Robs’ extra-relationships, and his marriage, were more than just about sex or where sex was unimportant at the end. A ‘bottom-line’ position on sex is used here to mediate and reassert Rob’s centralising of exclusivity in relationships, the situation was not about wanting more or even wanting sex, but rather constructs the situation within his primary relationship in terms of the problems in the relationship and not wanting to be with his partner ‘in the end’. This also helps to manage the contradiction of the centralising of exclusivity in a marriage and the non-exclusivity that has been discussed.

The ‘sex-as-signpost’ and ‘sex as the bottom-line’ discourses illustrate the ways in which sex was constructed as a grand, foundational discourse within talk about what behaviours could be defined as infidelity in personal relationships. Sex was positioned as the non-negotiable bedrock reality (Edwards et al 1995) in terms of infidelity. This was shown when participants used a sex-as-signpost discourse to characterise behaviours as ‘heading that way’, participants defining and relating other behaviours in terms of how close or how likely they were to lead to ‘sex’. So perhaps ‘heavy petting’ is heading that way, but is not sex, so is negotiable in terms of whether it constitutes infidelity. The centralising of sex within discussions of infidelity is in line with other research which has explored how sex can be constructed as a marker and defining feature of personal relationships (for example, Gilfoyle, Wilson and Brown, 1992; Crawford et al 1994; Lawes 1999; Kippax 2002; Jackson 1993; Jackson and Scott 1997). Sex is perhaps given this defining power because it is discourses as the culmination of all sexual/relational practices, the necessary and satisfactory end-point. Therefore if ‘sex’ is not involved then it may be positioned as not a relationship, either in terms of the primary relationship or extra-relational encounter. This functions to

maintain sex as an important marker and defining feature of personal relationship and within extra-relational encounters.

As noted above, often when this normative construction of ‘sex-as-infidelity’ and ‘infidelity-as-sex’ is utilised by participants it is presented as a generalised and ‘obvious’ account of infidelity. What constitutes ‘infidelity’ is then often particularised, and personalised further in terms of idiosyncratic accounts of infidelity. One reason why this may occur is because ‘infidelity’ as a concept is a foundational construction heavily imbued with normalised discourses in circulation (see Hollway 1989, Wilbraham 2004), as with ‘monogamy’. Therefore there is lots of cultural and social awareness shown by participants in terms of how this behaviour is usually referenced and constructed. Participants show awareness of this hegemonic status and then work to talk more specifically about what they personally think about infidelity. By further personalising accounts, individual definitions allow for personal freedom in terms of their own specific definitions and distances speakers from having to defend a more general standpoint.

#### **5.2.4. How big is your sin on a scale from one to ten**

The previous two discourses, ‘sex as signpost’ and ‘sex as the bottom line’, also substantiate the following discussing of a sliding scale or continuum of emotional and sexual behaviours constituting infidelity. This ‘scale’ discourse also accommodates the previous discussions of sex-as-infidelity, as sex is positioned at one end of the continuum typifying the extreme, undeniable infidelitous activity. The idea of a scale of behaviours was also touched upon above, in the dialogue and analysis of Dee’s comments of ‘heading that way’ towards sex, indicating a gradation of behaviours that could be or could become infidelity.

The idea of a sliding scale of infidelity is first explored in the following extract from Dee. Previous to the extract, myself, the interviewer, has been talking about having dinner with someone other than your primary partner and how this might begin to become a problem if you perhaps do not acknowledge “where it is going”:



**Extract:**

Dee: and they might just be enjoying playing, flirting with danger (Kate: yeah) perhaps (Kate: yeah yeah) and I don't think flirting counts as being unfaithful (Kate: yeah) I gu- I mean I don't know maybe you have a slight, maybe it's a sliding scale (Kate: yeah) you know how big is your sin on a scale from one to ten (Kate: yeah) but but I think generally speaking my my feeling is that most people would say that if you haven't had sex you haven't been unfaithful (Dee 479-84)

At the beginning of this extract there is the positioning of having dinner with someone, other than your primary partner, as “flirting with danger”. The construction here, as explored within the previous extract, is that closeness or time spent with someone else is verging on being dangerous. This is perhaps because the likelihood or opportunity of a more overt instance of infidelity could occur. Initially Dee posits that flirting does not count as infidelity, but then introduces the concept of a “sliding scale” of infidelity. This discourse is able to encompass more minor or contested behaviours within the realm of infidelity – as some behaviours may be more or less infidelitous than others. This construction is able to accommodate varying perspectives as to what behaviours more fully typify infidelity and the varying consequences attributed to such behaviours. This constructs a discourse of varying degrees of infidelity, where flirting may or may not make it on to the scale and sex most likely would. Behaviours also become “how big is your sin on a scale from one to ten” and graded in terms of their ‘sinfulness’. Religious language and connotations were explored earlier in the ‘Monogamy’ analysis section, which is again apparent here where relationship transgressions are characterised as ‘sin’. This works to position infidelity as necessarily undesirable and morally reprehensible behaviour. Fortunately though, some sins are smaller than others and it is negotiable how sinful a particular transgression is, graduating along a scale of infidelity. All behaviours outside of the primary relationship are not seen as equally bad or sinful, but rather are constructed differently in terms of individual positionings and discussions of ‘infidelity’.

Exploring infidelity in terms of a continuum of behaviours and different ‘levels’ of infidelity moves away from the dichotomous positioning of certain relationship behaviours as constituting infidelity or fidelity. This also shifts the

polarisation of sexual and emotional infidelity, because they become part of the same sliding scale of behaviours which constitute grades of infidelity. Further, using a 'scale' discourse encompasses and allows for different degrees of infidelity which helps to accommodate individual variations and particularisations of certain behaviours as or as not infidelity at given moments in their discussions. So flirting may be negotiated up or down the scale and sex is positioned as typifying one end of the scale, where "most people would say that if you haven't had sex you haven't been unfaithful". This bottom line argument underscores the more shifting approach to categorising behaviours as infidelity. External reference points are drawn on here, "generally speaking", "most people", to locate this as a normative positioning of sex as central to what infidelity essentially is. This again presents the prioritising of sex as the signifier of personal relationships and as the practice exclusive to such relationships.

In the previous extract, Dee utilises the sliding scale discourse to accommodate variability in terms of what behaviours may be considered infidelity. In the following extract, Cara also discusses varying degrees of infidelity:

**Extract:**

Cara: infidelity alright then, I guess there's different degrees of infidelity isn't there because there's sleeping with somebody or there's er having a one to one (.) with someone who's not your partner sort of just talking can be kind of (Kate: yeah) something I would feel uncomfortable about (Kate: yeah) or I felt uncomfortable about in the past... ('Cara', 13-17)

Similarly as with Dee's expression of a 'sliding scale' of infidelity Cara discusses "different degrees of infidelity", which again, rather than polarising behaviour as either fidelity or infidelity, constructs a discourse of graded infidelity. Here there is not a finite conceptualisation of what infidelity is, but more of a 'blurred' edge when it comes to labelling behaviours as such - "just talking can be kind of". This enables expansive individual differences in terms of what behaviours tip into being thought of as infidelity. There is some consensus presented in terms behaviours that would be defined as different degrees of infidelity, i.e. "there's sleeping with somebody" or "having a one to one" or finally there's "just talking"

all of which may be considered different degrees of infidelity. The defining axis here seems to be behaviours that Cara would feel “uncomfortable about”. This discomfort is not expanded further, but this is what the behaviours mentioned are located in respect of – whether they induce discomfort presently or whether such events have led to such in the past. Cara presents this in terms of individual emotions or tolerance levels denoting infidelity, rather than an external or normalised point of reference. Also the behaviours are not expanded further or discussed, for example, as to why ‘talking’ may be problematic. In this instance, they are also not underwritten by an overt relation to sex. These examples are not explicitly related as problematic because they will necessarily lead to something more, but rather as a different form or degree of infidelity.

Within the following extract the continuum construction is again related and is presented as mediated in terms of the primary relationship context:

**Extract:**

Kate: how would you define it?

Pippa: I think its quite difficult, its probably a kind of continuum and probably changes to the boundaries what what er it is to be unfaithful at a point in time (Kate: yeah) because I think that er lets assume infidelity is to have a privileged relationship with someone else when you are in a relationship (Kate: yeah) and this means things like going out to lunch to having sex (Kate: yeah) um so it really depends on the er on the way you feel about it (Pippa, 37-44)

The continuum discourse is introduced here to counter Pippa’s initial comment that infidelity is quite difficult to define. Pippa draws on the continuum discourse to illustrate that what can be thought of as infidelity changes at different points in time, in terms of changing relationship parameters and in terms of “the way you feel about it”. A continuum discourse here works to accommodate and indeed also substantiates considerable change and variance in what counts as infidelity, and as within the extract from Cara above, this is presented as individually mediated. Using this discourse here also helps present Pippa as an ‘aware’ individual who avoids utilising a restrictive characterising of infidelity in relationship, thus presenting Pippa as open and non-judgemental in terms of how different individuals may define a ‘privileged relationship’ and hence how they

may define infidelity. For the purposes of our discussion (“lets assume”), infidelity is conceptualised as having a “privileged relationship” with someone outside of the primary relationship, and it is definitions of this ‘privileged relationship’ that will shift in terms of individual boundaries and perceptions. This helps create a fluid, yet workable definition of infidelity, which reflects that it is hard to pin down and “quite difficult” to define.

This is in contrast to the bottom-line arguments explored previously, here there is no ‘bottom-line’ as to what constitutes a privileged relationship, and this could be “going out to lunch to having sex”. Therefore what constitutes infidelity changes in terms of the primary relationship’s parameters, and indeed in terms of the individual’s perception of these. This allows for considerable scope for the re-scripting of behaviours as displaying fidelity or infidelity – which echoes with the analysis presented in the ‘Negotiating Monogamy’ section. Again, external referents are not explicitly used to crystallise a definition of infidelity, but rather definitions are presented as changing based on individual, personal contexts and interpretations of what it is to have a ‘privileged’ relationship external to the primary one. Although this privileged relationship is loosely defined here, Jackson and Scott (2004) posit that such ‘privilege’ usually denotes sexual exclusivity. Such privilege centres on personal relationships being constructed as ‘exclusive’, namely sexually exclusive. Jackson and Scott argue that this privileging works to marginalize other types of relationships as less important, for example, close friendships – because ‘sexual love’ is regarded as *more* exclusive and *more* privileged than other types of loving relationships. So although sexually exclusively is not explicitly referenced here in terms of denoting ‘privilege’ there may be an inherent, assumed reliance on this component when discussing extra-relational encounters.

Within the follow extract the sliding scale discourse is presented as being mediated by the ability to forgive:

**Extract:**

Cara: what {kind of what what is infidelity}  
Kate: {what do you define as infidelity} yeah

Cara: well yeah unforgivable no not unforgivable but something that would take me a lot of time to forgive would be somebody <I don't know> er yeah sleeping with my husband (Kate: yeah) I would find that really really hard to forgive (Kate: yeah) and then graduating down I guess ('Cara', 21-26)

In response to my questioning as to what Cara defines as infidelity, rather than discussing behaviours that constitute infidelity, Cara at this point presents a definition of infidelity as mediated by the act of un/forgiveness. What is infidelity is thought of in terms of what is unforgivable, being unable to forgive a particular extra-relational behaviour therefore marks a relationship practice as infidelity and unacceptable. The example given of something that would take a lot of time to forgive is somebody sleeping with Cara's husband – this is infidelity because it is constructed as necessitating a lot of energy to overcome and damaging to the individuals involved. It is not necessarily the act or behaviour of sleeping with someone else, but rather the meanings attached to it, as something which is unforgivable, which mediates this as problematic and as infidelity. "Sleeping" with someone, i.e. penis-in-vagina sex is again used as the yardstick to measure other behaviours by, "then graduating down I guess" and presents a sliding scale in terms of what behaviours constitute infidelity and different levels of forgiveness.

This examination of a graded approach to infidelity more fully encompasses the variation and fluidity with which participants employed and im/positioned infidelity within their discussions. This discourse points to the variations and lack of clear, consistent conceptualisations of infidelity when participants talked about their own relationship experiences. And also perhaps again highlights the scope and opportunity for misunderstandings and differing opinions when individuals are operating with a more fluid conceptualisation of infidelity, which can be used to change and re-script behaviours depending on the particular contexts invoked. This also illuminates the difficulty in defining a set of behaviours as or as not infidelity, which is often the remit of much experimental psychological research (for example, Atkins et al, 2001; Blow and Harnett, 2005), because what constitutes infidelity is necessarily shifting, in this case, dependent on the mediated factors used to place behaviours on the scale of infidelity. This discourse allows participants to constantly redefine and mediate what behaviours

come at which point on the scale and what is un/acceptable within particular relationship contexts. This discourse simultaneously accommodates and substantiates variation in definitions infidelity, showing how language and discourses are both constructed and constructing the objects of focus (Potter 1996).

As well as participants presenting infidelity as hard to define and locate, and that different behaviours are open for debate in terms of whether they constitute infidelity, participants also at other times presented a more fixed, finite definition of what behaviours comprise infidelity (see in the opening extract of this analysis section). Participants also often particularise their own definitions and use lots of idiosyncratic devices when defining infidelity, which shows awareness of the contested nature of definitions of infidelity

#### **5.2.5. Infidelity ‘Breaks the Rules’**

As was implied in the very first extract presented in this ‘Infidelity’ section and which has reoccurred in several other extracts to this point, often what can be considered as infidelity rests on ‘boundaries’ or relationship ‘agreements’ as to sexual exclusivity or ‘monogamy’ existing within relationships. Behaviours are then defined as in/fidelity in terms of these previously agreed or assumed understandings as to what is considered acceptable within the context of a particular relationship. Within these discussions infidelity is therefore positioned as something that “breaks the rules” (Matt, extract below) of the relationship. In a previous analysis section, ‘Negotiating Monogamy’, it was discussed how monogamy was variously im/positioned within discussions of personal relationships. Monogamy could be given a ‘natural’ place within relationships, and hence would not need to be openly voiced or negotiated, or at different times relationships would be constructed as having unclear boundaries and it was therefore necessary to infer or deduce relationship rules in terms of monogamy. These discourses of im/positions of monogamy were similarly seen when participants discussed infidelity. At times monogamy was constructed as a norm within relationships and at others, relationship rules and boundaries had to be discussed.

**Extract:**

Kate: what is infidelity to you?

Matt: infidelity to me means basically is centres around (.) well firstly its about when two people agree obviously within a relationship we're talking here, two people have got to agree here what the relationship is and infidelity for that relationship is basically anything that breaks the rules (Kate: right) of, for that relationship, so for example (.) I don't know a re- (.) relationship with somebody that was exclusive that was just you know (Kate: yeah) and you went off with somebody else even I think sort of kissing or sexual activities (Kate: yeah) with somebody else that would be infidelity for me (Matt, 15-23)

Within this extract what is defined as infidelity is determined by the two people in the primary relationship, agreeing what the 'rules' are for their specific relationship, infidelity is then positioned as anything which necessarily breaks those pre-agreed rules. Here a relationship that may be agreed as "exclusive" would therefore position if "you went off with somebody else even I think sort of kissing or sexual activities" as infidelity. Matt's definition above and Robs' definition discussed at the beginning of this section, appear quite similar in this instance, they both draw on an aspect of 'sexual activity' to conceptualise infidelity. But these definitions both rest on different im/positioning of norms or 'rules' being established within personal relationships. Above Matt states "obviously" it is about what two people agree within a relationship and presents an idiosyncratic and relationship contextualised account of discussing norms/standards for fidelity in relationships. This constructs what constitutes infidelity as very relationship-specific and necessarily something that could vary across relationships and individuals. This positions both infidelity and monogamy as a negotiation between people within a set relationship, rather than something that is externally represented and im/positioned on the relationship. Such a construction resists universal definitions of in/fidelity in relationships and appears to allow for considerable diversity in terms of what behaviours are included and excluded from the 'rules'. Infidelity is then something that breaks these previously discussed rules. This particularised account of relationship rules is in tension with the construction explored prior within the extract from Rob. Within that extract what was positioned as infidelity within a relationship could either be "voiced or

assumed” and relies more on a normalised reference to monogamy in personal relationships. This construction still positions infidelity as a breaking of an understanding of exclusivity within a relationship, but this ‘understanding’ does not necessarily have to have been previously discussed within the relationship. A more generalised, assumed understanding of relationship rules or norms then has scope to include a multitude of behaviours as in/fidelity, which does not have to be discussed, and therefore opens up a space for unclear relationship boundaries and relationship ‘rules’. This was previously noted and discussed more fully within the ‘Negotiating Monogamy’ section cited above.

As has been seen above, participants variably invoked relationships boundaries or rules within their discussions of infidelity and monogamy in relationships. The following extract is an example of minimising adherence to monogamy ‘rules’. Clare has been talking about why she was unfaithful in a relationship:

**Extract:**

Clare: um (.) I think I just wanted (.) I don’t know (.) I was at that time in my life where I just liked [laughs] wanted to have fun really, I didn’t really, I wasn’t giving thought to the consequences I just um (Kate: yeah) and because I didn’t see it as a committed relationship (Kate: yeah) (Clare, 75-9)

To mediate the positioning of Clare’s behaviour as ‘unfaithful’ Clare uses minimising devices to re-script the relationship context within which the relationship-transgressions took place. Clare particularises this to a specific “time in my life” where she just wanted to have “fun”. This device was also seen within the group discussions, where participants similarly characterised events in terms of past attitudes and approaches to relationships. This also helps to negotiate any present accountability for past relationship behaviours, as it locates these behaviours in a different frame, in terms of the participants’ view of life and relationships. Clare also highlights her view of the primary relationship context, “and because I didn’t see it as a committed relationship”, this further helps to mediate the relationship ‘rules’ Clare was working towards, and thus further mediates the imposition of monogamy onto her ‘primary’ relationship.

### 5.2.6. Thoughts as infidelity

As can be seen within the previous discussions, what behaviours are considered infidelity was debated throughout the participant interviews. At some points in the discussions, thoughts-as-infidelity was easily dismissed and positioned as not even a consideration, “yeah its got to be (.) got to be an act its not like a thought of somebody else that’s not infidelity of course its got to be a sort of physical act” [Matt, 30-1]. And at other times, thoughts as infidelity was negotiated and variably positioned. The following extract from Clare considers thoughts-as-infidelity:

#### **Extract:**

Kate: Do you think that when you’re with someone then, that you’d never like to be with someone else?

Clare: Not that, you couldn’t, it’s not that you cant think someone else is nice or like attractive (.) even or whatever, but like if you wanted to, you know, maybe you wanted to physically be with them, then that would be (Kate: if you thought about them in that way) yeah (Clare, 40-49)

My question reads almost like a challenge and is organised in slightly argumentative rhetoric (Potter 1996), this is also shown in Clare’s response, which can be seen to manage my positioning of her as someone who might have unrealistic expectations within relationships. This leads to a defining of what is un/acceptable in terms of interpersonal attraction within relationships, “it’s not that you cant think someone else is nice or like attraction (.) even..”. This is conditioned though, on not taking these thoughts further, not wanting “to physically be with them”. This conditional rhetorical is shown in the organisation of the phrases “it’s not that you cant....but”. This works to mediate thoughts as infidelity, in that it is intention or more ‘active’ thinking, which is positioned as problematic. This idea is continued in the following extract (which has been presented previously):

**Extract:**

Dee: yeah I mean if it's a pop star or someone you're never likely to meet I think that's probably totally different (Kate: yeah) and very harmless but if its someone you actually know I wonder whether you're sowing the seeds and rehearsing (Kate: yeah) for something which then becomes more likely because you're doing that ('Dee': 440-444)

As examined previously, within Dee's comments it is not necessarily the thoughts of another person which are constructed as problematic but rather the contextualisation of these thoughts within the likelihood of them becoming reality. Thus being 'actively unfaithful in your mind' with someone you know is constructed as possibly problematic because this behaviour may become an actuality. Within both the extracts presented here, it is this thought *actually* being with someone outside of the primary relationship which is viewed as problematic, "wanted to physically be with them" (Clare), and "rehearsing for something". Therefore thinking about someone else, having a fantasy about a neighbour, maybe viewed as problematic and possibly drifting into being viewed as infidelity. I have written elsewhere (Nicholls 2001), that thoughts can be constructed as just as bad as a physical acts of infidelity, even though the partners involved have not 'technically' done anything. Defining what is or is not infidelity is further complicated if we include 'thinking' and 'thoughts', as this no longer relies on a physical 'act' or behaviour to be deemed infidelitous.

Within the two previous extracts thoughts of someone outside of the primary relationship were seen to have the potential to drift into being considered infidelity, or at least as being viewed as problematic within the context of the primary relationship. Within the following extract we see a different, more positive positioning of infidelitous thoughts about someone else:

**Extract:**

Nita: ...he can say about this girl at the convenience store, she's hot (Kate: right) look at, look at that racket, whatever he wants to say and you know if it's true I'll say yeah, she's really gorgeous (Kate: yeah) and that's the end of it. I don't care if he puts her in his spank bank and, because he comes home to me (Kate: yeah) and then if

he, if she turns him on he's going to take it out on me, and I'll be very happy about that (Kate: yeah) ('Nita', 109-114)

Within this extract we see having 'attractive' thoughts about someone outside of the relationship presented as normal and unproblematic. These thoughts, regardless of if they are stored for later use, are constructed as non-challenging to the primary relationship, "I don't care if he puts her in his spank bank". Rather, desire for another is talked about as a good thing for Nita and her relationship, as this increased sexual energy is used within the primary relationship, enhancing the sexual relationship they have, "if she turns him on he's going to take it out on me, and I'll be very happy about that". So here, thoughts about another are not constructed as problematic or as similar/the same as infidelity, but rather as contributing positively to the primary relationship.

### **5.3. Mediating individual opinions – 'It takes over', 'Vacuum' and 'Naivety' discourses**

Within this extract, Dee is discussing some of the reasons why people have extra relationship encounters. This extract comes in the middle of a long narrative in response to my initial phrase: "so going from what you've said then you don't agree with any sort of infidelity or" (Dee, 344-5):

#### **Extract:**

Dee: I don't know I mean maybe its easy for me, if I'm with somebody I just don't think about other people, well its not happened [bangs twice on desk] you know (Kate: yeah) I you know maybe I'm lucky maybe sometimes with people it just hits them out of the blue and they see somebody and it takes over I don't know (Kate: yeah) but for me that's never happened and I just don't I don't consider other men um when I'm with someone else and I (.) I don't know my feeling has always been that there has to be something wrong with the relationship in the first place for it to happen (Kate: yeah) because if you don't have a vacuum nothing steps in to fill it um (.) and my view is if there's something worrying you should be trying to sort it out if you've tried to sort it out and it's that wrong you should break up (Kate: yeah) and you should break up before getting involved with anyone else (Kate: yeah) because it is only

going to complicate the issue but part of me worries that I'm a bit naïve and I just haven't you know [laughs] come across enough life circumstance or I haven't been in a relationship enough (Kate: yeah) um to really you know understand the fullness of what its all about perhaps (Dee 358-373)

This extract contains several discursive constructions accounting for infidelity in relationships. These different constructions arise after Dee comments that fidelity is perhaps easy for her, she has never been unfaithful, because if she is with someone “I just don’t think about other people”. The use of the word ‘just’ also positions this as something easy and as something that ‘just’ doesn’t happen. Dee then works to particularise the ease with she has not been unfaithful, maybe she is “lucky” because extra-relational attraction may “hit” someone “out of the blue”. Infidelity here is constructed as uncontrollable thoughts or desire for someone else, which is beyond conscious restraint and which “takes over”. Such uncontrollable desire was often used by participants to mediate accountability for relationship transgressions (discussed further below within ‘cheaters positionings’) and this draws on a common-sense discourse of ‘attraction’ where attraction may be instantaneous and beyond individual control. Therefore, ‘luck’ is used to account for why Dee has not been struck by this desire for someone else and has not been unfaithful. After this ‘luck/out of the blue’ discourse is used to account for fidelity, Dee moves on to talk in terms of relationship circumstances fostering infidelity. Relationship circumstances are used here as a mediating factor in facilitating/enabling infidelity, i.e. having problems within the primary relationship. Because if you “don’t have a vacuum nothing steps in to fill it”, this constructs a picture of a ‘holey’ relationship, where a space or vacuum in a relationship may present an opportunity for infidelity. These ‘holes’ should either be worked through within the relationship, or if the problems are irreconcilable then you should “break up” before getting involved with someone else. In contrast to the previous discourse, here infidelity is positioned as occurring in terms of the relationship context, rather than individualised ‘attraction’. Within this discussion of relationship vacuums, the individuals have to have awareness of the problems and conscious control over their behaviour – again, in tension with the ‘out of the blue’ construction of attraction leading to infidelity used before. This vacuum discourse present more individual responsibility for infidelity occurring and

constructs a discourse of responsible moral actors who should concentrate on working through any relationship problems or terminate the relationship. To mediate this shift in personal accountability, Dee discusses that she may be naïve and perhaps has not had enough relationship experience to understand things fully. 'Naivety' was also a reoccurring positioning used by participants, often drawing on this to account for expecting fidelity in relationships (also discussed within the group analysis chapter). This works to protect the individual from any counter arguments, as they are acknowledging that they may be 'naïve' and not fully understand the situation or be naïve in their opinions about fidelity in relationships.

Overall, this exchange frames Dee's account as sympathetic and understanding, because although it may be easy for her to remain faithful she acknowledges alternative positionings. Dee uses discourses that substantiate her position, those of 'luck' and 'out of the blue' attraction, to account for why she perhaps has not been unfaithful and others have been. In contrast to these individualising devices, Dee also discusses the relationship context in terms of fostering infidelity which presents a position of individual awareness and accountability.

This discussion here shows the discursive work used to accommodate and mediate individual perspectives on fidelity and infidelity in relationships.

#### **5.4. Hindsight = Twenty-Twenty**

It was noted within the individual interviews, and group discussions, that participants would often distinguish between past events and their own, present, feelings towards same. Participants used a discourse of 'hindsight' to mediate their actions in the past, one example of this is shown in the following extract. This dialogue comes after an initial question about Cara's experiences of infidelity:

##### **Extract:**

Cara: ...yep by eldest sons' dad er was unfaithful to me and for some reason I forgave him which turned out to be good in the end because I got my son out of it (Kate: right) but looking back I cant believe I did actually because it was just kind of (.) it wasn't just a kind of one-night stand, he went back to his old girlfriend for a bit and then came back to me and at the time (Kate: right) looking back I cant believe I took him back but I did so (.) ('Cara', 33-39)

Participants often did discursive work to account for and justify staying in a relationship after infidelity (some further devices accomplishing this are discussed in the group analysis section). Within the above extract, Cara is accounting for forgiving a partner who had resumed a relationship with a previous girlfriend, which is constructed as worse because "it wasn't just a kind of one-night stand". Cara uses 'hindsight' to distinguish between what she did in the past, i.e. forgiving her partner and continuing the relationship with him, and constructing her current position on infidelity in relationships - that this is something she would not do now, and that she is surprised she did so previously. "Looking back I cant believe I took him back but I did so", which constructs a position of current clarity in respect of her past decisions. Such statements and the use of 'hindsight' also help to distance the speaker from their past actions and work to mediate personal accountability for past decisions, behaviours, situations etc. This helps show that things are different now, and mediates present responsibility for these past actions. This discourse helps to show that one has learnt from ones 'mistakes', and constructs a position of learning and self-development. Such a 'self-development' discourse is a common cultural repertoire which will help structure such accounts of past, undesirable, actions. The use of the discursive device 'hindsight' also helps in the structuring accounts of past events, and importantly, is able to mediate the retelling of experiences of infidelity and the decisions or behaviours engaged in 'in the past' and helps to maintain a privileging of the 'present' in terms of the decisions and behaviours individuals would engage in *now*.

## 5.5. Affairs

Explicit within all studies using discourse analysis is the focus on and awareness of the variability in the ways in which different phenomenon are constructed. This is often in contrast to how language and specific phenomenon are viewed within

experimental psychological research. The following examining of the use of the word 'affair' is used to highlight this variation and further point to the difficulties in the ways in which such terms are employed within experimental studies of infidelity and monogamy in relationships.

In the following extract Mel discusses the characteristics of what she considers to be affairs:

**Extract:**

Mel: but I think affairs are very different from relationships some how because there's a quantitative difference for me they're short that's a (Kate: right) big part of it, they're light weight um although the Sarah thing I would really describe more as an affair and that wasn't very light weight but (Kate: yeah) in theory they're light weight (Kate: yeah) and they don't, they don't have so much impact, different kind of impact. ('Mel', 1294-1299)

Mel constructs an 'affair' as something "light weight" (in theory) and "short" in comparison to extra-relational relationships, and they also do not "have so much impact" as an extra-relationship. This construction of an affair is quite different to how Rob employs the term in the following extract:

**Extract:**

Rob: ...I just thought 'oh my god', having an affair is just, this one felt like an affair the others being you know the end of a relationship or the beginning of a new one or a one off (Kate: yeah) but this was something to be repeated (Kate: yeah) and it was an affair by any definition really and it was just the most difficult stressful thing I have ever been through ('Rob', 378-383)

Rob is talking about his experiences of extra-relationships and how one "felt like an affair...it was an affair by any definition really", rather than a 'transitional' relationship or a "one off". Rob draws on a common-sense understanding of an 'affair', in that whatever definition you use, Rob's extra-relationship would be considered one. This affair is discussed as the "most difficult stressful thing" Rob had ever been through. Which is in contrast to Mel's construction of affairs as 'light weight' and as having little impact. This juxtaposition of extracts highlights the different uses of the same terminology participant's employ throughout

discussions. Further illuminating the importance of attending to individual differences in the construction and particularisation of, in this case, relationship language. The same words are not used consistently within or between participants.

## **5.6. Cheaters' positioning**

This section explores the discursive 'work' participants did to account for instances of their own extra-relational encounters and examines the devices employed to aid them in this work. Interestingly, in a significant piece of qualitative research examining constructions of infidelity conducted by Kitzinger and Powell (1995), they found very little explanation given by men when discussing instances of male infidelity. This is in contrast to the results of this study, where both men and women did considerable work to account for instances of infidelity. One methodological difference which might help explain this is that Kitzinger and Powell used a story completion task to illicit responses, whereas the present study used one-to-one interviews. Thus there may have been more of an explicit awareness of 'social' accountability and the need to justify infidelity when discussed within an interpersonal setting.

### **5.6.1. It takes over**

Similar to the analysis presented previously on "it takes over", within the following extract, one discourse that Rob employs to account for an extra-relationship is that of uncontrollable feelings:

#### **Extract:**

- Kate: so do you think how she, how she actually thought the relationship was an affair and not something that would lead to a relationship
- Rob: I don't know, I think she was just as confused as I was, she you know, logically she didn't want it and I didn't want it either logically, but I felt instant no control over my feelings um I think that's how she was in the beginning but it was a conversation we always had you know (Kate: yeah) what is this that we're doing

where is it leading (Kate: yeah) we could never give any answers to these questions other than to just say we both you know and I never gave any indication that I was ever going to leave Rachel, oh god this is just so classic, this is what men do, they have an affair and then they say 'I don't know what to do' and although I never said or suggested that, I don't know I just thought, for the first time I just thought it was very typical, anyway the stress of it was just too much and I thought never again [Rob, 402-414]

In my comments I question Robs' extra-partners reading of their relationship, was this thought of as an 'affair' and here I construct affairs in opposition to something that would lead to a 'relationship'. Rob then works to manage this positioning of his extra-partner as someone who was 'consciously' involved in an affair. To mediate this positioning, and Rob's own positioning as someone who had had an affair, Rob draws on a discourse of uncontrollable feelings, as with Dee's "it takes over", attraction here is also constructed as taking over ones rationality, "I felt instant no control over my feelings". Rob counters my construction of necessarily conscious 'thoughts' about the situation by stating she (the extra-partner) was confused and they were both unable to act in accordance with their rational feelings "logically she didn't want it and I didn't want it either logically". This works to show that initially they didn't think logically about the situation, as perhaps either an affair or as something leading to a relationship. This helps to mediate any presupposed accountability for Rob and his extra-partner, for engaging in an extra-relationship, as this 'uncontrollable attraction' discourse works to relinquish responsibility for ones actions. Rob then moves on to construct a position of responsible moral actors, who continually questioned their situation and where it was leading. Thus they were both giving thought to this confusing situation, although they were unable to come up with any 'answers'.

The dialogue then shifts to Rob accounting for his role in the situation, and that he "never gave any indication that I was going to leave Rachel [his wife]". Rob then immediately acknowledges one possible reading of this statement and situation – i.e. as a 'typical' male response, "oh god this is just so classic, this is what men do". This is drawn on to portray awareness of stereotypical things men might say or do whilst having affairs, such as, that they will leave their wife. By acknowledging stereotypes of male behaviour Rob is able to acknowledge being positioned as a 'typical male', and also work to resist such a positioning,

“although I never said or suggested that”. And that this is the first time he has had awareness of how his behaviour or words could be read as a stereotypically male response. Rob further indicates that he was deeply affected by the situation and as someone who has necessarily learnt from this experience, “the stress of it was too much and I thought never again”.

### **5.6.2. Cheating – but only a little bit**

The following extract is from a female participant, also contains several discursive devices which mediate Nicky’s account of her extra-relational encounter:

#### **Extract:**

Kate: so have you ever experienced what you would term infidelity in a relationship

Nicky: yes, now that’s quite funny, ‘cos my first boyfriend, which was not a good relationship anyway um (.) he (.) I think I cheated on him, well I did, but only a little bit [laughter] and um and that was when I’d gone to university you know so I sort of overlay on top of that things like big change, people changing and realising that we weren’t going in the same directions (Kate: yeah) those sort of things and so I’d met this (.) John (.) and alcohol [laughter] but I’d met this bloke at at university who oh god looking back such a mistake but um he was a lot older and he was just interesting to me there was that there just something he was really knowledgeable, funny and witty and um and that that was everything that my boyfriend wasn’t and so er just had drunken snogs and that sort of thing and that made, for me that was a catalyst, it was like, I wasn’t, see that’s the other thing, I sort of think I think of cheating on somebody as well as being an ongoing thing, where you’re, you’re continuing your relationship but you’re seeing somebody else as well and its I suppose, if its not an open relationship then that would be cheating, I think that’s how I see it (.) and um but for me this cheating, this one time cheating or whatever while I was in a relationship was a catalyst for me to say I need to get out of that relationship so I never prolonged it um but you know and that was hard having to admit that you know. (Nicky 45-65)

A long extract is used here to more fully attempt to include and explore the layers of discursive constructions drawn on when Nicky relates her experience of ‘infidelity’. ‘Humour’ is used initially to relate Nicky’s experience of infidelity in

a relationship, ‘now that’s quite funny’ which informs the telling and listening to her account of the following experience. Humour is also used to characterise this experience as cheating, “I think I cheated on him, well I did, but only a little bit [laughter]”, to which we both laugh. Nicky then constructs the situation as one of transition, as she had gone to university and “big change, people changing” and going in different “directions”, drawing on commonsense discourses to evidence this. Further Nicky positions the extra-partner as desirable and also constructs the encounter as a catalyst for leaving her present relationship. This helps show the encounter had ‘meaning’, a purpose, in that it resulted in change and enabled the individual to leave the primary relationship. This also is coupled with the introduction of ‘alcohol’, which again is introduced with humour and laughter, and draws on a commonsense understanding that the presence of alcohol may indicate poor or un-thought-through decisions. Nicky then also uses the ‘hindsight’ discourse, “oh god looking back such a mistake”, which works to distance her ‘present’ self from her past decisions – which she is about to relate.

Finally, Nicky mediates her positioning as ‘cheater’ by redefining or particularising what she herself considers to be cheating in a relationship. Within this context “cheating” is discussed as an “ongoing thing, where you’re, you’re continuing your relationship but you’re seeing somebody else as well”. The experience that Nicky is relating is constructed as “one time cheating or whatever”, but rather that this was a catalyst for her to leave her primary relationship so she “never prolonged it”. This works to mediate her positioning as a ‘cheater’, as her extra-relational encounter is constructed as not a long-term, ongoing deception. She did not prolong her primary relationship, and hence, did not prolong the ‘cheating’, which works to position Nicky as a moral actor in spite of this relationship transgression.

By exploring these layers of discursive devices used in the above account the complexity of the discursive accounting needed to mediate the explanations of infidelity in a relationship when the speaker is the ‘cheater’, can begin to be seen. In this sense, infidelity needs to be accounted for. The speakers show the negative loading of being positioned as a ‘cheater’ through their discursive work to show moral responsibility for their actions.

### **5.6.3. Transition**

As above, a discourse of 'transition' was a reoccurring construction used when 'cheaters' talked about their extra-relational encounters. Rob has been relating a relationship that ended, he met somebody else and subsequently met with his primary partner to tell her about the relationship that had developed outside of their relationship, he has just related how the primary partner got very upset and cried upon hearing the news:

**Extract:**

Rob: ..and cried for the first time ever, ever that I'd seen her cry um but to me and the memory of that action the same idea, it doesn't to me feel like you know an evil, wicked (Kate: yeah) bastard thing to do I mean because it felt like it was the beginning of a new relationship not swanning off with anyone, it was actually more meaningful than that so when I look back I look back and I don't think to myself 'oh what a horrible, how could I do that' plus she'd kind of sewn the seed by (Kate: yeah) wanting to cool it down a bit, evolution of that (Kate: yeah) um and then it happened again three years later. (Rob, 217-224)

Rob initially frames the event (telling his primary relationship partner about his extra-relational encounter) as significant, as upsetting, from the perspective of his partner. This was the "first time ever" he had seen her cry. Rob then reframes this characterisation of the event, using personalisation and introducing his memory of events "but um to me and the memory of that action". Rob then works to account for his behaviour, within the immediate context of this having been framed as considerably upsetting. Rob acknowledges that this past extra-relational encounter comes loaded with moral positions, in that it may be thought of as an "evil, wicked, bastard thing to do". This uses an extreme case formation (Edwards 2000) to conceptualise this encounter, positioning it as possibly immoral, involving deliberate harm and as essential 'evil'. This brings awareness to other readings of his (male) behaviour, which his primary partner may have expressed, and which is perhaps further brought to the fore because the interviewer is female. Rob goes on to particularise this extra-relational encounter in a way that works to manage his possible positioning as a 'bastard'. This is done by framing the event in particular ways, using a discourse of transition, "it felt like it was the beginning of a new relationship". This works to give the encounter more gravitas, it was not

“swanning off with anyone”. ‘Swanning off’ would construct a more casual, frivolous event but rather the extra-relationship is constructed as more “meaningful” and the beginning of a relationship.

Interestingly, Rob uses hindsight here to show that this is ‘honestly’ how he views the event, so that when he ‘looks back’ he does not see his behaviour as “horrible” or wonder “how could I do that”. This extract also incorporates a ‘voice from the past’, in that Rob voices what he (did not) think in the past. This works to show awareness of a counter position to how he is viewing the situation, and further justifies his reading of the event now.

Within this extract particular discursive devices are used to mediate Robs positioning as someone who carelessly ‘cheats’ in a relationship. Conversation work is done to account for relationship events that could be positioned as ‘cheating’ or ‘infidelity’ and which would then afford the speaker a negative moral subject position within the relationship narrative he relates and within the context of the interview.

#### **5.6.4. Mediating male norms**

As was touched upon above, participants often had to negotiate stereotypical or normalised readings of their behaviours. This was especially apparent when men talked about their extra-relational encounters where they were seen to distance themselves from ‘typical’ men who had affairs. Within the following extract Rob has been talking about a succession of extra-relational encounters and how he realised that this behaviour was not going to stop after he had had another short extra-relationship:

#### **Extract:**

Rob: ...I thought I’ve either got to stop doing this or realise that I don’t want to be married any more, be free to do this and (.) and each time the lie I was living was just awful I thought I just hate doing this I just hate, how do men do this, some men do this forever (Kate: mm) or have one offs going on for decades or something I thought well other people do that well some do and obviously or

whatever but I just thought, I think it was at that point I thought I just cant do this anymore.. (Rob, 522-529)

Rob is discussing the thought processes that lead him to decide he could not continue having extra-relational encounters. This extract frames Rob in a conflicted, 'moral', position and functions to illustrate how his relationship decisions were not taken 'lightly' and that there was a lot of emotional anguish involved, "the lie I was living was just awful I thought I just hate doing this". Although essentially positioned in a negative subject position of someone who has repeated affairs, this discussion of inner conflict and realisation works to mediate this. Further Rob expresses surprise and disbelief at how other men can (more easily) have repeated extra-relational encounters, "how do men do this, some men do this forever". This can be seen to function to show awareness of how men or other people may behave, whilst simultaneously distancing Rob from such people and marking himself as different. "Other people do that...but I just thought, I think it was at that point I thought I cant do this anymore", this comparison and tension with same is constructed as being the catalyst for Rob realising he could not continue in this vein. Rob is able to construct a position of conflicted moral actor, through acknowledging normalised positioning of men and distancing himself from such a position.

Within the following extract Ian is discussing a monogamy 'double-standard' for men and women in relationships:

**Extract:**

Kate: so would you say monogamy in a relationship would be important to you?

Ian: pretty much (Kate: yeah) yeah, I don't, I think, well, I think its, you've got a double standard in there as well (Kate: right) 'cos I think with (.) blokes shag around ... I think it's a double standard 'cos blokes like go out, maybe get drunk every now and again and cheat on their girlfriends and not consider it too bad a thing (.) but if a girlfriend does that (.) to a man (Kate: right) then he wont like it (.) I don't know, its, it's a very big double standard, but er (.)

Kate: so is that from you personally?

Ian: no, I'm not in a relationship, I wouldn't like that, and I wouldn't do it if I was in a relationship (Kate: right) I wouldn't cheat around because that's not fair ('Ian', 14-29)

Ian's initial response to whether monogamy is important in relationships is "pretty much", he then goes on to particularise this to a 'double standard' for men and women. Relationship transgressions are constructed differently in terms of the perspectives of men and women. Men are constructed as 'shagging around', "maybe get drunk every now and again and cheat on their girlfriends", which is positioned as not "too bad a thing". They are positioned as adopting a more 'flexible' approach to the application of monogamy in their relationships and a minimisation of the consequences of relationship transgressions. In contrast, such behaviour is positioned as problematic for the girlfriends of such men, "but if a girlfriend does that (.) to a man (Kate: right) then he won't like it". And with this the double standard, men may consider their own relationship transgressions as acceptable but not those of their girlfriends. This points not necessarily to gender differences in actual behaviour, but how interpretations of such behaviours can vary in terms of how gender is positioned. Depending on who is positioned as the acting party, a relationship transgression may be or may not be considered "too bad a thing", which re-scripts the interpretation of the events depending on gender in this instance. This is primarily 'general' talk from Ian, talking about 'blokes' rather than personalising this account of a double standard, helps Ian initially avoid being ascribed this positioning himself. I then explicitly position Ian here, questioning if this double standard is from his viewpoint personally. Ian then works to disown this 'male' positioning, perhaps as an effect of being interviewed by a female researcher and thus being positioned as accountable for this double standard as a 'bloke' and how he might personally use a double standard within his own relationship behaviours. Firstly he locates this position as inapplicable as he is not currently in a relationship, and then personally stating that he would not like that in a relationship and would not do that, "I wouldn't like that, and I wouldn't do it if I was in a relationship". This male behaviour is then constructed as 'cheating' as Ian further states that is something he would not do in a relationship, out of 'fairness', "I wouldn't cheat around because that's not fair". Within this example Ian has to explicitly work to manage a subject position he has constructed in terms of general male relationship behaviours. He does so here quite simply by using personalisation to mediate his generalised comments about male behaviour.

### 5.6.5. External voices

Throughout the individual interviews and group discussions participants used the discursive device of an external referent voice to help them in their discussions. One example of this can be seen in the following extract:

**Extract:**

Rob: ...I still you know feel the guilt I still have the guilt awful, everybody says to me 'will you stop feeling so guilty, so you did, so you had a couple of affairs, ok that's bad but in the end all you wanted to do was leave and you know, we've all got the right to seek happiness, so unhappy, you had to do what you had to do', I understand and believe that all logically but emotionally I just feel very (.) (Rob, 615-620)

In this extract, Rob projects an external voice to introduce and paraphrase an outside opinion on the experiences he has been relating. Using 'outside' commentary here helps offer an alternative perspective on Robs' interpretations and feelings about his continued guilt after his separation. This external perspective is presented as unanimous "everyone says to me", which helps to position Robs' feelings as in the minority and against general opinion of the circumstances. The external commentary minimises the severity of past events, "so you did, so you had a couple of affairs", which summarises the situation and constructs it as nothing particularly out of the ordinary. The external referent concurs that the situation was 'bad', and then uses a bottom-line argument to summarise the final interpretation of events, "but in the end all you wanted to do was leave". The phrase 'in the end' functions to draw a line under any alternative interpretations (hence a bottom-line) and positions the subsequent statement as *the* interpretations of the situation, in this case, that Rob wanted to leave the relationship. This interpretation is then justified by drawing on an individualistic philosophy of the "right to seek happiness". This external voice is used by Rob to offer an alternative, "logical", perspective on events and although Rob understands this perspective and "believes that all logically", this is in contrast to

his emotional feelings about the past. This discursive device is useful as it removes accountability from the participant verbalising the ideas, as they are not the ones explicitly expressing the viewpoint. Rob is further able to construct himself as an 'emotional' subject, saying that he "still you know feel the guilt" and further using the external referent to substantiate his 'guilty' subject positions, "will you stop feeling guilty". This is able to position him as a moral actor which again helps to manage the possible negative subject position he finds himself in within the interview context and wider social norms, as a 'cheater'.

#### **5.6.6. Negotiating the end of a relationship, shared responsibility, obsessions and aberrations**

The following extract is used to explore the multiple discursive constructions and devices used by a participant discussing the relationship context in which they had extra-relationships and their subsequent decision to end the primary relationship:

#### **Extract:**

Rob: but she would say ‘ahh but you know you knew that was blossoming and it was up to you stop it’ um (.) but it’s true that’s that’s very neglected part of this story it’s as if I did, everything wrong was done by me (Kate: yeah) and nothing wrong was done by her but actually (.) it was in terms of you know fidelity and all of that it was she did have she did something as well (Kate: yeah) (.) but more than that you know I’m (.) with hindsight I’m seeing more about you know what I regard as her bad behaviour generally not not in-in-infidelity terms but just other things that god actually you know that relationship was really stifling me it was really um suffocating in it and I feel like I have regained myself (Kate: yeah) through through leaving it (.) um so you know the more the more I get on with things the more I think it was so right for me to leave it was just killing me literally would have killed me I think I think I’d have died you know (.) of a heart-attack or something a lot a lot younger than I will die probably if you know what I mean so actually you know logically I was totally right to leave I should of, what I what I regret is that I wasn’t more honest about it and I didn’t ss- once the first affair happened I I maybe should have left then I didn’t and then I got into doing it almost kind of obsessively or habitually or something and you know obviously what was going on for me was like that was some some how my way of getting out of it or my way of ss- coping with it or something but I wish I’d just (.) I suppose with each one I thought well right I wont do this again (Kate: yeah) this is just er an aberration I wont do this again and by the fourth one I think I had to acknowledge I wasn’t going to not do this again (.) (Rob, 709-731)

At the beginning of this long extract we again see the use of an ‘outside’ voice, which is used to paraphrase the opinion of Robs primary partner. The ‘voice’ of the primary partner is used to locate the responsibility of her extra-relationship with Rob, in that he understood what was developing and it was up to him to stop it. This substantiates Robs following comments that his primary partners role in events is a neglected part of the ‘story’. Blame and responsible, for both Robs and

Rachel's behaviour, is located with Rob – and the external voice adds credibility to this positioning of Rob. Further in the extract Rob goes on to explore aspects of the relationship and Rachel's behaviour that may shift some accountability from Rob for ending the relationship. This discussion also works to add credibility, and reassurance, to Rob for ending the relationship, this decision gets framed as the 'right' thing to do given the circumstances – "logically I was totally right to leave". Unfortunately Rob's extra-relationships continued beyond the first one and he expresses regret that he was not more honest and did not leave the primary relationship after the first affair. This expression of emotion again works to frame Rob as a 'moral' actor who understands the consequences of his actions and how he could have behaved differently. To mediate some of this accountability for 'poor' decisions or behaviour he now wishes he had not continued, Rob constructs his behaviour as out of his control – "I got into doing it almost kind of obsessively or habitually or something". This creates a contrast with his rational reflections on his past behaviour, how he perhaps could have behaved, and how his behaviour was then out of his rational control. This helps remove some responsibility from Rob for these past actions. This past behaviour is also framed as a possible unconscious way of getting out of the relationship, "some how my way of getting out or it" or as a way of coping with the stifling primary relationship. Finally, Rob also constructs his affairs as 'out of character', as an "aberration", removed from what would be normal behaviour for Rob. So throughout this extract we see various constructions of Robs character and affairs, which can be seen as mediating devices to negotiate Robs past behaviours and the ending of his primary relationship. These layers of discursive work substantiate Robs' decision to leave the relationship while also managing the negative subject positioning of Rob as a 'cheater' and also as someone who has had a 'failed' marriage.

#### **5.6.7. Good intentions - I didn't even look at anybody else**

A further device used by participants to mediate their positioning as a 'cheater' was to locate this in opposition to their usual relationship practices and relationship ideals. In the following extract, Rob is talking about what he hoped for in all his relationships:

**Extract:**

Rob: yeah well that's what I hoped with all the major relationships you know I thought I love this person and I just want to be with them and you know for a long time I didn't even look at anybody else (Kate: yeah) in fact I was only unfaithful at the end with the next person with the next relationship it wasn't like I was sleeping around with anyone or everyone and even with Rachel like it was eleven or twelve years before I slept with anyone (Kate: yeah) ('Rob', 859-864)

Rob has been talking about his hopes for monogamy and longevity of the relationships he enters into, and in this extract discusses his hopes and thoughts about a relationships – “you know I thought I love this person and I just want to be with them”. This offers a position of ‘good intentions’ for monogamy upon entering a relationship. This is added by an extreme case formation of fidelity, “for a long time I didn't even look at anybody else”. The use of the phrase ‘I didn't even’ positions Rob as extremely ‘faithful’ because he didn't even partake in this minor transgression of the primary relationship. Rob then moves on to particularise his ‘infidelity’ by constructing it as a particular type of infidelity. This relates to the ‘sliding scale’ of infidelities discussed previously, in that there are different degrees of infidelity – some being constructed as worse than others. Rob draws on a discourse of transition “in fact I was only unfaithful at the end with the next person with the next relationship”, beginning a new relationship while still in a relationship. This constructs the ‘infidelity’ as having purpose, as a transitional event leading to a new relationship. The use of the phrase ‘in fact’ also works to offer this construction as a ‘true’ interpretation of events, as a bottom-line interpretation of the relationship transgressions as important and not casual encounters. This is presented in opposition to a commonsense discourse of ‘cheating’, which is “sleeping around with anyone and everyone” – which is casual and lacking specific purpose. Further substantiated by the length of time Rob was in his marriage before a relationship-transgression, “even with Rachel like it was eleven or twelve years before I slept with anyone (Kate: yeah)”, and by my affirmation of this as an important factor to consider. This works to create an important distinction between ‘cheating’ and what behaviours Rob was engaging in. These discursive devices position Robs’ extra-relationships as in line with his

overall relationship hopes and beliefs, and as more thoughtful and non-casual transgressions.

### **5.7. Infidelity – Facilitating, an easy way out**

Infidelity was also constructed as a ‘way out’ of relationships, either facilitating the end of a relationship or as a transition into a new relationship (as discussed previously). Within the following extract, Nita is discussing an experience of when she was ‘unfaithful’ within in a relationship:

#### **Extract:**

Kate: ...have you ever been unfaithful during a relationship?

Nita: I was once and that was a situation wherein I was engaged to a very scary man (Kate: right) he would intimidate me and try to control me urm wanted to control who I was and how much time we spent with my family (Kate: yeah). I wanted out (Kate: yeah, that sounds quite unpleasant) I needed the strength to do that, I needed to detach myself and I went to a friend of mine, so, he and I had sex and I was able to break up with my scary fiancé (Kate: right) (Nita, 46-52)

To reflect, this interview was conducted over the telephone and while I was hearing this story I felt quite uncomfortable. In my mind I was running through the possible conclusions, and one I had thought was that having sex with someone else within the context of this ‘scary’ relationship could have ended violently. Rather, Nita related that this relationship transgression enabled her to end the relationship with her fiancé. Nita constructs this event as enabling her to ‘break away’ from the relationship, stating that she “needed to detach myself” from the situation. This could be read as the act of having sex with someone else as enabling her emotional or physical distance from her fiancé. She needed the ‘strength’ to leave her primary relationship, and having sex with someone else, is constructed as giving her this. This could also be interpreted that the act of sex outside the primary relationship would itself bring the relationship to a conclusion, it being an event that would see a finite end to a relationship (also discussed with in the group analysis section and further below). Within this exchange extra-relational sex is constructed as providing a necessary distance within a primary

relationship, infidelity is developed as an escape and facilitating the end of a relationship.

Similarly, participants constructed infidelity as an ‘easy way out’ of a relationship. Perhaps performing relationship work that would otherwise be more difficult and complicated. This is shown within the following extract:

**Extract:**

Ian: I think that er infidelity is an easy way out (Kate: yeah) it is hard to break up with someone to sit down and explain why it is that you’re not you know, the more honest approach that ‘look I’m not attracted to you, I don’t think we have much in common, ok lets break it off’ (Kate: yeah) but I think its just easier to go out and shag someone else (Kate: yeah) and then let them find out ... you don’t want to have to have the emotional you know go through the emotions of breaking up with someone that you were close to and that you cared for a lot its easier just to go out shag someone else (‘Ian’, 499-513)

Within this extract there is a discourse of infidelity as signalling the end of a relationship and as an “easy way out”. There are also specific discursive constructions pertaining to relationship break ups, these are constructed as necessarily unpleasant and that break up discourse is to be avoided. Initiating a relationship break up, or rather initiating a relationship break up conversation, is constructed as comfortable and hard, “it is hard to break up with someone to sit down and explain why it is that...”. This relationship dialogue is presented by using an external voice and is positioned as somewhat a clichéd ‘honest’ approach, ““look I’m not attracted to you, I don’t think we have much in common, ok lets break it off””. Although this ‘honest’ approach does draw on common-sense relationship clichés for ending a relationship, this dialogue is constructed as unpreferable to letting a primary partner find out about an extra-relational encounter and signalling the end of the relationship that way. In this way one would avoid going through the “emotions of breaking up”. This discussion rests on the premise that infidelity does signal the end of a relationship and that this would not be discussed or negotiated within the primary relationship, and somehow this would avoid the ‘emotions’ of a break up. Thus infidelity is used to signify dissatisfaction with the primary relationship and as rather performing the

relationship break up dialogue, how the primary relationship is not working perhaps. This is similar to the previous analysis presented, in that infidelity may be positioned as a ‘distancer’ within interpersonal relationships and used as a way to extract individuals from relationships. This construction of infidelity as signifying the end of a primary relationship, and being symptomatic of problems within the primary relationship, is also similar to the discourse of a ‘vacuum’ previously explored. Where infidelity was constructed as symptomatic of a vacuum in the primary relationship, where infidelity was a means of escapism and avoiding dealing with existing problems. These discourses contrast in their positioning of individual agency though, where in the extract above, infidelity is constructed as being used actively to seek the end of a relationship and as more of a complacent act within the vacuum discourse.

## **5.8. Damaging self-esteem**

Within participants’ discussions of infidelity in relationships they often constructed infidelity as damaging to the primary partner, usually in terms of it affecting self-esteem. This theme is also explored within the group analysis section, where participants talked more explicitly in terms of future damage to individual self-esteem following infidelitous relationships. Issues of self-esteem are explored in the following extract:

### **Extract:**

Dee: I I am a very insecure person in terms of believing that anyone loves me (Kate: right) so if David was unfaithful I I would not be able to trust his feelings for me (Kate: yeah) or the quality of our relationship so as even if even if I said well that at a reasoned logical level I didn’t think it ought to break us up it probably would because I wouldn’t be able to cope (Kate: yeah) and he is precisely the same so (Kate: yeah) we cant do it (Dee 374-380)

Within this extract infidelity is positioned as exasperating a pre-existing problem with ‘self-esteem’. If Dee’s present primary partners was unfaithful in their relationship, Dee discusses that this would undermine her reading of his feelings for her – “I would not be able to trust his feelings for me or the quality of our

relationship” and as impacting negatively on the quality of their relationship. Infidelity is positioned as impacting negatively on an individuals’ sense of self and their judgements about the primary relationship. Throughout this is constructed as something located within Dee herself, an idiosyncratic or specific problem with Dee, rather than as a generalised or normative outcome of infidelity in relationships. Within this extract there is also the distinction between logical and emotional decisions. Even if at a “reasoned logical level” infidelity should not end the relationship, Dee’s emotional, and hence illogical, reaction would have to be to end the relationship. Emotions are used here to ‘overpower’ any reasoned response to infidelity in a relationship and constructs infidelity as impossible to overcome within a relationship.

In support of this construction of infidelity as irreconcilable and damaging to an individuals sense of self, is the positioning of those individuals who are *not* affected by infidelity in a relationship as abnormal and “cold hearted”. Discussing the effects of infidelity in relationships:

**Extract:**

Ian: I always think its very damaging unless you’re a cold hearted bastard or witch or whatever I mean you know to to er have someone come up to and say ‘yeah I was going out with you but I don’t like you anymore, I think this person has got a better personality and looks better’ cant do your self esteem any good ever you know what I mean its not a nice thing to hear (‘Ian’, 560-5)

An extreme case formation is used here to position those who are not personally affected by infidelity as deviant, i.e. as a “cold hearted bastard or witch”. In contrast to the former extract presented from the interview with Ian, where infidelity was constructed as a way to avoid relationship break-up dialogue, in the extract above the negative impact of infidelity in a relationship is linked to the resulting unpleasant discussion and consequences for ones ‘self esteem’. An external voice is used here to paraphrase such a relationship discussion after infidelity, “‘yeah I was going out with you but I don’t like you anymore, I think this person has got a better personality and looks better’”. Where infidelity is constructed as performing an ‘up-grade’ in terms of relationship partners, and

therefore as damaging to the primary partners self-esteem. This external commentary is also used as an extreme characterisation of relationship reasoning following a relationship transgression, dialogue is to the point and positions the primary partner as undesirable and having been replaced. This functions to substantiate Ian's initial reasoning that you would have to be abnormal not to be affected by infidelity in a relationship, if this is the explanation given.

## **5.9. Un/forgiveness**

Discussions of 'forgiveness' occurred within the individual interviews and participants variably constructed this discourse in relation to their constructions of infidelity. As touched upon previously, one way forgiveness was mediated was in terms of 'graded' infidelity, with one behaviour being more like infidelity than another and hence some behaviours being more forgivable than others. An example of this can be seen in the following extract:

### **Extract:**

- Kate: so going back to what I, I just asked before that was how difficult do you think it would be to get over or is that anything you ever think about or
- Cara: I think, well, I don't know, it would depend on you know different things, if Robert went off and had a one night stand I'd find it pretty bloody hard to get over but I would, whereas if he went off and had an affair I wouldn't even try you know I would just be like 'no, I cant handle, not the fact that you've done it but the fact that you have been lying with it' (Kate: right) you know ('Cara', 336-342)

In this extract different degrees of forgiveness are constructed in relation to different types of extra-relational encounters. A 'one night stand' is one type and is given as an example of an event that would be forgivable, although "pretty bloody hard to get over". This is positioned in opposition to an 'affair' which is constructed as problematic because of the "lying with it", on-going decent that is usually viewed as occurring with an affair. This builds on the conceptualisation of monogamy being equated with trust, and it is that breaking of trust, i.e. 'the lying',

that is positioned as most damaging to relationships. This is reinforced by Cara's comments "not the fact that you've done it but the fact that you have been lying with it". Here is it not the physical act of infidelity that is positioned as problematic per se but the surrounding circumstances and the meanings attached to such behaviours. As an 'affair' becomes ascribed with certain characteristics, lying being one, and it is these characteristics that mediated the impact within the primary relationship. Monogamy becomes a carrier variable (see Stenner 1993, Seu 2001), a signifier of other things within a relationship – trust, honesty etc. Monogamy signifies other things, not just the agreement to remain sexually faithful, but the agreement not to lie about sexual fidelity, not to break an assumed or spoken agreement and to be honest.

Participants also drew on the commonsense distinction between 'forgiving' and 'forgetting' extra-relationships. Forgiveness was constructed as possibly achievable; the following two extracts explore the difficulties constructed in terms of 'forgetting':

**Extract:**

Dee: I think (.) I might be able to find it in my heart to forgive but I wouldn't be able to forget (Kate: yeah) and that would be the destructive thing (Kate: yeah) because I think it (.) I would never ever again be convinced that I meant everything to the person concerned (Kate: yeah) and that would then put me on the defensive all the time I'm already pretty defensive [laughs] and it would just ruin any relationship (Kate: yeah) and it just wouldn't survive it (Dee 577-82)

Dee draws on a common cultural discourse when she says "I might be able to find it in my heart to forgive but I wouldn't be able to forget". This draws on a discourse of 'forgiving but not forgetting' to characterise Dee's reaction to infidelity, where forgiveness could be worked on but forgetting the event would be impossible. Here again infidelity is positioned as undermining an individual's self esteem and confidence in the relationship, leading to 'defensiveness' in the relationship. It is these resulting problems that are constructed as ruining the relationship, rather than the extra-relational encounter per se (as above). The reactions to infidelity are individualised, they are located in terms of an

internalised problem which the individual would not be able to overcome. Dee is positioned as not having the ‘strength of character’ to continue after infidelity in the relationship, which is a discourse echoed in the following extract:

**Extract:**

Cara: ...I’d, I’d find it hard to say ok, we wont talk about that again you know, I think people who can forgive affairs and things are very strong (Kate: yeah) because I’d probably end up bringing them up fairly often in an argument you know (Kate: yeah) (‘Cara’, 216-219)

Cara has been discussing the difficulties in moving past infidelity in a relationship, and positioned people who are able to “forgive affairs and things” as “very strong”. This again constructs it in terms of an internalised attributed to forgive or forget extra-relational encounters, something which Cara would not be able to do. Discussing people who forgive affairs as ‘strong’ also functions to avoid an explicitly problematic or ‘negative’ subject position for them, as Cara is located in opposition to this group.

## **5.10. Conclusions**

This chapter has presented a systematic analysis of the discursive constructions of infidelity present within the data gathered from conducting individual interviews. The first six discursive constructions examined within this chapter explored how participants negotiated and positioned experiences and behaviours as infidelity in relationships. There was an overarching discourse of sex and sexual activity used to define behaviours as infidelity, the centralisation of sex mediating definitions of infidelity and also being used to evaluate whether particular behaviours counted as infidelity within the context of specific relationships. There was a construction of a continuum or ‘scale’ of infidelity, where sex was variably used to signal an act as infidelity, sex being the yardstick by which other behaviours were judged as in/fidelity. Although participants at times draw on a commonsense construction of a distinction between emotional and sexual behaviours (in line with the treatment of infidelity within experimental research), it was seen that this became an

arbitrary distinction firstly because sexual content was seen to mediate the inclusion of 'emotional' behaviours as infidelity, and secondly where extra-relational sexual practices were not seen as problematic per se, but because they were implicitly used to signify further grand (emotional) discourses of 'trust', 'boundaries', 'honesty' etc in interpersonal relationships. As similarly seen within discourses of monogamy examined within chapter 4, it was not the specific behavioural practices that were necessarily problematic, but rather what the behaviours were constructed to signify and the meanings people attached to particular behaviours within the context of interpersonal relationships.

Participants showed awareness of commonsense conceptualisations of what behaviours count as infidelity in relationships, these conceptualisations were seen to work as an external referent for how participants scripted and related their opinions about what behaviours constitute in/fidelity in relationships; but they were also discussed as being too narrow and hence participants worked to present more personalised, particularised definitions of infidelity. Variation and further individual definitions of behaviours were also fostered by the discursive constructions of a continuum of infidelity (as above), this continuum construction moved us away from clear binary definitions of what is or is not infidelity, but rather constructed more blurred conceptualisations of what could 'count' – one specific example being the discussion of whether 'thoughts' could be deemed infidelitous. 'Thoughts' as infidelity was constructed in terms of rehearsing possible infidelitous encounters, and also being mediated by whether such behaviours could actually occur in reality (so infidelity), or were in the realm of fantasy (not infidelity). Considering participants positioning of thoughts as infidelity further complicated definitions, and any policing of infidelity within relationships. What behaviours are considered as infidelity was debated throughout the participant interviews, at times participants drawing on hegemonic and bottom-line arguments to position behaviours as infidelity, and at other points participants drawing on contextualised reasoning to position a multitude of behaviours as possibly infidelitous. Therefore the constructions of 'infidelity' within participants' discussions did not denote a fixed phenomenon that participants orientated to, the construct of infidelity was variously defined and mediated by participants' discourses. Even when we consider the grand narrative

of 'sex' and how this was seen to inform many accounts of infidelity, there was still considerable variation in the behaviours and events that were positioned as infidelity.

Within this chapter there was obviously also attention paid to how participants mediated their own individual opinions about why infidelity occurred in relationships (section 5.3 for example), and also how participants negotiated and explained their experiences of having extra-relational encounters (see sections 5.6.2 and 5.6.6 for examples). It was very useful to examine how participants negotiated such 'cheater' positionings, how participants did particular discursive work to mediate their re-telling of when they had been 'unfaithful'. Both male and female participants did this work, and it drew on a variety of discursive devices, such as the use of 'external' voices to add 'credibility' to their views; and also a variety of discursive constructions of infidelity, for example, constructing infidelity as a 'transition' from one relationship to the next, or in terms of a period of personal and situational change and transition. The layers of discursive work analysed when accounting for ones own infidelity within a relationship points to the conclusion that infidelity is something that *needs* to be accounted for, partly, or wholly, because of its constructed status as something inherently damaging and problematic within interpersonal relationships. Thus speakers of their own extra-relational encounters have to do discursive work to account for and negotiate this potentially morally loaded position of 'cheater'. The positioning of infidelity as essentially damaging to relationships was explicit within much of the discussions within this chapter, but was more explicitly explored in the final discourses presented, for example, where infidelity was positioned as damaging to self-esteem (section 5.8). This hegemonic construction of infidelity as necessarily damaging and undesirable within personal relationships is continued within the following chapter. The next chapter moves on from the data gathered from the individual interviews to discuss the analysis of the group discussion data, which forms part of study one (exploring discursive constructions of infidelity and monogamy in interpersonal relationships, and also encompasses study two of this thesis (exploring discursive constructions and the possibilities of challenge and change within particular discourses)).



# 6

## Analysis

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### 6.1. Introduction - Group Discussions - Analysis

Dealing with group data is quite different and perhaps even difficult compared to individual interview material. Although any interview situation is inherently social, a group situation amplifies that social element making it a rich and complex component to consider. It is much harder within group interviews to disentangle the contained, specific discourses, i.e. it is much harder to locate the common threads of particular discourses present within the discussions due to the often fast interchange of speakers and ideas discussed. This is obviously also due to the increased participants talking; there literally *are* more voices to consider and this is further attributed to the differences between one-to-one interview settings and group discussion settings in terms of conversation conventions (for example, turn-taking rules may not be adhered to by group members, considerable overlapping speech etc). The ‘micro’ context within these two occasions is therefore quite different and leads to different forms of data collected. These differences in local context will be explored after this analysis chapter, where sited language/knowledge will be specifically examined through comparisons between the various data sites utilised within this research.

The form of discourse analysis utilised to analyse the group data was predominately guided by Potter and Wetherell (1987) and Parker (1994) guidelines for discourse analysis. Prior to these subsequent stages of analysis I adopted a slightly different style of approaching the data set, group data initially being more complex and requiring a slightly different treatment to the individual data. Firstly, I found it very useful to conduct a positional analysis of the material;

this acted as an immediate ‘way in’ to the dataset. This involved analysing the material line by line in terms of the subject positions alluded to and made apparent when the participants spoke. This helped to determine what was being discussed or alluded to within the often-complex group discussions. After this initial positional analysis a more conventional discourse analysis could begin. Firstly, examining the texts for instances of particular relationship talk, for example, when ‘infidelity’ is referred to implicitly/explicitly. These instances can then be examined in terms of ‘consistency’ to identify the regular patterns in language use (Potter and Wetherell 1987) and then ‘variability’ in terms of the content or form of the accounts at various instances. The next stage was to pull together the various discursive threads and piece together the overarching relationship themes present within the data, this then involved forming hypotheses about the functions and effects of these discursive structures, and finding linguistic evidence for these hypotheses (Potter and Wetherell 1987). The initial focus on ‘function’ and ‘effect’ of the discourses was related to the micro context of the talk (the immediate group situation) and drawing on the positions analysis helped examine this. This enabled a discussion of what was being achieved interpersonally when participants drew on the various discourses. Once this micro context analysis had been completed a macro analysis was attempted, broadening the analysis to the wider social context to examine what was being achieved socially when participants talk about relationships in particular ways. For example, what is it about our present social/cultural/political context that facilitates this talk? Which aspects of the macro context perhaps inhibit alternative versions of these discourses?

Within the following sections my aim is to detail and explore the discourses from the group discussion data set, paying particular attention to both the micro and macro functions and consequences of constructing relationship behaviours in these ways. Firstly detailing those discourses pertaining to monogamy, secondly those relating to infidelity and finally a discussion of the relationship break-up discourses located within the group data. This analysis will also be interspersed with the second stage analysis, resulting from the further participant involvement and discussions after they had viewed sections of my initial analysis (the process discussed within the methodology chapter).

## **6.2. Monogamy**

Discourses of monogamy have been previously explored within the individual analysis section. This previous analysis concentrated on participants' definitions of monogamy and monogamy was variably im/positioned within the personal relationships. Monogamy was seen to function as a grand narrative scripting participants' understandings of personal relationships, which will be seen to echo within the following analysis. Within this section participants group discussions of monogamy in their relationships will be further explored, beginning with an exploration of monogamy as the defining feature within personal relationships. Rather than integrating the analysis of group discussions with the analysis of individual interviews, the decision was taken to keep these sections separate, partly because they did constitute different components of the data collection, group data forming part of both study one and two. Further, the form of data gathered was quite different in terms of the longer narratives and personalised stories present within individual data and the more quick-paced discussions of the group discussions.

### **6.2.1. The defining feature**

Inherent within the participant discussions of infidelity within personal relationships, was a lack of explicit relationship conceptualisations outside of the monogamous paradigm. There was an absence of discourses or relationship constructions of non-monogamy centred relationships, 'monogamy' was seen to inform discussions of personal relationships. When participants were asked directly about the important characteristics of a personal relationship, almost all cited monogamy and trust as paramount and often these were constructed as the defining features of relationships. This is in line with numerous research studies that report the prevalence of the importance of monogamy in personal relationships (for example, Boekhout et al 1999, Buss and Shackelford 1997, Laumann et al 1995, Smith 1994, Treas and Giesen 2000, Worth et al 2002).

Researchers also highlight the disparity between the high importance attributed to monogamy and the high rate of infidelity occurring within committed relationships. Monogamy was found to be central to how the majority of participants talked about their personal relationships, it being a grand narrative to script relationships and relationship experiences. There was variation across the relationship discourses as to the degree to which monogamy was the defining feature – for example, the ‘shopping discourse’ was an example of monogamy not being invoked strongly to define relationships. When participants were asked directly about the important aspects of relationships or the importance of monogamy to their relationships, they often stated that monogamy was central:

**Extract:**

- Kate: ..monogamy do you think {is that what} defines it when it gets a bit serious is if you’re faithful or  
Eve: {oh definitely} I don’t see that there’s any point in having any relationship what so ever if you’re not going to be faithful  
Flo: it’s not a relationship then is it {I think the main} for me the mainstay of a relationship is the trust thing (2:1, 424-9)

Within this exchange monogamy is constructed as the defining parameter of what can be classified as a ‘relationship’. It is interesting that Flo comments that “its not a relationship then is it” if monogamy is not involved, which works to classify ‘relationships’ in terms of monogamy. This is in contrast to when the group have talked previously about personal relationships where monogamy has not occurred and when they have also discussed a more casual approach to relationships where monogamy was not considered relevant to the discussions. In the above extract monogamy and trust are used interchangeably – perhaps signalling one reason why monogamy is viewed as important. Worth, Reid and McMillan (2002) noted that participants in their study on love and trust in gay relationships, pointed to love relationships being ‘underwritten’ by a commitment to sexual exclusivity and that this was held up as *the* article of trust (emphasis in original p243). Thus monogamy becomes synonymous with trust, as seen within the above extract. Monogamy is repeatedly held up as the ‘gold standard’ within personal relationships: “...monogamy has come to be the definition of love, the yardstick by which we measure the reset of our emotions...Like so much butter, romantic

love must be spread thickly on one slice of bread; to spread it over several is too spread it ‘thinly’” (Comer, 1974:219, cited by Jackson and Scott 2004:152). Jackson and Scott review a feminist critique of monogamy and trace why sexual exclusivity is treated as the glue that holds a personal relationship together and question why sexual exclusivity is regarded as more ‘exclusive’ than other types of relationships, for example, close friendships, polyamorous relationships. The privileged given to the sexually exclusive couple legitimates demands on partners that are never made on friends, particularly the demand for exclusivity (ibid, 2004:156) and sexual monogamy.

### **6.2.2. The only one**

Whilst conducting the group discussions, why monogamy was important within relationships and central to understanding personal relationships, was often not explicitly unpacked by participants. There was one instance of a participant exploring the logic/reasoning behind a monogamous approach in relationships, which constructs the importance of monogamy as centring on being “the only one”, this is explored in the following extract:

#### **Extract:**

Gem: ... for a man to look at me and and (.) like sexually and just be the only one that they want...I’ve felt that way in all my relationships and not looked around (Kate: mm) literally, like seriously not done it, and I want, I want that if I’m, if I’m capable of that I would like to be with someone who is capable of me being enough, I want to be enough and if I’m not enough then fuck off (Kate: yeah) you know (3:1, 577-87)

Gem draws on a common romantic discourse of being ‘the only one’ to exemplify the importance of monogamy in relationships. Monogamy is positioned as important because it symbolises being the “only one that they want”, being the central love object and meeting all the other persons’ relationship needs. Monogamy is in contrast to ‘looking around’, this is something Gem reports not doing in a relationship and therefore she expects this in her relationships, “if I’m

capable of that I would like to be with someone who is capable of me being enough". Using a discourse of being 'the only one' works as a powerful explanatory device used to explain Gem's relationship stance and what she requires of her partners. This points to what Jackson and Scott (2004) term the individualistic expectations entailed by monogamous love, you expect (and indeed monogamous love warrants this expectation) to be placed at the centre of another's universe and in turn build your own world around them. This also points to how an individuals' sense of self may be closely tied up in the relationship, one 'has to be enough' to foster monogamy in the relationship. This further links to previous discussions where participants discoursed the centrality of monogamy, if you do not want to be with just one person then you should not be in a relationship. This clear binary construction works as a bottom-line argument to underscore the importance of monogamy and being the only one in a relationship, all other relationship circumstances are undesirable and defunct.

Despite these discussions of the centrality of monogamy to individuals' conceptualisation of relationships, group members, and at times during the individual interviews, participants did particularise monogamy to particular relationship circumstances:

**Extract:**

- Kate: but did you say you, you think you believe monogamy is important  
{is that what you think}  
Gem: {yeah I do} um but then it depends on the relationship because if  
you're just seeing someone then I don't think its particularly and its  
very specific between what's going on between two people (Kate:  
yeah) and if you were say married then yeah (3:1, 591-6)

This extract is interesting because it is one of the very few instances that the group participants particularised the importance of monogamy in relationships. This person was in a 'committed', monogamous relationship at the time of the discussion, so the relationship circumstances of the participant was not one that would warrant a further qualification of monogamy. A more fluidly defined, personalised concept of "seeing someone" variably invoked to highlight a contrast between a standard, monogamous relationships, and a relationship context which is more negotiable. This extract points to an individual's freedom to apply

monogamy to their relationships, rather than a universal application of relationship norms. This is in contrast to construction of British dating culture posited by Eve in a subsequent extract – where monogamy is again positioned as the norm within any ‘dating’ relationship. Within this extract a more fluidly defined, personalised concept of “seeing someone” is invoked to highlight a contrast between a standard, monogamous relationship, here the relationship context is constructed as negotiable. This allows for an idiosyncratic approach to monogamy, and indeed relationships more generally, where monogamy and relationship norms become “very specific between what’s going on between two people”. Within the immediate interpersonal context this also works to limit the extent to which participants are seeming to generalise their personal standpoint to all relationship circumstances, thus allowing for a position of acceptance and difference within personal relationship. This further points to the fluidity of discursive concepts like monogamy, these are not concrete, context-free notions, but are used rhetorically during interpersonal discussions of relationships.

### **6.2.3. Substantiating and undermining monogamy**

When questioned directly, participants assert that they really believe in the concept of sexual exclusivity and monogamy. This often masked the complexity with which participants discuss and negotiate their personal relationships during the conversations, when they were not centred explicitly on discussions of monogamy per se. The following extract shows how ‘commonsense’ the concept of monogamy was within discussions, yet how simultaneously this idealised relationship norm was equally undermined:

#### **Extract:**

- Eve: it’s the you know, if you, if you want to shag other people you don’t want to be in a relationship (? : mm) you cant have your cake and eat it (? : mm)
- Flo: I think its just, its there from birth isn’t it you know, you see your mum and dad and on the telly and everything’s lovely {and romantic} oh::
- Eve: {actually my mum had an affair} when I was a kid so {[inaud]}
- Flo: {so did my dad (? : yeah) but they’re still together (2:1, 439-44)}

This extract comes after the group have been discussing infidelity in relationships, Eve draws on an extreme-case construction of fidelity in relationships “if you want to shag other people you don’t want to be in a relationship”. This works to create a dichotomous relationship between monogamy and non-monogamy in relationships and which essentially states that if you do not want to be monogamous, then you do not want to be in a relationship. This creates somewhat of a paradox, as it implies and creates a position where those people who transgress within a personal relationship therefore do not want to be in a relationship. This presents a ‘black and white’ positioning of fidelity in a relationship, a simplistic construction of fidelity/infidelity in relationships. This, as with the first extract in this section, further works to marginalize or discredit non-monogamous relationships as not being ‘relationships’. Being involved with two people and being in a ‘relationship’ are incompatible. The phrase “cant have your cake and eat it” is used here when discussing infidelity or rather tandem relationships and to characterise this as incompatible. ‘To have your cake and eat it’ is a popular English idiomatic proverb or figure of speech reflecting the desire to have more than one can handle or deserves and it is often used when referring to men having infidelitous relationships, who have a primary relationship (cake) and extra-relational encounters (eating it).

Within the above extract, monogamy and the romantic relationship ideal are constructed as being “there from birth” and further being learned through family life. Flo therefore seems to construct both an innate component, that is present from birth, and a learned component which is influenced by your parents and cultural norms “and on the telly”, “everything’s lovely and romantic”. This presents an ‘ideal’ or idealised version of personal relationships, centred around two individuals in a loving and romantic relationship. The participants, including the main speaker Flo, quickly undermine this version of relationships. Both Eve and Flo continue to discuss their parent’s relationships, both being mediated by affairs. Although this ideal is quickly problematised by the participants, there still seems to be an investment in this ideal notion of romantic love/relationships – in that it has become a commonsense discourse, which is commonly invoked throughout the interviews and group discussions. Even though the participants themselves immediately undermine this idealised relationship norm through

referencing their own experiences, this has not reframed what they initially present as desirable and ‘commonsense’. This perhaps points to how strongly embedded this ideal of the sexually exclusive, romantic relationship is within participants’ discussions and relationship narratives.

#### **6.2.4 Idealised relationships – I blame TV**

As noted above, referring to an ‘ideal’ relationship and relationship narrative was a common thread within participants discussions of relationships and drawing on external referent points to position this ideal in terms of a pervasive cultural messages of fidelity. This is further evidenced by the following discussion:

##### **Extract:**

Gem: because you build up an ideal don’t you (Gwen: yeah)...I think you do just build up I-I blame TV [laughter] I think something goes on somewhere and you just build up this amazingly like ‘ah:: he was perfect and he loves me really’ like (.) it does take like quite a short sharp shock to remember the truth >though I think< (3:1,810-20)

Television was often used by participants to draw on and acknowledge an external, ‘social’ milieu informing their conceptualisations of relationships. Television was repeatedly referenced in terms of portraying and influencing perceptions of ‘ideal’ relationships. Drawing on external referents contextualises Gems’ views and locates them in terms of a wider, more commonly held view regarding relationships – rather than one which is just particular to Gem. In this extract Gem works to “blame TV” for the ideal narrative of personal relationships, in helping to view male partners as “perfect” and “loving me really” despite any behaviour to the contrary. Television is used here with laughter to transfer and mediate some of the individual responsibility for investing in idealised narratives. It then takes “quite a short sharp shock to remember the truth” and become disinvested in particular romantic narratives. The previous two extracts presented here hint at the relationship between wider cultural discourses and individual, lived relationship practices. In both extracts, this relationship is disjointed, the

lived experience presented as being in tension with the ‘idealised’ romantic relationship narrative which nevertheless survives.

#### **6.2.5. Monogamy in the mind**

Often when participants discuss monogamy, they draw on what I have previously termed the ‘monogamy: a state of mind’ repertoire (see Nicholls 2001). This is where participants im/position monogamy on to their understanding of relationships, so that, for example, if they are being unfaithful in their relationships, they maintain the importance of monogamy by constructing this as something they were doing ‘in their mind’. This repertoire is seen as a rhetorical device used by participants to aid them in the ‘tricky’ negotiations surrounding behaviour that could be classed as ‘unfaithful’. Where monogamy is presented as the defining feature of a relationship, a relationship isn’t a ‘relationship’ if it’s casual/not monogamous, participants therefore have to work to account for extra-relational transgressions in what they also classed as a relationship. The ‘monogamy: a state of mind’ repertoire was drawn on to characterise monogamous behaviour as something individuals should have been doing in their relationship, evidenced by ‘thinking’ they should be monogamous, or by feeling ‘guilt’ upon ‘cheating’. The defining feature of a relationship becomes what the individuals ‘thought’ was appropriate, not what they were actually doing. The relationship becomes a state of mind (not a behavioural stance) that is mediated by how monogamy is rhetorically im/positioned. Because monogamy in personal relationships is a deeply embedded concept, participants work to reframe relationship experiences as infidelity, even in ‘casual’ relationships, which can be seen in the following extract:

#### **Extract:**

Eve: Americans have got the...better idea they actually date (Flo: yeah) and when they’re dating (Helen: yeah) they’re not actually in a relationship they actually date and then they discuss whether they’re going to be in a relationship (Helen: yeah) so they can date as many people as they want at the same time whereas we’ve got this tendency to go out with a bloke and (Flo: [inaud]) then three

days later (Flo: yeah) I mean I know even if I'm going out with a bloke on this weekend or whatever I feel like I'd be unfaithful if I (? : mm) snog someone else (Helen: yeah) know what I mean and you've only been out on one date (Helen: mm) because you kind of date it from the first time you go out (2:1, 1354-64)

In the above discussion Eve constructs a cultural distinction between American and British 'dating' culture to examine the consequences of being focused on 'monogamy'. Within British culture multiple 'dating' can be re-scripted as 'unfaithful' independent of the relationship context specifically, because you "date it [the relationship] from the first time you go out". This is in contrast to Americans who "actually date" and "they're not actually in a relationship they actually date", which constructs a different relationship context – where the start of the relationship (and presumably the start of monogamy) is something to be negotiated and discussed, rather than externally im/positioned. This dialogue further constructs the 'monogamy in the mind' repertoire, as Eve reports feeling like she has been unfaithful even if the relationship parameters do not call for this labelling. Such discursive work points to the seriousness and importance placed on fidelity in relationships by women. Here, Eve reframes dating behaviours as 'unfaithful' to sustain the importance of monogamy and this ideal relationship narrative and position Eve as a 'moral' actor adhering to the importance placed on monogamy in relationships. This reliance on fidelity to define personal relationships could further be reflective of restrictive discourses surrounding the idea that women cannot feature in 'casual' sexual relationships without feeling the need to justify them in terms of love and emotions. Participants generally had problems articulating, and indeed conceptualising, serious personal relationships that did not centre on or were not defined by monogamy. Although, as will be seen later within this analysis chapter, at other points in discussions participants constructed discourses of 'casual' encounters and a more 'consumerist' approach to love and relationships.

Within this section of analysis the differing ways monogamy was constructed within participant discussions has been explored. Generally I felt within the group discussions (and also within individual interviews) that there was a difficulty in articulating perspectives on monogamy, as to why this was so important to

participants within their relationships. This, and the above analysis, again further indicates how monogamy is a highly imbedded sociocultural relationship norm drawn on to conceptualise and discuss personal relationships. Monogamy is often discoursed as the defining feature of romantic relationships, partly due to its constructive power within romantic love narratives to position individuals as 'the only one'. But also within the group discussions was the awareness of the 'commonsense' nature of monogamy centred romantic narratives, and how these were often in tension with participants own experiences of relationships. And as we have seen, how participants can negotiate the im/position of monogamy onto their relationships. The analysis of how participants use and construct accounts of monogamy points to the importance of attending to the subtle variations and interpersonal contexts when exploring relationship narratives. Monogamy is not a concept that is drawn on universally by participants and as such it needs to be interrogated as to how 'monogamy' is differently constructed when people discuss their personal relationships.

### **6.3. Infidelity**

Infidelity as something undesirable and necessarily wrong within interpersonal relationship was very rarely questioned by participants and is not unpacked further when they talk about experiences of infidelity. This assumption underpins the majority of participants' talk of infidelity and subsequently the discourses they employ to construct it during conversations. Within the following section the discursive constructions relating to infidelity from the group discussions will be examined in detail, exploring the contextual and conversational factors mediating the construction and usage of the term 'infidelity'.

#### **6.3.1. Defining infidelity**

Examining the definitions used within a given text pertaining to a particular phenomenon is a useful and important place to start an analysis, and indeed was a useful place to start the group discussions. Participants were asked what they

deemed to be 'infidelity' in a relationship, and discussions began from there. Participants constructed infidelity with considerable variation, using a variety of terms and definitions when exploring this phenomenon.

The analysis begins with an exploration of these definitions and examines how such definitions have various interpersonal consequences for how such extra-relational behaviour is dealt with conversationally. For example, the ways in which the specific term 'unfaithful' is used during a conversation can be seen to construct a particular level of significance for the event, when compared to how 'cheating' is used within a conversation. These different terms will be seen to construct different and varying consequences for how participants viewed the event, in terms of its seriousness and also in terms of the consequences after the event. Differing terminology also works to construct different subject positions, for example, for allocations of 'blames' or 'accountability'. When participants attempt to define infidelity they acknowledge that there are a wide range of behaviours classified, or that could be classified, as infidelity in personal relationships. The exchange related below was in response to my question to the group about what infidelity is:

**Extract:**

Eve: well some people just class kissing as infidelity don't they  
Helen: yeah definitely-  
Eve: -and some people class full sex  
Kate: yeah {so its where}  
Eve: some people class just speaking with, to another woman in a pub  
Ivy: oh:: {yeah}  
Eve: {as infidelity (2:1, 33- 39)}

Eve details a list of behaviours that some people class as infidelity. "Kissing", "full sex" and "speaking to another women in a pub" are all listed as within the realm of the infidelity, where each definition is then collaborated by other members of the group. By using the phrase "some people" repeatedly Eve is able to detail a wide range of behaviours whilst simultaneously not owning any one particular definition personally. To talk generally is one device used regularly by participants to express a particular point of view whilst disclaiming any accountability for the ideas expressed. When talking about infidelity in the groups, participants were able to show complete awareness of the multitude of behaviours

included under the umbrella term ‘infidelity’, and it was often stated that what constitutes infidelity is a matter of personal opinion and individual perspectives. The following extract comes again in response to my initially questioning as to what constitutes infidelity, here the group negotiate an ‘all inclusive’ definition:

**Extract:**

- Tina: no I think snogging (.) is still wrong in-infidelity  
Sue: but infidelity  
Tina: because  
Sue: just sounds like you’ve sleep  
Tina: no I-  
Sue: -in my head infidelity means you’ve slept with someone it doesn’t mean-  
Tina: -yeah yeah {it sounds really serious}  
Sue: {(inaud) do you get what I mean}  
Tina: but if you’re in a serious relationship and you find out your boyfriend has snogged someone else I would  
Sue: I’d call that cheating I wouldn’t call that infidelity I don’t know, in my mind I don’t know why, infidelity has to involve sleeping with someone (1.1, 174-185)

Within this fast exchange between participants, Tina is trying to assert that ‘snogging’ is wrong and is infidelity, while Sue resists this proposition that ‘snogging’ someone would constitute infidelity in a relationship. At the beginning of this extract two parallel dialogues can be seen, where Tina and Sue compete to be heard and put forward their views on defining infidelity. To assert differing opinions, both participants use personalisation which works to substantiate their views as their own ideas, rather than ones they are necessarily trying to generalise to the other members in the group. To assert a different opinion Sue repeatedly classifies it as her own opinion, “in my head”, “in my mind”, as Sue disagrees with the inclusion of ‘snogging’ within the parameters of infidelity, rather for her, the “infidelity means you’ve slept with someone” outside of the primary relationship. Anything else would fall in the realm of ‘cheating’ rather than infidelity, which points to a subtle conceptual difference between what behaviours the words ‘cheating’ and ‘infidelity’ denote. Tina works to include extra-relational ‘snogging’ under the banner of infidelity, agreeing that ‘infidelity’ “sounds really serious”, but she would still assert that ‘snogging’ would still be problematic within a serious relationship. This short extract of negotiation between group

members is representative of further debates when participants discussed definitions of infidelity. Their multiple representations, and perspectives on what constitutes infidelity confirms the assertion that there is not one fixed, universal phenomenon called ‘infidelity’, but rather what behaviours are deemed as infidelitous in a primary relationship is something that is mediated both individually and socially – something that was previously reviewed within the individual analysis section, particularly when looking at the ‘continuum’ discourse of infidelity.

As seen within the previous extract, the dialogue from the group participants often overlapped and at times competing to present a particular idea or theory. Also within the group discussions, participants worked together to generate or present a common idea or perspective. When multiple participants discuss a topic in this way I term this ‘talking-up’ a topic, by this I want to convey how participants talk worked together to build up a common thread/idea. This can be seen when multiple participants contribute to a discussion in quick succession and their combined talk needs to be analysed for the discursive constructions used to explore a concept. This can be seen in the following extract where participants are discussing what constitutes infidelity:

**Extract:**

Sue: ...some words sound more serious than others like infidelity  
sounds really serious  
?: yeah  
Tina: and unfaithful  
Sue: yeah  
Tina: whereas cheating-  
Sue: -cheating yeah-  
Tina: -it could be just a small {not in a really serious relationship}  
Sue: {like just flirting with someone yeah}(1:1, 89-107)

The local context of this extract is my initial request to brainstorm the term ‘infidelity’, therefore it is expected that there would be discussions between group members as to what this term constitutes. When participants examine these terms one by one the terms can be seen to be given qualitatively different meanings – ‘cheating’ “could be just a small not in a really serious relationships”, compared to

‘infidelity’ which “sounds really serious”, as well as all being generally included under the umbrella term infidelity. Such discussions are interesting because they display how group members work together to define such terms as infidelity and the type of talk produced is specific to the group context. This talk involves multiple members talking in quick succession, the combined opinions working together towards a definition or group consensus – something quite different to talk within individual interviews. One conceptualisation of this activity is ‘talking-up’ a phenomenon – which involves multiple participants, talking in quick succession, all contributions seemingly relating to the same phenomenon. The above extract again also highlights the variability of terms used under the umbrella of ‘infidelity’, for example cheating, unfaithful and, later in the discussion ‘dishonest’, are all referred to. This use of multiple terms epitomizes the diversity of language used when talking about infidelity and, as briefly displayed within the previous extract, the meaning of particular terms are contextually dependent and interpersonally variable. This analysis of the language used when discussing infidelity subsequently problematises the simplistic usage of such terms within experimental psychological studies of infidelity in personal relationships, where often there is little or no acknowledgement of the range of terms used and how the meanings of these may not be stable and universal.

### **6.3.2. Mediating Factors – intent, impulses, complacency**

This section aims to provide an account of the factors constructed by participants as mediating infidelity, in terms of classifying behaviour as infidelity and the subsequent reactions and consequences to infidelity occurring in a relationship. One way infidelity was mediated was through the introduction of intentions and feelings by participants, which added another component to be considered when determining what behaviours are or are not infidelity. Within the following extract the group are discussing what would constitute infidelity in a relationship:

#### **Extract:**

- Flo: {I think it's deeper than that isn't it} for me it would be more whether they have feelings I think  
Ivy: yeah if they go out on a date

Eve: no no I've got to disagree with that as well though because you can have sex with someone with no feelings and that would still be being (.) well {that's the difference between unfaithfulness} and infidelity

Flo: {that hurts more though doesn't it } mm::

Eve: it would hurt more if they had, if they developed feelings for somebody

Helen: it hurts more if they develop feelings but it's still infidelity (.) I don't care

Eve: even just kissing-

Helen: -if he, if he touched a woman in the wrong place and it meant and he knew what he was doing I'd, I'd kill him (2:1, 42-53)

This extract shows how participants construct 'feelings' and 'intentions' related to infidelitous behaviour and how these mediate what behaviours may be considered infidelity and also mediate the severity of the interpersonal consequences after infidelity has occurred within a relationship. The participants assert that to develop feelings within a relationship transgression is more hurtful to the partner. Many researchers have proposed that women report that 'emotional infidelity' is more damaging to a primary relationship than 'sexual infidelity' (see Abraham et al 2001, Harris, 2000, Dijkstra et al, 2001, Drigotas and Barta, 2000, Wiederman and Hard, 1999, Yarab et al, 1998). The participants affirm that to develop 'feelings' within a relationship transgression is more 'hurtful', although the participants also contend that both the 'behaviours' (having "sex with someone with no feelings") and the development of feelings are all classified as infidelity. Here participants also tease out a conceptual difference between 'unfaithfulness' and 'infidelity', as opposed to a distinction between sexual versus emotional infidelity. Unfaithfulness appears to be worse, including feelings and perhaps going out on 'dates' with someone other than the primary partner. Whereas infidelity is perhaps having sex with someone, but with "no feelings". This rhetorical difference between these two terms is introduced here to accommodate the different conceptualisations of infidelity draw on by participants, by constructing these as related to the different terms and therefore they are necessarily talking about different things as opposed to disagreeing about the same thing.

Intentionality is introduced within the above extract as mediating the seriousness of a relationship transgression. Helen uses intentionality to mediate how she might view a partners' relationship transgression, "if he touched a woman in the wrong

place and it meant and he knew what he was doing”, the emphasis here is if Helen’s partner “knew” what he was doing. This added dimension of intentionality is used to justify Helen’s extreme case formation (Edwards 2000) of her response to her partner’s infidelity, i.e. ‘killing’ him. The introduction of intent on the part of the relationship transgressor works to magnify the consequences of a particular behaviour. This is further exemplified in the following extract:

**Extract:**

- Helen: ...there was never an instance when I cheated on someone that I wasn’t fully aware of what I was doing, people say “oh it just happened”, does it fuck, you completely and utterly are aware, for me anyway I was always completely and utterly aware of what I was doing knew that what I was doing was wrong, knew that I was about to kiss this person and I shouldn’t kiss {this person}
- Eve: {and could} you have stopped yourself
- Helen: absolutely at any stage I could have stopped myself {but I chose not to [inaud]} (2:1, 667-674)

Within this exchange Helen constructs a position of extreme culpability for her previous relationship transgression behaviours. Here infidelity is constructed as a rational choice, “I could have stopped myself but I chose not to”, with full awareness of the meaning and consequences of such behaviours, “I was always completely and utterly aware of what I was doing”. Through talking about her own past behaviours Helen is able to position herself as speaking from a knowledgeable position about the intentionality component within infidelity, as someone reporting her own feelings and awareness at having undertaken relationship transgressions. In doing so she also works to position herself as fully culpable and accountable for her infidelitous behaviour. Helen uses extreme case formulations and a position of self-awareness to locate herself within a negative subject position of ‘cheater’. This account helps to substantiate earlier comments (within the previous extract explored) about the severity of a relationship transgression, as it is posited by Helen that there is always awareness or intent on the part of the relationship transgressor. By using her own behaviour and intentions as an example, Helen is also able to create a position of complete culpability on behalf of herself and her partner if he cheats in their relationship,

thus substantiating her claims to her partners' accountability if he cheats within their relationship. This is also functioning to legitimise Helens' earlier claim that she would kill her partner if he cheated because he would be fully aware of the severity of his actions. Speaking from a 'knowledgeable' position of a 'cheater', someone who has necessarily 'been there', also helps to undermine any counterarguments given by other members of the group or her partner in his defence, as seen in the extract below:

**Extract:**

Eve: but its got to be {its got to be like conscious infidelity though hasn't it}

Flo: {I think that's like a victim of your own impulses sometimes though}

Helen: no

Flo: ah:: I don't know

Helen: no never, but then he'll say to me 'but oh these just happen' I say 'no babe, if ever I cheat on you then I deserve to be killed' because I will, could be completely aware of what I'm doing (2:1, 686-692)

By constructing 'intent' as nonnegotiable Helen is able to justify an extreme response to a transgression on either part. This intentionality brings with it extreme consequences: Helen states that she would deserve to be killed (and previously states that so would her partner in the same situation). Within this extract counter-discourses are utilised in relation to intentionality, those of 'impulses' and 'complacency'. Firstly Eve's substantiates Helen's previous arguments drawing on intentionality and states that it has to be "conscious infidelity" to incur accountability. In response Flo utilises a counter-discourse of 'impulses', you can be "a victim of your own impulses sometimes though". Infidelitous behaviour here is constructed as something that could be beyond conscious control, you would be a 'victim' and hence unaccountable for your actions. At other points in the discussion such an 'impulse' discourse of sexual drives is used to describe sexual contact with ex-partners, participants drawing on "hormones" and their "libido" to account for sexual behaviour that they would perhaps not usually engage in. Such constructions work to naturalise particular behaviours and function to reduce individual accountability. Although within the particular exchange above this counterargument is immediately dismissed by

Helen “no never”. A second counter-discourse is then drawn on and acknowledged by Helen, ‘complacency’, when she inserts an outside commentary into her discussion by utilising the voice of her partner. This discourse of complacency also works to minimise individual accountability for a relationship transgression, “these things just happen” which constructs a nonchalant attitude to the event as unavoidable and undirected – just happening. Helen also undermines this counterargument by using personalisation and relating her own position of accountability if she were to cheat in the relationship, “I will, could be completely aware of what I’m doing”.

The construction of intentionality can be seen to mediate the severity of relationship transgressions and clear ‘intent’ to ‘cheat’ is positioned as extremely severe in terms of relational outcomes – Helen would deserve to be killed if she transgressed. Infidelity with intent (and at times above, infidelity is constructed as unavoidably intentful) is constructed as punishable by death. This substantiates the damaging and undesirable nature of infidelity in relationships and also maintains the importance of fidelity in relationships as something to be maintained. Such discourses are not necessarily consistently invoked by participants – and indeed above two counterarguments were employed to mediate the assumption of intentionality within all relationship transgressions. Unintentional relationship transgressions are at times constructed as more damaging to relationships, than perhaps thought through transgressions. The following exchange resulted from an initial question as to whether extra-relational sex would be forgivable:

**Extract:**

Sue: no, sleeping with someone else I don’t think  
Kate: why do you think why’s that  
Sue: that’s more intimate (Tina: yeah) that’s more personal  
Ali: mm even if it was a fling and it didn’t mean anything and say he was like {drunk or whatever}  
Tina: {that’s even worse} in a way-  
Ali: -yeah its  
Tina: because you’d think you gave it all up  
Ali: {for nothing}  
Tina: {for a one-night stand (1:1, 348-354)}

Within this exchange sex outside of the primary relationship is positioned as problematic and potentially unforgivable. Qualitatively different sexual encounters are constructed and explored, it could be a “fling and it didn’t mean anything” and the partner was “drunk or whatever” compared perhaps to a more personal, meaningful relationship transgression. Being ‘drunk or whatever’ is a position usually employed to mitigate accountability and blame for one’s actions, and here it is used to characterise an ‘unthinking’ relational encounter. Within this exchange a ‘fling’ or unintended relationship transgression is discussed as being damaging to the primary relationship and is constructed as being “worse in a way” because the primary relationship will end “for nothing” – which contrasts to the readings of intentionality within the previous extracts. Extra-relational sex is also constructed as ending the relationship, and maintains its importance as a marker of personal relationships and extra-relational encounters (explored previously within the individual analysis section). This extract, when viewed in contrast to the previous explorations of relationship transgressions, helps to highlight the multiple readings of relationship transgressions utilised by participants when they talk of infidelity and the implications of these differing constructions for the primary relationship and the people involved in these encounters.

### 6.3.3. Mediating Devices – ‘Cheater’ Positionings

Within the group discussions, and individual interviews, participants often talked about their experiences of their own relationship transgressions. As seen above, when Helen discussed her opinions on relationship transgressions she explored her own personal experiences of having transgressed in a relationship. Whilst doing so Helen drew on several discursive devices to accomplish this positioning and also ‘manage’ this positioning within a potentially negative and morally loaded subject position. Whenever participants talk about their own relationship transgressions they are necessarily positioned as a ‘cheater’ within the relationship discourses, as was discussed within the individual analysis section, participants were seen to employ various discursive devices and discursive constructions to mediate and manage this ‘undesirable’ subject position. This included discourses of ‘it takes over’ and ‘cheating – but only a little bit’ and the device of using ‘external’ voices

to help negotiate the subject positions. How group participants negotiated the subject position of ‘cheater’ when talking about their own relationship transgressions is explored in the following section.

### **6.3.3.1. Not Cut and Dried**

Within the following exchange two participants, Helen and Flo, are discussing how they have regularly been unfaithful to their partners. It is important to note that this conversation comes immediately following an account of Ivy’s (another group member) partner being unfaithful (2:1, 100-132) where the group have labelled the infidelity “Paul’s fault completely” (2:1, 131/2). Flo, having agreed with Helen that she has often been unfaithful in relationships, then constructs an account of relationship transgressions as not being ‘cut and dried’:

#### **Extract:**

- Helen: I’ve been unfaithful to every single boyfriend apart from Craig  
Flo: [laughs] see I’m in your camp there  
Helen: {absolutely}  
Flo: its usually {been my fault} (Helen: yeah) and you, when you’ve actually, it’s not cut and dried its very sort of mixed if you you know (Ivy: mm) because sometimes you have very strong feelings for the person you’re with but then you might also have very strong feelings for another person and it’s never really that cut and dried (Ivy: mm) (2:1, 135-142)

Both Helen and Flo position themselves as having been ‘unfaithful’ within lots of their previous relationships, and hence can be seen as being positioned as ‘cheaters’ within the interpersonal discussions. Initially Flo takes responsibility for her relational transgressions, “its usually been my fault”, in line with their previous allocation of blame to Ivys’ partner for his relationship transgressions. Flo then shifts the account to problematise issues of blame and accountability for transgressions – which were essentially ‘cut and dried’ for herself immediately prior and previously when discussing Ivy and her partners infidelity. Flo draws on a “not cut and dried” construction to enable a discourse of variation and ambiguity in terms relationship transgressions, in that they may not be simple ‘cut and dried’ events. Rather there will be degrees confliction and indecision within the events,

and therefore allocating ‘blame’ and responsibility to the parties involved may be more complicated and harder to justify. One function of this discursive construction utilised by Flo here is to mediate the potentially negative subject position of ‘cheater’ – a position that has previously be seen to warrant punishment by death. This also functions to manage and account for the unfaithful behaviour that she initially labelled as her fault. Constructing relationship transgressional events as “not cut and dried” works as a complicating device which helps to frame Flo as someone not necessarily frivolous and careless in her actions, because “strong feelings” may be felt for both parties involved and hence feeling conflicted and unsure about things.

This ‘not cut and dried’ discourse of extra-relationships is in contrast to other points in the discussions where participants talked about fidelity and infidelity in relationships:

**Extract:**

- Flo: ...it it is about just being there for each other and not really needing that other person (Helen: mm) or  
Eve: that’s that’s the whole point {as far as I’m concerned it’s as black and white}  
Flo: {whether that’s realistic} I don’t know yet {[laughs]}  
Helen: {you have to aim high}  
Eve: {either you want to be in a relationship} or you don’t  
Flo: yeah (2:1, 432-434)

The above extract highlights a different construction pertaining to fidelity in relationships, and is constructed as being “black and white”. This uncomplicated view of relationships is in tension with the account given in the former extract, where fidelity in relationships was complicated by having “strong feelings” for someone outside of the primary relationship. These two extracts highlight the effect of the interpersonal context on the discourses generated, it can be seen that discourses are contextually dependent and are drawn on to achieve various interpersonal effects. Within the first extract the participants construct a position to accommodate or more easily understand their own relationship transgressions, which helped to negotiate any interpersonal consequences of being positioned as a ‘cheater’. In contrast, within the latter extract above a “black and white” discourse is constructed in terms of monogamy in relationships. The latter exchange works

to stress generally the importance of monogamy in relationships, wanting to be in a relationship equates to wanting to be in one, monogamous relationship - “either you want to be in a relationship or you don’t”. This is in contrast to Flo’s comments about ‘mixed feelings’ in the former extract, where you may have strong feelings for two people at the same time therefore complicating relationship decisions, particularly the stance taken on monogamy in the relationship.

### **6.3.3.2. Really bad and terrible people**

Edwards (2000) notes that expressions using extreme terms are often used to defend or justify an account, especially in response to a challenge. This could be seen earlier when Helen discussed her feelings about ‘intent’ and infidelity – all infidelity necessitating ‘intent’ in the part of the transgressor and deserve to be killed after infidelity (extreme case formations). Participants also used extreme characterisations of their own personality and behaviour when discussing their own relationship transgressions. An example of this can be seen in the following dialogue, the group have been discussing previous partners who have been unfaithful and they have just reached a consensus that Ivy’s partner was a “cock” for cheating; Helen continues:

#### **Extract:**

Helen: having said that though when I’ve cheated on people I’ve been really (.) manipulative and really secretive and really bad and terrible and oh I’m such a bad person [laughter] I have though I’ve proper I’ve, I’ve gone out and I’ve gone out knowing that I’m going to cop off...(2:1, 188-191)

Helen uses extreme case formulation to detail her past relationship transgressions, she positions herself as being “manipulative”, “secretive”, “bad” and “terrible”. Through this extreme description of Helen’s negative behaviour, Helen is able to pre-empt any criticism of her behaviour or challenge from group members. This also helps to disburse any tension within the group due to her relationship behaviours, indicated by the group laughter following Helen’s account of herself as being “such a bad person”. Rather than defending her behaviour Helen positions herself as being personally accountable and morally wrong for the

relationship transgressions and hence also constructs and maintains the undesirability and reprehensible nature of relational transgressions.

### 6.3.3.3. Bastards

Within the individual analysis section attention was paid to how male participants negotiated and traversed ‘male norms’ in terms of relationship transgressions. Within the group discussions (which included only female participants), participants also draw on ‘male’ representations of transgressors, primarily drawing on a position of ‘bastard’ to characterise all male cheating behaviours. The term ‘bastard’ functioned within the group discussions as a silencing device, which acted to limit any further discussion of a male partners’ infidelity:

#### Extracts:

- Ali: bastard  
[laughter]  
Sue: hm:  
Ali: hm: that’s just me thinking back to it happening to me [laughter] so really I don’t know what to say about that really (1:1, 155-9)
- Ivy: ...it was all Paul’s fault er completely but anyway yeah (.) some men are just bastards aren’t they [laughter] (2:1, 131-2)

When participants use this term there was no evident qualification of the behaviour or man in question, which implies that the characteristics of ‘bastards’ are culturally understood within these conversational contexts. This lack of qualification and the laughter that follows in both of the above extracts indicates shared understanding within the group and using the term bastard represents participants drawing on a cultural truism – men who cheat are bastards. The use of the specific, socially loaded term “bastard” draws on and implies quite specific characteristics about men who transgress in relationships. The term bastard is typically used to insult men and here it is drawn on to exemplify infidelitous behaviour. Therefore men who transgress from a primary relationship are constructed as reprehensible and despicable. This usage of the term also works to particularise infidelitous behaviour to an individuals’ personality and thus it becomes symptomatic of the individuals general persona, independent of any situational factors or relationship dynamics. This is interesting because this

construction is simultaneously able to particularise behaviour to an individual whilst also constructing the category of ‘men’ generally as bastards too.

#### **6.3.3.4. Awareness**

Within this section I have so far detailed some of the discursive devices utilised by participants when talking about their own and other people’s relationship transgressions. Only one participant talked explicitly about an awareness that people may engage certain explanatory devices to mediate their own accountability and blame when talking about relationship transgressions. This awareness was first directed at the participants’ own use of such explanatory devices:

#### **Extract:**

Gwen: ah:: I, I think the same as you [Gem] but I have different views (.) on infidelity when it comes to other people and then when it comes to myself I have different (Gem: mm) kind of views ... with regard myself I tend to rationalise so it makes it (.) ok so I think its not really cheating because there’s a reason for it (Gem: well how) but other people I’m very moralistic on (3:1, 36-48)

Within this extract the participant Gwen is acknowledging a difference between the characterisation of one’s own behaviour and the behaviour of others. With regards to Gwen’s own relationship transgressions she discusses the tendency to “rationalise” them and to minimise their importance, “so I think its not really cheating”. In contrast, Gwen expresses a different reading of other people’s relationship transgressions, “but other people I’m very moralistic on”. This points to quite a clear difference in terms of how particular relationship behaviours are constructed and viewed, based on Gwen’s position as either actor or recipient (which actually echoes traditional attribution theory – for example, see Fincham and Bradbury 1992, Hewstone 1989). Rather than constructions of infidelity being abstract, context-free definitions, this highlights the interdependent nature of constructions of infidelity and the context within which they are invoked. Further contextualising factors are explored within the following extract, the group have

been talking about the differing effects relationship transgressions may have in serious and non-serious relationships and how this is also mediated by age:

**Extract:**

- Gwen: yeah (.) and when people are young they make mistakes and (.) you don't take relationships as seriously {either}  
Gem: {I think esp-} when you're a teenager you've always got an excuse haven't ya always {for everything in life you know}  
Gwen: {yeah:: I know people do that} to make themselves feel better (.) but you have to justify it some how I guess (Kate: mm) >otherwise you wouldn't< (.) but I don't know (3:1, 181-7)

Although Gem positions self-justifications as a function of age, Gwen further posits that such devices are utilised to make a person “feel better”. This self justification is discussed as necessary, otherwise you would not engage in the seemingly negatively construed behaviour, “but you have to justify it some how I guess (Kate: mm) >otherwise you wouldn't<”. This brief discussion of the previous two extracts highlights some critical awareness by these participants of the devices they use to mediate issues of self-accountability when talking about relationship transgressions.

#### 6.4. The Effects of Relationship Transgressions

Within this section the constructions pertaining to the future effects of relationship transgressions will be explored. As can be seen within the previous analyses of talk relating to infidelity, the meanings given to ‘infidelity’ shift, dependent on the conversational context participants allude to and the ‘purposeful’, functional nature of their talk. This section will examine the differing accounts of the effects of infidelity; again looking at how the consequences of infidelity occurring in relationships and the meanings attached to it, shifted and were contextually dependent during participants’ conversations.

#### 6.4.1. Inevitable Damage

Through examining the language used by participants talking about infidelity, it can be seen that the hegemonic construction of infidelity is as something that will and does cause damage to relationships and the individuals involved. This concept is usually unchallenged by participants, which suggests that it is a common-sense understanding that infidelity is damaging to the self and personal relationships. When asked about the importance of monogamy in relationships, one participant also talked about the effect of infidelity in a relationship:

**Extract:**

- Kate: so how important do you think monogamy is in a relationship or just {you know that}  
Gem: ...I think its essential, I c- it would crush me, absolutely crush me to be with someone who cheated on me (3:1, 510-8)

The participant Gem states that it would “crush” her if a partner cheated on her. This ‘crushing’ is not qualified or elaborated further within the discussions. This talk regarding the consequences of infidelity in terms of the primary partners’ sense of self is presented unproblematically as fact and as inevitable. A lack of further explanation or justification of such feelings, of being ‘crushed’, following infidelity in a relationship, is therefore thought to relate to commonsense understandings of the effects of infidelity – Infidelity in a relationship will damage the primary partner. Participants also talked about the damaging effects of their own relationship transgressions on their primary partner. In the following extract the group have been discussing whether Helen told any of her previous partners about her relationship transgressions:

**Extract:**

- Eve: -you’ve got to think about the damage it might do to them in future relationships  
Helen: well this is it (inaud)  
Eve: look at Craig and how he is (Helen: yeah) with his ex  
Helen: yeah I know yeah  
Eve: he’s got on going effects hasn’t it sometimes I think its much better if they don’t know just for that reason

Helen: yeah but then I think do they are they really going to give a shit now {or would they just want to know out of curiosity like me}  
Eve: {but even like subconsciously} make them non-trusting of the next person (2:1, 263-272)

Within this extract participants can be seen to employ a psychological discourse to construct a distinction between unconscious and conscious behaviour. Within the first part of this dialogue Eve constructs a position of ‘on-going’ effects for when a relationship transgression has occurred within a relationship. These are further positioned as something that could occur consciously or even “subconsciously”. Within this construction, the primary partner is positioned as not having control over the ‘effects’ of infidelity having occurred within their relationship. This construction can be seen as a powerful explanatory device because it constructs the effects of infidelity as being subconscious and therefore out of individual conscious control and mediation. This is a ‘powerful’ discourse because it provides unlimited scope for the damage an individual or relationship may suffer and in turn, unlimited responsibility for this damage placed on the transgressor in the relationship. Further, drawing on the psychological concept of a ‘subconscious’ adds further weight to the discourses’ explanatory power as it could be drawn on to argue that someone has been affected by infidelity in their relationship, regardless of whether they feel they have actually been negatively affected. The construction of unconscious effects of infidelity at this particular point in the conversation can be seen to silence and counter the possible alternative reactions after infidelity, expressed by Helen. These alternative reactions include not caring about a partners’ previous infidelity, “are they really going to give a shit now”, or wanting to know about a partners’ previous behaviour out of curiosity. The discussion continues:

**Extract:**

Helen: I know, this is why I don’t ever bring the question up (Eve: yeah) because I wouldn’t be honest so why would I expect them to be honest so  
Eve: but you’ve been totally honest with Craig now haven’t (Helen: yeah) which means Craig knows how you’ve acted in the past  
Helen: yeah which {is why}  
Eve: which {probably} accounts for  
Helen: which is why he’s so {insecure about it all}

Eve: {as well as being fucked up by his previous girlfriend (Helen: I know) he's fucked up by your previous behaviour (2:1, 273-281)

Where in the former extract the group were talking generally about the effects of confessing to infidelitous behaviour in previous relationships, the talk now moves to a particular account of Helen's previous unfaithful behaviour and the effect this has had on her current partner Craig. Both Eve and Helen collude in positioning Helen, and Craig's previous girlfriend, as responsible for Craig insecurity and for being "fucked up" in his current relationship with Helen. The two previous extracts construct a position of universal reactions and consequences of infidelity, which will occur consciously or subconsciously to the primary partner, seemingly out of their control or regulation and irrespective of individual differences. Again this further substantiates a hegemonic discourse of infidelity as bad and necessarily damaging to relationships.

#### **6.4.2. Secondary Analysis – Inevitable damage**

The purpose of this secondary analysis section is to explore participants' reactions, explorations, expansion and any critiques of the discourse of 'inevitable damage', the primary analysis of which was discussed above. A short discursive analysis of the 'future effects of infidelity' was given back to the participants of group 2 for them to discuss and explore – they met for two further sessions to discuss my initial discursive analysis of their first group discussion. Feeding back this analysis led to further discussions of the effects of infidelity occurring in a relationship and a qualification of how these effects could be mediated by the individuals themselves and their approach to past experiences.

Upon reading the primary analysis, and question prompts, the inevitable damage discourses was initially substantiated by a further example of this having occurred to a friend of the group:

#### **Extract:**

- Flo: I have a friend Marie, my friend Marie in [location] she has a real problem with relationships now and she just cant seem to get herself out of the mine-set, each bloke that she's gone out with has cheated on her at some point right ... but I just think, it seems to me that she cant get over the fact that (.) way back in the past one guy cheated on her
- Eve: yeah but that's like Craig
- Flo: she can't let it go (Ivy: yeah) because she just treats everyone the same {everyone is the same}
- Ivy: {yeah that's just like}
- Eve: {that's just like Craig}(2:2, 1592-1611)

This discussion introduces a further 'real' example of the future effects of having previously experienced infidelity in a relationship. Such (negative) effects of infidelity are constructed as permeating subsequent relationships and essentially having a destructive impact on the individual. Within this exchange the negative effects of infidelity are constructed slightly differently when compared to the primary analysis. Previously, the resulting problems for the individual were seen as a consequence of infidelity's necessary damaging characteristics. Rather, within the extract above, the problem is located within the individual and their failure to "let it go" and "get over the fact that (.) way back in the past one guy cheated on her". The individual carries the effects of past infidelities into future relationships, perhaps as a consequence of infidelity's 'inevitable damage', but also in terms of individual failings to put such experiences behind you. This presents a more agentic failing, "she can't let it go", than the 'subconscious' effects of infidelity previous explored.

#### **6.4.2.1. Kate got it wrong**

By taking back the analysis to the participants, where participants in the group have been positioned in particular ways by my analysis – as managing accountability or blame for example, participants are now explicitly put in a position where they have to negotiate my positioning of them and their previous comments. It is important to note that care was taken to inform participants about 'subject positions' and the style of discourse analysis I employed to interpret their first group discussions, and how they might feel and respond upon seeing their words presented and interpreted. Importantly within the secondary group

discussions participants were at times clearly dismissive of my readings and interpretations (also evidenced and discussed further within this analysis chapter), which hopefully is indicative of the ‘power’ dynamics fostered within the research and participants own comfort levels in disputing and contesting the analysis. Of course, disputing the analysis is also a device that can be seen to function to alleviate or shift certain positionings within the analysis (and also within the group). Within the following extract Eve can be seen to traverse her positioning within the primary analysis, as the main speaker positioning Helen and a previous girlfriend as responsible for Craigs’ insecurity in his current relationship (see former extract above):

**Extract:**

Eve [said in a pitched voice] ‘yes nasty bit nasty Eve who is blaming Helen for absolutely everything’, that’s not exactly what I said I’m afraid, oh it {might be what I said but its in the}...wrong context yes (.) I don’t think I was blaming her I was just pointing out the consequences, I’m not making her responsible (.) I was (.) suggesting {that before you offload yourself} to get rid of your feelings of guilt or salve your...conscience (2:2, 1626-34)

At the beginning of this extract Eve uses a different ‘evil’ voice to acknowledge her positioning as the main speaker allocating ‘blame’ and constructing the ‘inevitable damage’ caused by infidelity. This works as a caricature of her interpretation of this positioning – as someone who is “yes nasty bit nasty”. A criticism of decontextualisation is then levied at the analysis which leads to Eve further elaborate and particularise what she meant, “I don’t think I was blaming her I was just pointing out the consequences”. Within a positional analysis it is not thought that Eve was in reality, within the interpersonal context, blaming Helen, but that was read as a consequence of drawing on that particular relationship narrative of inevitable and unavoidable harm. Eve works to manage this positioning (as the ‘blamer’) by shifting this from ‘blaming’ to a more neutral conceptualisation of highlighting the ‘consequences’ of Helens actions. This helps to manage or remove the interpersonal consequences or possible dispute within the group, whilst simultaneously maintaining the original construction of the harm of disclosure past relationship behaviours to subsequent partners.

#### 6.4.2.2. Consequences for future relationships

The group continued further to explore the consequences for future relationships of disclosing infidelity:

**Extract:**

- Eve: but if you don't [disclosure infidelity and continue with the primary relationship] and you finish things because you've been unfaithful I do not see the point in telling them you've been unfaithful it doesn't gain anything (Flo: no) whatsoever (Flo: I agree) and all its going to do is hurt their feelings and damage them for the future
- Flo: no I agree
- Ivy: yeah
- Eve: then they're going to be querying when, whether, where they feel perfectly {with, happy with the next person (.) 'yeah but I felt like this'}... otherwise they could be thinking 'well I was perfectly happy with her and there weren't no signs and there wasn't again clues and she was doing that behind my back' and that's probably why Craig's so paranoid about Helen because he had no idea while it was happening (2) (2:2, 1684-1701)

In the above extract the participants are discussing accounts to support not telling a previous partner of your infidelity in that past relationship (if that relationship has ended), even if you end(ed) the relationship due to having been unfaithful, it would be better not to disclose the infidelity. Telling an ex-partner (or soon to be ex-partner) about a relationship transgression does not "gain anything whatsoever" rather it is going to "hurt their feelings and damage them for the future". This discussion further reinforces the 'inevitable damage' discourse, discussing past infidelities will damage the individuals involved. This damage is constructed as stemming from the questioning and re-scripting of the past and future relationships, "they're going to be querying when, whether, where they feel perfectly with, happy with the next person". Learning about past infidelitous events leads to an undermining of future relationships and a querying of an individuals relationship perception and essentially an individuals sense of trust in future relationships. This is further supported by introducing Craigs relationship experiences again, knowledge of a girlfriends past infidelity is cited as responsible for him being "so paranoid about Helen", his current girlfriend. Infidelity

maintains some of its ‘inevitable damage’ due to its ability to undermine future relationship experiences.

#### 6.4.2.3. Out of Control

Participants further unpacked the consequences of discoursing ‘inevitable damage’ being caused by infidelity and the lack of individual control to mediate this position – as such effects could occur subconsciously. In the following extract participants are discussing the positive and negative benefits of using this discursive construction:

#### Extract:

- Ivy: ...I think it's positive perhaps talking about it but it's not positive in talking about it in this way (Helen: mm) in the way that she's put it because you know, Eve is kind of saying (.) that it's
- Helen: that it's all been out of his control, his previous girlfriend and my behaviour (Ivy: yeah) that's nothing to do with him, yeah
- Ivy: yeah but it's not, it's 'cos she's kinda missed out on the fact that it's down to him (Helen: yeah) he's the one who can take control and he's the one who can accept that it's in your past and just leave it there (Helen: yeah) but he's not he's letting it get to it (Helen: mm) um he's letting it get to him
- Helen: definitely (2:3, 714-24)

Ivy initially acknowledges that it is a positive to talk about such relationship experiences, but not positive to frame them “in this way”. Responsibility for Craig's feelings and behaviour in his current relationship was located outside of his control and positioned as stemming from his current and previous girlfriends infidelity in former relationships. This lack of control is constructed as unhelpful and not positive. Ivy continues with a counter-discourse, the inevitable damage discourse, by positioning Craig as determining his own behaviour, “it's down to him (Helen: yeah) he's the one who can take control and he's the one who can accept that..”. This draws on a discourse of individual control and self-determination to position Craig as responsible and able to direct his own feelings. This is in contrast to the previous discussions and analysis where Craig was positioned as not having the power to direct his current or future relationship attitudes.

#### 6.4.2.4. Getting in Control

A discourse of control and self-determination reoccurred within the secondary discussions stemming from the inevitable damage discourse. This discourse counters the ‘subconscious’ and inevitable consequences of harm to an individual following infidelity in a previous relationship – where essentially individuals were positioned at the mercy of their past relationship experiences. This was seen above and is further evidence in the following extracts:

##### Extracts:

Flo: you’ve got to put that behind you though haven’t you (.) for your own sake sometimes (2:2 1621-2)

~

Flo: but then that, I don’t mean to be cruel but that’s his problem

Eve: yes I know

Ivy: yeah each person then has to to has to {be ready to deal with} things and and sort it out

Flo: {they’ve got to take responsibility} (2:2, 1726-30)

Within the short extracts presented here, taking back individual agency and control is discoursed as important and necessary for moving past previous relationship experiences. The emphasis now shifts towards an individual’s responsibility to self and an ownership of feelings/reactions to relationship events, “they’ve got to take responsibility”. This counters the previous comments that past experiences of infidelity “will fuck you up” which seemingly presents an inevitability and uncontrollable consequence to an experience. Participants also discussed that it was important to experience such ‘inevitable damage’ as this would facilitate personal growth:

##### Extract:

Ivy: {but} {but it takes that} that that experience away from them {if they}

Eve: {yeah but}

Ivy: because they they can grow from every experience that is thrown {at them (.) every-} (2:2 1657-9)

This came in response to discussions that past infidelities should not be disclosed after a relationship has ended, this is countered above by framing this as a robbing of life experience that could necessarily lead to personal growth. This again places some agentic action in the control of the recipient party, the effects of knowledge of past infidelity does not have to lead to horrible damage, or if it does, the person will still be able to learn something from the experience.

#### **6.4.2.5. Fostering more critical awareness**

Through critiquing the presentation of the ‘future effects of infidelity’ participants also reflected on their own use of such discursive constructions and voiced a need to be more aware and reflective of relationship narratives:

#### **Extract:**

Ivy: yeah (Helen: yeah) um but it, when, when we’re talking about it we need to then, perhaps somebody else needs to (.) kind of listen more in the sense that they can hear what she’s saying but then say it, you know actually point out the fact that they don’t think that it’s, it’s down to him (Helen: yeah) because it doesn’t read like that, it reads that its, the, the lady’s fault and it’s not his fault (Helen: mm mm) but it is his fault because he’s letting people do this to him (Helen: mm) (2:3, 740-46)

This extract came after an acknowledgement from Ivy that how things are said and ‘come across’ might not be the specific meaning intended, this is discussed as perhaps difficult to ascertain without further awareness – “perhaps somebody else needs to (.) kind of listen more”. Ivy points to a more ‘active’ listening to become aware of the assumptions they may present and inadvertently support when they draw on particular relationship discourses. This is directed to the allocation of blame within the primary analysis of the ‘inevitable damage’ discourse, where responsibility for Craig’s current relationship attitude was positioned as beyond his individual control. Ivy acknowledges that their initial discussions do ‘read’ like that, but asserts a need to redirect responsibility to Craig for his feelings and that such assumptions should be “actually point(ed) out” when they draw on and substantiate such positionings during their talk.

### 6.4.3. Primary analysis continued - Right to know

In contrast to the previous constructions of the ongoing and inevitable effects of infidelity in a relationship, is the participants' discussion that partners have a right to know about relationship transgressions. Within the above discussions, such disclosure was constructed as causing 'inevitable damage' to the primary partner, within the following 'right to know' discourse responses to such transgressions are constructed as under the conscious control of the transgressed – they will not necessarily be damaged sub/consciously through such information. Rather, the effects from infidelity occurring in a relationship will vary individually. In the following extract the group have been discussing the pros and cons of telling a partner about a relationship transgression:

#### Extract:

- Ivy: I think that you shouldn't take choice away from them, they should have the choice (Flo: mm) of staying with you (Flo: yeah exactly) or (Flo: yeah) moving on because they don't feel that you're right for them
- Eve: I think it I mean it just comes down to more coarse stuff for me I just feel they've got a right to know that the hole they're putting {their dick in hasn't}
- Flo: {I'd want to know}
- Eve: hasn't had another dick in there a few days before do you know what I mean
- Helen: >she's such a charmer<
- Eve: I know that's what it comes down to basically I know that sounds really coarse (Helen: mm) I just think its unfair that when they're sleeping with you they think you haven't been with anybody else for x amount of months (? : mm) and they don't know (Helen: mm) (2:1, 1292-1304)

This account of relationship confessions is not necessarily in direct tension with the previous discussion of the all-encompassing negative effects of transgressional disclosure. Rather the 'damage' discourse is absent from this discussion, partners are characterised as having agency in terms of what they do after a disclosure, "they should have the choice of staying with you or moving on". Rather than protecting a partner from the knowledge of a relationship transgression, this discussion rests on the premise that partners have a "right to know" about any relationship transgressions. This is in contrast to participants constructing the

expansive damage of knowledge about a partners' relationship transgression and constructs an argument for informed choice, partners should be able to make an informed choice about continuing a personal relationship. This is achieved in the first part of the extract where Ivy constructs the relationship outcome in terms of 'choice', and this being a choice between "staying with" or "moving on". Rather than being explicitly linked with the act of infidelity, it is rather characterised as being a choice in terms of the person being the "right" or 'wrong' person to be with. Drawing on a construction of a "right" person is a powerful explanatory device, often requiring little or no further elaboration when used to justify relationship decisions. This also opens up a space for a less moral judgement of the transgressor, rather they can be framed as just 'not the right person' compared to a horrible individual who has cheated. This device also helps to mediate the damage felt by the transgressed, as it can be lessened by framing the partner as 'not the right person anyway'.

The discussion then moves on to a "coarse" evaluation of the sexual pragmatics of infidelity. Infidelity here is positioned as being synonymous with penis-in-vagina sex, which obviously excludes many other behaviours (sexual/non-sexual) and same-sex sexual infidelities from being considered. Eve constructs a discourse of sexual exclusivity and exclusive "rights" to a persons' body, specifically their "hole(s)". Within the exchange Eve is able to construct a position of 'ownership' of a partners "hole(s)", which confers with it some control and 'management' rights to the partner. They have a right to know who else has had access to their partners' body. This position also places demands on the individual to disclose any 'trespassing'. Such disclosures of intimacy are placed on personal relationships with little further justification, demands which would not necessarily be made of other types of relationships, for example, close friendships. Jackson and Scott (2004) account for these demands of exclusivity in terms of the privilege given to the 'couple' generally in society, and as such the couple relationship is viewed as 'special' and 'exclusive'; and the thing that makes it special 'sex' is only to be engaged in with that special person. As well as 'exclusivity' being positioned as a 'right' within personal relationships, which is implied within the above extract, this discussion could also relate to the assumption of unsafe sexual practices. This exchange could also be read in terms of partners having a right to know if their partner, whom they are possibly having

unsafe sex with, has been having 'risky' sex with someone else. 'Risky' sex here is defined as any sexual practice that increases the risk of sexual transmitted infections. Discussions of safe/unsafe sexual practices are absent from many academic debates surrounding monogamy/non-monogamy (e.g. Jackson and Scott ibid). Which may further obscure the difficulties surrounding negotiations of safe sex within long-term heterosexual relationships and within extra-relationships.

#### 6.4.4. Secondary Analysis – Right to know

Within the secondary group discussions the 'right to know' discourse was drawn on and further particularised to relationship outcomes. This is explored in the following extract:

##### Extract:

- Eve: {if you wanted the thing is if you're with} somebody and you're unfaithful to them (.) and you wanted to stay with them I feel that you would have no choice but to tell them {and that's fine}
- Flo: see I had to do that (Eve: yeah) {and it ruined} our relationship and I'd never do it again
- Eve: well no but, the thing wh- wh- {<but personally I feel} that you don't have any choice in the matter
- Flo: {but I had no choice} I didn't, didn't have a choice
- Eve: if you're unfaithful (.) and you want to try and save your relationship (Flo: yeah) I think you should tell them and be honest {and it might wreck things}
- Ivy: {of course you should, no you should}
- Flo: yeah
- Eve: but if you don't and you finish things because you've been unfaithful I do not see the point in telling them you've been unfaithful it doesn't gain anything (Flo: no) whatsoever (Flo: I agree) and all its going to do is hurt their feelings and damage them for the future
- Flo: no I agree
- Ivy: yeah (2:2, 1672-89)

Within this exchange a 'right to know' about relationship transgressions is limited to continuing relationships, if the transgressor wants to continue with the primary relationship then they would have "no choice but to tell". The onus on disclosure is positioned as the responsibility of the transgressor and dependent on whether

they want to continue or end the primary relationship. If the partner who has transgressed wants to try and continue the primary relationship then disclosure should occur to “be honest”. Here disclosure is contingent on the primary relationship being maintained. This discursive construction also accommodates the ‘inevitable damage’ discourse, where disclosure may “wreck” the primary relationship and where disclosure should not occur if the primary relationship does not continue because then the knowledge of infidelity will “hurt their feelings and damage them for the future”. Within this extract Flo also introduces an ‘experienced’ position, by discussing when she has been in a relationship situation where she has had to disclose a relationship transgression, she states she had no ‘choice’ and that this “ruined” the relationship, she also states she would “never do it again”. In this context Flo stating she would “never do it again” is taken to mean disclosing infidelity in a relationship, Eve accommodates this position by personalising her assertion that you have no choice, “but personally I feel that you don’t have any choice in the matter”. This is a slight paradox in this discursive construction, infidelity is acknowledged as ‘wrecking’ relationships and damaging individuals for the future, which is why it should not be disclosed in relationships that have ended. Yet, in continuing relationships infidelity to should be spoken about, and there is little discussion here of the consequences that this might have in the primary relationship. Telling is constructed as ‘honesty’, and this has concept has previously been discoursed as the cornerstone of personal relationships which perhaps explains the lack of discussion about disclosure in continuing relationships. Within these discussions there is no allowance for not telling about infidelity in a continuing relationship, despite a separate acknowledge that such ‘honesty’ may ruin or wreck relationships.

#### **6.4.5. Primary Analysis Continued - Unburdening guilt**

In contrast to the above ‘coarse’ reasoning, participants also introduce pragmatic reasoning in order to decide whether to tell a partner about a relationship transgression:

**Extract:**

Helen: I think if you're going to do more harm than good then it probably isn't worth unburdening your guilt

Flo: no exactly

Helen: because you're only doing yourself some good (.) by unburdening the guilt I think if you do it you suffer (Flo: yep) you live with the guilt if you're planning on staying with him (2:1, 1279-84)

This 'unburdening guilt' discourse again adds another layer to the decision of whether to tell a partner about a relationship transgression. This construction asserts that if you are going to do more harm than good then you should not tell, especially if this is motivated by a need to 'unburden guilt'. This does open up a space for disclosure of relationship transgressions doing 'good', whilst allowing for the possibility that disclosure may actually "do more harm than good". This a more flexible discourse in terms of outcomes than previously seen within the 'inevitable damage' discourse discussed above. Within the above extract disclosing infidelity is founded on the idea that you would confess to infidelity to "unburden your guilt" rather than to achieve anything else interpersonally. This positions this construction in contrast to the previous 'right to know' discourse. Rather here, if "you do it you suffer" which constructs a position of penance for those who transgress in a relationship.

These three discursive constructions – inevitable harm, right to know and unburdening guilt - allude to the complex decision processes that are involved after a relationship transgression has occurred. They further construct a position of 'dealing with' a transgression as a complex weighing up process and as a damage limitation exercise. The responsibility for the consequences of this decision process lies entirely with the transgressor. The transgressor has to weight up the costs and benefits of telling a partner about a relationship transgression, and take ownership whatever the outcome. The transgressed partner is afforded little agency within these discussions, especially within the 'inevitable harm' discourse, where harm may occur subconsciously to the transgressed and so is beyond their control. This further constructs infidelity and its necessary aftermath as something

that happens to the primary partner, independent of their own interpretations or personalised reactions to the event. Rather the negative consequences from infidelity are presented as universal and unavoidable. Further positioning infidelity as always problematic and undesirable within personal relationships.

### **6.5. Staying in relationships after infidelity**

Within participants discussions it was generally constructed as undesirable to stay in a relationship after infidelity has occurred. Participants characterise themselves as being naïve or ‘idiots’ for staying in relationships after a partner has been unfaithful. Relatedly, naivety was frequently cited by participants for them not expecting infidelity (i.e. expecting lasting monogamy) in a relationship. Participants often cited the parameters of age and inexperience for staying in a relationship after infidelity, which helps to particularise any decision to continue a relationship. In the following extract, participants have been discussing staying in a relationship after infidelity has occurred, and how this is difficult to do if the trust in a relationship has been lost:

#### **Extract:**

- Flo: I think I tried to do that when I was younger but I think having gone through a number of relationships, not like hot dinners obviously [laughter] that um I think you come perhaps, I don't know, just a little bit more confident to walk away (Helen: mm) (Ivy: mm) I think when you're younger, hang in there for dear life {thinking well} this might actually get better
- Ivy: {oh god I did}(2:1, 89-94)

In this exchange, age and having a limited number of relationships are given as justifications for staying in a relationship after infidelity has occurred, or for “hang[ing] in there for dear life”. These parameters are used to construct a position of inexperience and a lack of confidence to “walk away” from relationships that are now constructed as problematic or undesirable. This helps to create a negative loading of staying in a relationship after a partner has transgressed, as this would not occur if the individual had experience or maturity. Further factors affecting the decision to stay in a relationship after infidelity had

occurred are discussed in the following extract, the group are discussing possible reasons why Flo's mother may have stayed in her marriage after infidelity:

**Extract:**

- Flo: ...I'd love to just say to my mum whatever made you stay {and I think my mum never} worked she  
?: {yeah I don't understand that}  
Flo: was quite you know very old fashioned sort of upbringing she never {worked she never}  
Eve: {do you think she was just scared of standing on her own two feet  
Flo: yeah possibly {and she had two kids} and she wouldn't leave us  
Helen: {and she had two kids yeah} (2:1, 555-62)

In this extract, initially there is a lack of understanding and recognition as to why someone (in this case a parent) might stay in a relationship after infidelity. This is followed by a discussion of the possible reasons as to why Flo's mum did stay, such as having "never worked" (taken to mean paid work outside of the home), had an "old fashioned sort of upbringing", as being "scared of standing on her own two feet" and also having two children. This reasoning constructs a position of dependence and a lack of material power, a lack of independence and perhaps also the lack of 'choice' to leave the relationship. This discussion could also be understood in terms of feminist rhetoric, where women have become 'educated' and facilitate their own livelihood as a way of limiting dependence on men, an overarching principle that perhaps informs these 'present day' understandings of a "very old fashioned" set-up. A lack of independence becomes the reasons for necessarily *having* to stay in a relationship; so staying in a relationship after infidelity is constructed as a 'lack' of something, a lack of choice, a lack of independence, a lack of experience etc. Therefore if something were not lacking within the individual or the individuals circumstances, then they would not choose to stay in the relationship. Within both the previous extracts infidelity is constructed as marring the primary relationship and as such staying in a relationship after infidelity has occurred has to be justified and be accounted for. Infidelity is constructed as something individuals should have the confidence to walk away from, rather than something to be worked through. This is in contrast to discourses of ending relationships after infidelity, as ending a relationship after

infidelity has occurred does not need to be accounted for and rather is taken as necessarily occurring and as expected.

The above extract also incorporates a common device used across the group discussion and individual interviews, when talking about relationship practices participants would contrast ‘today’s’ relationship practices with those occurring in either their parent’s or grandparent’s generation, as seen above and shown within the following extract from an individual interview:

**Extract:**

Mel: ...really difficult stuff but they hung together through it [talking of her grandparents relationship] and that’s what you did in those days (Kate: yeah) you stuck together you bloody stuck together and that worked out well for them...and she used to think it was terrible that young people have no staying power and its so different, it’s not, it’s a different sort of staying power (Kate: yeah) isn’t it, because you stick to yourself more (Kate: yeah) and is that good or bad I don’t know

Kate: I don’t know, its just different (Mel: yeah) culture isn’t it, is a different way of doing (Mel: mm) relationships. (Mel, 859-870)

Such a historical reflection device works to illuminate and construct relationship practices and relationship contexts as changing over time. In the above extract this device helps to locate a particular practice to a particular historical circumstance, rather than an individual relationship style or approach. In days gone by “you stuck together you bloody stuck together” and continued with relationships regardless of ‘difficult’ stuff. This approach has now shifted to a more individualised prioritising of self over relationships, and hence perhaps not working so hard at relationships but rather “stick to yourself more”. These are constructed as different types of “staying power”, which avoids any negative evaluation of either of these positionings. This discussion is in contrast to the former extract where a similar concept of staying power was implicitly discussed, but where hanging onto a relationship was given a more negative loading. The latter extract constructing this as part of a general relationship ethos, and the former extract positioning this in terms of individual circumstances and an individuals’ mentality.

## 6.6. Conclusions

This chapter has focused on presenting the discursive analysis of group discussions, including data gathered from the ‘primary’ stage group discussion, where participants gathered for the first time as part of this project to discuss their experiences and views on infidelity and monogamy in relationships. This chapter has also included analysis of the data gathered from the ‘secondary’ group discussions, where participants met for a second time and were presented with my initial discursive analysis of their first group meeting – with the aim of exploring ‘discourse analysis in action’ (see chapter 3). This chapter began with a discussion of discourses of monogamy, where, similarly to the analysis of the individual interviews presented in chapter 4, participants constructed and positioned monogamy as the defining feature of personal relationships, where a personal relationship would not be seen *as a relationship* if it were not monogamous. Monogamy therefore retained its hegemonic status to define relationships as relationships, and this positioning was often not explored or unpacked further by participants, rather accepting it as a ‘commonsense’ norm of how personal relationships are organised. Participants draw on a romantic discourse in their limited exploration as to why monogamy was important; this was achieved by placing importance on being ‘the only one’ within a relationship and were, again, monogamy was constructed as being synonymous with ‘trust’ in a relationship. There was very few particularisations here of monogamy to specific relationship contexts, as was seen more in the individual interviews. Perhaps this was a consequence of participants within the individual interviews orientating their comments to me specifically, where I would have an ‘unknown’ opinion or practice of monogamy within relationships and where within the group discussions, they were all friends, and hence familiar in part with each of their relationship stances in terms of the adherence to monogamy in their relationships. There was a further interesting feature of the discourses of monogamy examined in this chapter, where participants were seen to simultaneously substantiate and undermine monogamy’s ‘commonsense’ place within relationships, monogamy being constructed as the point of personal relationships, and if you do not want to be monogamous then you do not want to be in a relationship; while also

problematise such commonsense norms as not in line with their own relationship realities. This discussion perhaps further highlighted how invested, and embedded, norms of monogamy are in commonsense constructions of personal relationships and how pervasive cultural messages of fidelity are. Although monogamy was positioned as a hegemonic construction organising personal relationships, there were subtle variations in how participants constructed and attended to discourses of monogamy and romantic love narratives throughout the group discussions. Therefore again it becomes important to unpack and interrogate such normalised constructions, participants do orientate to commonsense understandings of relationships, but these are also discursively re-worked by participants and varyingly constructed around their own lived relationship experiences.

This chapter then moved onto examine the discursive constructions of infidelity within the group discussion data. Participants constructed infidelity with considerable variation and used a variety of terms and definitions when exploring the phenomenon. There were seen to be subtle conceptual differences between the different terms used, for example, in the constructed difference between ‘cheating’ and ‘infidelity’ in a relationship. These different terms were variably used and were seen to afford different subject positions to those ‘cheating’ or being ‘unfaithful’, having differing implications for negotiating blame and accountability for one’s actions. There was not the same reliance on ‘sex’ within definitions of infidelity within the group discussions, in contrast to the exploration of sex as an important signifier of infidelity within the individual interviews. Constructions of infidelity within the group discussions were seen to be mediated by participants’ invocation of ‘intent’, ‘impulses’ and ‘complacency’, these constructions also being used to mediate the severity of the interpersonal consequences after infidelity had occurred in a relationship. Infidelity again maintained its ‘damaging’ potential within personal relationships, where infidelity at times was constructed as punishable by death, which also further worked to substantiate the importance of monogamy in relationships. The effect of relationship transgressions was discoursed at times as causing inevitable damage to both the primary relationship and individuals involved, the hegemonic construction of infidelity was as something that will and does cause damage.

Also discussed in this chapter were the mediating devices used by participants to negotiate 'cheater' positionings when discussing their own infidelity in personal relationships. For example, using a complicating discourse of 'not cut and dried' to present variation and ambiguity in terms of relationship transgressions occurring in relationships, further presenting conflict and indecision to complicate issues of blame and accountability for infidelity. Participants also drew on extreme characterisations of their own personality, in terms of being 'really bad' and 'terrible people' for having cheated in a relationship. This was seen to pre-empt any criticism of their behaviour by other group members and also used to disperse any tension within the group discussion as they presented themselves as personally accountable and wrong. Further, this also worked to maintain infidelity as inherent bad within relationships and morally loaded in terms of the subject position of the 'cheater'.

The secondary component of the group discussion methodology was seen as very useful and as important in further exploring the discursive constructions presented by participants. For example, the analysis of the secondary discussion on the 'inevitable damage' caused by infidelity enabled a fuller exploration of this discourse and presented a further expansion of how participants variably negotiated the consequences of infidelity for a relationship and the individuals involved. Rather than the negative effects of infidelity being a feature of infidelity itself (seen within the primary analysis), participants constructed the consequences as being mediated by the individuals themselves and their approach to relationships and past experiences. Participants were clearly able to negotiate essentially my positioning of them within the primary analysis, there were points of dismissal, dispute and contestation which as well as added to the discourse analysis present, was also brilliant for disputing 'power' within the research process and any possible 'expert' positionings of the researcher. The analysis of the group discussions continues within the following chapter, where move from discourses of infidelity and monogamy to considered further discourses presented within the discussions – chapter 7 exploring constructions of relationships break-ups, and chapter 8 exploring more general relationships discourses.

# 7

## Analysis

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### **7.1. Introduction - Group Analysis – Part 2 – Break ups**

Within the group discussions participants were given questions to prompt their discussions of monogamy and infidelity in relationships. As well as participants discussing these topics, there were also discussions related to relationship break-ups. The group discussions were essentially participant led, and very lightly moderated where I would introduce new questions when discussions had finished on one topic, but as such, participants were free to introduce and discuss topics that they saw as relevant. Although not part of the original aim of this thesis, the discussion now moves onto examine the construction of relationship break ups, this chapter aims to analyse the ways in which the participants within the group discussions related break-up experiences and how participants generally conceptualised break-ups. Chapter 8 then moves onto discuss more general relationship discourses included within the group discussions. It is hoped that by broadening out the focus at this stage, it will further contextualise the previous discussion of discourses related to ‘monogamy’ and ‘infidelity’ in relationships and be seen to add to the breadth and depth of this discourse analytical study.

Within this analysis the subject positions afforded by the different discursive constructions are explored. In line with aims of study two of this thesis, part of the initial primary analysis was given back to the participants for their comments and critical reflection, this section also incorporates some secondary analysis of those group discussions.

## 7.2. Getting shot, dumping and hell

In talking about their break-up experiences, participants drew on different discourses in conceptualising these experiences. Within the following extract, two discursive constructions are present which invoke slightly different subject positionings:

### Extract:

- Gem: I went out with a girl called Maxine and I broke up with her, how did I break up with Maxine, I just, I don't know {she pissed me off}
- Gwen: {she hated,} no you hated her towards the end
- Gem: yeah I just got shot, she was just annoying um but I don't really class that anymore, I don't really think about that (.) but Stephen
- Gwen: Stephen you didn't give a shit about because you dumped him and then went out with him and then dumped him again {a couple of days later}
- Gem: {I dumped him via I dumped him} via text message [laughing] for me, I know its very very very juvenile but to be dumped you have to say (.) 'I can't do this anymore' or like, like something serious that's a blatant dump (3:1, 629-39)

At the beginning of this exchange Gem is discussing a break-up experience where she "broke up" with a girl. Gem then relates how she ended the relationship "I just got shot, she was just annoying". The use of the word "just" several times in this discussion helps to construct commonplace, insignificant behaviour and event. These 'justs' present Gems behaviour as easily related and understandable. Further using a shooting analogy constructs the actual break-up event as quick and easy on Gems part, constructing little break-up 'process' or consideration. An easy 'pulling of the trigger' to end the relationship, this is further substantiated by Gems comments "but I don't really class that anymore, I don't really think about that". A 'getting shot' discourse, a phrase also used to denote getting rid of something, enables a construction of an inconsequential experience, which Gem no longer thinks about or classes as a 'real' break-up. Its interesting to note that although this getting shot discourse is employed to denote a quick and easy break-up on Gems part (being the active party doing the shooting) the connotations of 'being shot' could be construed as more consequential and painful. The discussion then moves to Gem relating a second break-up experience and this is positioned as

different to the experience previous discussed. Gwen relates the experience as repeated ‘dumping’ which is constructed as being symptomatic of Gem not ‘giving a shit’ about the partner. The discourse of ‘dumping’ characterises the ending of a relationship as a one-sided process, one person is positioned as ‘active’ and does the ‘dumping’ and one person is positioned as ‘passive’ and gets ‘dumped’. This discourse constructs ending a relationship as like getting rid of rubbish, so it might be construed as a positive step for the ‘dumper’ to remove rubbish from their life. In contrast, the ‘dumped’ is therefore constructed as ‘rubbish’ and no longer serving a useful purpose for the other person. The dumping here utilised technology, Gem reports ending the relationship via text message, which prompts laughter within the group. It could be argued that the use of mobile phones has altered interpersonal communication and such technology has facilitated different forms of relationship events and hence relationship break-ups. Within this example it further supports the ‘dumping’ construction as a one-sided process and communication, rather than something that required interpersonal negotiation or discussion.

Gem moves onto explore a “very very very juvenile” position regarding relationship endings and discusses how the interpersonal communication needs to contain a “blatant dump”. This position perhaps manages and supports Gems usage of a text message to end the relationship, as this medium could be utilised to present a clear and unambiguous communication to end a relationship. Gem further draws on a clichéd conceptualisation of break-up language to convey a ‘blatant dump’, someone, for example, has to say “I can’t do this anymore”. This presents a hegemonic script for relationship break-ups, drawing on a particular phrase as emblematic of relationship-ending language and removing it from a specific interpersonal context. This ‘clichéd’ language cited by Gem was also evident in a different discussion and utilised quite differently:

**Extract:**

Flo: it was the hardest thing I’ve done and just because he he what had happened was he was living (inaud) about and I in the meantime you get your own little life together don’t you (Helen: yeah) and um he said right one night he rung me up ...and he said right if you don’t let me move back in I’m leaving X ultimatum so I was like fucking hell didn’t know what to do with myself (Helen: yeah) I

thought I can't have that so I let him move back in and my mate at the time said I'll give it a week, literally a week and up, I was like I can't I can't do it anymore and I went through hell and I had to just had to cut him off (Helen: mm) because if I kept seeing him I would, he would just get in my life again because I still loved him (2:1, 1209-19)

In this extract Flo is relating a break-up experience that is constructed as the “hardest thing” she has done in her life. In contrast to the finite, swift ‘dumping’ discussed above, within the extract above the relationship ending is constructed quite differently in terms of a difficult process, requiring work and effort on Flo’s part. Constructing this break-up as the ‘hardest thing’ gives weight to the relationship decisions discussed by Flo’s and positions these, and the process of ending the relationship, as something that was not taken ‘lightly’ or indeed experienced ‘lightly’ by Flo. Thus helping to position Flo as a considered moral actor in terms of her role within the interpersonal event. Further within this extract Flo introduces an external commentary about the previous relationship situation, a friend stating she would give the relationship “a week”. This intersection of external opinion works here to set up the conclusion of the relationship as expected and as seen as inevitable from an outside perspective and “literally a week” Flo ended the relationship. Here, the ‘clichéd’ language, as introduced above, is echoed by Flo “I was like I can’t I can’t do it anymore”. Within the former extract the phrase ‘I can’t do this anymore’ was used to exemplify a break-up cliché, but within the above extract we see this same phrase used in situ. Within the first discussion, this hegemonic script was used devoid of any ‘personalised’ meaning and rather used as signifying relationship break-up language, the second usage is juxtaposed here to show the same phrase used within a discussion of a break-up experience. Similarly ‘I can’t do this anymore’ is used here to signify the ending of the relationship and further shows that this phrase carries explanatory ‘weight’ when discussing decisions to end relationships. Flo further states that she “went through hell” upon ending the relationship, which is given little expansion and further substantiates Flo’s earlier construction of this event as the ‘hardest’ thing she has had to do. Break-ups as necessarily hard and like ‘hell’ was a common discursive construction drawn on by participants and often required little justification or mediation by participants,

indicating that it is also a hegemonic, taken for granted representation of break-up experiences.

Interestingly, it is also important to note here that the position of ‘dumper’ is constructed as painful and an as conflicted subject position. This is explained by Flo having to take the lead within the break-up and necessarily being hard and firm with herself in terms of maintaining the decision to end the relationship, “I had to just had to cut him off (Helen: mm) because if I kept seeing him I would, he would just get in my life again because I still loved him”. This is quite a different construction of the subject position of ‘dumper’ in relation to the ‘getting shot’ and ‘dumper’ explored previously above. This presents the decision to end a relationship, and to stick to that decision, as personally problematic and difficult, and as needing personal strength and determination to see it through.

### 7.3. Being dumped, hell and death discourses

In contrast to the ‘dumping’ experiences explored above, participants also discussed their experience of being ‘dumped’. Within the following extract Kay relates a break-up experience where her partner ended the relationship:

#### Extract

- Kay: ...anyway um you know to begin with it was absolutely fantastic and then to the last sort of (.) I don't know three months or so it was just a bit crap and we'd argue and then um and then he finished with me (.) over the phone which (.) >I didn't particularly like< and I was... I was absolutely devastated (Gem: >I remember<) I mean I didn't go (Kate: mm) I didn't {I stayed in my room} and I cried, I like, to me it was like
- Gem: {and you was in a mess}
- Kay: my whole life was over and couldn't think about anything but that and it was just like an empty feeling in my stomach it was just (.) crap, really really horrible
- Gem: >hell mess<
- Kay: but then I met someone else and he's absolutely gorgeous so
- Gem: [laughs] all happy again (.) all happy again
- Gwen: that does happen though {I}
- Kay: {they} they say it's a bit like they say it's like losing someone like a death don't they (Kate: mm) that its that bad that's what they say

it's (.) can be like, and it was I was just a complete {mess}... I felt sick (3:1, 652-76)

Within this exchange, Kay constructs quite an emotive, embodied account of having her relationship end. Kay states she was “absolutely devastated” through the relationship ending, which is evidenced by not going out, staying in her room and crying. This devastation and “mess” is further confirmed by Gem and a discourse of break-up ‘hell’ is again drawn on. Kay discusses that her “whole life was over” and constructs a strong, embodied reaction to this break-up experience, stating that she could not think about anything else and this experience being “like an empty feeling” in her stomach and later commenting that she “felt sick”. This discussion quite clearly constructs a negative discourse of relationship break-ups and a negative subject position for the ‘dumped’ in this instance. This negative subject position is partly mediated by Kay’s introduction of a new partner who is “absolutely gorgeous”. This perhaps manages this uncomfortable subject position within the immediate interpersonal context and alleviates any possible ‘tension’ felt whilst relating this “horrible” experience - which may be evidenced by Gem’s laughter and comments. Kay’s commentary of the experience then moves to a more general exploration of the ‘pain’ of relationship break-up, drawing on a ‘death’ discourse to conceptualise one’s reaction to a relationship ending. This discourse was previously discussed within the individual analysis section, where participants were also seen to draw on this discourse. Kay draws on an external ‘they’ to introduce a construction of death and grief following a relationship break-up, “they say it’s like losing someone like a death don’t they”. Drawing on an external referent helps to add credibility to the comments whilst resisting any specific ‘ownership’ of the construction. This death simile helps to substantiate and warrant Kay’s earlier comments about the pain and devastation felt after her relationship ending and further helps justify her strong emotive positioning and things being “that bad”. Interestingly a relationship break-up is constructed as being ‘like’ death, rather than specifically being positioned as a death, i.e., the death of a relationship.

### **7.3.1. I wouldn't be dumped again for all the fucking money in the world**

In line with the above discussion of the 'pain' of being dumped and the ending of a primary relationship, is the construction of the undesirability and avoidance of being "dumped":

#### **Extract:**

- Gem: ...I wouldn't be dumped again for all the fucking money in the world
- Gwen: you wouldn't be dumped
- Gem: no:: If I get the first whiff, if I ever get a boyfriend again and I get the first whiff that like (.) he might {I'd get shot of him}
- Gwen: {you'd dump him first?}
- Gem: yeah I'm not fucking coping with any of that shit, first argument, I said this to you, first argument I have with a boy and he's off {I just cant be arsed..} (3:1,717-723)

This extract highlights the negative loading of the subject position of "dumped", Gem stating that if she gets "the first whiff" that a partner might finish the relationship, she would "get shot of him". Gem "wouldn't be dumped again for all the fucking money in the world", constructing a negative subject position and negative subjectivity following being dumped which should be avoided at all costs. Here a difference is constructed in terms being "dumped" and ending a relationship yourself, the former entailing more "shit" than the latter. The consequences for individual subjectivity, in terms of getting over a relationship break-up, following being dumped or being the dumper, is discussed further in the following analysis of a 'line drawn underneath' discourse.

### **7.4. Line Drawn Underneath**

Within both the analyses of the two extracts previously presented, a common element constructed has been the 'pain' felt through experiencing a relationship break-up, both as the person instigating the break-up and as the person being broken up with. Present within these analyses is the construction of having to 'work through' and overcome the resulting anguish or devastation. This 'process' following a relationship break-up can be compared to the othered position of

closure and being able to immediately 'move on' after a relationship has ended. Upon my introduction of the topic of relationship break-ups within a group discussion, one initial response was the positioning of a group member as 'weird' and having an unusual response to relationship break-ups:

**Extract:**

Eve: Helen's weird on that aren't you  
Helen: weird one↑  
Eve: well in the, in the you're the only person I know places no property at all whatever in an ex you know what I mean  
Flo: what do you {mean by that}  
Kate: {what do you} mean yeah  
Eve: well you know the issues that Sophie has with like you know like she's ever been interested in anybody nobody's allowed to go near them (Helen: yeah) even if she's interested and nothing ever happened or whatever you've said quite frequently that when you break up with someone  
Helen: that is it  
Flo: {that's it}  
Eve: {that's it}  
Helen: absolutely  
Eve: it's just literally a line drawn underneath and you wouldn't care if they if a friend shagged them two days later (2:1, 995-1019)

At the beginning of this exchange Helen is immediately positioned as being "weird" in her approach to relationship break-ups. This 'weird' approach is initially discussed as placing "no property at all whatever in an ex". Eve is asked to clarify what she means here and presents an example of another person Sophie and her 'possession' of people she has had a relationship with or has been interested in. It is therefore Helens lack of jealousy or possession after a relationship that is constructed as 'weird' and as an 'other' approach to relationship break-ups. This discourse, positioned as Helens approach, is constructed as "that's it", "literally a line drawn underneath". Further, 'drawing a line' after a relationship has ended constructs a position of finalisation and closure after a relationship break-up. Stating that Helen "places no property...in an ex" helps to construct material manifestations of such an approach, for example, not caring if a "friend shagged them two days later". I think this discourse ties in with a psychological/therapeutic discourse of 'personal baggage' that may usually accompany people in their life and into their relationships. A lack of baggage is

constructed as weird, atypical and therefore not the normal way of experiencing a relationship break-up. This discourse utilises an extreme case formulation (Edwards 2000) of moving on after a relationship, of personal closure, “that’s it...absolutely”. Carrying no baggage around (i.e. ‘property in an ex’) is othered and positioned as different to normal break-up patterns. This extreme case formulation further helps to substantiate a ‘baggage’ or non-closure approach to relationship break-ups as typically the norm. The group later discuss whether getting over a relationship break-up, for example utilising the ‘line drawn position’, is related to being the person who instigated the break up i.e. the ‘dumper’:

### **Extract**

Discussing the same relationship ending as above:

- Helen: ...didn’t bat an, the only thing I did think oh yeah (Flo laughs) did you have anything going on before (Flo laughs) because I was quite happy to be broken up it was I was just like
- Flo: do you think that’s the difference though because you’ve instigated the break-ups
- Helen: maybe (2:1, 1017-22)

Helen has been discussing how she did not react when her previous partner began relationships after their primary relationship had ended. In the extract above, Helen relates that the only thing she did think about was whether her partner had begun relationships with other people before their primary relationship had ended. Here this possible ‘infidelity’ is laughed off, and minimal concern is constructed about this – this contrasts to how knowledge about infidelity occurring in a relationship has been previously explored as causing ‘inevitable damage’ to those involved. Helen states how she was “quite happy to be broken up”, Flo then works to particularise this ‘happiness’ after a break-up as being mediated by having instigated a relationship break-up. “Do you think that’s the difference though because you’ve instigated the break-ups”, Helens subject position as ‘dumper’ is used to account for a position of closure after a relationship has ended, also accommodating her position within the ‘line drawn underneath’ discourse.

Interesting, this ‘closure’ or being ‘ok’ after a relationship break-up was similarly accounted for by a position of being ‘dumped’:

**Extract:**

Kay: ...like I mean I was just like ok that's it then and I haven't spoken to him since

Gem: but that's because he broke up with you I think (3:1 709-711)

As we see in the latter extract, the opposite positioning is implied. Here, it is being dumped that is positioned as responsible for a person having closure after a relationship break-up, "I was just like that's it then and I haven't spoken to him since". The introduction of this second short extract here shows the rhetorical use of discourses and the subject positionings they imply. Within these two extracts, the positions of 'dumped' and 'dumper' are both employed to explain the same consequence of having closure after a relationship ends. Having a relationship end or choosing to end a relationship are both constructed as acceptable discourses for having closure after a relationship. The juxtaposition of this two extracts here helps to show the flexible workings of relationship discourses and how discourses are employed interchangeably by participants to achieve particular accounting practices.

## **7.5. Heart-broken, loved & lost**

As previously acknowledged, the language used to talk about relationship break-ups is at times often quite emotive. This can be seen in the usage of the phrase "heart broken" to denote a relationship break-up.

**Extract**

The participants have been discussing relationship break-ups:

Helen: I've never had a hard break-up

Flo: I've had loads [laughs]

Helen: I've never, I've never had my heart broken at all which is why I think the thought of not being with Craig fills me with such dread because if we split then I'm going to have my heart broken-

- Eve: -see that's what I'm scared of but in advance of the relationship, you're scared of it now while you're in it and I'm scared {[inaud] because I've never been hurt either}
- Helen: {yeah but I'd rather be in [inaud] than not}
- Eve: and I'm also feeling like I'm waiting for the other boot to drop (? : yeah) I also feel like god it's my turn next oh in that case I just wont bother, do you know what I mean
- Helen: yeah but they say it's better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all don't they (2:1 1087-1100)

At the beginning of this extract Helen introduces that she has never had a “hard break-up” which is then constructed as synonymous with having ones “heart broken”. Drawing on a hegemonic discourse of ‘heart break’ constructs an emotive, embodied construction of relationship break-ups, break-ups are something that will cause bodily harm to a vital organ. Within this exchange the inevitability of having ones heart broken is substantiated, Helen states “if we split then I’m going to have my heart broken”. This is something that is constructed as something that happens to you, rather than something that is within your own control. Helen is positioned as having no choice in this if she splits up with Craig, she will have her heart broken. This discursive construction is therefore presented as both descriptive and prescriptive of future behaviour and feelings. This discursive construction of relationship break-ups raises questions in terms of the individual agency it allows, or rather the lack of presented agency within significant or hard relationship break-ups. Day et al (2003) explore how conventional norms and practices encompassing heterosexual relationships often present a ‘compromised’ position in terms of womens’ agency. In this way, it could seen that the prescriptive or pre-scripted nature of relationship break-up experiences and feelings signifies a loss of or restricted agency in terms of the subject positions afforded.

This ‘heart break’ discourse is then positioned as rationale for Eve not entering into relationships, “oh in that case I just wont bother”. Heart break is constructed as suitably ‘scary’ to warrant avoiding relationships and for anticipating hurt when a relationship ends, “I’m waiting for the other boot to drop...I also feel like god it’s my turn next”. Therefore break-ups are constructed as being characterised by a lack of control and experiences of inevitable pain, fear of which is given as a reason for not entering into relationships. To counter this

construction, or rather to accommodate and justify the ‘pain’ of relationship break-ups, a “loved and lost” discourse is drawn on. The phrase ‘better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all’ carries its literal meaning and is thought to originate from the Tennyson Poem ‘In Memoriam’ (1870). Drawing on a ‘loved and lost’ discourse in this exchange creates a space for the validity, and desirability, of a painful break-up – necessarily having your heart broken – within a dominant construction of the ‘power of love’. This loved and lost discourse works to put a more positive spin on break-ups, it is worthwhile if they are hard and that it is better to have gone through the process than to have not – constructing the importance of experiencing love regardless of the personal outcome. This discourse provides validity for break-ups being hard and necessitating having ones ‘heart broken’, as the discourse functions to normalise having ones heart broken and feeling hurt because it is interwoven with the idea that that implies a powerful and worthwhile love relationship – it is better to have loved than not to have loved at all. This discourse also works to link love with pain and that that is by implication something to aspire to, because pain, heart break, signifies a worth while live experience (which is explored further subsequently). The ‘loved and lost’ discourse works as a very powerful explanatory device as it justifies feeling horrible, heartbroken, after a relationship ends and makes such emotions worthwhile within a romantic love narrative. Thus a loved and lost construction is able to counter the pain and futility of relationship break-ups.

#### **7.5.1. Secondary analysis – loved & lost**

An unforeseen event occurred between group twos’ initial discussion and the subsequent two further group meetings to discuss my primary analysis, Helen and Craig’s personal relationship did ‘end’. The discussions which occurred in light of this event, and reading through the primary analysis, enabled considerable reflection on these conceptualisations of relationship break-ups. Helen and all the participants were at all times given the opportunity of withdrawing from the research, they were also repeatedly given the option of not discussing any part of the analysis or their own experience. All the participants did continue with the

second stage of the research. Helen spent time within the discussions reflecting on her positioning within the above discussion of ‘heartbreak’ and ‘loved and lost’ discourses:

**Extract:**

Helen: per::, I still think that, definitely, like Craig is saying, oh the past two and a half years are a waste, of course they’re not, you know, this is a very (.) beneficial relationship for me, it’s taught me all kinds of things, and if nothing else it has taught me, as it says here [reading] ‘this highlights the desirability for such a powerful and romantic love’ (.) I’m able to switch off, on (.) I’m trying really hard to switch off emotionally ... so you’ve got to think well is it, was it really that powerful and romantic? Was I just caught up in the whole thing? This is kind of what I’m thinking to myself anyway (.) >who knows< (Ivy: hm::) but as I said I hope a few weeks down the line it doesn’t all come on top of me and I go (.) [Ivy laughs lightly] because I don’t want, I’ve said here that I’ve never had my heart broken and I know that he’s having his broken at the moment but mine’s still intact (.) and I think that’s because I’m in control, I’m not (.) of course I’m upset, but I’m not heartbroken, I’m not devastated to the point where my like’s going to pot, I’m thinking of the future and I’m getting on with stuff and (.) I’m trying to pick up the pieces (2:3, 381-98)

This extract begins with Helen confirming that her views have not changed, “I still think that definitely” and goes on to introduce a learning discourse which helps to frame her now past relationship as a worthwhile experience – in line with Helen’s previous utilisation of a ‘loved and lost’ discourse. This is discussed as in tension with her partner Craig’s reading of their relationship as having been a “waste” of time. A learning discourse is drawn on to construct the relationship, and relationship break-up, as a beneficial learning experience, “this is a very (.) beneficial relationship for me, it’s taught me all kinds of things”. This helps to combat Craig’s positioning, and offer some comfort, a learning and ‘self-growth’ offers a more positive reading of the past two and a half years for Craig and Helen to draw on. A learning discourse is also used to show that Helen has ‘grown’ since the last discussion, because she has been taught things from the experience and has gained a different perspective in terms of the romantic love discourse explored previously. In contrast to the primary discussion analysis, where Helen and Eves heartbreak following a relationship break-up was constructed as inevitable and

beyond their control, Helen presents that the break-up experience with Craig has taught her that she is able to “switch off” from a “powerful and romantic love” discourse. Helen moves on to construct differences in terms of ‘reality’ of situations and ‘experiences’, “was it really that powerful and romantic? Was I just caught up in the whole thing?” This discussion helps to question Helens ‘real’ experience of ‘love’ and ‘romance’ in her relationship, her construction here of being ‘caught up’ in romance would also constitute part of a romantic love narrative. Interestingly this does allow Helen some present distance from this romantic love discourse, as this perhaps was not the ‘reality’ of Helens experience, but rather she was previously being carried away within a romantic love discourse.

In line with the ‘inevitable heartbreak’ discussed within the primary analysis, Helen explores her current feelings in terms of heartbreak following her relationship ending. Helen states a difference between how her partner and herself are experiencing the break-up, “I know that he’s having his broken at the moment but mine’s still intact”. A distinction between the positions of dumped and dumper is then drawn on to explain this differences, Helen is “in control” and not heartbroken or devastated. This is inline with a previous discussion, exploring the different rhetorical effects gained from positioning relationship ‘closure’ or coping as related to the positions of dumper or dumped. This in part works here to account for Helens previous position with the primary analysis as having her heart broken if her relationship with Craig ended. Helens ‘control’ of this situation is used to out-sway the ‘lack of control’ inherent within the discourses examined within the primary analysis, Helen is in control and “thinking of the future” and “getting on with stuff”.

The participants further commented on the ‘loved and lost’ discourse examined within the primary analysis, within the secondary discussions this discourse was both validated and disputed by participants. In terms of validating this discourse, participants drew further on a learning paradigm to interpret this discursive construction:

**Extract:**

Ivy: I think its better, well it’s always better to have, have an experience  
(Flo: yeah) if you need to have it

Flo: I, I agree  
 Ivy: whether it's love or hate {or um a death or}  
 Eve: {well its all very well telling yourself its better to have loved and lost but that's not going to make you feel any better when you've just broken up with somebody  
 Ivy: its not but {[inaud] no}  
 Flo: {nothing (.) makes you f-} (2:1, 1341-9)

Drawing on a discourse of learning and personal growth validates the previous usage of the discourse of 'loved and lost', Ivy stating that "it's always better to have, have an experience". This is expanded beyond learning from relationship break-ups to be a more inclusive and general conceptualisation – "whether it's love or hate or um a death", any experience becomes worthwhile in terms of offering a learning experience. This discourse is then undermined by Eve utilising a 'realistic' rhetoric, which disputes the 'comfort' obtained from characterising break-ups as worthwhile learning experiences. Eve undermines the benefit of constructing relationship break-ups in this way by drawing on the 'reality' of break-up experiences, which is further substantiate by the group, as "nothing makes you f-"eel better "when you've just broken up with somebody". Despite this rejection in the extract above of the 'loved and lost' discourse in terms of learning from 'love' experiences, at other points in the secondary discussions this conceptualisation was validated further:

#### **Extract:**

Helen: ... I definitely think it's better to have loved and lost, definitely, you have, its much better to  
 Ivy: you learn things about yourself  
 Helen: yeah definitely  
 Ivy: based on your relationship though and each one teaches you something that, you then, shows you something a bit more about yourself (Helen: yeah) (3:3, 411-6)

Again within this short extract the loved and lost discourse is substantiated by drawing on a learning discourse, in having relationships and relationship break-ups (loving and losing) "you learn about yourself". This utilises a common discourse of self-growth and self-improvement – a psychological/therapeutic discourse – to provide a positive subject position within the 'painful' heartbreak discourse.

## 7.6. Primary analysis - Desirability of love/heartache

Similarly to the ‘loved and lost’ discussion presented above, a romantic love narrative was further drawn on when participants constructed the desirability of strong romantic connections, and the heartache that may follow:

### Extract

Helen has been talking about her present relationship:

- Helen: ...I’m sure we would cope if we split up but I don’t think {either of us feel [inaud]}
- Eve: {which is funny because a year a go} I distinctly remember you telling me for half an hour that if Craig ever died you would have to kill yourself {because you couldn’t live without him}
- Helen: {oh I would ah ah I couldn’t} I couldn’t {if he died}
- Flo: {I would just love to feel that way} about anybody but I just don’t I really don’t (2:1 624-631)

In contrast to the previous exploration of the dread of having one’s heartbroken after the ending of a significant relationship, the exchange within the above extract highlights the desirability of a powerful, romantic love discourse. This extract begins with Helen stating that she is sure her and her partner would cope if their relationship ended, Eve then promptly reminds Helen of a previous conversation where Helen told Eve “for half an hour that if Craig ever died” she would have to kill herself because Helen “couldn’t live without him”. This revelation shifts the discussion in the group, but also implicitly challenges Helen’s initial presentation of ‘coping’ after a relationship has ended. Helen then confirms that she would not be able to cope with her partners death, “Oh I would ah ah I couldn’t I couldn’t if he died”. Both Eve and Helen draw on a dominant construction of romantic love, what I think of as ‘Romeo and Juliet syndrome’, a hegemonic discourse constructing a romantic love trajectory of certain death after a partner dies. The strength of this emotional reaction – being Juliet – also works to construct her present relationship as embodying a powerful romantic love. This dominant construction of romantic love, necessitating death, is constructed as highly desirable, Flo comments “I would just love to feel that way about anybody

but I just don't". Group members emulate this strength of feeling, embodied by a Romeo and Juliet narrative, even though it is explicitly linked to death and dying after a love relationship has been cut short. This brief extract highlights one dominant way of presenting and experiencing romantic love relationships, and in turn the subject positions available following the experience of a relationship break-up.

### 7.6.1. Secondary analysis – Desirability of love/heartache

As stated previously, the relationship primarily discussed above did end between discussion sessions, so the group were put in a position of having to negotiate and reflect specifically on their comments with regards to break-up discourses, Helen particularly having to negotiate positions of heartbreak and death following her relationship ending. The following extract explores the 'Romeo and Juliet' positioning, where Helen previously stated she would kill herself if Craig died:

#### Extract:

- Ivy: [reading from extract]...you'd have to kill yourself [Helen sniggers] that seems like you haven't got no control (Helen: yeah definitely) you were quite weak
- Helen: yeah (.) yeah I, I keep thinking that actually, what if he dies...>that would be so shitty< I don't think I'd kill myself now (.) in fact I'm quite sure, but I'm that wouldn't be very nice
- Ivy: yeah but that's something you've learnt from the time you said this to her (.) to now (Helen: yeah) you've learnt about yourself
- Helen: Definitely (.) and it's something I will (.) make an effort not to get so, like you say so (.) consumed again. I want to love deeply and powerfully and romantically and all that but I want (.) to make sure that I'm not so:: in it that it clouds everything else (Ivy: mm) that's why it's so painful at the moment I think for him and f-, it's not as bad for me, but for him because he's:: (.) so clouded that I am the only thing (.) and its just like >well you know I'm not< there is the rest of life (Ivy: mm) that's what that, that's the trouble with that (2:3, 519-35)

Ivy's initial reading and interpretation of the extract from the primary discussions, frames the 'Romeo and Juliet' construction differently. Previously this strength of

love relationship was something envied by group members, and such a 'powerful' love connection was to be aspired to and emulated. Here, such a 'Juliet' positioning is emphasised for the lack of control on Helens part "you haven't got no control (Helen: yeah definitely) you were quite weak". This is further interpreted as a weakness on Helens part, this reframing of Helens past opinions helps to manage this construction within the context of the present group discussion and within the context of Helen now having broken up with her partner. This helps to distance Helen from 'owning' this position within the present context, as it is reframed as undesirable and disempowering. Helen does talk about still thinking about "what if he dies" now that they have broken up, but moves away from a Juliet positioning by stating " I don't think I'd kill myself now". Again there is the introduction of a learning and self-growth discourse, "that's something you've learnt from the time you said that...you've learnt about yourself". This helps to manage and account for the differing perspective held about this discourse, and constructs the shifting positioning in terms of a positive change in attitude based on an increase in knowledge and Helen learning from her experiences.

Similarly to the previous discussion of being 'caught up' in love and romance, within the above extract Helen discusses a similar positioning of being "consumed" by a relationship and how she will try and avoid this in future relationships. Helen attempts to create a space within relationship narratives, to enable loving "deeply and powerfully and romantically" whilst avoiding being disempowered and it 'clouding' everything. This 'clouding' is given as an explanation as to why Craig is 'heartbroken' because of the centrality of Helen and the relationship within his life. Here this 'centrality' is constructed as problematic because it disables individual decision making and recovery after relationships, interestingly at other points examined within the group analysis section, this centrality of another and of personal relationships was constructed as desirable, and indeed, as often *the point* of personal relationships.

In light of the 'Romeo and Juliet' discourse, Helen states the importance of individual agency in terms of relationships and relationship outcomes and that this is an area where Helen could have previously discoursed things in a more 'empowering' way:

**Extract:**

Helen: now here is one where I could be more empowering, I could realise huh:: I am in control and be more positive and all the things that I do know about stuff, but like I say you get so clouded by (Ivy: hm::) the overwhelming feeling of that all powerful love (.) that you cant (2:3,567-71)

Helen states that within a romantic love discourse she could be more empowered and realise “I am in control and be more positive and all the things that I do know”. This helps present awareness on Helen’s part of how she could reframe her discussions and feelings within this discourse, in ways that afford her more control and acknowledges this idea as something she knows anyway. This self-awareness, or a more general critical awareness, in terms of the subject positions available within particular romantic love narratives, is presented as desirable but also problematic because of the very hegemonic nature of such narrative – “you get so clouded by...the overwhelming feeling of that all powerful love”. This short exchange helps to position Helen as a sensible, aware moral actor who is able to learn from her ‘mistakes’ or rather her past ideas, whilst also maintaining the dominant status of love discourses which helps to negate some of the responsibility for Helen previous discursive positions. This discussion also helps to mediate any future accountability because of the acknowledgement of the difficulty of possessing self-awareness and control within the context of romantic love narratives.

**7.7. Primary analysis continued - Breaking Habits**

Interestingly within the group discussions there was very little discussion of the process or decision-making process involved in the ending of a relationship. As has been seen within the previous discussions of relationship break-up discourses these were predominantly constructed as negative, damaging events, but often with little elaboration as to why relationship break-ups are necessarily problematic. When participants drew on a ‘habit’ discourse of relationships, they touched on the continual-process aspect of a relationship break-up, in that a relationship break-up is likened to continual attempts to break a habit. This

contrasts with a discourse of ‘dumping’ or ‘being dumped’ which constructs a more time-limited, finite event, something that could happen in an instant, a ‘contained’ event involving little process.

### **Extract**

The group have been talking about a couple who had broken up shortly after getting married, they have discussed that the woman involved was unhappy with the relationship before the wedding and have been discussing why she went through with the wedding despite this:

- Eve: how could you get married to someone {when you’ve got something going on with s-(.) that’s appalling}...
- Helen: but she’d been with him for twelve years she probably just thought I think didn’t she didn’t she think
- Flo: it’s just a phase
- Helen: it’s last minute nerves (Flo: yeah yeah ) yeah
- Flo: exactly
- Helen: yeah as you probably would (? : yeah) I probably would and you think oh I’ve been with this person for twelve years oh yes course I love him blah blah blah
- Flo: plus its not h- its not easy, nothings that easy as you know when you’re trying to move away from someone you’ve been with for years (Helen: mm) its not easy
- Eve: habit, such a habit {trying to break that}
- Flo: {its not even that} I think there’s, I think there’s loads of things, but I think the fear of the unknown is a massive one isn’t it (2:1 1473-1489)

The group discuss a friend’s decision to get married in spite of some indicators that she was unhappy in her primary relationship. Eve at the beginning of this extract states that it is “appalling” that the woman got married when she was having an extra-relationship. The group then unpack the decision to go through with the wedding and attempt to mediate and justify this “appalling” decision. The length of time in the primary relationship is introduced repeatedly within the extract and is used to signal an investment in the primary relationship “she’d been with him for twelve years” and rationalises continuing with the relationship. The extra-relational encounter is constructed as “a phase” which contrasts to the positioning of her primary relationship as long-term and serious. Helen further voices such reasoning, repeating the length of time in the primary relationship, “I’ve been with this person for twelve years oh yes course I love him blah blah blah”; ‘time’ is used as a significant indicator of the seriousness of the primary

relationship, which overrides interpreting the extra-relational encounter as a sign that the woman did not want to be in a relationship (in line with constructions of infidelity in relationships previously explored). Helen constructs 'time' as the primary indicator of love in a relationship, rather than any behaviour that might indicate the opposite. This may also draw on a commonsense assumption or cultural imperative that relationships are meant to last, regardless. Helen discusses possible 'self-rationalisations' "oh yes of course I love him blah blah blah", which works to highlight an understanding of the commonsense reasoning or 'self-talk' one would undertake at the end of a relationship, or before entering a marriage, confirming that any doubts about going through with the wedding were "last minute nerves".

The group continue to unpack the reasoning and justify going through with the wedding further by drawing on a 'habit' discourse, Flo stating that "nothings that easy as you know when you're trying to move away from someone you've been with for years". This construction is in line with the 'baggage' approach previously explored, where moving on from a relationship without difficulty was presented as abnormal and 'other' to the 'normal' way of approaching relationship break-ups. Within this exchange a more explicit discussion of the difficulty of reaching a decision to end a relationship can be seen. This difficulty is accommodated with a 'habit' discourse, "such a habit, trying to break that" and accounts for the problem of 'breaking away' from a long-term relationship and further substantiates the decision to go through with the marriage. Flo interjects that "the fear of the unknown" is also a "massive one", a barrier to ending a long-term relationship, which ties in with the habit discourse where the relationship has become habitual and therefore it is hard to imagine life beyond the relationship. Importantly, at other points in the group discussions this 'unknown' life following a relationship break-up was explicitly contested, where participants discussed returning to a "normal single life" following a relationship break-up (2:1, 1521). Within this exchange, the "fear of the unknown" is used to further manage the "appalling" decision to remain in the primary relationship and get married.

Constructing a relationship break-up as trying to break a habit creates a space for a 'continuing' event or process of a relationship break-up, rather than a finite event of 'dumping' where the relationship is constructed as instantly over and the break-up complete. Again, often there was little expansion of what made a

relationship break-up difficult or 'heartbreaking', yet presenting a relationship break-up as necessarily painful was easily accomplished within participants' discussions (see previous analysis of the hell and death constructions). The 'process' of a relationship break-up is explored further within the following extract:

### **Extract**

Eve: even six months after I split up with Ron I used to sometimes, because he, I never saw him in the week he lived in [location] I used to reach for the phone because like we'd perhaps watched something on TV or there'd be a football result or whatever (Helen: mm) and we'd speak to each other on the phone and even six months later I'd be reaching for the phone and then thinking 'oh shit I cant phone him' because I couldn't, I couldn't have any contact with him whatsoever (2:1 1490-1495)

Eve discusses the process of breaking her habit of phoning her partner Ron after their relationship ended. Eve uses the term "split up" to denote her primary relationship ending with Rob, which is another example of the emotive language used to talk about relationship break-ups. "Split up" constructs the jagged breaking of a relationship, for me the term presents the image of splitting wood and constructs something finite and not easily repairable. Eve then goes on to elaborate the process of breaking associations and attempting to leave the relationship behind, this extended 'breaking of habits. "Even six months" is repeated twice and works to construct this process as extraordinary and significant, as "even six months later" Eve would be "reaching for the phone" out of habit to call her partner. This is perhaps presented as extraordinary because it is in tension with a 'split up' discourse, of an instantaneous relationship ending. The language of 'break-ups', 'split up', 'dumped' to not allow for a drawn out relationship break-up, so a continued process of 'getting over' a relationship or "breaking a habit" needs to be particularised because it is in contrast to the constructions of relationship break-ups given by hegemonic break-up language.

## **7.8. Getting over relationships, drugs & alcohol**

Within both the group discussions and interview individual participants were asked directly what they thought helped get them through their break-up experiences. A dominant response to this question usually involved citing drugs and alcohol (or chocolate) and the development of a new relationship:

**Extracts:**

- Kate: so what do you think helps you get through break ups?  
Gwen: {ah: a new boyfriend}  
Gem: {[laughing] drugs and alcohol} yeah  
Kay: for me, for me I met this guy about a month, no two months later I met him (.) and that basically (Kate: yeah) that's the only time when I started feeling better (3:1, 740-6)
- Kate: yeah and what do you think, does anyone know like what kind of things help after a break up  
Tina: chocolate  
[laughter]

Asking a general question about what helped participants after a relationship break-up often lead to participants drawing on commonsense discourses of “drugs and alcohol” and “chocolate” to ‘ease the pain’ of a relationship break-up. These can be seen as non-threatening, depersonalised discourses which lead to laughter in the group and perhaps enabled a lighter discussion of the difficulty in getting over relationships. Within the first extract there is also the introduction of a new relationship aiding ‘recovery’ after a relationship has ended, Kay states that that was the “only time when I started feeling better”. Discussing relationship break-ups often entailed the used of emotive language and the construction of ‘pain’ and ‘heartbreak’ following the ending of a relationship, yet there was a lack of ‘serious’ discussions as to what guided participants through the heartbreak and commonsense responses and laughter were evident following my attempts to broach this topic within the group discussions.

## **7.9. Conclusions**

This chapter has focused on an exploration of discourses of relationship ‘break ups’ present within the group discussions component of this research. As well as

exploring the 'primary' discourse analysis of the first group meetings, this chapter also explored two sections of 'secondary' discourse analysis, where the data came from the second/third group meetings where participants met to discuss and reflect on my primary discourse analysis of their first group meetings. Although the original aims of this thesis did not specifically include an exploration of relationship break ups, talking about this event was often made relevant when participants discussed their experiences of infidelity in relationships, and they also presented some interesting accounts of their break-up experiences within the group discussions. Within the research process involving 'group 2', between the primary group discussion and the secondary group discussions, one participant did experience a relationship 'break up' which further added to the depth of discussion of this topic within the subsequent group meetings.

This chapter began with an exploration of the discourses of being 'dumped', i.e. being on the receiving end of having a relationship terminated, and explored the different subject positions afforded by the dumper-dumped narratives. This discussion was useful in highlighting the hegemonic 'commonsense' discourse drawn on by participants in their discussions of being 'dumped' or of being the 'dumper'. Here discourses of being 'dumped' presented an emotive and embodied rhetoric, and essentially a 'negative' or uncomfortable subject positioning – being dumped was constructed as something to be avoided at all costs. This, at times, was in contrast to the discourses of 'dumper', when doing the 'dumping' was constructed as an inconsequential process. Participants showed awareness of the clichéd language of relationship break-ups, when certain phrases became emblematic of signifying a relationship break-up (or 'dumping'), for example, the phrase 'its not you its me'. Certain phrases were seen to carry explanatory weight, and hence needed little unpacking or explaining by participants within their discussions. This did point to a hegemonic script for the narratives of relationship break-ups and the subject positions afforded.

Within this chapter there was also a discussion of the emotive language of relationship break ups, often with little further expansion by participants, for example the terms 'heartbreak' and 'broken hearted'. Such terminology was seen to be both descriptive and prescriptive of relationship break-ups, where experiences counter to 'heart break' following a relationship ending were positioned as 'other' and atypical of relationship experiences. For example the

'line drawn underneath' construction was seen as an uncommon way of experiencing/dealing with a relationship break up, where these were typically seen as necessitating 'pain' and 'heartbreak', and not being able to move on easily following a relationship ending. Discourses were explored that substantiated the 'heartbreak' positioning, for example the discourse of 'loved and lost', which explored the power of love and how relationship experiences (and the ending of relationships) were constructed as necessarily worthwhile learning experiences. This discourse was also seen to normalise having ones 'heart broken' following the ending of a relationship, and was seen to work as a powerful explanatory device as it justified feeling horrible and heartbroken and countered the pain and futility of relationship break ups. This discourse of 'loved and lost' was also seen to relate to a hegemonic construction of 'romantic love', which constructed the centrality of love and relationships and necessarily being 'consumed' by love – where such a 'powerful' romantic love necessitates feeling terrible following its ending and also constructs a position for 'death' following a relationship ending. As stated earlier, one of the participants did experience a relationship 'break-up' during the data collection phases, and as such participants had to come 'face-to-face' with their relationship narrative of 'death' and other consequences following a 'powerful' 'romantic love' coming to an end<sup>3</sup>. This provided the research with an interesting dimension, where participants had to explicitly negotiate and reflect on their comments, and indeed negotiate the lack of 'death' following the end of the relationship. The loved and lost discourse was further seen to provide a 'positive' subject position, where participants could love, learn, and move on. The discussion now moves onto the final data analysis chapter, exploring some further relationship discourses made relevant during the group discussions.

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<sup>3</sup> Ethical practices were followed here, where participants were continually made aware of their right to withdraw from the research at any stage, participants were also forewarned of the content of the secondary group discussions, and that they could choose not to discuss any aspects they did not wish to. Particular care was taken to ensure that the participant experiencing the break up was happy and comfortable being part of the discussions.

# 8

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## **8.1. Introduction – Group Analysis – Part 3 – Relationship Discourses**

Within the group discussions further, more general, relationship discourses were analysed and also included in the primary analysis given to participants to discuss in subsequent group meetings. These discourses when given back to the participants prompted lengthy discussions and interesting elaborations of the primary discourses, and also perhaps most exemplified the goals of study two; and as such are included here. Two relationship discourses are discussed within this section, including the secondary analysis of participants' further commentary on these discourses: the 'shopping/consumer' discourse and 'women's involvement in sex: a passive positioning'.

## **8.2. Shopping/Consumer Discourse**

This discourse presents a position of 'consumer' choice in terms of picking personal relationship partners and also represents variety in terms of the types of relationships and sex consumed by participants. This discourse was utilised by female participants and works to position them as the consumers of men and relationships:

### **Extract:**

Helen: I wasn't with anyone then so that, that didn't really matter but I was always on the look out for people always (.) looking for something better

Eve: and now she's like {I've got a boyfriend, I've got a boyfriend}

Flo: {you've got to try them on for size} before you find the right one  
(2:1, 224-7)

At the beginning of this extract Helen begins by particularising this discourse to her particular relationship circumstances, in that she “wasn’t with anyone” at the time and therefore she was free to ‘shop for men’. This shows one of the conditions of possibility that mediated the usage of this discourse, in that Helen positions herself as single and that she can justifiably use this discourse when describing her approach to relationships. The comments from Flo highlight the flexibility constructed within a shopping/consumer discourse. Trying relationships or men (participants in this group discussed relationships with men) on for size presents a position of variety and choice when picking relationships, and also presupposes that no one relationship type will be suitable for all women, you can “try them on for size”. Although, within Flo’s comment there is also the construction of “one” relationship, there being “the right one” in terms of a relationship partner or type of relationship, which individuals are necessarily striving for. This can also be seen in Eve’s response to Helen’s comments, which further constructs the desirability (and boast-ability) of having a boyfriend, in that Eve constructs a position of pride for Helen now that she is in a relationship. This could be read as the desired outcome of the shopping/consumer discourse, you shop for relationships before you find the right one that suits you. The ‘shopping’ here is constructed as having an endpoint, a purpose and substantiates the hegemonic relationship discourse of “the one”.

Further mediating factors are explored within the following extract, highlighting that a ‘shopping’ approach to relationships is something to be utilised finitely:

**Extract:**

Flo: needs something, I needed to do, to go out and be wild and do it  
Helen: definitely {yeah}  
Flo: {it once in your lifetime, try it on for size, see what’s out there but then there comes a point where you think well it’s all pants that really isn’t it...it’s like you’re not getting anything back really...  
(2:1, 365-70)

Flo draws on a shopping/consumer discourse to characterise a point in her relationship history as a time when she needed to “go out and be wild”. Therefore this discourse can be seen as being imbued with a certain ‘wildness’, that perhaps is not to be undertaken in the long term. Flo further clarifies this as she particularises this behaviour/position as something to be adopted ‘once in a lifetime’ and hence should not inform a regular relationship position. Within the two previous extracts it can be seen how the participants in these instances particularise and hence mediate the usage of the consumer discourse, through the factors of relationship status (in this case, not being involved in a personal relationship) and by locating the discourse in a specified historical time – this factor has been previously seen to function to mediate issues of blame and accountability for relationship behaviours (Nicholls 2001).

Within the following extract the participants are discussing one-night stands:

**Extract:**

- Helen: {yeah, meaningful sex, because one-night stand sex is shit {as a general rule}}
- Eve: {well no its not} its good technically {it just doesn't} have any feelings
- Helen: {for me} for me as a general rule technically its shit
- ?: {its (inaud)}
- Eve: {you've got to treat it differently} its like the difference between (.) fresh carrots and canned carrots, you know what I mean, sometimes you fancy one, sometimes you fancy another (laughter), you know what I mean
- Flo: sex is like carrots I love that, I love that (2:1, 328/31)

This extract highlights some of the complex interpersonal negotiations that occur within group discussions. Firstly, one of the ways in which disagreements between group members are conversationally negotiated can be seen. The group members are discussing one-night stands and are disagreeing as to its merits, for example Eve comments “it’s good technically”, whereas Helen comments “technically it’s shit”. Helen firstly manages this disagreement by personalising her comments, “for me, for me”, in this way she is able to assert personal opinion without dismissing Eve’s alternative view. Eve then further discourses this accommodation of viewpoints by stating ‘you’ve got to treat it differently’. Eve is

re-scripting Helen's account, which could also be read as Eve dismissing Helen's account of one-night stand being "shit" by stating that this type of sex should be treated differently (for example in contrast to "meaningful sex" or sex with "feelings"). This particular usage of the shopping/consumer discourse can be seen as direct attempt to accommodate participants differing experiences of one-night stand sex. Within this statement different types of sex are constructed as being like different varieties of carrots, and constructs sex and relationships in terms of consumer choice. This discourse can be seen to present a positive image of there being different types of sex that women can engage in, and in this instance is not presented in an evaluative manner rather it is a case of "sometimes you fancy one, sometimes you fancy another". This discourse can also be seen as resisting dominant constructions of sex taking place within a loving and lasting relationship and also resisting dominant constructions of women being chosen, rather than doing the choosing.

Within the following extract the participants are discussing different types of sex and relationships, they further draw on a discourse of consumer choice in their talk:

**Extract:**

- Flo: and its gone like that [clicks fingers] and there's nothing {lasting}  
Eve: {when I'm hungry} will I go and cook myself a full meal or will I just go out to the larder and pick out a huge {packet of crisps} you know  
Helen: {tin of carrots}  
Flo: yeah it is a, like a quick fix (?: yeah) almost (2:1, 374/8)

The social construction of sex and relationships in terms of shopping and consumer choice can again be seen within this extract. Eve details some qualitative differences between cooking a full meal and a convenience snack and in doing so constructs differences between one-night stand sex and sex within a long term relationship. In this way these two types of sex are not explicitly evaluated, although perhaps implicit within this comparison is a distinction between which food type would be more 'healthy'. Crisps can be generally seen as a low-nutrition 'junk food' and in this sense 'one-night stand' sex could be imbued with similar characteristics, therefore positioning in opposition "a full

meal”, or sex within a long term relationship, as the more healthy choice. Both options are constructed in terms of their convenience; they may both be suitable for individuals to engage in at different points in time – when they need a “quick fix” for example. This construction of women consumers has also been examined within other cultural texts. David Greven (2004) examines the portrayal of ‘freakish’ men within the television series *Sex and the City* and posits that the female leads in the show are portrayed as ‘rampant consumers’ of men and relationships. This show is seen as displaying women in the role of consumers and as ‘wielders of the appraising gaze customarily assumed to be the province of men’ (ibid p39). I would suggest that within the extracts I have explored it is constructed that there is no longer a ‘one size fits all’ approach to relationship styles, because it is now seen that there is a variety of relationships to suit a variety of needs. And, as Greven (2004) suggests, women are positioned as an/the ‘active party’ in choosing men and relationships. I would suggest that this discourse could be read as an empowering discourse when drawn on by women, as it represents an exercised freedom of choice. Also, I would suggest that this is empowering because it is in contrast to a historical discourse of women being ‘on the shelf’, which has presented men as the active party in choosing women/partners and who also get to ‘shelve’ women. Greven also proposes that such discussions of women, sexuality and commerce have been in circulation since the late nineteenth century within cultural theories. Janet Staiger (1995 p 42-43, cited in Greven 2004 p39) states that sexology and the consideration that women might have multiple kinds of desires, has reinforced the vision of women as consumers with a variety of tastes for relationships and sex. Within the consumer discourse I have explored how women are constructed as actively displaying and asserting their right to consume, here it is constructed as women who are shopping for men.

Participants in the individual interviews also drew on a shopping/consumer discourse:

**Extract:**

Ian: you know its go out and get what you want and then people might not be content on thinking I can improve this (Kate: yeah) like you

can with your job and maybe say well I'm going to trade this guy in for another guy (Kate: yeah) or I'm going to trade this girl in for another girl (Kate: yeah)... because I think if someone sees something better come along they're gonna go for that rather than stay where they are and work on it (Kate: yeah) I think they look I think people a lot of the time nowadays are looking for you know better than so ('Ian', 395-410)

Within this extract Ian draws on a discourse of consumer choice and shopping to accommodate individuals not working on their present relationships, but rather 'trading in' their partner for "something better". "People might not be content on thinking I can improve this", rather than working on a current relationship individuals are discussed as more inclined to "trade" their partners for a new one, "I'm going to trade this guy in for another guy". The concept of a 'trade in' is a common market term, you can trade in household appliances, cars or mobile phones for the latest model or discounted prices. A shopping discourse is used here to account for not working at relationships or for not settling, but rather moving on and shopping for someone better. This also relates to an earlier discussion within the individual analysis section, where "staying power" was discussed as a historical discourse, where within previous generations people had more 'staying power' and maintained their relationships. This was presented as shifting to individuals 'sticking with themselves' more, rather than to a relationship, which is further exemplified by the use of the shopping above.

### **8.2.1. Secondary analysis – Shopping/Consumer discourse**

The participants generally embraced the 'shopping' discourse of sex and personal relationships and the subsequent secondary group discussion involved much expansion and discussion of a consumer approach to relationships. The following extract is one example of participants' further utilisation of a shopping discourse:

#### **Extract**

Flo: [laughing] shopping (.) I've never thought of it, it's quite interesting actually what she's put here about the, the shopping

thing, I think, the way she's (.) I've never ever thought of shopping for a mate almost

Ivy: n:: yeah I

Flo: trying it on for size, because like some things she's mentioned there, trying it on for size 'oh this quality, that quality' [Ivy laughs] and I suppose in some respects we've all got like this ideal in our head, it would be like buying a new car, you've got you know this ideal in your head the, the model and makes that you want and a budget [laughs loudly]

Ivy: {yes::}

Flo: {and it's whether} because I think that's, that's another thing you know {do you}

Eve: {oh I wish} you could just go into a show room and just say {'I want} <this type of body work>

Flo: {yeah but}

Eve: and I want this type of interior

Flo: but do {we}

Eve: {'I want it} to come with a ten year warranty [laughing]

Flo: yeah but do we also, like we do with cars, we wouldn't ever like, for me I could not go and say 'I'll have a Porsche please' because it's just, it's out of my price range, do we do that with our partners as well {were you just think} {out of <reach>} (2:2, 169-90)

I purposely included the first comments from Flo to highlight one way participants responded to primary analysis, in terms of expressing my analysis as a new way of conceptualising the topic, one that they had not necessarily thought of before. Flo states a couple of times that she had "never thought of it", in those terms, "I've never ever thought of shopping for a mate almost". The primary analysis is constructed as reframing participants thinking on the topic, even though it is explicating their original comments and language used when discussing their relationships. The presentation of a discursive analysis to participants introduces a particular set of interpretations and readings, and possibly 'new' reflections on the topic by participants. This is perhaps one way in which a continued process of participant involvement and access to analysis and discussions can lead to 'conscientization' (Rappaport and Stewart 1995), which is not necessarily about 'conscious raising', but rather promoting a general 'questioning' and engagement with knowledge production.

Moving on to the main body of the extract presented above, the participants further appropriate and expand the shopping discourse presented to them within the primary analysis of their previous group discussion. Flo discusses

that trying a man or relationship ‘on for size’ relates to the “ideal” characteristics, “we’ve all got like this ideal in our head” which works as a comparison model by which we judge potential partners and relationships by. This discussion works to substantiate the construction of an ‘ideal’ relationship, necessarily ‘the one’ perfect relationship partner. This ‘ideal’ relationship was at times fostered by participants’ discussions and at times equally disputed and undermined by participants – which has been explored previously. Participants continue and expand a consumer discourse of relationships by using the simile of shopping for a new car, “it would be like buying a new car, you’ve got you know this ideal in your head”. This construction is then further expanded by the group, discussing the model, type of bodywork, type of interior, warranty and budget that you might have in your head when purchasing a car, or a relationship. This discussion again maintains and substantiates a position of consumer choice when looking for relationships and alludes to the multiple possibilities in terms of desirable characteristics such a relationship might hold. Flo continually tries to interject within this exchange and at the end of this extract we see her express her opinion in terms of questioning whether, like when shopping for a car, one has an idea of one’s price range – and an understanding of when one shops outside of that. This helps construct some limits in terms of ‘consumer choice’, as you have to shop within your price range - those being shopped for, and those doing the shopping, have a ‘price tag’ attached. This also sets limits on the transformative power of ‘the ideal’, as within this discourse, as participants may indeed have an ‘ideal’ partner or relationships, but this could necessarily be out of reach.

A shopping discourse and having particular relationship specifications was further used to justify ending a relationship:

**Extract:**

Ivy: ...I always used to know how I, if I liked the person or not, it’s like the whole shopping, trying it on, it’s like if I didn’t like, there’s one I went out with um called Andrew and he had weird shoulders, short [Flo laughs] short, funny shoulders [laughter] and I had to get rid of him after a couple of weeks I was like no, they’re bugging me, the shoulders are bugging me (2:2, 277-82)

The shopping discourse is used here to substantiate trying out relationships, “trying it on” and here particular imperfections, in this case having “funny shoulders”, are used to justify ending a relationship. This shopping discourse is able to construct a space for not ‘settling’ for a relationship and in this case, enables Ivy to keep ‘shopping for men’ without such imperfections. So potentially any imperfection can be used as a rationale for ending a relationship, as participants are necessarily shopping for the ‘right one’.

The participants move on to discuss if and how women can essentially ‘shop for men’:

**Extract:**

- Eve: I think women do shop for men though to be honest, I think that women can shop for men because men are desperate and women aren't, I'm not saying all {I'm just generalising}
- Flo: {I don't think men} are desperate at all ...
- Eve: no you see women, I mean if, if you're halfway attractive, even halfway attractive as a woman you know that you could go out and get a shag if you wanted to (.) you're not going to get turned down
- Flo: yeah but that's just a shag, its not about, its not um a {meaningful relationship is it}
- Eve: yeah but men cant guarantee that though can they even the good looking ones cant guarantee that a women's going to put out for them
- Flo: but sure::ly all everyone wants in life is just to have someone to, there's a lot a number of other things besides that, but just someone they actually connect with that and feel that the person that they're with understands them, that they're attracted to them and they can have a laugh, have a good time meet some fundamental needs with each other and actually go in a similar direction (Eve: yeah) how difficult is that, my god it's fucking well difficult (2:3,307-335)

This extract begins with Eve affirming that women do “shop for men” and uses a ‘bottom-line’ statement to substantiate this, signified by ‘to be honest’. Eve comments that women do and can shop for men because essentially “men are desperate and women aren't”. This position is then elaborated further, suggesting that any “halfway attractive” woman will be able to “get a shag” because men will always be available and seeking sex. In contrast, “even the good looking” men cannot guarantee the same thing – their shopping is restricted, because they cannot

guarantee the receptiveness of women. This construction undermines other discourses of women always being receptive and passive in the face of male advances (see Gilfoyle et al 1992 and Roberts et al 1995) – such alternative positionings are discussed more fully in the subsequent analysis section on ‘faking orgasm’.

Flo then introduces another bottom-line statement, “but surely all everyone wants...”, to shift the discussion away from shopping for sex to discussing attempts to seek out more ‘fulfilling’ relationships. Flo constructs a position where, among other things, everyone is seeking a relationship which will “meet some fundamental needs” and also cites the need for a ‘connection’ and ‘understanding’ from a partner; which all works to differentiate and substantiate Flo’s previous distinction between “just a shag” and a “meaningful relationship”. In contrast to the ease of ‘shopping for sex’, shopping for a meaningful relationship is constructed as considerable harder, “how difficult is that, my god it’s fucking well difficult”. This presents an alternative positioning to the ‘free and easy’ approach usually implied when participants drew on a shopping discourse, it may be easy to shop for particular types of relationships but not kinds of relationships that “everyone wants”.

At the end of the group session, the participants returned to the ‘shopping’ discourse:

**Extract:**

- Eve: what was my chat up line going to be again I can’t remember  
‘you’re definitely a canned carrot’ [group laughter]  
Ivy: yeah  
Eve: that would confuse them  
Flo: <get the tin opener> [laughing]  
Eve: get the tin opener you’ve scored [laughter]  
Helen: >I like that<  
Eve: though they make them all with ring-pulls these days [laughter]  
Helen: that is such a nice metaphor for ma- for modern man [laughter]  
easy to open [laughter] crap and no nutrition inside [laughter]  
Flo: I do like tinned carrots though  
Helen: I do  
Flo: the only tinned vegetable I like (2:2, 1825-37)

At the end of the group discussion participants return to the primary analysis discussion of tinned versus fresh carrots, which was initially presented and analysed as the distinction between ‘one-night stand sex’ and sex within a more ‘meaningful’ relationship. Here participants appropriate this language again with a discussion of ‘chat up’ lines they could use based on the tin-carrot conceptualisation – “get the tin opener you’ve scored”. This discussion is interjected with much laughter and I think shows a clever integration and appropriation of the topic previously discussed in a humorous way. This discussion also presents a more explicate evaluation of ‘tinned carrots’ and indeed a rather negative positioning of ‘modern man’, “easy to open [laughter] crap and no nutrition inside [laughter]”. This evaluation was previously touched upon implicitly in the discussion of a full cooked meal versus a packet of crisps. In line with the discussion of the former extract, within this extract there is also the presentation of dissatisfaction with ‘casual’ sexual encounters compared to more meaningful relationships. Although here, with laughter, the group presents a more general dissatisfaction with men.

### **8.3. Primary analysis continued - Women’s involvement in sex – a ‘passive’ position**

Within this discourse women are ascribed a ‘passive’ position in terms of sexual encounters. In this case men (the women within these discussions talk in terms of heterosex) are therefore accrued the active position in terms of negotiating and driving sexual encounters. Within this discussion of the ‘passive’ position, passivity is likened to a lack of agency and a lack of power within heterosex, in the sense that men’s wishes or desires are prevailing within sexual encounters and the women are discursively positioned as ‘passive’. The group have been discussing ‘threesomes’ and Eve has just started to talk about when she nearly has a ‘foursome’:

#### **Extract:**

Eve: {I started a foursome once, I cant say that it ever, I started it then stopped [...] [this was with two men, one girl and Eve] I cant remember her name [...] um she wasn't up for it at all anyway (Helen: yeah) I wasn't particularly up for it (Helen: yeah) they kind of talked us into it and I like, we kissed and I was just like you know what, its just not (Helen: yeah) do you know what I mean (2:1, 948-54)

Within this extract the men involved are attributed the active and driving position during the sexual negotiations, "they kind of talked us into it". Eve also describes a lack of interest in continuing this encounter "I wasn't particularly up for it". Despite this lack of interest she still attempts to begin this encounter by kissing one of the other participants. This constructs an active and powerful position occupied by men within sexual encounters and hence also constructs a lack of power attributed to women within such encounters. Gilfoyle et al (1992) have examined the language used within (hetero)sexual encounters and they state that the language used is predominately geared to articulating men's interests and accounts of sexuality; the dominant ways of talking correspond to men's interests. To understand the account detailed by Eve further, it is also important to note that such encounters are played out within the power relationships of dominance and subordination that exist in society (Crawford et al 1994), there is a larger, macro domain of social/relational inequality that forms a backdrop to sexual encounters and the language used to relate same.

The group have been talking about 'break-up' experiences; Eve has been discussing how she didn't enjoy sleeping with a previous partner during and towards the end of their relationship:

**Extract:**

Eve: [...] but I never even fancied him when I got with him he should have always only been just a mate (Flo: yeah) but he wanted to go out with me, I really enjoyed his company and we just fell into going out together and I never fancied him right from the start and I honestly believed for the three years, because sleeping with someone for three years puts you off sex for a fucking long time

Helen: but how was the sex?

Eve: crap

Helen: was it?

- Eve: and it didn't do anything for me whatsoever (Helen: yeah) and I spent most of my time, at the end I couldn't even {go through with} it at the end (Helen: yeah)
- Flo: {avoiding it}
- Eve: couldn't even make myself go through the motions (2:1, 1152-66)

This description highlights silence within Eve's relationship in terms of being able to voice her discontent with the sexual encounters. To signify how unpleasant the sexual encounters became in the relationship Eve states that she "couldn't even make myself go through the motions", suggesting that this is something that is usually possible and acceptable within relationship situations. Eve describes an uncomfortable relationship context, in which she went out with someone for three years who she didn't even 'fancy', the sex being unpleasant and necessarily avoidable towards the end of the relationship. It has been posited that women place the stability of their relationship above their own sexual pleasure, and that this is not often viewed as necessarily problematic (Roberts et al 1995). This is one explanation as to why Eve reports to continue having sexual relations with a long-term partner she "never fancied". Further to maintaining relationship stability through having unwanted sex, the 'performance' of sex within such a relationship circumstance may also function to avoid discussing the ending of the relationship. This is situated within sociocultural understandings of relationship break-ups being necessarily difficult and hard, within a cultural climate of 'coupledom' and 'working at relationships'. Thus providing little space to contemplate ending a relationship and continuing with unwanted sex facilitates postponing any such discussions.

The group have been talking about threesomes, and Eve begins talking about the fact that she nearly had one:

**Extract:**

- Eve: really funny though you know doing the threesome from Craig's<sup>4</sup> point of view but from the fact I don't really fancy him but I'm sure I could cope with that I mean the one thing about women is you don't actually have to fancy them (Helen: yeah yeah) you can fake it quite easily you know [laughter] (2:1, 807/10)

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<sup>4</sup> Referring to Helens primary partner Craig, previously appearing in other extracts.

The dialogue around sexual encounters here is not about enjoyment, but rather ‘coping’ with the situation - at least from the women’s perspective. This is similar to the previous two extracts in its construction of a ‘passive’ position, although the use of humour and shared laughter differentiates it from the previous extracts in terms of ‘tone’. Within this construction, being able to fake orgasm or enjoyment is seen as a positive attribute for women within sexual encounters. Within each of the previous exchanges, the woman’s voice seems to be absent and it is the man’s wishes that seem to be prevailing. I would also argue that the practice of faking orgasm, and having unwanted/unpleasant sex within long-term relationships, is a complex relational site of expectations and pressure. According to Potts (2000) orgasms have become naturalised, in that they have become to be seen as a fundamental biological right; due to this, sexual encounters may not be seen as complete without at least a ‘performance’ of an orgasm. Unfortunately, because of this naturalization the construction of ‘orgasm’ within some discourses obscures the fact that often these discursive constructions pertaining to orgasm are not always in the interests of women. Therefore it is hard to see the benefit of faking orgasm in the above discussion, when this is to mask a lack of enjoyment by the women. The practice of faking orgasm can be seen to reaffirm women’s position as the passive recipients of masculine technique, interestingly this practice simultaneously disrupts this passive position – when women fake orgasm they are being active and using their minds to perform (Roberts et al 1995). Participants elaborated, and indeed added to the complexity of this relational site, when they were given my initial analysis of their discussions – which is explored below.

### **8.3.1. Secondary analysis – Women’s involvement in sex**

The participants were presented with the primary analysis of the discursive constructions of women’s ‘passive’ involvement in sex; the following extract is their opening comments upon reading the section heading:

#### **Extract:**

- Eve: a new subject  
 Flo: right then yes, number two [laughter] ‘women’s involvement in sex’, oh we do get a say then [group laughter] nothing you just lay there [laughter] oh dear {talking about threesomes}  
 Eve: {oo:: shall we read loads of things} into that comment [laughs]  
 Flo: no, I was only joking yeah [laughing] because I went like that [actioning] oh she can’t capture that bit um (.) (2:2, 382-388)

In response to reading the title of the section, ‘women’s involvement in sex’, Flo states “oh so we do get a say then” to which there is group laughter which signifies shared understanding and humour at this self-deprecation of women lacking a voice within sexual encounters. This is followed by Flo also stating “nothing you just lay there” to which there is more laughter. This further reflects an open awareness of the sociocultural stereotype of women ‘just lying there’ and being passive during sexual encounters. The group laughter indicates the shared understanding (commonality), and humour, of Flo’s comments. There is also some presentation of the research/analysis being about ‘reading more into comments’, a position which Eve adopts “oo:: shall we read loads of things into that comment”. There is then acknowledge that this is probably exactly what I will be doing with their comments (!) and Flo highlights one of the problems of relying on verbal comments only, in that I might miss physical language which changes the meaning of the spoken words – in this case adding inverted commas to Flo’s previous comments.

Feeding back this component of the discursive analysis back to participants lead to a very long and detailed exploration of the practice of ‘faking orgasm’ within sexual encounters. During the guidance notes (see appendix 4) given to participants to aid the secondary discussions, the participants were prompted to explore issues of power and empowerment within all the analyses they received. This focus on ‘power’ within the discursive positionings further helped to explore and evidence the multiple and contradictory readings of ‘power’ in relationship practices. This is explored within the following discussion of the discourses of faking orgasm. The amount of attention paid to this relationship practice here corresponds, or rather is in accordance with, the amount of attention and talk paid to this practice within the secondary group discussions.

### 8.3.2 Faking orgasm as cowardice

Ivy has been guiding the discussion and in this instance is reading directly from the feedback analysis given to the participants (see appendix 4):

#### Extract:

- Ivy: yeah but then Kate's picked up on the [reading] faking it can present position-position of power for women (.) and have the power to fake it and ' [the] 'man not know'
- Eve: [exhales quickly] I don't think {its power I think its cowardice personally}
- Ivy: [reading] {'why should women', 'why should} women fake their enjoyment? (2:2, 421:425)

This exchange between Ivy and Eve is the first example of the participants directly addressing the issue of 'power' within the context of the relationship practice of faking orgasm. Ivy, by relating my reading of the relationship practice of faking orgasm, introduces the idea that faking orgasm could represent a position of 'power' for women, in that women have the power to fake orgasm and the "man not know". Eve immediately counters this reading by stating "I don't think its power I think its cowardice", at this point in the exchange Eve's talk is overlapped by Ivy continuing to read from the handout. At this point in the exchange Eve is unable to elaborate on the position of faking orgasm as cowardice, after a brief discussion of men's ability to fake orgasm, Eve returns to exploring the cowardice position:

#### Extract:

- Eve: ...no I don't think faking its power I think its cowardice, I think it's what women do when they don't want to admit to their partner [laughter] they're not enjoying it as much as they could do {haven't got there (.) wont happen}
- Flo: or cant be arsed {[laughs loudly] I've had enough now} {[laughing]}
- Eve: {hope yeah, hope them faking it will turn (inaud) their partner or enough to make their partner come} you know (2:2, 433-440)

Here women who engage in the relationship practice of faking orgasm are attributed the subject position of 'coward', as the act of faking is positioned as a

response to not being able to communicate with their partner issues of un/enjoyment. A position of ‘cowardice’ is morally loaded and represents an undesirable subject position. Faking orgasm is then repositioned as a response to not being “arsed” with the sexual encounter and as having “had enough” of the situation. Here, faking orgasm as boredom is subsequently constructed as a practice to end heterosex and this position does not have the same moral loading as a ‘coward’ subject position. This construction works to afford agency to the women involved in faking orgasm, in that the act (of faking) is used as a means to an end, literally, as it is used to facilitate the end of heterosex. This discourse can be seen to substantiate an aspect of Gilfoyle, Wilson and Browns’ (1992) ‘pseudo-reciprocal gift’ discourse. The main premise of the gift discourse is that women are viewed as passive receptacles ‘giving’ themselves to men during sex, or in ‘giving’ sex to male partners and in turn men reciprocate by giving women orgasms. Faking as boredom therefore substantiates this discourse because it necessitates the performance of the female orgasm in order for the male to ‘perform’ his. Gilfoyle et al assert that within the pseudo-reciprocal gift discourse men are attributed a powerful subject position because they are both the recipient of women and also confer the gift of sexual pleasure. I would argue that within this discussion of faking orgasm in order to facilitate the end of boring sex, women do position themselves as acting with a degree of agency; they are using faking as a tool to end a situation they do not like. In this context they are constructed as ‘actively’ using faking.

***Cowardice: socially undesirable subject position***

(Collins English dictionary, millennium edition 1999)

**Coward:** *n* a person who shrinks from or avoids danger, pain or difficulty. [from Old French *cuard*, from *coue* tail, from Latin *cauda*; perhaps suggestive of a frightened animal with its tail between its legs].

**Cowardice:** *n* lack of courage in facing danger, pain, or difficulty.

The construction of faking orgasms to end boring sex was initially introduced to counter the construction of faking orgasm as cowardice, and by referring to the dictionary definition of cowardice, it can perhaps be seen why the ‘cowardice’ discourse may be adopted within the context of discussing faking orgasm. The definition is suggestive of the difficulty in verbalising dissatisfaction, ‘lack of

courage in facing danger, pain, or difficulty'. This could then be seen as one reason why women fake sexual enjoyment; the 'faking' is preferable to a 'difficult' discussion with their (male) partner about (their lack of) pleasure. This reading and the cowardice positioning is somewhat confirmed within the following extract:

**Extract:**

Helen: ..I don't know, it can present a position of power for women, yeah it can, but at the end of the day its not a position of power if you haven't got the bollocks to, to say you're not doing it for me darling are you↑ (2:3, 156-8)

Within this extract Helen explicitly challenges the position of 'power' previously afforded faking orgasm (as contained within my feedback analysis), whilst also substantiating faking pleasure as an avoidance strategy to discussing male performance during sex. By using the phrase "at the end of the day" Helen characterises her subsequent statement as the logical endpoint or conclusion of the debate of the various 'power' positions attributed to faking pleasure, i.e. the bottom line argument. I would argue that this discursive positioning becomes problematic because faking orgasm is reduced to an individual problem, a personal failure within a given situation; evidenced by the repeated use of the word 'you' within this extract. Interestingly, the technical failings of the encounter are by implication located within the man "you're not doing it for me darling", but within this construction, it is a failing on behalf of the woman for not directing the man and having the "bollocks" to do so. It may also be worth noting that the site of power here, in being able to discuss and negotiate pleasure within a sexual encounter, is located within an explicitly male domain – "bollocks". Within this discourse, it appears difficult to construct a space where such relationship negotiations are *generally* difficult and therefore shift the focus away from an individual lacking.

**8.3.3. Faking orgasm to end boring sex**

As touched upon above, another discursive construction utilised by participants when discussing the practice of faking orgasm was faking orgasm to end boring sex. This discourse is further expanded within the following extract:

**Extract:**

- Helen: ...but I think a lot of that's got to do with age. I don't fake it anymore, with Craig there's not much of a need to. But if it ain't gonna happen I don't feel a {need to fake it}
- Ivy: {yeah, I don't}
- Helen: in a relationship now and whatever I go on to do I certainly ain't gonna fake it (.) I say that, sometimes though they're just banging away like a jack rabbit and you're like 'd'you know what' [ivy laughs lightly] just the boredom factor you know what I mean [ivy laughs] it's like get off me now
- Ivy: [laughing] they're really doing it for you then, lie there bored, I know I used to um at the end of me and Paul I just used to just let him do it (Helen: yeah) do it and just get off me [Helen laughs] get off me (Helen: yeah) because he never used to, it never used to {it never used to do it for me} (2:3, 181-193)

This extract begins with Helen verbalising some conditions needed in order to not fake orgasms, not faking orgasms can be seen as a product of age and relational experience, which in turn is able to counter the “need” to fake orgasms. Allen (2003) explored the ‘material’ conditions needed for her participants to engage in resistant subject positions in terms of (hetero)sexuality. Similarly, here, the conditions of possibility that are constructed as enabling participants to resist a dominant relationship practice, as and when they wish to do so, are age and an individual sense of self – lacking a ‘need’ to fake orgasm in a relationship. Both Helen and Ivy affirming that they no longer feel a “need” to fake orgasm within their relationships, and that Helen will not go on to do so. This is immediately undermined by Helen, “I say that, sometimes though...”, and she introduces one function of faking orgasm as a practice to end boring sex, “just the boredom factor you know”. This position is further confirmed by Ivy, who within her comments explores further sex within the context of moving towards the ending of a relationship (which was also explored within the primary analysis), “lie there bored...at the end of me and Paul I just used to just let him do it (Helen: yeah) do it and just get off me”. Faking orgasm in this context is constructed as serving an important function, ending ‘boring’ sexual encounters. Although, I think this

again does construct a 'passive' positioning of women within sexual encounters, especially within sexual encounters occurring towards the end of relationships. Gilfoyle et al (1992) also examined women talking about sex and relationships, and they pay attention to the 'passive' positioning of women during sexual encounters within their analysis. They discuss this passive positioning as being characterised by a relentless giving on the part of the woman, geared towards meeting the man's sexual needs. Importantly Gilfoyle et al also state that this positioning involves a loss of self-determination over one's body and thereby the woman is not seen as being in control during sexual encounters.

This presents a picture of unwanted and perhaps unpleasant sex happening towards the end of the relationship, "it never used to do it for me", where the sexual encounter is serving the interests of the man and the woman's desire is absent. Gavey et al (1999) in their research examining non-intimacy and intercourse, discuss how some of their participants described non-intimate (i.e. unsatisfactory) intercourse taking place in long-term relationships. This was understood within the context of their research as a pragmatic compromise, continuing with unwanted sexual encounters, to manage the woman's general lack of desire within the relationship. Again, perhaps postponing any discussion or indication of their dissatisfaction with the relationship more generally. Gavey et al state that in reading accounts of sex within long-term relationships, it is again important to note the context of inequality and the power of discourses which dictate that men must have intercourse, in shaping the conditions in which women sometimes choose intercourse. This constructs a paradoxical situation in which intercourse is positioned as the most intimate and least intimate sexual act within long-term relationships, which further demonstrates the fluidity of meaning attached to any sexual practices. Gavey et al state that while sexual intercourse is often metonymically linked with intimacy (in the same way that monogamy is used interchangeably to signify trust and love in a relationship), the meaning of these behaviours within relationships are clearly not fixed.

#### **8.3.4. Power & technique**

Returning to a discussion of Gilfoyle et al's (1992) pseudo-reciprocal gift discourse, a further implication of the gift discourse is that it constructs a position

of 'technical expertise' for men in relation to heterosex. This is specifically explored in Roberts, Kippax, Waldby and Crawford's (1995) account of the 'technique and work' discourse. This discourse similarly constructs women's bodies as the passive receptacle of men's technique and work, whilst men's pleasure is seen as 'natural' and driven, men use their technique to bring women to orgasm. Again, by implication, women are expected to experience orgasm when they are privy to men's expertise and thus the practice of faking orgasm can be seen as reinforcing the notion that men should possess the necessary skill to give their female partner an orgasm. The 'technique and work' discourse is therefore simultaneously reinforced and undermined by the practice of faking orgasm. This can be seen in an exploration of the following discourse, faking orgasm as power.

**Extract:**

- Flo: but it is {a power thing} really because you've in your hands you've got the power to make them feel good about it i.e. fake it if you can't actually get off
- Eve: {the power thing comes from}
- Flo: {or make them feel} shit about it by saying 'no there, wrong' [Ivy laughs] you know or whatever like you see on telly sometimes (Ivy: yeah) people do 'that's rubbish, down a bit, lower' [laughs] (2:2, 448-453)

Power here is constructed as coming directly from undermining the 'technique and work' discourse during a sexual encounter and displays female agency in terms of guiding pleasure and the man's actions. This is continued in the next extract:

**Extract:**

- Flo: {because we can decide (.) that's the better point} {surely isn't power when} you've got the control to make something happen either way, it's in your hands, it's not out of your control, we're in control in some {respects}
- Eve: {to make} what happen
- Flo: to make them either feel good about it, it is, if they're so inclined I mean some guys {don't give a shit} (2:2, 465-470)

Similar to the position afforded women within the practice of faking orgasm to end boring sex, here an 'active' faking (or not faking) is constructed and hence the woman is discourses as being in control of the situation, as they determine their partners perception of the encounter and their own 'performance'. Again, 'power' is located in undermining the discourse of male sexual expertise, even if the partner is unaware of his failings. Power is attributed to being able to control the responses to a partner's technique, through either affirming or undermining the technique and work discourse verbally. I would assert that because women have to 'fake' enjoyment this in itself undermines the technique and work discourse. Braun et al (2003) state that there are obvious links between the practice of 'faking' orgasm, reciprocity and obligation. Although reciprocity appears premised on 'genuine' pleasure, faking provides the appearance of pleasure and its practice might signal how strongly the obligation to affirm a partners' performance, and reciprocate, can be experienced.

By exploring how participants discuss the practice of faking orgasms it can be seen that there are multiple readings of this relationship behaviour, and varying positions of 'power' attributed to individuals that engage in this practice. Overall, within the talk it appeared easier to dismiss the practice of faking orgasm as not containing 'power' for the woman involved. I would agree with these statements, in that at a behavioural level the practice of faking orgasm appears to substantiate discourses of male power (the pseudo-reciprocal gift discourse, the technique and work discourse). When faking orgasm is used to convey enjoyment this validates the dominant norms of male activity and female passivity within heterosex and as such exemplifies the active/passive male/female dichotomy (Roberts et al 1995, see also Gilfoyle et al 1992); which can be seen in both the pseudo-reciprocal gift discourse and the technique and work discourse. Gilfoyle et al (ibid) assert that the gift discourse reinforces the oppression of women by encouraging their passivity in the face of (male) activity. This is perhaps implicitly suggested in the 'faking orgasm as cowardice' discourse, as faking orgasm is constructed as a behaviour adopted when "you haven't got the bollocks" to voice dissatisfaction with the sexual encounter. Although I would argue that as Gilfoyle et al's exploration focuses on the issue of female oppression within male/female relational dynamics, it offers more scope for action, compared to the position constructed by the participants – as a problem with an individual's lack of courage independent of a

larger macro political/social context. Furthermore, the notion that male orgasm signifies the end of heterosex is also substantiated within the practice of faking orgasm and the discursive constructions previously explored; this concept is always inferred by implication through women faking orgasm as a means to end heterosex, as once they have performed theirs, their male partner can complete his. I think faking orgasm in long-term relationships or ‘going through the motions’ in long-term relationships is a complex site of pressure and expectations and may represent participants drawing on an implicit normative script (Gavey et al 1999), which helps to make sense of why women engage in such behaviours that would seem to be in conflict with their individual agency.

### **8.3.5. Can Men Fake it?**

I think an important avenue for future feature, which would disrupt conventional understandings of male desire and dominance within sexual encounters, would be to investigate the phenomenon of males faking pleasure or orgasm during sex. I think this is an unacknowledged component of male experiences of relationship practices and may help undermine or highlight further complexes of such discourses as the ‘male sex drive’. Within the group discussions the female participants touched very briefly on this phenomenon, but here ‘faking orgasm’ was related to an inability to fake an erection, rather than faking an orgasm per se:

#### **Extract:**

Ivy: so do, do men fake it?  
Eve: well they’d find it hard to {wouldn’t they [laughs]}  
Ivy: {they would find it hard to} wouldn’t they  
Eve: I think you’d be {a bit like [laughing]} yeah  
Flo: {I can’t imagine it} well surely you’d know [laughter] (group 2:2, 428-432)

Ivy initially posits the question whether men can “fake it”, i.e. fake orgasm, and this is immediately dismissed as an impossibility, “well they’d find it hard to wouldn’t they”, which Ivy then herself confirms. I think in this case orgasm, or rather faking an orgasm, has been inextricably linked to having an erect penis, and that this is what men would find hard to ‘fake’. This short exchange was not

followed up, and it would be interesting to discuss perceptions of men's inevitability to reach orgasm within sexual encounters. Disputing this commonsense understanding of men's unfailing pleasure and orgasm within sexual encounters would undermine many discourses of male sexuality and male 'sex-drives' and perhaps expand the discussion of the centrality of male desire and of an erect penis to sexual encounters, which has previously been shown to be problematic for both women and men (see for example Potts 2002, Thompson 2006).

## **8.4 Conclusions**

This chapter began with an exploration of the shopping/consumer discourse that participants drew on within the primary group discussions. This discourse was seen to present variety and choice in terms of the forms of personal relationships and sex that female participants engaged in. Women here were seen as 'active' consumers of men and relationships, and it was a discourse seen in opposition to the commonsense narrative of women being 'on the shelf' and men essentially doing the 'shopping' for women. There was an underlying discourse of 'the one' where women were seen as shopping for the 'right' relationship, and shopping necessarily ending when they found the relationship that 'fitted'. The second stage of data analysis, focusing on participants' reflections and elaboration of this discussion when they met for a second/third time to discuss my primary analysis, was also included and enabled an expansion of this discourse of shopping for relationships. Within this second stage, participants were seen to appropriate and expand on the discourse of shopping, and also construct this discourse analysis as having reframed their thinking on the topic. Within this secondary analysis women were again seen to be the active participants in relationship consumerism, and men were positioned as having less options and lesser access to 'shop for women'.

The analysis then moved onto discuss the primary analysis of 'women's involvement in sex – a passive position', which, in contrast to the previous discursive discussion, was seen to explore instances of female participants constructing 'passive' positions for women in sexual encounters. This further

focused on the construction of men as active and as driving sexual encounters, and women as the passive recipients of male 'technique' during sex. There was also a discussion of the practice of the 'performance' of sex and of 'faking' pleasure during sexual encounters occurring at the end of relationships, here the practice of sex was seen to be a function of attempting to maintain stability within a relationship and as a means of avoiding a discussion of the ending of a relationship. This analysis highlighted the complexity of negotiating (unwanted) sexual encounters within long term relationships. This section contained perhaps the most illuminating discussion related to study two of this thesis, where participants interrogation of this discourse (women's involvement in sex – a passive position) presented a complex examination of the multiple readings, and multiple subject positions, afforded within the relationship practice of faking orgasm and women's 'passive' position within sexual encounters – explored within the 'secondary' analysis sections.

This chapter marks the end of the data analysis results presented in this thesis. Having covered discourses of infidelity (chapter 5, chapter 6) and monogamy (chapter 4, chapter 6), relationship break-ups (chapter 7) and some interesting additional relationship discourses (this chapter, 8), the discussion now moves to the last chapter of this thesis containing final discussions and conclusions from this body of research.

# 9

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## **9.1. Introduction - Final Discussions & Conclusions**

Following the recommendations from Blow and Harnett (2005), in their substantive review of studies of infidelity, a qualitative investigation was undertaken to explore infidelity and monogamy in personal relationships. In order to fulfil the goal of overcoming the dearth of research exploring in-depth explanations of infidelity in personal relationships, a fully contextualised exploration of the concept of ‘infidelity’ was undertaken within this thesis and an interrogation of the role of language in shaping people’s understanding of infidelity and monogamy in personal relationships was achieved. Having discussed a wealth of findings obtained through this research project, covered in chapters four through eight, the aim of this final chapter is to overview the key discussion points and conclusions raised by these findings. Through a discursive analysis, the findings were discussed and explored throughout the data analysis chapters, so specific conclusions reached from individual discourses will not be restated here. The discussions in this chapter will focus on two main areas, firstly a discussion of the main conclusions reached from studying the concepts of infidelity and monogamy, and secondly a discussion of the ‘discourse analysis in action’ component of this thesis (named and explored as ‘study 2’ within chapter three). The final section of this chapter will then move onto explore reflexivity in relation to the research undertaken for this thesis.

## 9.2. Unpacking the importance of monogamy in relationships

**“I don’t see there’s any point in having a relationship whatsoever if you’re not going to be faithful”**

The analysis contained in chapters four and six made a significant contribution to understanding the discursive weight of ‘monogamy’ and its positioning within personal relationships. Monogamy at times was constructed as a grand narrative that participants orientated to to organise and negotiate their interpersonal relationships. Monogamy was seen to be constructed as more than just signifying sexual exclusivity or as being only related to sexual practices, but used as a grand hegemonic discourse to signify things like ‘loyalty’, ‘trust’, ‘security’ and ‘love’. Thus participants constructed the importance of monogamy as being implicitly related to the ability that ‘monogamy’ had to signify these other relationship concepts. This finding builds on the research conducted by Worth et al (2002), in their study exploring gay men’s accounts of love and intimate relationships. Where monogamy here was also seen to be a signifier for commitment and love within relationships, and was constructed as ‘*the* article of trust’ (ibid p243, italics in original). Within the group discussions participants also constructed and positioned monogamy as the defining feature of personal relationships, where a relationship was constructed as not being a relationship if it was not monogamous. Monogamy was seen to have a hegemonic status within participants’ discussions, within the group discussions it was often left unchallenged or unpacked by participants, and was seen to act as a ‘commonsense’ norm of how personal relationships are organised. A romantic narrative was seen to substantiate the importance of monogamy in relationships. There were few particularisations of monogamy within the group discussions, less discursive work was done to specify and limit monogamy to particular circumstances, which is in contrast to how monogamy was organised in some of the discussions within the individual interviews. To explain these differences in the construction of monogamy within individual interviews and group discussions it is perhaps important to consider the specific micro context and how this differed between the two sites of data collection. Within the group discussions participants all knew each other relatively well and were familiar with each other’s relationship experiences, whereas in the

individual interviews, the participants (myself and the interviewee) were acquaintances or strangers, with limited or no knowledge of each other's relationship experiences or opinions. Thus, although within the interviews there will always be some assumption of shared cultural/normative knowledge, within the group discussions there would have perhaps been a further/fuller assumption of shared knowledge, and hence, less particularisation of their individual approaches to monogamy within their relationships. This brief discussion here points to the importance of the micro context in shaping discussions and perhaps also the importance of a mixed methods approach in sampling data from different interpersonal sites. Group discussions did feature the undermining of the hegemonic status of monogamy, but these discussions also further highlighted how embedded discourses of monogamy were in discussions of relationships. Participants' investment in the discourse of monogamy was also seen during various parts of the analysis, but was particularly poignant in discussions of monogamy within extra-relationships. Here there was the introduction of the constructions of a 'dual-ogamous' position, where having an extra-relationship was constructed in such a way as to not undermine participants adherence to and belief in a monogamous ideal.

### **9.2.1. Negotiating Monogamy**

**“If you're spending nights together well you wouldn't consider that to be more than casual, you know, one night standing, then if you would be spending time together...in the evenings or during the day you know stuff like that...I think that would be falling towards more of an exclusive type thing”**

As noted above, although there was a grand discourse of monogamy often informing participants' discussions of their personal relationships, participants also diversely reworked discourses of monogamy and varyingly constructed these around their own lived experiences. For example, in the individual interviews, monogamy was varyingly im/positioned onto relationships, where at times one would have to 'work' at monogamy, versus monogamy as 'natural' and assured in relationships. The relationship context was also seen to impact on how monogamy was defined and constructed as important, in the difference between 'casual' and

‘serious’ relationships for example. These varying constructions of monogamy can be seen as grounds for misunderstandings in relationships, as participants draw on contextual frames of reference for the importance placed on monogamy within difference relationships. This points to the important conclusion that more attention needs to be paid to the contextualised nature of relationship constructions, both in terms of the implications for personal practice within personal relationships and also in terms of the implications for research practices. Psychological research may employ normative constructions of monogamy within the data gathering and data analysis phases, and although participants are aware of and may relate to hegemonic constructions, such constructions may also constrain and limit the personal relevance of such conceptualisations and the depth of understanding gained of the phenomenon under investigation. As we have seen from the analysis, there is variation within and across participants in terms of their construction and utilisation of monogamy within relationships, and people although aware of, do not necessarily employ the same hegemonic narrative of monogamy in relationships when discussing their personal experiences.

### **9.2.2. Implications of discourses of non-monogamy**

**“...my approach to monogamy, which is that I think it is a complete load of old toss, I just don’t believe in it, I don’t think it exists...”**

Counter discourses of non-monogamy further work to highlight monogamy’s constructed status and its im/position on personal relationships. Monogamy here is not the defining feature of the personal relationships; it is not constructed as *the* marker of trust and security. Sexual exclusivity here is not the marker that counts in terms of signifying further grand relational components of trust, love, loyalty etc. Perhaps, alternative constructions of monogamy here, point to ways in which infidelity may not be completely and unequivocally damaging to relationships, by moving away from sexual exclusivity as the only behavioural marker of ‘monogamy’ in relationships. This highlights that personal relationships can be organised in other ways that are not unpinned by sexual exclusivity, and also highlights that there are multiple ways to conceptualise and relate to the occurrence of extra-relational behaviours. Such discourses may also open up

further space for particularised negotiations of monogamy in relationships, and also for what other behaviours or relationship practices may also signify love, trust etc in an individuals' relationship – a space for other aspects to be as equally important as sexual exclusivity within a relationship, and perhaps to also be just as 'damaging'. By examining and unpacking discourses of monogamy and explicating monogamy's hegemonic condition as defining personal relationships, we can begin to see the interrelationship between discourses of monogamy and infidelity in relationships. And how such discourses maintain the power of infidelity to damage relationships and undermine the 'foundations' as this is what the sexual act (or lack of outside of the primary relationship) has come to uphold and signify. But we also see, through examining discourse of non-monogamy, that this is not the only way of constructing 'infidelity'.

### **9.3 Discussing Infidelity**

**“in my head infidelity means you’ve slept with someone it doesn’t mean [snogging]...I’d call that cheating I wouldn’t call that infidelity”**

Through an interrogation of discourses of infidelity within this thesis (chapters five and six) we have seen how the concept of 'infidelity' is constructed and gained a fuller understanding of its discursive organisation. There was an exploration of the subtle conceptual differences between the different terms used to denote 'infidelity' in a relationship, for example 'cheating', having an 'affair', being 'unfaithful'. Such a discursive analysis of the language used when discussing extra-relational encounters problematises the simplistic and varying usage of such terms within experimental psychological studies of infidelity (examined within section 2.4.2). The meanings participants attribute to such terms are not constructed in stable or universal ways, as such any meanings attributed by researchers when collecting and analysing data may not be the same as the participants. Experimental psychological research taps into commonsense understandings of infidelity within relationships, which participants do at times orientate to, and at other times dispute and undermine. Within both the group and individual interview discussions there was huge variation in what could and could

not be included under the banner of infidelity, and attention to this interpersonal variation would enrich any studies examining this phenomenon.

### **9.3.1. Negotiating infidelity**

**“...infidelity is to have a privileged relationship with someone else when you are in a relationship...this means things like going out to lunch to having sex...it really depends ...on the way you feel about it”**

Within the analysis sections attention was given to how participants negotiated what behaviours were positioned and constructed as infidelity in relationships. There was seen to be an overarching discourse of sex and sexual activity being used to define what behaviours constituted infidelity in a relationship. Importantly the distinction between ‘emotional’ and ‘sexual’ infidelity was seen to breakdown, where sexual content was seen to mediate the inclusion of ‘emotional’ behaviours as infidelity, and where sexual behaviours were often constructed as problematic because of the implied/imbued ‘emotional’ components and viewed in relation to their connection to grand emotional discourses of trust, honesty etc. We can see how this explicitly relates to the discourses of monogamy and how this was not just about sexual exclusivity, but rather also about broader, implicit discourses. It becomes the signification of behaviours that is the important area of focus, what these behaviours are constructed as meaning should be focused on more fully, rather than drawing on commonsense narratives to infer what these behaviours mean to individuals. This further supports the work of Kippax (2002), who emphasised the importance of paying attention to the social production of meaning, in that the meanings people attribute to theirs and others behaviour is related to the micro/macro interpersonal contexts drawn on to make sense of such experiences. Again, it becomes not about specific behaviours being classified as infidelity, but rather the meanings people attribute to these behaviours that determines whether, and at what points, they are constructed as infidelity. As we have seen, potentially any behaviour can be constructed as infidelity due to the meanings people variously attribute and imbue behaviours with. This was seen further within the group discussions, where there was less adherence to bottom-line arguments of what constituted infidelity (how sex functioned within individual interviews), but rather what counted as infidelity was mediated by such

constructions as ‘intent’ and ‘impulses’. The term ‘infidelity’ is not a fixed phenomenon that participants orientate to, even when we consider the grand narrative of sex and how it can underpin many accounts of infidelity as a bottom-line argument. The construct of ‘infidelity’ is variously defined and mediated by participants’ discussions and not by concrete ‘acts’ or behaviours that are independently defined as infidelity. This perhaps points to an important interpersonal conclusion, that given this variability in conceptualisations, explicitly those related to infidelity, there is huge potential for misunderstandings and miscommunications unless individuals explicate their personal position within each specific relationship context.

Furthermore, participants negotiated the commonsense scripting of behaviours as in/fidelity within their discussions, and normative discourses where used as external referents in terms of what would be defined as in/fidelity. These discourses (for example, that it is sexual intercourse that marks an encounter as infidelity) were discussed as being too narrow and participants worked to present more personalised, contextualised definitions. It therefore becomes paramount to pay attention to individual narratives and to not assume the relevance and applicability of hegemonic conceptualisations of infidelity in relationships. Rather these hegemonic conceptualisations need to be given value by the participants themselves and ‘earn’ their value within individuals’ dialogues as being significant (Berg 2007). This obviously has important implications for how we research and study infidelity. Pointing to the need for adopting a research approach that enables the researcher to pay attention to, and allow for, individual meanings and interpretations within the data gathering process. Otherwise the research will only seek to confirm these commonsense, normative definitions of what is and what is not infidelity.

### **9.3.2. Infidelity as a continuum**

**“I think its quite difficult, its probably a kind of continuum and probably changes to the boundaries what...it is to be unfaithful at a point in time”**

As some of the discursive constructions suggested, perhaps it is more useful to conceptualise in/fidelity as a continuum of behaviours rather than to position

infidelity and fidelity as binary opposites. This may allow for a more explicit particularisation of behaviours as in/fidelity and the scope for ‘grey’ areas in terms of what behaviours ‘count’ as in/fidelity. Such a scale conceptualisation of infidelity may help to acknowledge the relatedness between behaviours and also how the construction of some behaviours allows for them to seem more infidelitous than others. A scale conceptualisation may further necessitate the complication of definitions of in/fidelity, and perhaps more accurately reflect participants’ discourses and conversations of this area, rather than the binary distinction. This also relates to the binary distinction made between sexual and emotional behaviours (e.g. Abraham et al 2001, Atkins et al 2001, Bailey et al 1994, Barash and Lipton 2001, Boekhout et al 1998, Buss and Shackelford 1997, Buss et al 1992, Buss et al 1999, Cramer et al 2000, Daly and Wilson 1992, Dijkstra et al 2001, Harris 2000, Harris 2003, Harris 2004, Harris and Christenfeld 1996, Shackelford 2002, Shackelford and Buss 1997, Sheets and Wolfe 2001, Wiederman and Kendall 1999, Wiederman and Lamar 1998), as when examined, such distinctions break down as any interpersonal behaviour is potentially constructed and scripted differently within and across participants.

### **9.3.3. Negotiating a ‘cheaters’ position**

**“I think I cheated on him, well I did, but only a little bit”**

Finally, a further important part of the discussion of infidelity in personal relationships was the examination of ‘cheaters’ subject positions. A focus on these discussions highlighted the discursive work ‘cheaters’ accomplished to mediate and negotiate this subject position. As stated previously (see 5.6-5.6.7) this pointed to the conclusion that infidelity, and the subject position of ‘cheater’ is something that *needed* to be accounted for. Particular discursive devices were seen to help participants traverse the morally loaded position of cheater when discussing their extra-relational encounters. This highlights perhaps an important area of future research, examining more specifically the experiences of those who have ‘cheated’ in relationships, and the difficulty with which participants may

experience and relate this behaviour. Further this discursive works points to the sensitivity needed on the part of the researcher, and practitioners, when investigating this phenomenon, to avoid further reproducing this negative positioning within the context of any interview dialogue.

#### **9.4. The importance of language**

**“Sue: ...some words sound more serious than others like infidelity sounds really serious (?: yeah)**

**Tina: and unfaithful (Sue: yeah) whereas cheating-**

**Sue: -cheating yeah-**

**Tina: -it could be just a small {not in a really serious relationships}**

**Sue: {like just flirting with someone yeah}”**

The conclusions discussed here, and the results from the thesis as a whole, points further to the theoretical importance of paying attention to the constructed nature of language and its role in constructing varying relationship realities. This emphasises the importance of paying attention to how language is used and how researchers construct the phenomena under investigation with the terminology used within their studies. If researchers utilise hegemonic relationships concepts, for example, that personal relationships are defined by and employ monogamy and that monogamy is defined by sexual exclusivity, then researchers need to pay attention to and acknowledge such assumptions within the research process and within any examination of results. This also highlights the importance of explicating these assumptions to participants during the research process, such that the researcher's treatment of reported behaviours does not re-script behaviours as in/fidelity within the context of the participants' relationships. One person's monogamy becomes another person's infidelity (see section 4.7, and Jackson and Scott 2004). Further, this problematises the inconsistencies of terminology used by researchers, and the lack of acknowledgement that subtle changes in the language used may draw on different constructions of personal relationships. This was also acknowledged by Yarab et al (1998), who noted that

there is a variety of terms used by researchers to discuss the same behaviour, but also researchers refer to similar but different behaviours with the same terminology. This further highlights the often simplistic and positivist use of language within experimental studies and how this can particularly be seen as problematic within the context of the results examined within this thesis.

These findings point to the importance of paying attention to and allowing for variability within participants responses, such sensitivity will further deepen and broaden our understanding of such relationship phenomenon. Careful examination of the data collection methods used is important, both for ensuring hegemonic assumptions are acknowledged, and variability of participants conceptualisations is accommodated, therefore the use of certain methods may limit the exploration of relationship topics, for example, the used of forced-choice questions. Such sensitivity may further explain many of the contradictions found within experimental psychological research, for example, the oft-stated contradiction between beliefs held and behaviours reported (for example, Allen et al 2005, Previti and Amato, 2004, Sheppard et al 1995, Buss and Shackelford 1997). Within experimental studies, such inconsistencies are explained variably in terms of participants' prior experiences, cultural differences, present relationship status etc, rather, the results discussed in this thesis points to the complexity of accounting practices and the varying im/position of monogamy within relationships. Such differences and variability is inevitable if we consider the constructed and constructive nature of language (Potter and Wetherell, 1987, Potter 1996) and view language as an action-orientated process (Potter 2004), that cannot easily be examined as reflecting consistent behaviours and beliefs. This discussion is continued below, in an examination of the methodological approach adopted within this study.

## **9.5. Discussing 'discourse analysis in action'**

**"I think it's positive perhaps talking about it but it's not positive in talking about it in this way"**

Within chapter three of this thesis the theoretical and methodological approach informing this research was explored. As well as structuring research to explore

the social constructions of infidelity and monogamy, a second aim was introduced which was to explore a methodology for ‘discourse analysis in action’. This involved the development of a methodology that integrated features of a discourse analytical project with some of the principles of action research. This was borne out of a theoretical commitment to language as being a site that is both constructed and constructive of our everyday reality (Potter and Wetherell, 1987, Potter 1996), and as such, discourse was examined for social constructions and the everyday accomplishments of reality in the course of social relationships and interactions (Potter 1998). This was coupled with an awareness of related discourse analytical studies (for example, Gavey et al 1999, Weedon 1987, Allen 2003) and the presentation of discourses that could possibly challenge or undermine hegemonic constructions. I argued within chapter three, that such a ‘challenge’ needed to be grounded conversationally, within the sites of discourse examined, i.e. does a discourse work to undermine or create alternatives when people use it within interpersonal interactions, can such formulations be developed conversationally? Such a debate led to the development of a methodological framework to explore and facilitate participants’ questioning and reflection on discourses, with a view to examining further the ability of discourse to challenge or substantiate particular ways of being, further exploring the subject positions given by particular discourses and thinking about other possible ways of being/ways of talking about particular relationship practices; all of which being grounded in language and interpersonal conversations.

#### **9.5.1. Re-worked example – the inevitable damaging effects of infidelity**

**“as well as being fucked up by his previous girlfriend (Helen: I know) he’s fucked up by your previous behaviour”**

The generated results from this study were integrated and explored within chapters six, seven and eight of this thesis, one discourse of infidelity, ‘inevitable damage’, will be returned to here to enable a discussion of the impact of this methodological component in terms of the analysis generated. A discourse of infidelity causing ‘inevitable damage’ to relationships and individuals was discussed within the primary analysis and was presented back to the participants.

In the primary analysis, this discourse was presented as part of a hegemonic discourse of infidelity necessarily causing damage to relationships, and that within such a construction there was seen to be unlimited scope for the future damage of infidelity, both within the relationship that it had occurred in and also through disclosing past infidelities (within a different relationship) to a current or past partner. It was explored how the partner who transgressed in previous relationships was constructed as responsible for how their present partner would feel, and how they were positioned as accountable for any damage caused. Thus it was seen that how you may be in a current relationship would be determined by how your partner was in their previous relationship, this construction was seen to work as a powerful explanatory device as blame was attributed to your current, or past, partners, for present feelings and behaviours. Also within this construction was the discussion of how these negative effects could also occur 'subconsciously', and therefore individuals were constructed as not having the power to not be effected by past relationships. Within the secondary stages of discussion and discourse analysis, this discourse was reconfirmed in places where participants offered further examples of where this 'inevitable' damage could be seen, although this began to be reformulated in terms of an individuals' inability to 'let go' rather than as part of infidelity's inherent damaging characteristics. Discussions followed as to the positive/negative consequences of framing infidelity and relationship experiences in this way, where a discourse of control and self-determination was developed to counter the lack of individual control fostered within the construction of 'inevitable' damage. Participants discussed the need to be more aware and reflective of relationship narratives and how they position themselves and others. They promoted active listening as a strategy to become aware of the assumptions that they may present and inadvertently support when they draw on a particular discourse. So within this discussion and analysis, a discourse of control and self-determination was introduced within the language used by participants, and was seen to be a 'grounded' discourse (i.e. it was used by participants in the data examined) that challenged the necessarily inevitable damage caused by infidelity to individuals and their relationships. This process of primary discourse analysis, and the second stages of discussions and analysis, therefore expanded and built on the original analysis, introducing some further

evidence of substantiating a discourse of inevitable damage whilst also introducing discursive ways of challenging this discourse.

### **9.5.2. Disputing readings, disrupting power**

**“Ivy: yeah but Kate’s picked up on the [reading] ‘faking it can present position-position of power for women...”**

**Eve: ...I don’t think its power I think its cowardice personally”**

This second component, involving taking my original discourse analysis back to group participants for them to debate and explore further, was also seen to be a valuable practice in and of itself, as it involved further collaboration with participants and enabled disruption of my position as ‘expert’ in reading their language. In two ways, they explicitly challenged and disputed my readings in places, and secondly, for involving them as ‘experts’ in terms of exploring relationship language and relationship practices. These further group meetings also added to the depth and breadth of the discussions of relationship practices and hence to the discourse analysis and results produced. The process of dialogue around the discourse analysis enabled a more interactive, multidirectional process of discourse analysis which also further added value to the process and the results produced. Rather than the analysis being uni directional, with myself as researcher analysing the participants’ words, it was transformed into a more active process with participants able to read and interpret my analysis, and their own words, and then myself again conducting discourse analysis of the discussions; this added the depth and multi-dimensional aspect to a discourse analytical study.

### **9.5.3. Language and language only, going beyond language**

In terms of this component of the study the conversational and interactional exploration of discourses was achieved, being able to further explore issues of resistance, power and discursive alternatives to particular discursive constructions, and as such presented a theoretical and methodologically informed approach to exploring alternative discursive constructions in situ. This was informed by the assumption that for alternative/challenging discourses to be effective, they have to be grounded in language/interpersonal interactions and mobilised conversationally, but is the focus on language and language only enough? Parker (1998) explores the importance of going beyond language to comprehend the underlying political and material structures which facilitate ‘conditions of

change', enabling some rather than other discourses. Similarly, Parker (1992) and Willig (1999) discuss the material constraints upon discursive change, where the material organisation of space and direct physical coercion will limit/enable particular discursive constructions and ways of being. As such, an examination of 'material realities' influencing the participants' social constructions is perhaps needed and was not explicitly included within the present study, this representing both a limitation and avenue for future research. Although a form of epistemic social constructionism (Edley 2001) underpinned this present study, where language was viewed as the medium through which we understand and represent the world, through the accomplishment of this research endeavour and experiences of other research paradigms (see for example, the collaborative research framework adopted by Riley and McArdle 2005-2007, and Barker and Ritchie (2004) or memory work paradigms, see Gillies, Harden, Johnson, Strange, Reavey, and Willig, (2004)), it now becomes possible to envisage further ways of developing the 'discourse analysis in action' framework. Indeed, Sims-Schouten, Riley and Willig (2007) in a methodological paper explore the integration of a relativist approach to language (discursive practice) and a realist approach to the extra-discursive, setting out guidelines for which to examine the extra-discursive through three domains, embodiment, institutions and materiality, accompanying a discursive study. Incorporating a 'material' dimension, examining participants specific relationship contexts and examining the link between talking and acting differently would be an important site for future research. The need for this dimension was highlighted most by the analysis of discourses of 'faking orgasm' and the bottom-line arguments presented by participants in terms of (not) discussing (the lack of) pleasure within heterosexual encounters. Discourse analysis has shown how the language within sexual encounters privileges men's desires and wishes (Crawford et al 1994), and the results presented within this thesis builds on the examination of discourses of faking pleasure and enjoyment explored by other researchers (see Gilfoyle et al 1992, Roberts et al 1995, Potts 2000, for example), perhaps now what is needed is an examination of the material realities of sexual encounters which facilitate and limit particular gendered actions, and a collaborative research endeavour could begin to explore the intersection between the material and the discursive in this domain.

## 9.6. Conclusions

**“Kate: Ok, well that’s about it, that wasn’t too painful was it?**

**Clare: No! Are you going to put that bit in the transcript? [laughs]**

**Kate: yeah [laughter]”**

This thesis has made a significant contribution to understanding interpersonal contextualisation of infidelity and monogamy in personal relationships, which has necessarily complicated our understanding of these phenomena. This has led to an unpacking of relationship discourse and a fuller understanding of the concepts of ‘monogamy’ and ‘infidelity’ in everyday accounting practices. This thesis has been able to investigate the extent to which constructions of monogamy and infidelity, and also relationship break-ups and further relationship practices, are discursively intertwined and should therefore be explored and studied together within research. The discussions have pointed to the potential grounds for confusion and interpersonal complications when individuals negotiate the terrain of monogamy and infidelity in relationships, and points to the importance of explicating these relationship concepts as researchers, and the need to disseminate this complexity at the personal-practice level. Further this thesis has contributed to a theoretical and methodological debate on the development of the use of discourse analysis as an appropriate methodology, the development of a framework to explore ‘discourse analysis in action’ posited the benefits of incorporating principles from action research into a discourse analysis method. This methodology component was not only theoretically interesting in terms of methodology, but was also invaluable in terms of adding to the analysis and our understanding of infidelity and monogamy in personal relationships.

## 9.7. Reflexivity

In increasing the integrity and evaluation of qualitative research, researchers need to evaluate how intersubjective elements influence data collection and analysis (Finlay 2002). This is thought to involve a thoughtful, conscious self-awareness,

that further helps to acknowledge that we actively construct knowledge that we produce as researchers, and therefore are integral to any sense that is made throughout the research process. Thus it is important to explore the dynamics of the researcher-researched relationship, which is seen as fundamentally shaping the research findings and data collection (ibid, Banister 1994). Acknowledging my specific impact on the research is important in allowing readers to further assess the validity of my presented findings, and also helps to further situate subjectivity within all aspects of the generation of this thesis, also acknowledging that a different researcher may have responded differently within the research context, such that they will have created a different relationship with participants, asking different questions (Finlay 2002); the research relationship that I created with participants will have fundamentally shaped the data collection process and the resulting data used within this study. At a minimum reflexivity should acknowledge the existence of researcher subjectivity and explicitly attempt to locate the researcher within the research process (Finlay 2002). Of course such a reflexive account depends on my skills as a self-conscious, critically aware person (ibid) and any attempt at reflexivity here may present a picture of an easily accessible self-awareness, that is linear and easily untangled from the multiple, interactive relationships occurring throughout this research endeavour; which is obviously not the case.

Taking a discursive view of reflexive accounting, means that issues of stake, accountability, blame etc are no less applicable here. This will always be a partial and rhetorical account of my role in shaping the research, however 'honest' and reflexive I am to be. Further, Finlay (2002) usefully acknowledges that attempting the process of reflexivity may mean taking 'the threatening path of self-disclosure' (p532) and that this process may be avoided altogether for the fear of external criticism. I attempted to acknowledge this dilemma of self-presentation within the preface to this thesis, foregrounding my own perception of peoples reading of my academic credibility depending on the 'stories' I tell in terms of my motivations for completing this thesis. I draw on Banister's (1994) guidelines for accomplishing reflexivity here, as well as Wilkinson's (1988) distinctions between three different (but interrelated) areas of reflexivity – personal, functional and disciplinary; these are approached in turn below.

### 9.7.1. Personal reflexivity

At the risk of ‘navel gazing’ (Finlay 2002) and whilst acknowledging Finlay’s discussion of reflexivity as it is relevant within a social constructionist paradigm – centring on the researcher-researched relationship and the construction of knowledge – within this section I would like to explore the ways in which my personal experience has impacted the production of this thesis, and I would also like to offer some reflection on the effect of the production of this thesis has had on my personal life and relationships.

Having conducted this thesis over a relatively long period of time (seven years), it has been a challenge in compiling this final version of my thesis in terms of presenting a clear, consistent ‘researcher’ voice. This time frame has meant many developments in academic experience, necessarily shifting perspectives and many crises in terms of academic alliances, developing a fuller understanding of realist and relativist traditions within discourse analysis. I started with a strong commitment to a relativist understanding of discourse, verging on an ontological commitment to there being nothing beyond language! Thus Edley’s (2001) paper discussing epistemological and ontological relativism was especially useful in developing my thinking in this area. The emphasis on a discursive psychological approach to language presented within this thesis is emblematic of my theoretical understanding developed within the initial years of this research endeavour. As discussed in 9.5.3 above, experiences of other research paradigms, taking part in a feminist collaborative project convened by Sarah Riley and Kate McArdle has necessarily shifted my thinking further in terms of trying to theorise and find a space for the extra-discursive and ‘practice’ within my thinking. Although this experience coming at the latter stages of completing this thesis, and as such, not represented in the body of analysis.

In terms of my personal life this has also undergone changes throughout the completion of this thesis, and it is hard to unpack the impact of my own personal relationships on this thesis. I remember when I started the research, being committed to a relativist view of language, I was convinced by the rhetorical and constructed nature of hegemonic romantic love discourses. This however took me down an unfortunate path of staying in a long-term, ‘romance-free’ relationship, for far too long, and I know that participants discussions of sexual practices at the end of a relationship particularly resonated with my own experiences (see section 8.3.). This relationship challenged by belief in social constructionism and necessarily made me reflect on the blurry and complex line of when social constructionism theory meets personal experiences (I have yet to reconcile these, and continue to reflect on the ‘extra-discursive’ in personal relationships). I know that studying social constructionism and personal relationships has undoubtedly complicated my own personal relationships, a joke I share with a fellow PhD colleague is that we have ‘educated ourselves off the market’, this also seems

quite pertinent in my case! I remain somewhat immune to romantic love discourses and any commitment to a relationship or individual, always seems like a double leap of faith for me, falling in love being an act of faith, and then falling in love having deconstructed relationships and its cornerstone monogamy, seems like a double-bind. Despite this, I have been engaged for the latter parts of my PhD, but still remain somewhat ambivalent and resistant to the importance placed on long-term relationships and ‘coupledom’ within society, and as such, often experience unease and tension with my compliance to relationship norms of monogamy and marriage.

### **9.7.2. Functional reflexivity**

Functional reflexivity involves thinking about my own location and approach and how this may have impacted on the various stages of the research process. Important areas of impact here will be my relationship with the participants taking part in this research and my presentation of analysis and findings. Within both the interviews and focus groups I adopted a relaxed ‘tell me all’ approach, and although using a semi-structured approach to the interview/group content, this was very much flexibly applied such that participants could guide the discussions and often went ‘off topic’ in terms of my aims of discussing monogamy and infidelity in relationships. This relaxed approach to the discussions undoubtedly had an effect on the nature of the discussions, and was guided by my location within a feminist methodology and wanting participants to be able to bring up areas of experience that were important to them rather than attempting to constrain discussions in terms of my original ideas and aims, part of my attempt to manage issues of ‘power’ within the research process. This was particularly evident within group discussions, where I did not adopt a ‘moderator’ role, thus I would introduce a discussion topic and let the participants ‘run with it’, only interjecting another discussion topic when the group finished talking, this often meant an inclusion of lots of discussions relevant to personal relationships, but not necessarily explicitly related to discussions of monogamy and infidelity. I am very much aware that a more structured approach to interviewing and group discussions would have produced a different quality of data, more focused on my areas of interest, but at the time, I felt it more important to allow participants to

discuss aspects relevant to them and to guide discussion topics themselves. This led to some further interesting areas of discussion, for example, on relationship break-ups, which then formed part of my analysis presented within this thesis.

The prior relationships, or lack of, I had with participants also impacted on the researcher-researched relationship. With the individual interviews all participants were either strangers, who I had never met prior to the interview taking place, or acquaintances, people I contacted or who contacted me through mutual friends. I think this lack of prior knowledge of each other and each others own relationship experiences, affected how participants orientated to me. I discuss this in section 9.2, where participants perhaps further felt the need to justify and personalise the accounts they offered, as I was an unknown quantity in terms of my approach to personal relationships. The group discussions were arranged slightly differently, where one group member was a friend of mine who was then good friends with the other group members, this arrangement would have again impacted on the quality of group discussions, where there was much more 'shared' knowledge within the group which may have led to less accounting and personalisation of their own individual views, as compared to the individual interviews. Through the use of discourse analysis within this thesis there is always already the acknowledgement of the relative nature of social reality and the possibility of multiple readings of any given text (Banister 1994). Throughout the analysis phases of the research, I attempted to be systematic in my approach to the texts and open to varying ways of reading the discursive accounts presented. Also with the help of discussions with my supervisor, and through presenting my ideas at conferences, I attempted to ensure that I hadn't missed alternative 'obvious' readings, but this is also coupled with the awareness that another researcher with a different personal and academic location could very well draw out different readings from the corpus of data examined.

### **9.7.3. Disciplinary Reflexivity**

It has been hard to reflect on the influence of the wider context of having conducted this research within the discipline of psychology; perhaps because it is the wider, macro context within which I am situated and that which will have had a broader area of influence in shaping my approach to this research. Being aligned

with a critical psychological approach to research and theory, which is the 'other' within psychological research, I worked hard on justifying my particular approach to research and departmental presentations helped and forced me to hone my critique of experimental methodologies within the study of personal relationships. The Psychology of Women Section, and being a member of the committee for 5 years, helped stave off the isolation I felt at times in researching a topic, and using a methodology, which I felt as 'other' to the main avenues of research within my psychology department. Although this location has very much helped shape and develop my methodological awareness and knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of different methodological traditions. The location within psychology, and positioning my approach in opposition to the tradition and dominance of experimental psychology, has perhaps made the 'subjectivity' and indeed this reflexivity a challenging component of this research, and indeed accounts for my decision to include a reflexive preface to the thesis - foregrounding and acknowledging the dilemma of presentation of subjectivity and what would be viewed as 'biases' within an experimental paradigm.

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## Appendix 1 – Interview Questions

### Interview Structure

#### Basic demographic questions

Age  
Dating Status  
Ethnicity

### ***Guide Questions***

Can you recall any experiences of infidelity in relationships?

-Where a partner of yours was unfaithful?

-Where you were unfaithful during a relationship?

(Include a discussion of these events, the relationship contexts and the outcomes of the relationships)

What are your opinions regarding infidelity in relationships?

-Is it acceptable?

-Is it forgivable

What are your opinions about monogamy in relationships?

-Is this something that is negotiated at the start of a relationship?

-Is monogamy assumed when starting a relationship?

## **Appendix 2 – Participant Information Sheet**

### Participant Information Sheet

Researcher: Kate Nicholls  
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This project forms part of a PhD thesis being completed at City University (London). The aim of this project is to investigate the way in which aspects of personal relationships are given meaning, and the ways in which ‘meanings’ change across contexts. This project focuses on ‘infidelity’ and ‘monogamy’ seeking to understand how meanings are ascribed to these terms and how the meaning of these concepts are generated interpersonally. So they are not viewed as fixed categories, but rather flexible concepts that can be constituted differently by people.

It is hoped that this study will be able to highlight the ways in which different constructions, different ways of talking/thinking about relationship experiences, in turn are able to have varying consequences for the individual and how we understand these relationship issues.

For those participating in this research confidentiality will be applied, in that no one taking part in this research will be represented in a way that would allow identification. Every participant has the right to withdraw from the research: interviews will be recorded/video taped with the participants’ permission. The audio/visual tapes will be typed up as a written transcript, and these transcripts will then be used within my research thesis. This material may then be used in presentations at academic conferences and articles in academic journals. Again, your confidentiality will be ensured throughout.

Interviews and group discussion will be semi-structured and will focus on a discussion of personal experiences and opinions of infidelity and monogamy. There is the possibility of follow-up meetings, where I will discuss the findings from the previous interview/discussion. The participant/s in the group discussion will have the chance to provide feedback on these findings and to offer any further points for consideration. This second discussion forms a valuable part of the research as it enables a form of collaboration between the researcher and participants; as a participant in either an interview or multiple group discussions, you still have the right to withdraw from the research at anytime. Participants can ask questions and request further information at any stage during the research.

The final thesis will be made available via the internet to all participants taking part in this research.

## **Appendix 3 – Group Discussion Topics**

### **Group Discussion Structure**

Basis demographic questions:      Age  
   Dating status  
   Ethnicity

### **Topics/Questions**

What terms can you think of for ‘infidelity’?

What would you define as infidelity?

What type(s) of infidelity are acceptable/unacceptable?

What type(s) of infidelity are forgivable?

What thinks influence the outcome for relationships after infidelity?

What are the possible outcomes for a relationship after infidelity?

How important is monogamy/fidelity in a relationship?

What things are importance in relationships?

## Appendix 4 – Guidance notes & sample of primary analysis (group 2:2)

Dear all,

Thanks again for all gathering to review the analysis I have done on the transcript from our original group discussion. This is a brief draft analysis and consists of some extracts from the transcript, together with some comments and bullet points which constitutes my analysis at this stage; and which is the material I would like you to discuss. I shall give some examples of the sorts of questions you should ask and discuss when reviewing the material (next page).

Things to bear in mind:

Firstly, this analysis may not look like what you expected, this analysis is a ‘discourse analysis’ of the group discussion we had before. I have also attached here an example<sup>5</sup> of completed discourse analysis work to hopefully give you a better understanding of what this type of research looks like and how things are analysed.

Discourse analysis involves a careful reading of texts (in this case the transcribed group discussion) with a view to identifying patterns of meaning. These patterns will be in the form of both variability (difference in either content or form of accounts) and consistency (the identification of features shared by accounts). The material below represents the search for consistency, the common ways that particular aspects of relationships were talked about.

It is important to note that this is just one possible ‘reading’ of the material, and within my research project as a whole, time is spent reflecting on my own personal/theoretical standpoint which inform my analysis and research. Also it might feel a bit weird seeing your words in print and being analysed, so prepare yourself for this! Again it is important to remember it is not about delving behind the talk, or for working out what ‘really’ happened in these relationships, but rather looking at the common ways people talk about relationships, the ‘norms’ that are used when talking about relationships etc. Hopefully this will become clear as you read through the example of discourse analysis research attached and then move on to discuss the material relevant to you.

Please remember, you have the right to withdraw from this research, or to not discuss any aspects you do not want to, for whatever reason, and without any explanation.

Thank you very much for taking part.

Kate

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<sup>5</sup> This was Burns (1998) and an extract from Nicholls (2001)

### **Questions to ask/discuss when reading each theme/discourse**

Do you think it is positive, i.e. do you personally benefit, to talk about relationships in this way?

How could this experience be talked about differently?

Is anyone viewed negatively, or who doesn't benefit, when talking about relationships in this way?

Who has the 'power' here? For example who is constructed as the 'active' person, who is in control here, when relationships are viewed this way?

What do you think it says about gender relations? Like, specifically what impression does it give of males and females in relationships here?

How could you express this differently? What would make it more empowering? For you? For the other parties involved?

Are there any relationships/situations where you wouldn't talk/think like this?

## **Feedback Themes/Discourses**

### **1) Shopping/Consumer Discourse**

This discourse presents a position of 'consumer' choice in terms of picking partners and also in terms of the types of relationships and sex partaken in.

'...I was always on the look out for people always (.) looking for something better'

'...try them on for size before you find the right one'

'try it on for size see what's out there'

Talking of one-night stands and sex in long-term relationships:

'you've got to treat it differently it's like the difference between (.) fresh carrots and canned carrots you know what I mean sometimes you fancy one sometimes you fancy another'

Here, different types of sex are constructed as being like different varieties of carrots. The participants are able to present a positive image of there being different types of sex that women can engage in, which is resistant to the dominant construction of sex = love = lasting relationship.

Here it is women making the consumer choice and therefore the ones positioned with power and choice.

Also, again talking about different types of sex/relationships:

'when I'm hungry will I go and cook myself a full meal or will I just go out to the larder and pick out a huge {packet of crisps} you know {tin of carrots}'

No longer a 'one size fits all' approach to having relationships, this shopping discourse constructs a variety of relationships that are entered into to suit a variety of needs.

This discourse also represents an alternative position to women being 'on the shelf', which presents men as the active party in choosing partners/women. Here it is constructed as women who are shopping for men.

Constructs a 'margin for error' when looking for relationships, not the pressure to settle down straight away.

Echoes the lad-et culture?

## 2) Future 'effects' of infidelity

The group have been discussing 'owning' up to having committed infidelity:

Eve: -you've got to think about the damage it might do to them in future relationships

Helen: well this is it (inaud)

***Eve: look at Craig and how he is (Helen: yeah) with his ex***

Helen: yeah I know yeah

Eve: he's got on going effects hasn't it sometimes I think its much better if they don't know just for that reason

Helen: yeah but then I think do they are they really going to give a shit now {or would they just want to know out of curiosity like me}

Eve: {but even like subconsciously} make them non-trusting of the next person

Helen: I know, this is why I don't ever bring the question up (Eve: yeah) because I wouldn't be honest so why would I expect them to be honest so

Eve: but you've been totally honest with Craig now haven't (Helen: yeah) which means Craig knows how you've acted in the past

Helen: yeah which {is why}

Eve: which {probably} accounts for

Helen: which is why he's so {insecure about it all}

Eve: {as well as being fucked up by his previous girlfriend (Helen: I know) he's fucked up by your previous behaviour

Within this exchange Eve positions Helen as being responsible for how her partner may feel, not just presently but in the future as well. This provides unlimited scope for the future damage, responsibility and blame that may be allocated to an individual after committing infidelity or other relationship misdemeanours. This also has implications for how you are in relationships, this may not be under your control but rather at the mercy of your previous partners' behaviours. It is constructed as important that you think about the 'future' damage your behaviour might have on the person within their subsequent relationships. Also, the effects of infidelity are constructed as possibly happening 'subconsciously', within this construction you are positioned as not having the power to not be affected by past relationships. This discourse works to silence counterarguments, like 'are they really going to give a shit now', about little/no harm being done by infidelity, as the harm could be occurring subconsciously. Talking about infidelity in this way maximises the possible damage done through infidelity.

### 3) Relationship Break-ups

The group have been discussing relationship break-ups:

Helen: I've never had a hard break-up

Flo: I've had loads [laughs]

Helen: I've never I've never had my heart broken at all which is why I think the thought of not being with Craig fills me with such dread because if we split then I'm going to have my heart broken-

Eve: -see that's what I'm scared of but in advance of the relationship you're scared of it now while you're in it and I'm scared {(inaud) because I've never been hurt either}

Helen: {yeah but I'd rather be in (inaud) than not}

Eve: and I'm also feeling like I'm waiting for the other boot to drop (:yeah) I also feel like god, its my turn next, oh in that case I just wont bother do you know what I mean

Helen: yeah {but they say its} better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all don't they

Within this exchange two discourses are drawn upon, 1) the inevitability of break-up

pain, and 2) the 'loved and lost' discourse. The account of relationship break-ups constructs the idea that there is an inevitability about having one's heart broken in the process of breaking up and moreover that the individuals involved have no choice in the matter. Furthermore this is constructed as something that is done to you 'I'm going to have my heart broken', Helen is positioned as having no choice in this when she splits up with Craig, she will have her heart broken. So the break-up pain is constructed as something that you do not have control over.

Drawing on the 'loved and lost' discourse creates a space for the validity of bad break-ups (in the sense that you'll have your heart broken) within the dominant construction of the 'power of love'. This 'loved and lost' discourse also works to put a more positive spin on break-ups, i.e. it is worthwhile if they are hard and that it is better to have gone through the process than to have not. Again this discourse provides validity to break-ups being hard as it functions to normalise having one's heart broken and feeling hurt because that is better than not having loved at all.

This discourse also works to link love with pain, and that this is perhaps something to aspire to; which was drawn on earlier in the discussion:

Helen has been talking about her present relationship and has just said that she thinks her and her partner would cope if they split up:

Eve: {which is funny because a year ago} I distinctly remember you telling me for half an hour that if Craig ever died you would have to kill yourself {because you couldn't live without him}

Helen: {oh I would ah ah I couldn't} I couldn't {if he died}

Flo: {I would just love to feel that way} about anybody but I just don't, I really don't.

This highlights the desirability of such a powerful, romantic love.

#### 4) Women's involvement in sex

The group have been talking about threesomes, and Eve begins talking about the fact that she nearly had one:

Eve: really funny though you know doing the threesome from Craig's point of view but from the fact I don't really fancy him but I'm sure I could cope with that I mean the one thing about women is you don't actually have to fancy them (Helen: yeah yeah) you can fake it quite easily you know [laughter]

The conversation around sex here is not about enjoyment, but rather 'coping' with the situation – at least from the women's perspective. Within these negotiations/exchanges the women's voice seems to be absent, and it is the men's wishes that seem to be prevailing. 'Faking it' can present a position of power for women, as they have the power to fake it and the man not know. Why should women fake their enjoyment?, is this something that men also talk about doing?

The group have been talking about 'break-up' experiences, Eve has been discussing how she didn't enjoy sleeping with a previous partner towards the end of their relationship:

Helen: but how was the sex

Eve: crap

Helen: was it

Eve: and it didn't do anything for me whatsoever (Helen: yeah) and I spent most of my time, at the end I couldn't even {go through with} it at the end (Helen: yeah)

Flo: {avoiding it}

Eve: couldn't even make myself go through the motions

Women are constructed as having a passive role during sex, as 'going through the motions'. It is the man's expectations that are prevailing here, despite the woman not being up for sex. This presents the idea that women should always been seen as receptive to sex, as sex is something that men always desire.

I wonder what are the strategies for saying no to sex whilst in a committed relationship? Is it possible not to feel obliged to have sex, from a female perspective?