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THE OPEN GAY RELATIONSHIP: 
A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST GROUNDED THEORY ANALYSIS

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MINOR-DISSERTATION
Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS IN CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY
of the
UNIVERSITY OF JOHANNESBURG

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July 2011
STATEMENT

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this dissertation is my own original work, and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any university for a degree.

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the constructions of gay couples who were in non-monogamous relationships. Three couples were each jointly interviewed to examine how they experienced the relationship. Interviews were analysed using Social Constructionist grounded theory. Findings included the following categories: men as being hyper-sexual, the complexities involved in dislodging sex from emotions, the joy experienced in expanding sexual pleasures and rules protecting the primary relationship. These categories were collapsed into a core category: dyadic commitment within the structure of nomadic sexuality. This study contributes to theory-building and has implications for clinicians who work with gay couples.

Keywords:

Extra-dyadic relationship, non-monogamy, couples, gay men, Social Constructionism, grounded theory
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For their contributions and assistance to this research study, I would like to express my gratitude to:

- My supervisor, Dr Prevan Moodley, for sharing the excitement of this study with me and for gently guiding and encouraging me.

- Elmien, jy het die pad vir my voorberei. Baie dankie.

- Aan my ouers, julle liefde en ondersteuning dra my deur so baie.

- The participants, thank you for sharing a part of your life with me.

- My caring friends.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Motivation for the study

Up until the release of the academic text, *The State of Affairs* by Duncombe, Harrison, Allan, and Marsden (as cited Barker & Langdriddle, 2010), which included two chapters on consensual non-monogamies, most social scientific writings excluded reports of this specific form of relationship experience (Barker & Langdriddle, 2010). Previous work, sparse as it was, focused primarily on non-monogamy within the context of affairs and infidelities (Rubin, 2001). The past few years, however, have produced more work that focuses on non-monogamies (see Bonello, 2010). The Kinsey Institute at present has a list of over 200 theses, books and articles relating to non-monogamies. There is also a Yahoo group devoted to discussion of research on this topic, which features over 250 members from around the world (Barker & Langdriddle, 2010).

In 2005, Pieper and Bauer coined the term *mononormativity*, which referred to prevailing assumptions of the normalcy and naturalness of being in a monogamous relationship. The term encapsulates mainstream thinking within political, popular and psychological discourses, which argue that couples in monogamous relationships are engaged in the morally correct form of human relating. Furthermore, this discourse of framing relationships is seen as the one to which most people inevitably aspire without exploring alternative ways of being in a relationship (Rubin, 2007). Rubin (2007) articulates this notion of normativity within the concept of a “sexual hierarchy” (p. 160). Nearly all discourses about sex, whether religious, psychiatric, popular, or political, “delimit a very small portion of human sexual capacity as sanctifiable, which is, safe, healthy, mature, legal, or politically correct” (Rubin, 2007, p. 160).

This limited position is what Rubin (2007) calls the *charmed circle*: heterosexual, married, monogamous and procreative relationships. This stands in hierarchical contrast to the *outer limits* namely bad, abnormal, unnatural, damned sexuality (such as gay men and all forms of transsexuality). The former group, whose behaviour is seen as praiseworthy in the hierarchy, are rewarded with certified mental health, respectability, legality, social and physical mobility, institutional support and material benefits. As the sexual behaviour moves downwards individuals who practice them are understood within a rubric that pronounces them mentally ill, disreputable, or criminal. Consequently, social and physical mobility can become restricted followed by a loss of institutional support and the experience of economic sanctions (Rubin, 2007):
Popular sexual ideology is a noxious stew made up of ideas of sexual sin, concepts of psychological inferiority, anti-communism, mob hysteria, accusations of witchcraft, and xenophobia. I would call this system of erotic stigma the last socially respectable form of prejudice. All these hierarchies of sexual value—religious, psychiatric, and popular—function in much the same ways as do ideological systems of racism, ethnocentrism, and religious chauvinism. They rationalise the well-being of the sexually privileged and the adversity of the sexual rabble (p. 159).

As critical discourses continue to penetrate the domain of the social sciences and humanities, greater scope is provided for understanding relationships that disrupt mononormative assumptions. The thinking of social constructionists such as Weeks (2003) directs the gaze towards debates about relationships, intimacies and values attached to socio-political and psychological ideas about the world. In vogue now is talk about the democratisation of sexuality and emotion, pluralistic forms of sexual life, and new ways of being intimate:

Sexual/intimate citizenship, like all forms of citizenship, is about belonging, about rights and responsibilities, about ending social exclusion and ensuring social inclusion. It is concerned with equity and justice. A major part of sexual politics is played out in daily struggles over what can be said or performed by whom in what circumstances in a multitude of battle grounds (Weeks, 2003, p. 113).

Such ideas suggest that what used to be taken-for-granted knowledge has to now be discussed, justified, negotiated and agreed upon (Barker & Langridge, 2010). This shift in relationships and intimacies is contained within the notion of the ‘pure relationship’ as proclaimed by Giddens (1992) in which choice and equality between partners becomes a key component of the relationship. These forces intersect in such a way that people in a relationship want to be equal and free, wishing to pursue their own autonomous goals. This results in dominant ways of being-in-the-world being problematised, contested as well as actively resisted. It is a ‘call-to-arms’ to defy the charmed circle and to give legitimacy to multiplicity (Elia, 2003).

Besides pursuing research that attempts to displace mononormative assumptions and values on a theoretical level, there are also ‘clinical’ objectives. There continues to be segments within the mental health professions field that view open relationships as an expression of pathology (individual and relational), despite this opinion showing a “lack of clinical sophistication and acumen” (Shernoff, 2006, p. 408). Shernoff (2006) argues that the position of pathology to be found within certain quarters must be understood from the position of heterosexual bias, which is embedded in mainstream society and in institutions (such as professional psychology training programmes). This argument holds that all sexual narratives should be valued against the heterosexual norm and that even minority people should be evaluated and understood against this norm. Within the mental health field this heteronormative position occurs when theories or research that relates to heterosexuals are by default...
assumed to apply to gays, lesbians, bisexual and transgender people – or the assumption that heterosexuality is a healthier psychological adjustment, despite the research not supporting this position (Hoff & Beougher, 2010). This is known as heterosexism. This study therefore is also a way of contributing an understanding of ‘alternative’ relationships without assuming a manifestation of psychopathology, particularly in professional clinical psychology.

1.2 Gay men and non-monogamy

Even though many gay couples are monogamous, findings suggest that many others are not (LaSala, 2004a). The proportion of gay men in sexually non-exclusive relationships ranges from 36% to 95%, depending on time together as a couple (Blasband & Peplau, 1985; Hickson, Davies, Hunt, Weatherburn, McManus, & Coxon, 1992). This prevalence is higher than in married heterosexual couples (25%), heterosexual cohabiting couples (33%) and lesbian couples (28%) (Blumstein & Schwartz, as cited in Wagner, Remien, & Carballo-Diéguez, 2000).

The importance attached to non-monogamous relationships for gay men can be partially explained through the lens of seminal anthropological investigations such as Kath Weston’s (1991) pioneering study of gay men in San Fransisco. In her work she described the construction of cultural formations with their own self-governing social organisation and kinship forms in the gay community. The gay community has for many years constructed a unique range of sexual and emotional connections that facilitate erotic and personal freedom. Weeks (2000) expresses an understanding of community as a ‘site’ that represents both a set of social realities and an aspiration towards something better, more inclusive and tangible. He writes that social (and therefore also sexual) relations of a community act as repositories of meaning of its members, with a certain “vocabulary of values” (p. 182), and he describes this kinship system as a “diasporic consciousness” (p. 183). It exists, he adds, because people believe it exists, and therefore it has material and cultural effects. The community is sustained then over time by common practices and symbolic re-enactments that reaffirm both identity and difference, and therefore of creating possibilities. Adam (2006) nonetheless remarks that this sense of possibility and multiplicity within the arena of identity expression can be seen as being ‘condemned to freedom’. This is the sense of relationship innovation without many of the signposts familiar to heterosexual kinships. This allows new opportunities for constructing relationships without much of the ‘baggage’ of patriarchy and gender expectations. As Bech (1997, p. 142) observes,

No social norms stipulate that two men must, live in a one-to-one relationship, nor is it dictated by financial necessity or demands to safeguard succession and continue the lineage. The partners are also from the outset equal in a specific sense, i.e. in terms of gender. No financial disparity has been brought into the relationship on the grounds of gender difference, nor any socially prescribed role allocation regarding the scope or nature of work in or outside the home, or concerning emotional and sexual give-and-take.
Therefore male same-sex relationships do not have to follow guidelines or regulations, like monogamy that is expected in heterosexual relationships. Michel Foucault (1997, pp. 159-160) was among the first to raise “the question of gay culture...a culture that invents ways of relating, types of existence, types of values, types of exchanges between individuals which are really new and are neither the same as, nor superimposed on, existing cultural forms.” It is a way of relating that resists the popular cultural idea that prescribes that erotic variety is dangerous, unhealthy, depraved, and a menace to “everything from small children to national security” (Rubin, 2007, p. 159).

1.3 Research on gay men in South Africa

Psychological research on gay men in South Africa is limited in scope and output. Research is at thesis and dissertation level, with a limited number of studies being published in peer reviewed journals. An electronic search of the South African Journal of Psychology reveals three articles that make use of the keyword “gay”. Epistemologically there is a strong reliance on positivism. This stands in sharp contrast to the upsurge of same-sex research in other disciplines in South Africa; however, it has occurred within the domains of law, history, cultural geography and social anthropology (Reid & Walker, 2005).

Potgieter (2003) observes that South Africa’s historical engagement with matters pertaining to non-heterosexuality had a strong, morally damning flavour. During the Apartheid years, efforts were directed at curing the white, gay South African man, so that he could re-enter the heteronormative and reproductive sex cycle. By orchestrating a specific form of hegemonic sexual citizenship that could serve to discipline and control the population, the state attempted to construct a variant of South African male sexuality that was aggressive and domineering (Conway, 2004) and fully aligned with ‘best-practice’ principles of the charmed circle.

Within the context of limited research on gay men in South Africa the objective of this study is to explore, from a psychological perspective, the way in which a sample of gay men construct and experience their non-monogamous (open) relationships. Interviews were conducted with three self-identified gay couples who reside within an urban area of South Africa and who considered their relationship to be open. The research is conducted from a broad post-modern/Social Constructionist perspective, which asks for a disengagement with traditional, mononormative psychological thinking, thereby promoting a re-imagining of theoretical models and locating itself firmly as an agent of critique of hegemonic, traditional ways of thinking.
1.4 Organisation of the study

The structure of this study is informed by social constructionist grounded theory. Chapter two presents the theoretical departure point. Chapter three concerns a brief overview of research literature pertaining to gay relationships and open gay relationships in particular. Chapter four addresses methodology. Chapter five contains the grounded theory analysis of the qualitative data, and integrates research findings with an expanded literature review that directly addresses the categories identified through the analysis. Chapter six concludes the minor dissertation by providing a summary of findings, a critical review of the study and recommendations.
CHAPTER 2
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Social constructionism

'Social constructionism' is a loosely labelled concentration of theoretical frameworks (Gergen, 1997; Hosking, & Morley, 2004). The cultural and intellectual 'backcloth' against which social constructionism in its broadest possible sense takes shape, and which to a certain degree gives it its specific flavour, is what is commonly referred to as 'postmodernism'. Certain strands though of Social Constructionism leans more towards a modernist position (this will be clarified in section 2.2.1) (Beasley, 2005). The postmodern position represents both a questioning and a rejection of the fundamental assumptions of modernism (the intellectual movement that preceded it) (Burr, 1995). The scholarly reach of this meta-theoretical position is multiple. First, it acts as a way of understanding the generation, transformation as well as the suppression of what is taken as objective knowledge. Second, it allows exploration of the rhetorical devices through which researchers achieve meaning that is rendered compelling. Third, it does so by illuminating the ideological and value-laden of the 'taken-for-granted'. Fourth, there is the process of documenting the implications of our world construction within the nexus of power relations and the subsequent inequalities that flow from that. Fifth, it allows for an understanding of the historical dimension informing current day practices. Sixth and lastly, it gains an appreciation of the processes of relationships that establish human intelligibility across cultures (Gergen, 1997). Social constructionism, however, as Gergen (2003, p. 15) says, is "principally concerned with explicating the processes by which people come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world (and themselves) in which they live." It is the search for an alternative theory of knowledge (Gergen, 1997). It does this by arguing against the interiority of the cognitivist as well as the empiricist/rationalist (and dominant) position in psychology (Durrheim, 1997; Zielke, 2006).

Within the modernist frame, clear distinctions can be drawn between an 'inner world' and an 'external world'. These two worlds become objectively knowable and can be decoded in a rational manner (Gergen, 2001). For social constructionism the main area of understanding is not to be found in 'the psyche' but in social relations (Gergen, 1997). The understanding that is achieved between people is a product of social artefacts and commodities moulded through historical and cultural interchanges among people. Descriptions and explanations of the world are not due to structural and genetic properties located within the individual. Instead, it is the outcome of "human co-ordination and action" (Gergen, 1997b, p. 49). Social constructionism challenges the modernist investigation and analysis of objective knowledge. It does this by arguing that any form of the knowledge enterprise is
a social construct. Language is not a tool that depicts mirrors or represents reality ‘out there’ (Durrheim, 1997). Instead, language creates realities instead of conveying ‘the truth’. Therefore objectivity cannot be argued as it is always informed by decisions about how to explain our world and how to study it. Durrheim (1997) remarks that, “words are used to do things in the world, and the distinction between the ‘subjective’ aspect of meaning and the ‘objective’ component is collapsed” (p. 7).

Language provides tools to organise daily life and make meaningful interpretations. Language is not a “map of interior impulses but outgrowths of specific modes of life, rituals of exchange, relations of control and domination” (Gergen, 1997, p. 53). As Bayer (1998) says, social constructionism is about making meaning, which is a participatory process that produces psychological subjects and their subjectivities by drawing on language as the historical and cultural agent in fashioning the psychological subject. It is through the process of talking to each other that the word is created (Burr, 1995).

2.1.1 Creating meaning within the relationship

With constructionist meta-theory tracing ontological posits to language, and language to the processes of relationships, meaning becomes an inter-subjective experience (Gergen, 1997). People are always already in a relational context. The utterances that a person will make, takes on meaning when others are positioned in relation to those utterances. This other person adds something supplementary to indicate that the initial utterance was understood and that meaning-making was successful. An individual then can never ‘mean’ something in isolation, another person is required to supplement the process. Without people positioning themselves around utterances, they are left unintelligible (Gergen, 2003). Therefore ‘finding’ meaning is the outcome of an enquiry into social practices engaged in by people. Meaning is neither to be found in the individual psyche nor in social structures, but in the interactive processes that take place between people (Burr, 1995).

2.1.2 Context

Our social context informs the process through which meaning within the relationship is established. Context is produced through structure and stability in the conception and understanding of the world thereby creating and maintaining solidarity among those who share it (Markus & Plaut, 2001). The positioning around utterances through relationships is critically determined by the social orderings. For example, within the recent history of the cultural West, meaning and ordering (positioning) has taken place within the context of terms such as: ‘purpose’, ‘functions’, or ‘goals’. Therefore in the newly developing context of a relationship, the ordering of that relationship will most likely be rationalised and directed by these understandings (Gergen, 2003).
2.1.3 Subjectivity

With the social constructionist emphasis on relationships, subjectivity then frames a contextualised understanding of reality through a shared language. This opposes positivist approaches that claim that subjectivity is a contaminant to objective readings and that objectivity is attainable. Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn, and Walkerdine (1998) understand subjectivity as referring to

individuality and self-awareness – the condition of being a subject – but (we) understand in this usage that subjects are dynamic and multiple, always positioned in relation to particular discourses and produced by these – the condition of being a subject (p. 3).

With social constructionism articulating a discourse of anti-essentialism, subjectivity is not concerned with a rigid and static understanding of self. Instead there is a focus on processes of fluidity, change, exploration and multiplicity. All these processes are dependent upon social setting, power relations and historical trends. This idea of subjectivity is important in that this study’s theoretical insights are built upon my shared experiences and relationships with the research participants. This happens through my trying to understand stories from inside the experience so that my theory is an interpretation, which is also a product of my viewpoints (Charmaz, 2006).

2.1.4 Social constructionism as critical psychology

Social constructionism constitutes a form of critical psychology by adhering to the position of historical and cultural specificity in its challenge of taken-for-granted knowledge (Burr, 1998). It subverts the more damaging and oppressive aspects to be found in mainstream psychology and understands subjectivity through ‘material’ power relations (Zielke, 2006). The various discourse streams in critical psychology acts as a ‘positioning’ theory (Zielke, 2006). If discourse is a “system of statements which constructs an object” (Parker, 1992, p. 5), then they ‘come to life’ as an expression of the power relations within which they are embedded (Burr, 1995). To give further meaning to context and subjectivity discourses of interpretation must be ‘positioned’ within a wider discourse of political, historical and social factors that allow for differentials of power to produce and place the subject accordingly. Being reflexive of power differentials is “psychology with its eyes open” (Morss, 2000, p. 103). Psychology must be seen as something that is “profoundly political, profoundly involved in the reproduction and extension of relations of power and control” (Hook, 2004, p. 13). There must be an active engagement in establishing processes that participate in commenting on broader forms of power, which also exist outside the spheres of psychology. Analysis should include socio-political factors and, by doing so, prevent psychological reductionism that favours purely psychological terms of reference concerned only with intra-psychic processes. Such processes, through their use, ignore the political, economic, racial and cultural nexus (Hook, 2004).

Parker (2002) in his analysis of critical psychology and social constructionism says:
Social constructionism has been invaluable to the development of critical psychology, and it invites us to reflect on the way each and every psychological experience we have is constituted in forms of discourse and practice rather than given and to be taken for granted. It leads us to interpret the complexity of human life and ask how it has come to be the way it is, rather than adopting assumptions that are relayed through common sense and that then feels as if they must be true (p. 17).

Whereas traditional psychology attempts to downplay the political nature of the discipline, critical psychology does the opposite (Hook, 2004). Alongside the philosophical foundation of social constructionism guiding this research, this study is also anchored within the rubric of critical psychology. By exploring the social construction of gay open relationships this study is engaging with the politics of knowledge and subjectivity. A specific kind of knowledge is produced in this study, because as critical researcher I explore a way of living that attempts to rupture taken-for-granted ways of being-in-the-world. The psychological knowledge being constructed through this study extends relations of power. However, it does so from a perspective that engages directly with the idea of ‘psychopolitics’ (Hook, 2004). Instead of extending relations of power towards maintaining or increasing a hierarchical structure, which positions gay sexuality on the side of psychopathology, I attempt the opposite. The gay man and his sexuality is a political subject. His ‘psychopolitics’ is striving towards liberation and to escape particular power structures of (heterosexual) oppression. As researcher I position myself within this political discourse.

2.1.5 A critique of social constructionism

Liebrucks (2001) remarks that the critics of social constructionism argue that the movement proposes an uncomfortable relativism, which allows almost anything to be equally valid. Gergen (1985, 1997) and Liebrucks (2001) point out that this is not the case. Gergen (1985) does not object to the use of empiricist methodology, only that it should be seen as a product of specific historical processes shaped through discursive practices of language that merely state that certain concepts, when fitted together, indicate a certain socially shared meaning. This then leads the empiricist to ask whether social constructionism can then try to make certain truth claims. Gergen (1997) argues that the social constructionist would state that constructionism is itself a social construct.

Burr (1998) is also concerned that constructionism seems to ignore the body as a source of discourse interpretation, with too much emphasis being placed on language. The corporeal body must be understood as a prime site of power relations, with the body being a powerful instrument of social control. With the capacity of the body to express social processes being silenced, personal experience becomes marginalised. Therefore Burr (1998) argues that some degree of personal ‘voice’ should be given back to the author, who must be given some notion of choice and agency.
Zielke (2006) echoes the thoughts of Burr above, arguing that a degree of personal ‘voice’ should be returned to the speaker. Constructionist scholars, she says, have the tendency to ‘bracket’ the entire concept of the ‘individual participant’ due to a fear of unwillingly re-introducing the autonomous, rationalist, ego-logical ‘cogniser’. This has the unfortunate consequence and paradox situation of taking the study of ‘social discourse’, ‘social practice’ and of knowledge as a ‘communal possession’ and pushing then aside a different, de-centred, creative and critical (individual) participant. Zielke (2006) continues that what is missing is a non-cognitivist, non-individualist account of the participant, which neither cognitivism, social constructionism, nor critical psychology have cared to conceptualise. This conceptualisation should be grounded both in the relational aspect of meaning-making and also ‘hold’ the ‘individual’ as having legitimacy. As Epstein (1987) remarks, Social Constructionism confronts how the ‘individual’ is pitted against ‘society’, and what is missing is any dynamic sense of how society comes to inhabit the individual or how individuality is socially constituted.

2.2 Implications of a social constructionist framework for this study

2.2.1 A social constructionist meta-theory in the study of sexuality

This study, in exploring the construction of sexually open gay relationships, is positioning itself within the domain of Sexuality Studies. Sexuality Studies refers to a critical analysis of the existing organisation and social meaning of sexuality as well as sexual identities, rather than providing merely a descriptive account of doing sex (Beasley, 2005). Sexuality is not a function or drive of energy that must be discharged.

Instead we must learn to see that sexuality is something which society produces in complex ways. It is a result of diverse social practices that give meaning to human activities, of social definitions and self-definitions, of struggles between those who have power to define and regulate, and those who resist. Sexuality is not a given, it is a product of negotiation, struggle and human agency (Weeks, 2003, p. 19).

The subject of sexuality has traditionally been examined within a narrow reductionist framework where sex is almost solely conceptualised as a physical behaviour or bodily response (Ussher, 1999). This engagement with sex as something ‘natural’ has resulted in a neglected understanding of sexuality as a complex text and a script of the erotic (Simon, 1996). Sexuality scholars are increasingly striving toward a multi-dimensional understanding of sexual life, which occupies a key focus for social analysis (Parker & Aggleton, 2007). Scholars within the field view existing, taken-for-granted frameworks of understanding sexuality as problematic. Rather, sexuality scholars view marginalised sexual identities and sexuality in all its varied forms in a positive manner as mediated by historical and cultural factors (Beasley, 2005). This includes the exploration of such domains as
sexual acts, sexual identities, sexual communities, the direction of erotic interest and sexual desire itself (Vance, 2007). It is to a significant degree a study of how power matrices that ‘regulate’ society through hierarchy can be disrupted through transgressive and pleasurable experiences that call for a complex expression and pursuit of desire.

At minimum, all social construction approaches adopt the view that physically identical sexual acts may have varying social significance and subjective meaning depending on how they are defined and understood in different cultures and historical periods. Because a sexual act does not carry with it a universal social meaning, it follows that the relationship between sexual acts and sexual meanings is not fixed (Vance, 2007, p. 45).

Within Sexuality Studies social constructionist perspectives occupy varying positions, from mid-range modernist to radical post-modernism, where thinking in the latter clusters around the notion of ‘queer theory’ and challenges any ‘essence’ to ‘identity’. This study finds its intellectual home to be more in line with mid-range modernist Social Constructionism. Social Constructionism written in capital letters, contrasts with social constructionism written in lower case. Written in lower case refers to the broad anti-essentialist stance. This ‘mid-range’ position holds a place for ‘identity’, which views it as meaningful. Social Constructionism, a dominant discourse in Britain (with Queer Theory’s home being in the United States), places a strong emphasis on understanding micro-social processes from a perspective that includes class, material, social and political conditions. Social Constructionism furthermore represents a form of thinking that is in a number of respects an intermediate position one that is somewhere between gay/lesbian identity politics and Queer Theory.

Jeffrey Weeks (1986, 2000), a prominent Social Constructionist in Sexuality Studies of the British tradition, expresses an intellectual position that resonates with the overall positioning of this study. Alongside Weeks, the thoughts of Michel Foucault (1997) are also briefly explored as his intellectual endeavour features strongly in this study too. These two authors’ ideas will be drawn on again in chapter five.

Key aspects that delineate Weeks’ (1986, 2000) thinking include foregrounding the social organisation of sexuality, understanding identity categories as social constructions mediated through history and dynamic socio-political movements, and making visible marginalised identities. Weeks values the material and economic nature of sexuality. The exploration of this material/economic discourse is guided by Marxist thinking to generate an understanding of gay identity within a capitalist society. This provides the analysis of gay sexuality with a certain emancipatory universalism and Libertarian overtones (Beasley, 2005). To explore non-heterosexual practices and intimate relationships is for Weeks an opportunity to establish and explore new community ideals and identities. By doing so, an understanding of the intentional realities and individual experiences of sexual minorities is achieved (Hostetler & Herdt, 1998). Weeks (2000) argues that society has to
increasingly accept this fact of diversity. He continues by writing that general understanding exists that people have different needs and desires, that people live in different types of households and have various sorts of relationships. However, society is nonetheless reluctant to embrace diversity: “that is, we still seek to judge people as if there were a common moral standard by which they should live” (Weeks, 2000, p. 173). Despite the tensions present in how sexual and social relations are constituted and whether new configurations pose a ‘moral threat’ to the world-at-large, “sexual activity and committed sexual-emotional relationships take place today in a number of more or less long-term settings, and have given rise to a range of patterns of domestic organisation” (Weeks, 2000, p. 175). These factors all culminate into the “politics of the erotic” (Weeks, 2003, p. 150). The scope of sexual expression within a hyper-modern society that allows for political multiplicity in the broadest sense allows for many possible identifications (gay, straight, bi, trans, queer, lesbian, asexual) as well as many potential differences (such as being straight yet enjoying sexual relations with same-sex partners). These life-strands are ultimately all knitted together into narratives which give coherence to individual lives, to express certain value systems and to act as sites of differentiation (Weeks, 2003). The notion of identity is central to Weeks’ theorisations. Whilst he offers a critique of identity he nonetheless views the concept as having value.

Hostetler and Herdt (1998) propose the idea of ‘sexual lifeways’ as an alternative to thinking about ‘identity’. They argue that though ‘sexual lifeways’ carries with it a sexual identity, or an internal sense of sexual sameness and a belonging to a specific group, it allows for thinking that could circumnavigate the possible reductionistic imagining of ‘identity’. The authors argue that ‘identity’ is more than just a process (an anchor). It is a ‘sexual identity’ phenomenon that consists of a narrative of origin (ontology), a fantasy of an ultimate purpose and future fulfilment (a theology) as well as a theory of and/or plan for moral action in the world (deontology). They remark that these three dimensions are important to the formation and nourishment of meaningful human life patterns. These ‘sexual lifeways’ are the culturally specific erotic ideas and emotions, sexual/gender categories and roles, as well as the theories of being and becoming a full social person that together constitute life-course development within a particular sexual culture. Sexual lifeways provide us with a cultural template or script that inflects individual subjectivity, which then shapes a fluid array of thoughts, feelings, needs and desires into specific attractions, fantasies, behaviours, understandings of the self, roles, rights, duties, ontologies, deontologies and teleologies.

Epstein (1987) argues that to establish a more nuanced Social Constructionist position theory needs to introduce on an individual level psychoanalytic concepts such as ‘needs’, ‘desires’ and development of the self in relation to others. Weeks (1986), similarly calls for a more complex engagement with the psychoanalytic unconscious as a mediating force between social imperatives and biological possibilities. This psychoanalytic lens could help articulate why sexual identity is apparently so
inessential yet simultaneously so resilient and permanent. Due to psychoanalysis not viewing sexual identities as a pre-given or an unproblematic category, it allows for a line of communication with Social Constructionism (Weeks, 1986). We live an embodied life structured around biology and physiology. However, there is nothing self-evident in this biology. The ways in which individuals come to understand, fantasise about, symbolise, internally represent, or feel about their physiology is a product of development as well as experience in the family and not a direct product of biology itself. On a social level this implies a more comprehensive understanding of power and of the “dialectical relationship between identities as self-expressions and identities as a-scriptive impositions” (Chodorow, as cited in Weeks, 1986, p. 153).

Alongside the intellectual contribution of Weeks to the analysis of sexuality is that of Foucault. Unlike many of the classical theorists, Foucault’s work is largely a collection of distinct pieces that share common themes rather than a unified body of theory (Foucault, 2003). As with Social Constructionism, it provides a way of looking at the world, rather than a particular hypothesis. Foucault’s objective has been to create a history of the various modes by which human beings are made into subjects. It is within the domain of sexuality where Foucault has devoted considerable intellectual resources to comprehend how human beings recognise themselves as subjects of sexuality (Foucault, 2003; Mills, 2003).

The exploration of sexuality takes place for Foucault within the field between social structures and institutions and the individual – even though the concept of ‘the individual’ is problematic for Foucault (Danaher, Schirato, & Webb, 2000; Mills, 2003). Located within the sphere of institutional structures is Foucault’s notion of power relations (Mills, 2003; Rouse, 2005). Foucault argues that instead of viewing power as a possession – something that the people in power hold on to and those who are powerless try to wrest from their control, it must rather be viewed as something which is performed (Mills, 2003). Foucault tracks the history of power in Western society as finding its structure in the emergence of the modern state during the 16th century. A process took shape over time that established ‘pastoral power’ and ‘political power’ as two key elements that shaped the individual through religion, medicine, psychiatry and the state. These institutions set out to form a new organisation, through the matrix of power relations, which informed the shape that the individual would take (Foucault, 2003). It is a case of “power [being] everywhere not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (Foucault, as cited in Rouse, 2005). Power is therefore distributed throughout a complex social network (Rouse, 2005). Foucault (1997) explains:

What I mean by power relations is the fact that we are in a strategic situation toward each other. For instance, being homosexual, we are in a struggle with the government, and the government is in a struggle with us. When we deal with the government, the struggle, of course, is not symmetrical, the power situation is not the same; but we are in this struggle, and the continuation of this situation can
influence the behaviour on non-behaviour of others. So we are not trapped. We are always in this kind of situation. It means that we always have possibilities. There are always possibilities of changing the situation (p. 167).

Foucault focused strongly on the body as a site where power is enacted as well as resisted (Mills, 2003). The body however should not be viewed from a liberal individualistic, atomised position. Rather it is a site of certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires that come to be identified and constituted as individuals (McNay, 2003; Mills, 2003). Appreciating the relationship between institutions and the body is known as biopolitics (Danaher et al., 2000). This relationship allows for bodies to then be classified as normal/abnormal. The female heterosexual body (as a political site) would be classified as normal in that it allows for the possibility of biological reproduction as well as the reproduction of heterosexual values. The gay body (as a political site) is abnormal in that it does not allow for certain heterosexual, Western, Christian moral standards to be perpetuated. It ruptures the social order. The biopolitical discourse creates the idea of a technology of the Self. This frame of analysis is a series of techniques that allow people to work on themselves through the regulation of their bodies, their thoughts as well as their conduct (Danaher et al., 2000; Rouse, 2005). This process is not only concerned with acts that are either permitted or forbidden (such as same-sex acts like sodomy which is still illegal in many countries), but also “with the feelings represented, the thoughts, the desires one might experience, the inclination to seek within the self any hidden feeling, any movement of the soul, any desire disguised under illusory forms (Foucault, 2003, p. 145). Sexuality, more than just being concerned with the physical act (although this too matters for Foucault), also looks at the impact of dominant social discourses on how individuals understand and express or deny desire to find expression through the body as a site of political power technologies.

The result of the work of Social Constructionists such as Weeks and the Postmodern work of Foucault, it is now widely accepted in Sexuality Studies that the notion of sexual identities and sexuality as being a matter of unchanging naturalism, is now a myth (Beasley, 2005). The work of Weeks and Foucault has furthermore established within the discipline of Sexuality Studies, a distinction between sex acts and identities, such that while sex acts may occur throughout history, by contrast sexual identity is viewed as a distinctly modern invention. However, Weeks is sometimes viewed as just being a “footnote” to Foucault, in that he is heavily reliant on Foucault for conceptual issues. Foucault’s Master status in Sexuality Studies is always affirmed. Consequently Social Constructionism perspectives may be presented as “following in Foucault’s wake” (Traub, as cited in Beasley, 2005, p. 146). What Weeks has brought to Sexuality Studies is to understand the importance of the social contextual nature of identity and the experiences that accompany that identity. He views it as vital to make visible marginalised identities and to celebrate new intimate communities and innovative patterns of relating (Beasley, 2005). This study attempts to draw from some of the
positions of these two theorists, to appreciate the body as a site of a sexual technology of the Self, which then leads to innovative patterns of relating.

2.2.2 The shaping of the (social constructionist) gay (white) (South African) man

The history of ‘homosexuality’ in Africa and South Africa has been closely documented by scholars across the humanities and social science disciplines (Aldrich, 2003; Murray & Roscoe, 1998). Authors focusing on African sexualities emphasise the need to acknowledge the legacy of colonialism on issues of sexuality on the continent. Murray and Roscoe (1998), for example, write about how early European travellers to Africa entered a world of gender and sexual construction vastly different from their own. Contemporary South African research on same-sex sexualities can be distinguished between studies that explores black South African same-sex experiences (Luyt, 2003; Morrell, 1998; Potgieter, 2005; Reid, 2005) and those of white South African experiences (Hatting, 2005; Nel, Rich, & Joubert, 2007). The historical story of gay white South Africa follows a pattern closely connected to and mirroring Western gay development. This section of the chapter will explore in brief the notion of the Western ‘gay’ man and its relation to South Africa.

Weeks (2007), identifies three phases when looking historically at the construction of homosexuality. The first phase can be dated back to 19th century, when in 1870 the first modern conception of “the homosexual” appears in medical literature, with its use being to diagnose contrary sexual instincts and pathologise same-sex sexual expression (Davidson, 2001). In 1886 von Kraft-Ebing published his Psychopathia Sexualis and in 1900 Havelock Ellis introduced the world to his work, Studies in the Psychology of Sex. Ellis introduced thinking that attempted to establish the parameters of homosexuality in terms of how it could be distinguished from other forms of sexuality as well as exploring its aetiology and social worth (Weeks, 2007). Both publications are seen as milestones in the scientific study of sexuality.

The second phase came into being during the 1950s and 1960s. Scholarly investigations began viewing homosexuality as capturing a distinct social experience, and the task was to record it in detail. The groundbreaking investigations of Alfred Kinsey and Evelyn Hooker added to an understanding of some type of ‘commonness’ to the ‘gay experience’.

The third phase, with some overlap with the second phase, is more vocal in tone and driven by the radical gay movements of the 1960s and 1970s in Europe and North America. There was a call for gay liberation, which called for a sexual revolution and a rebellion against socially sanctioned attacks on the homosexual community. A search started for the ‘ethnicity’ of homosexuality to validate a minority experience denied by history. The 1970s saw a positive re-reading of homosexual identity. The ‘lifeways’ of being gay was grounded in the fundamental assumption that same-sex desires and attractions are ‘normal’, ‘natural’ as well as being morally and socially equivalent to heterosexuality.
This rights-based discourse from the 1970s is still today the dominant platform from which gay rights activists stage their campaign for ‘equality’ before the law and society at large. Whereas the 1970s through to early 2000s were a time when gay men drove a sexual ideology that encouraged sexual variation, multiple-partners and non-monogamy, a new lifeway that is slowly taking form is one where gay men strive for a telos (a move towards some logical conclusion) that favours self-realisation and committed relationships.

The rights based, Gay Liberation movement has provided South African gay men over the years with a framework through which to articulate a desire for a ‘citizenship’ that is viewed as equal to heterosexual people. Despite apartheid-era sanctions restricting the flow of ideas either politically, economically and culturally, South African gay men are today (and even historically) in no ways dissimilar to their counterparts in the developed world. Black and white South African gay men identify, at minimum, with the process to obtain human dignity, equality and freedom, as contained in the Bill of Rights (Robson, 2007). White South African gay men (the group represented in the sample of this study) occupy a position alongside European and North American gay men, which celebrates a progressive socio-political agenda of ‘gay ethnicity’. This is a forward looking expansive position that challenges hegemonic ideologies and is centrally positioned in urban political affairs. It strives for the celebration of sexuality as a central dimension of existence and of a ‘unique’ identity that speaks to an ‘essentialised’ sexual orientation that is distinctly, and proudly, homosexual.

2.3 Summary

The chapter positioned this study’s epistemological and ontological framework within the theoretical domain of Social Constructionism. While no single description can articulate Social Constructionism, it is an intellectual position that takes a critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge, describes understanding as being positioned within a cultural and historical frame, and views knowledge as sustained by social process which can only exist within the domain of language. There is also a focus on interrogating power relations and the hegemonic and political forces that underpin power. Contemporary Sexuality Studies is ‘housed’ within the school of Social Constructionism, and is a critical analysis of the existing organisation and social meaning of sexuality and sexual identities. The focus is on gay male sexuality, and how sexuality can be expressed, celebrated and used in unique and meaningful ways to sustain and expand identities, as a way to challenge taken-for-granted thinking and to destabilise and resist hegemony. The following chapter reviews the psychological literature available on sexuality, relationships, and gay relationships in particular.
3.1 Framing intimate relationship research

Much of previous research into intimate relationships falls within an epistemological framework that is strongly modernist and empiricist in orientation. A review of the research on close, intimate relationships (whether heterosexual or gay), shows a strong reliance on conceptualising the psychological subject as a person who is an individualised, internalised, cognitive creature. Definitions that guide researchers in this domain include how it is the study of “two individuals and the interactions between them... involving behavioural, cognitive and affective aspects (Hinde, as cited in Perlam & Vangelisti, 2006). Such theoretical orientations guide intimate relationship research in the mainstay of traditional psychological thinking. Textbooks are loaded with ‘framing theories’ that argue the position of evolutionary psychology, social exchange and equity theories, cognitive-behavioural approaches and attachment theory in thinking about relationships. The domain is vast and includes the development of relationships, relationships as they appear across the lifespan, personality and its impact on the couple and stress in the relationship. This list seems almost endless (Harvey & Wenzel, 2006). As DeLamater and Hyde (2004) point out, this creates a research barrier to taking the couple into account. Harvey and Wenzel (2006) argue that these theoretical positions are inherently limited in accounting for the subtle interactions between individuals, despite each theory making a unique contribution to the research domain. In addition, critical psychologists would argue that the current research domain is mainstream due to political and power dynamics not being articulated. This results in the ‘taken-for-granted’ understandings being perpetuated, such as an academic bias towards monogamy research (Robinson, 1997).

3.2 Sexuality in intimate relationships

The domain of sexuality in intimate relationship research contains robust dialogue concerning issues around how to conceptualise the study of sexuality within the ‘context’ of the couple that promotes ‘dyadic interactions’. The idea of ‘script-theory’, a theory that calls for sexuality to be seen as metaphors for conceptualising certain behaviours within social life (Simon & Gagnon, 2007), also takes up a central position (Sprecher, Christopher, & Cate, 2004). Still, a considerable amount of historical research has been atheoretical. With the contradictions present, between this study’s social constructionist position and a conservative, cognitivised approach to relationship research, this chapter will provide a brief overview of sexuality in intimate relationship research as it currently
stands, including thinking around monogamous and well as non-monogamous relationships, both heterosexual and gay.

Despite sexuality being an integral part of close, romantic relationships, the research output that links these two areas is less developed than other areas of inquiry as it relates to intimate relationships. This is in part because it is difficult to define these concepts. Furthermore there is also little reference to intimate relationships in definitions of sexuality and to references of sexuality in definitions of intimate relationships (Harvey, Wenzel, & Sprecher, 2004). A benefit of exploring sexuality in an intimate relationship from a Social Constructionist perspective is its key acknowledgement and site of investigation of sexuality within a relational context. The intersubjective space forms sexuality; it is not by default an internalised experience that somehow ‘magically’ becomes externalised.

People enter relationships with a sexual history and a range of sexual beliefs and attitudes. The notion of ‘sexual desirability traits’ has been studied empirically within an experimental environment, and findings (the sample being heterosexual) showed that people generally prefer to date other people with low to moderate amounts of past and current sexual activity rather than a history of many sexual partners. Notably people with considerable sexual experience are more attracted to other people with similar levels of sexual experience (Sprecher et al., 2004).

In addition to the findings showing the relationship between sexual experience and partner selection, studies also show a positive association between sexual satisfaction and relationship quality. People who say they are sexually satisfied in their relationships are also likely to report higher levels of overall relationship satisfaction (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Edwards & Booth, 1994). This finding is also replicated in gay couples (Kurdek, 1991). Sexual satisfaction is also linked to other factors of relationship satisfaction, correlating positively with indicators such as love and commitment (Sprecher, 2002). Sprecher and colleagues (2004) point out that change in such general relationship dimensions as love and commitment may affect relationship processes, which in-turn induces changes in the sexual dimension of the relationship. Unfortunately though, little work directly investigates processes that could link the sexual and emotional pair-bonding dimensions of relationships. Researchers (e.g. Waite & Joyner, 2001) have only indirectly studied such processes.

3.2.1 Extradyadic sexual activity in heterosexual relationships

Every close relationship, especially those that include a sexual component, is structured around some degree of exclusivity (McKinney & Sprecher, 1991). Nonetheless, extradyadic relationships within the heterosexual population are far from rare. Lauman, Gagnon, Michael, and Michaels (1994) found that in the United States 25% of married men and 15% of married women report having had extramarital sex at least once. Individuals in dating relationships also engage in extradyadic sexual behaviour, although men are more likely to do so than women (Byers & Wang, 2004). Despite the
significant manifestation of extradyadic sex that couples practice, it is generally disapproved (Christopher & Sprecher, 2000). Thus, 77% of Americans agree that extradyadic sex is "always wrong" (Byers & Wang, 2004, p. 48).

The social exchange framework may provide insight about why a significant percentage of people nonetheless engage in extradyadic sexual activity. Social exchange theory argues that each person in a dyad engages in a diverse range of interpersonal interactions or exchanges in order then to influence his or her partner and to so attain the most favourable outcomes – to maximise rewards and to minimise costs (Byers & Wang, 2004). Research by Lawrence and Byers (1995) indicate that being with the same partner during each sexual encounter is identified as a reward by the vast majority of people (93% for women and 76% for men). Furthermore, their research shows that only 19% of men and 5% of women identify being with the same partner during each sexual encounter as a cost. Thus, sexual faithfulness is likely to be seen as a reward in most relationships. Still, men are more likely than women to experience being with only one partner as a cost and therefore view extradyadic sex as a reward. The reason for this, argued from a social constructionist perspective, is that the traditional gender script for men calls for a high sexual interest in general as well as showing an interest in sexual variety (Byers & Wang, 2004). It is also within this rewards/cost formula that one would find suspect theoretical positions such as ‘evolutionary psychology’ (Guerrero, Spitzberg, & Yoshimura, 2004), which would argue that men seek out a variety of sexual partners to pass on their genes through sex. Women, in this evolutionary model, are able only to have relatively few pregnancies and will seek out a mate who can provide resources for her survival and that of her offspring, and hence they do not seek out sexual variety to the same extent that men do.

Individual characteristics such as liberal attitudes, perceived need for sexual variety, and desire for freedom and autonomy have also shown to be linked to the need for extradyadic sexual relations (Buunk, as cited in Byers & Wang, 2004). These factors (freedom, sexual variety) may be thought of as costs and/or rewards resulting from extradyadic sexual involvement. For example, a person with a high perceived need for sexual freedom can possibly perceive sexual exclusivity as a cost. Therefore sexual freedom or the novelty of being with different sexual partners can be experienced as a reward.

Hatfield, Greenberger, Traupmann, and Lambert (1982) argue though that extradyadic sex, from a social exchange perspective, indicates possible dissatisfaction with the relationship. The extradyadic nature of the relationship results in a partner dyad where one person is overbenefitting and the other one is underbenefitting psychologically from the arrangement. The relationship has an inherent dynamic of imbalance that is playing out in a way that skews the cost/reward ratio in a disordered manner. The partner that overbenefits tends to experience slight guilt and uneasiness due to perceiving more gain from the relationship than the partner. The partner that underbenefits tends to experience a considerable amount of distress, anger, sadness and frustration as well as lower
relationship satisfaction (Sprecher, 1986). In line with this view, research conducted by Walster, Traupmann, and Walster (1978) shows that individuals who felt in some way underbenefitted in the relationship have more extramarital relationships than do either those who feel overbenefitted or those who feel the relationship is of equal standing.

Remarkably the academic literature related to extradyadic sex within a heterosexual framework seems, by default, to revolve around the secrecy that must be maintained to protect the primary relationship. A closed, two-person relationship is considered the ideal and it would seem that a conversation around an open relationship does not form part of the mainstream form of heterosexual couples. The literature mentions “sometimes couples construct a new sexual arrangement upon learning of one partner’s infidelity” (Willetts, Sprecher, & Beck, 2004, p. 79), thereby indicating that the majority of heterosexual couples from the outset seek a relationship structure that conforms to normative, dyad-as-given forms of relating, and any deviation is understood primarily as a breach of fidelity. Should an extradyadic relationship be sought out, then generally it is done in secret to avoid couple conflict. This stands in contrast to gay relationships where sexual nonmonogamy is a well-accepted part of gay sub-culture (Shernoff, 2006) and is not immediately contextualised from within an ‘infidelity discourse’.

3.3 Gay relationships

Research connected to exploring gay relationships dates mainly from the mid 1970s and draws extensively on a descriptive approach. However, a turn has occurred towards more theoretical and conceptual studies (Peplau, 1991). Many myths abound about gay men and their relationships. Amongst these myths are gay men are essentially unhappy people who drift aimlessly from one sexual encounter to another and that they do not want to be in relationships — although studies prove otherwise. A second myth is that those gay men who are in relationships are also essentially unhappy, are in an inferior relationship dyad to heterosexual couples, and that the relationship is dysfunctional and also deviant. A third myth is that gay male couples revert automatically to such gender stereotypes as ‘male’ and ‘female’ in their relationships. While this might have historically been the case, during recent times contemporary studies reject such traditional husband-wife or masculine-feminine roles within gay dyads. Some relationships might see specialisation of activities with one partner doing more of some jobs and less of others. Still, it is rare for one partner to perform most of the ‘feminine’ activities and the other the ‘masculine’ tasks. Specialisation would appear to be based on more individualistic factors such as skills or interests (LaSala, 2004a; Peplau, 1991; Robinson, 2008).

A significant increase in research on gay relationships has occurred recently. This reflects a growing awareness of the centrality of intimate relationships to the lives of lesbian, gay and bisexual people
Studies in the United States show that between 40% and 60% of gay men are partnered (Peplau & Spalding, 2000). Because presenting oneself as part of a gay couple opens a door to discrimination, abuse and violence, the statistics are likely to be underestimated (Kurdek, 2004). Considerable dialogue over the past decade has also centred on how same-sex couples can and should formalise their relationships, be it through legal recognition, religious or public ceremonies (Fingerhut & Maisel, 2010). Key explanatory frameworks that guide gay couples research are: relationship initiation, satisfaction and longevity, sexuality and the management of monogamous/non-monogamous relationships (Diamond, 2006). These explanatory frameworks are in turn mapped onto a larger conceptual canvas. Three conceptual approaches can be distinguished: (1) work that seeks to test the general applicability of relationship theories initially developed with heterosexuals, (2) work that uses comparative studies of gay, lesbian, and heterosexual relationships to test ideas about the impact of gender on interaction, and (3) work that seeks to create new theories about same-sex relationships (Peplau, 1991). This study is aligned with the third approach, that is, to create a new theory of open relationships.

3.3.1 Relationship satisfaction

Despite gay relationships being stereotyped as unhappy, unhealthy and fleeting, studies now show that gay couples are equally satisfied and dissatisfied as heterosexual couples (Beals, Impett, & Peplau, 2002). The same ‘bonding’ factors found in heterosexual relationships are also present in gay relationships. These factors of similarity are: attitudes and values, demographic background, perceptions of fairness and equity, and a mutual emphasis on dyadic attachment – shared activities of togetherness, commitment and intimacy (Kurdek, 1991). Alongside such ‘bonding’ factors, are ‘satisfaction’ factors. Whereas ‘bonding’ factors draw people together emotionally, ‘satisfaction’ factors maintain the relationship across time. Kurdek (1998b) found that relationship satisfaction was associated with consideration of intimacy, autonomy, equality and constructive problem-solving. In addition to these factors present in gay relationships contributing to satisfaction, findings from heterosexual couples report that marriage brings about lower levels of depression, lower anxiety and enhanced overall psychological wellbeing (Ross, Miroswky, & Goldsteen, 1990). Although Fingerhut and Maisel (2010) remark that the impact of psychological well-being on gay couples due to legal recognition has gone unexplored, the findings from heterosexual studies (Ross et al., 1990) would suggest sustained satisfaction is potentially enhanced through legal sanctioning of the relationship for gay couples as well.

Two recent studies, namely, Boesch, Cerqueira, Safer, and Wright’s (2007) work on relationship satisfaction and Fingerhut and Maisel’s (2010) work on satisfaction within the context of relationship formalisation helps to illustrate further. The studies both report that overall there is little observational research on what factors predict either the maintenance or dissolution of gay
relationships. Boesch and colleagues (2007) conducted their study using both an interview component and pencil and paper self-report measures to ascertain the level of relationship quality. The sample size was 57 male couples. The study showed that couples reported similar levels of satisfaction in the relationship, although not always similar levels of commitment for the relationship. Having a sense of equality and feeling attached to the relationship correlated positively with satisfaction for both individual members and also for the dyad. Having a perception of equality was seen as the strongest predictor of relationship satisfaction and commitment. This suggests that equality may act as a global indicator and overrides other negative aspects that the couple believes intrude upon the relationship. On average though, the study showed that while satisfaction of one partner was influenced by the satisfaction of another partner, the level of commitment by one partner was not significantly influenced by the other partner’s level of commitment. Boesch and colleagues (2007) argue that satisfaction expresses a certain relational mutuality whereas commitment has more of a cognitive and individualised sense of intent. They say that this finding about satisfied couples deserves further investigation in other studies of intimate relationships.

Whereas Boesch and colleagues (2007) applied an investigative gaze on understanding relationship quality, Fingerhut and Maisel (2010) included a further dimension and looked at relationship quality as it is mediated by the degree and manner by which the relationship is formalised, either through marriage, civil union or social acknowledgement (such as a ‘traditional’ marriage ceremony). In addition their study attempted to understand how formalisation also impacts on such factors as gay-related stress as well as individual and relationship outcomes. The study was conducted on-line using a sample of 24 gay couples (recruited through sequential elimination for non-suitability from an initial pool of 263 men) who completed a series of self-report measures. The findings from the study indicate that social recognition was associated with life satisfaction for the individuals involved, creating a feeling of life moving towards a state of contentment and individual security. It was, however, unrelated to relationship investment, which looked at how the individuals feel about what has been put into the relationship. A legal recognition though facilitated feelings of investment but was not related to relationship satisfaction. Consequently, emotional connection binding the relationship was brought about through social formalisation (a ceremony) and stood independently of legal recognition, which interacted more strongly with an individualised sense of investment by being allocated rights and responsibilities.

This subsection has briefly reported on the factors associated with relationship satisfaction. Whereas bonding factors pull people together through attitudes, values, equity and a similar demographic background, satisfaction factors are feelings of intimacy, a sense of autonomy, equality in the relationship and constructive problem-solving. It seems that equality acts as a powerful mediating factor and could potentially override other negative states in ensuring relationship satisfaction across
time. The manner in which the relationship is formalised also has an impact, moderating feelings of either investment or satisfaction. This was dependent upon the form in which the relationship formalisation was constituted and expressed. Social recognition brought about dyadic satisfaction whereas legal recognition brought personal investment.

3.3.2 Sexuality in gay relationships

The study of gay sexuality has generated more data on specific sexual behaviours of the individual rather than attempting to understand sexuality within a relational context, and current conclusions about sexuality in a relationship are based on a few major investigations. This is a limiting factor given that many gay men make their sexual decisions in the context of a relationship and not just as atomised individuals who stand outside of the relationship (Hoff, Chakravarty, Beougher, Darbes, Dadasovich, & Neilands, 2009). These major studies are supported by smaller, more focused studies. None of the studies conducted are representative, and most samples are disproportionately young, White, urban, and relatively well educated. Key studies were published during the 1980s and 1990s, with few major investigations initiated since 2000 (Bonello, 2009; Peplau, Fingerhut, & Beals, 2004).

The study of sexuality and sexual behaviour of gay men has been conducted against the backdrop of the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV). Research directed specifically at the impact of HIV within the context of gay relationships is limited and centres on two issues: how the AIDS epidemic has affected sexual behaviour in gay male couples and how couples manage their sexual relations when one partner is HIV positive (Peplau et al., 2004). Current data suggest that at present HIV prevention efforts fall one step behind the pace of the HIV epidemic. The majority of HIV prevention efforts that target gay men have also been individualised in focus and guided by such theories as the health-belief model (Hoff et al., 2009). Even though HIV prevention strategies have been somewhat successful in reducing HIV risk behaviour (Kelly & Kalichman, 2002), the proportion of new HIV infections attributed to primary partners rose from 15% in the mid-1980s to 67% in the late 1990s (Davidovich et al., 2001). A possible explanation for such a finding is that gay men in relationships engage in significantly higher rates of unprotected anal intercourse (UAI) with their primary partners than do single men with casual partners (Caceres & Rosasco, 1997). Hoff and Beougher (2010) who studied sexual agreements among open gay male couples found that couples were not motivated by agreements in an effort to reduce HIV transmission risk; many couples in their study simply assumed safe sex without defining what was signified by the sexual agreement. Recent studies confirm high rates of unprotected sex among gay couples (Crawford et al., 2006). A Swiss study found that gay men in steady relationships report using a condom for anal sex on average 57% of the time with their primary partner compared to 89% of the time with casual partners (Moreau-Gruet, Jeannin, Dubois-Arber, & Spencer, 2001). In a longitudinal study by Davidovich and colleagues (2001) 75% of gay coupled men aged 30 and under who contracted HIV between 1984 and 1993 contracted it from a
casual sex partner. This stands in contrast to the 67% of men in the same age range who contracted HIV between 1994 and 2000 due to infection by a steady partner. According to the researchers, "it appears that young gay men have adopted over time, safer sex practices with casual partners but to a lesser extent with steady partners" (Davidovich et al., 2001, p. 1307).

The study of the sexuality of gay couples also explores the frequency of sexual contact between male partners. In a study by Deenen, Gijs, and van Naerssen (1994b) 320 Dutch men who were in a relationship at the time were recruited. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 77 and relationship length varied from 10 months to 37 years. The sample revealed that 2% of the couples had sex 6 or more times per week, 25% had sex three to five times per week, 43% one to two times per week, and 17% one to three times per month. The remaining 13% of couples had sex with one another less than one to three times per month. Peplau, Cochran, and Mays (as cited in Peplau, Fingerhut, & Beals, 2006) also found a diverse range of sexual frequency within a sample of 325 African-American gay men in a relationship. The sample showed that 50% of the men said they had sex one to three times a week, 10% had sex more often, and 41% had sex less often. The available data demonstrates that, on average, the longer a gay couple is together, the less frequently they have sex with each other. Bryant and Demian (1994) and McWhirter and Mattison (1984) confirm this too in their studies, showing that the most sexually active gay couples were those who had been together for 1 year or less. These findings indicate that sexual excitement in the dyad decreases over time.

3.3.3 Extradyadic sexual activity in gay relationships

A distinct feature of contemporary gay men's relationships is the tendency to form sexually open relationships, therefore sexually exclusive relationship is by no means viewed as the norm among contemporary gay couples (Peplau et al., 2006). The analysis of this type of relationship arrangement needs to distinguish between partners' agreements and their actual behaviour regarding sexual openness of the relationship. This allows for variation to be noted in terms of nonmonogamy as an expressed intention of both partners, or whether an open relationship is something pursued secretly by only one partner. In contrast to individuals in mixed-sex relationships, where monogamy is still considered the "ideal" to strive for, gay couples have an easier social acceptance of sexual non-exclusivity (Shernoff, 2006). In the American Couples Study sample, 66% of the male couples who had been in a relationship 2 years or less had engaged in extradyadic sex, whereas 94% of the couples who had been together 10 years or more had done so (Peplau et al., 2006). A study by McWhirter and Mattison (1984) found that 73% of male couples started their relationship with an understanding, often explicit, and often implicit, that the relationship would be sexually exclusive. However, 100% of those couples who had been together for 5 years or longer had experienced an extra-dyadic encounter. These findings suggest even those gay men who start the relationship with the intention of being monogamous either over time change their intentions or fail to live up to this standard (Peplau
et al., 2004). The large number of mutually agreed upon sexual non-monogamy in a committed couple runs counter to the widely held notions that holds that intimacy in a relationship can only be achieved through exclusivity (LaSala, 2004). However, these statistics should be interpreted against the notion that it is virtually impossible to obtain a truly random sample of the gay population (Adam, 2006). Despite the high prevalence of extradyadic sex within gay relationships, controversy nonetheless remains. Segments within the mental health professions field still view open relationships as an expression of some form of pathology (individual and relational); this opinion though shows a “lack, of clinical sophistication and acumen” (Shernoff, 2006, p. 408).

Shernoff (2006) proposes that the high incidence of extradyadic sex in gay relationships can be attributed to gender. He argues that gender differences impact and create dynamics between men that account for the acceptance of sexual experiences to take place outside of the primary relationship. This is counteracted in opposite-sex couples by the socialisation of women. Shernoff continues that men are, in general, more orientated towards a recreational view of sex and to therefore be less monogamous. Despite the evidence to support a theory that men are better at separating sex from love than women are, investigators disagree with this claim, referring to evolutionary psychology, social conditioning, or a combination of the two. An additional dynamic that could be at play is that some gay couples are more realistic about the limitations of sexual exclusivity when combined with a committed love relationship. By observing the heterosexual, mononormative world that we live in, gay couples have elected to create their own value system. In addition gay men observe that monogamy also does not work for a sizeable minority of heterosexual couples. They have elected not to take on a specific patriarchal and capitalist notion of a partner who is considered as a possession. Furthermore, the vast majority of gay couples do not have children. It could be that children may foster sexual exclusivity. In traditional heterosexual families monogamy served as a function of keeping the family together and protecting the children. Therefore childless gay couples could be less compelled to be strictly monogamous. In addition, since gay relationships are already regarded by society as illicit, no clear barrier is breached when engaging in sex outside a union with another man that does not carry the social authorisation of society at large. Another factor that promotes extradyadic sex is the easy availability of recreational sex in gay bars and sex venues (Blasband & Peplau, 1985).

Blasband and Peplau (1985) conducted an empirical investigation to establish whether the quality of sexually open and closed relationships among gay men differed in any significant manner. Their sample consisted of 80 men (40 gay couples). The majority of respondents were white (81%), with the remaining 19% distributed fairly evenly across the remaining racial/ethnic spectrum of the United States. Ninety percent of the sample had a university degree. Respondents completed a questionnaire to answer the research question. Ninety percent of the respondents had also discussed the issue of
deciding to have an open or closed relationship. Personal attitudes and values about exclusivity were a central theme in both types of relationships (open versus closed) when choosing which relationship type best suited the couple. The study found that men in closed relationships had significantly more conservative attitudes and believed it was important for the relationship to remain closed if it was to be successful. These men also cited jealousy as an inhibiting factor – either from their partner’s side, or from their own. Those men who chose an open relationship identified the importance of sexual variety and personal independence as strong motivating factors to pursue this type of relationship. The desire to avoid both possessiveness as well as the jealousy of property ownership, were the reasons given most often for an open relationship. The study concluded that no significant differences were detected in terms of relationship adjustment; both open and closed relationships were equally likely to have strong feelings of love, satisfaction and commitment. Openness was not necessarily a sign of problems with the relationship. The authors call for further research that can shed light on the decision-making process that couples enter into about sexual exclusivity within a relationship.

LaSala (2004a) conducted a similar study and reports similar findings. One hundred and twenty-one couples participated in his empirical paper-and-pencil questionnaire study, with 88% of the respondents being white Americans. The study outcome showed relationship satisfaction (as measured by the Dyadic Adjustment Scale which scores for affectional expression, relational consensus, relational cohesion and relational satisfaction) was able to be achieved both by monogamous and non-monogamous couples. The study notes though that monogamous couples scored significantly lower on dyadic satisfaction compared to the couples who were in an open relationship. However, when monogamous couples who broke their agreement were removed from the monogamous group as an influencing variable, then no significant difference between the two groups emerged on dyadic satisfaction. The study also found no significant variation on dyadic adjustment for intra-couple scoring, either for monogamous or non-monogamous couples. LaSala calls for further research to shed light on factors that allow for open relationships to be maintained without relational satisfaction and commitment waning.

The work by Kurdek and Schmitt (1986b) also examined the relationship quality of gay men in either open or closed relationships. Ninety-eight men in closed relationships and thirty-four men in open relationships participated in the study. Paper-and-pencil questionnaires were administered to ascertain relationship quality. The results revealed that partners in open relationships lived together longer than those partners who were in a closed relationship. Also noted was that 20% of the couples who participated were in a closed relationship after 5 years (which counteracts research trends that show that by 5 years the vast majority of gay couples are in an open relationship). This would suggest that an open relationship is not the inevitable outcome of long term gay relationships. The authors argue that context could have an impact on the occurrence of either an open or closed relationship.
Environmental settings where gay men are visible and numerous may lead to couples valuing openness, whereas settings in which gay men are more hidden may lead to couples valuing and protecting sexual exclusivity. The study did not find any differences between men in open and closed relationships on either general or specific psychological adjustment (such as depression, hostility, anxiety and inter-personal sensitivity). Both open and closed relationships showed equivalent readings on intimacy, security, satisfaction and commitment. Kurdek and Schmitt (1986b) hypothesise those relationships that have endured, like the open couples who participated in the study, have done so because the couples may themselves have developed mutually recognised ways of keeping the relationship safe. These may include sexual variety, shared interpersonal relationships, reciprocal trust, shared property, shared material possessions, joint financial resources, and the symbolism of “serving as models of a relationship that has endured” (p. 97).

A few theoretical but notably qualitative studies on relationship exclusivity have emerged over the last few years. Adam (2006) sampled 70 men in relationships in the Canadian city of Toronto to understand the formation of sexual relationships with both primary and secondary partners. As in other studies, Adam reports findings that monogamy was rarely seen as a simple taken-for-granted presumption. The participants reported challenges of defining a relationship without ‘ready-made rules’ to guide them. The men reported entering uncharted territory, having to continuously assess options and to then determine whether monogamy should be viewed as the preferred course of action. Without the access to clear social norms, men had to often ‘feel’ their way toward a meaningful arrangement and understanding of the relational dynamics. Adam found that monogamy appears to be more common among men in early stages of the relationship. This reflects other research trends that show a decrease in monogamous relationships with the progression of time (e.g. Shernoff, 2006). Many of the men in Adam’s study reported that monogamy is viewed as a limiting factor that unnecessarily prevents individuals and couples from exploring a multitude of sexual options and experiences that could not be found only within the couple. Sexual exclusivity, it was found, acted as a foundation building process. The urban environment contributes through over time, Adam argues, in providing the space for sexual self-expression and to create “innovative arrangements in sexual and emotional connections among men” (Adam, 2006, p. 23).

Bonello and Cross (2010) and LaSala (2004a) found similar themes in their studies of eight gay men in relationships that allowed for extradyadic sex and living in London and sixty-five gay men in a relationship from varying locations across the United States. Again, monogamy was maintained during the early phase of the relationship to ensure emotional safety and a sense of “togetherness.” The participants across both studies reported that even though the relationships allowed for extradyadic sex, emotional monogamy was always maintained to protect the primary relationship. The sense of a “dyadic emotional union” (Bonello & Cross, 2010, p. 126) was important, influenced
by such conditions as emotional needs (that only the relationship can provide, such as love and understanding), shared history and commitment. The participants reported that casual sex enhanced the primary relationship. The explanation provided was that recreational sex allowed for the expression of sexual preferences and desires that differed from that of their partners and hence it was described as serving as a de-stressor, and at times it acted to increase self-confidence.

3.4 Conclusion

A striking feature is the rich variety of relationship configurations that gay men construct. This should alert researchers and the public at large to not talk about the ‘typical’ gay couple (Peplau, 1991). In opposition to heterosexual norms and prejudices, gay men pursue relationships that provide emotional security, nurturance and sexual pleasures and variety. The literature argues that it is important for gay men to seek out relationships, and that many do so, despite homophobia and prejudice. Contrary to popular belief about the fleeting nature of gay relationships, gay men have expressed a goal for functional and committed unions over time instead of entering multiple cursory relationships.

Couples who took part in the studies reviewed valued emotional connection and partner primacy. Several studies have shown that the presence of outside sex does not automatically result in a depleted primary relationship, but rather acts as a way of reinforcing dyadic commitment (LaSala, 2004a, 2004b). Couples were able to distinguish between emotional fidelity and recreational sex, which ensured stability within the relationship and prevented feelings of jealousy or anger from intruding. When such feelings did enter the dyad, couples showed resilience toward discussing such feelings to protect the valued relationship. As Bonello (2009) points out, the question of ‘functional vs. dysfunctional’ relationships has been adequately answered. Therefore research should attempt to transcend both the singular and dichotomous representation of gay experiences, which is overdue.

Peplau (1991) comments that new theories should be based on distinctive gay couple experiences to guide the direction of future work in the field. Research needs to be mindful of alternative relationship practices among same-sex couples, such as the pursuit of nonmonogamy (Diamond, 2006). Bonello (2009) remarks that most theoretical papers, which explored important aspects of male couples, were methodologically flawed often due to a lack of transparency in the reporting of analytic procedures. Therefore qualitative studies with optimum designs and robust methodologies are needed. Bonello further remarks that psychology underproduces both empirical as well as theoretical studies that investigate gay relationships. This limitation needs to be addressed. This study addresses theoretical and methodological limitations found in the literature of previous studies. A social constructionist grounded theory approach in this study overcomes this shortage.
CHAPTER 4

METHODOLOGY

4.1 The qualitative position in psychology

Associated with research within the critical paradigm and social constructionist epistemology are various traditions that challenge mainstream paradigms in psychology, and many of these traditions espouse a qualitative approach. These traditions serve as alternatives to positivist, postpositivist and interpretivist paradigms (Terreblanche & Durheim, 2007). Furthermore the subject area with which this research intersects (Sexuality Studies) also commonly uses qualitative methods (Parker & Aggleton, 2000). More specifically, as explained in the preceding chapter, this research aims to directly access the transformative psychology of gay relationships, a form of psychology and subjectivity that involves a focus on meanings.

Willig (2008) explains that to focus on meaning and meaning-making, a qualitative paradigm is appropriate. Additionally, disclosure of private behaviours and meanings may draw disapproval and judgement; this therefore involves research of sensitive issues, and to give voice to these sensitive stigmatized meanings qualitative research is indicated (Liamputtong, 2007). Three domains of research activity illustrate the foci of qualitative research: language as a way to explore processes of communication and patterns of interaction within particular social groups; description and interpretation of subjective meanings attributed to situations and actions; and theory-building through discovering patterns and connections within the qualitative data. This characterizes the methodological aim of qualitative research, that is, to achieve depth of understanding (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, & Davidson, 2002).

Willig (2008) distinguishes between two varieties of qualitative research. The first is the ‘big Q’, which refers to open-ended, inductive theory generation and the exploration of meanings, whereas ‘little q’ refers to the incorporation of non-numerical data management techniques into hypothetico-deductive research designs. This study is informed by ‘big Q’ methodology, which in this research translates into the meanings and perspectives co-constructed within a particular relational dyad lived out in contemporary society.

Whereas Willig’s (2008) distinction between the ‘big Q’ and ‘little q’ is based on the inductive-deductive division, Fossey and colleagues (2002) divide their categorization into interpretative and critical forms. The proposed study, aligned with the critical form, emphasizes the social-historical origins and contexts of meaning wherein knowledge is not discovered by objective enquiry, but generated through discourse and debate (Fossey et al., 2002). This particular knowledge-generation activity, as opposed to traditional research enables the critique and transformation of current
structures, relationships and conditions which either shape or constrain the development of social practices within a historical, social, cultural and political context (Fossey et al., 2002).

Parker (2005) and Eisner (2003) explain the political activity of research. Research in psychology, remarks Eisner (2003), as with research in other disciplines, is shaped by ideas and ideals about matters devoted to method. He continues that ideas and ideals should be understood as “what is legitimate to study and how such a study should be done” (p. 17). Framed another way the question is: What is the relationship between epistemology and methodology? Henwood and Pidgeon (1992), in their exploration of what it means to research qualitatively, remark that the gathering, analysis and interpretation of data are always being done within a broader understanding of what constitutes legitimate inquiry and warrantable knowledge. Parker (2005) therefore argues that the qualitative stance provides a context for “radical research in psychology [that allows for] subversion and transformation of how we can come to know more about psychology” (p. 1).

The epistemological position as espoused through the qualitative tradition is built upon the premise that knowledge generation should not be constructed around inappropriately fixed meanings, when they are variable and re-negotiable in relation to their context of use. In addition, there is a need in the qualitative tradition to avoid over-writing internally structured subjectivities with a priori systems of meaning (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1994). An aim of a qualitative study is to understand ‘what it is like’ to experience particular conditions. Therefore the qualitative researcher is concerned with the quality and texture of experience, rather than with the identification of cause-and-effect variables. The researcher attempts to “describe life-worlds, from the inside out, from the point of view of the people who participate” (Flick, von Kardorff, & Steinke, 2004, p. 3).

In this research paradigm sensitivity to context is allowed (Flick, 2004), because qualitative methods should open up a space to allow for radical and different aims that link human experience with social action (Parker, 2005). Being guided by the epistemological voice of ‘big Q’ methodology means that the research process (and by extension the researcher) needs to be located within the context of history, society and culture. It allows for a re-situation of individuals within their own life-worlds, requiring close scrutiny of the social locations that people occupy. Furthermore these advantages specify an understanding that the people participating in qualitative studies are assumed to be reflexive, meaning-making, intentional actors who are the primary script writers throughout the investigative process (Parker, 2005). Therefore qualitative research is about meaning-making through the experientially-based knowledge that participants bring. Taylor and Bogdan (1984) explain that a definable feature of qualitative methods include “learning about what is important in the minds of informants: their meanings, perspectives and definitions; how they view, categorise, and experience the world” (p. 88, emphasis is Taylor & Bogdan’s). The qualitative tradition draws on such direct knowledge as a primer for theory generation (Willig, 2008). Design and analysis therefore need to
incorporate research decisions not merely capable of yielding mere description, but also theory building and/or theory generation.

4.2 Social Constructionist grounded theory

This study aimed to contribute through constructing knowledge about a relationship variety that stands in contrast to dominant lifeways. Also a particular tradition is required to fit with the aim of knowledge generation, and a suitable choice on this level, which also has implications for data management, is the tradition of social constructionist grounded theory. The social constructionist grounded theory tradition also fits the critical psychological theoretical stance because the Social Constructionist researcher is alerted to the conditions under which the studied phenomenon arises and becomes maintained (Charmaz, 2006). This version of grounded theory allows for a systematic, yet flexible approach for collecting and analysing data and then to construct theories that are ‘grounded’ in the data. The researcher co-constructs the data. Interpretation cannot be conducted ‘outside’ of the shared relationship between first, the participant and researcher and second, between the data and researcher. This tradition is also reflexive because all analysis is contextually situated in time, place, culture and situation. This contrasts with the traditional, objectivist approach to grounded theory, which in assuming data are ‘real’ erases social context and the relationship between participant and researcher (Charmaz, 2006).

Grounded theory was selected as analytic device because it focuses on theory generation. This study aimed to describe, from a contextualised perspective, how the social process of being non-monogamous, unfolds in a social space where partners deliberately enact and live within the construction of an open relationship. Grounded theory attempts to synthesise, explain as well as interpret data by aiming for analytic power as well as conceptual grasp (Charmaz, 1990).

In its traditional form grounded theory asks that the representations presented of the psychosocial world be read as ‘true’ reflections of that world. The traditional or objectivist approach resides in the positivist tradition and therefore understands data as real and thus does not attend to the processes of how they are produced (Charmaz, 2006). A social constructionist informed grounded theory has therefore been articulated as a suitable variety that overcomes the criticisms aimed at the traditional variety (Charmaz, 1995, 2006; Henwood & Pidgeon, 2003). This specific method argues that theory does not just ‘emerge’ from the data; interpretation and analysis are always conducted within some pre-existing conceptual framework, which is part of the researcher’s prism of experience. Objectivity is not something to be found beyond the borders of language. Rather, the choice of language and the affective loading connected to words directly shape realities.

The constructionist perspective stipulates that the logic of interpretation requires that the researcher must remain aware that “knowing always involves seeing and hearing from within particular
individual, institutional, and other socio-culturally embedded perspectives and locations” (Henwood & Pidgeon, 2003, p. 135). In addition to the researcher’s subjective awareness of positioning, social constructionist grounded theory also means engaging with the participants’ taken-for-granted interactions, emotions, definitions, ideas and knowledge both about themselves and their relationships (Charmaz, 1990). Constructions are still experienced as reality: “they are not convenient fabrications, nor idiosyncratic inventions” (Charmaz, 1990, p. 1161). The kind of data produced is a product of researcher and participant interaction. This is due to topics that the researcher wishes to pursue, the goals that the participants have for taking part in the study, as well as the subjective world they bring to the study. The researcher must have self-awareness about how and why the data are collected and interpreted (Charmaz, 1995). Rather than search for causality and linear reasoning, focus is on indeterminacy of the social, to view the truth as provisional and to understand social life as processual (Charmaz, 2006).

The analysis of narrative is done with the researcher bringing to the process disciplinary knowledge and theoretical sensitivities. These theoretical sensitivities are to be viewed as tools that can lead to “vision-creating” or “vision-blinkering” (Henwood & Pidgeon, 2003, p. 135), depending on the complex interplay of individual, structural and cultural conditions. Theoretical sensitivity can direct the researcher towards certain areas, while ignoring others – processes vital in the construction of grounded theory. Grounded theorists draw inspiration from background assumptions, proclivities and interests, which allows for sensitisation towards the data in the search for issues and processes (Charmaz, 1990). It is a process that understands how and why meanings and actions are constructed the way they are in specific situations (Charmaz, 2006). My theoretical sensitivities for this study have been outlined in chapter 2.

Grounded theory allows for a full or abbreviated version. Willig (2008) recommends that the abbreviated version be used when either time or resource constraints occur. I followed the abbreviated version. The research satisfies (minor dissertation) fulfilment of the professional degree in clinical psychology. The degree programme should be completed by the time the candidate psychologist starts with the compulsory community service year for the state. This prevents an elaborate qualitative project, which requires greater time and effort to move through to the point of data saturation, which is a requirement for the full version. The choice to proceed with an abbreviated form of grounded theory has consequences for this study. The abbreviated version makes use of grounded theory as a method to code and analyse data.
4.3 Research question

Grounded theorists start with a broad concept which they wish to investigate further. The research question for this study is: How do men in an open (non-monogamous) gay relationship, construct and experience their relationship?

4.4 Sampling

Qualitative sampling is concerned with information richness and participants who can best inform the study should be selected (Fossey et al., 2002). For the purpose of sampling, an ‘open relationship’ is conceived as a gay male couple that seeks sexual relations outside of the primary relationship (as opposed to a ‘closed’ or monogamous relationship). Both partners must be aware of the ‘open’ status of the relationship and should have discussed this relationship status with each other.

4.4.1 Recruitment

Adequacy and appropriateness are two considerations that should guide the sampling method. Fossey and colleagues (2002) stipulate that qualitative sampling is purposeful when it aims to select suitable information sources to explore meanings. No fixed number of participants is necessary to conduct sound qualitative research; however, sufficient depth of information needs to be gathered to fully describe the phenomenon being studied. There are no hard-and-fast rules, and decisions about the number of cases are also determined by constraints imposed on the research, such as deadlines. I decided that a minimum of three couples would provide sufficient analytic depth.

To obtain a single or ‘once-off’ set of verbal data, participants were recruited through advertisements, which were placed in on-line resources such as a popular dating website (www.gaydar.co.za) and the website of a GLBT NGO (www.out.co.za). No exclusion criteria were set in terms of age, race, co-habitation or socio-economic status. The only set criteria were that the relationships be constituted for at least twelve months and that the couple should be aware that the relationship is non-monogamous. Three couples volunteered. By electronic and/or telephonic means the purpose of the study was explained. See Appendix A for the electronic advertisement.

4.4.2 Description of participants

All participants were Caucasian. One participant was Afrikaans speaking and five were English home-language speakers. The mean age was 38 and all participants self-identified as gay. The couples co-habited and all interviews were conducted at their homes. All the participants had at least an undergraduate degree, with two having obtained a professional qualification. They were all employed, lived together in well-appointed homes in up-market urban areas, with a monthly
combined salary of at least R 60,000.00. Couples one and two had been together for six years, whilst couple three had been together for ten years.

4.5 Data gathering and analysis

Grounded theory stipulates that data collection and analysis should occur concurrently. Rather than first collecting the data and then beginning the process of interpretation, the grounded theorist does both at the same time. To gather information from marginalized or vulnerable groups, in-depth interviewing offers detailed personal stories particularly about sensitive matters such as sex and sexuality (Liampittong, 2007).

The study object (open relationships) requires that both partners be interviewed simultaneously (conjoint interviewing). This is often used in the context of marital or relationship research (Arksey, 1996). Morris (2001) describes this method as appropriate when a socially-defined relationship and a joint frame are explored. It allows for interaction between participants and emphasizes relational dynamics, which can be explored in-depth. Furthermore, participants represent themselves not as individuals, but as concurrent participants in a relationship. Joint interviewing helps to establish rapport as well as an atmosphere of confidence; it reveals the different forms of knowledge held by each person and produces more complete data as interviewees fill in gaps or story ruptures during the interview (Brannen, 1988). Furthermore joint interviewing allows for observation of the interactions and nature of power relationships between couples (Arksey, 1996). The phenomenon is a shared event providing consensual data. Even if meanings are not shared the semi-public context reveals negotiation, unlike a focus group that is a public and more threatening arena (Morris, 2001). The in-depth interview will elicit each participant’s interpretation of the experience through thick description and reflection (Charmaz, 2006).

Lee (1993) points out that there is no reason to assume that qualitative interviews of a sensitive nature are any less uncomfortable for the interviewer, than it possibly could be for the interviewee. The highly personal nature of the topic can make the process a stressful experience for both parties. The researcher must engage fully with any awkward issues by being reflexive, and where need be, enter into a supervision dialogue with colleagues to understand conflicting personal issues. Brannen (1988) suggests three sets of contingencies that should be in place when investigating a sensitive topic. They are: (1) the approach to the topic; (2) being able to deal with contradictions, complexities and emotions intrinsic to the interview situation; and (3) the operation of power and control in the interview situation.

The in-depth interview must be seen as a directed conversation (Charmaz, 2006), where rich, complex, detailed descriptions are collected so that grounded theory can be properly applied (Charmaz, 1990). A social constructionist position stipulates that the researcher is aware that "true"
accounts do not exist, but aims to capture the subjective experiences and understandings of participants. The process of in-depth interviewing asks participants to present an interpretation of their experience that allows them to describe and reflect upon that experience. To achieve this outcome the researcher must not only observe with sensitivity, but also gently encourage the participants to respond while maintaining respect for the process (Charmaz, 2006). Charmaz (2006) also suggests that the comfort level of the participants be given priority over the kind of data being generated. In addition the researcher must also demonstrate understanding and validation of the participants’ experiences. Furthermore, no interview should end abruptly, which can lead to confusion and unresolved issues not being explored. Depth interviewing, as argued by Lee (1993), also poses more acute problems related to informed consent. This is relevant if the topic under investigation only gradually emerges during the interview process. Even if the sensitive nature of the topic is revealed upfront, participants might not be fully aware of the implications of such an interview. They are asked to disclose much about themselves, perhaps even at some-emotional cost. At the outset, participants do not know what they are going to reveal, in what ways, or even at what risk. It is vital then for the researcher to have the process contained within strict ethical parameters.

All the interviews were conducted at the participants’ places-of-residence. There homes were selected to maximize the comfort of the participants and to facilitate an easier commitment to the study. The interviews began with asking each couple: “how does it feel for you sitting here today with me?” I used their responses from this question as a departure point to explore whatever issues were raised by the conversation. The interviews were recorded on a digital recording device.

I approached the interviews both as a researcher and a therapeutic psychologist. A strong background position that I brought with me was of maintaining a therapeutic position broadly informed by psychodynamics. I took up a rather unobtrusive position in the room. I did this to allow the couple to fill the room with their own thoughts and feelings. The relative passivity of my presence, I hoped, was accompanied by a quality of attentiveness, a state of openness and receptiveness to what the couple was communicating. Alongside the therapeutic style, I also drew on strategies that inform grounded theory interviewing, such as getting the couple to describe and reflect upon the experiences they were talking about. By asking the couples to describe and reflect, the interviews went beneath the surface of a particular described experience to encourage the couples’ thoughts, feelings and actions on whatever was brought to the conversation (Charmaz, 2006).

Following verbatim transcription of the interviews many strategies were used in working with the transcripts. Analysis is initially structured around line-by-line coding of the transcripts. This step, Willig (2008) argues, compensates for the loss of breadth of the fuller version of grounded theory. This initial stage requires close readings of the data, followed by more focused coding that becomes more directed, selective and conceptual. It is used to synthesise the data and to explain larger data
segments. Next is theoretical coding. Here possible relationships between categories are specified. This establishes core categories (Charmaz, 2006). Grounded theory analysis therefore involves coding as the initial step from which to move beyond concrete verbal data towards analytic interpretations that in turn provide the researcher with a pathway towards theory building. In the study, this generates an explanatory framework or theory about how non-monogamous gay men experience and construct their particular open relationships.

The building blocks of grounded theory involve establishing the progressive identification and integration of categories of meaning. It is both the process of category identification and integration (as a method), which then leads to its product (as theory) (Charmaz, 2006). Grounded theory provides the researcher with the guidelines on how to manage the identification of categories, how to make links between categories and then how to establish relationships between them. Categories emerging from the data that share central features or characteristics with each other are allocated together. These categories are then expanded from a descriptive level to a more abstract analytical level that allows for theoretical possibilities to form (Charmaz, 2006).

A vital part of the process in establishing a theory is the process of memo writing (Charmaz, 2006; Willig, 2008). Memo writing assists in analysing ideas about codes that are generated. It acts as a primer to unpack the data and attached codes early in the research process. It keeps the researcher involved in the analysis and also aids in increasing the level of abstraction of the ideas. Memo writing allows ideas to take form, allows for comparisons and connections to be made as well as crystalising questions and directions for the researcher to pursue (Charmaz, 1990, 2006). It is a process of self-conversation that allows the generation of new ideas and insights. Memo writing was used throughout the research process to consolidate thinking around emerging themes and to allow for new themes to emerge. I use examples of memo writing in chapter 5 to illustrate this process.

The first step applied to the transcripts was line-by-line coding. Coding is the process by which categories are identified. As Charmaz (2006) remarks, it “identifies the bones of the analysis” (p. 45). The early stage of the analysis calls for coding to take place primarily on the descriptive level. Labels are then attached to discrete instances of phenomena. It is through coding that the researcher is able to define what is happening in the data and then to tackle its meaning (Charmaz, 2006).
An example of line-by-line coding is provided below to illustrate the process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TRANSCRIPT (P2)</th>
<th>CODE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It was fairly casual at first our acquaintanceship. Firstly, we didn’t seem to be particularly suited in any way but the main thing was we had absolutely no intention of pursuing any kind of romantic whatever – either of us. I said to him at the time “I’m going through a lot of shit and if you’re looking to settle down, I’m definitely not the one</td>
<td>Casual at first Not suited for each other No romantic link Going through personal difficulties</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The second major phase was that of focused coding. Once the analytic direction was established in the initial coding sequence, focus shifted across the three different transcripts. This allowed the researcher to check upon earlier assumptions about the topic. New ideas are generated and a cyclical process is established of returning to previous descriptive coding events and reading them afresh as new analytical codes (Charmaz, 2006). An example of focused coding illustrates this process:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EXTRACTS FROM TRANSCRIPTS (P2 AND P4)</th>
<th>FOCUS CODE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P2: No men can’t be trusted</td>
<td>Cannot trust men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I: What is appealing to you about having an open relationship?</td>
<td>Open relationship easier, don’t have to lie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4: To me it makes life easier. I don’t have to lie</td>
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Once focused coding established a clear analytical domain, theoretical coding was started. Theoretical codes specify possible relationships between categories that have been noted during focused coding. Theoretical codes allow for integration by providing structure to the focused codes. The theoretical codes provide the architecture for a coherent analytic story to take form (Charmaz, 2006).

By examining the focused codes, codes were then linked. From the example above the code “cannot trust men” was linked with the code, “open relationship easier, don’t have to lie.” Both these codes comment on trust issues. Consequently this provided a framework of “Trust” to build a theoretical code around it. Through a linking process this theoretical code was abstracted to ultimately take shape as the analytic category of, rules protecting the primary relationship. This category was then interpreted with theoretical sensitivities from the literature. This process culminated in the creation of a core category. Grounded theory as a theory is then viewed as the end-product of this process; this is an explanatory framework with which to understand the phenomenon being studied (Willig, 2008).
4.6 Quality

One of the strengths of quantitative research is its ability to provide normative standards against which work can be evaluated and scrutinized. Qualitative research lacks such techniques of verification (McGrath & Johnson, 2003). There are, however, methods to evaluate the credibility of qualitative research (Willig, 2008). Such methods must ensure that the perspectives of the participants have been authenticly represented in the process of research and that the interpretations of the data adhere to this authenticity. Henwood and Pidgeon (1992) recommend a number of guidelines for good practice. Research rigour must ideally be maintained while simultaneously acknowledging idiosyncrasy and creativity in the research process. The following guidelines informed this study (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1992):

- **The importance of fit.** The analytic categories should mirror the data appropriately. The researcher is therefore encouraged to provide explicit, clear and comprehensive accounts, which provides an audit trail that illustrates why phenomena have been labelled and categorised in a particular way.

- **Integration of theory.** The relationship between the different units of analysis should be clearly stated. The focus is to ensure that the theory at varying levels of abstraction is related to the problem domain in a purposeful way. Memos contribute to integrating theory.

- **Documentation.** An inclusive, comprehensive and well-substantiated account should be provided.

- **Transferability.** Readers must be able to explore the extent to which the study has applicability beyond the context within which the data were generated.

Besides the above strategies for maintaining quality, a core process in critical research is reflexivity. Research is structured on decisions and postulations about the way to proceed. These decisions determine what may or may not be accomplished in the research. The reflexive researcher provides a context that allows a dialogue that foregrounds the socially constructed quality of the work. Such issues include who the researcher is, the values brought to the study and how this has impacted on the study outcomes (Chamberlain, 2004).

Willig (2008) proposes that reflexivity be understood as both epistemological reflexivity and personal reflexivity. Epistemological reflexivity requires an engagement with the philosophical origin of knowledge, of exploring what can be known, and understanding the limits of what can be known or ‘found’. This reflexive stance asks for an exploration of the study design and how the method of analysis has constructed the data and the findings (Chamberlain, 2004; Willig, 2008). Personal reflexivity involves a process of reflecting upon the values, experiences, beliefs, political commitments and social identity of the researcher in order to understand how the research process unfolds (Willig, 2008).
Many reflexive opportunities are available. Giving consideration to any or all of them shapes the research process. The shaping takes place within the context of sensitivities and assumptions embedded within the research question and data analysis. This gives direction to the ethical factors informing research conduct. This is addressed next.

4.7 Ethics

Sensitive research holds potential consequences or implications, either for the participants, or for the class of individuals represented by the research (Sieber & Stanley, 1988). Furthermore sensitive research deals with life surrounded by taboo and is laden with feelings of awe or dread (Farberow, as cited in Lee, 1993). It is research which could pose a sizeable threat to participants (Lee, 1993). For Parker (2005) ethics in psychological research can be understood as the commitments made during a research project. These commitments must move beyond thinking about ethics in relation to laboratory-experimental research. It must at all times allow a moral-political dialogue. The researcher must reflect upon his political commitments in relation to the people being studied. Reflexivity therefore is not only a strategy for improving quality, but also of establishing ethical engagement.

An ethical issue also relates to how a researcher can best understand, interpret and present study findings (Fontes, 1988). A guiding principle should be that the way the work is gathered and presented shall always value the uniqueness and agency of the participants. The stories brought to the study have meaning and purpose for the people sharing them. This makes the participants vulnerable through their agreement to take part in a study. They are vulnerable through sharing something personal and revealing about themselves. The ethical researcher, who is at all times guided by a moral-political discourse, will avoid inflicting harm upon those who have agreed to be part of a study. In addition, this study adhered to certain basic formalised ethical considerations, which frame the research relationship. This included: informed consent of participants, avoiding deception of participants, allowing them to withdraw from the study at any time and making available and opportunity for debriefing. Confidentiality was maintained and all identifying data was removed from the transcripts.
CHAPTER 5

GROUNDED THEORY ANALYSIS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter describes and discusses the categories identified in my analysis. As Charmaz (1990) advises I clarify the properties of the different categories, the conditions under which they arise, the consequences these categories hold and the relationships that categories hold towards other conceptual categories. The analysis will conclude by integrating the categories to allow for a theoretical 'gestalt' that can articulate the various processes on a broader level.

The narratives illustrated a fairly fluid process of sustaining and maintaining a 'dyadic commitment' or emotional closeness in a sexually open relationship. This commitment is returned to repeatedly as the couple moves through a process of sexual nomadism and destabilisation (destabilising the traditional monogamous dyad), which is followed through with a process of re-stabilisation. This journey of commitment within the context of destabilising and then re-stabilising the relationship captures Foucault's (1997) thinking about new and innovative directions that gay men should take. This involves new forms of love and relationships that act as a creative force. The process pivoted around the management of nomadic desires in the dyadic union and was contingent on a series of conditions: being emotionally monogamous, feeling deeply attached to each other and committed to the relationship, placing a high premium on communication and honesty in the relationship, allowing each other to explore aspects of sexuality that might not be experienced fully within the boundary of the primary relationship and doing so from a position of trust. Through the analysis, the core category of nomadic subjectivity within the context of dyadic commitment was identified together with a range of integrative categories: (1) initial searching for a traditional relationship that evolves into moving an open relationship, (2) experiencing different ways of sexual pleasure and excitement, (3) experiencing a sense of personal exploration as well as simultaneously experiencing a journey of exploration as a couple, (4) establishing new and innovative rules as a way of understanding the boundaries of the relationship, (5) being able to compartmentalise sex and emotion as two different experiential aspects, and (6) being able to trust each other to always value the primary relationship.

Quotes from the interviews will be used to illustrate the building of categories. In the excerpts provided the interviewer will be identified by the letter I and a participant by the letter P. Couple 1 will be coded as participants 1 and 2 (P1 and P2), couple 2 will be coded as participants 3 and 4 (P3 and P4), and couple 3 will be coded as participants 5 and 6 (P5 and P6). On occasion participants refer to their partner by name in the interview. To ensure privacy names have been changed.
Furthermore, I include throughout this chapter a series of memos, which appear in shaded box form. Memo writing is an important part of social constructionist grounded theory analysis (Charmaz, 2006). These memos articulate some of my thinking as I moved through the data gathering and data analysis stages. They will help in illuminating my thinking around the construction of categories.

Memo:

I entered the interview with two hats, one of them being a researcher and the other of being a psychotherapist-in-training; two roles that call for two fairly different approaches. I view my role as a researcher as one that draws on skills of active probing in order to elicit a story that provides a meaningful experience and understanding within a time-limited context. I would imagine using questions such as: “what do you mean by that?”, “tell me more?” or “how do you make sense of what you’ve just described to me?” It is a process, as Charmaz (2006) says that allows the interviewer to: request more detail and explanation, keep the participant on the subject, slow or quicken the pace, or shift the immediate topic. My therapeutic orientation, as a psychodynamic therapist though asks of me a fair amount of neutrality. I adhere to the idea of psychoanalytic restraint. I imagine, upon reflecting on the interview process, that at times I adhered too much to the idea of limiting intrusion, as understood psychotherapeutically. Rather, I could possibly have been less inclined to view the interview from a ‘therapeutic perspective’ and more as a research journey that requires me to take a position that asks more clearly for description of events.

5.2 Categories

5.2.1 “I was looking for the white-picket fence”: Traditional discourses guide initial constructions of the ‘pure’ relationship

The interviews started with me asking the couple how it felt for them to be sitting with me and talking about their relationship. I used this approach to facilitate a process that would hopefully secure a feeling of safety by demonstrating that I would like to create a sense of thoughtfulness on my part. It was also done to see in which direction the couple would take the conversation, as my question allowed for latitude. Across the three interviews, the couples used the opportunity to discuss historical thoughts they initially had about relationships:

Couple 1:

P2: I used to be very naive (about relationships). Very, very – I don’t know, the white-picket fence, settling down or something. Then I moved overseas and lived in the UK and what I saw over there and how I was introduced to the modern way and age of gay men’s lives and the way they live. It was a bit of – at first a bit of a shock and then a bit of acceptance.

I: And that shock that you’re talking about, why do you think that was there?
Well, I came from like a South African society: white picket fence, how boring, and moulded on heterosexual marriage stuff, which fails anyway. You know, marriage is forever... (sarcastically).

And so your experience in the UK, seeing different relationships?

Well, they're just far more open. They are far more open about sex. They're also far more open about relationships. They are just far more open with everything. [In South Africa] we're like in this blinkered Victorian society.

I suppose there is a pre-conceived idea about relationships, a little white picket fence and all that.

Well, they're just far more open. They are far more open about sex. They're also far more open about relationships. They are just far more open with everything. [In South Africa] we're like in this blinkered Victorian society.

And what was the appeal of that ideal fantasy?

I suppose it just was security and being loved.

These extracts reveal the initial reliance on a 'traditional' narrative of how a relationship should be constituted. At least one person in each couple spoke about having a belief at an earlier point about the ideal relationship constructed around the notion of the "white picket fence." This narrative of the picket fence holds sense of dyadic security. The picket fence conjures up an image of peaceful, safe suburbia. Within that image is a sense predictability and of relationship rituals that are normative. In addition to the sense of peacefulness and predictability, the white fence, in demarcating the outer limits of the suburban home, acts as a symbolising structure of psychological containment. Within the 'boundaries' of the fence, the couple can comprehend rules, expectations, a familiar developmental progress of the relationship, and so live the story of "heterosexual marriage stuff." (P2) In doing so, containment manages anxiety by ensuring a form of disidentification from desires, wishes and unconscious wants that hold the risk of rupturing a sought-after storyline. The couple is able to foreground a 'mimicked' world that can aspire to be part of the charmed inner circle (Rubin, 2007). This script is presented, as P5 said, as "fact." By being fact it becomes an indisputable reality. It is a "factual" inevitability that this should be the only course to follow in searching out and starting a relationship.
The “socialisation” of believing in this “fact”, can be partly explored through Foucault’s concept of the ‘punitive society’. Foucault (1997) identifies a series of punitive tactics in the penal system of the Classical period. I argue that one of them has bearing on maintaining the charmed inner circle of which the “white picket fence” is a symbol. A punitive tactic that acts as boundary to transgression is the fear of exile, to be cast out, to be expelled beyond the borders, to threaten the destruction of the home, or to confiscate property. The “fact” of a relationship that espouses the values of the “white picket fence” also acts as a warning that deviation risks expulsion and exile. The participants not only talk about following the ‘heterosexual’ model, but they also talk, albeit silently, about fears of being cast out, and hence the fence, in acting as container, acts as a normalising symbolic structure that will safeguard the ‘home’ from destruction or confiscation. The ‘deviant’ gay couple, is not so deviant after all. Exile, it would seem, is not imminent. However, as P1 concludes, this way of ‘being’ as a gay couple is a naive narrative to follow.

Research by Adam (2006) reflects a similar narrative of assessing options and determining whether monogamy is the preferred course of action, that is, “without clear social norms governing the way that relationships are ‘supposed’ to unfold, men in couples often feel their way toward an arrangement” (p. 11). Furthermore, Adam (2006) remarks that monogamy ties into romantic discourses that are prevalent in the environing heterosexual culture which provide an image of how relationships are supposed to work. Monogamy, Adam (2006) continues, as articulated by gay men, is often viewed as an accomplishment in the relationship, rather than a provisional rule-of-thumb subject to revisiting. The ‘romantic discourse’ is prevalent in how the participants initially believed a relationship should be constructed. The idea of a monogamous relationship as an organising principle is more common in the early stages of a relationship. Blasband and Peplau (1985) note that personal attitudes and values about exclusivity play a central theme in deciding whether a relationship should be open or closed. These researchers found that men in closed relationships had significantly more conservative attitudes, believing that exclusivity is essential to a successful relationship. In addition to these personal values, jealousy also played a key role in wanting a closed relationship. Jealousy was born out of a fear of potential loneliness and also insecurity about losing one’s partner. Embedded within the identified white picket fence discourse are narratives of jealousy and the need for security. Traditional definitions of love perversely celebrate jealousy as an organising principle of the relationship. It may even facilitate maintenance of the charmed inner circle. However, as is illustrated in the following section, and echoed in research (Adam, 2006; LaSala, 2004a), monogamy as an organising principle can also be seen as an ‘uncomfortable pretence’, or an ‘unnecessary constraint’.
"Okay, how do you feel about an open relationship because that's pretty much who I am": Constructions of men as hyper-sexual.

The conversation with the different couples moved toward narrating how they came to think about relationships 'outside' the prescripts of the charmed inner circle, involving their 'need' to be in an open relationship. The idea of being sexually exclusive toward one other person was viewed by the participants as impossible. A component of this argument was that, "men can't be trusted" (P1). A meta-discourse positions men (gay or straight) as being 'inherently' untrustworthy as monogamous sexual partners. A biological reductionist position is followed that draws on the narrative that what men ultimately want to do is to have sex with as many partners as possible (due to an 'innate' need to be sexual for reproductive reasons). To support this position P2 remarks that even "the golfer Tiger Woods does it. All of them are exactly the same. All men are the same; they're predators. They like the game." There is a narrative that valorises the never-ending masculine search for a sexual conquest. It is a "game" played by "predators." This idea of the 'game' evokes an image of a labyrinth, a sexual labyrinth where men move through, drawing on the excitement of the possible sexual object that waits behind the next turn, it is a game of intrigue, of desire, of somehow being uncontained or unshackled by these norms that ensnare and ultimately doom one to sexual monotony. A sense of vitality is conjured through this predatory excitement and construction.

Couple 2:

P4: My previous relationship – my first long relationship was a 12 year one and it wasn’t closed. From the beginning it was an open relationship. So I was kinda used to something like that. And when [you and I] got involved, I think I kind of said to you, "this is who I am and if you're happy with that, then we can continue.

P3: I must say, it did not take me by surprise then, it took me by surprise a little bit later when it came into practice. Then one obviously develops your own perceptions of what it's all about and then you kind of grow into it.

P3, in conversation with his partner, continued by recalling the first time his partner disclosed his wish to be in an open relationship

P3: John said to me, “okay how do you feel about an open relationship because that’s pretty much who I am. At first it is a bit strange, just trying to compartmentalise in your head how it's going to be. One can separate the idea of sex and love and have two completely separate stories.

P4: Yes I agree.

P3: It is just sex, more than anything else. So ja, when it actually went into practice, it was actually only when we first did something that there was this sort of uneven, grey area where you kind of did not know where to tread. But the moment you actually have an experience and it’s actually – it just fell into place.
For me, when Michael said to me we can have an open relationship, it meant that okay, this is the right person for me to have a relationship with because I don’t want to go around doing things behind my partner’s back. If you do that it’s going to come back and bite you. And then you’re going to have fights in your relationship, you’re going to have a stormy relationship and then you’re going to lose the person in the process. It’s better to know from the start, this is how—this is who I am and how it’s been working for me. And you can’t change. People don’t change easily.

The transcript extracts illustrate the powerful impact of the construction that men strive for sexual conquests. Sex is a potent organising principle, and partners should ideally appreciate this, as is articulated by P4 in the extract directly above.

Located within this organising principle are power issues. Shernoff (2006) remarks that people do not love equally and rarely have equal power in a relationship. Whilst both partners accept and enjoy the sexual freedoms of an open relationship there is nonetheless a hierarchy present in how the arrangement was reached. P4 says to his partner, “this is who I am (in referring to the fact that he is not sexually monogamous), and if you’re happy with that we can continue [being in a relationship].”

P2 during the interview recounts that during his previous monogamous relationship his partner at the time cheated on him, resulting in a gross power distortion in the relationship. When P2 entered into the current relationship he and his partner “actually almost set out [to be in an open relationship]” in order to minimise power imbalances that come from cheating. P2 reflects on the sexual arrangement that a friend and his partner:

My best friend actually, he does not even want to know what happens with his partner and vice versa. They just agree it’s a timeout and during that time don’t really ask any questions. But that didn’t seem to work for us. We didn’t seem to want that. I don’t know why, we just did not—not so far anyway. Maybe it would get there.

If you had to think now a bit about why that is, where does your mind go?

I think we’re kind of deeply attached and we don’t really seem to have the idea of running off on our own.

P2’s comment that the friend and his partner “don’t ask any questions” regarding the sexual activities of the other person could suggest an avoidance of underlying power imbalances. P2 further remarks that he and his current partner “don’t want that” therefore possibly implying that they have a need to maintain a form of sexual equality. This equality, or awareness of potential abuse within an open relationship, is expressed when P2 says that “[we are] deeply attached.”

Research by Worth and colleagues (2002), also highlights a construction that the pursuit of sexual satisfaction outside the primary relationship is an inevitable and irrepressible reality. It would seem that anxiety associated with the possibility that either partner could be unfaithful leads the couple to pursue an open relationship partly as an attempt to manage the anxiety. Blasband and Peplau (1985) suggest a stage model for sexual exclusivity. Relationships would normally move through
developmental sequence of monogamy to non-monogamy. The couples from this study counteract the stage model, in that all relationships started as open. This would seem due either to one partner wishing to assert some form of control in the relationship, or to minimise power imbalances, or to reduce anxiety over the possibility that one of them could be unfaithful at some point. These discourses associated with providing reasons for an open relationship take shape within an overriding construction that men are inherently hyper-sexual creatures seeking sexual release from their natural instinctive desires.

5.2.3 “Sex is something you do.” “But wait, for me I want to get to know the person:” Complexities separating sex and emotional involvement.

With the interviews exploring the participants’ thinking around their need to be in an open relationship, sexual explorations with other people excluded emotional bonds. Sex is a ‘surface’ act and should not have to take place within the context of a strong emotional bond:

P4: I’ve always been one that is able to separate relationship concepts. Sex is something you do. You don’t even have to know the person’s name really. You don’t get emotionally involved when you’re just having sex with someone else.

In order to maintain the primary relationship, disruptions in the form of emotional connections with extra-dyadic sexual partners had to be avoided. This would be perceived as infidelity. To ensure the division between sex and emotions, like the example above, the couples engaged in a process of compartmentalisation. For P4 to say, “sex is something you do,” a distancing narrative is present that protects the individual as well as the couple. I imagine that the participant could be expressing a ‘behaviour’ (“do”) because he believes that the ‘mind’ is removed from the process – it is an engagement of bodies only. An interiority (a traditional mind) is removed, and a non-thinking self becomes constructed. I suggest though that a ‘mind’ is indeed present, but of a less traditional kind. Whereas a traditional mind would dictate notions that emotion must be present during sex, I think a different emotion is at work. A collective, dyadic ‘mind’ that searches out pleasure is present. The traditional ‘mind’ becomes shifted to the ‘mind’ of the body as well as a ‘mind’ present between the people who are being sexual together. Attachment (mind) involvement is reconfigured to bodily (mind) involvement in an extra-dyadic sex act. This has a distinct emotion of its own through which two (or more) bodies share pleasure, and hence, meaning. Therefore, whilst compartmentalisation of sex/body and traditional emotion occurs, a more fluid ‘body emotion’ is present. This ‘body emotion’ as well as ‘collective emotion’ between the actors produce an emotion of pleasure rather than of betrayal. The idea of ‘my core self’ and of ‘my love’ for my partner is not threatened. Rather than separating sex and emotion, two different emotion types that guide pleasure and attachment become compartmentalised. Sex is still emotional, but of a different, bodily variety; a recreational erotic variety rather than a socially sanctioned rational variety.
P3, however, expressed a desire to experience an ‘emotional’ side to the sexual encounter. In doing so, he is nonetheless talking about connecting with a bodymind:

P3: I’m a little bit different from my partner. I suppose we all like sex. I like there to be more of an emotional connection with someone. To me I think great sex is not only a physical connection but also when you have a – there’s a chemistry between people, and also to get that person – to know that person emotionally as well.

Bonello and Cross (2010) identify a similar process of separating emotion from sex, which they call compartmentalisation. In order to maintain the integrity of the primary relationship, Bonello and Cross found participants reporting measures that guided casual sex encounters to avoid emotional entanglement. The measures used to ensure dyadic emotional commitment seems to act as a containment function within which extra-dyadic sexual boundaries can be explored. This scenario is discussed in the following section.

5.2.4 “I think it’s about pushing your boundaries slightly into the unknown:” Constructions of expanding pleasure.

All the couples spoke about sexual scenarios, which took place either with them experiencing it together, or individually, which created a sense of fun, pleasure and excitement:

Couple 2:

P3: [Being sexual together with somebody else] for the first time, I think it was about exploring new territories. I must say we both had a lot of fun. We enjoyed it and it was – and it’s not like sex between us was ever bad, but it just created another dimension to it. And you know – well from my point of view, it’s exploring someone else and pushing your boundaries slightly into the unknown and then exploring how you feel about that.

P4: You know, boys are naughty and get up to a lot of mischief.

P3: For me to also push boundaries is to actually get to know the other person as well, mentally physically. And I suppose that’s where the boundaries come in on that side.

For P3, the expansion of boundaries is connected to his views about separating emotion and sex, as discussed in the previous section. Therefore to engage with the “unknown” is to also to enjoy something that feels like an exploration of the subjectivity of another person’s mind. Even though I argue that this is a subjectivity of body; that is where ‘mind’ and ‘emotion’ becomes located.

I: Are you saying that there was a time when you were focused more on getting to know somebody mentally or emotionally to the detriment of a physical side?

SP3: No, not at all. I’m just saying that to me I think any relation, a sexual relationship, becomes in my mind a little bit more intense when you do know a person a little bit better and it doesn’t mean – you don’t need to know the person really well but just have a little bit of a sneak peek into what they like and what they don’t like, as well as who they are as a person. So for me I find that’s more of a turn-on to know that. I know that’s quite the opposite of my partner. He actually shies away from that completely.
I: And John your thoughts about, as Michael has said, shying away from it. What makes it interesting for you or appealing for you? I know Michael spoke about an emotional connection, getting to know somebody a little bit and that you’re obviously a bit different. How do you think, or why do you think that is?

P4: I think I enjoy experiencing different guys, different bodies, different — each person is slightly different and what makes that person tick. You know, somebody might like this and somebody might like that. But I don’t really need to get down and understand a person or you know — just have some fun and that’s it. I don’t want the person to get involved with me on a mental level. I want — that’s something completely different.

Memo:

P4 talks about the enjoyment of experiencing different bodies, and located in that statement is embedded the idea of pleasure and sex in a ‘raw’ quality. By this I mean that there is something (potentially) un-modulated in the statement. A possibility exists that the participant is referring to an experience that could somehow exist outside of discourse. This is a theoretical debate (see Parker (2005)), whether we can talk about something existing ‘outside discourse’, but nonetheless I feel that I should have engaged with this idea of “different bodies” more closely. It opens up a space for conversation in which one can locate not only the enjoyment of another body, but also how that ‘other’ body impacts on how the participant understands his own body. It could have allowed for an elaboration on the idea of the ‘body mind’ facilitating pleasure through a type of ‘body emotion’. The conversation is asking for a more erotic quality. As interviewer I could have asked “how do different bodies turn you on” or “why do different bodies turn you on?”

P5 describes the pleasure that he and his partner (P6) experience after they have been with either one other person, or another couple:

P5: At the end of any threesome of foursome quite frankly the best part — this is the strange thing — it’s exciting, it’s fulfilling and satisfying and hopefully if it’s a good experience — it’s isn’t always and we’re happy to admit to that and we learn from that situation — but the end of any threesome or foursome, the best part is being alone together afterwards and sharing it and talking about it.

I: Why is that the best part?

P5: Personally for me, I always get to a part where it’s like; “it’s been good but Steven and I, that’s better. But I also don’t want to deprive myself of the excitement that comes [from also being with other people]. And I mean, Steven and I are at least to some extent sexually fuelled by the excitement we draw from that situation.

P5 expressed that the culmination for him and his partner being sexually involved with another person, or another couple is knowing that it does not damage their unique relationship. They feel closer and more intimate with each other. They revealed how they initially started the conversation about exploring sexual possibilities with other people. The dialogue shows a sexual ethic of reflexivity that attempts to be mindful:

P5: When you and I first started experimenting we would like really analyse every situation in advance, during, after and then talk it all through and we did a tremendous amount of that.
I: Why all the analysing in advance and what was that about?

P5: Nervousness as to how it would work, how it could work, whether it is something we should so, whether it was something we both wanted, and what our limits were.

P6: But I think in a nutshell we’re just making sure we were not hurting the other person.

P3 describes the “liberating” qualities within an open relationship:

P3: If I actually get excited for the other person because they are getting excited for something which I think is quite liberating. I think it’s actually – it’s really nice to actually feel another person’s excitement and not have any issue around it and not trying to box it and just let them enjoy it for what it is, which I think is great. ...I know that my partner is a very different person to me. I know that he has different sexual fantasies and different desires to me as well. I don’t want to be the one to inhibit him from actually experiencing those fantasies, those dreams because that is life and I don’t want to put a curve on it. I want him to lead a very full life and if it means doing whatever you need to do, well then that’s great because that’s part of his life experience.

Throughout the categories the constructions reveal that subjectivity permeates the conversation. I refer here specifically to Foucauldian subjectivity. In this category the participants spoke about the need to explore new territories, about “having fun”, to include an additional sexual “dimension” to their world, and to explore (either alone or with the partner), “someone else,” to “feel the excitement” of the partner as he explores his sexuality, and a wish to not “inhibit” such exploration. Expanding boundaries of pleasure and of self are foregrounded. The journey involving the pushing of boundaries and of experiencing something that has a quality of the unknown and of enjoying new forms of pleasure associated with it can be further understood through Foucault’s “technologies of the self”.

The idea of ‘technologies of the self’ serves as a series of techniques, Foucault (2006) says, which allows individuals to work on themselves by regulating their bodies, their thoughts as well as their conduct. The type of self-surveillance is reconfigured to monitor the dyad too. P5 talks about how he and his partner discuss extra-dyadic sexual experiences they have shared by remarking that “it’s almost like watching the video again basically. You go through it and discuss what you saw and what happened.” His partner replied, “there’s no guilt.” Whilst the comment implies an enjoyable re-living of an exciting sexual experience, another dimension is present: regulation. By revising the sex through a video analogy, an intricate process of surveillance is used to track each partner’s interpretation and emotional reactivity to the sex. This allows for boundaries to be pushed, yet at the same time to not potentially damage the relationship. In addition to dyadic surveillance, this technology of the self allows people to achieve happiness, perfection, purity, or wisdom. It is a process through which we attempt to live the truth, tell the truth, and be changed by it (Danaher, Schirato, & Webb, 2000). The participants are articulating a “technology of the self” that speaks of a sexual truth telling. This ‘sexual truth’ finds meaning and expression within the matrix of Foucauldian ‘askesis’- the organising focus of his thinking around ethics. Foucault poses the question: how should a person be ethical in pleasure relationships with others (Foucault, 1988)? The
answer lies in his remark that “ethics is the considered form that freedom takes when it is informed by reflection” (Foucault, 1997, p. 281). The participants view sex as a creative force. Sex and pleasure are the crystallising point of a ‘new’ gay culture (Foucault, 1997). Relationships of pleasure are entered into that have a “disciplined form of sensuousness” (Foucault, 1997, p. 231). The participants express a mindfulness, or a reflexivity in terms of their relationships. It is a reflexive celebration of a gay communal lifestyle that celebrates expressions of sexuality. Mutuality is present and pleasure is derived not only through direct sexual contact, but also by knowing that the partner is experiencing pleasure. An ethical presence is found in that a ‘care of self’, which is socially, politically and culturally encoded (the ‘gay community’), is expressed in the realm of reflexive sexuality. Participants expand boundaries, explore bodies and derive pleasure while maintaining a sensibility to context and the people who inhabit that context. Seeking out pleasure and varied sexual partners helps the participants to ‘work on themselves’ towards a sexual happiness. This sexual happiness celebrates a sexual ‘self-knowledge’ that is not restricted by monosexual norms. Foucault is saying that a multiplicity of feelings no longer needs to fit into a single (monosexual) model of love (Eribon, 2004). Yet it remains an ethical enterprise committed to the values and ideals of inter-relatedness and of knowing that subjectivity is found in the meaningful bond of the relationship.

5.2.5 “I think honesty and communication are the most important things:” Rules protecting the primary relationship

The participants express varying ways through which they ensure that the primary relationship remains one of security and trust. All the couples value honesty and lines of communication that remained open and ethical in terms of striving towards reflexivity. Couples discuss maintaining some form of dyadic unity to ensure the safekeeping of the relationship:

Couple 3:

I: How do you manage the open relationship?

P3: I think honesty and communication. Ja, I think those are the most important things. The most important thing I think is communication. If we are communicating then it’s a strong thing for the relationship. Through all of that we have ensured incredibly honest and intense communication and a shared experience where some of which were good, some of which were bad, and some of which were indifferent.

Couple 2:

P3: When we spoke about [the open relationship] in the beginning we decided that there should not be any parameters except honesty. And you know, we needed to be honest about both beforehand and afterwards as well. You need to say beforehand “this is what I want out of the relationship” and you need to be quite honest about that, and then actually in practice as well.
Besides maintaining dialogue around sexual and emotional needs, couples also spoke about how they manage specific sexual encounters to keep the couple cohesive:

Couple 1:

P1: We have a veto-rule. The rule is that if anybody is miserable or not having a good time or upset about anything, then they have the power to go and pull the plug.

Couple 3:

P6: We retain absolute veto-right, each of us. And in the sexual arena you're not entitled to reasons. That's just how it is. So just accept it. So we do that or we try to do that but we do manage it pretty well...not without some resistance and reluctance at times.

The extracts provide insight into how the three couples navigate and manage the protection of the primary relationship. The tone is one of deep commitment and care. The relationship acts as an emotionally sustaining and containing space where the couple can feel safe. They have found ways of managing potentially destructive emotions such as jealousy. Furthermore, the idea of a veto-right when engaged in group sex is significant. As P6 points out, no discussion is even entered into when a veto is called. It is done on occasion when either partner feels uncomfortable. It reinforces the importance of the couple and acts as a reminder of the importance of reflexive sexuality and respectful subjectivity.

Rules regarding boundaries to protect the primary relationship are of importance (Bonello & Cross, 2010; Hoff & Beougher, 2010; LaSala, 2004a; Worth et al., 2002). Eighty two percent of the participants in a study by LaSala (2004a) reported a series of rules to protect the primacy of the couple relationship. These rules included limiting the time spent with extra-dyadic partners or not having more than one encounter with the same man. Participants from the current study were vague in how they viewed primary relationship protection. The interviews seldom went beyond expressing the importance of “communication” and “honesty”. However, two couples did maintain a “veto-right” that stops a sexual encounter (when engaged as a couple) without having to provide explanation. This “veto-right” implies a regulatory function whilst also suggesting an administrative quality associated with processes of negotiation.
5.6 Exploring the core category of ‘nomadic subjectivity’ within the context of dyadic commitment.

Memo:

The journey towards thinking about the core category, around which a theory could be built, came about after a visit to the university art gallery. I was sitting in my study cubicle in the university library feeling despondent and tired. I was staring at dozens of pages of interview transcripts and looking at pages of notes, unable to think clearly about what I wanted to say. I decided to take a walk to the art gallery opposite the university’s administration building. The gallery had recently opened an exhibition of the artists Angus Taylor and Rina Stutzer. The exhibition Dislodge (Loswikkel) articulated the philosophy of the works presented as being about the “purposeful shifting from the safe haven of that which is known and the need to escape from the stagnant.” Furthermore the works were about “critical reflection” and about a “new playing field” where “structures of meaning, ideology and meta-narratives are thus questioned.” As I continued to read, intrigued by what I felt from the text thus far, my eyes fell on the word “nomadic.” The word was used to describe the art as “fleeting through...works that will change constantly over a lifetime,” that represents the “momentary and the transition, in a state of ‘in-between’.” “Nomadic”: it had become anchored in my mind as an idea that captures the experiences of my participants. Sexual nomadic subjects; moving through bodies, through experiences, searching out novelty, desire never revolving only around one other person. It is this idea, of the nomad, which informs my thinking as I construct a core category that I hope will capture the experiences of the participants that I have discussed throughout this chapter.

The American literary figure Gertrude Stein said: “It’s great to have roots, as long as you can take them with you.” (Braidotti, 1994, p. 1). I would like to propose a theoretical analysis that uses this quote as a departure point to pull together two ideas. The notion of “roots” in the above quote denotes the dyadic commitment of the participants to each other, whilst Stein’s idea of taking roots “with you” expresses the nomadic quality of the participants’ sexuality. These twin processes act as a force of destabilising (the nomadic search) the traditional notion of how a relationship is constituted and moving toward re-stabilising it through dyadic commitment. Figure 1 below demonstrates a cycle that re-stabilises the dyadic commitment, which in turn allows for destabilisation of the dyadic relationship within the parameters of an open relationship.
Throughout the interviews the couples emphasised being emotionally connected and loyal. Whilst the relationships were sexually open, they were emotionally closed. P1 called it living in “our own little brackets.” By this he means that the dyad is of primary importance. The bracketed relationship ultimately creates an impermeable barrier that prevents outside forces unsettling the relationship. The bracketed relationship allows a discourse of emotional commitment to secure an ‘authentic relationship’. Finn and Malson (2008) in their discussion of dyadic containment in non-monogamous relationships, note that the dyadic unit functions as a hegemonic index. Through this index a ‘core couple relationship’ is identified that acts as a delineating discourse that “brackets” the relationship. This places the emotionally ‘closed’ relationship in a position that is ‘superior’ by maintaining something ‘pure’. It creates a ‘secure base’ and draws on a narrative that says that ultimately people “yearn for home” (p. 520). This is in essence, the “white picket fence.” This form of relationship containment (the emotionally committed dyad) acts as a metaphor containing architectural imagery. This reifies the importance of the two-person relationship as secure base and allows for experience to be articulated within a relationship discourse that is immensely powerful and meaningful. The diagram above conceptualises this process within the processes of re-stabilisation and dyadic commitment.

Alongside the authentic desire for dyadic closeness and protection, which is a process of re-stabilisation, the couples though also inhabit a nomadic (destabilising) world. The nomadic universe allows for multiple, meaningful and enjoyable experiences that are lived and interpreted through an architectural imagery that allows for a “move against convention” by calling on a “critical consciousness that resists settling” (Braidotti, 1994 p. 3). The couples, in living an open relationship
use their imagination as gay men to step out of a stasis position. The gay celebration of sexuality is the subversion of set convention, which the participants are doing. The dyadic/nomadic cycle is a way of leaving behind “a linear mode of thinking” – that relationships are meaningful only when they are monogamous (Braidotti, 1994, p. 8). They are, as Braidotti (1994) says, living a political fiction (gay sexuality as antidote, to oppressive heterosexual regimes of normal/abnormal) that is more effective in the here-and-now than purely theoretical systems. The diagram above conceptualises this process within the processes of destabilisation and nomadic searching for an open sexual experience.

The shift away from stasis (Braidotti, 1994) articulates the development of “a new relationship paradigm” (Weeks, 2000, p. 213). The relationship, Weeks (2000) argues, becomes a defining element within the context of intimate discourses. This intimate discourse provides the framework of “everyday life” (p. 213). The celebration of everyday life mirrors Braidotti’s (1994) call to move beyond theoretical systems and to marvel at stories that give meaning to the here-and-now (everyday life). This new relationship paradigm allows for a focus on personal identity by prioritising individual choice. Furthermore, an understanding takes shape that commitment is a continuous matter of negotiation (Weeks, 2000).

The participants are, through the dyadic/nomadic cycle of destabilisation and connecting with each other again through re-stabilisation, bravely pursuing a sexual dislocation from the norm, whilst keeping a vital connection to a more traditional, yet equally meaningful, closed, unique dyad that provides safety on a multitude of levels. The participants are “blurring boundaries without burning bridges” (Braidotti, 1994, p. 7), and through “new stories” (Plummer, 2003) claiming demands for validation.

The core category of nomadic subjectivity that reconstructs dyadic commitment serves as a synopsis of other categories. The spiralling destabilisation – re-stabilisation movement involves the dyadic processes of re-stabilisation, for example, communication, honesty, veto-rights, emotional bonds. Meanwhile dyadic destabilisation challenges such traditional mononormative constructs by drawing on rhetoric of sociobiology to explain extra-dyadic sexual behaviour. The process of destabilisation on an individual level is clustered around reconfiguring the bodymind as well as seeking an expansion of pleasure.

My journey to the university art gallery resulted in a sense of being dislodged by the art and being moved by the ‘nomadic’ qualities expressed by the works on display. I became destabilised as a new world of texture and form opened up for me in the gallery. This resulted in a new lodging, in effect a reconstructed home with a new fence. This journey is possibly similar to that of the participants. A process shifts and unsettles the mind, yet a new mind, a new home with many possibilities are found, and a fence (dyadic commitment) maintains a sense of security.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS, CRITICAL EVALUATION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Conclusions

Category 1: Traditional discourses about relationships

In early stages of the relationship, the couples had naive ideas about their unions. It was at the outset meaningful for the participants to imagine the ‘ideal’ relationship to be structured around the idea of the white “white picket fence.” This form of relationship myth-making seeks its architecture in the traditional South African “heterosexual marriage stuff,” (P1) which is, as P1 said, “so boring.” Thinking about entering an open relationship was at first challenging. To think about an open relationship was to imagine a loss of security and of being loved. Using the image of the white picket fence as expressed by all couples. I theorised that this helps to contain possible anxiety by preventing a range of ‘deviant’ expressions rupturing a valued and sought-after storyline. The charmed inner circle had to be maintained.

Category 2: Constructions of men as hyper-sexual

The participants described the “impossibility” of being in a sexually closed relationship. Two strands were argued: First, men “cannot be trusted,” and second, men’s biology calls on them to be “sexual predators.” The couples’ gay construction is to engage with and be excited by a sexual game of searching out partners and to be unshackled by normative constraints. Furthermore, located within this organising principle of men-as-sexual predators seeking sexual vitality, are issues of power differentials.

Category 3: Complexities separating sex and emotional involvement

Extra-dyadic encounters were constructed so that they are not complicated by emotion. A narrative that compartmentalises sex and emotion characterised sex as something that you “do.” I argued that focusing on the behavioural aspect of sex (“doing sex”), a mind and hence a subjectivity are removed – it is an engagement of bodies only. I suggested that a ‘mind’ is present, but of a less traditional kind. Whereas the dominant predatory male discourse articulates a separation between sex and emotion, I argued that what become separated are two emotional systems. One emotional system guides dyadic commitment whereas the other emotional system guides pleasure. An emotional system is alive during sex, but of a different, bodily variety; a recreational erotic variety rather than a socially sanctioned rational variety.
Category 4: Constructions of expanding pleasure

Sexual scenarios offered fun, pleasure and excitement. New territories of subjectivity about pleasure and the self were foregrounded. The participants viewed sex as a creative force and became a crystalising point of a ‘new’ gay culture, which embraces a reflexive sexuality.

Category 5: Rules protecting the primary relationship

Couples expressed varying ways to ensure that the primary relationship remains one of security and trust. They valued honesty and open communication. Couples valued an ethical and reflexive dyadic unity to ensure the safekeeping of the relationship.

Core category: Nomadic subjectivity within the context of dyadic commitment

This core theoretical category was built around the idea of dyadic unity within the context of nomadic sexuality. The two-person relationship was the primary commitment. Alongside the desire for dyadic closeness and protection, which is a process that re-stabilises the relationship, the couples also inhabit a nomadic, destabilising world. The nomadic universe allows for multiplicity and reinvention. These experiences are lived and interpreted through architectural imagery. Through a sexually nomadic lifestyle the couples subvert convention. This process brings about a new relationship paradigm that focuses on personal identity and individual choice within the context of a couple.

6.2 Critical evaluation of the study

6.2.1 Personal reflexivity

My interest in Sexuality Studies is born out of my own journey of many years to understand and appreciate my sexuality as a gay man. As a teenager in the early to mid 1990s I struggled with a sexual orientation that made me feel alien and isolated. I viewed sexuality as something dangerous. Over the years I have devoted much of my academic time to understanding this process and attempting to find a way that reconciles my split-off parts regarding my sexuality. Alongside this journey is a process of attempting to better understand relationships. The process of exploring intimate relationships finds its origins in my own struggles with interpersonal intimacy.

In addition to the exploration of my sexuality and identity as a gay man, is a political consciousness that gravitates towards understanding power differentials within a socio-political context. This means being mindful of the impact that such differentials have on people who are in some way oppressed under race, gender or sexual orientation. I believe this resulted because I was called a ‘communist’ in my standard five year (1988) at school for not growing up in an Afrikaner home that supported the National Party, and I felt quite thrilled about this. Even though I hardly knew what a communist was at the time, I did know it was subversive, which I liked! Therefore this research report originates
within this matrix of being a gay man, struggling with issues pertaining to sexuality and sexual expression, being politically aware of the abuses of power on repressed or marginalised groups and taking pleasure from entering subversive (communist!) worlds.

Personal reflexivity also takes into account how I as researcher co-constructed the study outcomes. I am drawn to ‘subversive’ acts in a celebratory way. I applaud critical theories that challenge taken-for-granted ways of thinking. I am intrigued when, for example, Foucault states that people should use their bodies in new and exciting ways sexually (Foucault, 1997). My approach to analysis was therefore driven by a perspective that moves away from traditional interpretations of experience. Social Constructionism is a critical approach that interrogates power differentials, and it articulates the harmful effects of traditional dominant discourses. The analysis process was informed by this political stance. This means that as researcher I did not ‘seek’ psychopathology, but rather a narrative that abandons such a reductionist approach. The analytic category, ‘complexities separating sex and emotional involvement’, for example, is informed by my approach to expand possibilities and to attempt to seek new and innovative ways to explain the phenomenon. Rather than reducing the process of a separation of sex and emotion, my theoretical sensitivities, which are both social constructionism and a more emotion based psychoanalytic stance, attempted to rather expand the idea of emotion into varying segments. This allowed for an increase in sexual novelty and exploration without the modernist, Western religious doctrine of ‘guilt’ being imposed upon the sexual experience.

6.2.2 Epistemological reflexivity

Grounded theorists are interested in the manner in which human beings manage and negotiate social situations, in addition to how their actions contribute to the unfolding of social processes. The theory therefore subscribes to symbolic interactionism (Willig, 2008). An epistemological assumption then that social constructionist grounded theory makes is that the world is a product of human participation and negotiation (Willig, 2008). I therefore appreciated the co-constructed subjective process of meaning-making and honoured the experiential data of the narratives.

A critique of grounded theory relates to how theory is constructed. The end product of analysis should be the establishment of theory. However, as Charmaz (1990) indicates, most grounded theory work never transitions to the point of theory building. Researchers develop rich, conceptual categories and detailed analyses of lived experiences without framing it within a substantive theory. This study has attempted to generate theory, and move beyond only producing analytic concepts.

Alongside to the critique associated with theory building, Charmaz (1990) also states that the researcher runs the risk of prematurely committing to a set of analytic categories, unnecessary jargon and a lack of clarity about key terms such as theory or category. The data analysis in this study might
lack a comprehensive interrogation of extant literature, and therefore possibly foreclosed on alternative analytic categories that could have been raised by a further literature review.

The epistemological reflexivity with which I engaged can also be an awareness of the strength and limitations of the study.

6.2.3 Strengths and limitations of the study

A study strength is the methodological choice to ensure that the couple is the unit of analysis. The literature review showed that other studies are to be found exploring gay relationships, but the search revealed no study that interviewed the couple. Interviewing the couple to explore gay relationships is epistemologically congruent. The process of using a conjoint interview allowed for a full, nuanced, varied, co-constructed reality.

One theoretical perspective that could have illuminated the process further, is a more psychoanalytic approach to the data. As mentioned in chapter two, social constructionism lacks a language that talks about the ‘individual’. This is due to a fear of unwillingly re-introducing the autonomous ‘cogniser’. Weeks (2003) calls for a more direct dialogue with psychoanalytic thinking to further aid the social constructionist researcher to expand theoretical possibilities. Psychoanalysis too offers a radical, subversive analysis of people and could have complimented this study’s findings.

A further critique of the study is that it has not placed the participants within a more robust context. Information regarding childhood development, family-of-origin narratives, sexual experience history and previous relationships would have been avenues for interrogation that I did not pursue.

Research on gay men is still contextually located within a racially white universe. Researchers need to be more willing and adventurous and investigate same-sex experiences of racially marginalised groups (Diamond, 2006). Black men are rarely included in the studies that have been conducted, either from an international or national context. The present study too has perpetuated this lacuna in research.

6.3 Recommendations for further research

Future research could consider the following to expand and elaborate on open gay relationships:

- The core category could be explored further using the full version of grounded theory. This would require sampling to the point of theoretical saturation.
- Research can set out to use a racially different sample to explore how race and coupledom could possibly intersect.
- Further theorisation could be applied to the body as a site of pleasure and political destabilisation in extra-dyadic relations of gay men.
Discourse analytic techniques could be applied to interview narratives. For example, Foucauldian discourse analysis might offer theoretically robust analysis.

Data gathering may also use multiple methods. Adding a diary method for example could be used to obtain richer detailed information, particularly data about encounters with casual sexual partners of men who are in open relationships. A diary method prevents the dilution of memory and compensates for fading subjectivity.

A case-study design might offer in-depth insight that takes into consideration a multitude of contexts.

This study could aid therapists and researchers who wish to understand fully open gay relationships. As Davies (1996) states, gay clients should not educate therapists about their relationships, sub-cultures and practices – this is the clinician’s responsibility so that same-sex feelings and practices may get affirmed and respected through professional authority. The participants have shown, as Foucault has said, that people should have “relationships of differentiation, of creation, of innovation” (1997, p. 166).
REFERENCES


Bonello, K., & Cross, M. (2010). Gay monogamy: I love you but I can’t have sex with only you [Electronic version]. Journal of Homosexuality, 57, 117-139.


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Appendices:

Research Advertisement

Segment of transcript coding
WOULD YOU LIKE TO TAKE PART?

I am a master's level student undergoing professional training in clinical psychology at the University of Johannesburg. I would like to invite gay couples who are in an open relationship to be part of a study I am currently conducting that will take the form of the thesis that I am writing as part of my training.

Research has shown that many gay male couples are not monogamous. The proportion of gay men in such sexually non-exclusive relationships ranges from anything between 36% and 95%, depending on length of relationship. Against this backdrop, we have to acknowledge that South African psychology does not engage adequately with gay and lesbian issues and studies. It is further argued that many mental health professionals in South Africa lack knowledge and expertise about discussing matters of sexual orientation with gay clients and their relationship needs in an affirmative manner.

The study that I am running is a small attempt to address the lack of same-sex sexuality research in the field of South African psychology. If you are in an open relationship, then I would like to invite you and your partner to take part in an interview that will last anything between one and two hours. **The unit of analysis is that of the couple, so both partners will be interviewed by me at the same time.** I would like to explore in-depth, how the open relationship is maintained and experienced. The interviews will be confidential and your privacy will be protected. No incentive for participation is being offered, and you may withdraw at any time. You will sign a confidentiality form where I commit to maintaining the highest level of ethical conduct.

If you are interested then please contact me on the following e-mail address: gayrelationshipresearch@gmail.com or via gaydar.

Thank you.

Francois
INT: Maybe we should just start off by me asking you how does it feel talking about your relationship and what are the feelings in the room?

SP2: I have no problem talking about it because it's something that I've talked about quite a lot already but it would depend who I'm talking to. I mean, I wouldn't be comfortable talking to my mother about it or certain of my work colleagues but to you I'm quite comfortable because I think you're studying it and I think you're approaching it with an open mind, I'm sure. And ja, it's something that I've been through before because I mean besides the previous guy a week ago, I've been spoken to and interviewed like this about two or three times over the years, to be honest, in my previous relationship which was a long one and a difficult one. And at the time when I first interviewed with an open relationship - or my relationship first became open which was about 20 years ago for the first time, it was a subject that was much discussed with friends and all sorts of people. So it's kind-of old hat for me now; I have no problem talking about it. But, as I say, it depends who I'm talking to. I don't want to convince anyone and I still don't claim to have any answers whatsoever because I think I've tried about four different variations over the years. But we'll probably get to that.

INT: Ayton (sp), thoughts that you have?

SP3: I'm totally okay with it. Perfectly fine. I used to be very naive, very, very - I don't know, the white picket fence, settling down or something. Then I moved overseas and I lived in the UK and what I saw over there and how I was introduced to the modern way and age of gay men's lives and the way they live, it was a bit of a shock and then a bit of acceptance and just started understanding it's each person for his own. It's their lives.

INT: Well I came from like a South African like society: white picket fence, boring (chuckling) and moulded on every heterosexual marriage that has failed in South Africa and that's why we've got divorce courts. You know, marriage is forever, isn't it (chuckling)?

INT: And so your experience in the UK, seeing different relationships and relations -

SP3: Well they're far more open. They're far more open about sex. They're far more open about relationships. They're far more open with everything from their advertising, all the way through. For the way they deal with AIDS they're far more open and - to what we're doing here in South Africa. Ja. It's very taboo. I think that talking about somebody's relationship or whatever, if you're in that like whole little Victorian, blinkered society, I think - ja. I mean, I'm totally okay with it. Always have been.

INT: And you've been together for how long now?

SP2: We're going into our sixth year to our surprise.

SP3: Ja.

SP2: Ja.