



City, University of London  
Northampton Square  
London  
EC1V 0HB  
United Kingdom

T +44 (0)20 7040 5060

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**City University Declaration**

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## *Preface*

The preface will summarise the various components that make up the doctoral thesis. Each piece of work will be explained in terms of the area it covers and what its aims and objectives are. The overall connection between all three pieces of work will then be identified to conclude the section.

### *Part 1– Doctoral research*

This section consists of an original piece of research that aimed to explore men's constructions of their experiences of terminating romantic relationships with women with a particular emphasis on discourses of masculinity. It is a qualitative study grounded in a social constructionist framework. The study used Memory Work to collect written memories of men's break up experiences and then employed a Foucauldian Discourse Analytic approach to analysing the data. Social constructionism is discussed in some detail before illustrating the objectives of Foucauldian Discourse Analysis with particular emphasis on discourse and positioning. A second aim of this research was to identify implications for counselling psychologists from the men's constructions of experiences of relationship breakdown that could be implemented into clinical practice.

The male participants who produced written accounts of their break-up experiences discussed them together in two separate groups. They were analysed individually and collectively by the groups to generate shared constructed understandings of dissolving intimate relationships with women. Each group discussion was transcribed by the primary researcher who then analysed the men's constructions of breaking up using Foucauldian Discourse Analysis. Three discursive constructions of breaking up were identified: breaking up as wrongdoing, breaking up as problematic and breaking up as work to be done. The discourses that these constructions invoked are also identified with a focus on the subject positions that consequently become available. The results are then discussed in relation to existing literature on masculinity and suggestions for the practice of counselling psychology are highlighted.

## **Part 2 – Professional practice**

This section of the thesis contains two pieces of clinical work, a case study and a process report, that focus on the professional practice of counselling psychology. The aims of the pieces of work are for the author to demonstrate competence in a chosen therapeutic model by showing a sound knowledge and application of theoretical principles, formulating the client's difficulties within the specified model and showing evidence of critical reflection of clinical practice. The author's choice of model was psychodynamic for both the case study and the process report.

The case study is a written summary of the main aspects of the relationship between the therapist and client over a number of sessions. It aims to show the practitioner's skills, personal and professional self-awareness and ability to integrate skills with psychological theory. The case study illustrates a piece of therapeutic work with a female client presenting with low mood, stress and a withdrawal from her social network. The client was selected for presentation because of an initial difficulty in engaging with her but subsequently learning of the significance of this lack of connection and using the therapeutic relationship to work through it. The case study is grounded in the theoretical principles of Winnicott (1960) focusing specifically on his concepts known as the True Self and False Self which are used to formulate the clients difficulties. Negotiating the therapeutic contract and the development of the therapy including interventions made and difficulties that were encountered are also explored.

The objective of the process report is to critically reflect on professional practice and show an understanding of what occurs between the therapist and client in the counselling session. A ten minute excerpt is taken from a recorded session and transcribed to illustrate this process. This report focuses on the penultimate session of a twelve session piece of work with a female client presenting with panic attacks and anxiety. This particular client and session were chosen because the ending of therapy was approaching and the client had experienced loss and abandonment in her life; therefore, this moment in therapy was a challenge for both therapist and client. The report is grounded in the psychodynamic principles of panic attacks and conflict and there is specific reference to these principles as well as the therapists' countertransference during the ten minute excerpt of the session.

Both the case study and the process report make use of the clients' earliest memories that are elicited during the initial assessment to enhance the formulation of the presenting difficulties. Earliest memories have been shown to be a useful clinical tool when conceptualising client difficulties as they can provide information on relational patterns that might be relevant to the therapeutic relationship.

### **Part 3 – Critical literature review**

The final section illustrates a written critical appraisal of literature on a topic that is relevant to the practice of counselling psychology. The objective of the critical literature review is to demonstrate an ability to review literature including originality of thought, analysis and evaluation and explores the main themes and issues in relation to the chosen topic.

For this piece of work the author focused on the use of early memories as a therapeutic tool for counselling psychologists. In particular, it reveals how early memories have developed as a clinical tool over time to the present day that therapists can use to determine potential transference patterns that might emerge, to assess a client's transitional relatedness (denoting a client's capacity to 'play' using language and experience in an imaginative way to create connections with the therapist) and to speculate on the quality of the therapeutic alliance that might develop. The review notes the work of Freud (1899/1989), Adler (1929b/1937) and Mayman (1968) and the initial contributions they made to the clinical utility of early memories. It subsequently goes on to explore more recent work that has built on these original theories and critical evaluations of both the previous and recent research are presented. Most importantly, implications for counselling psychologists are highlighted throughout the review as each theme is discussed.

The content of the sections that constitute the thesis have been described and the connection between all three pieces of work will now be identified. The main thread that runs through all pieces of work is the construction of experience. The doctoral research makes use of men's written memories to understand how they construct their experiences of relationship breakdown and how they are positioned in the event. The case study and process report detail the earliest memories of clients that were elicited during assessment to enhance the therapist's understanding of how clients

relate to others and how they construct their inner worlds. This can facilitate the production of a formulation of their presenting difficulties. Lastly, the critical literature review describes how early memories can be used by practitioners to uncover object relational patterns and aspects of the client's inner world to facilitate clinical practice. In addition to this, it can be said that the concept of relationships with others also links all the pieces together: the doctoral research concerns men's relationships with women, the professional practice pieces are rooted within a psychodynamic framework that makes use of the therapeutic relationship and the literature review illustrates how memories of relationships with others can forecast various aspects of the therapeutic relationship including the therapeutic alliance and potential transference patterns that might emerge.

In conclusion, the thesis is constituted of pieces of work that draw on the use of memories to construct experience, particularly those concerning relationships with others, and each piece reflects different aspects of knowledge and skills that are pertinent to the practice of counselling psychology.

*Part 1 – Doctoral research*

**Men's constructions of their experiences of breaking  
up with women: A qualitative study.**

Anna Butcher  
City University

Research supervised by Dr Carla Willig  
City University



## *Abstract*

This study aimed to explore how men construct the experience of breaking up with women with a view to identifying what discourses and subject positions are made available by these constructions. The study also aimed to identify what implications for the practice of counselling psychology could be drawn from these constructions. A qualitative, social constructionist approach to the research was used; specifically Memory Work was employed to collect written memories of men's experiences and the data was analysed using Foucauldian discourse analysis. A sample of seven men aged between 25-31 years was recruited through the use of flyers advertising the research and through colleagues of the primary researcher. They formed two separate Memory Work groups to discuss their written accounts of breaking up with women. The group discussions were transcribed and analysed by the primary researcher. Three discursive constructions were identified: breaking up as wrongdoing, as problematic and as work to be done. Discourses associated with masculinity and the subject positions that were offered by these discourses are also highlighted and discussed in relation to possibilities for practice and subjective experience. A conclusion that is drawn from the research is that conventional discourses of masculinity are still mobilised by men in the present day, including patriarchal discourses of responsibility, objectivity and authority. The findings are discussed in relation to existing research on masculinity and implications for counselling psychologists, particularly when working with men in therapy, are identified.

## **Introduction**

### **Overview of the introduction**

The thesis aims to explore how men construct their experiences of terminating romantic relationships with women. In particular, a main concern of the thesis is to identify the discourses culturally available to men that they draw on in their accounts of relationship breakdown. The introduction will present literature and research concerning men and the theorisation of masculinity. Research in these areas has been considerable and studies on men and masculinity have drawn on different theoretical perspectives and epistemologies including *essentialist*, *psychoanalytic* and *social constructionist* approaches. Some of the topics that have been of specific interest to researchers across social sciences within the context of men and masculinity are men and emotional expressiveness (Levant, 1998; Jansz, 2000), men and psychological help-seeking (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Schaub & Williams, 2007), the experience of new fatherhood (Barclay, 1999; Habib & Lancaster, 2005), intimacy and relationships with women (Allen, 2005; Korobov & Thorne, 2006) and perhaps most especially, masculine identity (Edley & Wetherell, 1995, 1997, 1999; Wetherell & Edley, 1998, 1999; Gough, 2001; Speer, 2001; Connell, 2005). The introduction will discuss some of this existing research on men and masculinity that has been grounded within the various epistemological orientations mentioned above. More specifically, the remainder of the introduction will group together and discuss research from essentialist, psychoanalytic and social constructionist perspectives before going on to focus specifically on the present study and the research questions that it intends to answer.

### **Essentialist understandings of masculinity**

Essentialism assumes that people have an innate and discoverable nature, a conception to which traditional psychology generally remains faithful. According to this viewpoint people possess personalities and have identities that define who they are; for example, people can be described as having a caring personality or an aggressive character, and we assume that these descriptions reflect their true nature. Essentialism views masculinity as made up of fundamental characteristics or fixed traits distinct from those that constitute femininity. In this context masculinity is thought to have a biological basis. Indeed, studies that subscribe to this biological

perspective have focused on the relationship between male hormones and aggressive behaviour with results showing that men tend to show more aggression than women (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1980; Buss, 2005), a conception that has become generally accepted within mass cultures. Pop psychologists have gone on to endorse the notion that there are essential differences between men and women described as 'masculinity' and 'femininity' by writing books and literature aimed at mainstream cultures, such as *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus* (Gray, 1992) and *He's Just Not That Into You* (Behrendt & Tuccillo, 2004). Men and women have become conventionally understood according to certain traits and behaviours that are believed to be characteristic of each gender. For example, men are typically understood as stoical, dominant, self-reliant, unemotional, prone to express anger more than women and power-driven (O'Neil, Good & Holmes, 1995). Thus, masculinity is thought to be the possession and expression of these qualities. Women, on the other hand, are typically seen as emotionally expressive, more open to expressing feelings (except anger), sensitive to the feelings of others and more preoccupied with having children (Niedenthal, Kruth-Gruber & Ric, 2006). Femininity is the possession and expression of these attributes. These qualities that are deemed specific to men and women have become so culturally entrenched that they are now considered normative ideals for men and women's behaviour. Therefore, it is considered inappropriate for a woman to demonstrate aggressive behaviour and similarly for a man to show feminine qualities.

The Gender Role Identity Paradigm (GRIP) dominated research on masculinity from 1930 to 1980 and this framework suggested that individuals have an inherent psychological need to possess a gender role identity. Gender role identity refers to the gender that a person identifies themselves with and the norms associated with this gender (Canary & Emmers-Sommer, 1997). An individual's personality is then dependent on the formation of this gender role identity. Whether this inherent need is met or not depends on the extent to which men and women accept their traditional gender role. According to this paradigm then, the failure of men to completely embrace their traditional masculine gender role results in homosexuality, hypermasculinity (exaggerated male stereotypical behaviour) and negative attitudes towards women (Pleck, 1981). While this paradigm does not emphasise biological factors associated with masculinity, it still assumes an essentialist position owing to

its presumption that it is an inherent psychological need that drives the accomplishment of a gendered self-concept. Pleck (1981) demystified the GRIP in his book *The Myth of Masculinity* by noting how it did not adequately account for differences and even difficulties that were observed in living up to the traditional male gender role. In view of this shortcoming, Pleck proposed the Gender Role Strain Paradigm (GRSP) (1981, 1995) which captured the idea that masculinity and femininity are socially constructed rather than defined by certain behaviours and traits as essential to being male or female. The paradigm suggests that boys and girls are socialised according to the existing gender role ideals to which parents, teachers and even peer groups subscribe and this will be discussed now.

### **The socialisation of men and masculinity**

Socialisation is the process by which girls and boys are encouraged to take on or accept certain kinds of behaviours and roles that are socially sanctioned. Agents of socialisation are those who influence and reinforce these behaviours and roles such as parents, educational institutes, peer groups and the media. In this sense, socialisation does not necessarily stop once childhood has ended but continues as families and media influences continue to endorse these behaviours. As a result of this, traditional gender roles have developed with a set of gendered norms that are considered specific to masculinity and femininity. Prior the 20<sup>th</sup> century patriarchy was a dominant social structure that socialised men as authority figures both within societal organisation and the family context. In this sense, women were controlled by patriarchy and the authority of men; women would be expected to take a man's name once married and stay at home to take care of the children. Men, on the other hand, were socialised to support the family and hold overall responsibility for the family. The feminist movement in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century sought to challenge the oppressive forces of patriarchy on women and while this movement made significant changes to women's rights, patriarchy has had a considerable lasting effect on Western society. Thus, certain norms still prevail that dictate to men what masculinity entails, such as adopting the role of being the household breadwinner and maintaining a sense of control. According to Levant et al. (1992) men are still raised to conform to the following norms of masculinity: the avoidance of feminine behaviours, restrictive emotionality, toughness and aggression, self-reliance and a focus on achievement

and status. Hence, boys become men who are self-reliant, tough, aggressive and emotionally restricted.

The male socialisation process and norms of masculinity have been investigated particularly in relation to men's expression of and coping with emotion (Levant, 1998; Jansz, 2000; Fischer & Manstead, 2000). According to Levant (1998) men develop *restrictive emotionality* which describes how men supposedly suppress most of their feelings, particularly those which threaten masculinity. These include feelings of fear, insecurity, sadness, embarrassment and disappointment (Eisler, 1995). The expression of these emotions is considered 'unmanly' and can lead to a negative evaluation of the man who dares to show them (Siegel & Alloy, 1990) hence these emotions are generally unexpressed by men. A reason for this suppression of emotions is allegedly to do with men's fear of the consequences of becoming emotional and being overwhelmed by their feelings (Levant et al., 1992). It has also been reported by the same researchers that men also experience difficulty in coping with other people's vulnerable feelings. On the other hand, anger is the emotion that remains exempt from the restrictive emotionality rule because it corresponds to masculine ideals of courage and toughness, and often non-masculine emotions such as fear, shame and disappointment are channelled into anger (Jansz, 2000). In addition to the notion of men's restrictive emotionality, a separate term has been developed to refer to men's inability to put emotions into words: this is known as *alexithymia* (Sifneos, 1988; Fischer & Good, 1997). It is believed that alexithymia occurs as a result of the male socialisation process during which boys grow up without developing an awareness of their emotions. Indeed, some research concludes that between the ages of four and six years boys begin to increasingly inhibit any explicit response to emotion (Buck, 1977). As a result of this unawareness of and inhibited response to emotion, it is argued that men depend on their cognition to conclude what they should feel (Levant, 1998).

### **Psychoanalytic perspectives**

The dynamics between parents and children are also considered to play a significant part in the socialisation of men. Thus, rather unsurprisingly, research investigating this topic has largely come from a psychoanalytic perspective. One framework links the development of masculinity with the Oedipal stage of

psychosexual development. According to classical Freudian theory, the young boy develops sexual desires towards his mother and a wish to replace his father whom the boy considers his rival and thus experiences hostility towards him. However, the boy soon comes to fear that retaliation from his father for his sexual desires will occur involving castration. Given the choice of his love for his parents at the cost of his genitals the boy opts for 'his narcissistic interest' (Freud, 1924d, p. 318), the protection of his own body, and relinquishes his desires and wishes for his mother. Instead, the boy identifies with his father, something which Anna Freud (1936) termed *identification with the aggressor*, by turning his hostility into an angry emulation of him (Hearn & Morgan, 1990). As well as imitating the father's own aggression, masculinity is thought to be formed by the boy's own psychic conflicts and projections originating from early experience.

Psychoanalytic theories of masculinity have also drawn on object relations theory to emphasise the influence of the mother's role. It is suggested that the experience of being mothered by women leads men to develop a dominant personality and a desire to be superior to women (Chodorow, 1978). Typically, boys initially identify with their maternal objects and form a primary bond and total state of dependency on her during their early years of development. However, over time boys separate from their mothers and this state of total dependency and move more towards identifying with their fathers. This identification with a new 'object' is seen as a defensive strategy; men might continue to yearn for the closeness they once had with their mothers yet simultaneously fear engulfment by her and thus escape this threat to their developing autonomous ego by identifying with the father (Hearn & Morgan, 1990; Cooper, 1996). In this context, masculinity is viewed as a defence against the fear of engulfment and the disintegration of the ego; men show independence and dominance instead by way of preventing this from happening. However, men can encounter conflict during adulthood as the same fear of engulfment is experienced within the context of romantic relationships with women. Some researchers maintain that men's difficulties with intimacy in relationships with women are connected to unresolved attachment issues with their mothers (Osherson, 1992; Gurian, 1994). In this context, it is contended that men find it difficult to break the symbiotic bond with their mothers (Keen, 1991) and while they still yearn for this bond as mentioned before, they also fear it because this bond represents dependency. Dependency is

linked to vulnerability which emasculates men. Consequently, men are said to experience anxiety in response to commitment and intimacy with women as this reawakens men's fear of dependency that is associated with mothers. In some cases, this can be very problematic for men when it comes to forming lasting, committed relationships (Jansz, 2000).

The male socialisation process and psychoanalytic perspectives offer alternative viewpoints of masculinity to biological understandings. They emphasise the significance of society and the family context, particularly early attachments to primary care-givers, in shaping a man's masculine identity and maintaining traditional male gender roles. Hence, masculinity is constructed by systems within the social realm. However, it could be argued by social constructionist researchers, particularly those that are radical constructionists, that the male socialisation process and psychoanalytic frameworks still assume an essentialist position. For instance, the male socialisation process in a way suggests that men become trapped as certain kinds of men e.g. self-reliant and tough, that these qualities become stable constituents of their being. Furthermore, both these theories propose that men's early surroundings, including social factors, are internalised somehow and have a subsequent impact on men's resultant psychology, this being the development of restrictive emotionality, alexithymia, dominance and a fear of engulfment by women. In particular, alexithymia refers to men's *inability* to put emotions into words which suggests that it is something intrinsic that prevents men from identifying emotions with words. In other words, these concepts are described as conditions that *belong* to men, as if men have these qualities innately and as if masculinity is a psychological disposition, albeit the product of early life experiences. Therefore, it can be said that the studies discussed here still hinge on an essentialist framework.

### **Social constructionist perspectives**

In stark contrast to essentialist paradigms of masculinity social constructionist perspectives suggest that masculinity is produced through discourse and social practices. Social constructionism is an umbrella term for a broad range of theories and research approaches that share basic assumptions about the production of knowledge yet emphasise different aspects and differ in how they approach data. However, an overarching assumption of social constructionist theories is that they

challenge the existence of biological instincts and fundamental traits that determine the formation of personality and behaviour and instead see these entities as constructed through language and wider discourses. Thus, masculinity is not an innate entity that can be revealed or discovered but rather it is produced or constructed within the social realm. In its most radical sense social constructionism posits that nothing exists outside of language and this poses a real challenge to mainstream psychology and everyday understandings of people and the world. However, social constructionism argues that these everyday understandings are constructions themselves that do not reflect the truth about the world; rather, they are versions of the world that are historically and culturally specific. Social constructionism will be looked at in more detail later on in the thesis but for now research on masculinity that has been grounded within this framework will be discussed. Research of this kind has particularly looked at how men talk about masculinity and construct it through their use of language.

From a social constructionist perspective masculinity is produced via discourses and societal discursive practices rather than being an innate property of men. Each discourse offers men different positions that enable them to understand themselves as particular kinds of men (Jackson, 1999); therefore, masculinity is not something that remains stable across time and contexts but rather it is constituted and reconstituted to produce a multiplicity of masculinities (Connell, 1995; Edley & Wetherell, 1997; Pease, 2000). Certain discourses are then drawn on to construct their masculinity, some of which are dominant within society and culture, and this has implications for the men who choose to use them. For example, a dominant discourse of masculinity is *hegemonic masculinity*. Hegemonic masculinity marginalises alternative forms of masculinity, such as effeminate masculinity and homosexuality, and is strongly associated with traditional understandings of masculinity including stoicism, restrictive emotionality, competitiveness and aggression. Connell claimed that the task of men then is to negotiate hegemonic masculinity and its prescribed dominant masculine styles; however, other researchers have gone on to contend that the concept of hegemonic masculinity is ambiguous and insufficient in identifying how men actually go about managing their masculinity (Edley & Wetherell, 1995; Wetherell & Edley, 1999; Speer, 2001). Consequently, it has been emphasised that more ‘fine-grain work’ on what the negotiation and construction of masculinity looks

like in practice is called for (Wetherell & Edley, 1999, p. 337; Gough, 2001). In light of this, a large amount of research that has investigated the construction of masculinity has drawn on discourse analytic frameworks and focus group work to observe the processes within men's talk that produce masculinity (Edley & Wetherell, 1997; Brandth & Kvande, 1998; Wetherell & Edley, 1999; Gough & Edwards, 1998; Gough, 2001; Allen, 2005). In a study that aimed to understand how men produced themselves as gendered beings, Wetherell and Edley (1999) interviewed a sample of men from various age groups and occupational backgrounds to identify how they constructed their masculinity. In particular they found three clear discursive practices or positions<sup>1</sup> that men adopted in relation to conventional ideas of masculinity: *heroic positions*, *ordinary positions* and *rebellious positions*. Heroic positions describes how the men aligned themselves with dominant standards of masculinity such as being courageous and physically tough as well as remaining calm and keeping their cool. Such standards were demonstrated from the participants in the form of meeting challenges in risky situations and enjoying an aggressive sport such as rugby. Ordinary positions delineate how the men separated themselves from certain conventional discourses of masculinity and emphasised a normal, ordinary self without pretensions. In this instance, traditional norms of the masculine man were constructed as extreme, immature and characteristic of a man who was not comfortable with himself. Lastly, rebellious positions appeared to be a resistance to hegemonic masculinity as they rejected social expectations and produced themselves as unconventional in terms of undertaking activities considered unusual for their gender, such as cooking. Of great significance was the finding that the men took up heroic positions infrequently in comparison to the ordinary positions. The researchers speculate that perhaps the assumption of ordinary positions and distancing oneself from the hegemonic ideal might at times be an effective way of being a man. A concluding finding was that the male participants in the study occupied a variety of positions that demonstrated both complicity and resistance to hegemonic masculinity, further emphasising masculinity as a construction rather than an essence.

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<sup>1</sup> A position refers to an implied position that locates a person within a discourse or conversation and this position can be taken up by the person to provide a basis for their identity and experience (Burr, 1995). Likewise, positions can also be rejected.

The construction of masculinity has been explored in relation to certain issues including fatherhood, emotion, intimacy and relationships with women as these topics often present ideological dilemmas for men with regard to their masculinity. For example, Edley and Wetherell conducted a major study from the mid to late 90s exploring how masculine identity is constructed during which they carried out a study of young men's discussions of various subjects including their imaginations of fatherhood, future domestic lives and relationships with young women (Edley & Wetherell, 1999). The young men's talk produced several ideological dilemmas and different constructions in relation to their imagined futures which resulted in the men adopting a number of inconsistent positions. For example, the young men drew on the traditional discourse of masculinity of being the breadwinner when discussing fatherhood and the desire to have a career. Indeed, employment is believed to be fundamental to masculine identity (Morgan, 1992; Collinson & Hearn, 2004); research in this context has found that achievement and success in the workplace are especially important in the establishment of masculine identity. Furthermore, the discourse of employment is one way of managing masculine identity, particularly during significant transitional periods such as new fatherhood (Brandth & Kvande, 1998; Rochlen, Suizzo, McKelley & Scaringi, 2008). However, alternative discourses that resonate with the *New Man* (Billig, 1987) who is sensitive, caring and attentive to a woman's needs were mobilised when the young men in Edley and Wetherell's study spoke of wishing to be fully present in their children's lives and not assuming the role of the authoritative voice within the household. A similar difference could be seen when the young men referred to wanting an equal relationship with their female partners but simultaneously spoke of preferring her to remain at home with the children. Consequently, the men produced different constructions of masculinity and assumed different positions when imagining developmental landmarks such as fatherhood. Thus, this study challenges the notion of masculinity as having a biological basis as the men were producing their masculine identity within their talk with others; they were actively constructing it themselves. In addition to this, the deviation from traditional discourses points towards alternative understandings of masculinity suggesting that it is something that is constructed rather than innately retained.

Similarly, Gough (2001) analysed group discussions of male undergraduate students living in Britain during the late 90s which centred on topics such as identity, university life and relationships with men and women. He too claimed that ‘less common are studies of masculinity in/as social practice, that is, as accomplishment(s) in the contexts of everyday talk/activity’ (p. 170) and so his study focused on men’s talk of being a man during a transitional period of time that was believed to be associated with tensions in masculinity (Kimmel, 1987). The main finding of the study reinforced the concept of multiple masculinities and the idea that they are produced and settled upon depending on the context of the situation. In particular, the male participants identified a repertoire of ‘biting your tongue’ that was frequently employed to suppress specific thoughts and practices in order to present certain masculinities in specific contexts (p. 177). Such contexts included discussions with feminist colleagues, negotiating domestic labour with spouses or partners and socialising in the pub with male friends. Each of these scenarios stood as examples of when masculinity became problematic because of the dilemmas the situations posed for the participants. The notion of suppressing certain practices and thoughts also highlights the idea of *doing* masculinity rather than it being something that men *have*. Overall, these findings provide further support for the idea that masculinity is not a single, coherent entity but rather fragmented and constructed according to context.

### Men and emotion

The expression of emotion is another area that has been explored in relation to masculinity in the context where dominant discourses and the traditional male gender role emphasise restrictive emotionality. It was previously mentioned that men can be viewed as socialised to become inhibited in terms of the expression of emotion apart from anger; however, social constructionist perspectives would argue that the avoidance of emotional expression is in fact a way in which men *do* masculinity. Fischer and Good (1997) offer the argument that restrictive emotionality is a case of choice versus ability; men’s inhibited expression of emotion tells us more about what they *will* do rather than what they *can* do. In this sense, restricted expression of emotion is a practice of masculinity instead of a lack of ability. Research, therefore, has looked at how men construct emotion through their talk. Walton, Coyle and Lyons (2004) completed a study that analysed men’s talk about emotions and their

findings showed that the men did construct themselves as emotional beings; however, male emotional expression was constructed as 'being highly dependent on the object, source or context' (p. 412). Permissible contexts within which certain emotions could be expressed were as follows: a football match to express joy, a nightclub setting to express anger and death to express grief. Moreover, the men in this study constructed themselves as individuals who do experience emotions but the expression of emotion requires active control. In view of this, controlling the expression of emotion is the masculine way of doing emotion (Seidler, 1991).

Another aspect of life that tends to involve the expression of emotion and demonstration of intimacy is romantic relationships. In order to gain further understanding of how men manage romantic relationships with women studies have again turned to investigating men's talk about them and some of these will be discussed now.

#### *Men and relationships with women*

Studies looking at how men manage intimacy and talk about romantic relationships with women have burgeoned in recent years (Frosh, Phoenix & Pattman, 2002; Allen, 2005; Korobov & Bamberg, 2004; Korobov & Thorne, 2006). Allen (2005) investigated how young men (17-19 years) from New Zealand constructed their masculinity in focus groups while talking about heterosexual relationships. Findings from the study illustrated that the men constructed a sense of emotional detachment when expressing sexual interest in women; for example, when talking about relationships with women that offered more than sexual fulfilment the men's comments constructed a sense of indifference which was particularly apparent when one participant responded to the question 'Why do young people get involved in relationships?', with 'to pass time' (Allen, 2005, p. 45). Thus, the discourse of emotional detachment was deployed to construct masculine identity in relation to attachments with women. Another main finding was that the construction of masculine identity was coupled with managing vulnerability. This involved the practice of the men regulating their words and behaviour in the presence of their male friends as compared to when they were alone with girlfriends. More specifically, it was cited that girlfriends would see the romantic side of the men whereas friends would see the 'scruffy' side, as one participant described it (p. 45).

Here, the men acknowledged the significance of context in relation to what was said and done and how. Managing vulnerability through policing words and behaviour was generally associated with not wishing to come across as feminine and consequently being ostracised by friends. In instances where the male participants did deviate from conventional discourses of masculinity (such as references to vulnerable feelings), displays of 'hard' masculinity often followed which Allen describes as an attempt to 'salvage that which has been risked' (p. 54). In other words, this served the purpose of preserving a suitable masculine identity. These findings resonate with the idea that masculinity continually varies across contexts to produce a multiplicity of different masculinities, particularly according to contextual factors. Specifically, it would seem that the company of girlfriends was a context within which non-hegemonic discourses of masculinity i.e. romance were deemed appropriate to utilise.

Korobov & Thorne (2006) similarly analysed men's casual conversations to identify how they constructed intimacy in their stories of romantic relationships with women. Participants were American university students aged between 19 and 22 years. Conversations were dyadic and each dyad comprising of two friends was instructed to use the time allocated to catch up with one another and talk about whatever they wished without the presence of any facilitators. The researchers then coded conversations that contained any stories of romantic relationships with women for 'intimate' and 'distancing' positions (Korobov & Thorne, 2004, p. 27) whether they were stories about themselves or others. Intimate positions referred to one or both of the individuals within the stories as characterising each other or the relationship as positive, warm or supportive. This included expressions or ideas that conveyed mutuality, vulnerability, closeness and displays of empathy. Conversely, distancing positions entailed moving away from an engaged and warm characterisation of the partner or the relationship such as showing uncertainty or ignorance towards the relationship or partner, repeatedly describing the relationship or partner as negative and switching from the 'I' voice to the impersonal 'you/one' to describe a more generalised opinion. The results from this study showed that the participants constantly shifted between distancing positions and intimate positions; however, distancing positions were more than twice as prevalent as intimate positions. In particular, out of all 40 casual conversations analysed, only two stories

emerged that showed unmitigated intimacy indicating that though the practice of intimacy is not wholly unfamiliar to men, it is still moderated somewhat to achieve an acceptable balance and preserve masculinity (Korobov & Thorne, 2006). This shifting between intimacy and distancing is said to be indicative of identity exploration and expansion (Arnett, 2000); the occupation of intimate positions implies that the men are exploring the practice of intimacy and separating themselves temporarily from traditional masculine norms to expand their masculine identity. The shift back to occupying distancing positions then permits the men to go back to conventional male standards which might serve to provide them with a sense of familiarity during this period of exploration and development. Lastly, the shifting between the two positions is indicative of the dilemma many of the men constructed in their conversations: longing for commitment and mutuality but also wishing to maintain their freedom to be spontaneous and independent (Korobov & Thorne, 2006).

The two studies by Allen and Korobov and Thorne described here shed light on how men construct intimacy and sexual interest within heterosexual relationships in conversations with friends or peers. Hollway (1984, 1989) completed studies in a similar vein but actually with heterosexual couples. In her work Hollway explored how British couples talk about their relationships to identify the gendered discourses that construct partnerships. The *male sex drive discourse* offers a representation of male sexuality which constructs male sexuality as a physiological response linked to reproduction of the species, thus having biological roots. Men are consequently constructed as having a fundamental need for sex which must be satisfied and women are then constructed as the triggers for this physiological response. This construction of male sexuality has several implications for men owing to the rights that are afforded to them when the discourse is employed. For example, the male sex drive as a biological need offers men a legitimate reason for infidelity as they can claim it as an undeniable requirement. Furthermore, men are able to construct themselves as motivated by their biological need for sex rather than a need for their female partner when it comes to discussing relationships with women. This permits them to refrain from engaging with discourses that might deviate from masculine ideals such as discourses of emotion and intimacy. Thus, the male sex drive discourse can be a source of power for men (Burr, 2003).

Another discourse identified by Hollway is the *have and hold* discourse of relationships which is associated with Christian ideals of relationships including romance, love and commitment. This discourse was particularly pertinent for women who viewed sex as a sign of love and commitment; however, men generally spoke of being the object of this discourse in that they are the focus of women's desire to achieve commitment. Therefore, the man's position and related rights and practices in this discourse contrast with that of the male sex drive discourse as he is required to be monogamous within the *have and hold* discourse as infidelity is considered immoral. In the former he is positioned as more sexually promiscuous and able to justify any possible adultery as biologically motivated. The last discourse to emerge from Hollway's work is the *permissive* discourse which explicitly opposes the *have and hold* discourse and is separate from the Christian ideals of marriage and monogamy. This discourse resembles the male sex drive discourse in that it represents sex with many partners as an act of harmless pleasure but the difference is that this discourse is not gender specific. Hence, women are able to instigate sex as well rather than just being the objects of it as in the male sex drive discourse and this therefore affords them power. In other words, women are afforded similar rights to men in terms of their sexual behaviour; women, like men, can have many sexual partners for their pleasure without pejorative judgment.

The work of Hollway draws attention to the way heterosexual couples construct relationships and sex and some of the differing discourses that are relevant to each gender. Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind the time period in which Hollway completed her studies (1980s): given that discourses are culturally and historically specific these discourses were pertinent at that particular time. Even so, it can be said that these discourses still prevail in the construction of heterosexual relationships in British society; in particular, the institution of marriage (*have and hold* discourse) is still endorsed by society and the mass media. However, it would be of interest to investigate what, if any, alternative discourses are employed now to construct heterosexual relationships. Following on from this, the construction of relationships could also be investigated by exploring how men and women construct the dissolution of relationships. In other words, the discourses that people use to construct the end of intimate relationships could also demonstrate how people construct and understand relationships overall via the use of social and linguistic

resources. In a study that explored how male and female college students reacted to the recent loss of a relationship, Sorenson, Russell, Harkness and Harvey (1993) found that male students were more likely to start another relationship quickly as a means of recovering from the break-up. The female students confided in good friends as a means of coping; however, this was not so common among the male students. The researchers explain men's tendency to enter into a new relationship soon after the break-up as an act of preserving a strong masculine image. Entering into a new relationship soon after the loss of a relationship could also be linked to Hollway's male sex drive discourse and the need to have their sexual or physical needs met. Overall, the research of Sorenson et al. implies gender specific practices in response to the dissolution of relationships and thus warrants further investigation into how individuals construct this potentially problematic event.

Relationship dissolution has been explored extensively (Duck, 1982; Baxter, 1984; Fine & Harvey, 2006; Vangelisti, 2006) but little has been done from a social constructionist perspective. Previous research has focused mainly on the following areas: causes of break-ups, the processes or stages by which relationships end and how people respond and cope afterwards (Sprecher & Fehr, 1998). These studies have utilised quantitative measures and self-report inventories with little research looking at how individuals construct and produce the meaning of breaking up. Similarly, it would seem that there is a dearth of research into the role of gender in break-ups which is surprising given that it is a key factor in understanding relationship variations (Hendrick, Hendrick, Foote, & Slapion-Foote, 1984; Baxter, 1986; Clark, Shaver & Abrahams, 1999). Moreover, previous research has mainly looked at the dissolution of marital relationships whereas non-marital relationships have received less scholarly attention (Fine & Harvey, 2006), highlighting a need for further research in this area. Existing models and frameworks of relationship disengagement (Duck, 1982; Baxter, 1984; Lee, 1984) conceptualise it as a set of stages that each party goes through; however, it is important to note that the breakdown of a relationship is not necessarily as systematic as these models might suggest. It is often a complex and chaotic process that undoubtedly varies from person to person, relationship to relationship, and cannot be accounted for by a set of stages. This works on the assumption that people's experience of relationship loss is similar and produces a standard version of it, but it is the researcher's contention that

people construct their own accounts of the situation. In view of this it would appear that there is a gap in the literature concerning the construction of relationship dissolution that is exclusive of questionnaires or other quantitative measures. Personal experiences in the form of written narratives have been investigated in past research but mainly to assess the completeness of these narratives in relation to adjustment to relationship loss (Kellas & Manusov, 2003). More specifically, the researcher found no existing literature that has examined how men construct the experience of the breakdown of relationships with women, yet it seems highly apposite that this topic is studied given that the ending of a relationship can be associated with intimacy, emotion and vulnerability. Thus, it follows that research investigating men's constructions of their break-up experiences could shed light on this.

The literature that has looked at men, intimacy and relationships with women has tended to use adolescent or university student samples, and it could be argued that at these stages of life, especially during adolescence, intimate relationships are likely to be less committed and more transient compared to those of later adulthood. Life stages are socially constructed, and privileges, obligations and rights are assigned to people according to culturally constructed and shared understandings of periods of life (Fry, 2001). The socially constructed life stages, such as adolescence and young adulthood, have changed as broader social changes have occurred. For example, the expectations and rights of men and women have changed dramatically in the context of romantic relationships as decades ago it was an expectation, if not a requirement, for men and women to marry before living together. Contemporary society, however, now sees men and women both living together and indeed having children without being bound by marriage. In relation to the life stages of adolescence and early adulthood, Arnett (2000) claims that these periods are socially understood as times when men are still navigating their way through life's uncertainties. Arnett then suggests that notions of permanent committed relationships are not typical of men's lives during this time, but rather these years of life are usually a period of frequent change and exploration; longer-term, committed relationships are socially understood to occur in young adulthood (20-40 years). With this in mind, the researcher chose to study men from young adulthood given that this time period suggests the possibility of committed relationships being more customary and that previous research has

tended to focus on younger samples. It can be said, therefore, that the ending of a committed relationship during this time might contain alternative constructed meanings to those of adolescent men; consequently, further research using samples of men in later adult years (for example, mid twenties onwards) is warranted to examine how breaking up a relationship is managed.

### **The present study: Research questions**

The present study endeavoured to address some of the gaps highlighted in the previous section by exploring men's constructions of their experiences of terminating committed, non-marital relationships with women. A qualitative methodology was used rather than using questionnaires or inventories that impose preconceived variables, and prohibit participants making sense of phenomena as this methodology would enable male participants to give their own accounts of their experiences of breaking up with women. Given that research has shown that men construct their masculinity according to cultural messages and discourses of what it means to be a man, it is of interest to explore how these discourses are manifested in their constructions of their experiences of relationship dissolution, especially as this is an area that has not been investigated. Moreover, it would provide us with an opportunity to see which positions and subsequent practices are made available to men by these discourses as well as what is accomplished by using certain discourses to construct experience. The present study is particularly pertinent to the field of counselling psychology because of the potential implications for therapists working with male clients who might bring their break-up experiences as an issue to therapy. Therefore, the research questions of this study are:

1. How do men construct the dissolution of a committed, intimate relationship?
2. What positions are made available by these constructions?
3. What implications for counselling psychologists and therapeutic practice can be drawn from these constructions?

## **Method**

This section of the thesis will describe the methods that were used to collect and analyse the data. Originally, the researcher was motivated by a qualitative method known as Memory Work (Haug, 1987) to collect and analyse data (Crawford, Crawford, Kippax, Onyx, Gault & Benton, 1992; Onyx & Small, 2001). The researcher became aware of how Memory Work was designed to uncover the social processes involved in the construction of reality in a manner that removes the difference in status between the researcher and the researched; the participants, who become known as ‘co-researchers’ in Memory Work, essentially analyse their own data. Thus, the method appealed in two ways: firstly, its objectives were compatible with the research question of the present study (this will be explained further later on in this section) and secondly, it had the added advantage of the participants playing a significant part in analysing the data themselves. After some further consideration of the literature on Memory Work as both a tool for data collection and analysis it was decided by the researcher that it would primarily be used as a method to collect the data owing to some of its limitations as a developing method of qualitative inquiry. The method will now be described in more detail to explain the above points further including its theoretical assumptions. Subsequently, the limitations of Memory Work as a tool for analysing the data it produces will be identified and the chosen approach for data analysis will be discussed in detail.

### **Memory Work**

Memory Work was originally developed in 1987 by Frigga Haug, a German feminist, and her colleagues. They devised the method to explore female socialisation and the ways in which women contributed to this process. Haug was especially interested in exploring the social structures associated with capitalism and their role in women’s oppression; however, since its development the method has been modified and documented further as a method of qualitative inquiry by Crawford et al. (1992) who investigated the gendered construction of emotion. Since then the method has been applied to a broad range of topics including contraception (Harden & Willig, 1998), relationships between fathers and sons (Pease, 2000), menstruation (Koutroulis, 2001) and women’s experiences of sweating and pain (Gillies, Harden, Johnson, Reavey, Strange & Willig, 2004).

Memory Work locates experience<sup>2</sup> in the social realm. It assumes that experience is produced according to existing social structures and practices and that these processes that constitute experience also play a part in the construction of the self (Onyx & Small, 2001). In order to obtain meaning and intelligibility from the social world, individuals construct particular versions of events according to what is culturally available to them and through this process the individual also produces a sense of self. Therefore, Memory Work seeks not only to understand how an individual constructs the social world but also their place within it. This will now be demonstrated further by describing the Memory Work process, the data it collects and how they are analysed.

### *The Memory Work process*

Memory Work entails a group of people, or ‘co-researchers’, exploring a particular topic in which they have a shared interest (Stephenson & Kippax, 2008) by analysing written memories. In their work on emotion and gender, Crawford et al. (1992) set out three clear phases that the Memory Work process follows: phase one involves forming a Memory Work group and generating written memories, phase two focuses on the analysis of the memories in the form of group discussions and phase three concerns further analysis of the group discussions and theory-building. These will now be outlined in turn.

### Phase 1

- *Forming a Memory Work group*

The first step in Memory Work is to form a group which can have up to eight members. As previously noted the status difference between the researcher and the researched is diminished and it is the group members who discuss and analyse the data (the written memories). It is recommended that the group members share characteristics that might be relevant to the subject under investigation, such as single-sex groups or similar age groups, to reduce status differences within the group and encourage discussion by all members. Crawford et al. (1992) suggest that a group of friends is often a preferred option to enhance trust among the co-

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<sup>2</sup> The term ‘experience’ has different meanings according to what kind of approach to research is adopted. This will be discussed in more detail later.

researchers; however, they found that groups in which the individual members were strangers were also successful.

One of the members of the Memory Work group may act as a facilitator of the discussions; however, the presence of a facilitator could create status differences within the group and thus diminish the sense of collectivity. Conversely, a facilitator can be helpful if the topic in question is sensitive in nature. Overall, the essential ingredient for success in Memory Work is safety and mutual trust among group members.

- *Choosing a trigger*

Once a group has been formed a trigger needs to be settled upon that will prompt the co-researchers to write their memories. This trigger can be a word or short phrase that will produce memories relevant to the topic in question. Crawford et al. (1992) highlight the fact that triggers that generate rehearsed and well-rounded memories, such as ‘first love’ or ‘anger’, are not very useful as they are likely to produce episodes of first loves and anger in their clearest and most general form which do not reveal much about the particular ways in which individuals construct their personal experiences. Helpful triggers are those that refer to particular events or episodes that entail a sense of activity instead of generalised concepts.

- *Writing memories*

Each co-researcher writes a memory in response to the agreed trigger according to five basic rules recommended by Haug (1987) which are listed below:

1. Write a memory
2. of a particular episode, event or action
3. in the third person
4. in as much detail as possible, including even inconsequential or trivial detail (it may be helpful to think of a key image, sound, taste, smell, touch)
5. but without importing interpretation, explanation or biography.

Haug proposed that writing in the third person is to try and get a bird's eye view of the experience with the aim of generating detailed accounts of the experience rather than coherent, rehearsed accounts that might hide the processes involved in the construction of experience.

## Phase 2

- *Textual analysis of the memories*

Once the co-researchers have completed their written memories, the group comes together to discuss them. Each group member is handed a typed copy of each memory that has been written and is given the opportunity to give their ideas and opinions about each one in turn. Subsequently, the co-researchers identify specific features of the memories such as discursive constructions, role-relations, clichés, contradictions, cultural imperatives, metaphors, images, and statements that are made within the memory. Thus, we can see that Memory Work is compatible with the discursive construction of experience (Stephenson & Kippax, 2008). This phase marks the beginning of uncovering how experiences are constructed by the individual.

- *Cross-sectional analysis of the memories*

During this stage the co-researchers collectively compare the memories with one another and identify similarities, differences, recurrent themes, social norms and discourses contained in them. The aim of the cross-sectional analysis is for the co-researchers to expose the shared constructions and meanings embodied in the memories. Haug states that it is here that the co-researchers are considered 'experts of everyday life' (Haug, 1987, p.54).

The group discussions that make up the textual and cross-sectional analysis of the written memories are recorded and transcribed for further analysis in Phase 3.

## Phase 3

- *Analysis of group discussion transcripts*

The transcripts of the group discussions constitute further data for analysis. The ideas and themes generated by the co-researchers are subjected to critical appraisal

and further theorising. The group's insights are also explored in relation to existing psychological theories, models, concepts and everyday notions and the extent to which existing theories can account for the group's observations is explored. This stage can be done either by the group members or by an individual researcher who might have been acting as a facilitator during the group discussions.

The method of Memory Work has been set out in three defined stages; however, these phases are recursive and often not clearly differentiated in practice. It is likely that co-researchers will go back and forth between the phases as new ideas and understandings are collectively generated. Furthermore, the three stages demonstrate how Memory Work is both a method for data collection and analysis of the data.

From outlining the stages of Memory Work it is possible to see that it takes a *social constructionist* approach to research because it strives to capture the discursive resources such as metaphors, discourses, statements and clichés that produce experience. It also makes the assumption that as individuals construct their social world they produce a sense of self and that this formation of the self can be identified by analysing personal memories of events. However, it remains somewhat unclear as to exactly *how* the sense of self is theorised or what Memory Work aims to tell us about the individual. Indeed, what exactly is meant by 'sense of self' is uncertain; it is not clear how the term 'sense of self' relates to other established concepts such as an individual's subjective experience of themselves and the world or their position in relation to others. For example, Crawford et al. (1992) give an example of a childhood memory that was produced in response to the trigger 'happiness' which described a young girl playing outdoors and exploring by herself. The researchers concluded that personal space was important to this young girl; however, it can be said that this does not necessarily theorise the girl's sense of self but rather demonstrates how happiness is constructed according to her. In view of this, it can be said that Memory Work is in need of further development so that its claims are strengthened and grounded within a clearer theoretical foundation.

On the basis of the above, Memory Work was primarily used to collect data; however, a different method of data analysis that focuses on the social construction of personal accounts as well as identifying implications for subjectivity was deemed

necessary by the researcher. One such approach that addresses the relationship between the social construction of events and subjectivity is Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) (Willig, 2001; 2003, Burr, 2003) which, like Memory Work, is a social constructionist approach to research. Social constructionism and FDA will now be discussed in more detail as the present study is predominantly grounded within a social constructionist framework.

### **Social constructionism**

Social constructionism takes a critical position towards the taken-for-granted ways of understanding ourselves and the world (Coyle, 2007) which includes the common-sense assumption that the categories and labels that we give to the world correspond to objective and real entities. Burr (2003) argues that there is no single definition or feature of social constructionism that can adequately cover all the various ideas and theories that claim to be social constructionist; however, she identifies the following assumptions that are at the core of social constructionism and she states that social constructionist approaches to research are those that adopt one or more of these assumptions.

#### *A critical position towards taken-for-granted knowledge*

In everyday talk individuals make use of categories and labels that are assumed to reflect real and objective entities. For example, our common-sense understanding tells us that books can be categorised as ‘fiction’, ‘non-fiction’, ‘biography’ or ‘classical literature’ and this is reflected when we walk into bookshops where books are generally divided according to the category to which they belong. Social constructionism, however, argues that the categories with which we understand the world do not necessarily signify real divisions; in other words, it asserts that there is nothing in the nature of a book of ‘fiction’ that implies that it should be categorised in such a way. Similarly, yet more radically, social constructionism challenges the idea that human beings have an inherent personality that can account for how we behave and relate to others. It is a common-sense understanding that we as humans have certain qualities or traits such as kindness, aggressiveness or conscientiousness that constitute our personalities, our characters; however, as Burr (2003) states ‘how can you be sure that you have a personality at all? Even if a surgeon were to open you up and look, they wouldn’t find it’ (p.30). The social constructionist paradigm

argues that there is no concrete evidence for the existence of traits such as kindness and consequently for the existence of personalities. Thus, 'personality' is a concept that has been socially constructed in order for us to explain human behaviour.

Categories that sort one thing out from another are determined, or rather they are socially constructed, to give meaning to the world yet there is nothing to suggest that such categories represent the actual objective truth. Therefore, social constructionism opposes the claims of essentialism and positivism which state respectively that we have an essential, inherent nature and that it is possible to obtain accurate knowledge of things in the world.

#### *Historical and cultural specificity*

Another assumption that social constructionism makes is that the categories and concepts that we use to make sense of the world are historically and culturally specific. In view of the example above, the social constructionist position asserts that the traits that are believed to make up our personality are a function of the cultural and historical circumstances within which we find ourselves. In other words, how we understand the world is dependent on upon where we live in the world and at what time; our knowledge of the world is culturally and historically relative. For example, in many Western cultures prevailing social and economic structures that relate to class, employment, relationships between men and women and education provide many of the ways in which those living in these cultures understand the world. Societal and cultural norms are developed, including the norm of receiving an education, forming a close relationship that leads to marriage and getting a good job, yet who or what is to say that such norms are the proper way of living? Social constructionism sees norms as products of a particular culture which are therefore no more truthful or accurate than other ways of understanding in other cultures. Similarly, the ways in which we understand the world in the present day are significantly different to those centuries ago which highlights the historical specificity of knowledge and the plausibility of the social constructionist perspective.

#### *Knowledge is sustained by social processes*

From a social constructionist perspective, common-sense understandings of the world do not reflect objective truth and these understandings are said to be

historically and culturally specific. This then raises the question of where exactly these understandings come from and social constructionism claims that it is people who construct this knowledge between them. More specifically, it is through the daily interactions we have with others during the course of social life that we produce versions of reality. These exchanges and social processes with others are viewed as the practices during which shared accounts and ideas about knowledge are constructed. In view of this, social constructionism is concerned with all kinds of social interaction, particularly the main constituent of interaction and consequently construction of knowledge, namely language.

### **Language and social constructionism**

A conventional understanding of language is that it is the instrument which human beings use to describe objects that already exist and express feelings that are experienced internally. The common-sense assumption is that objects, feelings and thoughts precede language and that we choose certain words or phrases to describe them. In other words, when we talk of feeling angry or sad it is taken for granted that these feelings exist independently of language; that they represent inner states within our minds (and sometimes our physical existence) and language is the vehicle we use to communicate this phenomenon. This conventional understanding of human beings is both humanistic and essentialist because it views people as both coherent agents and authors of their own experience. It also assumes that there is an essential nature (e.g. in the form of stable personality traits) from which the meaning of experience originates. Conversely, social constructionism states that it is language that constitutes our experience and our very being in the world; it rejects the idea that we have an innate, essential nature that determines who we are and how we experience life. Indeed, to take the example above, the social constructionist position argues that the terms 'angry' and 'sad', and the concepts they represent, precede people which suggests that our experience of the world, let alone our emotions, remains somewhat meaningless without language. Furthermore, the availability of such terms and their shared meanings shape our experience of anger and sadness and also enables us to recognise and classify them (Harré & Gillet, 1994).

The focus on the role of language in constructing the individual and experience has been of particular interest to discursive psychologists (Potter & Wetherell, 1987;

Edwards & Potter, 1992; Parker, 1998). Discursive psychologists emphasise the performative and action-oriented nature of language which refers to how people use language, for example, to justify their actions, blame others and achieve certain objectives (Burr, 2003). In addition to this, discursive psychologists look at how we construct events and identities for ourselves which means that language can construct a multiplicity of versions of events and reality with no one version being 'correct'. People draw on shared resources within their respective cultures in the construction process which includes the use of discourses; however, it must be pointed out that the meaning of discourse can vary according to the different approaches that analyse the use of language. This will now be discussed further.

### Discourse

*Discursive psychology* looks at how people manage interest and accountability in their day-to-day life (Willig, 2003). More specifically, it is concerned with the action orientation of talk, meaning that it aims to uncover what exactly the talk is doing whether it be disclaiming, justifying or defending rather than what feelings or thoughts the talk might be representing. In this context, feelings and thoughts become things that people *do* rather than things that they *have* (Willig, 2003) because they are constructed through language rather than existing innately. Talk can be conversations or other forms of spoken interaction between friends, family or employees, but can also include interviews and written texts. Thus, from a discursive psychology perspective a discourse refers to 'an instance of situated language use' (Burr, 2003, p.63). Analysing talk from this perspective entails identifying the different *interpretative repertoires* (Potter & Wetherell, 1987) (terminology, grammatical features and other figures of speech) that construct subjects and objects within the discourse at the same time as attending to the context within which the discourse occurs and its action orientation.

It has been noted, however, that Discursive Psychology does not account for issues such as subjectivity and identity (Willig, 2001; Burr, 2003). Another approach to the analysis of discourse, heavily influenced by the work of Michel Foucault, was developed which not only identified the performative aspects of language but also focused on how it constituted social and psychological life (Willig, 2001). From this perspective, which became known as Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA),

discourses are seen as more than just talk or language (Burr, 2003). A discourse is defined as sets of statements, metaphors, images and stories that together construct objects, events and people (Parker, 1994; Burr 2003). As previously noted, language can create several versions of events and objects and FDA is concerned with identifying the different discourses that construct these numerous versions. In addition to this, FDA asserts that discourses offer *subject positions* which can be taken up by people and can have implications for subjectivity and practice. Therefore, FDA takes language further than the immediate context within which it occurs and addresses the relationship between discourse and how people might think or feel (subjectivity) and what they might do (practice) (Willig, 2003; Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008). The next sections will explain these relationships further as this will be particularly pertinent to the present study.

### Discourse and positioning

Social constructionism sees psychological entities such as attitudes, motivations and personalities as the product of language; in other words they exist only in discourse. Discourses can, and indeed do, have significant effects for people. For example, the discourse of personality disorders classifies individuals who demonstrate certain personality styles that are considered deviant from contemporary societal expectations or norms. As a consequence, these individuals might be shunned by society and referred for some form of treatment. On the other hand, the idea that personalities only exist in discourse poses key questions regarding our subjectivity – if we do not have personalities then how are we to understand ourselves as human beings? How does discourse account for who we are?

Burr states that social constructionist theorists frequently use the term *identity* to understand ourselves as people as it ‘avoids the essentialist connotations of personality, and is also an implicitly social concept’ (2003, p. 106). Discourses that are culturally available to us produce us as certain kinds of people. Some of the discourses that prevail in constructing identity are age, class, ethnicity, gender and sexuality; therefore, we can be constructed as a young person, an old person, a middle-class woman, an Asian man or a heterosexual adult. It is the combination of these discourses rather than the characteristics of our nature that bestow on us an identity as people and this is why the term identity is often used in social

constructionist theory. In addition to this, our identity is also said to be produced by the subject positions that are created by discourses. Subject positions offer us a location from which to speak and act and once we assume a subject position we become confined to the set of rights and obligations associated with each position. For example, the subject position of a doctor locates the person as medically qualified with the right to speak about illnesses and other physical difficulties to a patient. The doctor is also in a position where he or she is obligated to make diagnoses, to examine and treat patients and provide the right kind of care for them. It can be said that subject positions are not easily avoided as the discourses that create these positions predate individuals; therefore, the individual is constrained by these discourses, and the subject positions that are consequently offered (Willig, 1999).

The notion of positioning has developed considerably to show how people locate themselves and others within particular discourses during conversations and other forms of interaction (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré & van Langenhove; 1999), and to observe what a person may or may not do from the position in which they are located (Harré, Moghaddam, Pilkerton-Cairnie, Rothbart & Sabat, 2009). Positioning, according to Harré et al. 'can be deliberate, inadvertent, presumptive, taken for granted, and so on' (p. 10) in addition to being claimed or resisted (Burr, 2003). For example, a man might remark to his work colleague that his printer is broken after this colleague has used it. Subsequently, the colleague might take up the position of the guilty party and then fix the printer. On the other hand it could be that the remark was not intended to position the colleague in such a way and this demonstrates that positioning is not always intentional and that it can often depend on defining the situation (Davies & Harré, 1999). FDA in particular aims to identify the various subject positions that are made available by certain discourses.

In summary, positions can be either accepted or resisted by individuals and some positions are assumed more consistently while others can be more fleeting (Coyle, 2007). Indeed, social constructionist perspectives, particularly discourse-analytic inquiries, emphasise that selves are multiple and variable (Wood & Kroger, 2000) which demonstrates that who we are, or rather what positions we occupy, can be subject to change, a point with which Davies and Harré (1999) concur:

*“Accordingly, who one is, that is, what sort of person one is, is always an open question with a shifting answer depending upon the positions made available within one’s own and others’ discursive practices.” (p.35)*

It has been demonstrated that subject positions are produced by discourses and that when such subject positions are taken up they provide an identity with corresponding rights and obligations for the individual. It can be argued that this conveys an individual who is void of any fundamental characteristics or personality; however, as humans, speaking of how we feel and what we believe about things, people and ourselves is frequent in our dialogue with others and we tend to think of feelings, thoughts and beliefs as products that originate from somewhere within us. As we know, social constructionism opposes this essentialist argument which then raises the question of how we are to understand our subjective experience.

#### Discourse and subjectivity

Firstly, it is important to clarify what is meant by subjectivity. Here, subjectivity refers to our selfhood and subjective experience of the world which is commonly understood as the beliefs, desires and emotions we have. The common-sense understanding is that subjective experience comes first and we then use words to describe it; however, social constructionism claims that language provides our subjective experience as against subjective experience existing independently of language. Such a claim is quite contentious and social constructionism has been criticised for this as it cannot adequately answer certain questions such as why some people consistently behave differently from others, why some people are more angry than others or why some people become mentally ill (Burr, 2003). In an attempt to attend to such questions, social constructionism addresses the issue of subjectivity by the use of positioning. Discourses, as we have seen, make certain subject positions available and these subject positions also offer ‘certain ways-of-seeing the world and certain ways-of-being in the world’ (Willig, 2001, p. 111). Consequently, the occupation of certain subject positions then has implications for what can be felt, thought and experienced, and it is probable that we come to experience both the world and ourselves from the vantage-point that each position offers (Bamberg, 1994; Willig, 2001; Burr, 2003). For example, within an economic discourse, those who are laid off from work are positioned as ‘redundant’. Subsequently, the

possibilities for subjectivity made available by these positions could be feelings of despondency, sadness and a lack of value. This is not to say that individuals who are made redundant *do* feel such things, but that we can speculate on what *can* or *might* be felt by those who take up this position.

Discourses, therefore, have implications for our subjective experience because of the subject positions that are offered by each one. Discourses are externally available and in a way we internalise them (Davies & Harré, 1990) and subsequently mobilise a feeling or a way of being accordingly. Essentially, it is an outside-going-in process (taking the discourse inwards) rather than an inside-going-out process (experiencing a feeling and expressing it outwards) which ordinarily we are more familiar with as a way of thinking about experience. In this context, ‘experience’ takes on a different meaning which will be briefly discussed before going on finally to describe the relationship between discourse and practice.

#### What do we mean by ‘experience?’

Within everyday talk we speak of experience as an occurrence that we encounter (‘My experience of the wedding was wonderful’) or we use it to say that we felt something (‘I experienced real anger’). When we converse with others we often ask what their experience of something was like meaning that we are interested to know what it was like for them to be in a situation, what it felt like. Thus, experience from a common-sense understanding is the *start point* from which we can then access feelings, thoughts, sensations and other phenomenological processes. Conversely, from a social constructionist perspective, experience, as either an occurrence or a feeling, is constructed from the discursive resources that are available to the individual in the social realm. From this point of view experience is the *end product* of a construction process. In particular, FDA theorises experience by identifying the subject positions made available within different discourses and then highlighting the possibilities or implications for subjective experience. Therefore, it is still in keeping with the idea that experience is a product of social construction because it is the discourses and subject positions that constitute the possibility for experience.

The next section will now delineate the relationship between discourse and practice and discuss the issue of agency briefly before returning to the present study.

### Discourse and practice

Discourses are closely linked to institutional and social practices and consequently affect our lifestyle, what we can and cannot do and what can be done to us (Burr, 2003). They locate us as particular kinds of people and give us positions and statuses. For example, the institutions of capitalism and marriage offer us positions such as 'employed', 'unemployed', 'married', 'divorced', 'husband' and 'wife', and consequently 'open up or close down opportunities for action' (Willig, 2001, p.111). Being positioned as unemployed permits an individual to claim a jobseekers allowance which those who are employed cannot do. Being positioned as married makes the practice of unprotected sex legitimate because the marital discourse constructs marriage as a long-term, committed relationship (Willig, 1995). That is not to say that those who are single cannot practise unprotected sex but rather that its compatibility with the discourse of marriage makes the practice more legitimate (see Willig, 1995, for more detail). Discourses in this sense, then, do not solely refer to ways of speaking and writing; they are bound up with institutional practices that organise and manage social life. Furthermore, the more society enacts institutional practices day to day, the more we reinforce existing discourses to the point where they can become entrenched and perceived as common sense (Willig, 2003). As a result of this it can become hard to challenge prevailing discourses and find alternative practices because of the way in which prevailing discourses dominate social life.

So far, social constructionism has been described in terms of how it views the production of knowledge and people. It has been shown that discourse plays a significant part in this process and that implications for subjectivity and practice can be inferred from the subject positions that are made available by discourses. FDA is one such method of qualitative analysis that identifies the processes involved in the construction of reality, the self and experience, and therefore, this approach was selected to analyse the data collected from the Memory Work groups.

FDA can be carried out in a number of ways (Parker, 1992; Kendall & Wickham, 1999). Willig (2001; 2003) outlines six steps that enable the researcher to identify the discursive resources that construct particular discursive objects, the subject positions contained within these resources and the implications for subjectivity and practice.

The first two steps involve identifying the various discursive constructions of the object in question (in this case the discursive object would be ending a relationship) and the discourses in which the constructions are located. The third step looks at the function of constructing the object in a particular way and what can be gained from such a construction. The fourth, fifth and sixth steps focus on identifying the various subject positions that are made available by the discursive constructions and discourses and consequently the implications for practice and subjectivity. The implications for subjectivity, however, remain speculative as social constructionism supposes that there is no direct relationship between feelings, inner states and language. FDA is an appropriate method for the present study's research questions as it can adequately address how the men construct their experience of terminating relationships with women in a way that can identify specifically how the men are positioned in the event and how this might shape their subjective experience of it. Thus, the study remains in keeping with a social constructionist framework as both Memory Work and FDA pertain to this epistemology.

Unlike other social constructionist approaches, such as Discursive Psychology, FDA allows for the exploration of possible subjective experience, and in view of this it is pertinent to this thesis which is for a Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology. The practice of counselling psychology focuses largely on an individual's constructed subjective experience and what the implications are for practice; therefore, there is an affinity between the selected method for analysis and the academic domain in which this thesis is set.

### **Affinities between Memory Work and Foucauldian Discourse Analysis**

Both Memory Work and FDA share similarities that facilitate the use of them alongside each other within the present study. Primarily, the two approaches are concerned with the social construction of reality and how a person understands the social space he or she inhabits according to what is socially and culturally available to them. In particular, there is an emphasis on the linguistic resources involved in this process. In addition to this, the approaches acknowledge that constructed understandings of reality can be shared by particular groups owing to the discursive resources that prevail within certain cultures. Furthermore, both Memory Work and FDA acknowledge that, while social constructions are not objective reflections of

reality, they do have permanence and an influence over what we can and cannot do and subjectively experience (Willig, 2001). Both approaches agree that phenomena can be constructed in various ways with no one being necessarily correct but that there are certain social constructions that dominate in cultures and other social spaces and subsequently come to be perceived as ‘truth’.

Memory Work seeks to identify sets of social relations in people’s accounts of experience and what consequences these social relations have for those involved. This might include social relations between parents and children or men and women. Likewise, FDA pays attention to the subject positions that are offered within discourses and also considers the possible implications that these might have for an individual’s subjective experience and what they can and cannot do. Therefore, we can see that both Memory Work and FDA look at the construction of both the object and the subject and are, therefore, compatible with the aims of the present study.

Up to this point Memory Work, FDA and social constructionism have all been discussed with a particular emphasis on the significance of language, discourse and positioning in all three. To summarise, Memory Work was used to collect the data which were then analysed from a social constructionist/FDA perspective with specific attention being paid to the subject positions that were made available within the accounts and the implications these have for the men. The actual procedure of the study, including ethical approval, will now be described before introducing the results of the study.

### **Ethical approval and practice**

Ethical approval for the research was obtained from the Department of Psychology, City University, London (see Appendix A for ethical approval form). The main ethical issue concerned the possibility of co-researchers being friends of the primary researcher and the implications this had on the lack of anonymity for both the co-researchers and their current partners. However, only one of the co-researchers was a friend of the primary researcher and he was fully informed of what the research procedure would entail before he committed himself to the study. The primary researcher knew none of the co-researchers’ current partners.

The British Psychological Society Code of Ethics and Conduct (2006) was followed to ensure ethical practice in this study. The co-researchers were well informed of the purposes of recording the group discussions and assured that all written memories and transcripts would be strictly confidential and anonymous. The co-researchers were also told that any names appearing in the final piece of work would be pseudonyms to protect their identity. In addition to this, the co-researchers were also reminded that the research was being supervised by another qualified psychologist and they were provided with her contact details in order to make any queries during or after the research process. To ensure that they had understood the procedure and purpose of the study the group members were asked to give signed full and informed consent to taking part in the study and to the recording of the group discussion (see Appendix B for example consent form). The consent forms and any other identifying information were stored separately and securely from the collected data. Each member was reminded that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. The well-being of each co-researcher was monitored throughout the group discussions and before leaving the group by dedicating some time at the end to talk about the co-researchers' experience of the discussion. A list of resources and helpful organisations was also made available to the participants because of the sensitive information that was under discussion (see Appendix C for example resource sheet). The collected data and written memories were stored in a secure location during the research process and participants were informed that the data would be kept for up to 12 months following the completion of the research.

### **Personal and epistemological reflexivity**

I<sup>3</sup> decided to carry out the present study because it concerns an area which appeals to me greatly: relationships between men and women. As a heterosexual woman I have a natural curiosity about 'the other' or rather, the male perspective when it comes to romantic relationships. My own personal experience of relationships with the opposite sex, as well as the demise of them, and sharing experiences with female friends, has encouraged a continuous search for intelligibility of these situations, particularly in terms of men's actions. It can be said that my reflection on these

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<sup>3</sup> This section of the thesis is written in the first person as it concerns personal reflexive issues in relation to the study; therefore, the researcher felt it appropriate to address the reader in the first person for this section only.

experiences has only produced speculations and questions about men and relationships and this therefore motivated me to pursue a piece of research that might shed some light on some of these queries. A previous piece of research I conducted explored how men initiate romantic relationships with women and it provided some interesting insights and challenged some of my own assumptions of men's thoughts and behaviours. Although this previous study looked at the initiation of relationships, the ending of relationships was frequently cited as a reminiscent issue for the participants and this consequently motivated me to investigate this in the present study.

Another dimension of personal reflexivity concerns my clinical experience as a chartered counselling psychologist. Relationship dissolution, and indeed other issues relating to the deterioration of relationships, is often a presenting difficulty for clients entering therapy. In recent months it has been particularly noticeable that many of my clients who present in therapy with this concern have been male and it has been of great interest to me to observe how they speak of and understand the deterioration and loss of their relationship. Hence, the pursuit of this study is to gain further insight into how men construct the loss of a significant, intimate relationship so that it might enhance my work as a practitioner. Furthermore, intimate relationships and their many facets are an area that I would like to specialise in during my professional career.

I chose a qualitative approach to the research because I share many of its assumptions about people and the world. Qualitative research focuses on how people understand the world and how they produce accounts of their experience of events and circumstances such as managing personal relationships or experiencing pain and chronic illness. It does not aim to identify cause-effect relationships but rather to attend to the quality and texture of experience as well as the diverse constructions of reality that people produce. In view of this, it suggests that there is no right or wrong meaning to experience but rather varying accounts according to each individual with each account being equally as valid as the next. This is a particular assumption of social constructionist approaches to qualitative research: one person's construction of an experience is no more accurate than another's as there is no real or accurate version of reality. This resonates with the practice of counselling psychology where

therapists listen to the words, metaphors and images clients use to describe their experience in order to understand what meaning is given by these discursive resources. The same event can be constructed and given meaning in different ways by each client. For example, redundancy or job loss can be described as a shocking and unsettling event for one person, relief for another in being given a new opportunity, the loss of security for another and an existential issue in terms of one's life path and sense of identity for another. It is the responsibility of the therapist to attend to each client's account in order to understand how experience is constructed in various ways. One major tension, however, between therapy and social constructionism is what each construction signifies. Counselling psychology works on the assumption that a client's words reflect the inner workings of their mind and inform us of their thoughts and feelings whereas social constructionism sees subjectivity as a construction itself, as a product of language. Thus, despite the shared focus on language there is also a direct conflict between social constructionism and counselling psychology in terms of the function of language. This tension will be returned to later on in the concluding chapter of the thesis.

### **Procedure of the present study**

#### ***Forming the Memory Work groups***

Two Memory Work groups were formed for this piece of research and the members were recruited either through the use of flyers advertising the research (see Appendix D for example flyer) or through colleagues of the author of the research. An information sheet detailing the research aims and what was required from each participant was sent to the group members once they had agreed to take part in the research (see Appendix E for example information sheet). Group 1 consisted of five members; four male co-researchers, who were all friends with each other, and the primary researcher acting as a facilitator. Group 2 had four members; three male co-researchers who did not know each other and the primary researcher acting as a facilitator. Each co-researcher signed a consent form showing their agreement to take part and they also completed a demographic questionnaire before embarking on the group discussions (see Appendix F for example demographic questionnaire).

The co-researchers were all heterosexual men aged between 25 and 31 years; five of them were British (White), one was British Asian (Indian) and one was South

African. Furthermore, five were in full-time employment and the remaining two were postgraduate students. The age range of 25-35 years was specified from the outset of the research because it can be said that the breakdown of premarital relationships occurs more frequently during these years. Furthermore, an age range was specified so that the co-researchers were reasonably homogenous on some criterion (Crawford et al. 1992) and that status differences between the members were reduced. Being of a similar age was also thought to promote a sense of mutuality within the group.

The co-researchers were recruited on the basis that they had all experienced the ending of at least one committed relationship that lasted for one year or more. This was stipulated as a condition of participation in order to eliminate other kinds of relationships such as casual relationships, one night stands or flings, which might have produced an abundance of data that this piece of research could not manage altogether.

Once the group members had agreed to participate, separate initial meetings were arranged for both groups where the primary researcher explained the study further and provided an opportunity for the members to ask any questions. The initial meeting was also concerned with choosing a trigger for the memories and providing instructions on how to write the memories. The five guidelines set out by Haug (1987) were given to each co-researcher to assist them with their memory writing.

#### Choosing the trigger

During the initial meeting with the groups the researcher explained the purpose of the trigger and gave examples of suitable triggers for the memories. The groups agreed that an effective trigger would be one that placed the men in an active role, such as *'telling her it is over'*. The co-researchers in Group 1 settled on *'dumping a girl'* as this was a term they found most familiar when it came to ending relationships. Group 2 agreed on *'telling her it is over'* as a suitable trigger for their memories. Both of the triggers obviously reflected that it was the men who initiated the ending of the relationship. Once the trigger was determined by both groups, the co-researchers were required to write their memories outside of the group to allow more time to grasp the task and complete it. Both groups agreed to email their

written memories to the primary researcher once they were finished, and a date would then be set for the group analysis and discussions.

### *Textual and cross-sectional analysis of the memories*

The analysis of the memories for both groups followed the guidelines set out by Crawford et al. (1992); each memory was read individually by every group member and the author of each memory was asked in turn what it was like to write their account. Subsequently, the co-researchers were invited to give any opinions and ideas they had in response to each memory. The memories were then examined, both individually and collectively, for clichés, contradictions, cultural imperatives, metaphors, popular sayings, absences, role-relations and any other identifying features that stood out for the co-researchers. The memories were also compared with each other for similarities and differences as the discussions proceeded. It should be pointed out, however, that the textual and cross-sectional analysis did not differentiate clearly from one another during the process. The group discussions were open-ended and often the co-researchers went back and forth between the textual and cross-sectional analysis as new ideas were generated. The primary researcher who acted as a facilitator for both group discussions mainly contributed to the discussions to support, encourage, paraphrase and sometimes query the co-researchers' comments, thoughts and ideas. The primary researcher also posed simple questions such as 'how is that?' and 'why is that?' in response to the co-researchers' statements to facilitate further explanation and gain more detail. Once the memories had all been examined in detail and compared to one another, the co-researchers gave final ideas and also discussed their experience of the group work, including asking any questions about the research. Both the group discussions were digitally recorded for transcription purposes.

It should be pointed out here that in addition to the written memories the textual and cross-sectional analysis discussions constituted further data to be analysed because the construction process did not stop with the written memories. During the group discussions the men continued to produce discursive constructions of breaking up with women which were then analysed by the primary researcher.

### *Analysis of group discussions and transcripts*

The recorded discussions were transcribed in preparation for further analysis which was completed by the primary researcher. This involved applying the FDA strategies of identifying discursive constructions and discourses, subject positions and implications for subjectivity and practice to the collected data.

The results section which will be presented next will describe the main constructions identified from the analysis of the data. In the results section the author uses the terms 'man'/'men' and 'woman'/'women' when discussing each sex but simultaneously acknowledges that the co-researchers tended to use more colloquial terms such as 'girl(s)', 'bloke(s)' and 'guy(s)' in their comments. In writing this piece of research the author felt it appropriate to use the formal terms to differentiate the sexes. Furthermore, the term 'girl' was abandoned by the researcher in favour of 'woman' owing to the different meaning that 'girl' has compared to 'woman'. The term 'girl' denotes a much younger, almost vulnerable female which did not seem appropriate for the present study; therefore, the term 'woman' is used throughout by the author. However, this issue will be returned to later on in the thesis.

## Analysis

This section of the thesis contains the main discursive constructions identified from both group discussions following the textual and cross-sectional analysis of the memories. Verbatim reproductions of the memories can be seen in Appendix G. In addition, the subject positions that were offered by these constructions and the implications for subjectivity and practice according to the subject positions are also discussed.

Each discursive construction will be presented under a main heading given by the primary researcher and various components pertaining to each construction will be examined to describe the construction further. Subsequently, the wider discourses within which the discursive constructions can be located will be identified as well as the subject positions that are made available. The implications for subjectivity and practice will then be discussed. A summary of the identified discursive constructions and their components is presented below<sup>4</sup>.

**Table 1. Summary of the identified discursive constructions and associated components**

Breaking up as wrongdoing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>➤ <i>Guilt</i></li><li>➤ <i>Ruining the fairytale</i></li><li>➤ <i>Causing hurt</i></li></ul>
Breaking up as problematic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>➤ <i>Pressure</i></li><li>➤ <i>Escape</i></li><li>➤ <i>Making the best out of a bad situation</i></li></ul>
Breaking up as work to be done	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>➤ <i>A methodical process</i></li><li>➤ <i>Cost-effectiveness</i></li><li>➤ <i>A clinical approach</i></li></ul>

Each construction will be discussed individually and quotations from the group discussions will be presented to illustrate each one. The section will now proceed by introducing the first one: ‘breaking up as wrongdoing’.

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<sup>4</sup> The results of the analysis are presented in this fashion to reflect the analytic process and how I arrived at each final construction.

Key: .....*pause in the participant's response*

*[...] omitted text*

*[text] other person's comments*

### **Breaking up as wrongdoing**

The first discursive construction that was salient across the groups was how breaking up with women was constructed as a form of wrongdoing that caused the women distress. Within this construction the men were positioned as perpetrators of this wrongful act and in accordance with this a sense of guilt was constructed which is the first sub-theme of 'breaking up as wrongdoing' to be discussed.

### **Guilt**

Constructions of guilt were particularly prevalent in the men's accounts of dissolving their respective relationships; however, in discussing this sense of guilt Andrew<sup>5</sup> queried the appropriateness of this feeling and problematises it as the following extract shows:

*Andrew: I think there's an overwhelming feeling of guilt on one's part but there's no explanation as to why there's guilt [...] there is a lot of guilt, we've all done the right thing, we've been true, honest and just. We've each tried to give comfort to the person with the bad news kind of thing [...] why does everyone feel guilty at the end of the day?*

Andrew constructs ending a relationship as reporting something unpleasant or unfortunate for the woman by describing it as 'bad news'. A sense of foreboding is also conveyed in relation to telling a woman it is over as the saying 'bad news' is commonly employed to inform others of events and catastrophes, for example, a diagnosis of cancer or even the death of a loved one. The sense of guilt that is constructed by Andrew in the extract above is of an immense degree (*'I think there's an overwhelming feeling of guilt on one's part... there is a lot of guilt'*) which emphasises the notion of having committed a serious transgression. Though Andrew refers to feelings of remorse in his comment, he then goes on to identify the lack of a

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<sup>5</sup> Names have been changed to protect the identity of the participants.

reason for such feelings and consequently questions why they feature in the men's experiences (*'there's no explanation as to why there's guilt... why does everyone feel guilty at the end of the day?'*), particularly as he argues that by ending their respective relationships, he and his group peers have acted justifiably and honestly overall (*'we've all done the right thing, we've been true, honest and just'*). As a result, a paradox is constructed between guilt for wrongdoing and 'being true, honest and just'. In view of this, a moral discourse is evoked as Andrew constructs an ethical dilemma in his remark: on the one hand, finishing a relationship is constructed as a justified and appropriate occurrence that benefits one party yet, on the other hand, the end is 'bad news' and distressing for the other. Therefore, the individual who terminates the relationship can argue that they have acted reasonably and assume a position of legitimacy, whereas the other is likely to be disappointed and assume the position of the injured party. Despite Andrew being the one who initiates the ending and thus theoretically assuming the position of legitimacy, he is located as guilty in the extract above. Consequently, it can be said that the men are inevitably positioned as guilty even if legitimate reasons for dissolving their relationships are cited.

Additional constructions of guilt can be seen in the following extract from David who recalls the time he finished his relationship with his girlfriend:

*David: When I started writing it everything came flooding back [...] we've talked about it a lot, guilt more than anything[...] I remember when I was driving home I felt like something had lifted from my shoulders but also very, very guilty.*

David constructs his experience as unforgettable: *'when I started writing it everything came flooding back'*. In his account a prevailing feeling of guilt is constructed (*'guilt more than anything'*) and his use of the word 'very' emphasises the strength of the feeling (*'very, very guilty'*) and implies the gravity of his wrongdoing. In addition to a dominant sense of guilt, David produces a feeling of relief at the demise of his relationship (*'when I was driving home I felt like something had lifted from my shoulders'*) and his use of the metaphor of something lifting from his shoulders constructs the experience of breaking up, and perhaps also the

relationship itself, as onerous and a burden. Similar to Andrew's account, David constructs his subjective experience as a contrast of emotions; the weight of self-reproach and shame on the one hand and a sense of relief and alleviation from a burden on the other. Again, two positions are made available here to David. The first positions him as guilty for perpetrating a wrongful act and the second positions him as reprieved; however, the fact that David constructs feeling 'guilt more than anything' suggests that the position of the perpetrator is privileged.

The final extract to be presented in relation to constructions of guilt comes from a conversation between Philip and Dean during which they are talking about Philip's account of having finished his relationship with his girlfriend:

*Philip: I felt quite bad about it because like, this uh, I was really, kind of, I really liked her and um, I'd been, when I was writing this, I, it made me feel like really, really bad because I'd been quite nasty to her, I had uh, in preceding this I had just been, I was quite stressed at the time and I just kind of put her to one side and had been ignoring her for a little bit.*

*Dean: Who was this bird?*

*Philip: This was when I was living in Portsmouth, uh, girl I was going out with down there, then I moved back, when I was at university doing my Masters [Dean: oh, ok] so I was living at home and she was still in Portsmouth and that was half the problem that we had, but um yeah, I felt really bad, I was like, 'Fuck, I can't believe it, I was such a cock'.*

Similar to Andrew and David, a strong sense of guilt is constructed by Philip when he speaks of having been 'nasty' to his girlfriend ('it made me feel like really, really bad because I'd been quite nasty to her'). He then goes on to comment on the circumstances at the time of his relationship ending that were contributing to the difficulty of sustaining the relationship ('I was quite stressed at the time'; 'I was living at home and she was still in Portsmouth and that was half the problem'); hence, he constructed legitimate reasons for terminating his relationship with his girlfriend. Despite these valid reasons Philip denigrates himself quite abrasively

when he speaks of how he ended his relationship (*'I was like, "Fuck, I can't believe it, I was such a cock"'*) and with this self-criticism he constructs a feeling of guilt and culpability for his actions, especially by the use of the abusive slang words in his remark. Therefore, Philip is positioned as reprehensible.

Looking at the extracts collectively it is notable that the extent of the guilt that is constructed by the men is considerable in each one (*'there is a lot of guilt', 'an overwhelming feeling of guilt'; 'very, very guilty'; 'it made me feel like really, really bad'*). Pomerantz (1986) developed the term *extreme case formulation* to refer to the extreme limits to which something is described in order to warrant something effectively, particularly in speech. For example, the term 'very' is often used as an extreme case formulation to describe the gravity of something. With regard to the extract above, the use of extreme case formulations such as *'really bad'* and *'very guilty'* particularly emphasises the notion of having committed a serious improper act compared to a mild offence. Using extreme case formulations means that the men can avoid any further criticism or questioning from others because they are already positioning themselves as exceedingly guilty. In other words, if one states that he feels *'very, very guilty'* or *'really bad'* about something, it is unlikely that others will ask *'don't you feel bad about what you've done?'* because the individual has already acknowledged how badly they feel about their actions. In fact, it is arguably more likely that those who are listening to the *'guilty'* party will console them and make statements such as *'don't be so hard on yourself, it's not that bad'* because the guilty party is showing a recognition (to a maximum degree) of their culpability. Thus, in the men's case the use of extreme case formulations prevents them from receiving any further questioning or accusatory comments for their actions.

Constructions of guilt and wrongdoing draw on a moral discourse and ideas of right and wrong conduct. Notions of perpetrating some form of behaviour for which the consequence is a sense of guilt suggest having acted immorally and position the actor as a perpetrator. It can be said that as a result of assuming this position the possibilities for action (what can be said and done) for the men are restricted. For example, being positioned as a perpetrator requires that the individual take responsibility for their action and carry out an appropriate sentence that meets the severity of the offence in order to redeem themselves. One who is positioned as a

perpetrator may plead their innocence and argue their case by providing explanations for their behaviour as the men did by justifying their reasons for breaking up their relationships. However, such justifications are overruled by the sentence and consequently the perpetrator's rights become restricted as they are bound by the constraints of the sentence. In other words, their arguments do not absolve them of the offence; therefore, their claims are somewhat redundant. As previously noted, the men in the study did claim legitimate reasons for terminating their relationships but the constructed sense of guilt outweighed these reasons. However, an alternative position is also made available here. As previously noted, the use of an extreme case formulation constructs a sense of utmost guilt even though legitimate reasons were claimed for the end of the relationship. The men are then constructing themselves as 'having heart' or as moral agents. Therefore, the men are positioned as repentant sinners which implies that they can subsequently be forgiven. In terms of subjective experience, it perhaps goes without saying that feelings of penitence are made available to those who assume a position of a repentant sinner; however, it can also be speculated that the men might also expect forgiveness precisely because they construct themselves as remorseful, moral agents.

### **Ruining the fairytale**

The men's accounts of breaking up constructed the experience in terms of ruining a fantasy that the women have of romantic relationships. This discursive construction particularly emphasises the destructive effect of terminating relationships because the relationship is romanticised by the women and constructed as the ideal partnership which is then destroyed when it comes to an end:

*Andrew: The girls are all crying and these ones are all upset and all crying for a reason. But is it because they build themselves into this little world and it's like this and we feel guilty because we're destroying their world. In actual fact we're not, we're actually making it better and opening it up...*

*John: It might be, again without wanting to be too generalist, if there was the idea that perhaps as a girl...they'll have already have thought through about where they want their wedding to be, most guys I come across don't have those thoughts where they want to get married, or what they want to wear*

*when they get married [...] I mean the fantasy is very different...and there's something about crushing that fantasy in the ending it, it's almost like you're crushing this fairytale story that is almost ...that is there irrespective of whether I'm part of it or not [Andrew: Hmm, yeah] And who wants to crush someone's fairytale? The only people who crush someone's fairytale are evil characters.*

Andrew comments that the women build themselves into a 'little world' when in a relationship which denotes a kind of protective bubble or fantasy world that is separate from reality. The act of breaking up is then likened to the collapse of this protective bubble when Andrew speaks of destroying this world. He then goes on to highlight the positive outcome of the break-up by stating that the men are actually providing an opportunity for the women by releasing them from the bubble, and it can be said that by identifying the bright side of the situation, Andrew can disclaim some of the responsibility of having such a catastrophic effect on the woman's life. John continues to construct breaking up as ruining a built-up fantasy when he speaks of how, unlike men, women plan ahead to their wedding, and, given this, the effect of ending the relationship is ruining this plan. More specifically, he refers to ending the relationship as 'crushing a fairytale' which constructs it as the annihilation of this magical fantasy of living happily ever after; it conveys quite a brutal and violent act. This evokes the idea of the villain in typical fairytale stories who represents the 'baddie' attempting to thwart the 'goodie' and this constructs the ending of relationships as one person inevitably becoming the villain or the perpetrator and the other the innocent victim. Indeed, John states that the only people who crush fairytales are 'evil characters' which emphasises the idea of breaking up as a wicked deed.

The metaphor of relationships as fairytales has implications for those involved in the relationship and its subsequent demise. Traditional fairytale stories and popular myths are commonly associated with childhood as they are often used to entertain children. They generally contain fanciful ideas and characters that altogether convey an unreality or naivety that culminates in a happy ending. Children come to hold on to such fantasies of life until they are informed of the reality of life by their parents or other adults, for example, in learning that Father Christmas is not real. In fact, this

very idea was used as an analogy in Dean's account of telling his girlfriend that their relationship was over:

*She had the look of a child whose innocence had been shattered and was slowly coming to terms with a world without Santa or worse, a world without the person that protected her against ill.*

Dean's account explicitly positions his girlfriend as childlike. In relation to her, Dean is positioned as a figure of authority or a parent who has 'shattered' the child's innocence which produces a compelling image of a child who has an abrupt and rude awakening: learning that Santa is not real. The term 'shattered' especially evokes notions of disruption, disappointment and bringing an end to an innocent childhood. The position of a parent is emphasised even further by the sentence 'a world without the person that protected her against ill'. Ideally, parents are expected to protect their children from harm and immorality. In the extract above, Dean positions himself as the person who had this responsibility, but upon breaking up he will no longer be there to protect his girlfriend from harm. As a result of the rude awakenings that parents bring about children eventually come to learn of the fictitious nature of such stories and characters and gain a more realistic view of the world as they get older. Though parents and adults know that telling children the truth is somewhat wounding, they also know that it is a necessity and part of their role as a parent so that their children do not grow up overprotected. With this in mind, the men in the extracts above construct the women as childlike and naïve by stating that they see relationships as fairytales with a happy-ever-after ending and likening breaking up to disillusioning children about Santa. Subsequently, the men construct themselves as the ones who are ruining these unrealistic, fairytale ideas that women have which resonates with the idea of adults having the difficult task of teaching children about the reality of life; essentially they also ruin the fairytale. Therefore, the women are positioned as childlike and the men are positioned as adults or parents who have to undertake the unpleasant task of opening the women's eyes to reality; they adopt a position of authority. Constructing relationship breakdown as ruining a fairytale and dissolving childhood myths invokes both a patriarchal discourse and a paternalistic discourse. The former locates men as having a primary authority over others, particularly women who were traditionally seen as naïve, emotional and fragile,

especially during the Victorian era. This discourse also positions men as responsible for supporting and taking care of their wives and children which again positions them as the authority figure in relation to women. Hence, the traditional gender discourse of patriarchy is invoked here. Similarly, the paternalistic discourse positions the men as parental figures in relation to the women who are positioned as childlike and naïve for having fairytale fantasies of relationships. This discourse is especially concerned with men being required to protect and look after their children. This entails making decisions on behalf of their children and doing what they think is best and for their own good, i.e. teaching them the realities of the world.

Notions of fairytale-like fantasies draw on a romantic discourse. The men suggest that relationships are constructed by the women as idealistic partnerships involving typical characters such as the hero and the heroine, or the maiden who is rescued by Prince Charming and destined for happiness with him. In the first extract the men construct breaking up as destroying this fairytale relationship, which positions them as villainous characters (*‘the only people who crush someone’s fairytale are evil characters’*) who jilt the women and typically ruin this idea of ‘happy-ever-after’. Consequently, breaking up is constructed as an incident between the perpetrator and the victim, again drawing on a moral discourse within which the men are positioned as the bad, immoral characters or perpetrators of wrongdoing. By constructing the breakdown of relationships as this dichotomy of the perpetrator and the victim the men are unavoidably positioned as the immoral actors as there are only two available positions for each person within the relationship to assume. Consequently, the men are positioned as having done something wrong. On the other hand, the very fact that relationships are referred to as ‘fairytales’ implies that relationships are constructed unrealistically, and so, in ending the relationships, or ‘ruining the fantasy’, the men are only doing what needs to be done; they are providing the women with a more realistic view of relationships much as a parent does with a child when they have to quash fanciful ideas by teaching them some life truths, much like the Father Christmas example previously mentioned. In the extract above John asks rhetorically ‘who wants to crush someone’s fairytale?’ which suggests that ruining the fairytale is not the objective of ending a relationship; men do not want to do it, but rather the implication is reinforced that they have to carry out this unpalatable task.

A discourse of traditional gender roles is invoked again when the men refer to the difference between men and women's ideas about romantic relationships and the conventional ideas and practices that are associated with each sex in terms of relationships. As noted above, women are traditionally understood as more fanciful in relation to love and commitment, particularly in Western cultures. More specifically, conventional understandings of women are that they hold romantic fantasies or ideas of relationships and ultimately hope for one that leads to marriage, children, settling down and living 'happily ever after' with another. It can be said that there is a tension between romantic notions of relationships and the ideas about relationships that are thought to be traditionally characteristic of men within Western cultures, namely that they are hesitant about commitment and not so intent on finding a woman with whom to settle down. Therefore, a tension in relationship ideals is produced. John draws on this gender discourse in the extract above when he alludes to women's aspirations of marriage (*'they'll have already have thought through about where they want their wedding to be'*) and men's lack of such hopes comparatively (*'most guys I come across don't have those thoughts where they want to get married, or what they want to wear when they get married'*). It is because of this gender difference that constructions of ruining the fantasy are produced (*'there's something about crushing that fantasy in the ending it'*).

The construction of an encounter between the good and the bad, or the perpetrator and the innocent victim, is referred to again in the following extract:

*John: I think it's almost quite childlike how...it's like that playground scenario where if you're one of two people and the other one starts crying then you're the baddie.*

*Andrew: I was evil dude because I'd done it.*

John likens the termination of relationships to the childlike playground scenario of one person upsetting another and consequently being positioned as the 'baddie' for doing so, again another metaphor that evokes images of children and childlike behaviour. This image presents a softer version of breaking up compared to the brutality of destroying the woman's fantasy as it conveys a less potent incident that

does not have such catastrophic consequences. However, it still constructs breaking up as enacting some form of wrongdoing with a distressing outcome for the other party involved. The construction of breaking up a relationship as an interaction between the perpetrator and the victim implies a direct conflict between the two parties which constructs the experience as inevitably discordant. In other words, to the men in this study, breaking up is understood as a scenario involving two parties who are fated to oppose each other and subsequently constrains what can be said and done by those involved as there are clearly defined positions for each party to take up. In view of this perpetrator and victim construction, the one who instigates the break-up is inevitably positioned as the perpetrator or the ‘baddie’ as Andrew notes above when he constructs himself as the immoral one for ending the relationship (*‘I was evil dude because I’d done it’*).

### **Causing hurt**

The last theme to be discussed in relation to ‘breaking up as wrongdoing’ focuses on causing hurt. The men in the study constructed themselves as responsible for causing hurt and upset to the women with whom they broke up which in turn constructs the experience of breaking up as a burden and a heavy responsibility, as this extract from John illustrates:

*John: I felt this real burden on my shoulders that I was going to hurt her or that she was going to be hurt [...] I think there was a part of me that felt in ending it I was causing this, it was my fault almost, it was my responsibility almost as if I had the power to ...cause that hurt.*

John’s opening sentence constructs a sense of carrying a weight around with him in relation to hurting his girlfriend and being at fault or responsible to some extent for causing this hurt (*‘I think there was a part of me that felt in ending it I was causing this, it was my fault almost, it was my responsibility almost’*). The use of the terms ‘burden’, ‘fault’ and ‘responsibility’ constructs John’s experience of breaking up as an onerous and weighty experience which altogether provide a negative gloss on the situation. John’s construction of having power implies an ability or capacity as the one who is instigating the break-up to cause hurt to the woman. In terms of agency, John is constructing himself as agentic as he is instigating the end of his

relationship and acting with intention. At the same time John constructs a sense of unwanted agency by constructing the ending, an action that is nonetheless intended, as burdensome. Here agency is constructed as difficult by John as he problematises it. In view of this, agency can be constructed as having to do something that is unpleasant, for example, a parent having to reprimand their child for bad behaviour or indeed crushing a fairytale: it is not enjoyable for the parent but it is their responsibility. The construction of agency positions John as culpable for the consequences of his actions, even if they are unintended and undesirable. By assuming this position of culpability for hurting his girlfriend it can be speculated that he could experience feelings of remorse for his actions.

The next extract from Philip and Dean continues with the idea of causing hurt to the women. In particular, they construct the ending as troubling for them because of the women's resultant emotional upset:

*Philip: I wasn't particularly upset about having to end things [...] what I was upset and what I was nervous about was how she would feel.*

*Dean: I thought at one stage 'shit, she's gonna die here' like she was just, hyperventilating, crying uncontrollably.*

Philip constructs his own break-up experience as unemotional (*'I wasn't particularly upset about having to end things'*) which in the first instance positions him as indifferent. Nonetheless, he then constructs feelings of unease and concern because of the upset that ensues from the woman's perspective (*'what I was upset and what I was nervous about was how she would feel'*) which conveys breaking up as a difficult situation to deal with (to be discussed further later). While it can be said that Philip is positioned as unconcerned in response to ending his relationship, it can be equally argued that he is simultaneously positioned as concerned and decent because of his worry about his girlfriend's well-being. Constructions of causing the women hurt and worrying about their wellbeing echo and mobilise a paternalistic discourse in which the women are positioned as emotionally fragile and vulnerable, almost child-like, and the men are positioned as responsible and authoritative adults who are expected to take care of women. Following on from this, Philip might be

expected to comfort his girlfriend if she becomes distressed. It could also be speculated that he might show an ongoing concern for her wellbeing by continuing to enquire after her from time to time. With regard to Philip's subjective experience it can be speculated that he might feel a sense of responsibility towards his girlfriend. In addition, feelings of anxiety and stress could be made available to Philip because his forthcoming action is likely to upset her. Subsequently, feelings of sympathy towards his girlfriend could also be experienced by Philip upon seeing her upset.

Dean's account of telling his girlfriend that their relationship is over is constructed as traumatic for the woman. More specifically, Dean constructs his experience as having inflicted intense physical suffering on his girlfriend to the point of her health being jeopardised and her life literally being over (*'I thought at one stage 'shit, she's gonna die here' like she was just, hyperventilating, crying uncontrollably'*). Dean states that his girlfriend was crying uncontrollably which produces an image of her having broken down and being utterly inconsolable. As a result, breaking up with a woman is constructed as a grave incident in which physical injury occurs. Therefore, breaking up is constructed as akin to an act of physical aggression which has the potential to injure the victim physically. Dean, therefore, is positioned as the perpetrator of this incident of physical aggression. In this case, however, it can be said that Dean's 'offence' or wrongdoing is constructed as more severe than the other men's because his girlfriend's physical wellbeing is constructed as threatened. This is substantiated by Dean's exclamation of alarm (*'shit, she's gonna die here'*) and so he is positioned as someone committing a particularly injurious act. As with the other men, feelings of guilt are also made available to Dean by this positioning.

### **Breaking up as problematic**

The second theme to be presented relates to how the men in the study constructed breaking up as a problematic situation to manage. More specifically, discursive constructions relating to pressure, burden and making the best out of a bad situation were identified from the men's group discussions and these will now be looked at individually.

### Pressure

As the men discussed their memories it was found that constructions of stress and pressure were especially pertinent in their accounts of breaking up with women. In particular, the situation itself was constructed as difficult to manage as demonstrated by the first extract below:

*Dean: It's impossible to handle.*

*Philip: Yeah, like building up to this, as I said I was walking around in the room, I had the phone and I was like 'Fuck, what am I going to say?'*

*David: It's horrible.*

*Philip: It just makes it horrible.*

Dean constructs breaking up as 'impossible to handle' which suggests impractical circumstances that make dealing with the end of the relationship unfeasible. Philip's recollection of his experience constructs tension as he relates how he was walking around the room preparing for the inevitable and not knowing what to say (*'I was walking around in the room, I had the phone and I was like 'Fuck, what am I going to say?'*). This subsequently produces a sense of uncertainty as to how to manage the situation. In this sense, both Dean and Philip are positioned as being completely at a loss as to how to handle the problematic situation they find themselves in, and, in Philip's case, even at a loss for words (*'I was like 'Fuck, what am I going to say?'*); it is as if they know what they are attempting to achieve yet remain uncertain of how to actually do it. Therefore, it can be said that they are both positioned as having a clear goal but without any idea of how to achieve it. In addition to this, Philip speaks of 'building up' to calling his girlfriend to end the relationship which conveys a process of preparation that leads to a desired climax or conclusion. This build-up also produces a sense of pressure increasing as the conclusion draws nearer which substantiates the notion of breaking up as a stressful event. The joint construction of ending relationships as a 'horrible' set of circumstances by David and Philip also indicates the highly unpleasant nature of the occurrence. Dean's construction of breaking up as impossible to handle, and Philip's constructed uncertainty of how to

go about accomplishing the ending positions them both as rather helpless and in something of a 'no-win' situation. In other words, if breaking up is constructed as impossible to manage, then it denotes a condition in which one cannot benefit or succeed. As a result the men are then also positioned as under much strain and pressure to deal with the circumstances in any way they can. Being positioned in a 'no-win' situation also means that they can refer to these difficult circumstances to defend the means by which they ended their respective relationships. To be more precise, whatever words were used to finish the relationships or whatever approaches were taken can be justified by the men on the basis of being limited by impossible or awkward conditions. The concept of agency can be returned to here. In the extract above the men position themselves as agents with a task to complete under challenging circumstances. In other words, they are required to negotiate the task and do something that entails effort and preparation rather than be passive and wait for something to happen. It is not a spontaneous event that someone else can deal with, it can only be negotiated and completed by the men, and this emphasises their responsibility to act and therefore their agency. Hence, although the men construct the situation as unpleasant and difficult they still position themselves as in charge of this unpleasant situation: so it is not an easy agency.

The construction of pressure continues further as Dean talks of the moment he told his girlfriend that their relationship was over:

*Dean: But I just, there was something inside of me just bursting out so much that I had to say, 'look I can't do this anymore'.*

Dean constructs a kind of force or internal pressure that reached its threshold and as a result compelled him to tell his girlfriend that he could no longer continue with their relationship (*'there was something inside of me just bursting out so much that I had to say, 'look I can't do this anymore''*). The compulsion to end his relationship is seen in his use of his assertion 'I had to say "look, I can't do this anymore"'. By claiming that he 'had' to say that he could no longer continue with their relationship, he suggests that he was forced by the pressure, that it was a necessity. Furthermore, his construction of a force that is 'bursting out' especially conveys a pressure of very high intensity threatening to erupt. This enforces the idea of breaking up being a

particularly problematic and demanding situation which positions Dean as being under high levels of pressure. In terms of the implications for action from a position of being under duress, it is possible that Dean can say or do whatever is likely to alleviate the strain. For example, being in a position of intense pressure means that feelings of tension, desperation and anxiety become available for subjective experience and those in this position are likely to attempt to fend off these generally unpleasant feelings in any way possible. Therefore, it can be speculated that Dean might also experience similar feelings, particularly as his recollection engenders a sense of being exceedingly fraught with pressure (*'something inside of me just bursting out so much'*), and might do whatever he can to rid himself of this tension. Following on from this it can be hypothesised that Dean feels relieved once he has expelled the tension and anxiety and told his girlfriend that the relationship is over.

Dean's construction of an internal pressure compelling him to end his relationship positions Dean as if he has no control over the situation. Within this construction Dean is prompted by this force to act and end his relationship and so he is positioning himself as if he has no agency. This contrasts with the aforementioned construction of agency in relation to the men having to take responsibility for negotiating the problematic task of ending the relationship. Here, Dean is positioned as reactive to the pressure and thus he is not necessarily responsible for his actions. This suggests that agency is something that is constructed in different instances rather than being stable across all situations.

The next extract comes from Andrew who also constructs the experience of terminating a relationship as being under pressure. Specifically, his comment conveys the idea that breaking up with someone is similar to being under threat:

*Andrew: That's fight or flight, isn't it? That's fight or flight syndrome, that is definitely you either, obviously not physically, but it is a fight or flight thing am I going to get there and am I going to bottle it or actually come out and deliver it or not [...] Fight or flight, me walking up and down, going up and down the stairs wondering what ...it's fight or flight [...] with me, mine was like a do or die.*

Constructions of breaking up as a threatening situation are observed here in Andrew's remark when he alludes to the commonly known 'fight or flight syndrome'. Such a response refers to whether one fights or flees (though not necessarily literally) when faced with a threatening situation in order to survive or continue to function. Thus, Andrew constructs breaking up as a threatening and ominous situation in which the choice is to either lose courage and flee from the predicament (*'Am I going to bottle it'*) or to go through with the ending, or 'fight' (*'or actually come out and deliver it'*). The back and forth processes within the extract (*'me walking up and down, going up and down the stairs'*) construct a sense of heightened anxiety and hesitation in relation to approaching the ending, much like Philip describes in the previous extract. Furthermore, as Andrew relates his account of his experience he says 'am I going to get there', which on the one hand, is likely to refer to literally getting to the moment of being face-to-face with his girlfriend, but, on the other, could also be construed as preparing himself or building up to persevere and bring the relationship to its end which also resonates with Philip's account when he speaks of 'building up' to the ending. This particular construction of a fight or flight situation evokes ideas of physical combat quite literally by the reference to *fight* or flight. The back and forth processes in Andrew's account resonate with the idea of 'psyching' oneself up, or preparing physically and mentally for a fight, much as a boxer might do. In addition to this, Andrew's comment 'am I going to deliver it' also evokes associations with physical aggression as 'deliver' can refer to striking someone a blow, delivering a punch. Altogether, these ideas construct breaking up as an act of physical aggression and damage in which one is expected to triumph over the other.

Notions of breaking up as a critical and threatening situation are produced further as Andrew embellishes his experience and employs the hyperbolic phrase 'do or die' to convey the gravity of his situation. The expression 'do or die' implies a potentially fatal situation or conflict in which one is susceptible to dire consequences unless some form of action is taken which further engenders a sense of being at risk and implies high levels of anxiety. Alternatively, it suggests desperate determination or an extreme effort to do something which also produces the act of ending a relationship as an arduous task. In view of both of these meanings, it would seem that

breaking up is constructed by Andrew as particularly perilous and cumbersome situation.

Statements such as ‘fight or flight’ and ‘do or die’ draw on a stress/survival discourse and Cannon’s (1915) model of responding to threatening circumstances which originally stated that animals react to threat by priming themselves to either fight or flee. With this in mind, it can be said that Andrew is positioned as vulnerable and under pressure in terms of how to survive the predicament. Being in such a precarious position requires that a sense of safety be restored; therefore, in terms of practice, Andrew might say or do whatever he can to bring his relationship to an end as quickly as possible and subsequently diminish the pressure and threat. This means that Andrew can be primarily concerned for his well-being rather than his girlfriend’s comfort. High levels of anxiety and even fear or panic can be experienced from a position of vulnerability. In association with this, feelings of urgency and a desire to escape from the threat can also be conjectured in relation to this subject position. Indeed, a wish to escape is the next component of ‘breaking up as problematic’ to be discussed.

### Escape

Since breaking up was constructed as a pressurised situation it is not surprising that the men’s accounts of their experiences also contained constructions of escape. The following extract from John and Paul illustrates these constructions of escape:

*John: It was almost kind of acknowledging the situation but at the same time wanting to get out.*

*Anna: Hmm, yeah, it seemed like an urgency...*

*John: Yes, there was definitely...the theme of escape is very, very ...was you know kind of high on my agenda, even at that situation, even with her crying it was, I want to get out of here, and the longer I stay and be in touch with her crying the longer I’m not escaping.*

*Paul: I just was...[yeah] just, wanna get out [...] therefore, it was a case of 'I want this over with'.*

*Philip: Yeah.*

*Paul: You know you've gotta go through it but you're thinking 'I can't wait for this to be over'.*

In this extract both John and Paul make frequent references to escaping from the situation ('wanting to get out', 'I want to get out of here', 'I want this over with', 'I can't wait for this to be over') which constructs breaking up as an unbearable and constraining situation from which they would like to free themselves. John states that escape was high on his agenda signifying that removing himself from the situation was a priority that was thwarted the longer he stayed with his distressed girlfriend ('the theme of escape [...] was you know kind of high on my agenda[...] the longer I stay and be in touch with her crying the longer I'm not escaping'). The word 'escape' in particular denotes breaking away from peril or threat which, as previously discussed, is how the men constructed their experiences of dissolving their relationships with women. In the extract above, however, it would seem that leaving the situation is not an option as Paul points towards an obligation to endure the experience ('You know you've gotta go through it but you're thinking I can't wait for this to be over'). In this sense, terminating a relationship is constructed as a problematic and disagreeable scenario from which the men would like to absent themselves but are unable to do so because they are bound to stay and 'go through it' according to Paul. This constructs a sense of duty; therefore, the men are positioned as detained in a set of unfavourable circumstances that cannot easily be escaped as they are expected to carry out their duty. By assuming this position of duty the men are required to stay and deal with the breakdown of their relationships directly till its conclusion; they are unable to walk away from the circumstances easily. Furthermore, being positioned as having a duty to carry out implies that the men are required to maintain a sense of resilience to endure the challenge of their duty. It can be speculated then that the men might feel a need to remain tough and in control in order to carry out this responsibility.

### *Making the best out of bad situation*

Up to this point breaking up as a problematic scenario has been constructed as a pressurised situation that generates a desire to escape from the problematic circumstances. 'Making the best out of a bad situation' refers to how the men constructed an attempt to deal with these problematic circumstances as satisfactorily as possible. Again, it is possible to see references to agency within this construction of making the best out of bad situation as the men are constructing themselves as having to manipulate a difficult situation in order to make it easier to manage. Hence, they are positioning themselves as having some control or influence on their circumstances. The first extract is Philip's account of how he endeavoured to facilitate an adequate end to his relationship:

*Philip: It was quite an awkward conversation and she was pissed off as well because I'd been, preceding this I'd been really cold with her, kind of ignoring her a little bit.*

*David: Do you, do you...*

*Dean: Like prepping her.*

*David: Yeah.*

*Philip: In a way yeah, just like that was my way of making it easier when I actually came to end it.*

The problematic nature of breaking up is constructed here again when Philip refers to the 'awkward conversation' he had with his girlfriend. Moreover, Philip states that she was 'pissed off' which together conveys an uncomfortable and difficult exchange between them. Philip speaks of how he had been cold towards his girlfriend by ignoring her prior to finishing his relationship ('preceding this I'd been really cold with her, kind of ignoring her a little bit') and Dean constructs this as a way of 'prepping her', getting her ready for the end so that it is not unexpected. Philip agrees with this and states that the purpose of him ignoring her was to facilitate the ending of the relationship ('that was my way of making it easier when I

*actually came to end it'). His comment suggests an already difficult situation that needs to be made 'easier' and the preparatory stage of ignoring her is constructed as a means making the act of ending the relationship easier. In other words, ignoring her is constructed as the beginning of the dissolution process, as if Philip is weaning her from his affections and the relationship overall. Therefore, it can be said that this initial withdrawal from Philip is constructed as a way of making the best out of bad situation.*

Another way of facilitating the break up of relationships that was constructed by the men in the group discussions was to sugar-coat the truth. This served to make the ending more acceptable to the women with whom they were breaking up. The following extract is a discussion about Philip having said to his girlfriend that they were friends more than they were lovers as his reason for ending their relationship:

*David: When you were talking about friendship, is that, is that how you genuinely felt or is that just something you thought would be a good way of letting her down?*

*Philip: To be honest, the latter. I mean, I did, I did love her um...but yeah, it [...] it's just 'cos I was living in London and she was living in Portsmouth, I was doing my Masters and it was just so, you know every weekend I needed to be doing work and not going down to see her and uh, that was the real reason, it's just more circumstance and, and the whole friendship thing, that was bollocks, I just sort of used that as my line.*

*David: That's a definite point isn't it, I think we kind of think it's an easier way, any kind of line.*

Philip explains that circumstance and work commitments were the reasons for breaking up with his girlfriend (*'I needed to be doing work and not going down to see her and uh, that was the real reason, it's just more circumstance'*) and that the 'friendship thing' was a pretence signified by his statement 'the whole friendship thing, that was bollocks, I just sort of used that as my line'. The use of a 'line' points towards the existence of commonplace clichés and predictable phrases that make up

a form of relationship or dating language, such as ‘it’s not you, it’s me’ and ‘let’s just be friends’. These particular stock phrases serve the purpose of camouflaging the real reasons for ending a relationship as seen in the extract above when Philip uses a version of the latter, i.e. ‘let’s just be friends’, to break up with his girlfriend. David postulates that using a glib line offers an easier and more acceptable means of breaking up (*‘we kind of think it’s an easier way, any kind of line’*); thus, it is a means of making the best of an unpleasant situation. Overall, the truth is constructed as a kind of inconvenience that is preferably evaded. One of the reasons for this is because the truth is constructed as hurtful which then provides a justification for glossing over it with a cliché. The following extract details this further:

*Dean: If they’re confrontational and they’re asking for reasons you don’t wanna hurt their feelings more than you already have [all: yeah] [...] so you just, you go down the cliché-like narrative that you see in Neighbours or Eastenders.*

*Paul: You, you think you’ll mentally scar them if you uh, if you were really truthful.*

*Dean: It hurts.*

*David: Yeah, the truth hurts.*

Dean’s comment constructs an unwillingness to give women genuine reasons for finishing the relationship for fear of causing them more hurt (*‘If they’re confrontational and they’re asking for reasons you don’t wanna hurt their feelings more than you already have’*). Subsequently, modes of communication that are characteristic of popular television shows, such as clichés and other trite sayings, provide an avenue for evading the possibility of further distress (*‘so you just, you go down the cliché-like narrative that you see in Neighbours or Eastenders’*). The men continue jointly to construct the truth as hurtful (*‘the truth hurts’*) to the point of mentally hurting the women if they were to give genuine reasons for splitting up (*‘you think you’ll mentally scar them if you uh, if you were really truthful’*). Constructions of ‘mental scarring’ as a consequence of relationship dissolution evoke

a psychological discourse which enables the men to account for disguising the truth with trite sayings; in other words, by making use of clichés they can argue that they are preventing psychological damage. In view of this, it can be said that the men are positioned as decent and considerate of the women's well-being. Alternatively, it can also be contended that the men are positioned as slightly deceitful because they are mitigating the truth which is at odds with being positioned as decent. However, it is precisely because the men mitigate the truth that the position of decency and consideration is applicable here: they construct a disinclination to be entirely honest for good reason. This resonates with how the men previously constructed themselves as moral agents; here they are employing popular sayings and clichés to alleviate any possible distress that might occur as a result of breaking up the relationship. In view of this, the men can claim that they are acting with good intentions and also assert that it is legitimate to lie because it serves a purpose. It can be speculated that feelings of apprehension could be experienced by the men in relation to how the women will react upon hearing that the relationship is over; however, it could also be hypothesised that the men could feel a sense of relief at accomplishing the end in a way that does not make an already problematic situation worse.

### **Breaking up as work to be done**

The next discursive construction to be presented relates to how the men's accounts of terminating their respective relationships contained ideas associated with an occupational discourse and the world of work. In particular, much of the terminology that the men used to construct their break-up experiences referred to order, practicality and objectivity, terms which are relevant to being business-minded and doing one's job and this subsequently constructed breaking up with women as an occupational task or as work to be done. The first sub-theme will now be discussed.

### **A methodical process**

During the men's discussions the dissolution of relationships with women was constructed as a pragmatic affair in which logic and order prevailed. The following extract comes from Andrew which illustrates this idea:

*Andrew: I've spent a lot of time trying to justify it [...] as to why, my reason and my logics [...] we look at it objectively, [...] so you're analysing and weighing up the pros and cons of what it is you're actually doing.*

Andrew begins by saying that he spent a lot of time deliberating his reasons for ending his relationship indicating an important decision that requires considerable thought. More specifically, he remarks that he spent time 'trying to justify it' which constructs relationship dissolution as something that requires a legitimate explanation or substantiating with a valid reason. This subsequently constructs the breakdown of a relationship as a somewhat official matter with formal procedures in place; this resonates with an occupational setting. In particular, Andrew's statement above also contains several terms that produce a methodical approach to breaking up. Firstly, he refers to his 'reason' and his 'logics' for ending his relationship which constructs a prudent and systematic decision-making process. Andrew then continues by claiming that men take an objective and analytical view when it comes to ending relationships by specifically identifying the advantages and disadvantages of their decision ('*we look at it objectively [...] so you're analysing and weighing up the pros and cons*'). Weighing up the pros and cons in particular suggests a systematic evaluation of one's decision which substantiates the construction of relationship dissolution as a methodical process. In addition to this, it invokes notions of rationality and a lack of bias as both the positive and negative aspects are considered rather than settling on an initial decision.

The following extract conveys the construction of breaking up as a methodical process further. The first part of the extract is a section from Neal's written memory of ending his relationship and it continues with Andrew and John's comments about Neal's account (see Appendix for the verbatim memory):

Within a few moments he began speaking.

"Listen, I think we have had our moments, but I think we are moving too fast. It's only been 7 months and you are already doing stuff as if we are married. You look through my phone and drawers and question everyone I speak to. I think we should take a few steps back and cool off."

*Andrew: In your narrative the first few moments when you began speaking[...] you've systematically gone through and said we're moving too fast for seven months, you could almost bullet-point it, list it...it's not about I've fallen out of love with you, sorry I don't want to be with you, it's... [Laughter]*

*John: It's almost a PowerPoint presentation! [Laughter]*

Notions of taking a methodical approach to the ending of a relationship are constructed here again by Andrew and John as they describe Neal's organised delivery of his reasons for breaking up with his girlfriend. In particular, Andrew notes that the reasons pertaining to the end of the relationship were not in relation to Neal's feelings about his girlfriend (*'it's not about I've fallen out of love with you, sorry I don't want to be with you'*) but rather a list of concrete reasons as to why the relationship is no longer working (*'I think we are moving too fast [...] you are already doing stuff as if we are married. You look through my phone and drawers and question everyone I speak to'*). Andrew states that Neal could 'almost bullet-point it' which constructs Neal's experience of ending his relationship as a systematic process of giving a prepared and organised list of reasons or items that need to be made in order to get a point across. John picks up on this by light-heartedly constructing Neal's delivery as similar to a PowerPoint presentation which draws on a work-related discourse. It evokes images of individuals making use of a technological resource in order to present or sell an idea to a wider audience in an organised fashion. Therefore, it can be said that the discursive resources in the above extract support the construction of relationship dissolution as a methodical process involving organisation and structure.

The next extract from Philip also contains constructions of logic and order as he talks about considering the end of his relationship with his girlfriend:

*Philip: I kind of ranked things in priority and she was like right down the bottom so mentally I just blocked it out and it was, there wasn't much emotion to be honest when I actually came round to doing it.*

Philip constructs a sense of orderliness here as he states that he ranked aspects of his life according to their priority levels (*'I kind of ranked things in priority'*). A consequence of this was that his girlfriend was categorised as a very low priority (*'she was like right down the bottom'*) which enabled him to 'block' the relationship out of his mind and approach the end without much emotion (*'there wasn't much emotion to be honest when I actually came round to doing it'*). Ranking and prioritising items entails assessing the importance of each one and attending to them accordingly; therefore, Philip's relationship is constructed as something of less significance owing to its low ranking which subsequently enables him to end his relationship without emotion. In other words it is possible for him to legitimise the end of his relationship because it is at the bottom of his agenda. Hence, Philip constructs a pragmatic and methodical approach to the end of the relationship by producing a hierarchy of his priorities and acting correspondingly.

The extracts above illustrate how the men constructed the break up of their relationships as a methodical process involving objectivity and common-sense. Constructions of systematic decision-making and pragmatism resonate with a work-related/occupational discourse and the management of work-related affairs. For example, taking an objective outlook and remaining emotionally detached when making important decisions are fundamental aspects of managing business and doing one's job effectively in order to ensure success and the achievement of goals without being emotionally swayed. Similarly, an evaluation of the pros and cons of one's judgment, as per Andrew's comment, is also closely associated with a position of having a job to do or managing a business as it enables one to identify what is believed to be the best option and to reap the greatest benefit. Locating the men's constructions of relationship dissolution within the wider discourse of the world of work and business constructs intimate relationships as formal arrangements between people. Furthermore, constructions of intimate relationships that draw on a work discourse emphasise the practical aspect of relationships such as decision-making and negotiating finances which contrasts with the common-sense understanding of intimate relationships that often draws on a romantic discourse. In this context, and especially within Western cultures, relationships are commonly associated with ideas of love, such as being 'head over heels in love' or smitten with someone, displays of affection and emotion and making commitments to one another including

cohabitation and marriage. Nonetheless, relationships can also be constructed as practical agreements, particularly those that are arranged or for matters of convenience. This discourse of relationships contrasts with ideas commonly associated with a romantic discourse of relationships as it tends to restrict or even avoid courtship and does not invoke ideas of falling in love with one another, particularly in the case of arranged marriages which are usually decided on by older family members (Ghimire, Axinn, Yabiku & Thornton 2006). Furthermore, these relationships are often forged on the basis of religion, the wealth of those involved and social reputation (Hussain, 1999). Similarly, marriages of convenience sidestep any kind of courtship as they are generally entered into for practical reasons or strategic purposes, such as citizenship. These two distinct discourses of relationships make different positions and corresponding practices available to those who draw on them, something that will be discussed further now in relation to the men's constructions of their break up experiences.

Constructing relationship dissolution as a methodical process and invoking a work discourse positions the men as pragmatic and objective individuals with a job to do effectively. Thus, they are positioned as responsible for carefully considering the various options and the consequent advantages and disadvantages so that a conclusion based on rational thought and 'good business sense' can be achieved. Furthermore, it can be said that the men are in a position of authority as they are making the executive decision over the status of the relationship much as a business manager might decide to dissolve a business partnership. In relation to this, the women are positioned as subordinates whose place in the partnership is determined by the men. This invokes a patriarchal discourse again; here the men are positioned as having authority over the women. Having a job entails holding certain responsibilities and ensuring one's behaviour is professional and in keeping with one's remit. In addition to this, maintaining a job can entail performing certain tasks that are personally disagreeable yet necessary in the occupational context and therefore involves preventing personal feelings from influencing the decision-making process. An example of this might be a lecturer failing a student for producing an unsatisfactory piece of coursework; the lecturer may find the process personally difficult yet also understand that it is their professional responsibility to make such assessments of student work. It is their job and their position that licenses them to

say and do certain things. Therefore, how individuals speak, act and relate to others at work may differ from how they behave outside of work, for example, conversing with friends, owing to the set of expectations and obligations related to each context.

In light of this, it is possible that the men could argue that it was their job to end their relationships as they made a fair assessment of the situation by considering all factors involved including the advantages and disadvantages of the relationship. Hence, the men could possibly argue that by ending their relationships they were acting sensibly and appropriately. Subsequently, the men might feel that they made the 'right' decision for themselves as they processed their decision methodically and chose the option that made the most business sense. Drawing on a work discourse also opens up the opportunity for the men to think for themselves in relation to their own satisfaction and how they are benefiting from the relationship, much as a worker would consider their own job satisfaction, or a manager would think about the interests of his business when making important decisions. Following on from this, it can be said that the men could avoid being persuaded by emotions such as guilt or sadness because the ending is constructed as a formality, or a job, that is in their interests to be achieved. By contrast, if the men drew on a romantic discourse to construct their break-up experiences, for example, by talking about 'the one that got away', regret or lost love, it is conceivable that feelings of sadness and loss could be experienced. Therefore, it can be said that a work discourse enables the men to adopt a position of being more hard-headed and to proceed directly with the ending rather than wavering over their decision. In addition to this point, being positioned as business-like and responsible for their own interests also does not necessarily require that the men take responsibility for the welfare of their girlfriends. Consequently, possibilities for subjective experience are that the men might not feel a need to worry about the women's wellbeing but rather feel a sense of detachment.

### **Cost-effectiveness**

The sub-theme of cost-effectiveness refers to how some of the men constructed relationships, and subsequently the ending of them, as business partnerships that warranted dissolution if the men did not profit from them. The sub-theme of cost-effectiveness also relates to how a sense of ruthlessness was constructed when it

came to considering continuing with the relationship and actually carrying out the ending. The extract that follows is from Paul:

*I'd say I'd be slightly more ruthless, if mine isn't going anywhere I'd cut it out, there's a really nice girl at work but I know it's not gonna go anywhere so I don't bother unless it's gonna be all totally be on my terms.*

Paul constructs himself as 'ruthless' by saying that he would discontinue with a relationship that has no potential to develop, particularly through his use of the words 'cut it out'. This evokes notions of eliminating something, or in this case someone, rather abruptly and harshly on the basis of there being no possibilities for progress. In view of this, it can be said that Paul constructs a relationship as a form of investment which is worth withdrawing from if the possibility for profit is doubtful. Such a construction resonates with an economic discourse. By drawing on this discourse and constructing himself as ruthless Paul legitimises his decision to 'cut' the relationship out because it is in his interest to bring it to an end if it is not working, much like an investor or capitalist would terminate a deal that brings no return. Paul continues with this idea of ruling out relationships that are unlikely to progress into anything significant by talking about a woman at work whom he describes as 'a really nice girl' but he declines to get involved with her as 'it's not gonna go anywhere'. This again resonates with the idea of assessing the potential of a partnership or a business deal before investing in it. Paul then goes on to stipulate that unless the relationship is on his terms he does not bother getting involved with anyone (*'I don't bother unless it's gonna be all totally on my terms'*). Here, Paul constructs a relationship as a contract between two people that contains a set of terms and conditions which are specified by him and him alone. Therefore, the relationship is constructed as a business arrangement. His use of the words 'all totally on my terms' constructs an all-or-nothing situation which positions him as having the upper-hand over the relationship and the woman is positioned as the subordinate in relation to him. Moreover, it can be said that Paul is constructing a practical, cost-effective approach by ruling out relationships that do not satisfy his stipulation and do not produce an optimum result (actually developing into something meaningful) in relation to his investment.

In the extract above Paul is positioned as a prudent individual who is looking after his own interests by cutting out the relationships that are unlikely to move forward. Assuming this position of prudence means that Paul can terminate unrewarding relationships without unease and that he can justify the ending according to the aforementioned condition. It can also be said that by taking up a position of expediency Paul could argue that he is acting responsibly on both his behalf and the woman's by terminating a relationship that has no future. In other words, he can claim that he is saving both himself and the woman continuing with a pointless investment. Paul also assumes a position of authority by emphasising that unless a relationship is completely on his terms he will not bother to get involved. Assuming such a position allows him to maintain a sense of control in terms of which relationships he becomes involved in.

The next extract from Philip continues with the theme of cost-effectiveness as he recalls the time he ended his relationship:

*Philip: Like with me, maybe it was a bit of a cop-out doing it on the phone, but that made it easier that I was like, phone down, deed done, never speak to her again.*

Philip speaks of how he might have shirked some responsibility by ending his relationship on the phone when he refers to it as a 'cop-out'; however, breaking up with his girlfriend over the phone afforded him some efficiency (*'that made it easier'*) in that he was able to end the conversation, and ultimately the relationship, by simply putting the phone down (*'I was like, phone down, deed done, never speak to her again'*). Furthermore, Philip constructs breaking up as a 'deed' which has varying meanings that can be associated with a business discourse. For example, a 'deed' can refer to either an action or work to be completed or to an official settlement between people. Hence, the term 'deed' constructs the breakdown of a relationship as a formal act or transaction that is befitting relationships between those in the business context. As a result Philip is positioned as someone who is tied to another by a formal arrangement and is subsequently managing his stake in the partnership, and his own interests, by withdrawing from it or cutting it out. Thus, he is positioned as an economical individual. By using discursive constructions

associated with a business and economic discourse to describe his experience and by positioning himself accordingly, Philip, like Paul, can legitimise the termination of his relationship and claim that he acted pragmatically. Philip's final sentence, 'phone down, deed done, never speak to her again' comprises three succinct statements that construct his experience of dissolving his relationship as a brusque yet straightforward occurrence. It can be said that Philip's account resonates somewhat with Paul's construction of ruthlessness as he too is cutting the woman out conclusively (*'never speak to her again'*). The use of this three-part list of short statements also emphasises the finality of the ending and convinces Philip's listeners of the uncomplicated manner in which the 'deed' is accomplished.

### **A clinical approach**

The final sub-theme of 'breaking up as work to be done' relates to how the men constructed a need to take a clinical approach to ending their intimate relationships as this served the purpose of distancing themselves from the situation and from the women's distress. The first extract comes from a discussion between John and Andrew:

*John: It's almost like when you're ...thinking about the acts of saying this is over, you almost need to force yourself into this clinical state of mind [Anna: right] to avoid the reality of how much this might hurt someone, or how much you might be contributing to this person feeling distraught or bad or being hurt... [Anna: Hmm, yeah].*

*Andrew: But you have to take a very clinical approach to it, I totally agree, if not you're just persuaded.*

*John: Yeah, my only other thought is that perhaps I've had to take on...or I've taken on a more clinical way of looking at things or a more clinical way of being when I'm thinking of the act of ending it, because I'm not usually clinical, I'm usually you know a nice guy and therefore it's not a nice guy who's going to do that, it's as if I can almost displace my character into this clinical frame of mind, this clinical being, the clinical person can almost put*

*the knife in or cause that hurt [Anna: okay] [...] you know that's not really me but that's the easiest way of doing it [Anna: right]*

John constructs a 'clinical state of mind' as a necessary condition for telling the woman that the relationship is over, so necessary that one needs to coerce oneself to take on this frame of mind (*'you almost need to force yourself into this clinical state of mind'*). A 'clinical state of mind' constructs a sense of detachment and objectivity and John continues by saying that such a frame of mind avoids the reality of the hurt that could be caused by him ending the relationship; hence, he is constructing a way of distancing himself from the situation and the pain that might result. Constructions of being clinical and distancing oneself from a situation that is likely to produce pain or distress also resonate with a medical discourse. For example, a medical professional such as a surgeon performs invasive and painful physical procedures and operations on patients in order to treat them; however, in order to do their job efficiently it is likely that a surgeon will adopt a detached frame of mind and remain objective so as to tolerate the invasiveness of such procedures and possible pain that could ensue. Therefore, it is a way of managing the situation and it can be said that John's construction of a clinical approach may serve a similar function.

Andrew supports John's comments as he also constructs a clinical approach to ending a relationship as essential by stating that 'you have to take a very clinical approach'. He does not say that you 'can' or that it is 'possible' to take a clinical approach, but rather that you 'have to' which signifies that it is imperative. Andrew continues by remarking that not taking a clinical approach means 'you're just persuaded'. What exactly Andrew means here is not entirely clear; however, it is possible that he is suggesting that without adopting a clinical stance it is possible to be swayed by other influences such as the woman's distress. This resonates again with the notion that a clinical frame of mind enables oneself to detach somewhat from what one is doing and remain objective and pragmatic in order to achieve the task at hand effectively.

It was previously noted that within a work discourse people are obligated to perform certain duties that might not be personally agreeable yet they have to complete these tasks because their position requires them to: it is their job. Therefore,

there can be differences in how one might behave within a work context compared to a social context because each context contains corresponding practices and speaking rights. In the extract above, John's statement resembles this idea as he constructs a sense of transforming himself from a 'nice guy' to a 'clinical being' that opposes his usual character (*'I'm usually you know a nice guy and therefore it's not a nice guy who's going to do that'*). He then specifically states that this clinical persona 'can almost put the knife in or cause that hurt'; therefore, this transformation serves the purpose of enabling John to carry out the ending straightforwardly (*'but that's the easiest way of doing it'*). John constructs the ending of a relationship as a particularly unkind and wounding act by using the idiom, 'to put the knife in'. As a result, breaking up is constructed as not only doing something highly unpleasant to another, but also doing it in a hurtful way. On the one hand, it can be said that this relates to the previously discussed position of the perpetrator and a moral discourse as John is positioning himself as this clinical being who can 'put the knife in'. On the other hand, it can be equally argued that John has to do something unpleasant and he constructs a way, i.e. transforming himself into a clinical being, to achieve this. Once more, this construction evokes a medical discourse and images of medical professionals conducting unpleasant procedures, particularly those who perform invasive procedures. For example, a surgeon does literally 'put the knife in' when performing an operation on a patient; however, within a medical discourse this is sanctioned and considered appropriate practice because it is the surgeon's responsibility, it is their job to carry out such a procedure. Therefore, within a medical discourse John is positioned as having an obligation to enact something unpleasant yet necessary and assuming a clinical stance enables him to do his job.

The final extract relating to 'a clinical approach' is again between John and Andrew when they are discussing Andrew's account of having terminated his relationship:

*John: It's almost like he needed to be clinical in order to get the job done.*

*Andrew: Yes, the emotion was still there definitely and the upset and the what's going on, blah, blah, blah...but if I'd have sat there and gone with my emotions I'd probably have begged forgiveness and all the rest of it, and still*

*six months down the line not have ended up where I ended up...so I had to be clinical about it.*

*John: Almost, I need to be clinical to end it for good or to end it at that point.*

Constructions of a clinical approach as a necessity continue in this extract when John asserts that Andrew ‘needed to be clinical’ in order to break up with his girlfriend or, to be more precise, ‘to get the job done’. Here, the construction of breaking up as work to be done is suitably apt as John refers to it as a ‘job’ that has to be completed. Andrew concurs with John and also constructs the clinical approach as a precondition for ending his relationship (*‘I had to be clinical about it’*) as it warded off the possibility of his emotions influencing his decision (*‘if I’d have sat there and gone with my emotions I’d probably have begged forgiveness [...] and still six months down the line not have ended up where I ended up’*). This corresponds with the ideas previously discussed concerning the need to remain rational and to put personal feelings aside when making decisions within an occupational context. In this sense, Andrew constructs emotions as undesirably tempting and influential as they would have led him to a different set of circumstances, such as still being in the relationship six months later rather than ending the relationship at that moment. John supports this notion by remarking that Andrew needed to be clinical ‘to end it for good or to end it at that point’. Thus, taking a clinical approach to ending a relationship is warranted as it enabled Andrew to conclude the relationship definitively.

The extract above particularly draws attention to the different discourses associated with relationships. On the one hand, relationships can be understood as formal arrangements involving practicality and objectivity, particularly when making important decisions such as buying a property together or making other financial investments that are mutually beneficial to both parties. In this sense, both a work/business and economic discourse are called upon to construct intimate relationships. On the other hand, notions of love, devotion, the institution of marriage, particularly within Western cultures, and ‘till death do us part’ all produce an idealistic understanding of intimate relationships that draw on a romantic discourse. Practices that pertain to this discourse often relate to romantic gestures,

such as the giving of flowers and gifts, but also showing a concern for the other's wellbeing, celebrating Valentine's Day, proposals of marriage and marking anniversaries, which in turn reinforce the romantic discourse of intimate relationships. Hence, there is a clear contrast between these two discourses of intimate relationships as one has associations with pragmatic decision-making and rational thought and the other often involves practices and ideas that can be understood as almost surrendering rational thought and fulfilling a desire or acting in accordance with one's emotions. This contrast can be observed in the extract above as Andrew notes that, if he had 'gone with' his emotions, he would have begged his girlfriend for forgiveness, suggesting a moment of remorse and needing to be let off by her owing to some form of fault or distress that he might have caused. A romantic discourse is evoked here as Andrew speaks of how he would have attempted to make amends with his girlfriend and restore a unity between them, a practice that can be related to showing a concern for the other and indeed the relationship overall. By comparison, the extract then refers to the constructed clinical frame of mind that is required which, in Andrew's case, closed down the opportunity to act in accordance with any emotion and make amends and instead allowed him to stick to his decision and finish the relationship immediately. Consequently, Andrew constructs a way of being that was necessary for him to complete his objective much as a businessman or worker would do in order to carry out their job as previously discussed.

Within a medical discourse Andrew and John are positioned as responsible for conducting a serious and potentially distressing procedure and they assume a clinical and objective perspective accordingly. As a result of taking up a position that offers a clinical perspective, it is possible that John and Andrew could finish their relationships without becoming subjectively entangled in the process. In other words, constructions of ending relationships in a clinical manner could allow for the two men to maintain an emotional distance from the situation. In addition to this, it is possible that Andrew and John could contend that they *had* to be detached from the situation so as to facilitate the effective completion of their 'work'. In other words, they could both argue that they were merely fulfilling a duty. In terms of the implications for subjective experience, it can be speculated that by taking up a detached position and constructing the ending of a relationship as a job to be done Andrew and John can finish the relationship with a clear conscience. Feelings of

guilt might not necessarily be experienced in this instance as being positioned according to constructions associated with work and doing a job require that one fulfils one's responsibilities no matter what and a clinical frame of mind arguably facilitates this. Therefore, it can be said that feelings of stoicism might be available instead upon taking this position or even feelings of pride in a 'job well done'.

## Discussion

The discussion will be divided into three main sections: theoretical insights, methodological implications and applications to the practice of counselling psychology. The results of the study will be discussed in relation to each section and the research questions set out at the beginning of the study will be considered specifically in the sections regarding theoretical insights and applications to practice. The discussion will conclude with some of the researcher's final reflections on having completed this study.

### Theoretical insights

This section will focus on relating the findings of the study to the first two research questions that the study sought to answer. These were:

1. How do men construct the dissolution of a committed, intimate relationship?
2. What positions are made available by these constructions?

The various constructions and subject positions that emerged from the men's memories and group discussions will be discussed first. Following on from this the different discourses that were mobilised by the men in their break up accounts and the consequences of utilising such discourses will be considered. Throughout the discussion the findings will also be considered in relation to the existing literature and research that has been discussed so far.

The dissolution of romantic relationships with women was constructed by the men in this study as a form of wrongdoing, as problematic and as work to be done. Several discourses were drawn upon including the discourse of morality, patriarchy, paternalism, romance and work/business which consequently offered various subject positions for the men to occupy. These ranged from a position of pragmatism, a guilty perpetrator, being under pressure and a figure of authority (parent) with responsibility and obligations. The first two constructions, breaking up as wrongdoing and as problematic, described the dissolution of relationships generally as difficult and demanding. Feelings of guilt and high levels of anxiety were referred to in association to these constructions and consequently the men were positioned

somewhat unfavourably and under challenging circumstances such as being guilty for a transgression and having to do something disagreeable. The third construction that was identified, breaking up as work to be done, represented how the men constructed a way of managing the situation: by seeing it as work to be done and thus taking a clinical and objective approach to it. It also engendered a sense of the men doing something constructive for themselves and also for the good of the women; in other words, the one who sees no future in the relationship is ultimately saving the other further distress if they were to remain as a couple but separate later on. These different constructions certainly emphasise the numerous ways that one event can be understood with no one version being correct.

In terms of how the men were positioned, it has been demonstrated that some of the subject positions when constructing their experiences of breaking up with women were difficult to reject. An example of this can be identified if we revisit the construction of breaking up as wrongdoing. Constructions of a sense of considerable guilt were closely bound with the men being positioned as perpetrators of an offence, yet further discussion on the matter opened up the alternative construction of breaking up as productive and as an act of integrity which evidently differs from constructions of guilt and having perpetrated an immoral act. Hence, two contrasting positions became available. A third position, that being the repentant sinner, reconciled these two contrasting positions as it enabled a way out, or a solution to the pejorative position of having perpetrated some form of wrongdoing for which one would feel guilty. It was noted during the analysis of the men's discussions that constructions of guilt and wrongdoing overshadowed the legitimate reasons that led to the break up of the men's relationships. It is worth then considering why the dominant construction of guilt and the subsequent positioning of the men as guilty, or as a repentant sinner, seem unavoidable. Consideration of commonplace understandings of relationships and their demise might shed some light on this matter. It has already been identified that relationships of an intimate kind are likely to be understood or constructed according to a romantic discourse and as a result of this, ideas and practices surrounding love, emotion and commitment are evoked. In view of this, ordinary understandings of two people breaking up are frequently associated with heartache and loss, at least to one half of the relationship, which subsequently calls upon sympathetic statements from others. This of course does not

necessarily refer to those instances when a couple mutually dissolve their relationship. Indeed, the very phrase 'to break up' literally refers to the severing of a tie between two people; the relationship is 'broken' and has come to an end engendering sadness and a sense of loss. Since the dissolution of intimate relationships is often associated with these very ideas it follows that the one who instigates the end is likely to be recognised as responsible for causing any resultant distress. This might account for the overwhelming sense of guilt that was constructed by the men: it can be said that they were constrained by prevalent discourses of breaking up and thus unavoidably positioned as the guilty party. In light of the above, it is possible to suggest that relationship breakdown as a beneficial change in circumstances, or as having acted responsibly and sincerely, are less dominant discourses in comparison to everyday understandings of heartbreak and loss. On the other hand, alternative discourses of relationship dissolution such as these would open up other positions, more helpful positions even, to those involved. This demonstrates how discourses, in this case the discourse of relationships and relationship dissolution, constrain people to certain subject positions that are made available (Willig, 1999) and thus they are not easily avoided, a notion which will be elaborated on later.

Another example of the divergence between subject positions can be seen when constructions of breaking up as work to be done are compared with both constructions of breaking up as problematic and as wrongdoing. It has already been emphasised that the men's accounts engendered a strong sense of guilt but in addition to this, both breaking up as problematic and as wrongdoing contained various constructions of anxiety in relation to causing the women harm and quashing their hopes for their future. This subsequently positioned the men as considerate and sensitive individuals, which stands in contrast to how the men were positioned according to the construction of breaking up as work to be done. If we revisit this construction, notions of objectivity, systematic processing, pragmatism, ruthlessness and being obligated to complete a task were identified within the men's recollections of terminating their relationships which altogether evoked an occupational/business discourse. More specifically, constructing the ending of a romantic relationship as a job to be done efficiently, and indeed constructing relationships themselves as business partnerships, entailed the closing down of emotions and adopting a more

clinical approach in order to complete the task successfully. Notions of objectivity and level-headedness contrast with emotional sensitivity and consideration for others; this emphasises the varying ways in which the experience of breaking up can be constructed. To be more precise, in one instance the men convey apprehension and thoughtfulness in relation to the women's emotional wellbeing, and in another they adopt a position of having only their own interests in mind and cutting off relationships without hesitation. Therefore, two diverse constructions of breaking up are highlighted which consequently shape the experiences in different ways and offer various positions and possibilities for subjectivity.

In addition to the multiple constructions of breaking up it is also relevant to refer back to the issue of positioning and the notion of multiple selves. As we have seen, the men in this study occupied varying positions in their constructed experiences of ending their relationships. This shifting between the various positions that were made available corroborates the idea of numerous selves rather than a self that is fixed and stable across all contexts. The process of positioning can be intentional, inadvertent and even resisted (Burr, 2003; Harré et al., 2009), and some of the positions that the men occupied in their accounts can be considered in relation to this process. Intentional positioning occurs when the self is deliberately positioned, and it is thought that this is often because the individual has a goal they wish to achieve (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). With this in mind, it became apparent that in their constructions of breaking up as work to be done some of the men deliberately positioned themselves as clinical as this facilitated the accomplishment of ending their relationships without being emotionally swayed. Intentional positioning can also refer to instances where the individual is forced into a position, and this often requires the involvement of another (Harré & van Langenhove). Harré and van Langenhove give the example of one person asking after another person's general wellbeing to show that the 'forced aspect can be very mild' (p.26) but yet still requires one person to coerce the other into responding and thus assume a particular position. This notion of forced self-positioning can be applicable to the seemingly 'forced' position of the guilty perpetrator. This position was virtually unavoidable, perhaps owing to the dominant discourse of breaking up that was described earlier, and remarks that questioned this position from the men suggested that this position was unwelcome because justifiable reasons for instigating the end of the relationship

were claimed. This implies that this position was not deliberate. Furthermore, it can be contended that the guilty perpetrator position was assumed because the obvious involvement of the women in the ending of the relationship forced the men into this position. More specifically, the distressed reaction that the women exhibited, which many of the men described in their accounts, no doubt forced the men into the guilty position. These two examples of intentional (deliberate and forced) positioning of the men demonstrate not only the changeability of subject positions that a person can assume but also the different processes that can occur within the positioning process itself.

During the group discussions of their accounts, the men mobilised many discourses which resonate with the traditional male gender role and conventional norms of masculinity. Two discourses, in particular, that were invoked by the men were patriarchy and paternalism when discussing their accounts of breaking up. Both of these discourses were invoked when the men spoke of ‘ruining the fairytale’ – a metaphor that was used by the men to construct women’s ideas about relationships – which positioned them as figures of authority in comparison to the women who were positioned as naïve and fanciful. Thus, the men were located as powerful and dominant over the women. The discourse of paternalism in particular positioned the men as having to parent the women somewhat by quashing their fantastical ideas of relationships and breaking off their attachment. Consequently, the men were enacting an obligation to introduce a more realistic view of the world, specifically relating to relationships, to the women. By assuming this position of the parent the men were only doing ‘what they had to do’ and so they could claim that they were acting legitimately and responsibly. Both a patriarchal and paternalistic discourse resonate with the traditional male gender role and dominant masculine ideals of maintaining a sense of control and dominance demonstrating that conventional understandings of men are still alive in the present day (cf. Seidler, 1991). In light of this the women with whom the men were breaking up were also constructed according to traditional gendered discourses. As noted above, the women were positioned as childlike and naïve individuals who fostered idealistic notions of relationships with men which drew on a romantic discourse. This included preparing for marriage and references to happily-ever-after endings. This romantic discourse that the men invoked when discussing the women resonates with Hollway’s (1989) gendered *have and hold*

discourse that she found to be predominantly typical of women's talk of relationships. This referred to traditional concepts of love, romance and commitment which are consistent with the ideas that the men constructed as characteristic of their girlfriends, e.g. thinking about the location of their wedding. In contrast to this, the men alluded to the fact that thinking about the future of the relationship in terms of marriage was not a central concern for them. So what becomes apparent here is that the traditional gender roles of men and women are still upheld by the men's use of gendered discourses to construct their break up experiences.

A work/business discourse was invoked when the men constructed breaking up as work to be done. Within this discourse the men were positioned as pragmatic and rational individuals with a job to complete. In order to achieve this they constructed a clinical approach in which feelings were closed down so that they were not emotionally swayed. Objectivity, stoicism and pragmatism are qualities associated with the hegemonic discourse of masculinity and what is commonly expected of the traditional man: one who restricts his emotional expression, keeps his cool and remains rational. Similarly, employment has been found to be fundamental to establishing masculine identity (Morgan, 1992; Collinson & Hearn, 2004; Brandth & Kvande, 1998; Rochlen, Suizzo, McKelley & Scaringi, 2008); so the men's mobilisation of a work discourse, as well as the hegemonic ideals of objectivity and stoicism, suggests that the men were constructing themselves according to established and customary discourses of masculinity. In this sense, the men were positioning themselves as having work to do which entailed having responsibility and obligation, even if it meant having to do something that was not desirable, it was their job; breaking up was constructed as a job to be done. Notions of having responsibility and duties to do that are not always pleasant overlap with the ideas associated with a paternalistic discourse. As previously noted, the position of a parent often involves having to be strict with children and having to do things that might displease them initially yet are ultimately necessary; they are being cruel to be kind. In addition to this, a clinical approach may then be required as a parent so that responsibilities can be carried out. Both the work and paternalistic discourse therefore entail obligation, authority and a lack of emotional influence. Therefore, the traditional idea of men being the ones to work and hold responsibility is privileged.

Existing research has proposed that the expression of emotion is not typical of men and masculinity (Levant et al., 1992; O'Neil, Good & Holmes, 1995; Levant, 1998; Jansz, 2000) which has led to the development of the concept of alexithymia (Sifneos, 1988; Fischer & Good, 1997). The findings from this study, however, indicated that the men did construct themselves as emotional beings as several instances were found when an emotion discourse was invoked. For example, the men constructed feelings of guilt, anxiety, pressure and a concern for the women's wellbeing when discussing their experiences of breaking up. It is particularly noteworthy that these emotions that were constructed are those that can be associated with vulnerability, an emotional state that has been especially emphasised as non-masculine and a threat to masculinity (Siegel & Alloy, 1990; Eisler, 1995; Mahalik et al., 2003). Guilt can be associated with vulnerability because it signifies feeling remorse for doing or saying something wrong or immoral which can then lead to being reprimanded or castigated, and even to negative evaluation from others. Similarly, the feelings of anxiety and pressure constructed by the men convey a sense of uncertainty and unease which oppose conventional masculine ideals of stoicism and maintaining a sense of control and keeping one's cool. Therefore, anxiety and pressure can be associated with vulnerability too. Concern for the women's wellbeing was quite a dominant construction in the men's accounts; they referred to her distressed response to the break up as something that was problematic and so mitigating the truth in relation to reasons for ending the relationship was preferred. Constructions of concern for the women's welfare allude to sensitivity and resonate with the New Man (Billig, 1987) who is caring and understanding of women's needs. Collectively, the feelings that were constructed by the men could all be associated with vulnerability and so the men were flouting traditional masculine discourses and presenting themselves as emotionally expressive. This challenges the ideas of previous research suggesting that men are inherently emotionally inexpressive. Instead, the results of this study support the views of Fischer and Good (1997) and Walton et al. (2004) who claim that men choose what emotions to express and in which context rather than not having the ability to do so; in this sense, the choice of when to express emotions is perhaps one way of doing masculinity. Moreover, the findings corroborate the idea that masculinity is actively managed by men and further reinforces the unsuitability of categorising men and their emotional capabilities as it reifies them rather than seeing them as active agents.

It has now been illustrated that the men constructed themselves as emotional individuals and employed discourses that deviate from traditional ideas of masculinity. On the other hand, they also constructed themselves as objective and detached from their emotions which conform to customary discourses of masculinity. Hence, contrasting positions are produced which demonstrates that the construction of masculinity varies according to context. Men mobilise different discourses to present themselves as particular kinds of men (Jackson, 1999), and this points to the notion of different masculine identities. This study certainly supports the idea of multiple masculinities as the men occupied various positions that both resisted and complied with traditional masculine discourses (Connell, 1995; Edley & Wetherell, 1997; Wetherell & Edley, 1999; Pease, 2000). While the results of this study challenge masculinity as an essence, as well as some of the commonplace understandings of the traditional male gender role, such as restrictive emotionality, they also reinforce the idea that certain discourses are still very much alive and readily available within the culture that we presently inhabit. These include the discourse of hegemonic masculinity, patriarchy and paternalism. In view of this, the results of this piece of research have emphasised the power of the social domain, especially the power of established discourses and how they are intimately bound with the possibilities for human experience. Certain discourses and the resultant social practices prevail in cultures and societies in terms of being seen as more truthful than others, and the dominance of such discourses makes certain ways of being and seeing the world seemingly unavoidable. The point being emphasised here is that an individual's identity and experience of the world are substantially defined by the established structures and discourses of the culture they inhabit. The more a certain discourse is evoked, and the more a subject position and corresponding practices are assumed, the greater the strength each has in shaping human experience. For example, if the discourse of breaking up as wrongdoing is continually endorsed it becomes difficult to challenge such a construction and ultimately generate alternative understandings and positions other than that of the guilty perpetrator. Similarly, the more men, and indeed society, invoke the discourse of hegemonic masculinity, the greater the difficulty in resisting these discourses to bring about change for themselves. In view of this, discourses can be said to be two-sided; people both evoke discourses which reinforces their power within the social domain, but they are also constructed and constrained by them. In the context of this

study the men mobilised a paternalistic discourse when ‘ruining the fairytale’ for women and by doing so the men were reinforcing the dominance of this traditional view of men. On the other hand, a paternalistic discourse constrained the men to the position of having to be cruel to be kind and ruining the idealistic hopes the women had for the relationship. This then implicated the men as culpable for causing the women distress which then made feelings of guilt available. Similarly, the use of other traditional discourses of masculinity such as hegemonic masculinity will continue to construct men as unemotional, tough, stoic and dominant over women which could have unhelpful consequences for them. For example, men will continue to be positioned as guilty, clinical and aggressive if they persist in employing dominant discourses when constructing their experiences and themselves. In conclusion, this indicates that there is a need to challenge certain discourses and to resist particular positions in order for possibilities for human experience to be expanded or modified. This will be discussed further in the section concerning implications for counselling psychology.

### **Methodological implications and considerations**

This section of the discussion will consider some methodological implications of the research that include some issues relating to the research design and reflexivity, particularly in terms of how the researcher might have shaped the process and findings. Some suggestions for further research will also be identified.

To begin with, this study employed two Memory Work groups to collect and analyse data: one was made up of four male friends, the other constituted three men who were all strangers to each other. Collectively, the men were quite similar in age (25-31 years) yet there was some diversity between them in terms of ethnicity and occupational status: five of them were British (White), one was British Asian (Indian) and one was South African; five were in full-time employment and the remaining two were postgraduate students. This diversity of the sample is an advantage of the research design as it provided an opportunity for various constructions of breaking up to be collected from individuals with different demographics. Thus, the differences between the co-researchers facilitated the likely production of an assortment of versions of breaking up. Though the two groups differed in terms of familiarity with each other it can be said that both the context of

being friends with one another and being strangers could have resulted in certain constructions of masculinity given that context plays a significant part in how it is negotiated by men. For example, both contexts could have invoked the masculine discourse of competitiveness in terms of scoring points over other group members in order to assert one's masculinity, particularly in the presence of a female researcher (this specific issue will be discussed later). A couple of instances that occurred within the group discussions can be given here. Within the group of friends one co-researcher made comments on several occasions that could be seen as him actively managing and asserting his masculinity in the presence of his friends. In the first instance, this co-researcher made a point of mockingly declaring that he had been the only one in the group to justify the typed paragraphs of his written memory. This comment, while humorous and trivial, could be understood as this co-researcher affirming how he stood out from the rest of the group. He emphasised that he was the *only one* of the group to justify his paragraphs which singled him out as having done something commendable or having performed better in a task (though trivial) – attending to the layout of his written account that the others failed to achieve. In another instance the same co-researcher made the following comment when the written memories were being distributed to the group members and he saw the length of the others before his: *'Mine's really short, I feel like I've uh... Oh no, it's all right ...oh a page! That's good!'* (Seeing the length of his written memory). Here, the co-researcher remarked that his written memory is 'really short'; his subsequent comment, 'oh no, it's all right...oh a page! That's good' then implies that the possibility of his memory being short in length troubled him because his later comment constructed a sense of relief when he saw that he had actually written a page. This could be understood as another instance of this co-researcher seemingly 'keeping tabs' on his masculinity and not wishing to be positioned as inferior in any way to the others. These two examples from the group of friends context can be associated with masculine discourses of performance and competition suggesting that the construction of a masculine self is important among friends. Within the group of strangers one co-researcher made notably fewer contributions to the group discussions compared to one other who spoke very openly and energetically about his experiences. It is possible that this co-researcher's dominant way of speaking created status differences within the group by positioning him as some kind of leader of the group which might have had a prohibitive effect in terms of not leaving the

other co-researchers much space to give their views and ideas. This co-researcher's assertiveness in the group of strangers could also be understood as him enforcing his masculinity by mobilising the discourse of dominance and thus positioning himself as a dominant man. The point being made here is not to critique the two groups that were used for this research, but rather to reflect on how the two contexts could have contributed to the men mobilising traditional discourses of masculinity in their interactions as well as in their accounts of their experiences. At this point, the researcher would like to acknowledge an awareness that the examples given here have been interpreted as specific constructions or instances of doing masculinity that took place within the group discussions that the researcher observed; however, the researcher is producing a construction of the men's remarks based on her own knowledge of masculine discourses and what she assumed to be displays of masculinity. In other words, the interpretations relating to the men negotiating their masculinity can be seen as constructions of constructions. For example, with respect to the comment above about the length of one of the men's memories, this could have been a simple remark of surprise that he had written so much as the exclamation 'oh a page! That's good!' might suggest. Therefore, the researcher might have constructed this as an instance of asserting masculinity based on her own reading of the text. Indeed, this is a pertinent point that overarches this thesis given that it is grounded within a social constructionist perspective and it will be discussed further shortly.

Another point concerning the methodological design that will be briefly discussed concerns the fact that two separate triggers were used by the two groups to construct their memories. The two triggers that the two groups settled on were 'dumping a girl' and 'telling her it is over'. The fact that two different phrases were used by the two groups demonstrates how ending a romantic relationship can be discursively constructed by men in different ways. The former phrase tends to be used colloquially and constructs breaking up as a more informal, casual matter as opposed to 'telling her it is over'. Perhaps it is unsurprising that this is the trigger that the group of friends settled on precisely because of its colloquialism and informality. In particular, the word 'dump' invokes images of disposing of something or even the actual site where rubbish is left which constructs breaking up as unloading refuse or something that is no longer needed. In contrast, the latter is comparatively more

polite than ‘dumping a girl’; it produces images of actually engaging in interaction with the woman to end the relationship rather than ‘disposing’ of her. This was the trigger that the group of strangers agreed on. It is not the point here to suggest that these two different triggers produced specific, corresponding discourses (even though this might have been possible) but more to indicate how the construction process began even when the groups were deciding on the trigger.

The presence of a female researcher in the men’s group discussions and the fact that the thesis has been written by a woman is also an important point to reflect on, particularly when completing research that entails a discourse analytic approach to data analysis. Any research paper or report that is produced is itself a discursive construction that draws on the knowledge of the researcher and the discourses that are utilised to construct this knowledge (Willig, 2001). The researcher who authors the research is therefore required to consider how their own constructions of reality and knowledge shape the findings (Parker, 1999). The issue of how the presence of a female researcher might have influenced the group discussions will be considered first; following on from this the construction of the final findings will also be reflected on in terms of coming from a female perspective.

The primary researcher acted as a facilitator for both group discussions which raises significant discussion points around the production of the data, particularly the construction of masculinity. One of the key questions concerns whether the presence of a female facilitator meant that the men were more or less likely to construct themselves according to traditional masculine discourses. In other words, it is possible to speculate whether the researcher’s presence facilitated the mobilisation of traditional masculine ideals or even the resistance of such ideals accordingly, producing ‘softer’ versions of masculinity, that is those that constructed the men as sensitive and emotionally expressive in comparison to hard versions of masculinity. On the one hand, it can be asserted that the researcher’s presence facilitated an openness to discussing their accounts of having ended relationships. Indeed, as the results have illustrated, the men referred to feelings of vulnerability (pressure, anxiety, guilt, uncertainty) when recollecting their relationship dissolution experiences, thus mobilising an emotion discourse that is not conventionally expected of masculinity. Further support for this openness comes from the

summarising of the group discussions; both groups remarked that they had not talked openly about their break-up experiences in much detail with others, including close friends. In particular, the group of friends acknowledged that they knew of each other's break-up experiences, such as when they happened and with whom, but that detailed conversations about them generally did not occur in terms of how each one constructed the situation and their subjective experience of it. Furthermore, two of the three co-researchers in the group of strangers specifically mentioned that their experiences had not been talked about at all with others until the group discussion. This suggests that the presence of the female researcher might have encouraged a more intimate discussion of the men's constructed experiences that also facilitated the exploration of their subjective experience too. In this sense, the men were producing themselves as men who were open to engage in intimate conversation with others that involved speaking of their constructed subjective experience which contrasts with customary perceptions of men and masculinity. On the other hand, it can be equally argued that the presence of a female encouraged the men to invoke conventional masculine discourses. Although the researcher could not obviously engage with and share a joint dominant masculine identity with the men as a male facilitator might have done, it is possible that some collusion with its production might have occurred. For example, during one of the group discussions the men were discussing the use of clichés as a means of mitigating the real reasons for ending their relationships. Specifically, the men remarked that the use of clichés served to avoid being honest with the women in terms of how they felt towards them and the relationship. At this point, the primary researcher then wondered aloud whether the employment of clichés was linked to the conventional understanding of it being unsuitable for men to be emotionally expressive. Here, it can be said that the researcher was affirming this traditional male norm and imposing her own assumptions of what the men's behaviour signified. Indeed, the men in this group refuted the researcher's hypothesis and related that the use of clichés was not a result of their restrictive emotionality but in fact a way of preventing further distress on the woman's part. The men constructed a concern about upsetting their girlfriends and so mitigating the truth was to obviate hurting them any further. In view of this, the men were actually constructing themselves as sensitive to feelings rather than insensitive of them as the researcher originally proposed. Hence, the researcher was invoking a traditional discourse of men, but the men resisted this and mobilised another that is

reminiscent of the New Man who shows sensitivity and care. This example demonstrates an instance of the primary researcher's assumptions intruding on the men's own constructions of their experiences and masculine selves.

As this research is grounded within a social constructionist, Foucauldian discourse analytic framework the final findings and the overall written piece are in themselves a construction. The researcher's own knowledge and constructions of reality therefore shape the process of analysing and discussing the data so that the final summarised findings are a construction of others' constructions. The example just given where the researcher misunderstood the meaning of the men's comments demonstrates this process quite clearly as the researcher drew on her own knowledge to understand what the men were implying. In that instance the men were able to correct the researcher's misconception but the analysis of the men's constructions and the final written piece are based on the researcher's constructed knowledge without the possibility of the men's verification or disagreement. In light of this, the discursive constructions, breaking up as wrongdoing, problematic and work to be done produced certain versions of the men's accounts that might not have been as the men intended. Another important point concerns how the researcher used the term 'woman' in place of 'girl' which was the men's preferred terminology. Though the researcher made a point of arguing that this was appropriate for a piece of academic work it can also be speculated that her own assumptions were being imposed on the men's constructions. The researcher's preference for the term 'woman' could have been to promote a sense of equality between the two genders that were under discussion. Furthermore, it is possible that the researcher did not feel comfortable referring to women as 'girls' because of the sense of immaturity and underdevelopment this term bestows on women. Therefore, it can be said that the author of the research was mobilising a discourse of feminism whereas calling the women 'girls' assigns them to a junior social identity category which could be associated with the discourse of patriarchy. The men's references to women as 'girls' also constructs relationships (and consequently the ending of them) as casual affairs; on the other hand, the term 'woman/women' constructs the females as adults and thus implies adult relationships. However, perhaps the men construct relationships as more casual attachments and the researcher's introduction of the more formal term altered the men's constructions of their experiences.

### Suggestions for further research

In light of the reflections concerning the presence of a female researcher a suggestion for further research would be to conduct a similar study that explores men's constructions of breaking up with women but with a male facilitator. This would provide an opportunity to observe whether different discourses are employed by men to construct their experiences and their masculine selves when in the presence of a facilitator of the same sex. It would be of interest to see whether more dominant forms of masculinity would be mobilised in this context; in other words, the presence of another man could produce a sense of needing to construct themselves as traditionally masculine. Alternatively, a male facilitator might bring about a sense of ease for the men and so reduce the possibility of drawing on dominant forms of masculinity. However, this remains speculative and only further research would shed light on this.

Other ideas for further research concern a greater involvement from the women. For example, one idea could focus on men's constructions of their break-up experiences in which women instigate the end the relationship. It would be of interest to see what discourses are utilised and what positions are consequently taken up by men when the situation is reversed and they are faced with (what could be) the unexpected loss of a significant relationship. This could place the men in a position of vulnerability where feelings of sadness and shock are made available which contravene the traditional male gender role. Research into this area would shed light on how men manage this situation of being in the position of being told, rather than telling, of the end of the relationship. In addition to this, a study that explores women's constructions of breaking up, both instigated or not, would also be significant in order to see what discourses are mobilised by women and how these differ from those used by men, thus providing an opportunity to see what gendered discourses remain dominant for men and women.

### Implications for counselling psychology

The third research question that this study sought to answer was to see what the implications for counselling psychology and therapeutic practice could be drawn from the men's constructions of their break-up experiences. The findings from this study can provide counselling psychologists and other psychological therapists with

a clearer understanding of how relationship losses are constructed by men and how their constructions then position them within the experience. It is important to note here that the implications that will be discussed are not generalisable to all male clients who present in therapy but rather that they could be applicable to men from cultures and societies similar to those of the participants in this study.

The discursive constructions that emerged from the men's accounts and group discussions were breaking up as wrongdoing, problematic and work to be done. Collectively, these constructions give, unsurprisingly, a negative gloss to the situation in which the men are positioned as pressured, anxious, uncertain, guilty, culpable and required to work. Overall, breaking up is conveyed as a demanding and onerous situation. Given that counselling psychology focuses on a client's thoughts and feelings the implications for subjective experience that were speculated on in the analysis section will be expanded on here because of the relevance to psychological therapy. The comments made here, however, regarding subjective experience still remain speculative. The positions that were assumed by the men in their break up accounts, such as perpetrators, repentant sinners, ruthless and authority figures (parents, workers), generally made feelings of liability available to the men. Perhaps the most dominant feeling that was associated with these positions was that of guilt, and in some instances this feeling was emphasised to a great extent. Guilt is understood as a burdensome emotion and usually associated with having done something immoral or hurtful; therefore, it is an emotion that is an emotion to be avoided if possible. Consequently, it can be speculated that a man might feel unenthusiastic about new relationships with women for fear of a previous break-up experience, including the ensuing feelings of guilt, repeating itself. In addition to this, this man may worry about being negatively evaluated by others for having ended his relationship, and to ward off the possibility of this occurring in the future, he may encounter difficulty with entering into new relationships or even avoid them altogether. In the context of counselling psychology, therapists would do well to highlight to male clients who present in therapy with this dilemma how constructing their break up experience as a transgression constrains them to a position of having perpetrated some form of wrongdoing and produces feelings of guilt. Therapists and male clients can explore together what the implications and consequences are when break-up experiences are constructed in this way. Clients could then consider

alternative ways of constructing their experience, such as seeing their decision to end their relationship as reasonable, and consequently reject the position of a guilty party as well as relieving themselves of feelings of remorse and culpability.

Discourses constrain people to certain positions and speaking rights (Willig, 1999b). More specifically, certain discourses prevail in societies to the point where they are assumed to be common sense; the dominant discourses of masculinity, for example, have demonstrated this point. It can then be difficult for people to resist certain discourses and associated positions because of their prevailing presence. In the context of the present study, the men were constrained by the gendered discourses of patriarchy and paternalism. Both of these discourses bestowed the men with responsibility that was at times problematised because of what this responsibility required them to do. This responsibility related specifically to being in a dominant, parental position to the women who were accordingly positioned as childlike. The power differential between parents and children means different life perspectives: children play and indulge in fantasy and parents look after children and are responsible for enlightening them on the realities of the world. The consequence of this difference in perspective is then likely to involve the parent (man) upsetting the child (woman) by quelling their fanciful ideas and wishes. In this sense, parents are required to be steadfast in order to protect their child and manage their disappointment and upset; therefore, they are not expected to show any vulnerability themselves. Thus, it can be said that the implications for men who draw on the discourses of patriarchy and paternalism are that they are required to maintain a sense of stoicism and primary authority over others, including their girlfriends or wives. Consequently, it is possible to speculate that men could become closed off to the expression of emotion or feel unable to discuss their own difficulties with others as traditionally this belies the position of a patriarch and father. This scenario could be a possibility for the male client who draws on traditional gender discourses of masculinity and presents in therapy with a female therapist. Here, the therapist is positioned as the one who has a duty of care and a responsibility to provide support and containment of the client's vulnerabilities. Furthermore, they are also positioned somewhat as having authority by setting the boundaries of time and payment; essentially, they are assuming some of the characteristics associated with the male discourses of patriarchy and paternalism. This could be a potential difficulty for men

who draw on discourses of masculinity in terms of engaging with the therapeutic set-up and assuming a position that can be associated with vulnerability and emotional exploration and expression. However, counselling psychologists could utilise the therapeutic relationship to observe directly and point out to male clients how these prevailing discourses and the resultant positions affect them in terms of how it might help them but also impede them. The effectiveness of positioning theory in therapy has been previously illustrated (Winslade, 2005) and emphasises that by having the opportunity to re-position themselves clients can renegotiate their relationships with others and their own identity. Winslade specifically comments that positioning 'enables close inspection of the detail of conversation and the ways that people negotiate meanings. Such close inspection provides material for the theorising of the kinds of discursive shifts and changes that counselling is supposed to support' (p.362). This suggests that the concept of positioning could be a useful therapeutic tool for counselling psychologists to draw on for effecting change in clients' lives.

In light of the above, the therapeutic context could provide a space for men to look at the consequences of the discourses they mobilise and what implications they have for their subjective experience and possibilities for action. However, it is important to assert that the discourses of paternalism and patriarchy are not necessarily exclusively problematic and unhelpful and that men should draw on others that are 'better' or more helpful. Rather, the point of therapy would be to explore what constructions and discourses male clients might be constrained by and to look at what they allow them to do and not do. If certain discourses are considered to be problematic then counselling psychologists and other therapists alike can help male clients to expand on their range of available positions and possibilities for practice by identifying alternative discourses for them to utilise. This would also mean that male clients would be required to resist these previous discourses and to draw on alternative ones in order to bring about change; however, is not necessarily as easy as just switching from one discursive vantage-point to another because of the power that discourses have over people. This tension between discourses and change, particularly within the therapeutic context, will now be discussed further.

The practice of counselling psychology often involves looking at how people can make suitable changes to their lives so that the difficulties which they initially

present with no longer impede their overall functioning. In other instances counselling psychology can serve to offer people a therapeutic context in which they can explore significant issues in order to bring about greater understanding. In this case the aim of therapy is not necessarily about effecting change. However, when change is the focus of therapy it can often be a difficult task, a notion that is asserted within a Foucauldian social constructionist perspective. On the one hand, Foucault himself emphasised that people were manifestations of discourse which makes the possibility of human agency and people making change particularly problematic; in its most extreme view it is impossible given that this perspective characterises people and subjective experience as nothing more than constitutions of existing discourses. With this in mind, the very suggestion that people are agents who can make choices and effect change in their lives becomes pointless and then incompatible with the practice of counselling psychology. On the other hand, Foucault also suggested that change becomes possible when marginalised discourses are unlocked to generate alternative discourses for human experience. In this sense, humans are afforded some form of agency that enables them to take into account how prevailing discourses currently shape their lives and subjectivity, and consider mobilising alternative or even marginalised ones that serve their interests better (Sawicki, 1991; Burr, 2003). This view sees humans as both constituted by discourse and as manipulators of it (Davies & Harré, 1990). Taking this view then, clients who present in therapy can examine the discourses that they frequently mobilise and the resultant positions that they occupy and begin to work towards drawing on alternative discourses that are less detrimental. This then allows for the possibility of change. To return to the original point then of how men can bring about change for themselves, they can examine how traditional discourses of masculinity construct their experience and subjectivity and look towards claiming positions within different discourses that are of more benefit where necessary. However, a final word about change concerns the power of discourses that prevail in everyday life. An avenue for implementing change means resisting these discourses and invoking alternative ones, but to suggest that this substitution of discourses is as easy as this is a misconception. Clients in therapy often recognise that the positions they assume within discourses are detrimental to them, but such recognition is often met with the statement, 'But I can't help it'. A good example to illustrate this is the discourse of addiction; people invoke this discourse and position themselves as an addict as a way of explaining the virtual

impossibility of giving up their addiction, such as smoking (Gillies, 1999). Resisting prevailing discourses means resisting the social practices that are bound with each one that people take up day to day. In this sense, resisting these discourses and practices means challenging societal and cultural norms. Therefore, if the men in this study wanted to be more emotionally expressive or less dominant so that women assumed positions of authority, they would be behaving in ways that were inconsistent with established discourses of masculinity. Essentially, it would mean going against the grain of what is socially expected and endorsed and this could be met with disapproval from others, thus illustrating how difficult it can be to break away from prevailing discourses and the positions that they offer. However, for change to happen, particularly for men, resistance to traditional discourses of masculinity and to norms of the traditional male gender role is the first step (Pease, 2000). Resistance cannot be ignored; we cannot claim that it is not there or that people do not practise resisting certain constructions or positions. The point here is to emphasise that while it is not as easy just to step out of prevailing discourses, resistance provides a starting-point for men, and women too, to introduce alternative ways of seeing and being in the world.

### **Final reflections**

This concluding section of the discussion will contain some of researcher's reflections and learning experiences after having completed a piece of social constructionist research. In addition to this, the researcher will reflect on the possible course that she might follow in terms of developing her research career.

One of the most significant learning experiences for the researcher has been learning about social constructionism and its theoretical principles in more detail. More specifically, it has been of considerable interest for the researcher, a practising counselling psychologist, to gain a new epistemological perspective of knowledge and reality; this has enabled her to reflect on some of the assumptions that she has held about the individual as a result of her professional training. For example, the philosophy of counselling psychology has roots within the humanistic paradigm that sees the individual as self-conscious and reflective with the capacity to make choices and live up to one's full potential (Strawbridge & Woolfe, 2003). Therefore, as a counselling psychologist, the researcher places emphasis on individual subjective

experience and the individual's capacity to self-actualise (to recognise one's potential and achieve a fulfilling life) (Maslow, 1943). This particular aspect of counselling psychology contrasts to the *death of the subject* (Foucault, 1972), a principle that is central to the social constructionist perspective. This principle offers an alternative perspective and suggests that an individual's capacity to reflect, feel and self-actualise is a product of language and discursive resources. Thus, perhaps the most significant learning experience for the researcher has been gaining an awareness of how the individual is understood from a social constructionist viewpoint; it has offered the researcher an alternative perspective and hence, broadened her knowledge regarding this particular branch of epistemology.

As a result of completing this thesis, the researcher now has a greater appreciation of the concept of how knowledge can be seen as a construction of reality rather than being finite or predetermined. In particular, the researcher has certainly come to recognise just how significant a part culture and society play in people's lives. By gaining an understanding of the discourses and related subject positions that are associated with masculinity, the researcher found herself reflecting on her own experience in certain situations, including work and romantic relationships, and considering some of the discourses that are mobilised and subject positions that are consequently occupied by her in these different contexts. Therefore, the researcher has certainly come to realise more and more how people position themselves differently according to the contexts in which they find themselves. The concept of positioning in particular has been of real interest to the researcher as it has allowed her to recognise how people both position themselves and are positioned persuasively by discourses. Moreover, the researcher has found the process of positioning to be an effective therapeutic tool in her counselling psychology practice when formulating an understanding of a client's situation and how this consequently affects what they can and cannot do in their day-to-day life. Thus, this piece of research has not only expanded the researcher's knowledge of the social constructionist perspective but also provided her with an additional tool to facilitate an understanding of how clients, and consequently their subjective reality, are influenced by the positions that they occupy.

In summary, a concluding point concerns where the researcher now stands after having completed this piece of research. It has been made clear that the researcher has come to appreciate many of the ideas and principles of social constructionism; the study has not only developed her knowledge as a researcher but also encouraged personal reflection in relation to her own life experiences. On the other hand, as a counselling psychologist the researcher also lays great emphasis on the self, subjectivity and why we make certain choices over others too; thus, the researcher is left somewhat in a position of two minds. However, there are some possible routes for the researcher to explore that could resolve this position of being in two minds. Attempts to merge social constructionist and essentialist approaches that consider the importance of innate structures have already been made by researchers such as Stephen Frosh, Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson; indeed, they have gone some way to blend social constructionism with psychoanalytic ideas in order to theorise the individual as both internally motivated and constructed by elements of the social world. Alternatively, the development of Narrative Therapy (White & Epston, 1990), a social constructionist approach to psychotherapy, might offer the researcher some useful insights and points for consideration in terms of developing her epistemological viewpoint further. Thus, these are certainly two possible lines of thought for the researcher to pursue in her continuing development as both a counselling psychologist and researcher.

### *Conclusion*

The present piece of research aimed to investigate how men construct their experiences of terminating romantic relationships with women and to identify what implications these experiences could have for counselling psychologists. Overall, the study found that breaking up with women was constructed in three different ways that offered the men a number of different positions which, in turn, offered them various possibilities for practice and subjective experience. In particular, the results of this study show that some traditional discourses of masculinity are still invoked in men's constructions of their experiences and themselves demonstrating how certain discourses prevail in social life. Resistance has been identified as a way of offering a new set of consequences for men so that they are not constrained to discourses that could be identified as problematic for them. Counselling psychologists can be aware of some of the constraints placed on men by certain masculine discourses and help male clients to explore how they can generate alternatives in order to take up different subject positions and expand their lives accordingly.

**END**

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## **Appendices**

**Appendix A - Ethical Approval form**





Appendix B - Example consent form



**Consent to Record & Participate in Memory Work Research Group**

**Participant's consent**

Thank you for agreeing to take part in my Memory Work research group. Before the group work commences it is important that you give signed consent to show that you fully agree to participate and understand what is involved. As part of my research it is necessary that I record the group discussion for later transcription and analysis. The transcripts of the recorded discussion will be completely anonymous and confidential. Any names used in the final piece of work will be pseudonyms to protect your identity.

The Memory Work group will be looking at written memories of the dissolution of romantic relationships with women, and discussing them within the group afterwards. The group work will last between 1-2 hours and you can withdraw your consent to participate at any stage during the process.

This consent form will be stored separately from the written transcripts.

I understand what will be required of me in the Memory Work Research Group. I also agree to participate in the research and that the group discussion can be recorded.

Participant's Name.....

Participant's Signature ..... Date.....

Interviewer's Name .....

Interviewer's Signature ..... Date .....

### **Appendix C - Example resource sheet**

*Please find below a number of resources and telephone numbers which you may find helpful if you feel that you are experiencing any difficulties after the interview. The following numbers and websites all provide help and support regarding relationship difficulties.*

Saneline – <http://www.sane.org.uk> 0845 767 8000 12noon to 2am

Relate – <http://www.relate.org.uk> 0845 1 30 40 16

The Samaritans – <http://www.samaritans.org.uk> 08457 90 90 90

Divorce, Meditation & Counselling Services – 020 7730 2422

Open Door Counselling Service for Young People - 0121 472 2071

Covent Garden Counselling - <http://www.coventgardencounselling.com> 020 7240 1911

*British Association for Sexual and Relationship Therapy (BASRT) – [www.basrt.org.uk](http://www.basrt.org.uk) 020 8543 2707*

London Friend – <http://www.londonfriend.org.uk/> 020 7837 3337 (19:30 - 22:00 daily)

SupportLine – [www.supportline.org.uk](http://www.supportline.org.uk) 020 8554 9004

ARC (Association for Relationship Counselling) – <http://www.arc-relationshipcounselling.co.uk/> 020 8299 0155

North London Relationship Therapy – 020 8374 2074

Relationship Counselling for London – [www.counselling4london.com](http://www.counselling4london.com) 0800 652 2342

*The following organisations have lists of qualified therapists and counsellors if you wish to see someone privately to discuss any problems you may want to share which can be accessed under the 'Find a therapist/psychologist' section.*

[www.bacp.co.uk](http://www.bacp.co.uk) (British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy) 0870 443 5252

[www.psychotherapy.org.uk](http://www.psychotherapy.org.uk) (UK Council for Psychotherapy – UCKP) 020 7014 9955

[www.bps.org.uk](http://www.bps.org.uk) (British Psychological Society) 0116 254 9568

[www.babcp.org.uk](http://www.babcp.org.uk) (British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies) 01254 875277



**Are you male?**

**Are you heterosexual?**

**Are you aged between 25-35?**

***Have you experienced the ending of a committed romantic relationship which lasted for a year or more?***

*If you tick all of the above then you could make a valuable contribution to psychological research....*

For my doctoral research as a Counselling Psychologist in Training at City University, London, I am investigating men's experiences of ending relationships with women, and how these experiences have impacted their sense of self.

I need male participants, preferably a group of friends, to form a group of 3 or more, who are willing to take part in a group discussion concerning the above. The group discussion will be facilitated by me. If you and some of your friends are interested and willing to help please call Anna Butcher on [REDACTED] or email [REDACTED] for more information.

Research is supervised by Dr Carla Willig (email: [REDACTED], Chartered Psychologist, City University.

Appendix E - Example information sheet for participants



**Anna Butcher**

**Doctoral Research Information Sheet**

Dear Participant

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my doctoral research project. My research is being supervised by a qualified psychologist and research supervisor. Please do not hesitate to contact my supervisor at City if you wish to confirm any information, or if you have any queries. Their details can be found at the end of this document.

My research is exploring men's experiences of ending romantic relationships with women and how these experiences have impacted their sense of self. This will comprise of forming a 'Memory Work' group of 3 or more participants; you will be one of these participants. The largest part of the group work involves the analysis of personal written memories of relationship breakdown written by you and the other participants. The group will meet prior to this to discuss how the memories should be written. Once the memories have been written the group will meet again to discuss the memories individually and collectively and this discussion will be facilitated by me. A more detailed account of the procedure will be given at the first group meeting.

Once a group of participants has been formed we will meet in a location to be confirmed where the initial meeting and analysis of the memories shall take place. The discussion/analysis shall be audio-taped for later transcription and further analysis which will be completed by me. You will be given a consent form to complete at the time of the **initial** group meeting which may last up to 1 hour. Once the group analysis is complete you shall be given the opportunity to ask any questions and give any feedback on your experience it.

If you have any queries please do not hesitate to contact me prior to or after the arranged meeting on either my telephone number or email address.

Many thanks for your cooperation.

Anna Butcher  
Counselling Psychologist in Training  
City University  
Tel. no. [REDACTED]  
Email: [REDACTED]  
  
Research supervisor: Dr Carla Willig  
Email: [REDACTED]

Appendix F - Example Demographic questionnaire



**Anna Butcher**

**Doctoral Research Demographic Questionnaire**

Background information

To begin with I would like to ascertain some basic information about you. Any information you disclose will not under any circumstances be used to identify you in any way as this research is entirely confidential. If you do not wish to answer some of the questions please do not feel that you have to.

1. How old are you? ..... Years
2. What is your nationality? .....
3. Please circle one of the following which best describes your ethnic origin.

- |                                      |                                    |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| White (British)                      | Asian or Asian British (Pakistani) |
| White (Irish)                        | Asian or Asian British (Indian)    |
| White (other)                        | Asian or Asian British (Chinese)   |
| Black or Black British (Caribbean)   | Other Asian background             |
| Black or Black British (African)     | Mixed background                   |
| Other Black background               | Other ethnic background            |
| Asian or Asian British (Bangladeshi) | Information refused                |

***Please circle 'yes' or 'no' to the following questions:***

4. Are you currently single? Yes No  
(N.B. not in any intimate relationship of any kind)
5. Have you ever been married? Yes (go to q. 6) No (go to q. 7)
6. Have you ever been divorced? Yes No
7. Have you ever cohabited with a partner? Yes No

8a. Do you have any children? Yes (go to part b)

No (go to question 9)

b. How many children do you have .....

9. How many committed intimate relationships have you had with women in the past that have lasted for a minimum of a year?

.....

10. How many committed intimate relationships were terminated by you?

.....

11. Of these committed relationships how many would you say ended:

Successfully/Amicably? ..... Unsuccessfully/Badly? .....

**Thank you very much for your cooperation**

## *Appendix G - The co-researchers' written memories*

### Andrew

The room seemed brighter than usual. The high white ceilings seemed a long way away and the plain walls, vast and open, almost clinical. This was their home, his home, but it was worth nothing. He paced up and down, stressed, anxious, and nervous. There was a fear inside him, the fear of not knowing what to do. Somewhere he knew he had lost his way. How could it come to this? Why? What were the reasons? He knew it was decision time. Should he seek advice first, should he wait for another day, the morning perhaps? She had spent the evening crying and was now asleep. After what seemed like an eternity although frantic and naked apart from boxer shorts he made the journey up the stairs several times only to return each time to pacing downstairs in the bright room with the darkness outside.

He felt nauseas, he was standing in the doorway, looking into the bedroom, memories of looking at her whilst asleep, years before, came flooding back. He could feel the warmth of the room, sense the softness of the furnishings. Into the darkness, he reached out and woke her up.

### Neal

The sun shone brightly on a November's winter morning as Neal sat on the 11:35 Oxford train toward Paddington. It felt like a Monday due to the sombre mood on the train yet it was a Friday. As he jumped off the train at Paddington, his heart began to race as he walked toward Starbucks. He stopped, stood still for a while then turned back. He stared making his way toward 'Reef' – a bar right inside the station.

“Double Hennessey with ice please”

As he sat there sipping his heart somehow returned to normal. After 10 minutes he got up, with a ridiculous grin on his face and began walking. Raising the collar on his jacket and with a spring in his step, he drew closer to Starbucks. As he got in he drew a huge sigh and calmly walked toward a table where a well dressed young lady sat.

As she got up to reach up to him he insisted she kept her seat. Within a few moments he began speaking,

“Listen, I think we have had our moments, but I think we are moving too fast. It’s only been 7 months and you are already doing stuff as if we are married. You look through my phone and drawers and question everyone I speak to. I think we should take a few steps back and cool off.”

Jane looking unflinched but soundly upset replied,

“It’s only coz I love you and have never done this with anyone else”

“I’m sorry but there is things that I would like to still do by myself without you always checking up on me. I just need to grow up and have a bit of myself – I’m sorry”

Jane sat there with a glint in her eyes as Neal stood up and leaned forward to kiss her on the forehead. She looked up and held his hand. For a while time seemed to stop then the awkwardness faded as Neal walked toward the door and left. The cold breeze greeted him as he left as it matched the coldness inside him.

### **John**

He sat looking up at her as he ended it. She was perched on the raised side of the sofa. Her hands were covering much of her face, as she cried. He felt tension in the pit of his stomach as he could only focus on her and the door out of her house. He needed to walk past her in order to leave. He told her, "You are going to be alright" and gave her a hug. As he did so, she continued to cover her face and cry. She needed to leave for work soon, so she gathered herself and they left the house together.

### **Paul**

Lily picked Paul up from outside Reading train station at around 7 O’clock. She gave Paul a kiss as he got into her blue fiat and she wished him a happy birthday. They then drove the 10 minutes to Lily’s new flat, it was the first time that Paul had been there.

After a quick tour round Lily took Paul into the bedroom and gave him his birthday card and presents of an art print and aftershave. As a house warming gift Paul gave Lily a handmade lamp from Covent Garden.

Lily cooked a meal of spaghetti bolognese which Lily prepared whilst Paul sat on the kitchen counter chatting. They ate in the lounge watching TV and talking about the African canvas that was hung up above her mantel piece.

After dinner Lily had some school work that she had to mark for the next day which she did in her room whilst Paul remained in the lounge watching TV.

They went to bed at around 10 and after watching a short amount of TV they turned the lights out. After a long period of silence in the dark Paul said: “We can’t go on like this can we?”

L “I know, what do you think we should do?”

P “I think we both know what we have to do. Something’s changed to make it just plain awkward between us tonight and over the last couple of months, it has never been that way in the past. I don’t know why it’s changed but it has, we both know that we’re not making time for each other since you got your job in Reading and I moved to London”

L “I know, a lot has changed since Uni, so you think we should break up”

P “yep, do you?”

L “I think so”

L&P had a kiss and a cuddle.

Throughout this conversation they both remained on their backs looking at each other in the darkness and staring at the ceiling which had some glow in the dark stars on it. Paul then got up and went to the toilet; he then ironed his shirt in her kitchen on a very old iron board and equally old iron. Paul then hung his shirt up in the lounge and then sat on the sofa in the darkness.

After around half an hour Paul returned to the bedroom, Lily was asleep facing away from the door, Paul got into bed and went to sleep also with his back to Lily.

## Dean

It was a lazy summer's afternoon in Knightsbridge. As they walked he told her the news. With commendable bloody-mindedness she refused to register the news and walked on slightly more quickly. Within minutes her pace slowed to a meander and she stopped and bent over like an athlete pining for air after the big race. Instead of slowly catching her breath her pulse sped up as the reality of the situation became apparent, this race at least was coming to a close and there was to be no consolation prize. The words used were about time and responsibility but ultimately the heart did not remain.

He made to console her but merely held her as if protecting a child from the busy road. She looked like she was going to be physically ill – she shook uncontrollably. In the bus on the way home he thought of the relief as she looked out of the window, motionless and in a confused daze – she had the look of a child whose innocence had been shattered and was slowly coming to terms with a world without Santa or worse, a world without the person that protected her against ill. The only cure had become the cause.

On returning home he made one last cup of tea, she spoke of her shock but also of her ultimate knowledge that this day would come. They cried, he because of the euthanasia that he had committed, she because it was over. They held each other for a while as if in consolation and thanks for the times they had shared. They cried some more until dusk fell when she went back to her home. The farewell was a quick one, backs were quickly turned, a proud girl; one of the traits he loved about her character.

He went back inside, made a cup of tea and announced the break up to his housemates and then went back into his bedroom and sat in silence. It was over so quickly.

## Philip

It was a weekday afternoon around tea time, early January 2004. Philip was downstairs in the kitchen pacing the room trying to pluck up the courage to dial her number. He was hungry and could smell the pizza cooking in the oven. But more than hunger he was feeling nervous.

He dialled the number, it was a number he knew well having gone out with her for 6 months. She answered and was immediately cold. His heart was beating frantically and he didn't really know what to say. They hadn't talked very much in the past 2 weeks, in fact since he'd come back from holiday in December. It was a stressful time for him with piles of coursework due and his first thoughts had not been for her of late. She knew this was the case from the lack of contact he had made and the frosty conversations that had preceded this one. She said very little, presumably waiting for Philip to give his explanation. He was pacing up and down the kitchen, nervous still, perhaps even more so for having heard her voice. He told her he was sorry, perhaps to placate her, perhaps because he really was. She asked what was going on, why he had been ignoring her. He explained that he thought their relationship was based more on friendship than love; they'd been friends before they were lovers and although this had been such a positive start to their relationship he was now citing this as the reason for ending things. She didn't understand and needed more explanation and despite having thought so hard about what he was going to say he couldn't find words to explain why things weren't working and why he wanted to end it. He was still nervous and knew the conversation wasn't working out as he had intended. He attempted to deflect his attention from the problem and started dealing with the pizza that was in the oven. He took it out, plated it up and took it to the kitchen table with some cutlery. It was ready to eat but the conversation was far from over.

He repeated his reason for ending things and laboured the point that they were friends and he couldn't see a future for them as lovers. She was angry and upset and didn't accept his arguments as valid. The conversation went on for some time, backwards and forwards with little progress being made. She brought things to an

end and told him she had moved on anyway. He hung the phone up and ate his pizza. He was alone in the house and so didn't talk to anyone about what had happened.

### **David**

David had been travelling in East Africa for two and a half weeks and was in the final week of a gruelling trip. He had been getting increasingly aggrieved by many aspects of the relationship, not least the pressures and guilt of being away from loved ones for some time. He had been unhappy for a few weeks prior and the trip proved to be the tipping point for him – having distance and time to think had cemented many of the doubts he had had. It was a Sunday afternoon and David had enjoyed a very relaxing time on the beach by his spectacular hotel in Mauritius. It was beautifully quiet and he had enjoyed the time to relax and collect his thoughts. As usual, David gave Natalie a call in the early evening. He was lying in his room having had a few beers from the mini bar and flicking through endless re-runs of the CNN and Friends episodes. The late evening sun flickered through the window – the shutters on his balcony casting a splintered light across the bright room. It was a very romantic setting.

The phone call started off along similar lines as normal – a catch up of the day and what they had been doing and alike. David tried to play down the fact that he was actually in a very beautiful place without her and didn't want to appear that he was enjoying it too much. (He obviously was.) He hadn't intended to discuss our relationship, but a typical moody response or whiny comment sparked it off. There was a silence in conversation and, unlike he would normally do, David decided to remain quiet until she asked if everything was ok. This appeared to come as a shock to her and you could sense her nervous silence. David then proceeded to calmly talk about some of his concerns with the relationship and that he was having doubts. They had always argued a great deal throughout their relationship and Natalie did enjoy a good shouting match, but perhaps because of the severity of the discussion she took his comments well and thoughtfully. This was surprising. She was asking if this was the end of their relationship – if he was dumping her. Because he hadn't really intended to – his words were pretty spontaneous – he was determined to leave it open-ended so he could really think it through. It was more of an ultimatum.

They shared a few texts before bed.

When David got back from Mauritius a week later, he obviously went to see Natalie pretty quickly. They had had a few awkward phone calls in between and he was glad to be back. He was however pretty sure that he had to do something about it. He drove round to see her at her house in West Hampstead. They had a very long and close hug when he saw her at the door. She clung on to the hug for an extra long time. David gave her a present from his travels and exchanged some small talk, and had a few kisses. Normally, whenever he would get home from a trip they would pretty much have sex as soon as he walked through the front door, but this time he didn't kiss her with any real conviction and she could tell that something was obviously up. It was a beautiful summer Saturday afternoon – similar in many ways to that evening in Mauritius. Again, just as the week before, the light broke through her wooden window shades. The room had that familiarity and smell of her candles. He spent so much time there, it felt like home.

They walked to the main high road and decided to have a drink in a tapas restaurant. Despite the nice weather, they sat inside in a dark room at the back. They both ordered a glass of Rioja and David ostensibly flicked through the menu. However, she said she wanted to cut through the charade and talk things through. They both knew they weren't there for a catch up. David repeated much of what they had discussed at length over the phone. But this time, he couldn't avoid the ultimate question. He told her he didn't want to be with her anymore – that he wasn't happy and could not go on any longer. It was awkward being in the bar – it wasn't very busy and the waitress could obviously detect that they were having a heart to heart. David had drunk his large glass of wine very quickly; Natalie had barely touched hers.

They began the 10 minute walk to her house. Natalie had said nothing and had tears streaming down her face. David tentatively had his arm round her, which she kept on shrugging off. He insisted that he would walk her home, but didn't really want to - it was a long walk, and at this slow pace it would feel like an eternity.

As they neared her house, she still had said nothing and was staring ahead impassively and quite scarily – it was as if she was in a different world and David had never seen anything like it. She walked up to her room and started packing every single item or gift that David had given her or represented their time together into a box – photos, letters, candles etc. He said that he didn't want them and hoped that she would keep them.

She was talking now, but in a barely audible mutter and saying that David had lied to her, had let her down and was a typical man. She said that he had ruined her life. He stayed for some time trying to make sense from her – she was in a bewitched state. He eventually decided to leave, with the box she had given to me. But as he was about to leave, she grabbed the box from his hand and put it down on the floor. She then began to strip to her underwear (a very sexy outfit that she would wear for a special occasion) and tried to kiss him, throwing him forcefully to the bed. He had to physically move his face from side to side to avoid the kisses and she was trying to remove his jeans as she pinned him down. Yet she still had this distant, lost and empty look on her face. David managed to break away, apologised and left.

As he got in the car he called her best friend and asked her to keep an eye on her. He then drove home and turned the radio up loud. A song by The Kooks was playing and he sang loudly the line, “You don't pull my strings, 'cos I'm a better man, moving on to better things”. It wasn't a totally accurate metaphor, but it still seemed apt and he really sang it loud.

**Winning the therapy race**  
**A psychodynamic case study**

Anna Butcher  
City University

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Rationale for the choice of case**

I have chosen to present this particular client, Samantha<sup>6</sup>, for several reasons. My learning increased significantly by exploring the therapeutic relationship with Samantha and using it where appropriate to make interpretations. I also experienced some difficult feelings when working with Samantha which, after discussing them in supervision, were informative of the therapeutic process and I was able to use them therapeutically. Lastly, Samantha is my client of choice for this case study because I feel more confident as a psychodynamic practitioner as a result of working with her.

### **The psychodynamic approach**

The psychodynamic approach stems from the psychoanalytic theory of Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) which postulated that behaviour is motivated by unconscious conflicts between the *id*, the *ego* and the *superego*. Freud (1923) coined these terms to demonstrate the different internal structures of the psyche (mind). Other theorists have used different terms as equivalents such as Winnicott's (1960) *True Self* and *False Self* and Melanie Klein's (Segal, 1992) development of *internal objects*. This case study shall focus mainly on the concepts put forth by Freud and Winnicott as they underpin the majority of the therapy done with this client. The *id* refers to the biological aspect of the psyche which responds to instincts and needs such as sexual gratification. The *ego* represents rational thought and our sense of self; defence mechanisms may be employed if the ego is operating weakly or unhealthily. The ego also acts as the mediator between the motivational drives of the *id* and the punitive aspects of the *superego*, which includes the internalised representations and standards of parental figures from early infancy (Bateman, Brown & Pedder, 2000). The *superego* may operate as an inner critic which may give rise to banishing unpleasant or unacceptable feelings away. Freud's model of the mind illustrates that we relate to ourselves just as easily as we can to others.

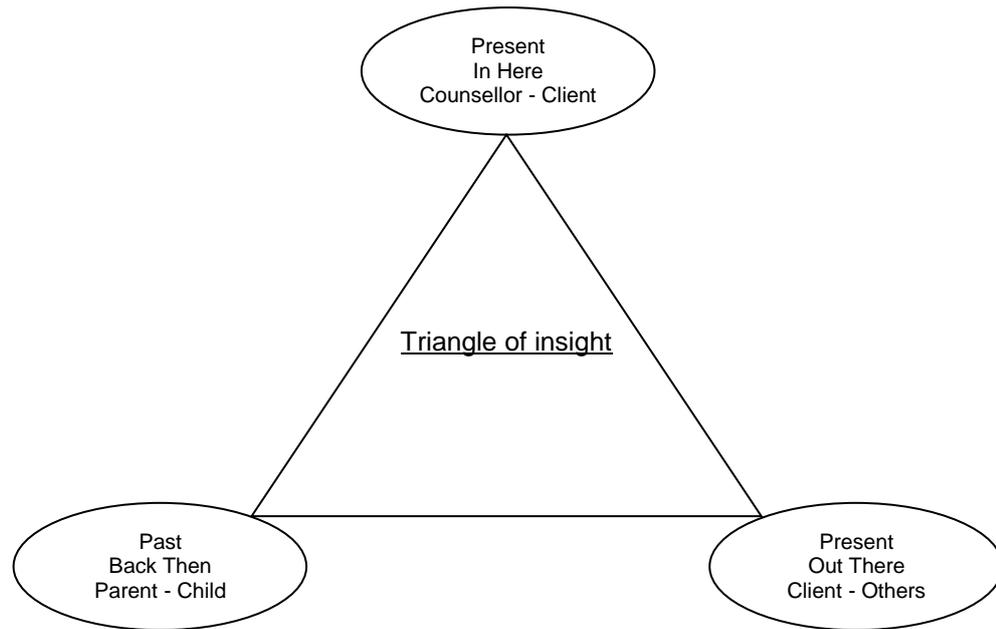
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<sup>6</sup> Name has been changed to protect the identity of the client

Winnicott (1960) posited that during infancy the individual's ego is increasing in strength and that demands of the id will be felt as part of the self rather than environmental demands. The satisfaction of the id consequently becomes a significant reinforcer of the ego, or as Winnicott named it, the *True Self*. Winnicott emphasised that the strengthening of the infant's ego, or the True Self, is dependent upon a *good-enough mother* who meets the infant's needs. As the good-enough mother does this repeatedly the True Self begins to have life and the child develops a healthy sense of self. If the mother is *not good enough* she does not sense the infant's needs and a *False Self* develops; the infant responds to environmental demands and complies with them rather than satisfying id demands to build up a healthy and autonomous ego. The False Self therefore hides the True Self and consequently false relationships can develop with others. Winnicott identified that is the aim of the therapist to provide a 'holding environment' for clients with False Self disorders so that an opportunity is created for the client to meet neglected ego needs and allow the True Self to emerge.

### **Transference and the central relational theme**

By exploring the client's childhood experiences links can be made between past and present experiences to understand their way of relating to others outside of the therapy room. What is talked about as happening outside of the therapy room can also have links with the therapeutic relationship in that exchanges between therapist and client contain clues and signs of how the client relates with others (Jacobs, 1999). The client will also repeat former patterns of relating to significant people (particularly parents) with the therapist and this is known as 'the transference' or their *central relational theme* as I shall call it. The use of transference conjointly with the client's past and present experiences can help the therapist to make useful interpretations by linking the three points together (see Figure 1).



*Figure 1: The relational triangle of insight from which the therapist can identify the client's central relational theme. All three points of the triangle are considered when making a transference interpretation. Taken from Jacobs (1999).*

Much attention is given to the transference relationship. The development of transference invites the therapist to help the client distinguish between what is real and what is imaginary. Past conflicts that are felt in the relationship with the therapist can then be explored and resolved with this distinction (Sandler, 1989). Transference also facilitates the client's understanding of their way of relating to others and how it may be hindering their personal relationships.

Psychodynamic therapy was suitable for Samantha because her early experiences seemed to play a large part in her difficulty with forming close relationships. By exploring her early experiences and identifying her central relational theme the reasons for her difficulty in relating to others would be uncovered. Samantha also appeared to feel awkward from the start of therapy, as if she could not engage with me. By using our relationship conjointly with her early experiences we were able to explore this barrier in the work together and identify its presence in other aspects of her life too.

### **The context for the work**

The therapy took place in a GP surgery which offered a counselling service to patients who were referred by their GP. The sessions were weekly and lasting for 50 minutes each. The counselling service primarily offered psychodynamic therapy to patients; however, cognitive-behavioural therapy was also provided if necessary. The appropriate theoretical approach for patients was decided upon during the initial assessment.

### **The referral**

Samantha visited her GP with complaints of low mood and stress after changing jobs that had lasted for 6 months. Her GP prescribed her with some antidepressants to stabilise her mood and felt that she would benefit from some psychological help too. She was consequently referred to the counselling service by her GP stating in the referral letter that she was suffering from symptoms of depression and general anhedonia. Samantha was initially assessed by a Chartered Clinical Psychologist and subsequently referred to me for psychodynamic therapy. It was determined during the assessment that psychodynamic therapy was suitable for her as her difficulties stemmed from her early childhood relationships and experiences. After the assessment I telephoned Samantha and we agreed on a date for the first session.

### **Biographical details**

Samantha is a 33-year-old, single, heterosexual, white woman who lives by herself in rented accommodation. She currently works as a civil servant which she enjoys. She is a well-kempt woman who was dressed casually and came across as friendly and slightly nervous.

### **Earliest Memory**

Samantha's earliest memory was elicited during assessment to shed light on some of her early relational patterns and experiences. She recounted an early childhood memory of being dismissed by a group of school friends after returning from a week's holiday from school. She remembered finding a note in her desk from her friends saying that they no longer wanted her to be part of their friendship circle. She related feeling very upset at the time.

### Family

Samantha has an older brother and an older sister, both of whom are married with children. Her sister lives in America with her family and her brother still lives in England. Samantha's parents are still married and she maintains contact with all of her family members.

Samantha described her mother as critical during childhood and adolescent years which she found hurtful; she often made disparaging remarks towards Samantha varying from her appearance to the books she read for pleasure. She related that her brother ridiculed her throughout her childhood and teenage years by belittling her appearance and her school work. Her father was emotionally cold towards her and frequently worked away from home.

From the age of 6 to 18 Samantha was a competitive swimmer which she did to fulfil her mother's wishes. She had no interest in pursuing her swimming but felt she had to do so to please her mother. She was coached by her mother and continually urged to try harder; her mother would often question why Samantha did not win all of her races.

### Life events and social relationships

Samantha had a relationship with a boy from her college when she was 17-years-old which lasted 6 months. She described it as a casual relationship which petered out as neither of them maintained contact. This is the only relationship Samantha has had in her life and she feels embarrassed that she has not had more intimate relationship experience. Samantha attended university but found the transition from home life to university very difficult. She found it hard to integrate herself into university life and make friends. Her sister left England to live in America at this time which Samantha found distressing as her sister was a close source of support to her. After university she went straight into full-time employment. Samantha related that she had some good friends in her life but she often found it difficult to take the initiative to contact them and arrange to meet up. She also conveyed that her difficulty in meeting up with friends was associated with feeling like the 'odd one out' as the majority of these friends were either married or engaged.

As Samantha spoke of her life experiences and relationships she appeared indifferent and rationalised many of her difficulties. For example, when speaking of her hesitance in contacting friends and meeting up with them she often identified work demands and a lack of time as the underlying reason.

### **The presenting problem**

Samantha's presenting difficulties were low mood, stress and an increasing withdrawal from her friends which had developed 6 months before seeing her GP when she changed jobs. She had explained that settling in to her new job had been more difficult than she had imagined. Samantha told me that she had suffered from feelings of depression before, particularly when making the transition from home to university, but had never sought help for it.

Additionally, Samantha found social situations difficult because she felt that she had nothing valuable to contribute to conversations with others. She felt that others found her boring because of this and as a result spent much of her time alone. She wanted to break out of this 'comfort zone' but found it difficult to achieve this. Furthermore, Samantha expressed a desire to begin an intimate relationship with someone but felt unable to because she worried about how they would respond to her lack of relationship experience. Consequently this prevented her from meeting others and entering a new relationship.

Samantha decided to come for therapy at the time she did because she was finding the integration into her job stressful and she noticed that she was feeling increasingly lonely; she wanted help with both of these issues as they were interfering with her day-to-day functioning.

### **The psychodynamic formulation**

My impression of Samantha was that she was experiencing considerable low self-esteem and a lack of a sense of self due to the conflict between her ego and superego. Her sense of self was governed by the punitive aspects of her superego which led to a poorly-functioning ego. Her difficulties with life transitions and recurring symptoms of depression could be understood when placed in the context of her early relationships and the therapeutic relationship (Hinshelwood, 1991).

Samantha was rejected early in her life as demonstrated by her childhood memory of her school friends dismissing her. In the family context it seemed that Samantha did not feel accepted by her mother either for the person she was, based on the ongoing criticism she received as a child. In my view she complied with her mother's demands, such as continuing swimming, in order to avoid criticism and maintain her mother's love and approval. This conceivably contributed to the development of a False Self as a means of preserving her mother's acceptance as her True Self was unappreciated. It seemed difficult for Samantha to meet her mother's expectations, particularly when she did not win her swimming races, and it is my view that this, as well as the recurrent criticism, was internalised by Samantha which led to her weak sense of self and overactive superego. The demands of her id seemed diminished too due to an absence of satisfying her own needs which perhaps explained her lack of intimate relationships. In addition to the relationship with her mother, Samantha was not appreciated by her father and brother when she was younger based on their behaviour towards her. My impression is that Samantha grew up feeling unloved and unaccepted by her family which reinforced the disguise of her True Self.

It appeared to me that Samantha's early experiences were conducive to her current difficulty in forming close relationships. Her tendency to stay in her 'comfort zone' protected her from showing her True Self as it may not have been accepted by others (as it had not been by her family) if she stepped out of the zone. Samantha's earliest memory in particular described being rejected by others; therefore, it could be said that rejection from others was a pattern in Samantha's life experiences. This pattern reinforced a withdrawal from her friends, subsequently increasing her loneliness and low self-esteem as she had few people she could relate to. My sense was that Samantha had also achieved a poor sense of autonomy due to satisfying her mother's wishes rather than her own which explained her difficulty in making the transition from home life to university and into new jobs. McLean (2005) stated that transitions such as entering college or university are significant stages as the individual must not only adapt to their new environment but also impart who they are. Samantha could not communicate who she was because her True Self was concealed, both in the university context and her current life situation.

### **Transference and the central relational theme**

Samantha's difficulty in relating to others was observed in the therapeutic relationship. She seemed reluctant to engage with me and she often did not know what to say or how to begin the sessions. She appeared nervous, as if she was not able to show her self to me. My sense was that this reluctance served to protect her from any criticism that she might have expected from me, much like she expected it from her mother. I felt her nervousness was also linked to an uncertainty of whether I would like and approve of her and by limiting what she had to say to me she was evading any anticipated disparagement from me. Therefore, Samantha was repeating a pattern of relating to significant others, namely her family members, in our relationship. Her central relational theme was a lack of engagement with others for fear of criticism and disapproval. This appeared to be weaved in her life experiences when other contexts were considered such as her lack of friends at university and a withdrawal from social activities in her current life. See Appendix A for triangle of insight. In view of this way of relating to others, it was considered likely that Samantha would show some form of compliance during the course of therapy, such as showing frequent agreeable responses to therapeutic interventions or suggestions and feeling a need to be 'successful' in therapy and reporting good health as the sessions progressed.

### **Negotiating a contract and therapeutic aims**

The counselling service offered 12-week contracts only to clients due to long-waiting lists and continual referrals from the GPs. Samantha agreed to work on a 12-week contract with me. Given that psychodynamic work tends to be longer than 12 sessions, it was important for Samantha and me to establish a focus for the work during the assessment which entailed concentrating on a particular area or difficulty that was most significant for her. Establishing a focus also facilitates safe, competent practice by providing containment for the client for the short duration of the work and avoiding uncovering areas that remain unexplored as the contract terminates.

Samantha and I agreed to explore significant events in her early childhood which might have been conducive to her low self-esteem and difficulty in engaging with others, both inside and outside of the therapy context. The aim of this was to enable Samantha to see how her current pattern of relating encouraged her to remain in her

‘comfort zone’ and hindered the formation of new relationships. A main aim was also to provide a facilitative environment for Samantha to revive her True Self and to understand why her False Self had evolved.

### **THE DEVELOPMENT OF THERAPY**

#### **The identification of the False Self**

Samantha showed a distinct unease at the beginning of therapy which seemed to communicate to me that she did not know how to behave or how to proceed with the session. Her leg would often jolt out as she was speaking to me and she fidgeted during the sessions indicating that she was nervous. As the sessions progressed she would come reporting that her mood was improving and that she felt better in herself which left her with little to say. The content of the sessions would be focused on the routine aspects of her life and she would frequently recite a list of social activities and hobbies she was determined to take up as a means of improving her social life. Jacobs (1999) notes:

*“Sometimes a client talks about many trivial issues or reports the week in such detail that the counsellor feels that more spontaneous feelings are kept at bay. The need to control what they say is also seen in clients who come each week with ‘a little list’ of things to talk about”.* Jacobs (1999, p.108)

Despite this motivation to integrate more activity in her life and her expressed improvement in mood, to me there was something almost lifeless and empty about her; her expressed improvement in mood did not match her outward appearance, as if her words had no meaning. I felt as though Samantha was trying to convince me of her determination to achieve something. I remember feeling a struggle to remain interested in the sessions and I felt frustrated because I did not feel connected to her. Most notably I would find it difficult to recall my time with her, as if she had had no impact on me whatsoever.

After a couple sessions of this repeated struggle with Samantha I discussed it in supervision as I wished to understand my countertransference and what it might be

indicative of. After considering her past experiences I was able to recognise that Samantha's 'flight into health'<sup>7</sup> was a transference of her mother expecting her to win her swimming races. Her improved well-being demonstrated that she felt an obligation to achieve a good result in therapy in order to gain my approval and acceptance. She was repeating a pattern of feeling that she had to meet her mother's expectations with me. It also suggested that significant feelings were being concealed from me which highlighted why I struggled to remain interested; she was not showing her real self to me so our relationship felt superficial. Overall, supervision helped me to see that Samantha's False Self and overactive superego were operating in the therapeutic context which informed me of how to continue with our work together.

### **The emergence of the True Self**

Following supervision I said compassionately to Samantha in our next session, "On the one hand I can see how behaviourally motivated you are through your desire to improve your social life but on the other hand I feel as though I do not have a sense of your emotional or real self, or how you feel about your experiences, and I wonder if you have any thoughts of why this might be?" Upon reflection I wonder if this may have come across as criticising; Samantha may have felt she had done something wrong by not showing her self to me, however, I wanted to convey to Samantha that I wished to know this part of her, her True Self, particularly as others had disregarded it during her early experiences. I felt that it was important to offer her the opportunity to reflect on this first before I made a transference interpretation to encourage her to reach her own intelligibility, and to avoid her complying with my agenda as she had done previously with her mother. An alternative intervention could have been to make more use of the here-and-now and our relationship by saying 'It seems as though you are trying to convince me of things you are going to do, as if you are expecting me to have expectations of you that you need to meet, as you felt your mother did'. This would have been more interpretive and drawn on all three contexts of the triangle of insight (Jacobs, 1999). Nonetheless, Samantha acknowledged my intervention and related that her recitation of her weekly routine

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<sup>7</sup> The 'flight into health' denotes a client's sudden improvement in well-being seen in statements such as 'I feel much better now', as if they have experienced a miracle cure. This is often a form of resistance to avoid exploring symptoms or feelings further.

had been to avoid certain feelings because she was unsure of whether to reveal them or not. We identified how this was due to her withholding her feelings from her mother as a means of 'keeping up appearances' and maintaining her mother's approval. I used this opportunity to make an interpretation about her 'flight into health' and said "I wonder if perhaps you felt that you had to achieve some sort of speedy recovery here, as if I had expectations of you to succeed in therapy much like your mother did when you were younger?" Samantha responded by saying that she had felt the need to impress me by achieving better mental health quickly and recognised how this was keeping difficult issues hidden. On the other hand, Samantha stated that she was keeping certain feelings hidden from me and it might have been more helpful to have focused on this and attempt to uncover some of these feelings rather than make a transference interpretation. This would have provided a 'facilitative environment' (Winnicott, 1965) for Samantha to work through some of her feelings regarding her original parenting (Clarkson, 1995; Malan, 1979). Despite this, I felt that a connection with her was eventually made.

As therapy progressed, Samantha began to acknowledge the distress she felt in response to her mother's criticism and how it also contributed to her anxiety about relationships with men. During one session she remembered her mother disapproving of the one relationship she had when she was 17 to the extent that Samantha did not feel permitted to enjoy the relationship. As a result Samantha felt undeserving of intimate relationships and gradually came to feel intimidated by them. As Samantha continued to express her feelings of unworthiness and disapproval from her family she covered her face, broke down in tears and sobbed. She wondered aloud if anyone would notice if she were not around anymore because she had grown up feeling unimportant to even her closest family. It transpired that although Samantha never contemplated taking her own life these were thoughts she had had for some time and she continuously questioned her worth. This was a breakthrough in our work together and I felt very moved by Samantha's emerging pain and distress. I felt connected to her as she was showing her True Self to me; we were able to identify that this was the 'real Samantha' that had been masked by her False Self to ensure acceptance and love from her family. I conveyed to her that I could understand how upsetting this was for her and that I felt touched by her expression of grief.

Samantha explained to me that she had never spoken of her distress before to anyone. She stated that it was a relief to release it and to discuss the discomforting feelings she often suppressed. Samantha and I recognised that her False Self and the punitive standards of her superego seemed to be diminishing gradually the more she got in touch with her True Self. My countertransference altered too in this process; the sessions became less of a struggle and I experienced considerable warmth towards Samantha as she engaged with me in our relationship.

### **REVIEW OF THE THERAPY SO FAR**

#### **Changes in the therapeutic contract**

At present I am still working with Samantha as our contract was extended. As we approached the end of our initial contracted 12 sessions important issues were only beginning to be uncovered. This highlights the difficulty of short-term psychodynamic work even when a focus is established for the sessions. My supervisor and I agreed that to end the therapy at a critical point would be unhelpful to Samantha and that 12 additional sessions may benefit her and help her to explore her difficulties further. I offered the possibility of another 12 sessions to Samantha to see how she felt about it and she readily accepted. She felt that she was only beginning to make sense of her problems and she wished to continue with this. Upon reflection I could have paid more attention to Samantha's acceptance in terms of her complying with the extension, and whether it resonated with satisfying her mother's demands; however, I am now more aware of this process issue and shall continue to be mindful of it in the work.

#### **Difficulties encountered**

I encountered considerable difficulty in building up a rapport initially with Samantha and I found it concerning that I often felt uninterested in the sessions. I have noticed that as I began to write this case study I felt stuck and detached from it which I feel reflected a parallel process of my initial struggle to engage with Samantha. The lack of a connection with Samantha was challenging because of the block it caused in the work; I felt immobilised and frustrated and it prevented her from touching on the feelings that were of great significance. However, I feel that this was an important point in the work; by discussing this issue in supervision it

encouraged me to consider what these feelings may be signifying which then informed the interventions I made. I believe that this also ensured the provision of safe and competent therapy with Samantha.

Overall I feel pleased with the work I have done with Samantha so far. I believe that my interpretations have been theoretically sound and have helped to develop a strong therapeutic alliance. I feel that this alliance is also demonstrated by the change I experienced from feeling stuck at the beginning of this report to feeling stimulated and engaged as it has progressed. I now continue to look forward to my sessions with Samantha.

**END**

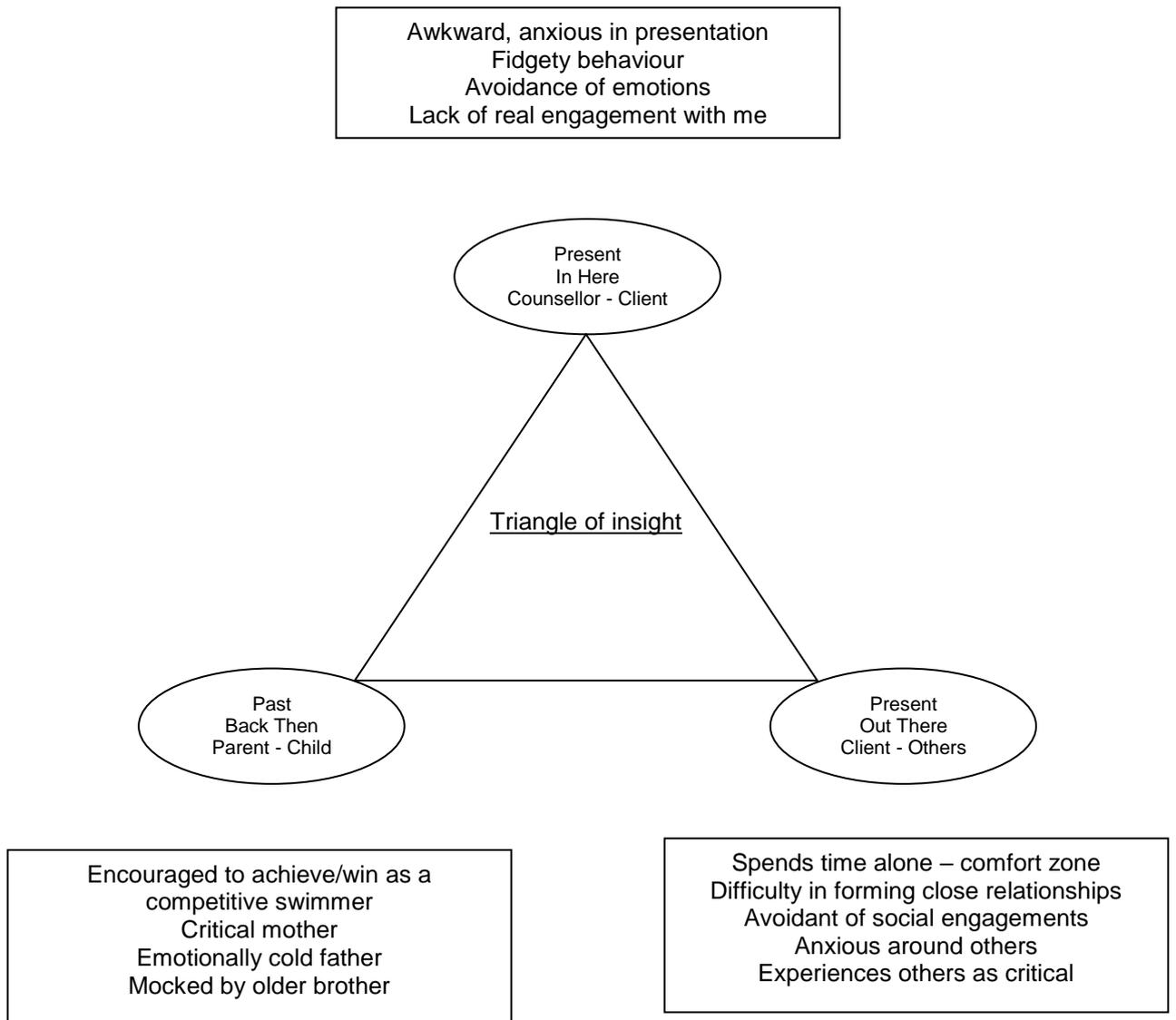
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## *Appendix*

Appendix A – Triangle of insight



*Figure 2: Samantha's relational triangle of insight.*

**Preparing to say goodbye**  
**A psychodynamic process report**

Anna Butcher  
City University

### **Rationale for the choice of case**

The completion of therapy is extremely important and needs to be handled sensitively and with care. Through my work with Michelle<sup>8</sup>, I was reminded of just how difficult the ending of therapy can be for clients, especially when traumatic experiences of abandonment and loss are all too familiar. Most importantly, I learned that defence mechanisms which are employed to withhold the expression of genuine feelings need to be understood and appreciated rather than disputed. This was a valuable learning experience for me because it reminded me of the importance of showing respect for the client and the structure of their inner world.

Lastly, I experienced some sadness as Michelle and I approached the ending and this enabled me to see how my countertransference influenced my interventions. My own sadness encouraged me to reflect on our sessions together which produced some personal insights and learning experiences for me to remember in my future as a therapist.

### **The psychodynamic approach**

The psychodynamic approach affirms that an individual's current life situation can be understood in terms of early attachments and relationships, or *object relations* (Klein, 1932). This refers to the individual's personal relationships to both humans and objects, or what Winnicott (1958) called *transitional objects*, such as a child's blanket. During infancy the child's object relations creates a template upon which later relationships will be established and maintained. In other words, the individual will seek out others (friends, partners) who will reaffirm these early object relationships. Additionally, psychodynamic approaches place great importance on the *transference relationship* whereby the individual repeats former patterns of relating to significant people with the therapist. The development of transference invites the therapist to help the client distinguish between what is real and what is imaginary. Past conflicts that are felt in the relationship with the therapist can then be explored and resolved with this distinction (Sandler, 1989). When these three areas, the current life situation, early object relationships and the transference relationship, are conjointly considered, a core-object relationship, or a common relational pattern,

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<sup>8</sup> Name has been changed to protect the identity of the client

can be derived (Hinshelwood, 1991). The notion of early object relations and the psychodynamic theory of panic attacks shall be the focus in this process report.

### *Conflict and panic attacks*

According to Freud (1895), several aspects of mental life such as anxiety, fantasies and character styles are a product of *compromise formations*, which refers to the compromise between an unacceptable desire and the defence against the desire. Such compromise formations can take the form of panic attacks and often the compromise is associated with feelings of anger or rage, and fears of abandonment or separation. Busch, Milrod & Singer (1999) support this view and found through their clinical observations that fears of separation and anger are frequent areas of conflict responsible for the onset and persistence of panic. They note that:

*“From early life, individuals prone to panic struggle with feelings of inadequacy and a sense of being dependent on caretakers to provide safety. This fearful dependency can develop from.....traumatic developmental experiences, such as loss or abandonment threat.....the child experiences the parent as providing inadequate protection and becomes angry at the perceived rejecting or abandoning behaviour. This anger triggers anxiety because of a fear that it will lead to further disruption in the relationship to caretakers, increasing fearful dependency.” (p.238)*

In adulthood fantasies or experiences of disruptions in attachments occur which are triggered by life events. Defence mechanisms are employed by the individual to deny anger and compensate for any unacceptable feelings associated with the fantasies and experiences. As a compromise, panic attacks develop as an expression of the underlying conflict which Busch, Milrod & Singer (1999) emphasise as the least uncomfortable solution to the conflict at hand; the angry feelings and fear of loss that underlie the panic attacks are far more distressing to the individual than the panic attacks themselves.

### *The context for the work*

The therapy took place in a GP surgery which offered a counselling service to patients who were referred by their GP. The sessions were weekly and lasting for 50

minutes each. The counselling service primarily offered psychodynamic therapy to patients, however, cognitive-behavioural therapy was also provided if necessary. The appropriate theoretical approach for patients was determined once the initial assessment was completed.

### **The referral**

Michelle visited her GP after experiencing panic attacks shortly after becoming more emotionally involved with her boyfriend. She requested a referral to the counselling service as she felt that psychological input would provide her with some understanding of the development of her panic attacks. Her GP concurred with her request and stated in the referral letter that Michelle had recently become very anxious and suffered panic attacks. He felt that this had been brought on by the stress of meeting her new boyfriend's parents. He prescribed her with a dose of 5mg of Zolpidem Hemitartrate (mild sleeping tablets) as she was also experiencing sleep difficulties and Michelle was contacted by me shortly afterwards to attend an initial assessment.

### **Biographical details**

Michelle is a 30-year-old, heterosexual, white woman who lives by herself in rented accommodation. She currently works for her father's business as an administrative assistant. She is a well-kempt woman who was dressed casually and she came across as warm, friendly and open to engage.

### **Earliest memory**

Michelle's earliest memory was elicited during assessment as this can be a clinically useful tool in identifying relational patterns that stem from early experiences. When Michelle was asked to recall her earliest childhood memory she recounted two that stood out the most for her. In the first one she described walking up the garden to the shed with her father when she was three-years-old. She related that they were going to get straw for her fancy-dress party costume which she was excited about. In the second she detailed chewing the legs off of a 'Sindy' doll when her younger sister was born; she explained that her parents had given the doll to her as a gift from her new-born sister. Michelle stated that at the time she felt cross at her parents because she knew the doll was not really from her sister.

### Family and relationships

Michelle is the eldest of three children; her sister and brother are three and eight years younger respectively. They all live in their own accommodation. Michelle recalled that she began to take care of her siblings when she was nine- years-old as her parents were often away from the family home with work. She would pick her brother up from nursery school and cook for herself and her siblings. Michelle's parents separated when she was 13-years-old after her father had several affairs with other women. She described herself as a 'daddy's girl' as a child but after her parents' separation she explained that she did not see much of her father. Her mother frequently remained absent from home too after the separation. Her parents now have new partners whom Michelle said were continually put before her and her siblings which upset her.

After the separation, Michelle's relationship with her parents deteriorated further. She remembered her parents being unsupportive and uncaring towards her as she grew up. She recounted that she found it very hard to show her distress to them as they would not know how to manage it. They would make flippant comments stating that she was not the only one who had emotional difficulties which Michelle found rejecting and hurtful. Michelle described a good relationship with her younger brother and sister and reported that she felt very protective of them, particularly her younger brother who had experienced his own mental health difficulties in the past. She explained that her parents failed to attend to her brother's problems which angered her.

Michelle described a strong network of friends whom she enjoyed to socialise with. However, she also reported that she found it hard to share her difficult feelings with them for fear of burdening them. She stated that her current boyfriend of one year was very supportive of her but she felt uncomfortable expressing her feelings to him and allowing herself to be vulnerable with him. Michelle also expressed a constant fear of her boyfriend leaving her.

### Life events

During her first year of university, one of Michelle's friends committed suicide which she found devastating. She returned home from university when this happened

to stay with her mother and her mother's new boyfriend. However, Michelle related that her mother's boyfriend did not want her in the house and consequently her mother was not very welcoming and supportive of her at this time. Michelle remembered feeling unwanted and as if her mother's boyfriend took priority over her.

Five months after her friend's suicide, Michelle's mother left the family home without telling anyone when Michelle was 18-years-old. She remembered being home from university and returning to the family home to find it empty of all its belongings which she found upsetting. This resulted in a lack of contact between Michelle and her mother until Michelle's grandmother died two years later.

As Michelle related this information she said that she felt 'annoyed' at her parents for their past behaviour but that she still loved them dearly.

### **The presenting problem**

Michelle's presenting problems were severe anxiety and panic attacks which developed after telling her boyfriend that she loved him. Prior to this, she had experienced low mood and difficulties in sleeping which lasted for a period of eight months. Initially she thought the termination of the oral contraceptive pill was responsible for her low mood, however, her symptoms persisted which she found unsettling. Michelle expressed a fear of opening up to others, particularly her boyfriend, as she expected rejection and a lack of understanding. Consequently, she would hide her feelings which was becoming increasingly unbearable for her.

### **Initial assessment**

Michelle was assessed by me for two sessions before commencing psychodynamic therapy. During the assessment she was very tearful as she spoke of her current anxiety and low mood. She explained that she wanted to understand the underlying factors of her anxiety and panic attacks as the uncertainty of this caused her additional distress. She also felt that it was interfering with her relationship with her boyfriend because her anxiety prevented her from enjoying the relationship.

Michelle described some traumatic experiences and difficult relationships from her childhood during the assessment which appeared to be largely conducive to her increased levels of anxiety and panic attacks. It seemed that psychodynamic therapy was appropriate for Michelle to explore these experiences further to identify a core object relationship and conflict that might have developed as a result.

### **The psychodynamic formulation**

My impression of Michelle was that she was experiencing panic attacks due to a core intrapsychic conflict associated with feelings of anger, abandonment and loss from her early childhood. This conflict and the development of her panic attacks could be understood when placed in the context of her early object relationships and the transference relationship (Hinshelwood, 1991).

In my view Michelle experienced threats of loss and separation from her parents from the age of three. Her two childhood memories contrast in emotional content and seem to portray a disruption in her parental attachments. The former illustrates an excited ‘daddy’s girl’ walking with her father and the latter highlights the threat of separation from her parents when her sister is born which conveys two very opposite affects. This risk of separation from her parents conceivably triggered anxiety and feelings of anger towards them which she felt unable to express for fear of causing further disruption. Furthermore, her anxiety and anger might have increased by the loss of being ‘daddy’s girl’ as her father now had another daughter. The fact that Michelle recalled these two memories simultaneously indicates her unmanageable inner conflict of experiencing both love and anger towards her parents.

Michelle experienced further significant loss and rejection from her parents throughout her childhood. It seemed to me that her parents provided inadequate care to both Michelle and her siblings through their absence from the family home thus imposing the role of the care-giver onto Michelle. This undoubtedly led to an internalised abandoning parental figure which was emphasised when her parents separated and remained absent in their care to their children. The continuation of her parents providing inadequate support and care for Michelle could be seen by the insensitive remarks they made and their inability to comfort her during her emotional distress. This was particularly evident at the time of Michelle’s friend’s suicide when

her mother did not respond to her daughter's grief. My sense is that Michelle grew up feeling unimportant and unloved by her parents which induced a low sense of self and a fear of attachments to others.

Michelle's anxiety of depending on others for fear of them rejecting or abandoning her was manifested in her current relationships with her friends and boyfriend. Her reluctance to share her feelings with her friends and her boyfriend could be understood as a defence of self-sufficiency set up to evade the *point of maximum pain* (Hinshelwood, 1991) which, in Michelle's case, was abandonment and rejection. It is significant to note that the onset of her panic attacks came after expressing her love for her boyfriend; this communication of her emotional attachment to him conceivably triggered a fantasy of their relationship being ultimately disrupted (Busch, Milrod & Singer, 1999), an anxiety she was familiar with from her parental attachments, thus reinforcing the unmanageable fear of dependency. My sense is that Michelle's panic attacks were a compromise formation between her unexpressed feelings of anger and her fears and fantasies of abandonment stemming from her traumatic experiences as a child.

### **The transference relationship**

During the sessions with me Michelle spoke *very* quickly and in a desultory fashion. She digressed frequently from her thoughts and ideas which made it very difficult for me to understand her. This created a lack of space between us to interact but most notably it was as if she was reluctant to allow me to speak. At times I felt engulfed by the abundance of material that she discharged into the sessions which consequently left me feeling lost. Furthermore, Michelle would talk about her family members more than herself, as if she was bringing them into the session to keep the focus off of herself. This crowding of the room, and the lack of interaction between us, could be understood as her evading an attachment to me for fear of any anticipated rejection or abandonment, particularly if her early memories are borne in mind. It is plausible that I appeared before her as someone who might reject her and not show support for her emotional difficulties as her parents had done previously. My sense is also that her deviations from her own difficulties were to avoid being a burden on me and to uphold the concealment of her unexpressed feelings, such as the anger she felt towards her parents.

At the times when she did talk about herself I often felt very moved by Michelle, particularly when she explored her traumatic experiences. It evoked a strong desire in me to want to take care of her. *Projective identification*, first introduced by Klein (1946), has been described by Ogden (1982) as ‘the process whereby the therapist is given stage direction for a particular role’ by the client as they direct an enactment of their inner world. In this context I assumed the role of a care-giver to Michelle; I experienced a strong sense of responsibility to compensate for the inadequate care she received in the past. This integral part of the transference-countertransference process was particularly noticeable as we approached the ending of therapy which shall be discussed further in this report.

### **Contract and counselling plan**

Michelle was offered a contract of 12 weekly sessions lasting 50 minutes each. Due to a long waiting list and continual referrals from GPs the counselling service only offered 12-week contracts to patients. Given that the contract is brief, particularly for psychodynamic work, it is important that a focus for the sessions is agreed between therapist and client during the assessment. The focus centres on a particular area or issue most significant for the client. This promotes containment for the client during the brief contract without opening up areas which are left unexplored as the sessions reach a close.

Our focus for the sessions was to explore events that provoked anxiety for Michelle and to identify themes across these events. We also agreed to explore her childhood experiences and early relationships in more detail to ascertain areas of conflict and to highlight the core object relationship that was woven throughout areas of her life.

### **The aims of the session**

The aims of the session were to work through the ending of therapy as the contract was drawing to a close by exploring what Michelle was experiencing in response to this. Michelle had had previous traumatic experiences associated with loss and abandonment and therefore an aim was to explore similar feelings around the loss of therapy and to encourage the expression of them openly. Another aim was

to look at Michelle's thoughts about her counselling experience and to look at her needs in terms of pursuing further support.

### **The lead in to the session**

The following transcript is taken from our eleventh session, the penultimate session. Michelle had started by saying how she felt a considerable reduction in her anxiety and how she was now sleeping throughout the night without any disruptions. We also began to look at her feelings regarding the end of therapy and the possibility of continuing with psychological support elsewhere. Michelle related that she found the thought of beginning therapy again scary and as the session proceeds from here she is continuing to explore her experience of therapy.

### **The transcript and commentary**

(C1: Client, T1: Therapist, Co.1: Commentary)

(..... pause in speech)

C1: .....there's a bit of me that feels like.....mmm.....rather become dependent on it instead of [right] ....getting on, you know, doing it [mmm] actually just, [mmm] well I am doing it you know it's not like I..... [sure] I'm gonna be in limbo the rest of the time than.....it's just a weird feeling, it's a weird.....because it's not, it's not the same as being physically, like, you know, like having to.....keep.....using crutches or something, you know it's not, um, it's not as, kind of, um assessable.....to me like I don't, you know, um (*small sigh*).....I don't know whether I'm convincing myself I don't need it because of a, um (*tut*) a, a, a more negative side of me or if the more positive side, you know, the, the bit of me that's, um..... (*swallows back tears*) doing ok, if that's the bit that's making the decision, um, sounds, this sounds like I've got two personalities, I *don't* think I've got that but....but otherwise you know it's hard, um (*tut*) it's hard not to start with, when I was feeling paranoid of things sometimes you think 'well, I'm paranoid but what if I'm not?' you know, what if a lot of these feelings are normal feelings but I'm not, [mmm] I'm just not processing them properly, um..... (*swallows back tears*) and it's kind of how it feels now like, I can't, I can't um, (*getting upset*) I can't

make a deci-, yeah, I just can't make a decision...for myself, I don't know, and it's not even that I want someone else to say 'do it' or 'don't do it' (*tearful*)....I just um, yeah I just.....don't know [mmm, yeah] yeah, it's really weird, I don't know, I'm not, um.....it's almost like, seems like I've decided I've definitely got to....and another bit of me thinks, well if you thought that, you've definitely got to be, then you're obviously thinking quite rationally so maybe you don't need this if...I don't know, does that make any sense?

T1: Mmm, it....sounds like you're confused.

*Co1: Michelle is clearly experiencing some form of ambivalence here as she speaks of taking up further therapy. As she spoke she was getting visibly upset and I felt certain that she was feeling a great sadness at the loss of therapy but that she felt unable to communicate it to me. She stumbled over her words which demonstrated that it was difficult for her to piece her thoughts together. I feel that this pattern of speech reflected the panic or anxiety that she might have been feeling internally about therapy finishing. The 'rule of abstinence' in psychodynamic work involves being cautious and not intruding upon what clients are trying to get in touch with (Jacobs, 1999). My intention in T1 was to reflect her confusion rather than interpret her distress as sadness at the loss of our relationship because I felt she might have resisted it at this point. My sense was that she was also beginning to acknowledge her regret that we were ending and I felt it important to let her continue to process this.*

C2: Yeah! I don't, and I don't really wanna be confused about counselling like that's the only thing that (*voice breaking*) was just, um (*very tearful*) ..... like a constant [right] um..... [so] and I don't want it to be distressing, I don't want this to cause me stress, you know, 'cos I don't know why I'm.....I think I've got that s-, um, just fear of it, like I said fear of it starting again and having to talk about things and, and having to do.....I don't know, it's not getting to know somebody is it 'cos I don't know you, it's getting.....familiar, or getting um, to a, sorry, streaming down my face (*points to her tears and takes tissues*) getting comfortable again with somebody um, and feeling, I don't know 'cos either way (*blows her nose*) .....(*voice*

*becomes guarded*) I don't know, I'm getting myself all in a state about nothing so, might as well just stop thinking about it (*wipes face, straightens up*).

T2: I think it sounds like what you're saying is that this is almost.....like a loss.

*Co.2: Michelle seems to open up after my reflection of her confusion as she expressed that counselling has been a constant for her. I felt that this had been an enormous statement for her to make because of her fear of dependency and abandonment, and this could be seen when her voice broke as she said it. I remember feeling touched at this point to see her expressing her distress and for implicitly saying that she felt comfortable with me. Michelle became defensive after saying this as noted in the guarded tone of her voice. By referring to her reaction as getting 'in a state about nothing' she was warding off her intolerable distress by denying it and perhaps covering up some anger at me for repeating the abandoning behaviour of her parents and that she might be 'replaced' by another client as she felt when her sister was born. My intention in T2 was to use trial identification by putting myself in her shoes in relationship to me (Casement, 1985) and to suggest what she might have been feeling. I tentatively proposed a feeling of loss so that it would have been identified as an appropriate response to have (Jacobs, 1999). With hindsight, I now feel that it would have been much better to comment on the here-and-now process of her sudden attempt to disconnect from her sadness and encourage her to reflect on it (C2). This would have provided an opportunity for us to explore her current experience in the context of her previous experiences of loss.*

C3: Well, I guess so, it's a bit pathetic though but (*laughs*) .....guess so.

T3: Pathetic?

C4: Yeah, well it's a bit (*starts crying*).....it just doesn't really feel like that.....or I didn't think it did, I don't know.....I'm a bit annoyed (*laughs*) I'm a bit annoyed now.

T4: You're a bit annoyed.

C5: I don't wanna be upset about it (*crying*) .....I don't think, I suppose I must think of it as that but.....[yeah] I hadn't in my mi-, like consciously, I just.....maybe I just thought right, it's you know, it's gonna be done and [mmm] .....I think I was expecting it, it's like exams or something, you want it to just be tied up and done and to know that you're, that you, you like, you as a per- um, person is quite.....intimidating, yeah, intimidating um.....[it's um] yeah, dunno.

*Co.5: Although Michelle did not refute my suggestion of loss, she still appeared defensive and as if she did not want to accept it by describing it as 'pathetic' (C3) and by getting 'annoyed' (C4). Jacobs (1999) emphasises how the reasons for resistance need to be understood by both client and therapist and that meeting it head-on only reinforces the resistance. Therefore, I repeated her words in T3 and T4 to see if she would elaborate on her resistance and for us to reach an understanding of it. Michelle related that it was an intimidating experience for her to have known me and that she wished the ending to be 'tied up' (C5) which explained her resistance to explore her feelings somewhat. It is clear from her faltered speech that she was still struggling with her feelings. With hindsight I could have interpreted her annoyance as disappointment or anger with me for repeating the failures she experienced with her parents. This might have again shown her that this was an acceptable response to have; however, I know that I was feeling sad to complete therapy with Michelle and perhaps I did not want her to be angry with me.*

T5: I think it's.....really important that, you know, you do understand that.....that it, it is a loss and it's ok [yeah] because, and I know you don't almost want to.....go near that or accept that, that it is, 'cos you're saying it might be pathetic and you don't want to feel like that and.....maybe this is tied into this sort of.....fear of becoming too attached or dependent on someone or something [mmm] and then it inevitably going away, which in some way is going to happen (*she sighs and laughs*) you know, after next week (*laughing through tears*) that is the end and [yeah] you have opened up to me and you've shared a lot of painful stuff with me and then it's....gone..... um, and I'm sure that can evoke feelings of fear or maybe even anger and frustration and it then, on top of that, it seems like you're then getting cross at yourself for feeling those things because why should this feel.....like a loss because in a sense it's a very, very different relationship [yeah, yeah it's not a...] (*laughing*)

it's very, it's a bizarre one [yeah] in a sense in that you know, you tell me a lot of things about you and I don't tell you anything about myself (*laughing*) [yeah].

C6: Yeah, I'm not laugh-, I'm only laughing 'cos you're right, it's like you don't um..... want to quantify connections to people [sure] by emoti- you know like (*inaudible word*) emotional and choice and, um.....and I'm, also there's a choice because I made a choice to come and talk [sure] to come and talk to you that it could have been I guess um, you or some- you know somebody else and I suppose that in itself's....kind of, the knowledge that that means the next.....if I go on with counselling, somebody else that's the same thing you know, it's still, it's kind of a choice [yeah] um.....yeah I don't know, it just feels like, yeah you're right, it just probably is...that....loss...thing [absolutely] that it feels, it does feel weird because it's not um.....um, you know it's just not like other things and I suppose that's, it feels pathetic because it feels like um, like it's a neediness or something or.....or some clinginess, it's, I suppose that's not what I feel and so I've, then I've, it's like I've um.....equated closeness with, with those other, that those other things have to come even though, you know, [yeah] they, they don't feel there, does that [yeah] .....make sense, that's why it feels stupid, 'cos it feels, yeah to be upset about something then gives.....to me I feel like I'm giving off a different impression to what I feel about it, um.....that.....yeah, like um, I suppose, there's, I want to joke about it 'cos I do anyway like joke....generally, but it makes me feel like a bit of a stalker (*laughing*) or something, you know, to be upset about.....something that's.....kind of the natural thing I always knew was coming [yeah] so.....

*Co.6: Wolff (1977) stated that loss is a central theme in therapy and my intention in T5 was to affirm this loss for Michelle because up to this point she did not seem too welcoming of this idea. I also wanted to try and interpret her reluctance to accept the loss, and her perceiving it as pathetic, as her anxiety of depending on our relationship because of the eventual ending. The interpretation of the client's intrapsychic conflict is important because of their difficulty of putting feelings into words (Busch, Milrod & Singer, 1999) and although Michelle shows some relief as she sighs, my intervention is far too laborious and convoluted. I wish I had stopped talking after stating that the end would be happening the following week. I feel I had*

*said enough and my continued rambling lacks focus. Upon reflection I believe I was struggling with my own difficulty of feeling like I was abandoning her and my rambling was indicative of this. Michelle's response (C6) is also quite incoherent demonstrating her inner confusion; however, she does eventually recognise her distress as loss ('it just probably is...that....loss...thing'). I feel that the pause between the last three words show how challenging it is for her to verbalise. Furthermore, I feel that she softens to some extent as she recognises her need to make light of the situation by joking about it. Her response to my intervention is not accompanied with defensiveness and she even accepts my interpretation which shows a reduction in her resistance.*

T6: But.....you know....even though we can know from the outset when the end date will be you can't predict what will happen between that time [no] and how much you will say to someone and what kind of attachment will be formed and.....

C7: No, and I never kind of knew what I'd say, I didn't know I'd.....(*inaudible*) maybe it's like um, it was always unexpected [yeah] and at first I'd dread it, I'd absolutely *dread* it and, then suddenly you just feel ok [mmm].....not, not ok but then it was sort, oh I've had a bit of wake-up, I felt like personally I'd had a wake-up call um.....and I suppose it's sort of having to do that [mmm] even though that's the point, I wouldn't have to do exactly that.....again 'cos it's, it's, nothing's the same but it's also having to feel.....like that [mmm] any of those earlier feelings is not, just not good, I just don't wanna feel like that and, and I'd, I think I'm too worried that....it'll be like um.....awakening the beast a bit [mmm] that they're not, I don't know, that the feelings aren't gone or that, that the stress around the, the trauma of them all is stronger than me again [right] and, I suppose I've, yeah, maybe it's, I don't know, 'cos of here now I feel like it's done and I can talk about other stuff and those things don't matter, you know they're not, they're not as, they're kind of not as important to me in here [mmm] they're not as important to me now in the outside world and....[mmm] and that's a really good thing but it's quite scary that someone might (*laughing*) scary that someone else might make me (*tearful*).....look at it again or something or [right] make it um, I suppose I'm, still feel quite, you know I feel susceptible [right] um.....not so much to my friends and family, you know I feel stronger, but in this kind of environment I do feel more

susceptible 'cos you know you're laid open, um [yeah] and, and you know it's not that you do, but someone could say anything to me in this environment and I would, I would take it on because I'd, um, respect your.....you know, knowledge and understanding and I think I'd feel, 'cos I've always felt quite.....I suppose safe to talk about those things, it feels quite scary..... to do that again [yeah] as it maybe that someone else might say something.....[different?] yeah, or upsetting or I don't know like, it's like the um, fear of new things that haven't even happened yet but it's quite scary to be you know in a position where someone can say [of course] 'don't you think you're being....' whatever [of course] I don't know.

T7: Of course.

*Co.7: I wanted to validate Michelle's distress at the ending of therapy despite knowing the end-date in advance (T6) by commenting that the experience itself is still unknown. I was also attempting to gently challenge her belief that her distress at the ending was a sign of 'neediness'. Wolff (1977) pointed out that the client needs to renounce certain beliefs, such as the belief that one can cope independently, in order to prepare for new beginnings. On another level I feel was also trying to comfort her implicitly due to an experience of projective identification. I feel that Michelle was projecting these unwanted feelings of sadness and fear at the end of our relationship on to me which I identified with and subsequently I felt a need to soothe her, as if I had been given a care-giver's role to play (Ogden, 1982) which compensated for the lack of support and reassurance she had received in the past. I was also experiencing my own disappointments of not being able to continue to see Michelle which aroused familiar feelings of inadequacy as a therapist and falling short of the ideal. It was necessary here for me to distance myself from my own feelings so that they would not colour my understanding of Michelle's experience. It would have been better for me to perhaps think of my own feelings of sadness as some of the emotion that she was not allowing herself to feel and to offer this to her. Despite my blunder, it seems that Michelle does go on to express some of her feelings more with regard to what has been and what could still be with her experience of therapy.*

## Discussion

### Evaluation of the session

Looking back at the session I realise that I did not make many interventions within the segment and those that I did were generally limited in content. However, I feel that by being tentative I was encouraging the open expression of Michelle's feelings associated with the end which was one of the aims of the session. Michelle was defensive at points when discussing her feelings and at the time I felt that I would have enhanced her resistance if I had been more interpretive of her defences. Upon reflection, these were here-and-now moments which I could have observed to Michelle and encouraged her to reflect on them. This could have promoted the exploration of how the ending evoked similar feelings to her previous losses and disappointments and provided opportunities to look at similarities between the therapeutic relationship and her external relationships. Furthermore, as I noted I was feeling sad to finish with Michelle and I could have used my own countertransference to reach her feelings that she was defending against. My experience of projective identification recruited me into a role of a compensatory care-giver which provoked me to make some unhelpful interventions. However, I feel that this was an important learning experience for me. Overall, while I feel that I could have made some improvements in my work I feel satisfied with the session.

### What I learned for future sessions

Throughout my training as a counselling psychologist I have tended to attribute a client's resistance as a failure on my part to set up a good working alliance. I became accustomed to thinking that I was not a good-enough therapist if the client was resistant with me which subsequently induced a resistance in me in a bid to defend against the intolerable thought of being incompetent. Through my work with Michelle I learned that a client's resistance is an important and informative mechanism that needs to be accepted and respected by the therapist because of the function it serves for the client. I realised that this acceptance and ability to tolerate the client's resistance is what produces a competent therapist.

I have learned that my interventions need to be more concise and focused to avoid woolly and clumsy responses which can be achieved by thinking about what I want

to say initially. Furthermore, I feel I need to focus on the here-and-now process more carefully and to ensure that this is fed back to the client appropriately.

Lastly, I experienced disappointment as I approached the ending with Michelle which was linked to my own perceived personal shortcomings. I learned how important it is to separate myself from my own feelings of inadequacy to avoid contaminating the interventions I make and to instead consider what psychological processes might be operating. However, I was also reminded that sadness at the loss of the therapeutic relationship is an acceptable response for the therapist to experience too and that acknowledging and accepting this sadness is an important process of personal and professional development.

**END**

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**The Use of Early Memories as a Therapeutic Tool:  
A Counselling Psychology Perspective.**

**A CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

Anna Butcher  
City University

## Introduction

It has been emphasised that once an individual reaches the age of ten they develop *continuous memory*, the ability to recount events and perceptions in chronological order (Mosak & Di Pietro, 2006). Memories before this age, or *early memories*, therefore have been described as stories of events and experiences that an individual 'says' happened (Clark, 2002). This ambiguity of the authenticity of early memories has long been examined and explored (Freud, 1899/1989; Adler, 1937; Saul, Snyder & Sheppard, 1956) with later theorists and researchers focusing on early memories as an informative therapeutic tool (Mayman, 1968; Verger & Camp 1970; Fowler, Hilsenroth & Handler, 1995).

The aim of this literature review is to illustrate how the use of early memories as a therapeutic tool has developed over time to the current day. It will accordingly acknowledge the works of Freud, Adler and Mayman and the initial and founding contributions they made to the therapeutic value of early memories and the veracity of early memories. The author acknowledges that some of the resources cited within the review date back to the mid-1900s; however, these works have been fundamental to the development of early memories in therapy. Recent work on the therapeutic value of early memories has capitalised on these previous original theories and they are, therefore, deemed relevant to the review.

The literature review will focus specifically on the clinical utility of early memories with regard to interpersonal issues relevant to the therapeutic relationship. This shall include transference patterns, transitional relatedness, the quality of the therapeutic alliance and how the alliance can be enhanced. Suggestions for interpreting early memories will also be discussed. Implications for counselling psychologists<sup>9</sup> shall be highlighted throughout the review as each topic is discussed.

Certain aspects relating to early memories that are beyond the scope of this review will not be discussed. These aspects include children's earliest memories, repressed memories, childhood abuse and trauma and early memories and hypnosis.

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<sup>9</sup> The term 'counselling psychologist' and 'therapist' will be used interchangeably throughout the review

It is suggested that the reader refer to the works of Bruhn (1981), Loftus and Ketchum (1994), Paley and Alpert, (2003) and Laurence and Perry, (1988) respectively for a discussion of these issues respectively.

The review will now begin by delineating the early work of Freud and Adler on the clinical utility of early memories.

### **Early memories: past or present?**

Sigmund Freud and Alfred Adler, two of the pioneers in the work of early memories, produced two contrasting views on the nature of early memories. Freud (1899/1989) postulated that memories from childhood served to conceal disturbing conflicts and labelled such childhood memories as ‘screen memories’; they functioned to screen out, or distort, original traumatic events that could be potentially damaging to the ego if recalled (Kopp & Eckstein, 2004). Freud emphasised that during analysis the distorted memory could be explored to reveal a memory of an actual occurrence. In this context, Freud’s approach to early memories recalled in adulthood incorporated two main points: firstly, that the early memories do not reflect reality and do not even exist. They are adult memories distorted as if to appear from childhood and are therefore, implausible (Bach, 1952). Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, the primary function of early memories is to conceal significant events or experiences; it is the latent information that is of interest in Freudian analysis.

In stark contrast to Freud’s approach is Adler’s (1929b, 1937) theory of early childhood memories. While Freud’s approach concentrated on what early memories concealed from the past, Adler (1937) proposed that early memories revealed much about the individual’s present view of life. He saw the manifest content of early memories, real or fantasised, as a representation of an individual’s attitudinal frame of reference and lifestyle (Bruhn & Last, 1982; Sweeney, 1998). With this in mind, Adler hypothesised that the clinician or therapist use the client’s early recollections to assess the individual’s current unique worldview rather than observe them as determining the whole course of personality development as Freud asserted. The table below outlines the major differences between the approaches to early memories:

*Table 1. The differences between Freud and Adler's theoretical perspectives of early memories.*

<b>Factor</b>	<b>Freud</b>	<b>Adler</b>
<b>Causality</b>	Determining & Irreversible	No causality; reveals current situation only
<b>Content</b>	Latent	Manifest
<b>Function</b>	Concealing	Revealing

This section of the review has provided a very brief outline of the contrasting views of Freud and Adler; however, some initial tentative implications for counselling psychologists can be highlighted. It can be argued that therapists need to be aware that early recollections described by clients are distorted truths, and communications of their inner-world and personality structure rather than objective truths. Therapists who fall prey to the seductive meanings of early memories rather than maintaining a neutral stance can divert attention away from the more informative unconscious meanings of the same events. A neutral stance prevents premature endings and enhances curiosity about what the early memory might be informing the therapist of (Fowler, 1994).

Though the theoretical perspectives of Freud (1899/1989) and Adler (1929b, 1937) are largely recognised as two comprehensive models of early memories and their clinical applications, they retain some limitations. Each framework appears to have an endpoint in view regarding the nature of early memories and what they are about without providing an approach to interpretation (Karson, 2006). In other words it is not clear to the counselling psychologist exactly *how* early memories can be interpreted beyond a general understanding of the client. The author believes that therapists are left with an endpoint in mind without being shown how to reach it; therefore, only suggestions for clinical practice can be inferred as noted above. The specific psychological aspects of early memories, such as core object-relationships and transference patterns are not considered in these frameworks whereas these aspects would undoubtedly enhance therapists understanding and use of early memories as a therapeutic tool. However, we shall see how further research has considered these vital aspects of case formulation. Lastly, Freud and Adler's models of early memories could be appealing and applicable to the therapeutic context but only if their fundamental theories were applicable to all individuals and all

presenting problems (Karson, 2006) and as the review progresses it will become clear that this is not the case.

Despite these limitations, Freud and Adler provided two sound theoretical perspectives on the function of early memories illustrating what they might imply about the individual. Given that the two perspectives are fundamentally different in their assertions yet both conceivable, a synthesis of the two, with particular emphasis on the psychological revealing nature of early memories, would provide a more comprehensive model for counselling psychologists. This notion was developed by Martin Mayman (1968), an ego psychologist, which produced a new approach to childhood memories and will be explored next.

### **Early memories: past and present**

The ego approach to early memories integrates the views of Freud (1899/1989) and Adler (1929b, 1937) as it presupposes that the manifest content of memories is as significant as latent content. The underlying assumption in ego psychology is that the early memory, as an expression of ego-functioning, is an attempt by the individual to integrate and resolve current conflicts by stimulating childhood experiences of similar content (Burnell & Solomon, 1964). Therefore, the ego psychological approach to early memories straddles the past and the present.

Martin Mayman (1968), one of the leading contributors to early memories and ego psychology, emphasised that it was important for therapists to know about the ego, its structure and methods of maintaining repressed experiences. He argued that just as the latent content of early memories exposed the workings of the id, the manifest content uncovered much about the operations of the ego. In his 1968 paper, 'Early Memories and Character Structure' he produced a set of hypotheses about early memories which he found constructive in his clinical practice. Some of these will now be discussed in detail.

### **Object relationships and transference**

Mayman (1968) hypothesised that early memories represented important fantasies around which an individual's character-structure is arranged. He asserted that early memories are one of the most effective sources to extrapolate the individual's

capacity for forming object-relationships and possible transference patterns that might emerge within therapy. Mayman (1968) gave brief examples to illustrate this point; the following example is taken from his work and details two early memories recalled by an adolescent girl. The first one describes her having a white kitten that she was not allowed to keep in at night under the orders of her mother. She awakes the next morning to find the cat has been run over with its blood all over the street. The second describes her experiencing terrible stomach-ache to the point of not being able to stand properly and fearing she is going to die. In the memory her mother laughs at her and scorns her for eating lots of candy. She is between 7 and 8 years of age in both memories<sup>10</sup>.

Mayman (1968) interprets these memories as representations of an inner-world in which the girl experiences object-relationships as heartless, severe and empty. He claims that the memories show how the girl perceives an evil mother who ridicules the nurture the girl craves from her. Mayman (1968) goes on to speculate that these memories suggest severe pathological expectations she might transmit into potentially nurturing relationships; however, it is of note that he does not explain what these pathological expectations specifically entail. The author contends that despite informing therapists of what psychological data can be extracted from early memories, Mayman (1968) makes statements without providing evidence or clear explanations that support his hypotheses. Furthermore, he does not make explicit suggestions regarding how therapists can use them in clinical practice. It might be said that a case study approach focusing explicitly on how Mayman (1968) used early memories in his clinical work would have been of benefit because it would equip counselling psychologists with knowledge of what to do with early memories and how to apply them to the therapeutic work that goes beyond achieving a general understanding of the client's inner-world.

#### *Early memories: real or illusory?*

The veracity of early memories had already been questioned before Mayman's work; however, he went on to present an original and sound case for the illusory nature of early memories. Mayman (1968) states that when a client narrates an early

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<sup>10</sup> These memories have been summarised by the author of the review; for verbatim memories see Mayman (1968).

childhood memory as if it actually occurred the therapist can ask the informant if they appear as one of the figures within the memory. He contends that in more than half of all early memories the individual *sees* himself as a young child, as if the child is a separate person and the individual is an observer looking on at the scene. Scenes from early memories have also been shown to be reported as if the individual is looking down on the action or from other unlikely vantage points, further highlighting the implausibility of the event occurring in the way in which it is recalled. Mayman (1968) added that for those incidents where clients report that they *feel* themselves to be present, as if they are standing there in the memory, therapists can ask them from what eye-level they see the other people and objects around them and how large they appear. Responses to these questions tend to confirm that the client is visualising the event as it would appear to him in the present day. Mayman's (1968) demonstration of the improbable veracity of early memories presents counselling psychologists with some therapeutic advantages. Firstly, not only does it enhance the aforementioned point of not falling prey to childhood memory content, but it can also provide therapists with windows into the client's internal-world and perceptions of others. Given that the early memory is how the client observes the event in the present day, therapists are able to identify how the individual perceives himself and others at the age he is now; in other words it elucidates possible core object-relationships that might be in operation both in and outside of the therapy room. The therapist can enquire what the client's view of the event is, for example, betrayal, mistrust or abandonment, which paves the way to understanding their perceptions or expectations of other people and the world. Furthermore, asking the client what they think the child might be feeling in the memory (Verger & Camp, 1970) elicits the client's current feelings in response to the type of action that is being depicted, whether it is anger, distress or even no emotional response whatsoever. We can see how the answers given in response to such enquiries can provide therapists with significant interpretative clues regarding how the client might typically react to others or events similar to those that appear in the memory (Verger & Camp, 1970).

This section concludes by affirming that early memories are reconstructions of the past that indicate much about the present. They can provide therapists with a glimpse of the client's object relationships; however, the reality of the recollection itself is

not of critical importance (Verger & Camp, 1970). On the other hand it can be argued that Mayman's (1968) work on early memories is somewhat limited because although it provides a coherent explanation of the use of early memories he does not highlight areas of debate or limitations in their utilisation. For example, Mayman (1968) does not make note of the fact that early memories alone cannot provide a detailed understanding of the client's relational patterns. Other information such as the therapist's countertransference, their early relationships and experiences should be obtained during assessment before determining a client's expectations of others. The author also recognises that no suggestions for further research on the clinical utility of early memories are made in Mayman's (1968) study whereas one view is that more research on what the therapist can actually do with the recollections and how they can be applied clinically, rather than identifying the gist of how the content relates to the client, seems essential. Research up until this point has fallen short of meeting this aim as it has not been detailed and specific enough. The next section of the review will now consider research that capitalised on the work of Mayman (1968) and focused on the clinical application of early memories.

#### **Early memories as a therapeutic tool**

Christopher Fowler and Mark Hilsenroth, two ego psychologists, extended the work of Mayman to produce suggestions for applying early memories in therapeutic work. Fowler, Hilsenroth and Handler (1995; 1996; 1998; 2000) developed a set of novel 'memory probes' designed to shed light on transference phenomena and a client's ego functions and explored their effectiveness in therapy. The research conducted by Fowler et al. (1995; 1996; 1998; 2000) that focused on clinical utility of these early memory probes will now be discussed.

#### **Transference patterns: acceptance of dependency and support**

The first memory probe developed by Fowler et al. (1995) involved querying the client for early memories on 'feeding, eating or being fed' as they suggested that this would bring dynamic conflicts around the client's ability to accept nurture and dependence, an aspect considered most important in the therapeutic relationship (Bornstein, 1993), to light. To demonstrate the clinical effectiveness of requesting a client's earliest memory of feeding, eating or being fed, Fowler et al. (1995) compared the early memories of clinical patients (personality and psychotic

disordered) and non-clinical patients to highlight significant differences that were produced in response to the memory probe. Sheila, a case example from the clinical population, in response to the question, ‘What is your earliest memory of being fed, feeding or eating’, reported the following:

*“At the ranch house...I wouldn’t eat...it was Hamburger Helper, and I wouldn’t eat it. And my dad took a fork of it and shoved it down my throat. I think he whipped me or kicked me after that.”* (Fowler et al., 1995, p.91)

Another two early memories were produced by Sheila involving her father in malevolent, physically abusive situations, most notably in the context of eating. The information provided by the early memories was interpreted as indicative of her experiencing nurture and support from men as harsh, cruel and abusive. More specifically, it was inferred that a male act of support would be experienced by Sheila as something being shoved down her throat which in turn, provided clues to her probable transference patterns to a male therapist (Fowler et al., 1995). It was hypothesised that Sheila would experience the interventions made by the therapist as controlling and harsh, ultimately terminating therapy early.

As predicted Sheila rejected many of therapist’s interpretations saying that she experienced the therapist’s stance as similar to that of her father’s (Fowler et al., 1995). As the therapist had forgotten information gained during the assessment and consequently fell prey to a convoluted transference-countertransference struggle. Had the therapist retained the interpretation of Sheila’s early memory he could have adopted a therapeutic stance which drew her into an equal relationship which encouraged her to make her own interpretations, consequently enhancing the quality of the therapeutic relationship (Clark, 2002; Kern, Balangee & Eckstein, 2004).

The case illustration demonstrates the projective efficacy of the feeding/being fed memory probe and how interpretations and the therapeutic process can be informed by the early memory (Fowler et al., 1995; 1996). It also illustrates how counselling psychologists can avoid therapeutic stalemates by retaining potential transference patterns and adopting the appropriate therapeutic stance (Kern et al., 2004). Fowler et

al. (1995) argued that the memory probe could differentiate between clinical and non-clinical samples too as differences were found in their respective early memories. Clinical patients demonstrated more persecution at the hands of malevolent figures and presented a more flat, uni-dimensional and simple characterisation of self and other. Comparatively, the non-clinical sample gave richer, more complex and life-like representations of self and other in their early memories. While this suggests to counselling psychologists that early memories of feeding can highlight differences in clinical populations, it remains unclear exactly what clinical populations these might be because no details are given regarding their presenting problems. Thus the findings are vague in terms of who they are characteristic of. In addition to this, it is possible that some or all of the participants who constituted the clinical population were on medication which might have been partly responsible for the flat, uni-dimensional characterisation of self and other observed in their early memories. However, this remains unknown as details of the clinical population were not identified. Furthermore, the findings seem to be generalised from a sample that the researchers note was predominantly white (94%); therefore, the findings are not necessarily transferable to other cultural populations.

Fowler et al. (1996) stated that psychological problems concerning dependency are often associated with 'difficult-to-treat' populations which can often lead to therapeutic impasses. On the one hand this suggests to counselling psychologists that information obtained from early memories of feeding or being fed might facilitate productive therapy with those who have difficulties with dependency. On the other hand it seems unwarranted to associate individuals with issues around dependency as 'difficult to treat' because it categorises individuals unnecessarily. Furthermore, the argument also suggests that therapeutic impasses can be mainly attributed to the client which positions the as innocent in the process (Karson, 2006) which is seen in other case examples that Fowler et al. (1995; 1998) use to illustrate the use of their memory probes. The possibility of the therapist's own material impeding the treatment process, such as responding to the client's dependency difficulties unhelpfully, is not considered in Fowler et al.'s conclusions; an example of this could entail enhancing a client's dependency because of a need to be depended on. Furthermore, the validity of feeding/eating/being fed as a projective measure of dependency can be questioned. Sheila's memory appears to illustrate that it is the *act*

*of things being shoved down her throat* that is abusive rather than support or nurturing behaviour (Karson, 2006).

In an attempt to confirm the validity of the feeding memory probe Fowler et al. (1996) recruited sixty-five psychiatric patients (predominantly severe character-disordered patients) and therapists and compared patients' early memories of feeding/being/fed/eating to the Rorschach measure of oral dependency (Masling, Rabie & Blondheim, 1967). This measure assesses two aspects of oral dependent content: 1) dependent imagery, such as figures exhibiting overt dependent behaviour, situations involving passivity and helplessness, nurturing and caretaking, and 2) oral imagery, including food and mouth-related concepts. Therapists' ratings of patients' dependent behaviour, based on Masling's (1986) Rorschach oral dependency measure and behavioural manifestations of dependency, were also collected in the study. Fowler et al. (1996) found that patients' feeding memories were highly correlated to the Rorschach measure of oral dependency, and with therapists' ratings of dependent behaviour during therapy. For example, early memories of being force-fed correlated with the therapist rating that they had to be more forceful in the delivery of interpretations. Fowler et al. (1996) argue that such findings show the concurrent and predictive validity of the feeding memory probe and that it does tap into patients' levels of dependency. This confirms to counselling psychologists that accessing memories of eating or being fed could produce significant information regarding the client's level of dependency. In addition, such memories could inform the therapist of the types of interventions that could be made accordingly.

In contrast, it can be said that relying on the information obtained from one memory of feeding alone could put the therapist at risk of assuming transference patterns prematurely. Previous research has demonstrated that the practice of eliciting several early memories rather than just one proves fruitful in the establishment of accurate themes and relational patterns (Mosak, 1958; Verger & Camp, 1970; Mosak & Di Pietro, 2006). This is particularly relevant when the first reported early recollection is not fully understood by the therapist (Verger & Camp, 1970). This suggests to counselling psychologists that it is important to elicit several early memories until an emerging pattern or theme is consolidated. While this might prove to be more productive it can be said that gathering several early memories

could be quite time-consuming and it might be that this is not always possible as client's may find it difficult to recall the required number of memories in relation to eating. In addition to this, other aspects of the client's current and past life relationships and experiences are undoubtedly important when establishing core-object relational themes and expected transference patterns (Hinshelwood, 1991; Jacobs, 1999), thus emphasising the risk of the therapist missing vital information if a single early memory forms the basis of predicting the client's dependency patterns. Counselling psychologists would therefore be wise to integrate the feeding memory probe with other essential client information gathered at assessment.

Though the researchers contend that the concurrent validity of the feeding memory probe was identified, it can be argued that this form of validity can be weak because even though two measures correlate with each other (in this case the feeding memory probe correlating with the Rorschach measure and therapists' ratings), it is possible that neither measure what they claim to measure. For example, the Rorschach is a projective measure and has poor validity as the inkblots do not necessarily measure aspects of personality. Similarly, it can be said that the memory probe 'feeding/eating/being fed' carries several different meanings because of the actions each word denotes. For example, 'being fed' conveys someone supplying food to another, which is likely to be more indicative of an individual's capacity to accept nurturance and dependence compared to a memory of 'eating' which denotes someone feeding themselves without the assistance of others. Therefore, it can be said that the memory probe might produce a variety of memories that do not all pertain to the ability to accept nurturance and dependence from others.

The next sub-section will now consider how early memories could shed light on a client's ability to use imagination and fantasy as ways of connecting to the therapist, or, in other words, their capacity to 'play'.

#### *Transitional relatedness: can the client play?*

Fowler et al. (1995; 1998; 2000) produced a second novel memory probe designed to allow for the projection of ego functions such as the individual's ability to 'play' using fantasy and transitional objects (Sugarman, 1986; Winnicott, 1971). This has been termed 'transitional relatedness' (Winnicott, 1975) which, in the

therapeutic context, refers to the client's capacity to use language and experience in a playful manner to engage with, and create illusory connections with the therapist. Fowler et al. (1995) hypothesised that tapping into early memories of transitional objects, such as a beloved doll, a blanket or some other treasured object would reveal much about this capacity for relating.

In order to elicit an early memory involving a transitional object the researchers familiarised patients entering into therapy with a character from a well-known cartoon who possessed a security blanket. From there, patients were asked if they had ever had a similar, special object or toy and requested their earliest memory of being alone with this object. The transitional object memories were then coded for the presence of an object and the engagement with the object. A case example from the study, Maria, who presented in therapy with violent outbursts of anger, produced the following memory in response to the probe which highlights the clinical utility of obtaining transitional object experiences:

*"I had a blue doll...and I would dress her up like myself...I remember drawing blue marks on her arms, and I remember my mother took her away, and I remember having a fit and telling her that she was my doll...I expected the doll to go through a lot of punishment – to share the punishment I got. She shared my punishment"* (Fowler et al., 1995, p.95).

The early memory was interpreted as indicating that Maria was capable of imaginative fantasy by engaging with an object that soothed her over the abuse she endured (Fowler et al., 1995). The shared misery created a bond between Maria and the doll. It was anticipated that Maria would transfer the role of a soothing object to share her misery on to her therapist (Fowler himself) meaning that the therapist would also be subjected to the attacks similar to those the doll received. With this information in mind, the therapist recognised the need to survive these attacks without retaliation (Winnicott, 1971), demonstrating his potential as a dependable, reliable object with whom she could identify (Fowler et al., 1995; 2000).

Maria's capacity for fantasy and imagination, as recognised from her early memory of a transitional object, became the vehicle for therapeutic change. The

therapist introduced Maria to the idea of using her imagination to envisage him during periods of potentially violent arguments with others. By using the image of her therapist and imagining what he would say Maria began to control her violent behaviour and consequently made progress beyond expectation (Fowler et al., 1995). Therefore, the client's capacity for transitional relatedness retained from the client's early memory of a transitional object not only informed the therapist of how best to work therapeutically with her (Kern et al., 2004), but also empowered the client to make new choices, exercise new behaviours and discover new experiences and emotions (Sweeney, Myers & Stephan, 2006).

The transitional object memory probe was tested for its validity as an assessor of transitional relatedness in psychotherapy (Fowler et al., 1998) and the results illustrated that, similar to the dependency memory probe, it did show predictive and concurrent validity. This provides support for the memory probe and its promise for providing the therapist with a glimpse of the client's capacity for transitional relating. Overall, it appears that both the dependency and transitional object memory probe offer counselling psychologists valuable projective tools that could facilitate the therapeutic relationship and process. Furthermore, the extensive work of Fowler et al. (1995; 1996; 1998; 2000) corroborates the original view of Mayman (1968) in that early memories can indeed reveal much of the client's object-relationships and potential transference patterns.

On the other hand, these studies can be perceived as biased and too conclusive. The researchers give brief summaries of their work that support their contentions yet limitations of their work and suggestions for further investigation are not identified. For example, the research limits transitional relatedness to those who possessed a blanket or a toy as a child which implies that this capacity for playing and use of imagination does not apply to those who did not own a transitional object. Therefore, a suggestion for future research would be to explore transitional relatedness of those who did not own a toy or blanket. Furthermore, it would be of interest to compare these results with participants who did have a special blanket or toy as this could highlight the potential significance of transitional objects in terms of using play and imagination to relate to others.

The author does not contest that the development of the novel memory probes supplemented the field of early memory use in psychotherapy; however, in reviewing the research further considerations are illuminated which bear reference to counselling psychologists. The early memories produced from previous research (Fowler et al., 1995; 1996; 1998; 2000) are interpreted and presented entirely in isolation and important contextualising information is excluded (Karson, 2006). For example, the researchers assume that the emergence of a theme or pattern within an early memory is solely the function of the client's pathology and do not consider other aspects such as the circumstances within which the memory is set, other people within the memory and relationships with these other people. In addition, other therapeutic factors such as the therapist's countertransference, which is a 'potentially sensitive indicator of the transference' (Hinshelwood, 1991, p.172), therefore emphasising its value in foreseeing possible transference patterns, are overlooked. The point here is that the therapist's contribution to the therapeutic relationship is overlooked, placing him in an innocent position as previously noted (Karson, 2006), and leaving the term therapeutic *alliance* rather questionable. It is paramount that counselling psychologists, while reaping the benefits of early memories, do not rely exclusively on these narratives for case formulation but rather incorporate them with other aspects such as countertransference (Hinshelwood, 1991), and their own personal issues that could be operating in the relationship (Newbauer & Shifron, 2004).

The next sub-section will now consider how early memories can be used to provide information of the quality of the therapeutic alliance between client and therapist.

#### *Early memories and the therapeutic alliance*

The therapeutic alliance is a core component of therapy which has been shown to play a crucial part in effective therapeutic outcome (Barber, Connolly, Crits-Christoph, Gladis & Siqueland, 2000). Previous research has also demonstrated that the client's quality of object relationships impact the therapeutic alliance (Eames & Roth, 2000; Hillard, Henry & Strupp, 2000) and their attendance of therapy sessions; for example, patients with poor object relations and increased interpersonal distress, while also experiencing a desire to invest in relationships, were more likely to attend

a greater number of therapy sessions (Ackerman, Hilsenroth, Baity & Blagys, 2000). Such findings from previous research imply that early memory narratives containing object relationship information could be good indicators of the client's capacity to form a therapeutic alliance and the quality of that alliance.

Few studies have employed early memories to examine the therapeutic alliance (Ryan & Cicchetti, 1985; Pinsker-Aspen, Stein & Hilsenroth, 2007) which seems surprising given that the alliance is such an essential ingredient for successful therapy. Ryan and Cicchetti (1985) found that object-relational themes from early memory narratives were extremely useful in predicting the expressive and collaborative dimensions of the therapeutic alliance as rated by the therapists themselves. In a more recent study, Pinsker-Aspen et al. (2007) explored early memories as indicators for the quality of the therapeutic alliance from the patients' perspective. They gathered early memory narratives from 57 participants in psychodynamic psychotherapy and aspects of the alliance, such as Goals and Tasks' and 'Bond', were assessed by rating statements including 'My therapist and I are working towards mutually agreed upon goals', and 'My therapist and I trust each other' (Combined Alliance Short Form-Patient Version, Hatcher & Barends, 1996). The results illustrated that patients who reported a stronger alliance exhibited more complexity, differentiation and integration in their representations of 'self' and 'other' in their early memory narratives (Pinsker-Aspen et al., 2007). Complex representations of others in early memories denote the client's capacity to *mentalise*; this is a process in which the individual learns that human behaviour is organised by thoughts and feelings in relation to both self and other (Fonagy & Target, 2003). Therefore, the current study demonstrates that a client's construct of object relations – their representations of self and other – as derived from early memories, can determine their ability to separate themselves and their feelings from their relationship with their therapist. Those who have the capacity to understand themselves in a complex manner are more likely to build a stronger alliance with therapists (Pinsker-Aspen et al., 2007). This suggests that counselling psychologists can use the relational aspects inherent in a client's early memory accounts as indicators of a client's capacity to form a working relationship, and the prospective quality of the alliance.

An issue that arises from the study of Pinsker-Aspen et al. (2007) is one of gender. The researchers note that of the sample 17 were male and 40 were female, and of the therapists 6 were male and 12 were female. Though the researchers contend that it was the complex representations of object relations in early memories that determined the quality of the therapeutic alliance, it is conceivable that gender may have played part in this process too as this undeniably plays a part in the (transference) relationship between therapist and client (Jacobs, 1999). We can see that the chances of being assigned to a female therapist were twice as likely as being assigned to a male therapist; similarly there was a greater chance of therapists entering a therapeutic relationship with a female client. The author of the review is not implying that either gender shows more promise for establishing good working alliances, but rather speculating that the gender of the therapist and client might have made significant contributions to the engagement between both parties. For instance, it could be that a client and therapist of the same gender established a good connection because of this shared characteristic. We are also made aware that the mean age of the participants is 30 years; however, the age of the therapists remains unknown and this could also have influenced the client's perception of the alliance. For example, it is possible that a client who engaged with a therapist of similar age might have formed a stronger alliance than if they had engaged with an older therapist; however, this is purely conjecture as these details are not clear within the study. The point here is that other factors beyond the Combined Alliance Short Form-Patient Version (Hatcher & Barends, 1996) might have affected the client's perceptions of the alliance and these are not alluded to in the discussion. A study which compares the early memories of males and females and their subsequent therapeutic alliances could highlight any possible differences between the sexes.

Early memories of childhood can enhance the therapeutic alliance because recollection is a reasonably non-threatening and unrestricted procedure (Clark, 2002) thus instilling security and trust in the client. The enquiry into the client's earliest recollection assumes no right or wrong answers as the individual does not respond to an external stimulus such as the Rorschach which could influence their response (Verger & Camp, 1970). As the client narrates their early memories the therapist connects with the client by empathically relating to their experience (Finn & Tonsager, 1997). Through empathy the therapist momentarily imagines what it is like

to be the client in the temporal context of relating their early recollections (Clark, 2002), facilitating a strong therapeutic alliance. Counselling psychologists would do well to remember that early memories can enhance the therapeutic alliance by using them as a tool to reduce defensiveness and anxiety (Clark, 2002). For example, if the early memory elicits themes of a sensitive nature, such as abandonment, and the client is not prepared to discuss their feelings around this experience, the therapist can use the memory as a metaphor to approach the topic tactfully (Pinsker-Aspen et al., 2007). The early memory as a metaphor, therefore, reduces potential threat or discomfort the client might experience and can be integrated into the therapy process without it being perceived as intrusive (Hood & Johnson, 2002).

Early memories have now been looked at in relation to transference patterns, transitional relatedness and the therapeutic alliance. Suggestions for counselling psychologists have been made as each area has been discussed and guidelines for therapists for interpreting early memories will now be identified.

#### *Interpreting early memories*

Before early memories are interpreted by the therapist the respective feeling or emotion that was experienced in the early memory should be elicited from the client as this will provide a main interpretative clue (Verger & Camp, 1970; Clark, 2002; Kern et al., 2004). Often clients might relate that they felt nothing which could be indicative of the 'feeling avoider' (Mosak & Di Pietro, 2006, p.137). Such clients can perceive feelings, either theirs or others, as threatening or burdensome and will tend to produce thoughts rather than feelings in response to the early memory. Mosak and Di Pietro (2006) do not encourage the therapist to make tentative guesses on the client's feelings as this may produce an inaccurate interpretation. In this context, the therapist's own biases or inferences stemming from their own frame of reference pose a risk of ruling out new and alternative information (Clark, 2002). In view of this, the therapist is discouraged from pushing the client for a feeling because this may cause them to 'create' an invalid feeling (Mosak & Di Pietro, 2006). While the lack of an identified affect associated with an early memory might indicate a 'feeling avoider', it seems imperative to note here that the client might also feel unwilling to reveal too much of himself to the therapist, especially if it so early on in the relationship (Verger & Camp, 1970). Expressing feelings early on in therapy could

be an extremely daunting task for the new client; this needs to be respected and retained by counselling psychologists before assuming that they are avoidant of feelings.

Another aspect of the early memory that counselling psychologists would do well to identify is the most vivid part of the experienced early memory and the associated feeling with the vivid part (Olson, 1979c; Clark, 2002; Kern et al., 2004). This frequently points to the central theme of the memory and when this is considered in conjunction with the specified affect response, an insight into what the client has concluded about the event is highlighted (Olsen, 1979c). For example, a memory recalled by a woman details her as a young child aged 2 and climbing up on a chair with an apple, some ketchup and a knife to cut her apple. She pours ketchup on her apple at which point her mother walks in and screams at the young girl for fear of her having cut herself (Kern et al., 2004). The overall feeling associated with the memory is one of independence and confidence. However, the most vivid part for the woman was when her mother screamed at her and the associated feeling was one of fear. This demonstrates to counselling psychologists that by focusing on the most vivid part for clients and the associated feeling can produce a remarkable difference in information that can be obtained (Kern et al., 2004).

General interpretations have been postulated from the study of early childhood memories and their content (Verger & Camp, 1970; Shulman & Mosak, 1988; Kern et al., 2004) which can provide counselling psychologists with insights into the client's inner world. Recollections involving the birth of a younger sibling, known as 'dethronement' (Verger & Camp, 1970), might signify resentment at the sibling for taking centre stage (Shulman & Mosak, 1988). Memories of sickness and death have been linked to a fear of these dangers (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956), and juxtaposed meanings or themes between two memories can represent two sides of an issue (Powers & Griffith, 1987) such as an underlying conflict. The author of the review supports this contention of contradicting meanings in early memories because of personal clinical experience. Two contrasting early memories produced by a client were particularly significant in revealing an underlying conflict of love and hate towards her parents which enhanced the case formulation. On the other hand, as previously noted, counselling psychologists need to consider individual differences

in early memories of clients because while the general interpretations illustrated here serve only as guidelines, it would be inappropriate to assume that, for example, all early memories involving the birth of a sibling imply feelings of resentment.

A final word to counselling psychologists on the use of early memories focuses on the possibility of clients feeling unable to produce any early memories at all. Although it is inconceivable that a client cannot recall an early memory it is better therapeutic practice to acknowledge this assertion and avoid probing for a recollection (Clark, 2002). Prompting a recollection if a client finds it difficult to identify one, such as asking the client for their earliest memory of school, denies the opportunity to assess the memory as projective information in an open-ended respect. Encouraging the client to take their time can enhance the process of recall for the client (Clark, 2002). It is also good practice to consider that the client might be reluctant to report early memories for significant reasons such as anxiety (Verger & Camp, 1970; Clark, 2002) in which case simple reflection of their anxiety or unease at the task could prompt a reconsideration of the task from the client. However, it is suggested that counselling psychologists proceed with other assessment measures if the client's engagement with memory recall is not achieved. The therapist is then encouraged to consider reasons for the client's reluctance (Clark, 2002) by exploring additional information gathered at assessment.

### **Summary**

The review has explored the therapeutic effectiveness of early memories with particular regard to their projective qualities and the therapeutic relationship. Focusing initially on the fundamental contributions of Freud (1899/1989) and Adler (1937), the review illustrated how subsequent research (Mayman, 1968; Fowler et al., 1995; 1996; 1998; 2000) supplemented existing theoretical principles by applying them to clinical practice and informing counselling psychologists of their exact therapeutic value. It has been highlighted that early memories can reveal much about the client's inner world, most notably their object relations which can be used as indicators of potential transference patterns, the client's capacity for transitional relatedness and the therapeutic alliance. Guidelines for interpretation have also been discussed in the review, emphasising to counselling psychologists that while they can

provide a general understanding of relevant relational themes, the individuality of each client memory should always be the therapist's priority.

### *Conclusion*

Theoretical approaches to early memories reveal much about a client's object relations and potential transference patterns, highlighting that approaches have focused on schools of psychodynamic theory. While the theoretical concepts of early memories put forth by Adler (1929b; 1937) resonate with cognitive-behavioural models of therapy, it can be argued that taking an object relations/psychodynamic approach can reveal a deeper understanding of the client's inner world. It is the author's contention that this approach to studying early memories has provided therapists with extremely valuable information that can be used in anticipation of future therapeutic relationships.

It could be suggested that cultural differences in early recollections and the therapeutic process be investigated given that counselling psychologists tend to see clients from many diverse backgrounds, and that previous research has focused mainly on white populations. Culture effects on earliest memory recollection and self-representation have been examined recently (Wang, 2001) and significant differences in emotional content and self-descriptions were found between cultures. Therefore, additional research exploring diverse groups and earliest recollections could potentially enhance therapists' understandings of representations of self and other in other cultures.

The review noted that differences were found between the early memories of clinical and non-clinical populations (Fowler, 1995) which suggests that different client populations, such as patients with depression, anxiety or eating disorders, could be investigated further to highlight themes in earliest recollections that might be characteristic of specific psychological problems. For example, Nigg, Lohr, Westen, Gold and Silk (1992) demonstrated that borderline personality clients exhibited increased levels of malevolence suggesting that clinical differences can occur, yet it would seem that other clinical populations have not been investigated in much detail. A thematic analysis of early memories in specific clinical populations

would benefit counselling psychologists' understanding of relational patterns prevalent in various mental health difficulties; furthermore, it could provide therapists with clues to the client's presenting problem when this is vague or unknown.

A final area for investigation that has not been specifically alluded to in this review is the use of early recollections in couples' therapy. Previous research outlined in the review has been conducted on clients in individual therapy and given that counselling psychologists often work with couples, thematic analysis studies on the early recollections of couples would enhance the a small amount of research existing in this field (Eckstein, Vogeles-Welch & Gamber, 2001; Deaner and Pechersky, 2005).

In conclusion, it is clear that early memories are valuable as a therapeutic tool. They provide many advantages for counselling psychologists which in turn can facilitate productive and successful therapy for the client. If used in conjunction with other therapeutic elements and assessment measures, and integrated in relation to these elements, early memories can work to produce a detailed picture of the client's internal experience thus paving the way for effective therapy for both client and therapist.

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