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A phenomenological enquiry into the experience of western women who found a significant other after a course of psychotherapy

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A phenomenological enquiry into the experience of western women who found a significant other after a course of psychotherapy

By Anna M. Nuzzo

Submitted to the New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling and Middlesex University

Psychology Department in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of

Counselling Psychology and Psychotherapy

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"But if overcome by fear you shall only seek peace and pleasure in love, then it is better for you that you cover your nakedness and abandon love's threshold,
For a seasonless world where you shall laugh, but not all of your laughter, and you shall weep, but not all of your tears".
Gibran,1923

Statement of Authorship

This dissertation has been written by Anna M. Nuzzo and has obtained ethical clearance from the New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling and the Middlesex University Psychology Department. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Counselling Psychology and Psychotherapy.

The author is wholly responsible for the content and the writing of this dissertation, and there are no conflicts of interest.

Statement of Copyright

Abstract

Whilst relationship therapy is a thriving practice (van Deurzen & Iacovou, 2013; Barker, 2015; Charura & Paul, 2015), no research has focused on women who found a significant other during or after a course of psychotherapy. This study explored the experience of women who overcome their previous difficulty entering healthy romantic relationships during or after attending a course of psychotherapy in any modality. The focus was on uncovering what the participants believe made the difference for them. Seven women gave an account of their experience via semi-structured interviews. The data analysis was performed using a phenomenological-interpretative analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009). Four superordinate themes emerged from the analysis of the seven transcripts, with fifteen associated themes:

1. *Self-Love and four associated themes.*

The results point towards marked and varied changes in feelings towards oneself.

2. *Self-Awareness and four associated themes.*

The results show a new understanding of the participants' worldview.

3. *Sense of Agency*

The results indicate that the participants have gained an ability to act on their new understandings to shape their lives.

4. *Role in the family and three associated themes.*

The results suggest that unpacking past events helped support the participants' change.

Recommendation: The counselling psychology, the psychotherapy world, and the public could benefit from putting psychotherapy forward as a place women can consider going when struggling to form healthy romantic relationships.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Is this topic too girly? Shouldn't I propose something that sounds more doctoral? Something about bullying, maybe. (Personal Journal, September 2013)

The need to belong is generally viewed as a basic human need (Deci & Ryan, 2000), and many people consider being in a romantic relationship as the primary means of fulfilling that innate need (Solomon, 2010; Finkel et al., 2014). For example, life span theories have identified forming a love relationship as a cornerstone of adults' developmental tasks (Sugarman, 1986; Rydz, 2011). Coupling was historically considered a superior way of living by some, as it could demonstrate an ability to be intimate (Gould, 1978). From an evolutionary viewpoint, the increased protection for one's children derived from pair-bonding would strongly select for such instincts to be preserved (Fletcher et al., 2015). Interestingly, some authors have observed how the romantic partner tends to replace other social relationships (Collins & van Dulmen, 2006). In other words, at a certain point, the romantic partner becomes more important than friends. As such, it is no surprise that humans exhibit such an interest in romantic relationships and love (Johnson, 2010).

This interest is expressed mainly through cultural mediums, such as books, movies, talks, and articles (Barker, 2012); however, science has also concerned itself with love. As a ubiquitous human behaviour, love has been researched across various disciplines, including neurobiology and new technology (Bode & Kushnick, 2021; Brogaard, 2015; Hendrick & Hendrick, 2019; Sternberg, 1986; Sternberg & Barnes, 1988). Neurobiological research views love as a cocktail of attraction, attachment, and lust (Fisher & Brown, 2006) and proposes that the neurotransmitters involved in human romantic love can be modulated with

pharmaceuticals (Young, 2009). For example, Earp et al. (2015) have advanced the idea that the medicalisation of love is underway, and it may be a good thing for humanity. This approach includes mending a relationship through the injection of oxytocin in the brain and alleviating the sufferings of a broken heart through the administration of an oxytocin blocker (Walum & Young, 2018). Soon common problems with love, like heartbreak, difficulty in relationships, and a lack of relationship, may become curable with medication. Meanwhile, within the new technology, mobile applications like 'Tinder', 'Bumble', and 'Hinge' promise to help people find their perfect other half. This online dating industry is estimated to be worth 11 billion US dollars (Business insider, 2018).

Conversely, as other sciences invest effort and funding into researching various aspects of love, psychotherapy research still lags. While there are many publications about relationship therapy (Barker, 2015; Charura and Paul, 2015; Clulow et al., 2018; Johnson, 2010; van Deurzen & Iacovou, 2013), there is a lack of psychotherapy research investigating the correlation between women and the difficulty of forming relationships. Based on the current literature, precise statistics about how many women struggle to form and maintain healthy relationships in the UK cannot be found. Official data only considers marriages and partnerships, which cannot account for the whole picture. According to the Office for National Statistics (2019), "In 2017, males in England and Wales were more likely to be living in a couple than females, 63.0% compared with 59.9%".

The choice of women only for the sample is due to several factors. Firstly, I, as the researcher, identify as a woman. As such, I feel a kinship with other women and their plights. I recognise that we are all different, and not all women have such feelings; however, many studies have shown a remarkable increase in empathy for other humans who share similar experiences (Israelashvili & Karniol, 2017). In addition, I happen to have a keen interest in

women's issues. Far from being niche, women's problems concern half the human population (Perez, 2019).

As demonstrated by the feminist critique of social sciences (Gergen, 1993), psychology research suffers from a gender imbalance, skewed by an influx of male researchers conducting studies with only male participants (Chrisler & McHugh, 2018). Given the overwhelming nature of the data, that it was impossible to argue with the strength of the evidence presented by the feminist authors in their critique (Gergen, 1993). As consequence, the field has since placed a larger emphasis on qualitative research and reflexive practice in psychology research (Langdridge & Hagger-Johnson, 2004). However, the underdevelopment of research focused on female-only participants may only partially explain the lack of research into women struggling to form a significant relationship.

To investigate this further, the next natural step was to examine the cultural context around how women are perceived in our world. For women, being in relationships with men is still, in some circles, seen as preferable to being single (Budgeon, 2015). I previously assumed feminism[1] had defeated the cultural expectation of being mum and wife only, a societal pressure which dominated Western women's lives until the first part of the last century. Following these changes, second-wave feminism unintentionally created the imperative for women to be moms, wives, and career women in an egalitarian relationship (Trimberger, 2005). There is now a pervasive neo-liberal and post-feminism discourse that once more sees women being partnered with men, preferably in a marriage (Budgeon, 2016). Seeing that this is part of the cultural climate, I would like to detach myself from these imperatives. I hope to do so by clarifying the scope and intent of the present study. The topic of this study relates to cis-gender women who want to enter a healthy, satisfactory, straight relationship and struggle to do so. At the same time, this study is not an invitation for women

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[1] **Note: For an overview of the feminist movement, see Chapter 2.**

to find a relationship when they are happy being single, nor is it a convoluted way to indicate that a woman needs to be in a relationship with a man. Contrary to the cultural beliefs that see single women as unsuccessful, recent research shows that child-free, unattached women are, in fact, the happiest demographic (Dolan, 2019).

The selection of cisgender, straight women as the exclusive sample group was a deliberate choice based on the need for a small and homogeneous sample that could provide in-depth insights into the specific phenomenon being studied (Smith & Nizza, 2022). This decision was made in alignment with the chosen qualitative research method and was supported by the guidance of supervisors. While it is acknowledged that the exclusion of other demographic groups, such as gay women, limits the inclusivity of the study, the focus on a specific demographic was essential to maintain coherence and depth in the analysis (Willig, 2013). For example, my initial research proposal included gay women in the sample. Sadly, refining the research question and matching it to the right qualitative research method made it evident that the sample needed to be small and homogeneous (Smith et al., 2009). This thus required a more stringent inclusion criteria than originally anticipated. In the current cultural climate, where inclusivity plays such an important role in a changing world, it is regrettable that this study is non-inclusive of all women. Hopefully, the framework of this study can serve as a guide for future research, creating the groundwork for developing a more inclusive examination of this topic.

The current data has been collected from women who claimed to experience difficulties entering a straight romantic relationship, despite actively looking for one. To qualify, these women had to have found a satisfactory relationship during or after attending personal therapy. In my opinion, this can be an empowering experience for women, and I was honoured to investigate their cases. This study has explored both existential and practical aspects of the phenomenon of struggling with straight romantic relationship formation,

focusing on the lived experience of women who overcame this difficulty. Therefore, the focus is on success stories of how these women defeated a problem that they once considered insurmountable. Consequently, this study is relevant for both women who experience this difficulty and therapists who work with relationship issues.

By now, the reader will have noticed the elected use of the first-person narrative. Aside from Chapter 2, Literature Review, this thesis does not adopt an academic tone, and I thought it best to justify this decision from the outset. In qualitative research, there is often tension between embodying the subjective process that such research requires and the need for trustworthy and dependable results (Denzin & Lincoln 2005). I believe that we do not need that tension, and a first-person narrative enhances the writing of a phenomenological study such as this (Todres, 2007). For example, as we prioritise understanding over cognition in qualitative research, a first-person narrative facilitates both a sense of embodiment and freedom for the researcher (Werz et al., 2011). In addition, my epistemological position (critical realist) and the methodology (interpretive-phenomenological) employed in this study lend themselves well to narrating in the first person.

The justification for framing this research as a qualitative study was driven by the need to analyse the intricate and nuanced experiences of the participants. Through in-depth interviews and reflective analysis, this approach aimed to capture the rich and diverse narratives of women who struggled with entering a straight romantic relationship. The emphasis on reflexivity and subjective understanding aligns with the fundamental principles of interpretative-phenomenological analysis (Smith et al., 2009). To ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of the study, the data collection process underwent meticulous planning and execution. The participants, all cisgender, straight women, were carefully selected based on specific inclusion criteria, including their active pursuit of a romantic relationship and their

engagement in personal therapy. This deliberate narrowing of the sample aimed to maintain homogeneity and depth in the exploration of the phenomenon at hand (Smith & Nizza, 2022).

A series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews provided the platform for the participants to share their lived experiences, emotional journey, and triumphs in forming a satisfactory romantic relationship. The open-ended nature of the interviews allowed for the organic unfolding of narratives, ensuring that the participants' voices were at the forefront of the study (Knox & Burkard, 2009). These interviews were supplemented by reflexive journaling and field notes, providing a comprehensive account of my interactions during the data collection process (Finlay, 2002).

Personal Interest

"We'll have to take her abroad; in these moments, you can usually find an Italian who's not too picky" (Countess Violet Grantham, Downton Abbey).

Like many researchers before me, my initial interest in this topic was borne out of my personal experience. One evening, a friend casually pointed out that I only dated emotionally stunted guys. As I was in therapy at the time, I mentioned this to my therapist, which shifted the focus of my session to my relationship difficulties. This was a definitive turning point which brought awareness around relationship issues to the fore. While I have since entered a healthy relationship, my engagement with the topic continued through discussing my personal journey with friends, colleagues, and fellow psychotherapy students. Though I spoke about it matter-of-factly, as if going to therapy to work on relationship issues was common, the response from others ranged from curiosity to disbelief. From my professional experience

and conversations with my colleagues, general views seem to have since changed, with many women (and men) now seeking therapy because they struggle with relationship formation.

Unfortunately, I have found that, apart from well-labelled mental health conditions, the literature on why people attend therapy is surprisingly scarce. However, in a statistically significant study, Elliot et al. (2014) noted that a necessary step for people to seek therapy was believing it would help their actual difficulty. I found this claim to resonate with my experience with clients. While many did not list relational issues as the main reason they came to therapy, this consistently arose as a relatively common issue for both people already in a relationship and single people.

Another personal observation that led me to this topic was the apparent feeling of shame I detected in my clients who identified as single women. This shame often stemmed from the belief that finding it difficult to be in a relationship was not a real problem or, at least, not a problem that requires seeking therapy. This last instance is what convinced me to undertake this study.

When I decided to go ahead with this topic, it dawned on me that it would have been far easier to write a doctoral dissertation about a well-established psychological construct, such as burnout or bullying. And yet, if these women knew that theirs was a valid reason to seek therapy, perhaps their suffering would have been alleviated sooner. After all, as mentioned above, we all need to belong somewhere (Finkel et al., 2014). In these modern times where some are tirelessly working to market drugs that will ease the pain of loneliness and heartbreak, it seems urgent to put psychotherapy forward as an alternative path towards a happy relationship.

This work is my small contribution toward that end and asks how do women, who were single for at least a year, understand their experience of finding a significant other during or after a course of psychotherapy.

Terminology

Before proceeding, it is important to clarify the terminology of several key words used throughout this thesis. Firstly, with the term 'single woman', the present study intends a woman not involved in a stable sexual, exclusive, romantic relationship. Considering cultural and societal expectations surrounding relationships and the significance bestowed on relationship status, this study hopes to shed some light on the experiences of single women who navigate the complexities of forming healthy relationships with men during or after attending therapy.

I mostly use the term 'relationship' to indicate a straight relationship. I refer to women 'finding love', entering a 'satisfactory relationship', or starting a 'gratifying/happy relationship' interchangeably, even though I am aware they could have different meanings for different people. I chose this approach to avoid limiting the kind of relationships that my prospective participants were happy to have found. For example, a relationship could not be exclusive and still be satisfactory for all parties involved and therefore qualify for my inclusion criteria (Please see Appendix A for a complete overview of the participants' inclusion criteria). Moreover, a relationship could be short-lived and still qualify so long as the participant found it to be satisfactory for her. This is about a relationship that the participants define interchangeably as satisfactory, suitable, adequate, happy and in line with what they were personally looking for. In addition, I use the term: 'therapist' to indicate both a UKCP registered psychotherapist and an HCPC registered, chartered counselling psychologist.

Finally, the term 'western woman' has attracted feedback and needs to be defined within the context of my topic. As per my ethics review, 'western' was clearly defined within

the study information sheet (as found in Appendix C) to provide clarity and mitigate any

potential misinterpretations occurring among participants. For the purpose of this study, the

above-mentioned term refers to women who identify as 'western' in that they espouse values

of freedom in choosing, dating, having sex, and flirting with whomever they choose. After

all, being in a romantic love is a western anomaly (Cleary, 2015). A cultural phenomenon

that is not reflected elsewhere (Giddens, 2013; Shumway, 2003). In the context of this study,

'western' is a word that exemplifies autonomy and equality in relationships; however, it is

essential to note that this definition is based on self-identification and can be adopted

regardless of the cultural or religious background the participant may have been born into.

Aims of the Project

This study aims to examine the transformations experienced by a sample of women when they overcame a difficulty with healthy relationship formation during or after therapy. The focus is strictly on the experience of the female participants and the insights gained within or outside the therapy room during a defined period. Therapists often find that a significant portion of their work revolves around relationships (van Deurzen, 2015), with psychotherapy appearing to impact the romantic life of the client. For example, after psychotherapy, clients may develop tools to change the current romantic element of their lives, choosing to terminate a relationship or use new insights to find love. Unfortunately, while many therapists observe these instances, no qualitative or mixed methods research focusing these claims exists in the current literature. For this reason, this study investigates what, in therapy, brings about the change in object.

Participants are the real experts on what makes the difference when something inside shifts, and they can face something they could not do before. Too often, in my opinion, clinicians and researchers make inferences based on an assumed client experience. Timulak (2010) states that clients and therapists differ in what they believe was helpful during the sessions. This led me to understand the value in hearing the first-person account of the client's experience. While I fully recognise the need for more extensive practice-based research in counselling psychology (Henton, 2011), I remained faithful to my intent of exploring what participants understood to have happened when experiencing their transformation. Their non-specialist accounts did not always detail the specific process of therapy that brought them the desired results, but the interview questions were not designed to elicit those types of answers. That said, I was always open to the possibility that the participants may be able to connect the therapy process to their change.

In summary, this study is about what changes are experienced by a sample of women who were single for a minimum of a year before entering a satisfactory, heterosexual relationship after a minimum of eight months of psychotherapy. Even without explicitly focussing on the therapy process, the psychotherapeutic journey is still implicit in their change, as a catalyst for change, the means to an end, or something else altogether. A qualitative study such as this will provide themes for subsequent quantitative studies by developing a research base for working with clients in the important area of healthy romantic relationship formation.

Research Objectives

This study aims to answer the following research objectives:

- What common themes emerged from these women who went through the same experience?

- How did they experience these changes?

- What did they learn that they had not considered before?

- What do they think changed?

- How does therapy connect to these changes? If it does connect.

To answer the overall research question and the specific research objectives, I carefully formulated an interview schedule to ask participants a series of open-ended questions. The development process is fully described in the methodology chapter, but it is critical to explain the logical connection to the research objectives before proceeding. The interview questions were approved by the ethics board at NSPC and there were no amendments during the pilot study. Please note, the prompts (in normal italic) were only asked in the event the participant wanted to clarify what I meant by the question.

Question 1: Before you started therapy, what were your ideas around relationships?

Prompts: History of issue, client's own thoughts and experiences.

This is a background question meant to establish a baseline with which to understand the participants' experience. Before exploring the change, I needed to understand how things were before. After the pilot study, it became clear how important this question was to contextualise the participants' emotional state. The question probes how they imagined their idealised future love life, and therefore the answers pointed to their original wishes for their relationships.

Question 2: In what way has your understanding of your difficulty entering a happy relationship changed during/after therapy? <u>If</u> it has changed?

Also a background question, this second question was devised to compliment and build from the responses of the first. Invariably, the participants quickly contrasted what they had wished (from the answer given minutes before) with their lived experiences. The question was also designed to start teasing out possible insights on participants' current understanding of their past relationship choices. This question prompted participants to uncover, at times unexpected, accounts of their previous unhealthy relationship patterns. A summary of those can be found in the results chapter.

Question 3: During/after therapy, did you notice any change in your way of approaching your relationship with men in general? If so, at what stage?

Prompts: Change in thinking, behaviour, attitude, routines, beliefs, choices.

Question three was intended to be the natural progression from the previous question. It aimed to elicit an account of general changes in participants in any relationship with men. The hope was to start to focus the participants' attention on their transformation, and, if any had occurred, how did they experience these changes? Once more, the question is open to the possibility that no change had occurred or been noticed.

Question 4: What was your experience of finding a satisfying relationship during/after attending personal therapy?

Prompt: What actually happened in your own words?

Question four seeks to answer the overall research question. It simply paraphrases the research question to elicit an account of the central experience that qualified the participants

as part of the sample. I expected the transcript of their answer to this question to be dense in meaning.

Question 5: What were the main insights you gained from therapy?

   Prompts: *What did you learn about yourself, your worldview, your values, your past experiences.*

Question five builds on the previous question and prepares the field for question six. The participants had just revealed their moment of happily finding a satisfying relationship. After, I tried to explore the insights they gained from the relationship that qualified them for the study. I did this by starting from the general insights before directing their attention to their 'eureka' moments. The question is about all breakthrough moments, even the ones which are not linked to relationships.

Question 6: How do you think these insights connect to your ability to enter a gratifying relationship?

Question six attempts to expose the connection between their perceived transformations and their psychotherapy journey. It also opens the possibility of reflections, building on the previous answer. If there is a connection between their insights and the ability to enter a happy relationship, this question aims to help answer that.

Question 7: Talk me through any aspects of therapy that you found impactful. What do you think would have been different in your life if you had not undergone personal therapy?

This last question is a review question. It aims once more at linking the therapy to their newfound ability to relate to men in a romantically healthy fashion. Question five and

six already begin this exploration, but this question uses a different lens, what if? Let us imagine the therapeutic journey never happened. My initial aim with the question was to expose avenues of thought that could have been missed before. The thinking behind it was that, after talking about relationships for an hour or so, the participants would be drawn to switch lenses and possibly say something more. It ended up being all participants' favourite question. Their feedback was that it gave them the chance to look at the enormous change that had taken place within them. For some participants, it was the first time they saw the whole picture.

Question 8: Is there anything you want to add?

This question was added to give the participant the opportunity to bring up something they may have been holding back during the interview.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

"Romantic love is sustained by mystery and crumbles upon inspection" (Yalom, 2013, p. 15).

This chapter details the relevant literature supporting this study. Following an outline of search strategy, Chapter 2 explores the feminist movement and its connection to society's perception of single women. This provides the necessary context to understand a select sample of studies related to difficulty in relationship formation, where the concepts of love, attachment theory, and schema therapy intersect. The review then explores how relationships difficulties and how therapy can be focused on single people struggling to form a relationship. Finally, it outlines relevant literature from an existential-phenomenological lens followed by a short paragraph on the process of therapy.

Introduction to the Systematic Literature Review

In reviewing the literature, the first step was to clarify what was relevant for this research from the broad range of studies exploring the field of relationships. Considering the vast number of publications, with many authors taking different approaches, key search terms were developed based on existing literature. This meant utilising available resources to investigate if existing studies had previously researched women struggling to find a significant other, ideally through the lens of psychotherapy. Applying a strategy based on philosophical stances, as opposed to 'hard' sciences, was justified by the need to find data relevant to the type of client present in this study.

In addition to the information and references contained in key texts on relationships and psychotherapy (Barker, 2015; Charura & Paul, 2015; van Deurzen & Iacovou, 2013), digital

sources, including academic journals and popular media, underpin this literature review. Using a snowball technique, several digital search repositories were utilised, including Google Scholar, Middlesex University Library, PsychInfo, and EBSCO Psychology and Behavioural Sciences Collection Database. Different combinations of the following keywords were fed into the search engines: Relationships; Psychotherapy; Romance; Love; Single Women**;** Romantic Love; Relationship Formation; Romance Difficulty; Women; Attachment; Dating; Feminism; Intersubjectivity.

The resulting references were collected and stored using *RefWorks*. Unfortunately, this search strategy failed in finding previous studies which specifically investigated healthy women who struggle to enter a romantic relationship with or without a course of psychotherapy. While some studies analysed the impact of breast cancer on women's attempts find a partner during or after treatment (Shaw et al., 2016; Shaw et al., 2018), the conclusions identified diminished self-esteem after the experience of having breast cancer as the root cause of relationship difficulties (Kurowecki & Fergus, 2014). While in no way exhaustive, the lack of previous results suggests that general research into women's transition to healthy relationship formation represents a gap in the existing literature.

A Short Outline of Feminism

The purpose of this study is to explore the internal changes experienced by participants in their romantic relationships with men during or after undergoing psychotherapy. However, as a participant cannot be removed from their cultural context, it is prudent to outline the key doctrines that have shaped how 'western' women construct their identity. This includes the prominent movement of feminism. As negative and conflicting

connotations that have been ascribed to the term (Rampton, 2015), this outline defines feminism as "the belief that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men" (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 2006, p. 583).

Prior to the contemporary movement, examples of ancient representations of feminism can be found in historical texts. The first mention of women being regarded as equal to men is found within Plato's *Symposium,* where one of the characters is a female philosopher called Diotima (Sheffield, 2008). Whilst some scholars argue that Diotima is merely a literary device, others have found ample arguments that Diotima was a historical figure, a priestess and philosopher who greatly influenced Socrates (Buxton & Whiting, 2020).

The next examples of ancient feminists are an unlikely pair: Jesus and Mary Magdalene. In the last few decades, feminist scholars have revised the image of both Mary Magdalene and her relationship with Jesus (De Boer, 1997; Ehrman, 2006; Freke & Gandy, 2001; Haskins, 1993; Hearon, 2004). Far from being a repentant prostitute, these authors have sought to prove to biblical scholars that Mary Magdalene was an equal partner in Jesus' enterprise in preaching (Starbird, 1993; Starbird, 1998). The apostle of apostles, main point of reference for all disciples, these authors make a case for Mary Magdalene being a trusted kind of 'manager' figure and for Jesus to be regarded as a model of what a male feminist should look like (Starbird, 1998; Swidler, 1971). Lastly, for a growing number of non-academic believers, women, gnostics, and new-age worshippers, Mary Magdalene represents the embodiment of a divine feminine that perfectly complements the Christ (Beavis, 2012).

Turning back to feminist theory, an outline of early feminism would be incomplete without the mention of Mary Wollstonecraft's seminal book*, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1797), and the works of Jane Austin (d.1817). Both authors are considered foremothers to women's movements (Rampton, 2015).

These early examples demonstrate the varied and complex history of feminism, and the remainder of this section seeks to put some semblance of order. Feminism, as a movement, has gone through several waves, each representing different struggles and achievements. Starting with the Convention of Seneca Falls in 1848, the first wave of feminism dates from the early nineteen century to the 1950's. Primarily concerned with acquiring the rights to own property, suffrage, and dress reform (Johnson, 2017), white, middle-class, cisgender, western women spearheaded this movement (Molyneux et al., 2021). Notably, they believed women's moral superiority provided positive change in the political and public spheres (Rampton, 2015).

In contrast, the second wave of feminism focused on equality, sexuality, and reproductive rights (Lear, 1968). Beginning in the 1960's, this wave is most commonly associated with the word 'feminism', and conjures images of burned bras, the throwing of lipsticks in the bin, and crowning a sheep as Miss America in protest to beauty pageants (Freeman, 1975). The second wave of feminism saw women defined as a social class, and critiques of the patriarchy began efforts by both the government and commercial advertisers to rid society of sexism (Rampton, 2015). While considered a radical face of feminism, it proved effective, with women gaining access to abortion, contraceptive pills, support to escape domestic abuse, and increased access to and equal rights in the workplace (Rampton, 2015).

Crucially, for this study, the second wave saw a woman's role in relationships as something to be discussed. Women possessed identities outside of their role as a wife and mother. One of the pivotal texts from the period, *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan, advanced this idea. According to the author, women were victims of a "mystique", which often led them to focus completely on others at the expense of themselves (Friedan, 1963).

Meanwhile, the third wave of feminism developed in direct response to second wave

ideals. Started in the 1990's, this wave deconstructed the very ideas of 'womanhood',

'gender', and 'sexuality' (Fisher, 2013). Moreover, it recognised that the feminism of the past

generations had primarily benefited privileged, white, straight women (Alhumaid, 2019).

This post-modern, politically transversal part of the feminist movement sought to become

inclusive of all kinds of women (Bronstein, 2005). An interesting aspect of the third wave

was the re-adoption of objects that were rejected by the foremothers of earlier movements,

including lipstick, bras, and high heels. For these reasons, this wave has also been dubbed the

'grrl-feminism' or 'lipstick feminism' (Rampton, 2015).

Given the sample demographics, the participants of this study would be familiar with

concepts stemming from this third wave. They would likely have been taught to reject

victimization by defining feminine beauty as subjects rather than the object of the male gaze.

They may also have appropriated words like 'slut' and 'bitch' in an effort to deprive the

patriarchy of its verbal offences (Rampton, 2015). Notably, most third wavers did not identify

as 'feminists', seeing the term as exclusionary, radical, and limited to one kind of woman

(Bronstein, 2005).

There is a certain consensus on classifying the present socio-political feminist

movement as fourth-wave feminism (Bameschi, 2017; Baumgardner, 2011; Blevins, 2018;

Jain, 2020; Rampton, 2015). Starting around 2012 and arising mostly from social media, this

wave connected to complacency, namely that of male and female third wavers who thought

gender equality had either been achieved or was well on its way. For those who lived through

the 1990's, feminism was not needed anymore, especially the kind of feminism that was seen

as radical and man-bashing (Rampton, 2015). Sadly, what is becoming apparent is that many

of the victories of the second and third waves were never solidified in law or societal

thinking. Now, the new generations coming of age have been left with the job of addressing a

host of resurfaced challenges, including unequal pay, rape, violence against women, femicide, slut-shaming, unrealistic body shape ideals, low or non-existent support for mothers, and the rolling back of the right to abortion care. These are only some of the obvious issues faced by women everywhere that are as prevalent now as at the beginning of the feminist movement.

This outline is merely intended to highlight the cultural background and lived experiences of the participants. It is in no way an exhaustive account of female suppression or of women's achievements through feminism. That is well beyond the scope of the present work; however, it is important context to the next relevant area of literature, single women, and the concept of love itself.

Single Women

All I ever wanted was to be rich and be successful and have three kids and a husband who was waiting for me at night to tickle my feet. And look at me! I don't even like my hair. (Ally McBeal, Tv series, 1997).

There is a large body of literature on singlehood (Adams, 1976; Byrne & Carr, 2005; Taylor, 2011). Generally, it seems that, whether male or female, those who identify as single are discriminated against in our society (DePaulo & Morris, 2006). As this study focuses on women, this literature review limits itself to data about single women and how they are seen in society. As all participants are contemporaries who have experienced a long period of being single, this literature provides the necessary background for inserting the discourse from the data.

Regardless of the changing waves of feminism, stereotypes about single women are still plentiful in the sociocultural discourse (Budgeon, 2008; DePaulo, 2007). For example, single women may be seen by society as ugly, pathetic, or pitiful (DePaulo, 2007; Trimberger, 2005). While modern times seem to accept young women being single, they are only welcome to be selective in choosing a partner up to a certain point (Lahad, 2013). As soon as women are perceived as ageing, society prescribes adjusting expectations of a potential romantic partner (Gotlieb, 2008). The exact age is debatable, but this shift for women seems to occur around 30 to 35 years old (Budgeon, 2016). Regardless of age, the cultural atmosphere is one where a single woman is constantly required to explain her relationship status, thus perpetuating the every-growing scrutiny of women's choices (Budgeon, 2016). The passage below perfectly describes the conflicting messages aimed at women openly or overtly.

> Women are hailed through a discourse of 'can-do' girl power, yet, on the other hand, their bodies are powerfully re-inscribed as sexual objects; on the other hand, women are presented as active, desiring social subjects, yet, on the other hand, they are subject to a level of scrutiny and hostile surveillance that has no historical precedent… notions of autonomy, choice and self-improvement sit side-by-side with surveillance, discipline and vilification of those who make the 'wrong' 'choice'. (Gill, 2008, p. 442)

A Short Outline of the Concept of Love

According to Fromm (1956), love is an essential aspect of human existence that needs to be learnt as any other art. In Western societies, one of the main issues is that, rather than developing the capacity to be loving, people are more concerned with making themselves attractive to be loved. The author delves deeper than most in observing human behaviour

around this ubiquitous, complex emotion. For example, he observes how men make themselves successful and women make themselves beautiful, as it looks like these are the things society at large values to be worthy of love. Individuals focus all their attention on finding the 'right' person, or object of love, rather than 'standing' in love. His description of falling in love is profoundly poetic and inspires us all to remember those tender feelings.

> If two people, who have been strangers, as all of us are, suddenly let the wall between them break down, and feel close, feel one, this moment of oneness is one of the most exhilarating, fulfilling experiences in life. (Fromm, 1956, p. 3)

Fromm (1956) also delineates various forms of love, including romantic love, motherly love, and self-love. For the scope of this research, this literature review focuses on romantic love. As something that drives humanity, theorists have tried to find out exactly what love is. For example, Maslow (1962) saw the pursuit of love as part of a journey into self-actualisation, or in materialising a whole self. Other psychologists pursued a more empirical approach to find out the 'secrets' of love (Sternberg & Weis, 1986).

The pull towards categorising the various ways of loving can be also seen as an attempt by psychologists to support their clients in exploring their love style in relationships. For example, Lee (1976) came up with a theory of love styles, suggesting that individuals have different ways of experiencing and expressing love. These included eros (passionate, romantic love), ludus (playful, game-playing love), storge (affectionate, companionate love), pragma (practical, realistic love), mania (obsessive, possessive love), and agape (selfless, unconditional love). The author grounded his theory in painstaking qualitative research work. Firstly, he conducted a thorough cataloguing of love constructs found throughout literature and philosophy. This was followed by extensive interviews. Stopping individuals in the streets of Britain and Canada, Lee reviewed personal history and perspectives on love (Lee,

1976). Due to the accessible language, this theory still functions as a common language between therapists and clients.

Following Lee (1976), the twentieth century is marked by the development of taxonomies and scales to measure and categorize love. Using Lee's (1976) love styles as the baseline, Hendrick and Hendrick (1986) proposed a love styles inventory that measured individuals' preferences and tendencies in romantic relationships. They found that men tended to score higher on the ludic love style, indicating a greater inclination towards casual and game-playing love, while women tended to score higher on the storge and pragma styles, emphasizing affection and practicality in their approach to love. These results quantified how men and women have varying approaches to expressions of romantic love.

Another attempt at explaining what love is, comes in the form of Sternberg's (1986) 'triangular theory of love'. This theory suggests that love consists of three components: intimacy, passion, and commitment. These components present in varying degrees and combinations, resulting in different types of love, including romantic love (high passion and intimacy), companionate love (high intimacy and commitment), and consummate love (high levels of all three components). The strength of this theory lies in its ability to provide a framework for a discussion about how the various components appear in a client's loving relationship. Sternberg's theory is not without fault. In particular, the nature of the commitment dimension has been questioned. Though it can be conceptualised as a part of love, it is psychologically a separate construct (Rempel & Burris, 2005).

Regardless, Sternberg's 'triangular theory of love' has inspired advances in research. For example, Hatfield and Berschei (1969) conducted a study on the two-factor theory of love, proposing that passionate love is characterized by intense emotional arousal and cognitive preoccupation, while companionate love is marked by affection, deep attachment, and feelings of satisfaction and emotional closeness. Chandler and Kay (2006) sought to

evaluate marital satisfaction using the triangular theory of love, whereas Lemieux (1996) investigated how the interplay of commitment, intimacy, and passion changes over the lifespan. In contrast to the complexities expressed by Lee (1998) and Fromm (1956), this research has focused on finding 'truths' and quantifiable meta-components of love.

In contrast, other scholars have tried to explain love as an emotion (Halwani, 2010; Karandashev, 2017). In this explanation, love is viewed as an intentional emotion directed towards a specific person. This emotion, however, is mediated by beliefs about that person, social constructs, and the passing of time, all of which influence the intensity of the original emotion (Halwani, 2010).

In addition to psychological theories, the biological and evolutionary perspectives on love have also gained attention. Evolutionary psychologists, such as Buss (2006), have proposed that love and attraction serve as mechanisms for ensuring reproduction and the survival of the species. They argue that certain characteristics, including physical attractiveness and resource acquisition, are sought due to their evolutionary advantages. However, it is worth noting that these theories do not fully explain love, as love is influenced by cultural norms, family traditions, and societal expectations. Some respected scholars have advanced the idea that love is a social construct (Hatfield, 1988; Noller, 1996). As such, the frame of reference we carry about what it means to experience romantic love, influences our expectations and behaviours (Hatfield, 1988).

More recently, the meaning of romantic love has changed greatly compared to what it was throughout history. In the past, it wasn't love that led to marriage, but rather practical considerations such as economic stability, social status, and family obligations (Fromm, 1959). In contemporary Western societies, the idea of love has shifted towards a focus on romantic relationships that are centred around a well-assorted partnership and a common aim of personal fulfilment and happiness (Cleary, 2015).

The present heteronormative script for dating, for example, is gendered, with men pursuing women whilst women wait to be chosen (Eaton & Rose, 2011; Lamont, 2014; Paynter and Leaper, 2016). We find the same scripts apply to online dating. Even though most dating sites give the same powers to men and women to start interactions, men and women tend to adhere to traditional dating scripts even when dating online, where men mainly message women first (Sharabi & Dykstra-DeVette, 2019).

However, Fromm (1959) argued that true love goes beyond this narrow understanding and involves a wilful commitment directed towards a single unique individual. The concept of romantic love has only recently arrived at the forefront of societal ideals, and its influence continues to shape our understanding and expectations of relationships (Shumway, 2003). Forms of love are intertwined with the next concept presented within this literature review, attachment theory.

Attachment Theory

Attachment theory draws from an early claim of Freud (1905), who hypothesised that early experiences with one's parent of the opposite sex heavily impact the future relationship one has with their partner. In the early 1940's, a psychiatrist named Bowlby started to investigate the possibility that early separations and adverse childhood experiences could have an impact on the development of a neurotic character in children (Bowlby, 1940). This early hypothesis developed into several direct observation and follow-up studies. In one such study, Bowlby (1953) confirmed how the involvement of the primary caregiver had an immense impact on childhood development, theorising that children develop specific interactions with their parents. These interactions give way to the formation of an 'internal working model', which both guides the child in their dealings with their parents and helps the

child predict how the parents will behave towards them (Bowlby, 1973). Moreover, Bowlby proposed that this internal working model will guide the children in their expectations for future relationships for the rest of their life (Bowlby, 1973).

This component of Bowlby's (1973) work has implications for this research. If early experiences guide behaviour in relationship formation, then this theory explains difficulties with relationship formation. However, scholars have questioned the legitimacy of the basis of attachment theory (Davila et al., 1997; Serning, 2019; Tizard, 2009). As evidence demonstrates genetic makeup also contributes to behaviour, the level of impact parental behaviour has on children remains under debate (Oliver et al., 2014; Pike et el., 1996; Plomin, 2018; Polderman et al., 2015).

Attachment theory was further developed in a seminal study conducted by Hazan and Shaver (1987). The results made a clear connection between attachment style and the ability to form healthy romantic relationships, claiming that adults follow the same attachment style in their adult relationships as those developed with their primary caregiver (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). While additional studies have theorised that adult attachment theory can predict the ways adults may behave in their romantic dealings (Levine & Heller, 2010), similarly to children's attachment theory, this theory has been scrutinised. There are many unanswered questions about their claims that such a theory could adequately predict human behaviour in romantic relationships (Fraley & Shaver, 2000). Based on professional experience, many clients find attachment theory to explain some of their present relationship difficulties; however, it is essential to be cautious of any theory which claims to singularly explain the full scope of romantic relationship formation. As such, this theory may be useful to consider in conjunction with others, including schema therapy.

Schema Therapy

      Similarly to attachment theory, schema therapy (Young et al., 2003) postulates that children whose basic needs are unmet in childhood learn a pattern of coping strategies, also called schemas, that are helpful for the child to navigate their environment. They can also be seen as scripts of behaviour that guide clients. Problems arise when these schemas are automatically applied to other situations in adulthood, becoming maladaptive or counterproductive (Farrell et al., 2014). The therapist is invited to adopt a limited reparenting attitude towards the client to change the sabotaging schemas and strive to meet their core needs (Farrell et al., 2014). As such, therapists working with single clients have cited issues with relationship patterns as leading to relationship formation issues (Charura & Paul, 2015). While several authors have researched this topic (Charura & Paul, 2015; Leontiev, 2013; van Deurzen, 2015), a lack of focus on women who experience and overcome this issue remains. As such, this thesis will contribute to the literature by highlighting the importance of this area of study to the counselling psychology and psychotherapy community and the public.

Difficulty in Forming Relationships

A literature search for studies exploring difficulty in forming relationships did not yield any results when filtered to only include female participants. When the gender parameter was removed, studies focusing on both men and women were found; however, psychotherapy was not part of the participants' experience (Apostolou, 2015). Rather, the study's focus was to prove that finding a mate is an unregulated task in modern, post-industrial times. In contrast to human history, where mating was largely arranged by others, they postulate that difficulty in romantic relationship formation derives from humans' inability to adapt through natural selection to this newfound freedom in choosing a partner (Apostolou 2010; Apostolou 2015). Another body of research focuses on the readiness to enter a romantic relationship (Hadden et al., 2018) and commitment with an emphasis on timing (Agnew et al., 2019; Tan et al., 2020). Other studies of interest centre on findings that support the theory that people who are anxious about maintaining their single status tend to settle for partners they find less than ideal (Spielmann et al., 2013; Spielmann et al., 2020).

Relationship Therapy

Though a form of grey literature, the website for Relate, a UK-based counselling provider which offers support for relationship and gender issues, serves as a relevant source on relationship therapy for this thesis. Relate's resources resonate with both the client and the therapist working to help them. Their website openly invites single people to attend relationship therapy, including those struggling to enter a relationship. Their advert (2019) reads as follows:

> If you're single, the idea of going to 'Relationship Counselling' might seem a bit inappropriate. You're not alone. Lots of people think that relationship counselling is all about couples and isn't relevant if you don't have a partner. Not true. If you want to look at your relationship patterns in order to start making changes within yourself and look at the kind of people you choose to have relationships with, we can help. (Relate Website, 2019)

> Furthermore, Relate summarises what is likely to happen in therapy, including forming a therapeutic relationship with the counsellor as a vehicle for making conscious choices. They suggest that clients might feel like they are always dating the same kind of person and that some maladaptive behaviour patterns might limit their ability to form romantic relationships. They advise resolution may come from having a frank look at their family history and then making more conscious choices for their future relationships (Relate Website, 2019).

This approach aligns with anecdotal reports from many therapists. Charura and Paul (2015), for example, describe working with clients who present with struggles in forming a satisfying relationship. They advance the hypothesis that therapists might work with this issue by letting clients act out their difficulties through their relationship with their therapist (Charura and Paul, 2015).

Existential Literature

The biggest danger, that of losing oneself, can pass in the world as quietly as if it were nothing. (Kierkegaard, 1849, p, 35)

The final portion of the literature review addresses the topic of relationships and relating through the lens of existential thinkers. Although the word 'western' has been used in this study to summon ideas of freedom in romantically engaging with whomever we choose, it is also true that western societies broadcast the idea of separateness amongst people (Cooper, 2003). This is in opposition to existential thinkers, who argue for the belief that human existence is inextricably tied to others. This is also known as the intersubjective position (Crossley, 1996).

Existential-phenomenological thought theorises that our human existence is located between self and the world, as humans are intertwined with the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). For example, Heidegger (1966) and Husserl (1913) see being-in-the-world-with-others as the primary human condition. Heidegger (1996) proposes that intersubjectivity is about the implicit assumption that humans are linked to each other through shared meaning and shared interpretation of the world. In other words, humans are always in connection with the world and with others. For Buber (1970), the *I* can famously only become itself when in relationship with the *Thou,* and it is there that human essence is to be found. It is, therefore, the possibility of fully immersing into the meeting with the other that is the essence of the I-Thou intersubjective connection. That moment of true encounter also holds, in and of itself, the possibility of being changed by that authentic meeting (Buber, 1970).

As this study contemplates romance, Merleau-Ponty's (1962) notion that being embodied includes relating to others in a sexual way is worthy of note. This does not translate

into desiring sex with any given person, but rather it is about an inability to separate from the body. This in turn points to the belief that a fundamental facet of intersubjectivity is that all encounters with others are mediated by inherent sexuality (van Deurzen & Iacovou, 2013).

Other authors have wrestled with the idea that it is not just the being-with-other but rather understanding the other, or even 'knowing' the other's experience. With its preoccupation with the individual's experience, this is something that phenomenology somewhat fails to acknowledge (van Deurzen & Kenward, 2005). Before Rogers (1959), Jaspers (1932) defined empathy as a conceptualisation of an intersubjective relationship with another person. He poetically explains the space of the encounter with another as something that changes both the self and the other. He calls this 'love'.

The love in this communication is not the blind love which fixes upon one object as readily as another. It is the struggling, clear-sighted love of possible existence tackling another possible existence, questioning it, challenging it, making demands on it. (Jaspers, 1932, Vol 2, p. 59)

Scheler (1931) coined the term of *fellow-feeling* to indicate the sympathy and love we as humans naturally possess towards all living things; however, the question remains about how reliable this feeling is. Levinas (1974) characterises the relationship to the *Other* as having priority over the own self. In this form of thought, the self has an ethical requirement that is defined by how it responds to the meeting of the *Other* (Levinas, 1974). Unfortunately, the author also identified the *Other* as the woman, clearly framing the theory from a one-sided male outlook (van Deurzen & Kenward, 2005).

Within the literature examined so far, the existential philosophers agree that being connected or in relationship with others is a basic tenet of human existence. A contrasting point is made by Simone de Beauvoir (1949), who acknowledges that women dream of great love. At the same time, de Beauvoir criticises women who are too devoted to their men, as

this behaviour diminishes women's autonomy (de Beauvoir, 2011). In the context of the present study, this point highlights a clear example of the cultural context influencing the author's view of relationships.

Finally, Sartre is the one author that has written more directly about love than any other existentialist. He portrays a rather pessimistic view of interpersonal love. For Sartre (1943), when we encounter the other, we want to become one with them, as the other is the only one that has the truth about us. However, this implies the need to become everything for the other, meaning that one party would need to lose their freedom. In this view, love is destined to be subject to constant conflict for the supremacy of one or the other (Sartre, 1943). In his later works, however, Sartre revised his ideas on love relationships by adding the possibility of cooperation instead of competition in the loving dyad (Sartre, 1960/2004).

With a more realistic view on love in therapeutic practice, van Deurzen (2015), a prominent existential contemporary voice, states:

Most of therapeutic practice is about love, one way or another…Because we are really nothing without being in relationship, relationship is always at the forefront of a person's concern…love is often one-sided, unrequited, problematic, or conflicted. (van Deurzen, 2015, p. 21)

van Deurzen (2015) proposes that we have such a high expectation of perfection for romance that, often, the experience of a real relationship has a distant resemblance to that standard. This, in turn, creates ground for the insurgence of feelings of being unloved (van Deurzen, 2015).

These thoughts are echoed by Barker (2015), who points out that the seemly unwritten rules for finding the one person that will be one's perfect match. Working existentially with relationships is about challenging these culturally sedimented ideas and taking responsibility for one's interactions with others. It is about learning to be alone first,

respecting personal needs before exploring individual ways of giving love (van Deurzen &
Iacovou, 2013). Existential relational therapy is now a thriving practice, and van Deurzen
developed a way of working with couples using the four dimensions (van Deurzen, 1998).

Leontiev (2013), in a book exploring existential perspectives of relationship therapy,
describes the case of a client who struggles in her relationship with men. This client had
already entered two long-term relationships in her life, one of which resulted in divorce. Like
the RELATE website advert, Leontiev (2013) suspected the client to be subconsciously
employing a script for relationships. As in schema therapy, this pattern of behaviour, or
schema, was obstructing the development of an enjoyable romantic relationship. Like many
other practitioners, this existential therapist included this example within a chapter discussing
relationship therapy. However, it is worth considering that the struggle to enter romantic
relationships may deserve its own nomenclature, if not its own chapters within relationship
therapy.

Process of Therapy

Inspired by the words of van Deurzen, this study briefly considers the psychotherapy process, primarily as a client-therapist relationship. Consistent research findings show how the relationship between the therapist and the client predicts the outcome of therapy, regardless of the therapist's methodology (Cooper, 2008). Yalom (2001) makes a powerful distinction between the content of the sessions (the words spoken, the facts told by clients) and the process of therapy. The process of therapy is the relationship that unfolds between therapist and client along with the content that is presented (Yalom, 2001). Other authors have been trying to identify helpful processes in psychotherapy by separating clients' and therapists' contributions to therapy (Cooper & McLeod, 2011). Results indicate that clients find talking to and receiving directions from their therapist the most helpful therapy activities (Cooper & McLeod, 2011). Other writers have advanced the idea that Rogers' (1959) core conditions are, in truth, a description of the kind of loving relationship the therapist should endeavour to create in the therapy room (Charura & Paul, 2015).

Chapter 3. Methodology

"In studying human behaviour, it is not possible, and probably not desirable, to be anything but subjective" (Robson et al., 2000, p. 535)

Quantitative vs Qualitative

As I was thinking of the method to employ for my research, I had to contend with the first choice between quantitative and qualitative methods. Considering my background in clinical psychology, I was used to thinking of research as a deductive process. This way of reasoning starts with an existing theory. Then, the researcher formulates a hypothesis and tries to confirm it empirically (Willig, 2013). The hope is that the results will be such that a cause-effect relationship can be found, and the results applied to a vast population (Willig, 2013). This is quantitative research, which has been long purported as the scientific method of enquiry for social sciences (Bryman, 2008).

In recent years, counselling psychology and psychotherapy research have shifted towards qualitative methods (Milton, 2010). However, the critical field of outcome research still widely employs quantitative research (Vossler & Moller, 2013). This means that all therapy modalities and their effectiveness are evaluated using quantitative methods (Vossler & Moller, 2013). For this reason, I considered quantitative methods first for my research as I aimed to examine the process of therapy and what happens there for women who were single for a long time when they arrive in therapy. Establishing a cause-effect between attending therapy and finding a significant other because of therapy was tempting. Nevertheless, I am pleased that I have continued my quest for the right method, as I was trying to connect my research question to my epistemology and my aim for the research.

Ontology and Epistemology

At this point, I felt concerned that my way of seeing reality (ontology) was going through a transformative process, and I was no longer sure about what I believed. This philosophical confusion posed a real challenge when writing this part of the proposal. The reflection that I did to write this paragraph has been very enlightening. It forced me to reflect on my way of seeing reality (ontology).

Besides the ontological question of the nature of reality, my epistemological position should focus on what I believe we can know about reality (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). However, if I was unclear about how I see reality, how could I answer the all-important epistemological questions? In particular: how can we know reality, and what is the relationship between the researcher and the object of the research? (Willig, 2013). Clarifying my ontological and epistemological positions was a crucial step toward choosing the correct methodology for the study, as the three are interdependent (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Rather like the epistemological developments in social sciences, my worldview was quite positivist in my younger years, but it subsequently evolved as my worldview changed. It was probably reassuring to think that the world was black and white. During my undergraduate degree, I espoused the positivist epistemological position that reality was what we could see and touch, and that we could know reality through science (Bryman, 2008). Growing up, I started to see the world as a critical realist. Critical realism is a development from the positivist's naïve realism. Critical realists also assume that there is a fixed natural world out there, but that we can only know it imperfectly (Bhaskar, 1986; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). It is a way of seeing the world that I would like to illustrate with Plato's Myth of the Cave. According to the myth, there were humans living in a cave with their feet bound on one side. Because of their position, they saw only shadows of the men passing by. Since the only

thing their viewpoint afforded them was shadows, so they thought that shadows were all there was (Gaarder, 1994). A critical realist would say that there were men passing by (the reality), but we (the bound humans) could only see an imperfect version: the shadows.

Figure 1

An illustration of the Allegory of the Cave, from Plato's Republic (Wikipedia, 2022)

For the purpose of clarifying my epistemological position, I also considered constructionism. According to this position, there are many realities (and not one and only as stated above). This is because reality is seen as a construction based on social factors and personal experiences (Bryman, 2008). I weighted my position for a time and, following this path of new understanding, I have taken a critical realist epistemological position with a realist worldview. Having said that, the object of this study is the mind and experiences of the women I have interviewed. In order to bring these experiences to the fore, I needed to interact with the participants.

For critical realists, the results of an investigation such as the one I carried out are at least partly the product of the interaction between the researcher and a group of subjects (Morrow & Brown, 1994).

Furthermore, I believe that there is an intended meaning in the words that the interviewees used to answer my questions: the participants meant to say something specific. From my critical realist point of view, the intended meaning of the participants is the reality I have endeavoured to understand. However, I accept that as the interviewer, I have interpreted that meaning and gave it a significance that might or might not be entirely in line with what the participants wished to express (Hirsch, 1967). In addition, my way of asking the questions, the questions themselves, and the relationship between the interviewee and me all had an impact. I believe there is a new interpretation of the reality and experiences the subject has lived through. Because I believe this new reality is valuable, I needed a method of analysis that allows for this level of interpretation without forgoing my need to try to gain insight into the lived experience of the participants (Reid et al., 2005).

Descriptive vs Hermeneutic

Having decided on a realist ontological position within a critical realist paradigm, I needed to consider the interpretation (hermeneutic) level to employ. When I was in a time of confusion over my epistemological position, I read about various qualitative methods. I realised then that I also had to decide if I wanted a method that was to be more descriptive or more interpretive (Vossler & Moller, 2015). For a time, I felt a tension between descriptive and interpretive. Considering that I am very involved with the topic, I briefly wondered if using a descriptive method when analysing the data would keep me closer to the participants' experience, sidestepping my interference as much as possible (Colaizzi, 1978; Giorgi, 2008).

Other Methods Considered: Descriptive Phenomenology

Initially, I was leaning towards a descriptive phenomenological enquiry, like the Colaizzi's (1978) method. Husserl (1928) first talked about a phenomenological attitude towards the study of human consciousness, where one should be a spectator of the phenomenon (Willig, 2013). In other words, the researcher should suspend his judgements and knowledge of the world and focus her attention purely on the phenomenon in front of her as portrayed by the subject (Willig, 2013). According to the phenomenological psychology of Giorgi (2008), the researcher should try to stay close to the account of the participants, minimising interpretation. Therefore, the whole focus is the phenomenon as experienced by the participant (Willig, 2013). The descriptive side of Husserl's phenomenology (1928), which states, the basic phenomenological concept that we do not need to go beyond the façade to find meaning, appealed to me. The meaning is in the facade itself, if we only know how to look (van Deurzen & Kenward, 2005). However, I also found myself drawn to Heidegger's (1927) hermeneutic, for which all our descriptions can never be objective. As soon as there is an observer, a researcher, or someone who is describing, a viewpoint is added to the mix (Robson et al., 2000). I concluded that, for me at least, a researcher is unable to completely detach from one's own views; therefore, I abandoned the idea of employing a descriptive method of analysis.

Other Methods Considered: Grounded Theory

Besides Colaizzi's (1978) and Giorgi's (2003) descriptive methods of analysis mentioned above, I also considered grounded theory; particularly when I realised how little literature there is about the topic of my research, as this method is very well suited in such cases

(Payne, 2007). I was especially drawn to it as a method of analysis that focuses on the "how" (as IPA does) and the "why" of a phenomenon (Nolas, 2011). It follows that it is very often used when investigating professional practice (Nolas, 2011). Grounded theory was created in the 1960s by Glaser and Strauss, and it is geared toward creating a theory by means of analysing the data (Bell, 2014). The focus of the researcher is, therefore, the creation of a theory. This aim is what guides the whole process. For example, theoretical sampling is employed in grounded theory to select participants (Bryman, 2008). This means that the sample changes as new data emerge, and following this, the theory evolves accordingly. For as much as it would be a worthy endeavour and relatively well suited to my topic, employing grounded theory would have moved away from my interest in looking in depth at the experience of a specific group of women who underwent a similar experience to me. To arrive at a theory, grounded theory (Nolas, 2011) loses some of that ideographic focus I so value in IPA (Smith, 2009). In addition, a practical consideration was that grounded theory would require a large sample to reach "saturation," when no new themes emerge from the analysis (Bryman, 2008). A large sample is impractical for this study, considering the time constraints of doctoral research.

Rationale for Adopting the Research Method: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

- Smith developed IPA, a relatively recent method, in the 1990s. When I was searching for the perfect method to analyse my data, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) appeared to be a good compromise between Husserlian Phenomenology (1928) and the Heideggerian hermeneutic (1927). The tension between interpreting the data and understanding the significance of the participants' meaning is also enhanced by the underlying tenet of IPA presupposing a cooperative process (Smith & Nizza, 2021). In

other words, when utilising IPA, the participants' involvement is highlighted rather than treated as something to be merely observed (Smith et al., 1995).

- In IPA, participants and researcher collaborate to develop the meaning that leads to the final themes (Charmaz, 2015). This is consistent with my critical realist epistemological position. According to IPA, the knowledge drawn from the data is partial, mediated by circumstances, and co-constructed (Smith & Osborn, 2008; Smith et al., 2009).

- IPA is an inductive method. Accordingly, the research begins with the ontic, singular experience in order to arrive to the ontological knowledge that might be universal (Smith & Nizza, 2022). IPA does not seek to generalise. However, by asking the participants their thoughts on a phenomenon, we might draw themes that can have theoretical applicability to the topic (Smith et al., 2009). This aspect of performing a deep analysis of one participant at a time is also known as idiographic (Smith & Nizza, 2022). This characteristic of IPA relates to its emphasis on a unique and in-depth assessment of a single experience (Shinebourne, 2011). This is critical in uncovering the hidden meaning of intensely personal experiences that are often difficult to articulate, as the current study attempted to do. The life-changing experience of overcoming a long-standing difficulty in connecting with a healthy partner is such a personal experience. IPA is particularly suited for investigating life changes, emotional experiences, and sense of identity (Smith & Nizza, 2021). This emotional aspect of IPA was especially appealing because it seemed to be the best fit for answering my research question. As if that were not enough, IPA is well suited to analysing complex issues that have received little attention and are, in fact, messy (Smith & Osborne, 2003). This aspect, once again, perfectly fit the current study, helping to answer the research question.

- The IPA analytical process is iterative, which means that all steps can be retraced to revise previous interpretations (Smith & Nizza, 2022). This aspect of IPA resonated with my characteristics as a researcher. I appreciated the opportunity to be spontaneous in my initial notes and impressions, knowing that I could always go back and revise after delving deeper into the analysis. Following that, I could apply what I learned from analysing the participant's worldview (Smith et al., 2009). It is the opposite process of starting with a hypothesis and testing it on a population, an approach commonly used in quantitative studies (Bryman, 2008).

Reflexivity and IPA

In keeping with my reflexive stance as a novel researcher (Etherington, 2004), I have kept a research journal throughout my research process. An excerpt from my reflexive research journal is found below:

> I am well aware of my assumptions. After all, they are why I started all this. The reasons some women struggle with entering a satisfying relationship. As much as having assumptions on anything is not generally regarded as a positive, I wonder: could we exist without any assumptions? And are assumptions as good as hypotheses? After all, aren't assumptions just hypotheses? It looks like hypotheses are just a fancy word for assumptions about reality. (Research Journal, October 2020)

During my training in counselling psychology, I learned that we need to become aware of our biases and assumptions (Bond & Reeves, 2021). Only by being aware of them can we change our minds, or at least keep our biases in check (Etherington, 2004). Following this train of

thought, I engaged in a reflexive journey throughout the research process. I kept a research journal and vowed to stay honest with myself when encountering anything unexpected or unwanted. The second part is to remain transparent in my study and writing (Yardley, 2003). As a case in point, my main conjecture on the research topic was that women with low self-esteem have more difficulty finding a happy relationship than confident women. Someone with low self-esteem is more likely to give up any undertaking, including the big project of building a healthy relationship (Branden, 1995).

As I made my assumptions transparent in this study, I also intended to "bracket" them when interviewing and analysing the data. Husserl (1928) first spoke of a process of putting aside what we think we know (*Epoche'*) to experience fully what we encounter. This exercise suits me well and is part of that tension I mentioned above between interpreting and describing. I enjoy trying to put aside my preconceived ideas and try and experience anything as if it were completely new. IPA gave me his opportunity: after each analysis of a single case, the whole process started again for each subsequent case (Smith et al., 2009).

The Husserlian Epoche' needs to be employed repeatedly for every case until all have been analysed. Only then, the researcher is allowed to make all the connections and let all the previous knowledge flood in (Smith et al., 2009). In this way, by putting my assumptions aside and using them later, I hoped they could be a valuable part of my investigation rather than a hindrance to my interpretation of the results. It follows that I needed a method where the researcher's views are valued. As an interpretive phenomenological method, IPA is a method where it is assumed that we cannot grasp anything if we do not already have a preconceived idea about it (Eatough & Smith, 2008; Van Manen, 1990).

At the same time, IPA's structure promised to help me make sense of the participants' experiences, and it was an in-depth investigation of those experiences, which is what I was aiming for (Reid et al., 2005). This intent was also enhanced by the double-hermeneutic

aspect of IPA. This aspect concerns the role of the researcher, which is striving to make sense of the participant's experience, at the same time as the participant is trying to make sense of their own experience (Smith et al., 2009). Many writers now believe that, at least in social sciences, we should focus on understanding rather than causality (Dilthey, 1984); and IPA seems to deliver on that.

Research Design

To try to give an answer to the research question, a set of procedures needed to be in place (Vossler & Moller, 2015). In the following paragraphs, I outline the procedures I implemented to select and recruit the participants, to gather the data, and to analyse the collected data.

Data Collection Method: Semi-Structured Interviews

Something unexpected impacted my data gathering: Covid-19. As I prepared the finishing touches for the ethics application, the Covid-19 crisis changed our lives. The UK and many other governments across the world mandated social distancing rules to slow down the spread of the Covid-19 disease caused by a coronavirus. I, therefore, added online interviews with my perspective participants as a valid and safe alternative to face-to-face meetings. I am fortunate to have had several years of experience in online therapy, both as a client and as a therapist—being a supervisee in online supervision sessions. Based on this ample experience, I was confident that a genuine connection goes beyond a screen, and therefore the data could be as rich as if it was collected in person (Janghorban et al., 2014). As I had ethical clearance for both, the remote interviews were conducted via Skype or Zoom according to the participant's preference.

Using interviews to gather data is almost ubiquitous in qualitative research (Creswell, 2007). After examining the questions in Chapter 1 and their connection to the research aim, I will now outline how I developed them. I chose semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions so that the participants had the freedom to communicate what they felt was relevant.

These kinds of interviews are an excellent way of accruing data for qualitative research methods (Knox & Burkard, 2009). They also provide a helpful structure, leaving room to creatively pursue the various paths that could emerge from the participants' answers. This way, the researcher can facilitate the full account to emerge (Knox & Burkard, 2009). I spent considerable time constructing the interview schedule according to my knowledge of the topic and discussions with supervisors. I also read about the subject and followed the advice on considering my research question from different points of view to support my quest for the right questions to ask (Smith et al., 2009). I settled on starting with a question about how they imagined their romantic relationships would be before having any romantic engagement. It was a descriptive question with a narrative element that focused the attention on the topic straight away. I also decided to prioritise the temporal aspect of the interview schedule (Knox & Burkard, 2009). I chose to ask questions that followed a chronology for the participants, so they may be able to tell their stories in the correct order. I thought this would facilitate the participants' ability to follow a familiar thread. I closed the interviews with a fantasy question: what would have been different if they had not gone to therapy. It ended up being the participants' favourite question. They reported that the last question helped them review all they had achieved. There were seven interview questions in total, and I had several prompts written down to clarify the questions to the participants if needed and to support the flow of the rich accounts I was seeking.

I also tested the questions on myself, having a colleague interview me with my interview questions. This was part of my reflexivity practice, and an account of that experience can be found at the end of this chapter. At that point, I was confident that the questions could help me answer the research question.

Finally, the interview schedule went through several revisions, some of which to meet the feedback from the proposal approval panel. Outside the set interview questions, I also asked the participants for demographic information such as type of work and education, age, relationship status, length of therapy, and type of therapy attended. See Table 2 on page 79 for the demographic profile of the participants and Appendix B for the interview questions.

The Sample

The process of selecting participants for the research is known as sampling (Vossler & Moller, 2014). In quantitative methods, the sample must be representative of the general population. This ensures that the results of the enquiry can be generalised (Vossler & Moller, 2014). However, I am interested in the depth and richness of new data, which can be delivered using a qualitative method (Willig, 2013). To obtain rich data that could help answer the research question, I selected a sample of women that had gone through the same experience I wanted to investigate. This process is also known as purposive sampling (Bryman, 2008). The sample consisted of seven straight, cis-gender women between the age of 25 to 45 years old. A homogeneous sample such as this is well suited to produce a rich description of a particular phenomenon that occurs in a specific social world (Bryman, 2008). As per the sample size, for IPA 6-8 is thought to be a good size, which delivers a compromise on variety and similarities of themes that can emerge without overproducing data with more participants (Smith et al., 2009).

After deciding on the method and the sample demographic, I debated with my supervisors on the other inclusion criteria. In the early stages of planning this project, I intended to interview participants who attended either existential or humanistic psychotherapy with a relational focus. As time passed and I received more feedback on this study, it became clear that it was not feasible for self-funded doctoral research to have such a narrow recruiting criterion, and therefore I included clients who have attended therapy in any modality. In addition, the therapy that the participant attended could have been centred on relationships or have had a different aim, and the fact that the participant then entered a happy relationship could simply be a by-product and not the focus of therapy. The research focused on the clients' experience rather than on proving that relationship therapy works in a certain way.

The minimum duration of therapy to be included in the study also went through some iterations. Initially, I thought of a minimum of one year, but modern financial and time restraints meant that some prospective participants might have been left out. Having attended therapy for eight months minimum was a compromise as six months seemed too little and one year appeared too restrictive. Other points raised throughout the research were, firstly, what a satisfactory relationship means. Secondly, if the participants needed to be in a satisfactory relationship at the time of the interview. I was very thankful for the feedback, which helped clarify what I wanted to communicate to the readers. In my opinion, what makes a relationship satisfactory is very personal. I could not possibly decide what that was for anyone. Therefore, I let the participants self-select if they thought they had overcome their issue and found a healthy relationship. I did not think it was my place to decide on the length of a satisfactory relationship. Consequently, the participants needed to have been single for a minimum of one year and have been in personal therapy for a minimum of eight months.

To meet the inclusion criteria, the therapy had to be carried out with a chartered counselling psychologist (HCPC) or a registered psychotherapist (UKCP). Belonging to these accrediting bodies was an important step to ensure that the level of training of the therapists was certified to be of a high standard. There was a proviso after the proposal approval stage that, in case the recruitment phase proved to be too slow, I could consider changing my inclusion criteria. For example, I could include participants that had been in therapy with a BACP accredited counsellor without restricting the inclusion criteria to participants who had been in therapy with UKCP registered psychotherapists and HCPC chartered counselling psychologists only. However, as discussed below, I should not have worried; after the first nerve-wracking two months, the recruitment went relatively smoothly. For a complete overview of the inclusion criteria, please see Appendix A.

Ethics

As part of my training to qualify as a counselling psychologist, I attended a course on research ethics. Afterwards, I prepared my ethics application to conduct research with human participants. After meeting their conditions on my application, the ethics committee granted me full approval to proceed with my research.

To preserve the autonomy and safety of my research participants, I applied the principles specified in the BPS' Ethics guidelines for internet-mediated research (2017) alongside the general BPS code of ethics and conduct (2009). For instance, the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants were paramount. This was explained to the participants both in writing via the information sheet and repeated verbally before the beginning of each interview. Data protection information was added to the participant information sheet, which was sent to all participants prior to the interviews.

The information sheet outlined the research's aim, the study's process, and their rights to withdraw from it. The interviewees were made aware of their right to withdraw from the research at any stage until when analysis commenced.

As specified in the consent form, participants were notified of the time the analysis of their interview was commencing and given a timeframe so they could withdraw. Informing the prospective participant and being transparent on the whole process of the research is part of a more extensive "consent" ethical requirement, as described in the BPS Code of human research ethics (BPS, 2014).

For a complete overlook of the consent form, please see Appendix D. I then recorded the interviews digitally and stored the recorded material in a password-protected file on an external hard drive that I stored in a locked drawer. Any personal, identifiable details of the participants were amended as I transcribed the raw data, and this was made clear to them. As stated in my approved ethics application, an information sheet (Appendix C) was sent via email to all participants, and I asked for informed consent (Appendix D). Having obtained informed consent, I then performed remote interviews with women who met the inclusion criteria.

The feedback I received from the ethics committee primarily concerned the recording of the interview. Considering the relatively novel use of a video conferencing medium, they wanted to ensure that I only recorded the audio and not the video of the interview. I complied with this by amending the information sheet and the consent form and clarifying this with the participants. I debated with myself whether to start a subscription with the Zoom video conferencing medium that would have allowed me to record the audio only of the interviews, as required by a condition of my ethics approval. However, during my pilot module, our lecturer suggested we do several trials of recordings. Before the actual pilot interview, I had

had four attempts at recording digitally during which I tried recording using my iPhone, an external recorder, and a computer-based software, often using two of them as a backup.

After a few trials, I settled for the external recorder, which was excellent at picking up the sound from the online interviews. I placed the external recorder on my desk, close to the laptop through which the videoconference interview took place.

When I was writing the risk assessment for this study as part of the ethics application, I had to change or delete any of the usual possible risks, as the interviews would be taking place online only and not in a physical location. However, the risk of emotionally harming the participants is always present when discussing sensitive issues. Therefore, minimising any distress to the participants has been my guiding principle throughout this process (Bond, 2004). This point is highlighted when discussing the value of the findings versus the potential distress the participants could incur by participating in the research. I was reassured by the fact that I interviewed women about what is considered a positive outcome. However, during the interview, difficult topics might have emerged, and I was mindful of checking on the well-being of each participant as the interview progressed. If any of the participants were distressed by the interview, the information booklet had directions for contacting the nearest confidential counselling service and the details of the Samaritans of London. In addition, I offered a debrief after the interview for participants who required it, and I sent a follow-up email with a debrief sheet (Appendix E).

Recruitment

After obtaining ethical clearance, I conducted a pilot study per my course's requirements. It was an excellent way to try all the steps with one participant only. The first hurdle was the recruitment of a participant, of course. Considering this took place in the

autumn of 2020, the world was a changed place from the one we were used to, with the Covid-19 pandemic still running our lives and directing governments' policies. I was worried about how this external circumstance was going to impact my ability to recruit. My thoughts were focused on the fact that at any other time, I would have advertised both online and in person. Thankfully, my original plan for recruitment already included a substantial online process, so I advertised through social media and sent my advert to all my contacts in the hope that someone would reach out to say they were interested or knew someone. I also advertised on NSPC's Facebook pages. During those few weeks when nothing happened, I started to get worried; one day, the well-known academic Mick Cooper (2020) published a blog that gave lots of valuable tips on recruitment and some food for thought. It felt very serendipitous as it was a read that had arrived at precisely the right time. The blog summarised what I was finding to be accurate: that we can have the best ideas and the most solid research plans, and yet without participants, there will be no data. And no data means no research (Cooper, 2020). Besides, the tips in the blog pointed me in the right direction. Following the advice from Cooper's blog (2020) and double-checking the plan with my primary supervisor, I created a Facebook page for the sole purpose of recruiting the pilot participants. I uploaded a few neutral pictures, a synopsis of my study and the recruitment advert. The primary usefulness of this page was that on posting the advert on another business network medium (linked-in), having the link to another web page provided that little bit more of an interest that was sufficient for the first participant to message me. When I saw that message, it was a fantastic day for me that has taught me to persist, change tack, and use all available avenues to find a participant. After that first message, I received other three people interested in the following few months. As I worked on the pilot study, I contacted these perspective participants but postponed the interviews to a later time.

In a way, being in the 2021 and early 2022 lockdown meant that several people were keen to have their time occupied by something, and I believe that helped my recruitment immensely. In January 2022, my pilot study passed so that I could proceed with the recruitment. I was lucky that the three previously available participants were still keen on meeting with me, and I conducted these three interviews in the last part of January 2022. In the meantime, I redoubled my efforts on social media and advertised on the official BPS professional counselling psychology student forum Facebook group. This latest move proved very successful, and I found two participants there. I had been wary of advertising through one of the BPS channels because I wanted to avoid having all my participants be psychology trainees. Not that there would be anything wrong with it, but I thought that if all the participants were therapists, it would influence the results. My wish was to have a sample that was constituted mainly of women who viewed therapy as clients. However, this Facebook group was slightly different from other official BPS groups because some of its members are just thinking of becoming counselling psychologists but are not yet in training; so, the pool of participants is rather varied. At this point, I had six participants and was happy to close the recruitment. As I was interviewing the last two participants, I was messaged by an acquaintance who had shared my advert with her contacts and found someone interested in being interviewed. I completed my recruitment in the early part of February 2022.

Setting up the Interviews

Thanks to the pilot study, I simply repeated all the steps that had worked well the first time and applied them to all the participants to screen them. I outline this part of the process below. Before setting the appointment for the interview, I exchanged messages with the prospective participants to screen them and answer any questions they may have. As detailed

in the recruitment paragraph, they had usually seen my advert on their homepage (linked-in) because a contact had re-shared it. Alternatively, they had seen the advert posted on a Facebook group, or it was sent to them by a mutual acquaintance via personal email or the 'what's up' messaging service.

My first contact with participants was a message reply to them on a social media page. There, I asked for their email address to send over an information pack that included the information sheet and the consent form. I also offered a brief phone call where I could clarify any doubt they had. When they agreed they would be happy to receive the information pack via email, I reminded them to take their time to read the documents ahead of the call, in case they had any questions for me. During this preliminary phone call, I tried to ascertain whether they fit the inclusion criteria. In fairness, they were the ones that were worried they did not fulfil the requirements. For example, one participant told me she was a divorcee, still in therapy, had been for about a year, and was not presently dating anyone. This last circumstance made her question if she fulfilled the inclusion criteria. After a few questions, it became clear that she did indeed fulfil the inclusion requirements. In fact, the participants did not need to be in a relationship at the time of the interview as long as they had been in a relationship that they found satisfactory during or after therapy, and this had happened after being single for at least a year.

Another participant was unsure whether she fulfilled the criteria as she did not think she was "western." During the conversation, we discussed what we intended as western, and eventually she agreed that she espoused western values of freedom in dating anyone she liked with no religious or cultural restrictions. Instead, she had conceptualised the word "western" as geographical and interestingly only regarding Europe (for a complete overview of inclusion criteria, please see Appendix A).

I was also curious to gauge their motivation to participate in the project. For most participants, it was either a chance to review their self-development or a strong willingness to share their enormous success and eureka moments about relationships with others. Considering that the research topic pertains to the ability to form happy romantic relationships, I found those to be good reasons to participate. I also highlighted the possibility that the interview could become upsetting, and some recollections may or may not bring up difficult emotions. With these thoughts in mind, I reassured the participants that if they were upset we would interrupt the interview. Finally, I asked about the info sheet and if they were happy to go ahead to sign the consent, which they did electronically and sent via email. Once we agreed to proceed with the interview and the participants had chosen between Skype and Zoom, we scheduled a suitable time.

The Interviews

According to Knox and Burkard (2009), it is only through establishing a rapport with the participants that they can give us a rich account of their experience. This makes sense to me as we ask participants to dive deep into their lived world with a stranger. I used my innate warmth and ability to connect as a therapist to create that rapport with the interviewees. As expected, the participants' personalities differed; therefore, the resulting interviews were wildly different in some cases.

For instance, I interviewed someone who was very chatty. I got the sense she was perhaps a people pleaser, and I wondered at the time how this could impact the data. After going through some salient points from the info sheet, we drifted into some small talk. I was aware of this: the participant was leading it, and I stayed with her as I was mindful that this was a good use of time if it made the participant relax and feel comfortable with me. When I

started with the first question, I found myself paraphrasing it a bit to make it more friendly and "light," so we started. This participant was very detailed in her narration; I got the impression that she did not want me to miss a thing from her experience. She also talked so fast that I could just make out her general meaning. I thought that perhaps her mind had already jumped ahead of the sentence she was speaking, and often she would suspend phrases and jump to the next thing as if she had finished the previous sentence, even though she had not. I did not want to interrupt her flow, and I wondered if that was suitable, if the data would be good considering some sentences were truncated. I could still follow, and therefore I concluded that it was acceptable. It was just her style of expressing herself, and the more I listened to her, the easier it became to follow her train of thoughts. As much as she was a fast talker, she was methodical in her answers.

Perhaps it was first-timer's luck, but I managed to ask all the questions during the interviews. The participants answered them, although sometimes with less enthusiasm. One participant's interview lasted less than half of the usual 60-90 minutes of other interviews. This participant was very friendly but slightly cutting in her answers. She gave me the impression of great "busyness," almost as if she was trying to decide if she was wasting her time. She answered all the questions, albeit with a clipping tone. I had the impression that she thought I was asking for complete obviousness. Regardless, it was a good interview, as were all others. They all brought something unique and magnificent to the project, and I will be eternally grateful for their time and effort.

Finally, during the interviews, I sometimes felt I was slipping into "therapist" mode, but I was able to catch myself and concentrate on the participants' interesting answers (du Plock, 2018). All participants looked happy and grateful at the end of the interviews. Regardless of these instances, in the following days I sent the participants a debrief sheet (Appendix E) with a thank you email.

Transcribing

Per my ethics application, I transferred the recording to an external USB pen and deleted it from the recorder. I was so eager to start and finish with the transcribing that, after obtaining some indication from my supervisor, I began to transcribe before reading anything about transcribing for IPA. When I read about the subject, I discovered that for IPA it was not necessary to transcribe passages that were not going to be analysed (Nizza & Smith et al., 2021). In hindsight, I am glad I did not know I could leave some trivial parts out of the transcript. Since I transcribed absolutely everything, including the awkward initial moments, the pauses, the little noises, the meandering about the first sweetheart, the chuckles, and the hesitations, I think I reached a sense of what the participant was saying. On occasions, I had to go through the recording many times to understand the words themselves, as some participants had a difficult accent or spoke very fast. I settled for a simple transcription in chronological order, and I made the transcript as accurate as possible, leaving all grammar mistakes, colloquialisms, etc. (Landgridge & Hagger-Johnson, 2004). As I transcribed, I altered all recognisable details regarding the participants and the people they mentioned. This means that all names in the transcripts' excerpts are pseudonyms; and all places, jobs, illnesses, circumstances, and even timeframes have been altered to preserve the anonymity of the participants (BPS, 2010). I transcribed all the interviews myself, despite having obtained ethical clearance to use an agency to transcribe. I decided against using one because, after transcribing the pilot interview, I noticed how important that part was for me to get familiar with the data. I used my awareness of the reduced time available to complete the doctorate to propel me and went through this phase as quickly as possible. Eventually, I finished transcribing, and I was ready to start the new phase of data analysis.

The Analysis

"Remember, however, the importance of both the I and the P in IPA" (Smith et al., 2009)

One of the pieces of feedback from the pilot interview regarded the fact that in the analysis I was too descriptive and needed to interpret more. In a way, I understood what was meant by that; in fact, many novel researchers tend to stay very descriptive at the beginning for fear of misrepresenting the participants' meaning (Nizza & Smith, 2022). I knew this would be my challenge from the beginning, and I did my best to tackle it head-on in the current study. IPA is a flexible approach but with a robust set of guidance (ibid.). As an inexperienced qualitative researcher, I sought my supervisor's advice and followed the process described by Smith et al. (2009) and Smith and Nizza (2022) for IPA. I immersed myself into the transcripts by printing all the hard copies, line-numbered them and then started with the first case by making copious amounts of general notes.

I was surprised by how many new aspects seemed to emerge from the data at every re-read. The first read-through was always whilst re-listening to the recording. The following readings were done subsequently. I must have immersed myself rather deeply in the raw data because to this day, every time I read an excerpt from the transcript, I still "hear" the voice of the participant whose extract belongs to. At one point, I felt I needed a tighter grip on the information that was emerging. This was when I went into a structured way of producing my comments on the data. See Table 1 for a small excerpt of this part of the analysis. For a complete coding example, please see Appendix G.

Table 1

Anonymised Transcript Excerpt of "Helena"

Emergent themes	Verbatim	Descriptive[a]	Interpretative[b]	Queries and ideas[c]
- Reality - Checking with myself what I am doing - Presence and awareness - Guilt	H43: A malaise. It's like boiling up. As soon as I negate myself, I feel horrible. But I also have guilt. Fundamentally I am worse off... but if I am able to move past this thing, at least, now basically, I feel selfish if I don't do that thing for that person. I feel like I am not helping that person; and different from before; now I am a bit in contact, and I say: wait. That guilt is not healthy. And sometimes I give in, I do the previous schema, but I know I am doing it. It's not really automatic. I tell myself, ok am doing it now because I really feel I have to do it. So, a sense of reality and awareness, now more after therapy.	The participant now experiences a negative feeling for negating her needs and guilt for her old rules for living. "I'm selfish if I think of my needs." There is also a sort of mindfulness and "presence" in the now for making informed choices. And being aware of herself that was perhaps absent before.	There is also the waiting, biding time so that emotions, valid and authentic decisions, and wishes may come forth. Difficult time in between, when the old equilibrium is still kicking in, and the new order of things is there, but she has not taken total control yet.	A "malaise." It's a powerful, evocative word to describe anxiety. It makes me think of a lady from another time. "I am a bit in contact," she means with herself. Her language in this passage is also full of psychological concepts. I presume this is her therapist's influence.

[a]Phenomenological focus and close to the participant's explicit meaning. What it is like for Helen. [b]The how and why, the contextual: more interrogatives and the participant's lived world. I identified concepts to make sense of the patterns of meaning in their account. [c]Linguistic comments: exploring the specific use of the language of the participant.

Only during this second level of analysis, I realised how many themes there were, and how rich the material really was. Finding meanings and identifying experiential themes was not difficult. If anything, there were just too many of them. At one point, it became impossible to make sense of them. I knew I had to structure them into clusters (Landgridge & Hagger-Johnson, 2004). I read all the instructions on how to find connections and patterns, but it all became too abstract. Keeping in mind the hermeneutic circle, I returned to the transcripts, retraced my steps, and ensured that I was staying close to the data (Smith et al., 2009). Following my supervisor's advice, I printed out all the themes and cut them, so each theme was a single piece of paper. Then, I spent three days on the floor, moving themes around, making the connections, until it all fit. This was only for the first case. Once I had found a list of suitable themes that fit together coherently, I prepared a table of personal experiential themes (PETs) for the first participant (Smith & Nizza, 2022). After this stage, I went fully old fashion writing on papers, and I only have pictures of my tables of experiential themes and not word files. Below is an example from the participant whose pseudonym is "Summer."

Figure 2

Table of Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) from Summer's Analysis
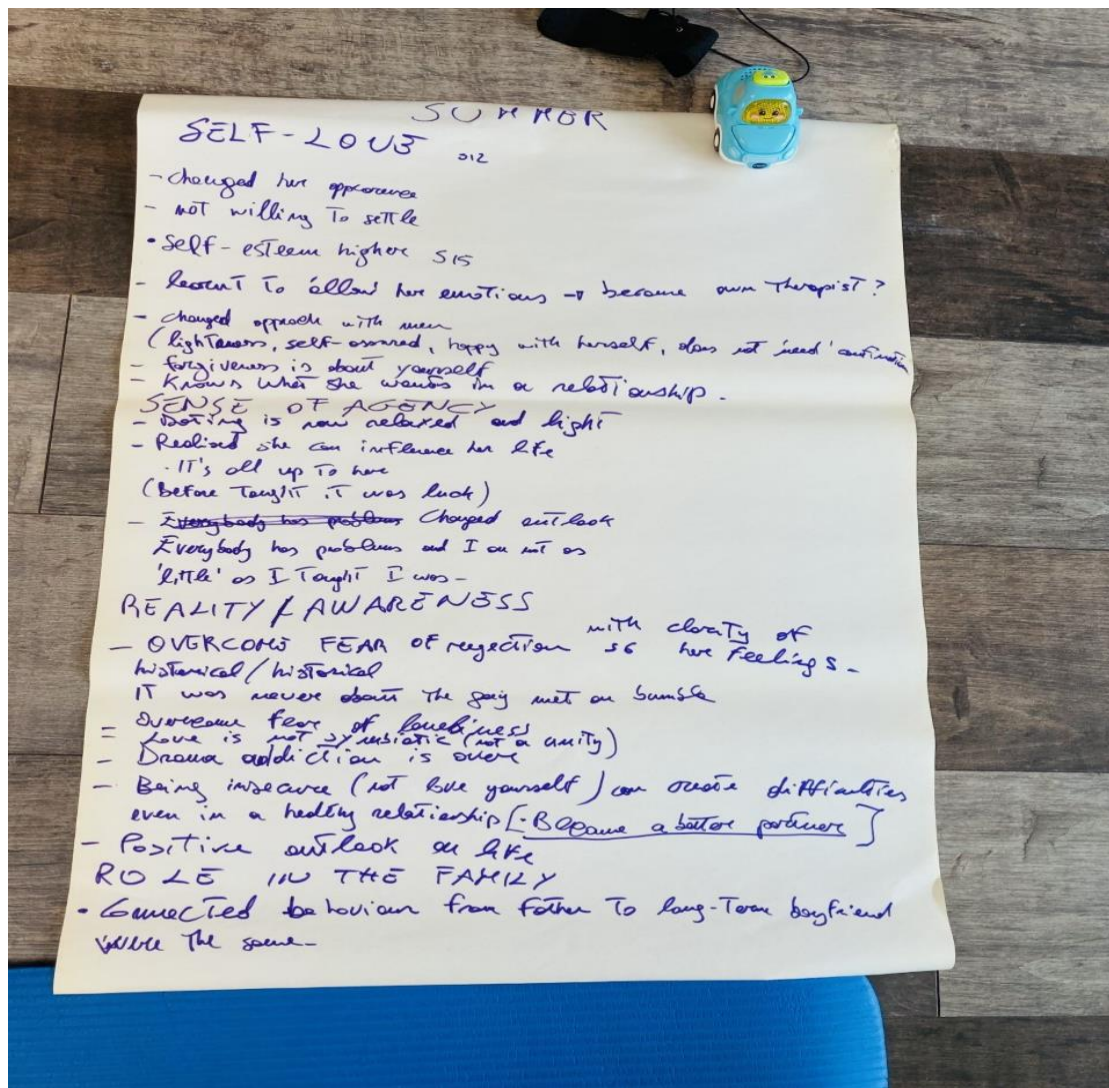
An excerpt from my reflexive research journal is below and outlines my analysis

process (April 2022):

Very involved, full on. My god. When will I ever finish this?? There are thousands of

words to carefully look at and understand in their context and then draw what I think,

what I think the participant thinks. And it's both involved creatively AND really long.

A sustained, deep effort for a very long time. I am following guidelines to a T. Firstly,

I read and re-read while listening to the recording. Then I read again, trying to

understand and write a description of what the participant has said. I do this to make

sure I am understanding, and I basically paraphrase. If themes jump out at me, I make a side note of them, noting the line numbers so as not to lose my process. After this, I go to the linguistic level. Here all the sentences, expressions, phrases, and idioms the participant has used go through a different sieve. I select them mostly following my intuition. What is jumping out at me?

I tried to understand what the participant was saying and noted those peculiar or interesting expressions. Then I analyse what they could mean in the broader context of the participant life. It goes on and on and on. Last, I move to the "contextual" and how. Basically, I interpret. Here, I don't hold back. I go full-on with whatever I'm hearing may mean. Or what I think it may mean. I am never going to finish this. It's thousands of sentences. I was supposed to have completed the analysis by now, and I have only done three...

Perhaps it was naïve on my part, but I had not anticipated how long the analysis of the cases would take. It was beautiful and challenging and heart-wrenching at times. Once I finally finished with the analysis of all cases, I moved to the cross-case analysis stage.

My first step was to read all the PETs I had compiled and look for connections and similarities. By this point, all the PETs were on the floor, and I literally could walk amongst them and make notes on a pad of what was similar and what was different. It was now a matter of integrating the clusters and finding the main themes that repeated for most participants, noting the similarities and the differences (Smith et al., 2009). What I noticed is that, far from being over, the analysis continued throughout this process, and the themes themselves went through more iterations as the days progressed. I then was able to generate a table of group experiential themes (GETs), which contained all the relevant superordinate themes and their associated themes. After I was satisfied with the integration of themes and

clusters across the cases, I sorted them in order of importance and relevance. At this point, I went back into writing in a word document and repeated the process of sorting through the themes that belonged to each cluster, this time across all the cases. Below is another picture of my floor at this stage (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Clustering Together of Themes Across Cases

After completing this process, I was satisfied that I had a good list that would form the structure of my write-up. However, I was mindful that, at times, I would have to go back to the individual tables and to the transcript themselves; the journey to this point had taught me that much. I was, therefore, grateful once more to have chosen an iterative method of analysis that contemplates going back to refine the analysis at any point (Smith et al., 2009).

I was also aware that the analysis could have continued: that in a way, the job of analysing is never completely done, and new meanings could continue to emerge (Willig, 2013).

This understanding was soothing to me, considering my tendency to linger on specific tasks and my involvement with the material. The analysis could have continued for a very long time. And it did, partially, in the results chapter. In keeping with IPA commitments, this further continued the analysis (Smith & Nizza, 2022). I hope the reader will find the results in the next chapter as compelling as I do. They are as faithful as possible to the meaning the participant expressed, all structured together with what I understood from the data. Ultimately, the beauty of IPA is in the constant tension between staying close to the participants' experience and what the researcher takes from the data (Finlay, 2009). This understanding can spark ideas and connections, informing the interpretation part of the analysis.

Reflexivity

As with most researchers, my interest derives from personal experience. I was a young woman who was single for many years. Then I went to therapy and worked on my relationship issues with a counselling psychologist. That therapy completely changed my life. In my case, it was a matter of low self-esteem, as I did not think I deserved to be loved; I was not. As soon as the therapy ended, I met someone who became my husband. I have no issue with being transparent with my assumptions, as I am curious about other people's experiences. In my understanding, transparency is the best way forward to allow readers to retrace the steps and the choices I make throughout the process (Smith et al., 2009).

At the beginning of this research journey, I had some concern that using myself in the research in such an open manner could be a hindrance because of my personal experience (Etherington, 2004). However, by fully disclosing the lens through which I am observing the

participants' accounts, the reader will be able to understand where my interpretations are coming from, and the results could be enriched (Vossler & Moller, 2015).

Altheide and Johnson (1994) openly discussed the validity of a qualitative study as a reflexive account, so that the attention is focussed on the research process and not solely on the results. After reading about this last point, I started a reflexivity journal and included some excerpts of it in the present dissertation. I also had a constant open dialogue with my first supervisor throughout the research journey. It is widely acknowledged that researchers that keep a reflexive stance throughout the research process have a better chance of producing a robust piece of research (Finlay, 2002).

Finally, to further my reflexive practice, I was interviewed by a fellow student with my interview questions in autumn 2020, whilst I was attending the pilot module. Bolam et al. (2003) advocate this reflexive practice for researchers. I am happy I employed this exercise as I found it surprisingly difficult to be on the receiving end of such intimate questions. My colleague asked me if the difficulty came from having to disclose such personal insights. However, for me it was more about the challenge of pulling concepts together in a coherent manner. Being the participant was mentally tiring, and I noticed it was helpful when my interviewer used prompts or clarified the questions for me when I was stuck on a point.

These discoveries made me even more sympathetic to my perspective participants, and I believe they made me a better interviewer. The exercise also made me reflect on the confessional stance I had been embodying up to that moment in recounting my insider experience as someone who used to struggle to form healthy relationships. Therefore, I tried to transition to a more profound reflexive stance that could perhaps better illuminate my position regarding the study. In addition, I became fully aware of the tension between my insider role and my outsider position as the researcher (Bolam et al., 2003).

Demographic Profile of the Participants

Before presenting the findings, Table 2 below shows the demographic profile of the seven participants included in this study. This information was obtained at the beginning of the interviews.

Table 2

Demographic Profile of the Research Participants

Gender	Female (7)
Age	25-34 (1); 35-44 (6)
Nationality at birth	European (5); British (2)
Ethnicity	Caucasian (7)
Employment status	Employed (7)
Relationship status at the time of the interview	In a relationship (4); single (3)
Marriage status	Previously married (2); presently married (1)
Presence/absence of children	With children (3); no children (4)
Education level	Higher education (5); lower education (2)
Therapy length attended	Less than a year (1); between one and three years (3); more than three years (2); more than five years (1)
Therapists' orientation	Existential (2); psychodynamic (2); systemic (1); gestalt (1); schema therapy (1); integrative (1)
Therapists' qualification	Counselling Psychologists (2); psychotherapists (5)
Therapists' gender	Female (4); male (3)

All participants were employed and Caucasian, either British or European. Most of them were highly educated to bachelor or master's level. All participants, but one, were over 35 years old. Only one was married at the time of the interview, with three participants having children. This part showed a homogeneous sample as required by IPA standards. Rather more differences were found in their therapists' orientations. Six different modalities

were present across seven participants. Instead, the genders of the therapists were rather even.

Finally, the therapy lengths were evenly distributed.

Chapter 4. Findings

"I shall either find a way, or I shall build one" (Attributed to Hannibal at the Alps'
crossing)

Overview of Findings

Four superordinate themes emerged from the transcripts.

- Superordinate theme I: Self Love

- Superordinate theme II: Self Awareness

- Superordinate theme III: Sense of Agency

- Superordinate theme IV: Role in the Family

The superordinate themes result from the subsumption of clusters of connected, "like"
themes. Amongst the emergent themes, each superordinate theme was chosen as it captured
the essence of its cluster (Smith et al., 2012; Tomkins & Eatough, 2010). They are present in
the participants' lived experiences of entering a satisfactory romantic relationship during or
after a course of psychotherapy.

Figure 4

A Visual Representation of the Four Superordinate Themes
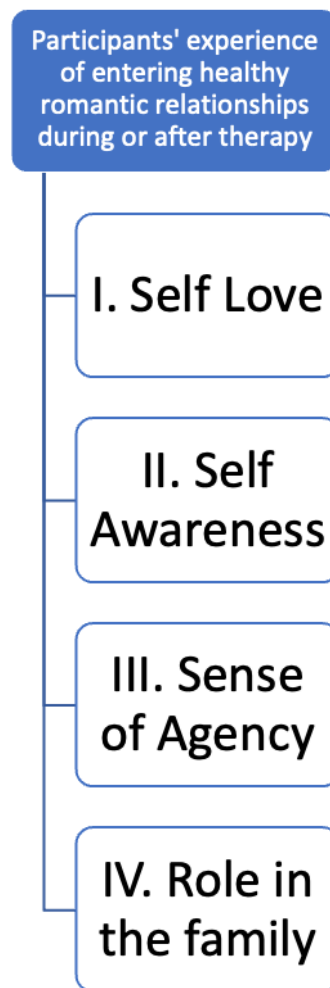
Following the directions outlined in Smith and Nizza (2019) for an IPA research study, I elected only to include themes present in more than half of the participants. Considering my sample size, this means that the following superordinate themes and their related themes have emerged in at least four participants out of seven. Table 4 shows how the themes are represented across participants. The table also offers an overview of all superordinate themes and their related themes that will be presented in more detail in this chapter. Pseudonyms are used throughout the paper to protect the participants' identities.

Table 3

Representation of Emergent Themes Across Participants

Themes	Participants						
	Helena P1	Roxanne P2	Summer P3	Lucy P4	Darla P5	Lorna P6	Lulu P7
I. Self-Love	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Defining oneself based on others or self	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Authenticity	Yes				Yes	Yes	Yes
Increased self-esteem	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Own needs are prioritised	Yes	Yes		Yes		Yes	Yes
II. Self-Awareness	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Decreased Romanticism	Yes	Yes√	Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes
Clarity over own and others' responsibility	Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes		Yes
Knows what she wants in a relationship		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Reality check	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes		
III. Sense of Agency	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Became a better partner			Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes
Became own therapist	Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes
Willing to end relationships that bring pain	Yes		Yes		Yes		Yes
Dating a different kind of man	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes			Yes
IV. Role in the Family	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Re-enacted elements of her family role into previous relationships	Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes		
Chose partners that fit into old family scripts		Yes	Yes	Yes			Yes
Varying degrees of having overcome fear of intimacy		Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Each superordinate theme (I-IV in Table 4) is the result of the clustering together of a set of themes. I will start with a comprehensive look at the first superordinate theme with its related themes and continue in the same fashion for the other superordinate themes. This will be achieved by presenting relevant verbatim excerpts from the interview that hopefully help display the connection between the emerging themes and the participant's experience. The verbatim quotes are all numbered by following the same order of page and line. For example, "Lucy, 2022, p. 12.5" indicates the excerpt from the participant Lucy (pseudonym) on page 12, line 5.

Superordinate Theme I: Self-Love and Its Themes

"My biggest discovery was that you can literally re-create your life. You can redefine it. You

don't have to live in the past. I found that not only did I have fight in me, I had love"

(Davis, 2022, *Finding Me*)

Figure 5

Superordinate Theme I: Self-Love and Its Themes
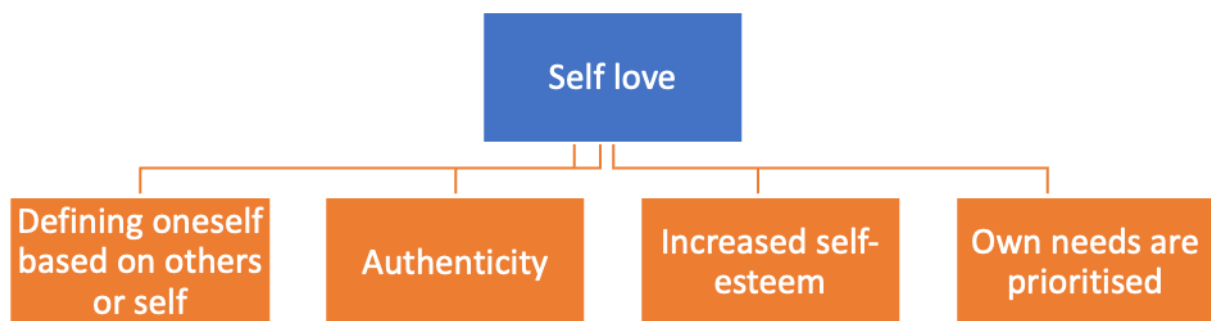
Self-love is a recurrent superordinate theme in almost all participants' accounts. As I examine this superordinate theme, I will use the word "self-love" as an umbrella term that indicates varying degrees of the participants' positive feelings towards themselves. I hope it will become apparent to the reader that there had been a substantial shift in the positive regard these participants now hold towards themselves. Perhaps, as the common saying states, it is true that one needs to love oneself first to be loved. More than a commonplace, this study shows that self-love may be a conditio sine qua non of entering a healthy romantic relationship. All participants mentioned having had either their self-worth, self-respect, or self-love increasing. For example, some participants talked about how they were now comfortable being themselves and therefore stopped pretending to be someone else. For other participants, it was about letting go of perfectionism. We will now look at how this increased self-regard was expressed through its different facets (themes) across the participants.

Theme I-I: Defining Oneself Based on Others or Self

This paragraph explores a phenomenon common amongst the participants: the shift from perceiving oneself through the eyes of others versus perceiving oneself through their own eyes. This accent on other people's opinions is observable in many contexts and many people. I will try to illustrate this change by comparing how the participants now relate to this aspect of themselves with how they previously were only impacted by how others viewed them.

Darla grew up in a patriarchal family where a woman's worth was measured mainly by her being with someone else: "It was part of the self-worth being with somebody, being somebody's other half. Otherwise, you're just somebody, you're just on your own. Nobody wants you" (Darla, 4.31). Lucy used to believe she deserved less than others: "In all honesty, I always thought I deserved less. Therapy made me aware of what I deserve in life" (Lucy, 7.1). Darla has now attended four years of therapy and is in a happy and stable relationship. Her voice is clear, her understanding shines through the transcript, alternating moments of immense psychological insights to comedy gold punch lines. Darla explains that her way of seeing the world has completely changed, but she had to do a meticulous unpeeling of messages that she had absorbed throughout her life without being aware of them. That was the tricky part. After that, the recognition that her worthiness only regards her came almost magically: "I think what happens is, you know, you work on your self-worth and suddenly the way you experience everything in life is calmer, healthier. You look for quality. You say no" (Darla, 9.41). And: "During therapy, I started focusing more on myself rather than trying to find myself all through the reactions of the others" (Darla, 35.55).

There seems to be excessive importance placed on the approval of others. Consequently, one's own opinions are considered unimportant. In this sense, I find that the shift to finding

our own judgements to be as important, if not more important, than the judgement of others signals a movement towards self-love.

Similar to Darla, Lucy is also now in a stable, long-term relationship. She expressed her changed regard towards herself as "self-respect," and stated that she had now decided she deserved better. In this case, it is about the switch from someone who used to believe she deserved less than others to someone who can carve her own path. This knowing of being deserving made all the difference as Lucy found love by going on multiple dates with this newfound sense of being worthy:

> It was more around me as a person who I am, what I deserve, what I want in my life. Self-respect, you know? […] So, I started dating and dating and dating and going on dates. Oh, my dear Lord, I can't remember how many dates I've been to. (Lucy, 7.3)

The fact that Lucy gave herself the chance to go on numerous dates shows that she gave herself more opportunities to find the right person and that she chose for herself, basing the decisions on her own opinions. This is in opposition to her previous choice of being very selective, only pre-choosing guys that fit a certain standard that had been imposed on her by society and family.

Unlike the first two participants, who are in ongoing satisfactory relationships, Summer and Lorna found that their self-love had increased dramatically because they are now perfectly content being alone. Both fulfilled this study's inclusion criteria of having been in a satisfactory relationship. Lorna explains it in terms of feeling complete and only looking for someone to complement her instead of measuring her worthiness based on the outside world's response. There is also an element of being okay because the world's opinions about being single do not hold the weight they once did:

When you don't really love yourself, particularly like kind of looking at it from

elsewhere. You're looking to kind of complete you, I suppose. Whereas now, even

though I've not had great experiences recently, but I do feel like I am okay by myself.

Like as a person. I'm perfectly okay by myself, and it's more about like finding

someone to compliment my life as opposed to that I need someone else to complete

me. (Lorna, 6.11)

What I found alluring about Lorna's attitude is the idea that as your sense of love for yourself

grows and the opinions of others fade into the background, the desperate need for a

relationship seems to fall away. When those relationships did not last, participants' felt a

sense of being at peace on their own, a change from the anxiety previously experienced

around the lack of a relationship.

Similarly, Summer expresses the shift in object in a very straightforward way, as an

unwillingness to accept any relationship that falls below her standards: "If I don't find it,

someone that will make me be the best version of myself. If you want to come into my life,

you have to make me happier than I am. Otherwise, I'll be alone. That's fine" (Summer, 4.13).

This is hugely different from her narration of the past, where she would go out with anyone

as long as they showed minimal interest in her. Once more, the feeling/opinion of another

person used to have the priority, and that has completely changed now.

Theme I-II: Authenticity

It was a beautiful moment for me when I realised how many participants had been

able to find authenticity: the courage and self-love to become themselves in front of the

world. Sometimes it can be a struggle, and only glimpses of authenticity can appear at any

given time, or only in specific situations. What was clear from the data was the acute sense of

shift that had taken place. I understood authenticity as a journey, which is how I

conceptualise it below to account for the way participants expressed their varying levels of authenticity in the interview.

I will start ideographically with excerpts from Darla. I think her words are the essence of being authentic. She expressed authenticity as the capacity to identify oneself; and as the added understanding that the other person will do their thing, which is not about us. Paraphrasing, Darla's further understanding of being authentic for oneself is complemented by acknowledging that other people come with their ideas and assumptions. She is now fully embracing herself for who she is, with no masks. And this, she found out, is perfectly acceptable in her new relationship. Darla used to change all aspects of herself to be wanted. She used to think something was wrong with her when she was not respected, or when a partner denied her wishes. She now realises she has a right to be the way she is and there is nothing wrong with that. Furthermore, she has the valuable knowledge that her being herself has nothing to do with being or not being rejected. Being yourself is never the reason, as she beautifully puts it:

> And what I realized is that somebody stays or goes for their own reasons. They, it's not that I wasn't worth their love, is that what they were looking for in life wasn't who I was. So, me trying to keep them in my life was unattainable. It wasn't going to work. (Darla, 25.59)

Darla also added: "I think it's almost magical; once you are able to identify yourself, you suddenly also acquire this ability of tolerance towards others. You don't take it personally how the other person is" (Darla 3.55). And that "What others like about you and enjoy in your company and in your presence is about them" (Darla, 4.17); "I'm being stubborn. I'm being feisty. I'm being needy. I'm being sensitive. All of the things that have been blamed as the reasons why the relationships didn't work by others" (Darla, 6.31). She can now clearly see that her personality was never the reason for the breakups or being single. And that being

yourself is never the reason a relationship ends. The problem was that she believed too quickly that something was wrong with herself; and some guys took advantage of that weakness to gain the upper hand in the relationship.

Similarly, rather than risking rejection, when with guys Lorna used to pretend to be another person. She feared being herself as she believed her true self to be unlovable:

> And I remember going out on dates with people trying to convince them that, you know, that I'm worth dating or whatever. And like, you know, not showing them my true self, because that wouldn't be acceptable. Whereas now, I feel able just to present more of who I feel comfortable with. Who I am. And now it's more like, well, if you don't appreciate that person, then we're not, I don't want to be with you. (Lorna, 19.26)

Or this quote: "If I hadn't said it, then that wouldn't have been being truthful to myself and what I wanted" (Lorna, 14.15). "Not showing them my true self because that wouldn't be acceptable. Whereas now, I kind of feel able to just present more of who I feel comfortable with. Who I am." (Lorna, 19.26)

> I look back, I guess pre-therapy and like... It is crazy, isn't it when you look back, like, that was just my life! [..] Like constant anxiety […] these thoughts and assumptions like, you just think is so true. Like people will not like me if I show myself. Whereas now I'm just like, that's crazy. Like, why should I spend so much time believing that? (Lorna, 19.42)

This looks like a tremendous shift and completely contrasts with the past. Lorna is now the centre of importance, and it is she who does not want to be with someone that does not appreciate her.

I will now ideographically present Lulu. For her, being authentic was a great conquest, as she used to negate her real self to be accepted. Lulu presents as very sweet and

has an interesting way of speaking in the future tense, both for the present, future, and past events. During therapy, she discovered the joy and liberation of being her true self. It was a great act of courage, as in the past, she was used to being a people pleaser and disallowing herself to facilitate others. She calls it an act of "pretending." She was pretending while in social circumstances and in any sort of relationship, romantic or otherwise. She was trying to get something from people. She was trying to be liked. And this meant the annulment of herself and a pretence of being someone different. She changed according to who was in front of her to get the "reward" of them saying how fun or clever she was: to have this reward, she was giving up herself. Her relationships now are deeper and more authentic because she is not trying to obtain anything. She is more herself, which is only possible because she has discovered she can be herself. She has a right to exist exactly as she is.

> That is so that the two people in the relationship are both getting what they want and are being respectful. I think I'm still trying to figure it out, but I think the main thing for me is realising that all the previous relationships, even the friendships, were not really what I wanted them to be or were not. I wasn't the person that I really am. And I was just like, pleasing people. (Lulu, 16.5)

Finally, for Helena, it was more about how she found herself lost when the times of the courtships were frantic in past relationships. This dynamic did not leave her time to think or to be herself. In her present experience, Helena is striving to be herself, which is, in my opinion, a sign of movement towards authenticity: "This gave me also the time to come out as I am, whereas from the other men I always felt a bit… overwhelmed" (Helena, 7.6).

Theme I-III: Increased Self-Esteem

This theme is very valuable for me. Every researcher is biased towards their topic, and I assumed that increased self-esteem was the primary element that changed when issues with romantic relationships were solved. As it turns out from the present data, this is an important theme, but it is part of a matrix of change that is more complex than I previously thought. Self-esteem is a well-known but relatively new construct; in this study, I conceptualize it as the general opinion that the participants have of themselves. Not all participants mentioned self-esteem, and sometimes I detected it implicitly in some assertions. I hypothesised that some therapists do not work by making it explicit that their clients' opinions of themselves have changed. Let us now see commonalities and divergencies in how the participants expressed their improved self-esteem.

Summer is the participant who has been in therapy the longest, for almost seven years. Incidentally, she mentions self-esteem and is very direct in explaining her improvements: "I carry really great energy for everyone around me. I am energetic, I am positive, and that's something that is really changed. My self-esteem is just so much higher" (Summer, 4.37). Darla, on the other hand, rather than talking about self-esteem, describes at one point how she started doing something that implicitly pointed towards a higher degree of self-esteem: she decided that she would no longer accept rude behaviour from guys. Another aspect of increased self-esteem is lowering tolerance for being breadcrumbed. If one thinks they do not deserve better, they may accept poor behaviour without protest. She used to accept being wronged without receiving an apology: "I had noticed that pattern, and I thought, I'm not going to take it. He hasn't answered my question. That he has changed the pattern of how he communicated with me and he's not going to answer to it" (Darla, 7.20). And: "Only when I separated in my marriage, I reflected on the fact that my ex had never, ever said the word I'm

sorry. Never… The fact that he was coming back to me felt sufficient" (Darla, 7.25). This is now part of the past for Darla, and it seems such an improvement as it also points towards having positive feelings towards oneself. Knowing that one deserves to be treated with respect and acting as someone who only accepts being treated properly can reinforce positive ideas about oneself; thus, creating a virtuous cycle of self-respect, self-esteem, and self-love.

For Helena and Lucy, we can see some movements towards an increase in self-esteem, rather than an all-out change; for example, with a diminished inner critic. The participant had a history of thinking she was somewhat lacking because she was not fitting a certain standard. This seemed to come partially from feedback from guys she used to date and perhaps also from the high expectations placed on young women in general. Helena was adamant that she wanted to think more of herself, rather than listening to the previous narrative that depicted her as wrong and feeble: "I would have misunderstood because of empathy and because of my own personal dynamics, and I would have justified him, and the narrative would have been that I am a bit fragile, a bit depressed" (Helena, 13.25).

Similarly, Lucy talked about a decreased critical voice. She used to have chatter in her head about what she was supposed to be doing in many circumstances. The voice was never friendly to her, yet it directed her behaviour and moods. Therefore, she could not choose what to do from a place of authenticity. I now see implicit increased self-esteem and a vastly different attitude towards men. "And I think as well to be less critical towards myself. Because whenever something bad happened in the relationship, I would blame myself. And it happened because of me, and we fought because of me" (Lucy, 19.24). She also added: "And stand up for myself, Yes. I'm not going to take your shit today" (Lucy, 19.8).

Confidence is also something that can be considered part of self-esteem. Lorna expressed her increased confidence as something that is now helping her in many aspects of her life: "I feel definitely more secure in myself. I feel like in my 20s I was probably just

quite insecure" (Lorna, 6.10). Lulu expressed part of her increased opinion of herself by letting go of perfectionism, which was a big part of her life since she could remember. I inserted these aspects in the self-esteem category because I think that when someone has a high opinion of themselves, they also tend to have a high view of whatever they produce.

> I had a tendency to be too perfectionist, and I actually will think that I could be that perfect person. And I actually thought that I had to be that perfect person. And it was really making me suffer a lot. Because it will be a constant feeling of failure because obviously, it was not something realistic that I could reach. So, it was constantly a feeling of failure, I think. Very, very hurtful. (Lulu, 18.17)

As it happens in all meaningful changes, there are different degrees and interpersonal variations in how something like self-love can express itself. For both Roxanne and Helene, there are clear signs that they had consciously mentalized their increased regard for themselves.

For Roxanne, the fact that she is now able to accept dating someone who takes care of her means to me that she has developed the capacity to admit that she is worthy of being cherished: "Like, you know, coming and pick me up at any time, buying things for me, being very helpful when we have friends around and helping out and all of that" (Roxanne, 5.29). In common with other participants, she had a history of being someone who does a lot for others. Roxanne had this role particularly ingrained in her beliefs and behaviour towards all previous boyfriends. Therefore, in my estimation, having Roxanne accept this level of care from someone else marked a significant shift for her; and indicated her opinion of herself had increased, even though she does not explicitly reference this. Somewhat differently, Helena is aware that she deserves more and wants to give herself more but has not done so in practice yet: "So, this became very clear, and the fact that it is really enough, I need to think more of

myself as well. Not I am doing it, not yet. But I have had this fact twirling in my mind, at least" (Helena, 10.8).

Theme I-IV: Own Needs are Prioritized

During the interviews, participants spent most of the time talking about accepting and voicing their personal needs (when talking about "needs" in this study, I mainly refer to psychological and emotional needs rather than material ones). To account for this, in an earlier version of the themes' structure, "own needs" was a super-ordinate category. During the subsequent analysis, I came to understand that the participants were also expressing their previous inability to be aware of, to accept, and to prioritise their needs. I therefore decided to put this theme under the superordinate theme of self-love, because I believe that prioritizing one's needs is one aspect of increasingly loving oneself. On the other hand, the participants voicing their needs to their partners became part of the "becoming a better partner" theme (discussed later in Theme III-I), as this behaviour points towards an active action rather than relating to feelings towards oneself.

The first element to become evident in this complex phenomenon is experiencing the needs of others as having priority over one's own. For the participants, it was not even a question; it appeared as an automatic response. These findings suggest that before therapy, most of the participants struggled with prioritizing their own needs: "I don't think I was even thinking of my needs. I was doing my needs whatever the other person's needs were" (Lulu, 8.22). Similar to Lulu, Helena also tended to put other people's needs before her own. Even though at the time of the interview she had made progress and was willing to prioritize herself, she was still experiencing feelings of guilt when she tried to put herself first:

I feel selfish if I don't do that thing for that person. I feel like I am not helping that person, I am not doing and different from before, now I am a bit in contact, and I say:

wait. That guilt is not healthy. And sometimes, I give in. I do the previous schema,

but I know I am doing it. It's not really automatic. I tell myself, ok am doing it now

because I really feel I have to do it. (Helena, 13.9)

It looks like there may be moments of awareness; and that one has a need and right to have them. For example, Helena has stopped negating them. But all is still work in progress because prioritizing others has always been so automatic. Helena now needs to control herself consciously and make a concerted effort to put herself before others. Putting her needs first has become so important that she feels unwell when she negates them. This is a challenging but hopefully transitory time for Helena when she is experiencing guilt towards both others and herself. I see this as a typical phase during change, where the new status quo is not entirely established, and the old ways have not wholly been broken. In her words: "A malaise. It's like boiling up now. As soon as I negate myself, I feel horrible" (Helena, 13.6).

So far, we have seen how two participants used to prioritize others automatically. Now, we go a little deeper into that phenomenon, using Lulu and Roxanne as examples. Both participants exhibited a remarkable lack of basic awareness of having needs. This was coupled with a denial of needing anyone to fulfil them, and presenting this denial as strength and independence:

Yeah, so I think having needs is not something that I would feel proud of in the first

place. It's like if you could actually not have needs! (She laughs). It is like that kind of

sensation of being powerful. I don't have needs, and the ones that I have, I can get

them myself. So I was, in my head, a very independent woman who can get whatever

she wants, or whatever is realistic to get so I can get good grades, get a good job,

travel, and do all these things. And I don't need anyone. (Lulu, 9.21)

Similarly, Roxanne states: "When I really need something, I take it by myself. I act upon my

needs on my own. I don't like to ask for, you know" (Roxanne, 12.3) and "I don't ask for what

I want. I kind of… not even when I'm pissed. I kind of expect whoever is in front of me to understand what I want and where I stand. And this with men particularly" (Roxanne, 10.37).

Whilst Roxanne mainly still denies needing anyone, Lulu's lack of awareness of having needs at all has changed. She would not allow in her attention that she wanted to be in a loving romantic relationship. For instance, a guy offered her an open relationship, and she pretended to herself that she wanted the same, even though she also recognised that it was painful for her to accept that. An important step forward was to become fully conscious of her feelings and embrace her need to belong in a loving relationship:

> I think before; I will just put a great effort in trying to control certain things. And I will not be aware of what I wanted, or what I needed, or whether something was bad or good for me and I needed to stop it or not. (Lulu, 15.22)

Lulu also added that:

> All these encounters I was having, is because of I was trying to fill that gap of feeling that someone looked at me with those eyes, and is like, paying attention to me. But I wanted to make it so that it will never get hurtful. (Lulu, 7.4-6)

Compared to the past, she felt very different:

> I would like to have someone loving me that I would like to have someone looking at me, listening to me, maybe taking care of me in some ways and me doing the same. While before, I would always be very reluctant to recognise that that's a need. Or a wish I have, I will pretend that I don't really care about all these things. (Lulu, 7.1)

The reliance on being rational, strong, and not needing anyone looks like a shield to protect oneself from possible hurt. At the time of the interview, Roxanne is still thinking that way: even though she is aware that she should be asking for what she needs, this is something she cannot bring herself to do yet.

Differently from Roxanne, Lorna and Lucy are now able to express what they need. In the past, Lorna either would not ask anything or would get very anxious about how the other person would react if she voiced a need.

However, this has now changed: "I was actually able to say, like; this is what I'm feeling, this is what I need" (Lorna, 17.21). Somewhat similarly, Lucy now also puts her well-being first. She decides not to "accommodate" someone else before herself. She used to push aside her own needs to help others. She used to put the other person first, but no more:

> I don't want to sort of accommodate him because he needs help. Not that he asked for it. And there's a difference. Because I'm always sort of doing a step further than my boyfriend so, I would help. Here I stopped myself beforehand. (Lucy, 10.37)

Once the participants started to be aware of their needs, accepting them and giving priority to them, this seemed to aid their ability to enter happier relationships.

Superordinate Theme II: Self-Awareness and Its Themes

"Forgiveness is having given up all hope of having had a better past" (Lamott, 1993)

Figure 6

Super-Ordinate Theme II: Self-Awareness and Its Themes
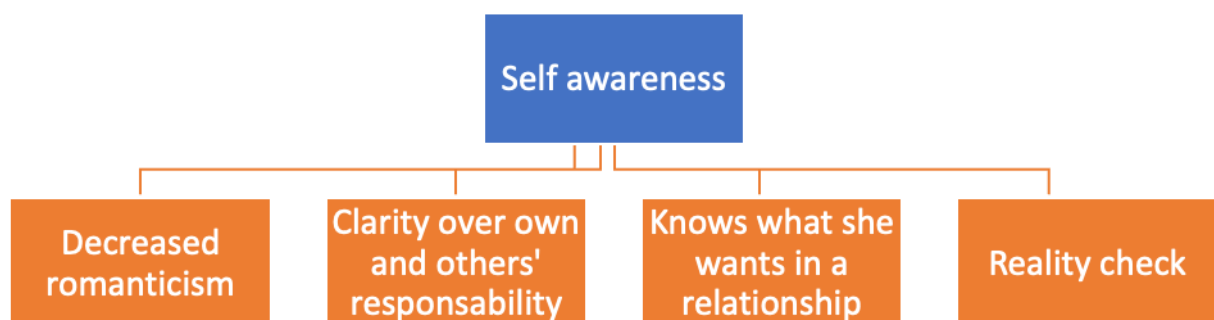
The second superordinate theme is self-awareness. Self-awareness occurs when participants have gained an understanding of various facets of the issues they carried. This newfound understanding, in turn, marked changes in how they conceptualize the world and see reality.

This increased awareness of the outside world and of their inner state means that they are now more connected to their decision-making ability. Finally, being aware also means that the participants now often check with themselves to assess how they are and what they are doing.

Introduction to Theme II-I: Decreased Romanticism

This is an interesting and unexpected theme that emerged from the data, mostly from the participants' answers to the first three interview questions. These questions concerned the ideas that participants held about relationships, men, and love before therapy; and how those ideas had changed after therapy—if they had changed at all. The answers revealed that the beliefs around men and romantic relationships had shifted.

I am aware that the word "romanticism" could be interpreted in the modern, colloquial usage that draws images of candlelight dinners and holding hands with an established partner. However, this is not the meaning I am attributing to the concept in the present work. In the naming of the theme, I have been influenced by personal interest in romanticism as the current of thought that flourished in Europe from the end of the eighteenth century (Eichner, 1972). The romantics, amongst other things, viewed love as something everlasting, a fusion of souls, as life itself. As such, love was to be put above all else (Buhner, 1980). These ideas seem to have become pervasive nowadays, and are pushed through many cultural mediums, particularly onto women (Barker, 2015; Cleary, 2015).

Furthermore, I was influenced by the work of De Beauvoir (1960) and her idea that for men the attention given in life to romantic relationships is much smaller than it is for women. It is my observation that women, more than men, seem to have embraced those romantic ideals. Therefore, if a woman believes that the person they are dating is "the one," they are then chained to that person and ready to sacrifice everything for them.

I found this tendency in the past behaviour of the participants. They were unable to move on, almost as if that is the deal with love; and one needs to accept any substandard situation in name of romanticism. Furthermore, they had a rose-tinted view of the partners' behaviours and constantly tried to reframe events with their romantic lens on. Somehow, these results suggest that during therapy, these sedimented and somewhat unconscious beliefs were unpacked, and the participants gained a more realistic view of what their love life really is (van Deurzen, 2015).

If I had to choose a second-best name for the theme, I would have called it "downsized importance of love life." The paradox is that, as we will see, this scaled down investment in the romantic life brought the participants more satisfaction in the romantic relationships they have.

Theme II-I: Decreased Romanticism

As introduced above, this theme pertains more to women's experience of their cultural environment than to their psychological processes. Several participants described how their thinking around romance had changed as their investment in the romantic side of life decreased. Interestingly, as their romanticism decreased, their satisfaction in their relationships increased. Some participants described how they used to have an idealised version of how their relationships should be. The couple was seen as symbiotic, a unity where nothing ever goes wrong, against which all the world could be set upon but could never be

torn asunder. Participants expressed these concepts in different ways. Lorna focussed on the difference between Disney and reality:

> It's like the Disney film, isn't it? Prince comes in he's like, showering you and kind of thing, and you don't really realize the other things like a compromise.
>
> And you know, when you're living together, and you do the washing kind of thing. I guess it was quite an idealized version of things. (Lorna, 3.35)

Lulu only discussed the frictionless ideal, though there is an implicit hint that such an ideal is not sustainable: "In my fantasy, nothing goes wrong. Like we just do like little everyday life together. And we are staying together, and we are not having problems" (Lulu, 5.3). Helena and Summer, by contrast, forwent hints about the ideal being unattainable and celebrated the romantic unity: "Being present for the other and being attentive to the other, being a team, something beautiful, where things enter and get out, but the nucleolus is always strong. In the end, they can't be torn aside" (Helena, 2.2). And: "We have to support each other. We have to be one thing, like a unity, together. In a sort of symbiotic togetherness, a symbiotic love because I tell you that if we were not in a symbiotic love, that wasn't love" (Summer, 2.31).

Their real relationships fell short of those ideals. That failure, in turn, contributed to feelings of anxiety or simply of being wrong. In the excerpts above, the participants recalled how they thought romance should have been. They used to spend a lot of time and energy on that part of life. At the time of the interview, there were varying degrees of change in how they saw romantic relationships. Mostly, there was no prince, no fairy tales, and the ideas around relationships could be seen as more practical and mature:

> Oh, with men? The main thing now is a bit of detachment. Distance, detachment, I feel like better describes it […] Because you live so strongly things that are so intense, so I don't' know, but I don't have this way of thinking anymore […] I moved forward, and that's what made me see that fairy tales do not exist. (Helena, 11.7)

Do note their characterisation of the change as moving forward, being more mature—there is a sense of leaving romanticism behind:

> Now I live through even the flirting in a more mature way. I don't expect people to make me a priority straight away, and I don't make them a priority straight away. I like to be honest and just enjoy the moment, no expectations. (Summer, 3.22)

Lucy: "I was expecting a lot more quality time with me. And then I realized that I can't put this man in the same category as the others. So, I gave it sometime as well" (Lucy, 13.16). Roxanne was at a stage where she had understood what was attainable and what was not. However, she was still wrestling between her old ideals and what was available to her:

> Even with therapy, I clearly struggle between what I truly would like to get in a relationship and what I'm settling for. I believe that without therapy, probably there would not be that clear understanding of okay; this is what I want, and I know it's going to be a failure. And this is what I have in front of me; let me try to correct one for the other. So now it's kind of a clear process. (Roxanne, 10.25)

Even though Roxanne has not wholly abandoned her romantic ideals, we can see a movement towards awareness. The participant is now aware of what is possible, and what consequences there could be in case she still chooses to pursue a movie-type romance.

Theme II-II: Clarity Over own and Others' Responsibility

Taking responsibility for our actions could be considered a hallmark of being an adult. One surprising aspect that emerged from the data is that most participants had in common, as a default, the tendency to take blame and to put responsibility onto themselves. This happened in many spheres of their lives, but we will focus on examples from previous relationships.

Lulu realised she was not responsible for how other people felt. This used to be a significant impediment for her.

Even when she wanted to end things with a guy she was dating, she would feel a paralyzing responsibility for how the other person was feeling. She now knows this is not her responsibility:

> And if they get hurt, that is not necessarily my fault. I'm not responsible for the hurt because I just have the right not to want to be with them in our relationship or not to want to do whatever it is. So, I think that's very new for me. (Lulu, 17.16)

Lucy and Roxanne automatically thought that anything going wrong, either in life or in the relationship, was their fault; a belief that previous partners reinforced. This was a massive downside of their life, and it happened constantly. "So, I again, get to the point where I was fine with people blaming me. Even though there was nothing to blame! And kind of being, apologetic" (Roxanne, 8.31). And: "I would find a way to blame myself. Because it was easy for a person to say it's your fault. And after some time, I would start believing that it was my fault" (Lucy, 19.31). They have now decided they will not take the blame any longer: "I think therapy helped me to distinguish between when is my responsibility. And when it is not my responsibility" (Lucy 19.26). Roxanne similarly stated that "I felt responsible for many, many things. And therapy helped me a lot to put into perspective that actually I was not to blame for the things I was feeling responsible for" (Roxanne, 7.27); and that without therapy "I think I would still be blaming myself much more than you know, I should have" (Roxanne 10.24). Helena shed some light when she explained how her ex had a problem relating and took advantage of her way of being very giving:

> The narrative would have been that I am a bit fragile, a bit depressed, and in the end, he is a nice person. Yes, he is a bit like that... but all men are. It's I who has the problem.

The therapy made me understand that the problem if I have it, is that I need to love myself more, not that I have a problem with him, and he is the nice one, and I have the problem. He has a problem in our relationship. I have this problem with myself. (Helena, 13.30)

Finally, Darla talked about the day she realised she was being gaslighted. It was as if suddenly there was no more confusion. The pull to apologise and admit things that were not real was not there anymore. She kept her stance and eventually got the recognition of what had happened by trusting her crystal-clear awareness that she was not to blame*:* "I wanted him to acknowledge to me that it wasn't fair on me that he was the one who disappeared. And then he was the one who blamed it on me. I just wanted that acknowledgement" (Darla, 8.12).

And I decided that you don't; nobody does this to me over a whole month with poking me and blaming me and poking me, blame me and in the end, because it didn't work to him otherwise, to then go and admit it. (Darla, 8.23)

Theme II-III: Knows What She Wants in a Relationship

This experiential theme regards the clarity most participants gained over what they wanted in romantic relationships. In various parts of their narratives, the accent was not on what the participants wanted from a relationship but on whether they would be accepted or wanted at all. The shift was striking once the participants gained an awareness of what they wanted in a man and in a relationship. Their requirements and wishes are now at the centre of their search instead of being the other way around. I will start to illustrate the phenomenon ideographically using Lucy as the primary example and then move on to a comparison with other participants.

For Lucy, there used to be a feeling of being compelled to "forget herself" in favour of others. In contrast, she is now aware of what she wants.

Lucy exemplifies this phenomenon by showing the apparent movement from knowing what she deserves, to knowing her position in the relationship, to knowing what she wants and does not want. At the same time, the excerpt is full of emotion, as evidenced by the participant's many "false starts"-"it was, there was a lot of, a lot of"—which in my opinion signals the participant's frustration while remembering how she used to be unfair to herself:

> I think at this time, I started to see what I deserve in a relationship. What I want it to be my position in a relationship. I used to be a lot of helping, wanting to help people all the time. So, I didn't want to get into a relationship where I was going to help a person and forget myself in the process. It was, there was a lot of, a lot of times where I had to forget myself. And I did not want that, and I sort of knew what I wanted. I knew what I wanted in a relationship, and that was something that I didn't want to do. (Lucy, 11.26)

Similar to Lucy, Darla used to "lose herself" in the relationship. The focus was on being wanted and not on what she wanted: "One of the problems that was there is that the moment that I would like someone, I would literally lose myself within that someone […] Wanting to be wanted by that person and wanting to be liked" (Darla, 3.34). Instead, now there seems to be a new process for the participants when evaluating a prospective relationship. It consists of being clear about their boundaries and about what they are now willing to accept in a relationship; and of questioning the person in front of them to see if there is a match to their expectations:

> I think what therapy did for me is that it allowed me to embrace my wants. This is what I want. And whether others consider it as demanding, pressure, or whatever they consider it relevant or irrelevant. That's got nothing to do with me. These are my

walls. If somebody goes away because they cannot respond to my walls, it's not that

there's something wrong with me. (Darla, 6.15)

To follow, excerpts from other participants:

- Lorna: "Can I stay with this person? Forever? Are they going to be the person, then like every day with, kind of thing?" (Lorna, 4.26).

- Lucy: Because I tried, I started to sense that some people are not good for me. There were particular traits, particular characteristics, like when they're talking all the time about themselves, when they don't ask questions about you, or they're not interested in your life. (Lucy, 7.10)

- Lorna: I would like a, like a partner, basically, you know, that I, we do things together, we make decisions together. And then obviously this comes, not that I want to get married and have kids like right now, but like, it's kind of considering it a bit more. (Lorna, 7.42)

- Summer: After all my past, now I kind of sense what I want. Even if I go out with someone older, I sense that they have issues with themselves. I just like to leave it because I can see that there is an issue there. (Summer, 7.35)

This clarity seems to be an essential turning point for these participants to find the

relationship they want.

In contrast to all the other participants, Roxanne has been in therapy for less than a

year. Perhaps this is evidenced in her degree of progress in knowing what she wants in a

relationship. The excerpt below perfectly illustrates one of the change processes that emerged

in this study. Roxanne recognises that she has a cognitive understanding of what is "wrong"

in her relationships' choices, but she still has trouble "knowing" it in the most profound

sense: "It's like, you know, when you decide to not smoke anymore. It's not that you

automatically decide to not take a cigarette, you think about cigarettes all the time, you just consciously decide not to light one up" (Roxanne, 4.25).

She finds it challenging to stop looking for the traits she always thought she wanted in men, even though she has discovered that they usually lead to hurtful relationships:

One thing is to know what's wrong, and one thing is to then believe that, that's something wrong to look for. And not keep looking for that. Actually, not looking for that. That's more difficult. So you can change your behaviour and your attitude towards people, in this case towards men, and see what you attract once you do that. But it's the different trigger, in my opinion, is to be able to put it in your mind that you don't actually want this kind of people anymore? (Roxanne, 4.13)

Roxanne ends her statement above with a question: this exemplifies all the doubts she is wrestling with. The participant talks about stopping desiring specific characteristics in a mate as one would talk about stopping smoking. Even though she has fully comprehended they are not suitable for her wellbeing, it is challenging for Roxanne to decide that she does not want those kinds of men anymore as she is still attracted to them.

Theme II-IV: Reality Check

Virtually all philosophers and thinkers have busied themselves with the concept of reality. The way it is conceptualised in this study is that there is a reality in the world outside, and there are opinions that we hold about that outside world. These opinions may or may not correspond to what is happening in the world. In other words, our framing of the events may not mirror what is happening in our life. This has repercussions in all aspects of life, but we will focus on the participants' lived world concerning their romantic relationships. For the participants, it was mainly about differentiating between an empirical perception of men's actions and their reading of the men's actions. I will illustrate this phenomenon by delving

into Helena's and Darla's experiences first, and then by drawing comparisons with other facets from Roxanne, Lucy, and Summer.

Favouring a realist view of previous partners' behaviour seemed beneficial to Helena. She had been prone to fantasising about the romantic relationships she was in. Even though this may not be a negative per se, she recognised that often had a rose-tinted view with the men she was involved with. This led to her selectively reframing their behaviour in a better light to keep the "dream" alive. Now, her attitude is to observe reality outside of her thinking, which led her to conclude that people are what they do:

> It is to try and look at reality as it is, not to idealise things. And so, to see what is there actually. Without saying to yourself, yes, but perhaps it's not really like that. No. He is like that. He is exactly how you see him! […] Basically, I observe him and not what I can think about him. Really, I focus on how he behaves […] But, at a certain point, I could have seen, and instead, I clung so much to that beautiful part that I wanted so much to continue having it that then I started to project my thoughts really […] To look at the real picture, I don't project, but I look at the situation as it is. (Helena, 6.1)

Darla used to insist on calling the men she was dating for several days. Even when they did not reply anymore and had ghosted her, she fantasised there must have been some significant incident happening in their lives. She has now gained an understanding that there was no malevolent intent from the guys with whom the relationship did not work out. Implicit in the text is her increasing ability to be attuned to other people's signals and what they may mean: "When they didn't reply, has something happened to them? I mean, now I laugh because nothing had happened to them. They just don't want to reply. But it didn't look so clear cut to me" (Darla, 5.34). And: "Now looking back at it, I don't see any malice, I don't see any, anything as humiliating but at the time everything was experienced as: that is humiliating" (Darla, 5.38).

A different understanding about feelings came to Roxanne. She realised that when some relationship dynamics were triggered, she could not see the situation clearly:

> If you ask me now, I would not know whether I was so much in love as I thought with the people who drove me so nuts; because you lose the sense of perspective and reality. So now I think the sense of perspective and reality is there. (Roxanne, 6.49)

On the other hand, Lucy realised guys cannot mind-read what she needs. She used to feel very disappointed when people did not go the extra mile for her: "You know, these little things that I used to say, my boyfriend doesn't care about me because he's not thinking about what my needs are. And the thing is, I wasn't telling my boyfriend what my needs are" (Lucy, 9.39). Finally, Summer discovered that she was not the unlucky person surrounded by lucky people who were all doing better than her. That way of thinking led her to depression and painful feelings of envy towards other people. She imagined everyone to be doing so much better than her. The participant now sees that belief had no bearing on reality:

> I was the one who always managed to see the best in other's people lives […] I discovered that I am not so little, actually. I am not so unlucky […] I was angry at life. And thought I had ALL the problems in the world. Because of what therapy gave me and also growing up, developing. Is that everybody has problems. Different ones, but everybody does. We are all on the same boat. (Summer, 4.37)

All the participants found that trying to verify if what they thought tallied with what was happening out there was helpful. Most times, things were brighter than their minds had made them up to be.

Superordinate Theme III: Sense of Agency and Its Themes

"You didn't come here to make the choice; you've already made it. You're here to try to understand why you made it" (The Oracle to Neo, Matrix Reloaded).

Figure 7

Superordinate Theme III: Sense of Agency and Its Themes
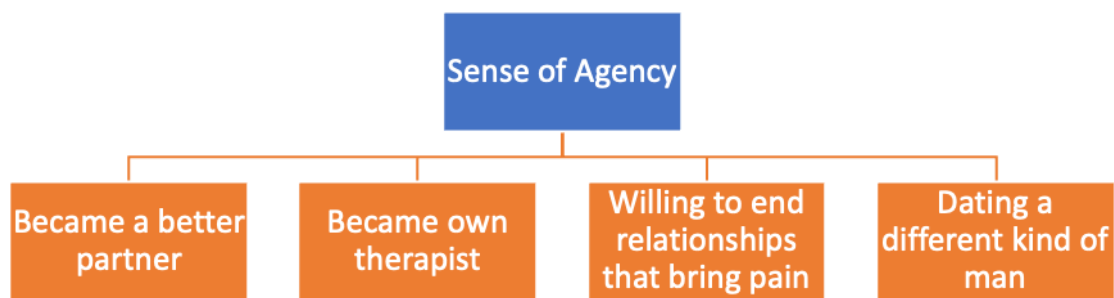
This superordinate theme is about action, the willingness to do something, to modify own's behaviour to get a desired effect. The participants learned they could have an impact on the world. That many circumstances can be affected by choices and changes in behaviour. They learnt how they could do things to shape their life. During the interview and subsequent analysis, it became apparent that most participants had developed the ability to take action to influence matters related to romantic relationships. This contrasts with their past, where they complained of feeling out of control as they struggled to escape behaviours that appeared almost automatic.

Theme III-I: Became a Better Partner

This theme is at the heart of conscious changes that materialised with several participants during or after therapy. The data showed how often the participants found faults with the men they dated. This was highlighted through examples of slights and difficulties in their lives with their exes. The complaints were often justified, particularly in relationships that were not healthy. However, this theme shows another angle of the matrix of change that the participants went through. During or after therapy, these women recognised their contribution in supporting a healthy relationship. At the same time, they recognised their responsibility in supporting unhelpful or hurtful behaviour in the past. In other words, this theme is about action and responsibility. The main changes highlighted in this theme seem to be the following: being direct in expressing needs; an acceptance that a partner will have shortcomings; and the trust that one can influence matters when things are not working out. I will explore these aspects by contrasting Lucy's and Lulu's experiences first. Then, I will present the other points that other participants' data reveal.

Lucy is the participant that appears to have done more development in how to be a better partner. She openly talks about having reflected on how to contribute to the success of her relationship: "I also started to explore my side of how I am in a relationship. What are my expectations in the sense of, if I need this new relationship to... am I going to wait for it?" (Lucy, 9.30). Both Lucy and Lulu recognise that they harboured an unspoken desire for a telepathic understanding in the past:

> I think that's what's helped that relationship sustain itself. Because I wouldn't expect
> him to do the dishes, I would tell him; can you do the dishes, please? Because I
> realize that males don't read minds. That if I have a need, I have to make it verbal, I
> have to speak it out loud. (Lucy, 13.31)

Lucy would sulk when she did not get the things she wanted. Lulu would become sad. Whereas now, they are more conscious they have a right to ask for what they want: "I think one of the main, main differences is that very early in the relationship, I will tell him how I was feeling" (Lulu, 8.5). And: "If there's a need, if there's a want, I know I can discuss it. I know this" (Lucy, 16.3).

When things are not going well in the relationship, they can do something about it and have a safe discussion without going into confrontations:

> What I couldn't control when I was 16 when I was 19. Now I'm aware that I can control I can control it and change it the way I want it. […] If there's a need, if there's a want, I know I can discuss it. I know this. (Lucy, 16.3)

Lulu: "I will just feel a bit more in control. Like, I like this. I don't like this. I felt like I could say it. This is working, and this is not working" (Lulu, 8.19). Lucy: "And I think that's something I learned from therapy as well: acceptance. I cannot change a person. I can't pretend that my husband is perfect because he's not, but I accept the way he is" (Lucy 18.12). When expectations and needs are expressed clearly in a couple, and the partners are responsive to each other, issues can be discussed, and the relationship can flourish. The safety the participants feel in expressing what they want shows how far they have come.

Lorna illustrates a different aspect of becoming a better partner. She recognises how she used to be more self-centred, whereas now has developed empathy. She will not just discard someone based on preconceived ideas: "Just be open to, like, everyone's got baggage, right?" (Lorna, 6.31). On the other hand, Summer changed her approach to men entirely from her past. Through therapy, she became more self-assured. Now, she does not need to ask her partner to constantly confirm he loves her, that she is pretty, or how good she looks today. Summer believes that the insecurity she used to carry can create an imbalance in any couple.

Even if the couple is healthy and the boyfriend is nice, they would harm the relationship if she still had rampant insecurities: "Always asking, being needy creates something that is no good even if the person is good but it creates something always difficult in the couple" (Summer, 5.22). This is an interesting and critical point that Summer made. Unfortunately, it did not appear in the data for any other participants. As pointed out before, Summer is the participant who spent the longest in therapy. It is, therefore, possible to argue that this level of self-assurance and awareness could only be achieved over time.

Theme III-II: Became Her Own Therapist

Becoming one's therapist here is intended as applying all the tools and learning the participants have picked up in therapy in their everyday life. The data shows how they have interiorised compassion, gentleness, and forgiveness towards themselves. These are some of the conditions of acceptance that therapists usually employ towards their clients. The participants are now checking with themselves, when in doubt, whether they are falling back into the old patterns. I will illustrate the first aspect of this theme using examples from Lulu and Helena.

Helena is mindful of her actions in relationships with men and catches herself without going into the automatic mode of the past:

> Basically, now, for too many years, I behaved automatically without thinking, in the wrong way and then sometimes, I stop and I say, now what is it? I am feeling bad. Is it an automatism, or is it that thing? And it's already something. Because now, at least I stop. (Helena, 12.11)

Whereas for Lulu and Lorna, they did not follow an out-of-control behaviour but deeply seated beliefs that were rigid. Lulu used to hold a negative view about her performance without questioning it: "So if I am trying to beat myself because I'm not doing good enough,

at some point, I do realise that I'm doing that, and I go: hey, you're doing this again. Just try to be gentle" (Lulu, 18.22). Lorna used to succumb to unhelpful ways of thinking that she can now see as passing thoughts rather than truths written in stone:

> I look back, I guess pre-therapy and like... It is crazy, isn't it when you look back, like, that was just my life! [..] Like constant anxiety […] these thoughts and assumptions like, you just think is so true. Like people will not like me if I show myself. Whereas now I'm just like, that's crazy. Like, why should I spend so much time believing that? (Lorna, 19.42)

In contrast, Roxanne understands that she behaves in a way that can hurt her, but she is still unable to stop herself when that happens. What she has decided to do instead is to put her disruptive tendency to good use. For the time being, she has chosen to divert all her excess energy into fulfilment and self-development, by taking a challenging course and applying for a much more demanding job than she ever held before: "This part of me, this trigger is kind of sorted between work and studying" (Roxanne, 9.25). Even when the old tendency is still present, there is something that she can do. In addition, she is deciding to stay in a relationship that is good for her, even though her "gut feeling" would be to break up. She has learnt that her gut feeling is not always reliable; therefore, she is sticking to a decision to try being with someone nice. Being her own therapist for her means making choices within her limitations: "Because of therapy, I'm trying to keep myself grounded and not do what I would usually do and just say ok he's not ticking these boxes, bye. The usual habit" (Roxanne, 5.25).

Finally, Summer and Darla learnt and applied to their life a life-changing lesson of allowing emotions rather than fighting them or suppressing them: "Because you are managing, but that basically is about allowing. So self-love, self-care, self-love, self-care and forgiveness" (Summer, 8.5). The paragraph ends with Darla's description of how she now

deals with powerful emotions. It is about her reaction and the perceived rejection that she experienced after a break-up:

> I just was, just observing my physical responses. Like, you know, the ones that you're having a panic attack; hard burning stomachache, feeling dizzy, feeling overwhelmed by tension in your body, and you need to sit still, and I sat with it. And then at the end, because that's, you know, all these symptoms take five minutes, ten minutes maximum. And at the end, I thought to myself, well, he is wrong. (Darla, 7.1)

Theme III-III: Willing to End Relationships That Bring Pain

This theme regards the ability to end hurtful relationships. Many people had the unpleasant task of saying to someone that it was not working out. But the participants of this study had in common a difficulty that went well beyond the avoidance of an unpleasant task. So much so that they were compelled to talk about this change in the interview. Finally, being able to end a hurtful relationship is portrayed here as a common, overarching experience. Despite the commonalities, the mechanisms behind their previous difficulty and the strategies they now implement differ amongst the participants. To illustrate this theme, I will compare the experiences of two sets of two participants, pulling in similarities and differences.

Both Lulu and Helena felt a "duty" towards the other person in a way that compelled them to stay in relationships that were not ideal. For Helena, this presents as the ability to make a judgment call on someone she is dating. She can now end that relationship if it elicits negative feelings for her:

> It's a positive bad feeling that makes me see, oh perhaps I am making this person too close, and then I go, ok, I am sorry, but I am feeling bad, I can't let you closer than this. I have to solve... I need to think of myself first for a moment, and it seems strange and a bit sad, but I see it as a positive thing.

That allows me to look at myself; it allows me not to forget about myself. Even

though I still am not doing anything for me, But I'd like to. (Helena, 11.14)

In my opinion, this behaviour signals that the participant is starting to focus on her own

wellbeing. For Lulu, the first step was to be able to end relationships that did not satisfy her.

This represents a change for her as she used just to follow whatever was presented as

acceptable: "I've noticed is that I am a bit more able to not jump into scenes that I don't want

to. So I'm a bit more able to if I'm not fully convinced that things are going the way I want"

(Lulu, 7.37). Being able to assess what she wants and deciding to break up is a substantial

change, particularly for Lulu. Her words show how prior to therapy, she did not even think

she had the right to put herself first. Even with someone new. As clearly expressed below:

And things started good at the beginning. But I wasn't getting what I needed from the

relationship. Now it is as if I just learned that I've got rights! And it's like, well, I've

got the right to say to this person what I think. (Lulu, 8.2)

In a somewhat different vein, Summer and Darla express this theme through a change

in perspective. Summer explained this as something pervasive in her life with all male

interactions. In the past, as soon as a guy paid her a compliment, she would think that she was

being valued, or that she was being seen. Therefore, she felt a strong pull to go with that guy,

make out, perhaps even spend the night, or start a relationship: "And I don't like to go all in.

I'm a lot more selective […] before even if someone, just a guy, just said, oh, you're pretty, or

he just tried. I just went for it because I thought, oh my god, he is valuing me. Whereas now

my self-esteem is much higher" (Summer 8.17). Whereas for Darla, the accent is more on

being respected. In the past, for example, she would have accepted the boyfriend coming

back to her after a break-up, even with no apologies:

At that point, I decided that I was not a princess. I decided that I'm a queen. And I replied that he had lost his chances. And he could not believe it. And I didn't do it in a vindictive way. I really, truly felt that there was no reason for me to give any more chance or to give that chance to a person who, clearly by that message, he knew very well what he had done. (Darla, 8.22)

Their past insecurities were about male attention. Therefore, if the object of their interest stayed in the relationship, that was already good enough. There was no consideration of how they were faring in those relationship. Both participants link this newly developed ability to leave relationships to an increase in self-esteem. Summer now recognises how much she was devaluing herself. Whereas, once the Darla's self-esteem grew, so did her ability to refuse compromise and demand the respect she was due.

III-IV Theme: Dating a Different Kind of Man

A prevalent theme amongst the participants is their choice to be in relationships with men that are entirely different from the ones they used to date. The common thread seems to be choosing a respectful partner. As it could be expected, being with someone respectful means something slightly different for each participant. For example, for Lulu and Roxanne, this is someone less interested in other women:

So yeah, so with J. I think what I liked about it is that he wasn't the kind of guy that I will normally date. So, he had a good job. He was gentle. He wasn't the kind of guy that flirts with many girls. (Lulu, 12.11-13)

Roxanne talks about her current partner in a similar way: "'He is not someone who will give me room to worry. Let's put it that way.' Interviewer: 'Worry?' Roxanne: 'Like he can ever be a cheater for once'" (Roxanne, 6.16).

In contrast, Lucy is very clear about the qualities she wants in a partner. Here, the bar is very much higher than before, and she is attracted to a different kind of man based on a new understanding of what is good for her:

> There can be a lot of males, but men. Not everyone can be a man […] he has to be caring, has to be empathetic. He has to be protective. He has to know himself and be comfortable with his own self. And masculinity, as well as being, you know, having that a little bit of femininity in him as well on the caring side. And I think a man is a person who takes a decision and keeps to it. (Lucy 7.21)

Helena and Roxanne became aware that they dated unavailable, selfish guys. They had not made the connection before, as the men all seemed very different. The participants were surprised to discover they had a "type." This shared past is the reason this aspect is presented here together. However, they now date guys they see as entirely different, opposite to the men they used to like: "Very cute, very authentic because he is not the kind of guy that I would have gone for before. The opposite but really the opposite of people that I could ever have considered" (Helena, 6.29). And: "He's completely different also in attitude. He is like a person who you know is there to listen to you; I was always the listener. He is a person who, if you tell him you need something, by the time you finish the sentence, he has already taken care of it" (Roxanne, 5.8).

With Summer and Helena, this change was expressed in how the timing of their courtship unfolded. They mentioned how it used to be frenzied. Helena was always pressed to decide whether to enter or not the relationship quickly. Almost as if, had she not decided fast, her chances would have disappeared. This pushed her into feeling anxious from the beginning of the relationship. In comparison, Summer was complicit in the frenzy, which took place in the form of constant messaging and very early declarations of undying love.

For Helena, the new relationship developed slowly: "From the other men I always felt a bit… overwhelmed, like wait a minute! Whereas this guy, it was more like calm, the time, nature, truth, what it is, what is simple, beautiful, authentic" (Helena, 7.6). Here, she describes how she had been given time to measure the guy up: she was not just prey. He wooed her and then waited to see how she reacted to him. The timing of courtship was therefore relaxed, whilst the out-of-control feeling she used to experience during past liaisons is now absent. Similarly, Summer now steers clear of people who exhibit that sort of behaviour in favour of a calmer dynamic:

Now, they almost scare me away if they have this kind of approach; they bother me. And also, it follows that the kind of men that I am interested in every day changed as well. On the way they were. The one before they were psychopaths. In a word, psychopaths like me! Well, like I was. (Summer, 4.5)

Superordinate Theme IV: Role in the Family and Its Themes

"There is no need for red-hot pokers. Hell is other people!" (Closing line of the play *No Exit*, Sartre, 1943)

Figure 8

Superordinate Theme IV: Role in the Family and Its Themes
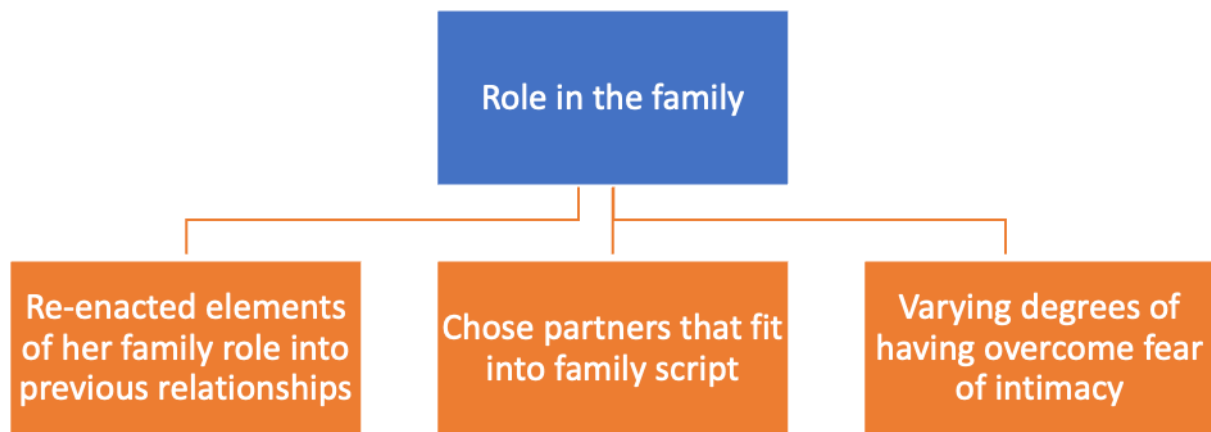
This theme regards the positive impact that the ability to uncover a narrative for past experiences developed by participants in therapy seems to have on their ability to enter healthy relationships. I have tried to avoid falling into any one way of thinking in exposing the findings. In line with this intent, the "role in the family" is not intended here to be a rigid, restrictive category where a person is forever destined to repeat old patterns. We cannot be sure about what impacts the development of children that then translates into their future romantic involvements. There are many hypotheses, and I am open to all of them. Therefore, in reading this section, the reader may keep in mind that findings are conceptualised so that it may or may not be the parents' relationship with the child that influences future romantic relationships: even though some participants implicated that relationship directly.

The modelling of the relationships between parents; the relationship parents had with other siblings; and the larger cultural context participants grow up in could all play a role.

Reflexive Journey into the Emergence of Superordinate Theme IV: Role in the Family and Its Themes

The very existence of this superordinate theme in the present findings created the biggest doubts in me during the long months spent on the analysis. During the pilot analysis, an experiential theme called: "Identified her role in the family" was selected as it appeared clinically relevant. It was included in the pilot's findings as a sub-theme of "self-love." It made sense at the time because something from the past would find its place as part of a journey of self-acceptance. During the analysis, I briefly debated whether to include the whole "role in the family" superordinate theme and its themes in this study. This is because I viewed it as an "explanatory" theme, pointing to a root cause for the issues. As much as finding the root cause of any problem is crucial, I was worried that this would not answer the research question, focussed on the changes that allowed participants to enter healthy relationships. Finding a root cause was never the aim, hence my reluctance towards the whole category.

However, participants often talked about these issues they used to carry in the past. Therefore, I would feel unjust towards the data if I did not include them in the findings. And it is good that I did, because the deeper I went into the analysis, the clearer it became that it was an explanation of their issues, in a way that made sense to them and that helped make the change that is object of the study. On reflection, perhaps I should not have been surprised by the emergence of this topic as a superordinate theme with its own set of themes. Generally, the role of the original family is considered of great importance for the future romantic life.

If we add that working on family relationships and recalling childhood experiences is very common in various therapy modalities, it follows that the presence of this superordinate theme should have been entirely predictable.

Unlike the pilot study, when analysing the data for the rest of the cases, the role in the family became more and more prominent. The fact that I was not looking for this theme means that I had no bias towards it; yet it ended up being one of four superordinate themes. I believe this validates my analysis and makes me confident that this is a truly important part of the participants' experience on their journey, which I endeavoured to honour in these findings.

Theme IV-I: Re-enacted Elements of Her Family Role Into Previous Relationships

This theme concerns the participants' newfound understanding of having brought elements of their original family role into their romantic dyads. They now seem to have mostly overcome this tendency. Therefore, this theme is about what happened before they attended therapy. The relevance of this theme for the present study is that these insights are part of the matrix of change that eventually led the participants to choose a life different from the one they had before. I will illustrate this theme through examples from Helena and Roxanne first, and then ideographically using Darla's and Lucy's experiences separately.

The first step is usually a recognition that the participants did have a role within the family. Helena did not connect the recognised family dynamic with the patterns she experienced in love relationships. It was rather straightforward for me to frame her attitude towards past boyfriends as "saving" them by compulsively helping them: "And there has been this strong insight […] that I am a bit of the 'saviour' of the family. Ehrm, almost as if my role is always to be the one that comes and 'saves'" (Helena, 10.19). When these kinds of connections started to appear in the other interviews, I started to pay closer attention.

For example, Roxanne clearly attributes her new understanding of where she was going wrong with relationships to therapy. She now realises it all stemmed from her inversed role relationship with her parents. In her case, she was the adult and protector of two psychologically immature parents: "I have kind of made peace with the fact that I was too young and it was not natural for me to take care of all the things I had to take care of. Because I shouldn't have" (Roxanne, 8.9); "They were using me as their PR, their PA, everything!" (Roxanne, 3.39). My understanding of Helena's world is that she felt a great sense of guilt when she was not there doing the utmost (the "saving") for others. Whereas for Roxanne, in coming to terms with the family dynamic, she understood her great sense of responsibility and how it influenced her romantic relationships. Because of her background, she believed it was normal for her partners to exploit her for their chores. The participant was doing with her partners what she had always done at home, which was familiar to her. What seems common amongst the participants is that they may have been put in family roles where the happiness of others depended on them. It seems they somehow re-enacted this role in their romantic relationships in adulthood. Once the role they used to re-enact was brought to the surface, a different choice of position became possible in the new relationships.

Darla clearly connects her family environment to the development of her way of being, not just in relationships but in every sphere of life. Her understanding starts from the value and roles her family gave her. For years, she was convinced that it was her fault if the other person was not happy in a relationship with her: "If your worth is to keep the balance. That means that your worth is how happy you make the other person. So fast forward to being an adult in relationships. That is what I replicated" (Darla, 13.5). Through therapy, she had to learn a different language: "You cannot speak a language that you were never taught. And I could never speak from the I position. I want, I think, I don't like that!" (Darla, 13.19). She had to move to a position where finally she was at the centre:

These things, of course, are never said to you in so many words. And probably and probably that's why they are so crippling to you. Because they're not said to you, there are various mechanisms in how one grows up […], but it was when I was saying them to the therapist that everything started, everything was said that was unsaid within me.

(Darla, 4.39)

The main problem could be that the family rules that bind us from childhood are mostly implicit. And this is what makes them very difficult to overcome. It is almost as if, in therapy, Darla went through a work of excavation to find out what was holding her back.

Lucy expressed this understanding by refusing to fall into the same old patterns. She now refrains from being a saviour:

"And because of therapy, I didn't want to be a saviour. I didn't want to be the one helping and rescuing this person." (Lucy, 11.24). This was also about putting the other person's happiness and feelings before hers. She is not doing it any longer. Like Darla, Lucy also implicated her relationships with her parents and made a clear connection between her role in the family as a child and her part in the romantic dyad:

In fact, this is where I think the fitting comes in. Because I accommodate a lot, I think people knowing that I accommodate a lot, they would take advantage, be controlling and fit in it, which happened when I was young, as well […] When I was a child living with my parents, I think since my mother was quite dominant, even her emotions would affect how I would feel. So, if my mother was angry, then I had to feel scared. If my mother was happy, then I could be happy. So that is where I fit.

(Lucy, 15.21)

This was her belief of how she had to be in a relationship, and as an adult, she would have the role that she was "allowed" to have by the boyfriend.

Thankfully, these participants are now aware of those dynamics that used to bind them and have chosen the way they want to be in a romantic relationship.

Theme IV-II: Chose Previous Partners That Fit Into Old Family Scripts

Some participants noticed that they used to have a "type." In some cases, they saw they had rejected healthy perspective mates in favour of men that would end up making them miserable. During therapy, some participants noticed with some astonishment that the candidates they tended to choose matched the old patterns of behaviour employed in their original family. Understandably, almost every one of the four participants that brought up this theme expressed it differently. Consequently, I will illustrate this theme ideographically, using one participant at a time. The common denominator is that they recognised that the guys they tended to date enacted a pattern of behaviour familiar to the participants.

During therapy, Lucy had an insight about how her feelings were often invalidated. This happened to her as a child in her family life and as an adult in romantic relationships. She allowed this somewhat abusive behaviour in her life as an adult because it felt like a caring behaviour to her, and because it was familiar. People were saying to her that she was lucky and therefore happy. As a child, she was not allowed to have the emotions she was feeling. For instance, if she expressed any frustrations, it was suggested that the way she felt was wrong. This belief was carried on and brought into her romantic relationships that she chose to have with people who also were not validating her feelings, "It lingered in the relationships as well, of what I chose." (Lucy, 15.34). As Lucy puts it:

> I think it also came from the family in the sense that sometimes even when you're young, and you're feeling sad, or you're feeling anxious, they would tell you or my mother would tell you, oh, you're too young to feel sad, you're too young to feel

anxious, you have a good life in front of you. Thank God for having this life. So, the

feelings were always not validated. And then they were, when I was in a relationship,

it continued to confirm that the feelings were invalidated. So that is something that I

worked on with the therapist. I think the therapist validated my stories and therefore

validated my feelings. (Lucy, 17.18)

The participant's emotional world was shaped to fit in with her parents' feelings, and she

chose guys that would do the same while invalidating her emotions. I understand that she also

wondered for a long time if her feelings were valid. The transcript excerpt below is a perfect

example of choosing a partner that fits the family script: "For example, in a particular

relationship. If I said, I don't know; I'm feeling frustrated. It probably would lead to: why do

you need to feel frustrated? Especially it's not your place to feel frustrated" (Lucy, 17.3).

I hypothesised that this familiarity was why the participants accepted these unhelpful

behaviours as the norm.

Lulu realised that all her previous relationships had been with men who exercised a

certain control over her and made her feel small. Similar to Lucy, Lulu also clearly connected

her earlier issues with partners to her position within her family of origin:

I've done the reflections in therapy and kind of like, got to understand how, like part

of those bad relationships that I had as an adult are because when I was a child, maybe

I was not heard and respected in the way that, it would have been ideal. (Lulu, 19.32)

"My pattern was to end up with people that didn't want to commit. Or if they wanted to

commit, they were just like sort of like a little bit violent, not physically, but like that kind of

disrespect" (Lulu, 10.36). As I asked more questions about the lack of respect, the participant

also highlighted a form of control on her that she accepted with no challenge:

It was about belittling. It was just like, yeah, it was belittling. And kind of like

control. Like they will do things on purpose to make me feel that I don't have control.

They do. So very, you know, of course, they were very subtle, because if I, if he

would be so obvious, then it's, you don't carry on with the relationship. (Lulu. 11.6)

I found it implicit in the text that she failed to notice these behaviours were wrong due to her

familiarity with them. In other words, she did not think things could be any different than

that.

In a similar fashion, Roxanne and Summer noticed that the dynamics belonging to

their family of origin had found their way in their romantic lives. For Summer it was about

her long-term relationship, where she noticed her ex behaved precisely as her father did

towards her mother. This was a case of great resentment and massive amounts of spite long

past the break-up: "My ex-boyfriend who was the same as my father actually. You know

some will treat you very badly afterwards when you split up" (Summer, 4.25). Roxanne was

drawn to people who recreated a familiar pattern and had the same core behaviour her parents

had towards her. In her case, it was about the parents and the partners all being extremely

short-tempered with her and blaming her for no reason.

My relationship with my parents was also full of ups and downs. It was never smooth.

And in general, in my family. So, I wasn't used to smooth. So for me, why does

someone else coming from a stable background, normal people (chuckling), whatever

we want to define as normal... They would never get into a relationship like the ones I

had with my ex boyfriends. Because that would be something so far away from what

they are used to, for me was very familiar. You know, was kind of normal."

(Roxanne, 9.6)

And: Yes, particularly even not similar as personalities, but this basic scheme […]

Even though they were different people, they would extremely match in these

circumstances. Which you know you study, the statistics tell you that you're not

taking five people, the same five people behaving the same way. You are taking five

people that were actually different." (Roxanne, 3.24)

Roxanne and Summer's shock at noticing striking similarities in most guys they chose to date

points to the fact that she used to have a "type," but they were unaware of it.

Theme IV-III: Varying Degrees of Having Overcome Fear of Intimacy

This theme concludes my findings and somehow seems to close a circle. The first

theme was a definition of oneself that is now internal rather than based on what others say

(see Theme I-I). The findings end with the ability to connect to romantic partners more

closely. Participants mentioned rejection, abandonment, confrontation, or loneliness, and not

always in so many words. I have therefore elected to assemble all these instances under the

umbrella of "fear of intimacy." Fear of intimacy is conceptualised here as any behaviour and

emotion that block the possibility of connecting emotionally and authentically to another.

These issues came to the fore in the participants' attempts to connect to another person,

specifically to men. Understandably, this is a multi-layered theme. Therefore, I will start with

describing one aspect, which is managing confrontations. Several participants exhibited

extraordinary difficulty in managing confrontations.

Different participants expressed this theme through personal experiences. Lucy used

to be very worried about expressing any annoyance for fear of having a confrontation or

being abandoned. She mentioned several times how difficult she found the prospect of having

a discussion with her partner; she now realises that it is not a given that expressing frustration

will lead to blaming:

> If I have had a fight with my boyfriend, I know it's not the confrontation or one of us
>
> has to leave, or you're not right. And, you know, shut your mouth and don't say
>
> anything. I know that we can argue, and it's safe to argue.

> But it is something that I had to learn in therapy. That not every argument is equal to someone leaving or blaming the other person, or, you know, and being made, that you're a terrible person because you voice your opinion. (Lucy, 16.3)

At my asking, she confirmed her past belief came from all the previous experiences she had witnessed, both romantic and within her family. Lucy believed that if she did not go along with everything happening with a partner, there would be a confrontation: "Yes, it was my belief, from previous relationships and previous experience, that if I say something, it's probably not good. It's going to lead to an argument" (Lucy, 16.33). Lucy now knows that this is how her previous relationships went, and it is not something she has to accept:

> I think this is where I started to be more assertive when my therapist and we spoke about confrontations. And then I still hate confrontations. So, we made the distinction between confrontations and being assertive. And this gave me a little bit more tools that I can use when I am dating. (Lucy, 9.30)

> Similarly, Lorna used to experience guilt about how other people could react if she ever expressed any disagreement:

> Because like, I don't think that there have been that many times in my life where I had been able to do that, [voicing what she wanted from a boyfriend] because it was always like, oh my god, if I do this, then this other person is going to feel this way. And getting so anxious about it. (Lorna, 17.21)

This reporting from Lucy, Lorna, and further down from Lulu make me think of a power unbalance in past relationships. Lucy was not validated and firmly invited to literally "shut up." She believed that was the normality of a relationship. Lorna became anxious even thinking of disagreeing with her partner. Only through therapy they started to entertain the possibility that perhaps they could have a say with no risk of retaliation.

For Lulu as well, any disagreement was perceived as a "confrontation." Lulu exhibited a more extreme version of putting herself second, with an implicit acknowledgement that she is there not for herself but for the other person. She kept suffering with this until she uncovered these patterns in therapy and chose a different way to be:

It took me great courage. Like, it was not easy for me. Because I think in the past, I will avoid confrontation. For a person that I want to be interested in me, my way of thinking was, well, if I want this person to be interested in me, I cannot confront them and tell them that I don't like the way they behave because I want them to like me. (Lulu, 8.8)

And:

If I wasn't happy or thought it was wrong, I will not have the resources to stop it. So, I will let it happen because it's like, I feel paralysed, I just don't feel I have; I can do anything to stop it because I will not confront it. And so, my only way, all along, my only way to protect myself was to avoid. So, if I got in a situation that wasn't pleasant or good, I will just let it happen at that moment. And the moment that I can go away, I will never call that person again. I will never see them again if I can. And that was my way of protection is just avoiding. But I will not say anything. (Lulu. 11.29)

The participant became aware of things she wanted or did not want and of the associated feelings and emotions. In the past, she used to convince herself that everything offered her was good; even when it blatantly was not.

Another way of expressing this theme came from Lorna, Summer, and Darla. For them, it was about rejection versus being wanted. Lorna noticed that she felt rejected even if she wanted to break up with someone. When this guy readily agreed that he was ready to cut the relationship, she went through intense feelings of rejection:

I was having lots of thoughts of just, yeah, some thoughts of like, I'm unlovable, or like, I'm going to be alone forever. Like, no one wants me and that kind of thing. But I suppose it's just having the capacity to kind of challenge that and just being like, that's how I feel right now. Okay, like, fair enough. I got rejected, and that wasn't very nice. It doesn't really mean that I'm going to be alone forever. Probably not. That doesn't mean no one wants me. No, it's not really evidence for that. (Lorna, 19.34)

Summer used to be anxious and feel rejected even after two hours of not receiving a text or a reply. She realises now how much meaning and emotion she was attaching to any flirting. Now she sees that her fear of loneliness pushed her to want more from the guys she dated early in the relationship. There is for several participants, this intense need to be wanted: "I think it's the fear of being alone and not lose that person and therefore you know I own you. Sorry, I'll own that person. Whereas I've learned that I can't own anyone. And then you can't own me" (Summer, 3.23).

Darla has now become the centre of importance for herself. This is remarkable considering that in the past, she had an implicit belief that a woman's only self-worth was defined by being with a man:

And I would meet a person and, in a way, I would want to gain value from being that person's other half. And I would need to gain value; I would then be, I don't know, I would then be desperate for that to happen. The moment I became desperate for that to happen, I became too intense for the other person. (Darla, 11.17)

There is extreme pressure here: the frantic quality, the intensity are not surprising. There is lot at stake if your value is determined by being with someone else. The power imbalance is also such that it would be impossible to have real intimacy with a partner. During therapy, she saw that it was an unreasonable reaction that was well beyond the realms of "it's never nice that someone is ready to move on," and she started to wonder what that was about with

her therapist. Even though she has not entirely overcome this fear, I liked the fact that she was reflecting and being curious about it. In the past, she had just accepted it was like that because it was.

Reflexive Closing Remarks on the Findings

The journey from recruiting the participants to the write-up of the findings has been remarkable; challenging and exhilarating in equal measures. On many occasions, I found myself reaching for some literature during the write-up. It was such a novel experience to write something new, made up of my co-creation with the participants. At points, I was worried that I sounded too authoritative. I believe there is nothing new under the sun, and therefore I am aware that most, if not all, of the concepts in my findings have been discussed elsewhere in some shape or form. However, they had not been explicitly showcased as concerning women, their difficulty to find a happy relationship, and their journey with psychotherapy.

The study aimed to investigate the experience of women who had overcome their difficulties in relationship formation and to uncover what they thought had changed. My analysis has stayed close to the phenomenology of the participants' point of view of what is now different for them that helped entering healthy relationships. However, IPA analysis also involves situating the participants in their background context (Smith & Nizza, 2022). In answering the first two interview questions, all participants described how their relationship patterns had been until when they noticed significant changes in themselves. While analysing their answers in the transcripts, I noticed a ubiquitous theme that I called "relationship patterns before therapy." I debated whether to include it in the results chapter as a theme. I decided against it because the participants did not link the knowledge of their past relationships to their newfound healthy ones. However, I found the information they provided

about their past relationships extremely useful as a starting point to better understand the participants. Below, I ideographically present each participant's relationship patterns before therapy as I understood them from the analysis of the transcripts (Table 4).

Table 4

Participants' Relationship Patterns Before Therapy

Participant	Relationship Patterns Before Therapy
Helena	She was used to having relationships with guys who were often already in a relationship with another woman. The guys would court her with great insistence and leave the existing girlfriend to be with Helena. This being 'chosen' was a thrilling experience. After a first period of being attentive to every and any of Helena's needs, the guy would become distant. At this point, Helena would experience fear of abandonment. To keep the guy for herself, Helena would start providing emotional and practical labour for the guy. The relationships usually ended after long periods of exploitation at her expense, rendering Helena depressed and tired. After a short while, she would feel better and start the whole process again, while being unaware of it. She had several long-term relationships, one after the other. She was hardly ever single. At times, she dated guys that were different, not exploitative and nice. However, Helena would soon become bored with them and leave the relationship.
Roxanne	Similar to Helena, Roxanne was never single. In her case, she only chose men that were highly successful at work. They had to be masculine and controlling of her; otherwise, she would not be attracted to them. She loved when the relationship progressed at lightning speed, with the guy asking her to move in two days after the first meeting or planning a family with another guy after a

few days of dating. The pattern evolved so that Roxanne would take on more

and more of the life admin work of her boyfriends to the detriment of her own

life and wellbeing. The relationships were coloured by constant fights where

she was blamed and accused of anything that went wrong. The pattern was that

regardless of all the work and sacrifice she put into the relationship, the guys

she dated never took a step forward in proposing or wanted to start a family for

real. This caused Roxanne extreme suffering and feelings of rejection,

accompanied by anger and frustration. After a while, she would recover, go out

again and start dating someone else who seemed different; but she would end

up in the same situation. As seen with Helena, any time she dated someone

different she would not like them and would break up at the earliest

opportunity.

Summer	Summer had a long-term boyfriend since her teenage years. The relationship was controlling on both sides, with fights and harsh words being bandied about daily. When she finally was able to leave that relationship, she started to date anyone who paid her any attention. When a guy gave her a passing compliment, she felt obliged to them. To spend time with them, she often slept with them even if she had no particular attraction or feelings for them. Sometimes, the relationships would continue without any clarification of how they could be defined. Summer would experience intense fear of loneliness as soon as the guy (whom she had no feeling for) was late replying to her on social media. The relationships were also punitive, with the guy withdrawing either sex, affection, or time together if she had behaved "wrong."
Lucy	Lucy had two long-term relationships. She was attracted to guys who looked kind and attentive but were rather high-handed and domineering. They managed

the direction of the relationship and tried to direct Lucy's life choices. When in these relationships, Lucy never felt free to express what she truly wanted for fear of confrontations. The relationships lasted years but eventually, when her partners noticed they could not fully control Lucy, they would refuse to commit and/or break up with her; thus, leaving Lucy with the devastating sorrow that she had been abandoned, which felt like the end of the world.

Darla	Darla was convinced that there was something very wrong with her in terms of relationships. When she met someone, if she liked them, she lost herself in favour of that person. She became very intense quickly; usually, the guys would try to retreat from that intensity. At this point, Darla tried to "keep" them employing various strategies. Anxiety coloured her days in relationships, as she attributed her value to being the guy's other half. She had had two long-term relationships, where she assumed the complete onus of making the relationship work. When anything went wrong, if there was a fight or a breakup all the "fault" was automatically hers. The power was wholly tilted towards the guys, who could, in reverse, make all the mistakes and not even apologise to her. There was a sense of her inherent inferiority in the relationships, which drove the whole connection. She described her previous relationships as "torment," while also being passionate and intense. She experienced the separations as traumatic when they ended, perhaps because that ending impacted her whole sense of self-value.
Lorna	Lorna's main pattern was to do with rejection. She only had one long-term relationship, her college sweetheart. He was emotionally shut off even though, in practical terms, he was very nice. She decided to break off with him because they wanted very different things in life. Since that relationship, she had dated

casually. All those flirts started well and ended up with the guys not wanting to continue dating her. This gave way to crippling thoughts that she was unlovable and to intense feelings of being rejected. This pattern repeated itself a few times, regardless of whether she was interested in the guy she was dating.

| Lulu | Lulu did not have romantic relationships for most of her adult life. She entered several hook-ups, flirts, and flings whilst having an intense longing for romance. This happened because she always had a crush on someone but would hide it completely. In the meantime, she would hook up with men she did not like, to protect herself from the possible hurt of losing someone meaningful. Some of the people she dated were disrespectful of her and her wishes to the point of being psychologically abusive. Lulu did everything she could to avoid any confrontation. Her key strategies were avoidance and distraction. She distracted herself with outings, pretended to herself that everything was fine, and then avoided dating anyone she could find interesting. If someone hurt her, she would not react immediately but would then avoid them completely. She did not foresee that some of those hook-ups did have the potential to become more serious. When they did, the guy usually had a commitment issue and refused to upgrade the relationship, thus making Lulu feel unwanted and rejected. |

Reflexive Practice

Reflexive research journal, May 2022.

Wow! The analysis is the best thing one could do to further one's understanding of anything! I am finding the results so useful already in my practice, and I now feel very positive that my results could be useful to other practitioners. It all seems to make a lot of sense. Often, when a client struggles with forming relationships, I ask questions about what it would look like if they experimented with being authentic sometimes, or I simply notice some things they are saying that I would not have noticed before. Like, when they tell me they have spent the whole last week thinking about that guy, which is why they have not made that application they were meant to be doing. I also keep noticing how hard they are on themselves. And all the results seem to come alive in the therapy room with this client group. Knowing what had helped the participants when they were clients is helping me as a therapist. It's making me so hopeful.

Chapter 5. Discussion

"In order to change an existing paradigm, you do not struggle to try and change the problematic model. You create a new model and make the old one obsolete."

Buckminster R. Fuller

Introduction to the Discussion Chapter

One of the sections of the discussion of a new research piece is dedicated to contrasting the results with the existing literature reviewed as a backdrop to the study (Smith & Nizza, 2021). Considering my existential background, I will mainly use existential thinkers' ideas to support the findings. Finally, the conclusion section is dedicated to methodological integrity, contribution to knowledge, and ideas for further research for the study.

Discussion

This study has focused on the experience of seven women who have defeated a self-identified difficulty entering satisfactory romantic relationships during or after a course of psychotherapy. The results of an interpretative phenomenological analysis indicate that the participants experienced a host of macro and micro changes in their understanding, feeling, actions and acceptance of the past. The analysis produced fifteen themes organised under the umbrella of four superordinate themes.

I see the changes in the participants as a unified experience. My classification (or anyone's) is arbitrary; it's my way of putting an order to these phenomena. For example, I assert that Lulu has become a better partner. I think she has because she can now voice her needs. To do that, I speculate that she first needed to know what her needs are; then gained an awareness that she has a right to ask for her needs to be met, which means she has increased her self-esteem. The participants' various experiences are decomposed in their building blocks, but they are also a unified process that likely happened over several months or years.

There is also the element that the current study was not about the participants knowing what psychological processes were implicated in the shifts that took place for them. What made a lot of sense, though, was that the superordinate themes all pointed to interesting concepts. I would like to start this discussion by acknowledging that the themes that emerged during the analysis are mostly well-known psychological constructs. Authenticity, self-love, self-esteem, reality testing, agency, and fear of intimacy, just to mention a few, have all been written about extensively.

In my understanding, I found a gap in relationship research because these themes had not been expressly linked to women who have overcome a difficulty in relationship formation and who have attended therapy. The reader will have read how I went about the literature search in the literature review section. I will now proceed to contrast the findings with the literature in chapter 2 and with concepts from several existential thinkers. See Figure 5 for a visual graph to showcase the concepts that will be discussed.

Figure 9.

A representation of the interconnectedness of the Superordinate themes.
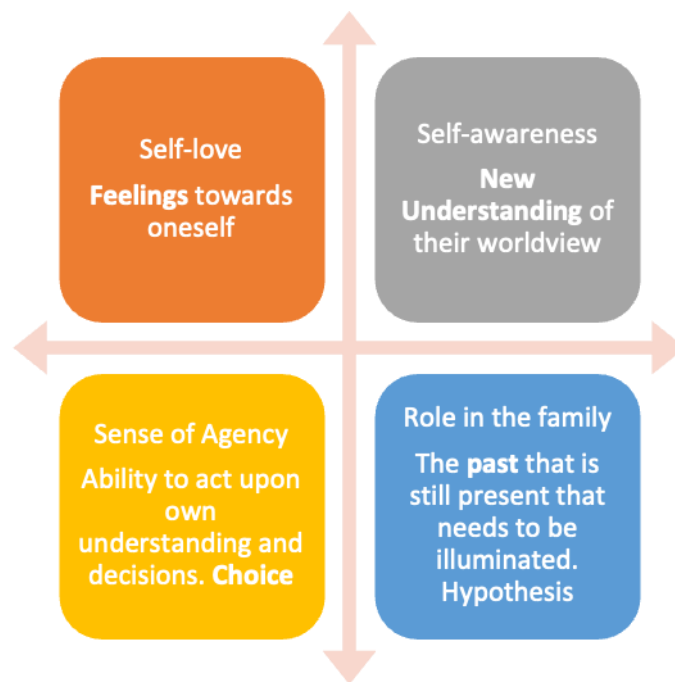
1. **Self-Love** is the Category of Changed Feelings Towards Oneself

The participants were ubiquitous in showing how their kinder feelings toward themselves were fundamental for them to be able to make different choices. Higher self-esteem, the ability to be authentic, trusting one's perspective and prioritising one's needs were all linked to changed feelings that can be described as self-love. Amongst the authors reviewed in the literature review, Fromm (1959) talks about one of the type of love being 'self-love'. Historically, self-love has been equated with selfishness or even narcissism (Freud, 1953;

Calvin, 1928). Fromm on the other hand flips this concept completely and assert that if one is unable to love oneself, then they are unable to love others (1959).

This view was foreshadowed by Kierkegaard (1847/1995), who proposed that to love ourselves is the cure. Even more, it's a commandment. His ideas were steeped in Christian love, particularly around the commandment of loving your neighbour as yourself. In 'Works of love', Kierkegaard (1847/1995), maintains there has been a misunderstanding in the Christian world, where the self-love part of the commandment has been abandoned in favour of the other, the neighbour. To love another more than oneself is not what it is intended.

"This phrase does not want to teach a person that he is not to love himself but rather wants to teach him proper self-love" (Kierkegaard, 1847/1995, p. 18).

More recent research has confirmed the idea that self-love is associated with health and well-being (Abramson & Leite, 2020). Even though, more research is needed in defining the construct of self-love and its meta component there is consensus that self-love is positive for the individual and would often be accompanied by self-acceptance (Abramson & Leite ,2020; Henschke & Sedlmeier, 2021).

Theme 1.1: Defining Oneself Based on Others or Self & Single Women

The first thing that can be noticed about the findings is a pervasive change in the participants' perception of their self-worth as single women. As remarked in the literature review, we find ourselves in exceptional times, where the value of women seems, once again, to be somewhat attached to her being in a relationship with a man (Budgeon, 2016; Gilchrist, 2023).

This study's participants wanted to enter a satisfactory relationship with men. It stands to reason to hypothesise that this sample of women had interiorised this cultural imperative.

The results indicate that the common saying of 'having to love oneself first' may be correct. It looks like one element to be able to enter a happy relationship with a man is to acquire the paradoxical understanding that being in such a relationship is not the most important thing in the world. The participants went from an interiorized belief system based on others' opinions, which saw them as being pitiful as single (Budgeon, 2008; DePaulo, 2007), to trust their ideas that hint at an openness about being single and fulfilled on their own or self-partnered (Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2017). This understanding, in turn, made it possible to be less anxious about the idea of relationships, and this seems to have contributed to the formation of satisfactory relationships.

Theme 1.2: Authenticity & Difficulty in Relationship Formation

The sample of the study is constituted of women who used to exhibit a self-diagnosed difficulty in forming satisfactory relationships. As mentioned before, the literature was scarce on this topic as well. The present study does not support the idea that a portion of both men and women find it challenging to find a mate because pairing up is now unregulated (Apostolou, 2010; Apostolou, 2015). If anything, finding a 'mate' or a 'date' was not necessarily the problem for the sample of participants that were interviewed for this study. This is evidenced by the fact that most participants recalled many previous unsatisfactory relationships, that they used to be in. The difficulty in finding a partner for the sample seems

to start when they try to relate to someone who will be respectful and loving rather than finding someone to date.

The participants found that one of the obstacles to their entering happy relationships was that they were trying to please people. They were trying to win the approval of the prospective partner by hiding their true self in favour of a supposedly better personality.

In existential terms, this could be seen as the Heideggerian (1927) concept of inauthenticity. For which a human being (Dasein) has an innate tendency to 'flee' oneself and negate their true nature to gain some practical advantage (Heidegger, 1927). In this case, the advantage could be entering a relationship and fitting in with the overarching cultural imposition of coupling up, no matter what. If the message to women is that they need to be in a relationship, lest they are deemed pitiful, they will try to get into one (Trimberger, 2005; Budgeon 2015). Even an unsatisfactory one. For Sartre (1943/2003), to give up one's freedom of being authentic to make the other person 'love me' is an act of bad faith. With this term, Sartre (1943/2003) proposes those acts of 'pretending' (that many participants have mentioned) aim to limit not only one's freedom but also the other person's freedom. In this light, the participants' old behaviour could be seen as deception of themselves and the people they were involved with. Conversely, being authentic means embracing all our freedoms and possibilities (Sartre,1943/2003). This can be very frightening as being authentic also means facing up to all our anxieties (Kierkegaard, 1844/2014).

This last concept closely allies with a study reviewed in the literature. The argument brought forward by the authors is that difficulty in relationship formation concerns the fact that when people are particularly anxious about being single, they may settle for less than they would like (Spielmann et al., 2013; Spielmann et al., 2020).

This is something that was confirmed by the present findings. As mentioned above, most participants used to accept less-than-ideal partners and poor behaviour.

Journeying toward authenticity means embracing one's own way of being, not dictated by any other person's preference, without being directed by society's preference or the 'they' (Heidegger, 1926/2010). This process, whatever it may have been, seems to have helped the participants tremendously in achieving their goal.

The last body of literature on difficulty in relationship formation that was reviewed, regarded timing. The authors proposed that people will overcome their difficulties and commit to a relationship once the time is right for them to do so (Hadden et al., 2018; Agnew et al., 2019; Tan et al., 2020). In this case, the present research findings did not support this hypothesis. Perhaps it also depends on the kind of questions asked in the interviews. I was trying to explore freely the experience of change and what it had brought to the participants. Rather than asking about their commitment readiness as the studies in review did. In this present study, however, the participants stated that they were ready to be in a happy relationship, and yet they either were not able to find one or kept being in relationships that were either shallow or full of sorrow.

Theme 1.3: Increased Self-Esteem

As mentioned in the current thesis, self-esteem represented my primary assumption when I started the research journey. I hypothesised that an increase in self-esteem would create the conditions for forming healthy relationships. Self-esteem levels appear to influence general relational and academic capabilities (Hepper, 2016). In addition, I thought that an improved opinion of oneself was a by-product of therapy. Some studies have successfully linked an

increase in self-esteem to CBT interventions (Kolubinsky at al., 2018). The present findings

support the concepts of self-esteem as presented by Branden (1995). It seems like the

participants experienced changes that might have supported their improved opinion of

themselves. And they match closely some of these changes Brendan (1995) proposes,

including:

- Self-awareness

- Taking responsibility for one's life

- A belief you are deserving

- Behaviour

In his best-selling book, Branden (1995) argues that healthy self-esteem involves (amongst

other things) awareness of one's capabilities in realistic terms. For some participants, an

unrealistic expectation of their standards set them up for constantly feeling like they were

failing themselves. This perfectly matches the perfectionist ideal that an increased self-esteem

helps overcoming (Branden, 1995).

As evidenced from the data, all participants enjoyed a movement toward increased self-

esteem. A recent review of both CBT and non-CBT psychotherapeutic interventions on

clients suffering from depression found that there was no difference in the self-reported

improvement on self-esteem regardless of the therapeutic modality (Bhattacharya et al.,

2023). More research is needed in this important area, particularly to link other kinds of

therapeutic modalities to an increased self-esteem. From the present results, an increase in

self-esteem appears to be dependent on a web of changes that touch on all the superordinate

themes that emerged from the findings of self-love, self-awareness, sense of agency and role

in the family.

Theme 1.4: **Own Needs are Prioritised.**

This is one of the most significant themes; it made me think of Heidegger's concept of *being-toward* (1996). The reason is that before this transition in being able to have healthy romantic relationships, the participants predominantly put the 'Other' before themselves. For Heidegger (1996), *being-toward* is a positive way of being as it shows concern for other people. However, this way of being was not particularly helpful for the participants.

A different way of being had to be found to allow the participants to give themselves enough importance and attention, which was taking away from the other person. Heidegger (1927/2010) also conceptualises our *being-in-the-world* as synonymous with *being-with-others*; we are always relating. Perhaps the best resolution comes from Sartre's later works on relationships (1960/2004). He postulates that we have a choice. We can be in competition (in this case, the needs of the dyads were competitive, one or the other) with each other, or we can be in cooperation (Sartre,1960/2004). The results indicate that the participants found a way to enter relationships where cooperation was the choice.

2. Self-awareness: The category of a New Understanding of their Worldview

Looking at the literature about the self-awareness construct leads to the realisation that, as for many other psychological constructs, there is no consensus over its definition (Carden at al., 2022). Looking separately at the nature of self and awareness, can of course lead to many viewpoints (Sutton et al., 2015). The best definition I found comes from a categorization for which self-awareness consists of two dimensions: subjective self-awareness, focusing on external events, and objective self-awareness, which focuses exclusively on the self (S. Duval & Wicklund, 1972). Achieving self-awareness involves directing attention towards oneself and making comparisons against internally developed standards (Silvia & Duval, 2001).

The presents results confirm that definition and add that a certain level of self-awareness was achieved probably during therapy for the participants. I see self-awareness as a necessary step before being able to make any transformative change. I would like to link it to the 'taking stock of one's life' part of the practical step employed in existential psychotherapy (van Deurzen, 2012). Looking at one's values, beliefs, assumptions and how one sees the world. Giving up a worldview that was forced on them by the culture they live in could lessen their suffering (van Deurzen & Iacovou, 2013). The results seem to support the idea that the participants have altered their worldview substantially; the following themes showcase in which ways.

Theme 2.1: Decreased Romanticism

As seen in the literature review chapter, Sternberg (1986) describes romantic love as the interaction of intimacy, commitment, and passion. Generally, researchers argue that romantic love serves multiple functions in mate selection/pair-bonding alongside contributing to relationship satisfaction longevity (Dion & Dion, 1996). In the findings chapter, we saw that this theme is about changing one's views on romance.

Romanticism is a western concept, and some authors argue that western women are constantly bombarded by fairy tale images or rules on how love should be (Cleary 2015; Barker 2015; Buss, 2019). The participants reported that before therapy they had a very idealised view of love. Other research agrees that romantic love is expressed differently across cultures (Karandashev, 2015). For instance, some studies indicate that people from individualistic cultures (western societies) are more likely to endorse overly idealized romantic beliefs resembling fairy tales (de Munck et al., 2011). Another finding indicated that the participants had used a 'rose tinted' view on their partners behaviour. This particular result is also supported by research. Endorsing idealized romantic beliefs more strongly has been linked to overlooking a partner's negative traits (Murray and Holmes, 1997; Karandashev, 2019). The present results do not support the ideas, reported in several studies, that strong romantic idealisation is supportive of long-lasting love. Strong romantic ideals in partners have been related to prolonging the relationship's duration, experiencing less decline in marital satisfaction over time, and expressing higher levels of relationship satisfaction (Ogolsky et al., 2017). This discrepancy, I believe, could be justified by the fact the differently from the samples analysed in the above-mentioned studies, the participants of this study were all women who were used to substandard relationships. Therefore, the results might not be in opposition at all but just being analysing different phenomena altogether.

In one of her lesser-known autobiographical works, de Beauvoir (1960) explains how men experience romance as part of life, whereas for women, the message pushed through cultural mediums is that: a romantic involvement with a man is life itself (de Beauvoir, 1960). The findings support the idea that having a more realistic (or detached) view of romance is beneficial in developing healthy relationships (van Deurzen & Iacovou, 2013). The results indicate that the unfair expectation these women had interiorised throughout their lives contributed to the insurgent feelings of being let down by partners (van Deurzen, 2015). The surprising paradox, unveiled by these results is that a decrease in a romantic ideal in the participants seems directly related to a maximising of their enjoyment in their relationships with men. More research is needed to verify if this important change could make a positive difference in women's' relationships satisfaction.

Theme 2.2: Clarity Over Own and Others' Responsibility

Another interesting theme concerns being aware of the boundaries between one's responsibility and the responsibility of others. In existential writings, the concept of responsibility is part of the journey to being aware that life is your own to take care of (Sartre, 1943/2003; Heidegger, 1962). However, the results of the current study indicate that the participants made the opposite journey: they started by picking up all responsibilities that partners, families and society at large, conveniently placed on them.

Humans are only supposed to take full responsibility for the 'other' towards their child in the transition from women to mothers (Bergum, 1989). And yet most of the participants were not even mothers. The results support the hypothesis that some women with difficulty forming relationships may have interiorised a maternal stance in their romantic life.

Another observation brings us to consider the sad reality that the emotion management of others is placed upon women and expected as a matter of fact (Schur, 1984).

In our society, women are strongly encouraged from childhood to take on the burden of caring and feeling responsible for how other people are feeling (Manne, 2018). Recently, this burden of responsibilities and blame has been shown to be routinely placed upon women even when they are victims of domestic violence or rape (Taylor 2020).

The findings confirm that personal responsibility was not left to others in this journeying. The participants took full responsibility for their lives and through their journey learned that not everything was their responsibility.

Theme 2.3: Knows What She Wants in a Relationship.

This is another change that I had not foreseen. It regards the awareness that the first step to obtaining something is knowing what one wants. Clarifying one's values and belief system could be very beneficial for clients in understanding their way of loving (van Deurzen, 2015). I would speculate that clarifying one's worldview could also help dispel some culturally sedimented ideas about how to be a woman, how to be a partner and ultimately, what one wants in a man and in a relationship (van Deurzen, 2002).

The results suggest that this shift has happened in the participants' awareness. They seem to have negated the unspoken patriarchal rules that saw them as 'prey' to the male's gaze (De Beauvoir, 1960); in favour of going back to their inner conscience to discover what they would like in a relationship.

Theme 2.4: Reality Check

This theme is about being able to question one's interpretation of events. It is about keeping in mind that our assumptions may be wrong. Once again, van Deurzen (1994) comes to our aid in explaining some of her philosophy applied to existential therapy. For her, there is no perfect life waiting for anyone. However, people struggle to face this reality, and they invent a fantasy world where as soon as that obstacle (whatever they conceptualise as the obstacle at that time) is removed, they will have their rosy life (van Deurzen, 1994.). This conceptualisations tallies with the findings.

The results point to a change that could be assimilated into the phenomenological method, where one sets aside all the assumptions, ideas, and fantasies and strives to engage with the world as it is (van Deurzen & Kenward, 2005).

3.Sense of agency: Ability to Act Upon Own Understanding and Decisions.

The concept of agency refers to the feeling of being in control of one's own actions and therefore having an impact on events in the external environment. Most people generally believe that they have control over their behaviour most of the time (Haggard and Chambon 2012). This superordinate theme is conceptualised here as the acquired ability to act upon one's understanding. The main shift seemed to be about the participants understanding that they are agents in their lives and can affect the world with their actions. This is in opposition to the previous belief that their lives were down to luck, destiny, or external circumstances that they could not affect.

In existential terms, it is about taking responsibility for the direction to take and for shaping their own life by making conscious choices (van Deurzen, 2002). For Sartre (1945/1996), we are nothing but what we make of ourselves. Thus, reminding us of the constant becoming of our selfhood that has no predetermined essence (van Deurzen & Kenward, 2005). It follows that the current theme regards choosing a course of action and then following through with it in the act of commitment to that (van Deurzen, 2002).

Theme 3.1: Became a Better Partner.

This is another exciting theme that falls under the umbrella of self-agency and concerns how the participants have changed their behaviour. Many of the themes discussed so far have been contrasted with existential literature. However, in no other theme so far do the findings so perfectly match existing literature as in this case:

> "*Instead of focusing on the desire of wanting 'to be loved', existential therapists will explore how a person loves. Loving in an active and engaged manner with the courage to tackle conflict is something that has to be learnt*" (van Deurzen, 2015, p.19).

Even though only two participants were in therapy with existential therapists, the findings support the idea that migrating to a mature way of loving facilitates entering and maintaining healthy relationships (van Deurzen, 2015).

Theme 3.2: Became Own Therapist

Becoming your own therapist is one of the steps that cognitive behavioural therapies aim to teach clients (Wright, 2006). Through a collaborative effort to solve the clients' problems, they acquire the skills necessary to carry on the work once therapy has ended (Wright, 2006). The current findings indicate that the participants interiorised many of the insights they learned during therapy, regardless of their therapist's therapeutic modality.

A more humanistic view sees Rogers' (1959) core conditions as implicated in the transformative effect that therapy can have on clients through the relationship with the therapist (Charura & Paul, 2015; Luca, 2017). The results support the idea that clients may interiorise some of the accepting behaviour widely employed by therapists (of any modality) and apply it to themselves long after therapy is over.

Theme 3.3 Willing to End Relationships That Bring Pain

The third theme under the superordinate theme of self-agency is common amongst the participants. One of the changes they noticed in transitioning to people who can enter happy relationships was to end hurtful liaisons. It could be summarised as follows: I prioritise my well-being by choosing what is best for me. As the reader may recall, we established that this set of participants used to take responsibility for the 'other' (whoever that may be) (Bergum, 1989). In this theme, we see how participants have moved from feeling such responsibility for how the other feels, to taking the action that is in their own best self-interest.

The choice to end relationships that are deemed unsuitable should not even have been a theme. It could be speculated that the cultural diktats placed on women to be caring and pleasing others may have had a hand in their previous difficulty (De Beauvoir, 1949/2011).

Theme 3.4 Dating a Different Kind of Man

This theme regards the participants choosing to date and enter relationships with men that are different from the ones they used to be attracted to. It is a conscious choice, sometimes in open contradiction to their instincts.

Making such conscious choices point toward an increased autonomy intended as the ability to be free determining beings (De Beauvoir, 1949/2011). For De Beauvoir (1949/2011), the problem of diminished autonomy rose from an excess of devotion from women towards men. The results indicate that when the participants chose men that were good to them, their autonomy was increased rather than diminished.

Another way to look existentially at the participants' choice of a different kind of man is to see it as choosing one future amongst the many possible ones (De Beauvoir, 1944). One must evaluate the many available possible selves, then choose one and act to become that person (De Beauvoir, 1949/2011).

4. Role in the family: is the category representing the past that is still present that needs to be illuminated.

The role in the family category is about how the participants understood the impact their past was still having on their romantic life. In talking about the past, what is meant is the influence of the original family or of important figures during the formative years. Following the data analysis, I have taken the view that an understanding of their family system and an acceptance of the past was an essential step for the participants to be able to enter healthy relationships. Clarifying the values and influences on clients from the original family is something that many therapeutic modalities work with (Ainsworth 1969; Bowlby, 1973; van Deurzen, 2002; Stadlen, 2013).

Theme 4.1 Re-enacted Elements of her Original Family Role in Previous Relationships & Short Critique of Attachment Theory

As I went through the analysis, particularly at the stage of extracting themes from the pile of experiential themes, I noticed a newfound 'knowing'. There are so many lenses one could use to look at the data. Through the long process of analysis, I had so many eureka moments. To cite a few: It's all about needs! No, it's all about self-esteem! No, it's all about adverse childhood experiences! These are only three examples of instances that I was analysing. These instances often became themes. And for a while, almost every theme seemed to be all-encompassing. Initially, it was all about attachment theory (Ainsworth, 1969).

That is where the most pertinent research to my topic can be found. I was mindful, though, of keeping an open mind. Later on, as I analysed the data, at moments, it looked like everything was about needs: fulfilling needs, having needs, voicing needs. It made me think of core beliefs and maladaptive schemas (Young et al., 2003). Then it looked like it was all about the family relationships in their entirety and the role one plays in them rather than the relationships with one caregiver (Satir, 1972).

Over time I came to the old conclusion that there is not one thing that explains the ties that bind us to our formative years. There are so many readings that one could give the data. I start with one of the most obvious for this current theme: attachment theory. Many therapists who heard about my topic were convinced that my literature review was going necessarily to be about attachment theory. After all, it is a well-researched theory. According to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1973), we develop patterns of behaviour that are categorised according to our relationship with our main caregiver, usually our mother.
And whilst that is still one truth, the current data support the argument that we are more complex than attachment theory proponents would like us to believe (Serning, 2019).

Probably if I wanted to explain the data through the lenses of attachment theory, I could classify all my participants as having an anxious attachment style (Ainsworth, 1969). After all, they were all trying to please other people (i.e., their partner, their mums, their dads), and they were all, at some point, dating men who were a bit rejecting, detached or weary of commitments. These are all classic traits for the 'avoidant' type (Attached, 2010). Any quick search on the internet will produce multiple hits of many practitioners and 'relationship experts' who have looked at the ins and outs of the avoidant-anxious romantic relationship dyad and its pitfalls.

While I find attachment theory a useful background theory, almost as a quasi-neutral canopy where to insert my interpretations, I bristle at its confinement. Perhaps it is my existential part that rebels against its prescriptiveness.

Going back to the results, for the data that I analysed, it made a lot more sense to look at the past through the lenses of family theories, mainly through the work of Virginia Satir (1972). She proposed that every person has a specific role within their original family; that role is imposed on us as children. We can then observe how often people carry this role around for far too long until they are made aware of it and can choose how they want to be. For example, one participant believed her role was to make others happy even at her own expense; and this was what she replicated in her relationships with men.

Saying that a child is given a role, any role, leaves room to empathise with that someone that believed her role was to make other people happy. That is a very different reading than saying someone is anxious for other people's attention. Crucially, the data support the idea that becoming aware of one's family role aids in entering and staying in healthy relationships.

Theme 4.2: Chose Previous Partners That Fit Into Old Family Scripts

The findings are not about happy endings. They are about the reality of overcoming personal challenges that are difficult to put into words. My enquiry was not into the process of therapy as that would require a different focus. However, in my quest for literature that concerned itself with any aspect of my topic, I found a reference from an institution that works with couples and singles in general. Relate is a UK-based counselling provider that specialises in relational therapy. They claim that:

"If you want to look at your relationship patterns in order to start making changes within yourself and look at the kind of people you choose to have relationships with, we can help".
(Relate Website, 2019)

I found their summary to resonate with part of my results. For example, in theme 4.2, 'Chose previous partners that fit into old family scripts', I noticed how several participants seem to have become aware they had a 'type' of guy they used to date. The theme is about how the participants' discovery that they were falling into the same type of relationships repeatedly has helped them make different choices. Or noticing when they were falling into old patterns.

Theme 4.3 Varying Degrees of Having Overcome Fear of Intimacy

The last theme of the analysis brings us full circle after journeying through the themes that emerged from the analysis.

Reviewing the many ideas and theories that have been written about the fear of intimacy is obviously beyond the scope of this dissertation. As pointed out in the analysis chapter, fear of intimacy is hereby seen as any fear of authentically connecting to another (Stadlen, 2013). Once again, under this category, the past is present. It stands to reason that those fears may be a consequence of our first attempts at intimacy when we were little. If those first attempts did not go well (parents may have been distracted, absent, depressed, addicted), we might hold an intrinsic mistrust of a partner (Stadlen, 2013). The data suggest that the participants have overcome their fear of experiencing real intimacy to varying degrees.

In addition, the results support the idea that tackling conflicts in romantic relationships is not an innate skill: we need to learn it and can do so in therapy (van Deurzen 2015).

Concluding remarks to the discussion

There is such a strength in the participants' voices. I found their journeys so inspiring. I knew first-hand how life-changing a therapy journey can be, but even with that knowledge, I was surprised at the depth of positive change the participants achieved. The other unexpected aspect for me was the consistency in which the themes were expressed across the participants. They went through very similar transformations with each other.

The literature review that specifically talks about the transition to entering happy relationships from a self-identified difficulty with them is scarce at best. However, I enjoyed looking at all the literature and trying to understand my findings through other lenses. In a way, writing the discussion has been another level of analysis where to contrast my results with what other people have written on the phenomenon I have observed.

Finally, the results seem to support existential ideas about love and relatedness in the world. Some of the foremost existential philosophers have all proposed that we start being in the world by giving in to others, thus living inauthentically (Kierkegaard, 1980; Nietzsche, 1887; Heidegger, 1927). In accordance with these ideas, the participants all appeared to have lived their lives by cultural dictates and the sedimented values they had interiorised from childhood (van Deurzen, 2015). Until one starts to live authentically, and it is only then that we are capable of true loving (Heidegger, 1927).

Chapter 6. Conclusions

Evaluating Methodological Integrity

Submitting qualitative studies for publication in peer-reviewed journals used to be a frustrating struggle. Qualitative research validity was evaluated against a standard developed for quantitative studies (Smith & Nizza 2022). Thankfully, times have moved on, and in recognition of the importance of qualitative research, the American Psychological Association (APA) has released the Standards for Qualitative Research in Psychology (Levitt et al., 2018).

I will be commenting on the strengths and weaknesses of the current dissertation using the APA standards (Levitt et al., 2018), as a guide to evaluate my study.

· Introduction & Literature Review

To date, the writing around the difficulty in relationship formation with a link to therapy has been written from the therapist's point of view (van Deurzen, 2013; van Deurzen, 2015; Leontiev, 2015; Barker, 2015). The present research has sought to start something new in exploring meaningful changes in relating romantically to men from the women's point of view.   I believe the study's main strength is that it has never been done before; it is uncharted territory. This newness is also the reason for its main weakness: the background literature review on the topic in chapter 2 was unavoidably limited. However, I have endeavoured to meet part of APA standards by providing a good rationale for the need of the study and an adequate explanation of the aim of the research.

The research aims were further explored by providing a detailed commentary of how the interview questions were designed to answer the research's question and objectives.

· Method & Methodology

Unlike the apparent difficulty with the literature review section, I believe I have met the APA standards as closely as possible for the method section of the thesis. Besides giving a rationale for using IPA as the chosen method of analysis, I have transparently described all the steps taken during the research journey. In keeping to a reflexive stance throughout the process, I have given detailed accounts of how I conducted the recruitment, the interviews and the analysis (Finlay, 2002).

However, as this is a critical appraisal of my study, I shall not shrink away from the weaknesses I have noticed now that the project is over.

A doctoral dissertation usually requires a sample of more than six participants (Smith et al., 2009). However, during the analysis, I was sometimes overwhelmed by the sheer amount of data. IPA is a method that seeks to achieve depth, and it does so via the detailed nature of its analysis. I agree with Smith (2009), that four participants would be ideal for IPA, and such a number would have allowed me to go deeper into the phenomenon, considering the amount of data obtained with IPA with one case only is already considerable.

The other aspect I noticed in critically reviewing the study is that the participants were at different points in their therapy journeys and personal development. I cannot fail to acknowledge that the homogeneous sample recommended for IPA was only relatively achieved (Smith & Nizza, 2022).

One of the inclusion criteria for the study was to have been in therapy for a minimum of 8 months; there was no upper limit. This could be viewed as a strength as the breath of experiences in the data was enlarged. At the same time, the participants' experiences lacked the homogeneity that IPA so much requires.

· Methodological Integrity

Understandably methodological integrity is an essential feature of the guidelines. The aim is to demonstrate that the researcher has produced the findings with integrity. I have spent considerable time and effort on the analysis and therefore produced copious amounts of tables and notes of each stage. In chapter 3, I provided a selection of proofs of the various stages involved in the analysis and consequent write-up. Specifically, I presented tables with early versions of the analysis (please see Appendix G) and photographic evidence of annotated table of group experiential themes as an evidence trail of how I arrived at the results.

· Findings

The findings' write-up resulted from months of relentless work trying to uncover what the participants meant to say in their interviews. In keeping with IPA commitments (Smith et al., 2009), I sought to balance my interpretation and co-creation of the themes supported by the right excerpts from the transcripts. I think I achieved a reasonable balance. But I accept that had I been a more experienced researcher, I could have reduced the number of quotes further and increased the interpretative commentary.

At times, I was worried that I was interpreting too much; therefore, going back to the hermeneutic circle proved to be a valuable tool to interpret based on what I thought the participants wanted to say (Gadamer, 1997; Smith et al., 2009).

Nevertheless, I tried to meet other APA standards by using quotes representing the participants proportionately and going beyond the usual demographic information. In common with Yardley's (2000) sensitivity to context criteria, the APA standards (Levitt et al., 2018) seek to see some participants' personal histories being included that are relevant to the research topic. I complied with this aspect by compiling a table of the relationship patterns of the participants before therapy. By ideographically exploring a pertinent part of the participants' background relevant to the topic, I focused on their individual contexts.

· Discussion

This is where my participants' accounts were contrasted with the relevant literature. I could have added a lot more literature on the hypothetical 'root causes' that some of the themes exposed. However, I decided against it and instead focused on the transformational changes the participants went through to stay faithful to the aim of the study. The engagement with the participants' material continued through the discussion.

Limitations of the study

One definite limitation of this research is the impossibility of generalising the results to the whole population compared to a quantitative study employing a sizeable, random sample (Bryman, 2008). However, my aim has always been to produce a detailed description of a particular process that happens in a specific social world. That meant choosing a homogeneous and small sample. In turn, this choice implies that the results will lack the ability to be transferable to other contexts automatically (Willig, 2013). At the same time, by being transparent about the characteristics of the sample, the results can inform the kinds of experiences that future quantitative research can study (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Furthermore, even if my results cannot be shown to apply to all possible clients, it gives a rich account allowing clients and therapists to get an in-depth understanding of this specific sample of people.

Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest that to create a solid, trustworthy piece of qualitative research, it is necessary to be very rigorous in following procedures and applying the methodology, and this has been my guiding principle throughout the research journey.

The contribution to knowledge which may be expected

My hope is that this study could contribute to the recognition that relational psychotherapy for singles is already a reality, and therapists need to start researching and writing about it, as it could open vast opportunities for therapists, women and the public. I will now enumerate the ways that the current study could be impactful.

·   Possible benefits for counsellors/therapists,

The insights garnered from this study hold profound implications for the field of counselling psychology and psychotherapy. One possible benefit is through the focus on the importance of acknowledging and addressing the relational concerns of individuals, particularly women, as valid and significant reasons for seeking therapeutic intervention. Another implication of these findings is that they could provide the basis for further research. That research could, in turn, point to an effective way of working systematically with this client group. For example, if the themes were confirmed, practitioners could add the knowledge of which areas seem to shift for this client group. This in turn could facilitate the uncovering of several unhelpful patterns that keep this type of clients stuck in unhappy relationships.

An example from the findings: knowing that clients who have become more authentic have also been successful in healthy relationship formation could have positive consequences on how therapists approach these issues.

· Possible benefits for clients

Knowing a clear connection between what therapy can do and the success stories of these participants can provide some needed references for clients. When presented with the issues of difficulty in forming healthy relationships, prospective clients can evaluate the possibility of working on themselves in therapy.

· Possible benefits for society

As we read in the literature review, part of society still sees single women as defective, unlucky, pathetic, and unwanted (Budgeon, 2016). These findings also say something about the various issues and world views that seem problematic for this client group. Perhaps it would be positive to start seeing the impact families may have on their daughters when they teach them to be 'good little girls'.

Further research

Doing research for a doctorate requires juggling so many other requirements, and there are necessary restrictions on time and resources that the novice researcher can allocate to the project. These limitations may restrict the breath of the study. After finishing with the doctoral demands, the researcher has accrued some experience and may have some time to go deeper in specific interesting directions. I will be thinking of that in the future.

For example, to re-do the analysis using a different methodology. For as much as IPA was the right choice for the study, it has its own limitations. According to Giorgi (2010), IPA's results tend to be ambiguous and scientifically unsound. This is probably due to the heavy creative involvement of the researcher. It follows that if another researcher did the whole set of steps as I did, with the same data, they probably would end up with different findings (Willig, 2013). I could use a more descriptive method, like thematic or discourse analysis, and compare the findings' differences.

The other project to further this study after the end of the doctorate is to choose one aspect of the findings, go back to the transcripts and go deeper into the existing analysis for one aspect only, self-love, for example. Then write about the results and see if a journal would deem it good enough to publish.

The current research could also be expanded, even using a similar sample but including both the therapists and the clients of the dyads. This sort of double interview could give us more depth into the process that has happened in therapy. We know that clients differ in what they think was helpful in the therapy room from their therapists (Timulak, 2010). I did not want to go into the process of therapy for this study, but I think it would be a worthy enterprise for the future.

Furthermore, looking at a more inclusive sample. All my participants were Caucasian. This was not intentional; there were no criteria to exclude Black or Asian women. As this was doctoral research, the recruitment was limited in time and resources. And therefore, I accepted all the requests of women who fulfilled the inclusion criteria. Perhaps my circle of acquaintances on social media is prevalently Caucasian, or the word 'western' in the title put off possible candidates. I think it would be interesting to see if the results differ by changing the ethnicity of the participants.

The participants' inclusion criteria were stringent in the sample, being cisgender and straight and therefore, I would like to see the study repeated with LGBTQ+ women.

There is also the remaining 49% of the population: men. This research was slanted towards women in its construction and premises. However, with the firm knowledge that some experiences are universal, repeating the study with men as a sample would be hugely interesting.

In my opinion, there is a particular group that would benefit from relationship therapy for singles: INCELS. They are a group of disenfranchised men that have declared a difficulty in connecting to women. They are becoming more and more dangerous and involved in mass shootings, suicides and criminal activities (Daly et al., 2021). Perhaps no one like INCELS show us how important it is for people to relate romantically in a healthy manner. A study involving such individuals before they become radicalised could be of interest to the whole of humanity.

Concluding remarks

This study has sought to illuminate a new area of relationship research which could have vast implications for the work that therapists do in the therapy room.

There seems to be a mixture of elements that fall into place the moment the participants can make the shift into entering healthy relationships. The elements are varied. Some pertain more to cultural factors, such as decreased romanticism. This is something interesting because women are fed romantic ideas since infancy through fairy tales and the saving prince ideal.

Then there are elements about overcoming more 'serious' and personal difficulties. Such as the fear of rejection that drives so much of the old unhelpful behaviours of the participants.

In my reflections, it's been interesting to think that I could have continued the analysis. I could have looked at other aspects and delved deeper into the interpretations. I know that I can continue this work, write about this under-researched topic, and look into other aspects of the data. In a way, this research is the end of my doctoral journey, but it is only the beginning of the journey on this topic.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Participants Inclusion Criteria

For the sake of homogeneity in the sample, so that rich material may emerge, the sample will be constituted of 25-45 straight, western, cis-gender women only.

- **Gender**: Females only

- **Age**: 25-45. This age bracket was chosen based on the assumption that women are more likely to look for a significant other and go to therapy when in this age group.

- **Personal Therapy**: The participants have undergone at least eight months of continuous 1:1 psychotherapy (not couple therapy) with an accredited psychotherapist (UKCP) or a chartered counselling psychologist (HCPC) in any modality. Psychotherapy may or may not have had a focus on relationships. The therapy must have taken place within the last 5 years so that the recollection is relatively fresh.

- **Relationship status**: The participants were single for a minimum of 1 year or more before starting personal therapy. They entered a relationship that they deemed satisfactory during or within a year of attending therapy. The participants do not need to be in a relationship at the time of the interview. In fact, the participants may even be looking for a relationship at the time of the recruitment/interview. That fact does not detract from the participant's experience; that is the object of this research.

Appendix B: Interview Schedule

- Before you started therapy, what were your ideas around relationships?

  -History of issue, client's own thoughts and experiences.

- In what way has your understanding of your difficulty entering a happy relationship changed during/after therapy? <u>If </u>it has changed?

- During/after therapy, did you notice any change in your way of approaching your relationship with men in general? If so, at what stage?

  -Change in thinking, behaviour, attitude, routines, beliefs, choices.

- What was your experience of finding a satisfying relationship during/after attending personal therapy?

  -What actually happened in your own words.

- What were the main insights you gained from therapy?

  -What did you learn about yourself, your worldview, your values, your past experiences.

- How do you think these insights connect to your ability to enter a gratifying relationship?

- Talk me through any aspects of therapy that you found impactful. What do you think would have been different in your life if you had not undergone personal therapy?

At the end of each interview, I will ask the participant if they would like to add anything.

Appendix C: Information Sheet

NSPC Ltd.	Middlesex University
254-6 Belsize Road	The Burroughs
London NW6 4BT	London NW4 4BT

Title of Research:	A phenomenological enquiry into the experience of western women who found a significant other after a course of psychotherapy.
Researcher:	Anna Vincent, Email: an672@live.mdx.ac.uk
Supervisor:	Niklas Serning, Email: niklas@serning.com
Academic year:	2020/21

You have been invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide to participate, it is important that you understand why the research is being conducted and what it will entail. Please take your time to read through the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. And do not hesitate to contact me if there is anything that is not clear to you or if you would like to know more. I am happy to respond to any queries you may have. Take your time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

What is the purpose of the research?

This study is being carried out as part of a Doctorate in Existential Counselling Psychology and Psychotherapy with NSPC Ltd and Middlesex University.

The project aims to explore the experience of women who identify as western in that they espouse values of freedom in choosing, dating and flirting with whoever they choose. Women who struggled to enter a romantic relationship while actively looking for it for at least a year and then found a relationship that they find satisfactory during or within a year of attending personal therapy. The aim of the research is to investigate which aspects of therapy, if any, may impact the ability of women to enter a relationship that they deem healthy and happy. This study will attempt to explore existential and practical aspects of the phenomenon of struggling with romantic relationship formation and the lived experience of women who overcame this difficulty during or after psychotherapy. This study could be of interest both to women who experience this difficulty and to therapists who work with relationship issues.

Why have you been asked to participate?

You are being asked to participate because you have replied to my advertisement and met the
following criteria:
1. *You are a cisgender, straight female that identifies as western between the age of 25 and 45 years old.*
2. *You have struggled to enter a romantic relationship for at least a year, while actively looking for one.*
3. *You have attended a course of personal psychotherapy, which may or may not have had a focus on relationships, and you were in therapy with a counselling psychologist or a UKCP registered psychotherapist for at least 8 months.*
4. *You entered a romantic relationship that you found satisfactory during or after your course of psychotherapy.*
5. *You are happy to share your experience and to reflect on it.*

What will happen to me if I take part?

You will be invited to an interview with me by phone and email. The interview will be
conducted either remotely, in order to comply with social distancing rules, or in person. If it
is safe to meet in person, the interview will take place at a counselling agency in central
London in a private and quiet therapy room. Alternatively, the interview can be conducted
remotely using a videoconference medium like Skype or Zoom. The interview will last
between 60 to 90 minutes and will be scheduled at a time convenient to you. The interview is
conversational, and you will be asked open questions regarding your experience. There is no
agenda except the exploration of your own experience. Only the audio of the interview will
be digitally recorded and transcribed, there will be no video recording. The transcript will be
analysed with the interviews of all other participants, in the hope that universal themes will
emerge from your collective experiences.

What will you do with the information that I provide?

The interview will be transcribed by me or by an approved professional agency, who is also
bound to confidentiality. I will be recording the interview on a digital recorder and will
transfer the recorded material to an encrypted, password protected file on an external hard
drive which I will store in a locked cabinet. As soon as the files are transferred to the
external hard drive, I will delete them from the recorder. From that point onwards your
details will be coded so that your name or other identifying details will not be linked to the
file. All of the information that you provide will be identified only with a project code and
stored either on a password protected USB stick, or in a locked cabinet. I will also store the
key that links your details with the project code in a locked cabinet. In accordance with the
Data Protection Act 2018 and the Freedom of Information Act 2000, the information will be
kept at least until 10 years after I graduate and will be treated as confidential. If my research
is published, I will make sure that neither your name nor other identifying details are used.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?

Exploring significant experiences might bring up difficult emotions. If you are currently
experiencing high levels of stress or if you think that exploring your experience requires
further professional support, then perhaps it is not right for you to participate in this study. If

during the interview, you experience such difficulties, please let me know, and if you wish, I will stop the interview. The interview is confidential, however, should you tell me something that I am required by law to pass on to a third person; I would have to do so.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

You will have the opportunity to reflect and give a voice to your own experience. Exploring significant experiences and reflecting on them may have some therapeutic benefit for you Participating in a research about a topic close to your heart that might be published might prove satisfying. You may develop a deeper understanding of your own experience and your participation and the findings may benefit other psychotherapy clients in the future.

Who has reviewed the study?

All proposals for research using human participants are reviewed by an Ethics Committee before they can proceed. The NSPC research ethics sub-committee have approved this study.

Thank you for reading this information sheet.

If you have any further questions, you can contact me at:
NSPC -61-63 Fortune Green Road
London NW6 1DR
United Kingdom
An672@live.mdx.ac.uk

If you any concerns about the conduct of the study, you may contact my supervisor:

Niklas Serning
NSPC - 61-63 Fortune Green Road
London NW6 1DR
United Kingdom
niklas@serning.com

Or: The Principal
NSPC Ltd. 61-63 Fortune Green Road
London NW6 1DR
Admin@nspc.org.uk
0044 (0) 20 7624 0471

Appendix D: Consent Form

NSPC Ltd.   Middlesex University
254-6 Belsize Road   The Burroughs
London NW6 4BT   London NW4 4BT

<div align="center">

Written Informed Consent

</div>

Title of Study: A phenomenological enquiry into the experience of western women who found a significant other after a course of psychotherapy.

Academic Year: 2019/20

Researcher: Anna Vincent, Email: an672@live.mdx.ac.uk

Supervisor: Niklas Serning, Email: niklas@serning.com

1. I have understood the details of the research as explained to me by the researcher, and I confirm that I have consented to act as a participant.

2. I have been given the contact details for the researcher in the participant information sheet to keep.

3. I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary, the data collected during the research will not be identifiable, and in the instance that the interview takes place remotely, only the audio of the interview will be recorded and not the video. In addition, I have the right to withdraw from the project at any time until data analysis begins, without obligation to explain my reasons for doing so.

4. Furthermore, I understand that I will be notified of the time when data analysis will begin and I will be given a timeframe to withdraw from the study.

5. I further understand that my anonymized data will be used for analysis and subsequent publication and provide my consent that this might occur. Specifically, the publications will include the researcher's dissertation, journal and magazines articles, books or chapters in books, online blogs and posts.

In addition, I consent that the data collected may be transcribed by a professional agency which is bound to confidentiality and my data will be held with strict adherence to confidentiality in encrypted form.

_____   _____

Participant   Researcher

Date _____   Date: _____

To the participants: Data may be inspected by the Chair of the Psychology Ethics Panel and the Chair of the School of Social Sciences Ethics Committee of Middlesex University, if required by institutional audits about the correctness of procedures. Although this would happen in strict confidentiality, please tick here if you do not wish your data to be included in audits:

Appendix E: Debrief Sheet

Debriefing Form

Researcher: Anna Vincent, Email: an672@live.mdx.ac.uk

Supervisor: Niklas Serning, NSPC, 258 Belsize Road, London, NW6 4BT
Tel: 0207 4358067   email: niklas@serning.com

Date:

A phenomenological enquiry into the experience of western women who found a significant other after a course of psychotherapy
_____

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this research project and for making a valuable contribution to our knowledge about women's experiences of finding a significant other after a course of psychotherapy. This study was designed to investigate aspects of personal therapy that bring about change in the way that women engage with the romantic side of life after they have struggled forming a satisfactory relationship.

The audio digital recording of our interview will now be transcribed either by the me or a by a professional transcriber from an approved agency. In the transcription all identifying features will be removed and you will be given an identifying code. Your anonymized transcript will then be analyzed, and the findings written up as part of a doctoral thesis. The results may also be published in peer-reviewed journals or magazine articles. If you would like to withdraw from the study, you can do so at any point up until analysis has started. Your anonymized data will be stored on an encrypted USB stick which only the researcher will have access to. Paper copies will be stored in a locked cabinet on the researcher's premises. All data will be destroyed after a period of 10 years.

I hope that you enjoyed your participation in this project. I would like to take this opportunity to encourage you to get in touch with me, should you be left with any areas of doubt or confusion as to your participation or have any queries regarding the research, please feel free to contact me (tel: 0207 4358067; email: an672@live.mdx.ac.uk).

Should you wish to explore any issues or difficulties that may have surfaced following the interview please find below a list of resources for you:

https://www.samaritans.org/branches/central-london/
(You can call the Samaritans 24/7, 365 days a year. The service is completely free and confidential, and you can talk on the phone on any issues that is arising for you).

https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/drugs-and-treatments/talking-therapy-and-counselling/how-to-find-a-therapist/#.XbQ_dy2ZMWo
(Mind is a leading mental health wellbeing charity where you can find excellent information on how to access a therapist through the NHS or other channels).

https://theawarenesscentre.com/therapy-services/low-cost-counselling/
(The awareness Centre offers low-cost therapy in south west London).

https://www.bps.org.uk/lists/DIR
(The British Psychological Society's directory where to find a chartered Counselling psychologist).

Appendix F: Recruitment Advert

Have you found love after psychotherapy?

Volunteers needed for a doctoral research into:

The experience of western women who found a significant other after a course of Psychotherapy

Conducted by Anna Vincent - Counselling Psychologist trainee

DCPsych student: Doctorate in Counselling Psychology and Psychotherapy by Professional Studies

Who may be suitable:

- If you wanted to enter a happy relationship but struggled to do so for at least one year.

- If you were in personal therapy with a UKCP registered psychotherapist or with a chartered counselling psychologist for at least 8 months.

- If you entered a satisfying relationship during or within a year of attending psychotherapy. Even if that relationship did not last and you are presently looking for a partner.

- If you attended the psychotherapy in object no more than five years ago.

- If you identify as a western, straight, cis-gender woman, aged 25 to 45.

You would be an excellent candidate to participate in this research, and we could explore together what this experience has meant for you.

Please contact Anna at email: an672@live.mdx.ac.uk or on mobile number: 07947446416 for any information. Your participation would involve one interview of approximately one hour, which can be conducted remotely from the safety of your own home. In case it is deemed completely safe to meet in person and it is your preference, the interview will take place in central London.

Appendix G: Coding Example

Anonymised transcript excerpt
Legenda
Descriptive comments: normal text
Linguistic comments: *italic*
Conceptual comments: underlined
Emergent themes: colour

Emergent theme	Verbatim	Descriptive, now with a phenomenological focus and close to the participant's explicit meaning. What it is like for Helen	Interpretative-Now the how and why, the contextual: More interrogative and their lived world, identify concepts to make sense of the patterns of meaning in their account.	Queries and Ideas, now linguistic Comments: exploring the specific use of language of the participant
1st theme Reality check	P20: For me personally, so mine, it is to try and look at reality as it is, not to idealize things. And so, to see what is there actually. Without saying to yourself: yes, but perhaps, it's not really like that, No. He is like that; he is exactly like you see him!! (Chuckles lightly).	Participant states that biggest takeaway is to stop idealising things and talking herself out of reality she can see.	To see what is there, phenomenologically, no rose tint. Just what is there. Rather than idealising/talking yourself out of what you see. She started to have this different attitude in looking at things as they are and not as she wanted them to be in her head.	*Again, there is this need she has to say: 'mine, for me personally'; when answering a question. I wonder what that is about. 'He is exactly how you see him'. This seems very strong assertion in just looking at what is.*
Possible theme: People are what they do	P21: Basically, I observe him and not what I can think about him. So really, I focus on how he behaves.	Participant is now focusing her attention on the guy's behaviour rather than what she (wants to?) thinks of him.	The focus shifted to what was in front of her eyes Focusing on the guy's behaviour Not on what she thinks is the biggest shift, I think.	*"I observe him and not what I think about him" Very clear, strong assertions.*
Possible theme-Idealisation of the loved one.	P22: Well Daniel and Luke, what's coming to me right now is that they… conned me. Like in the beginning It wasn't me, I think it was really them. Then again, I might be wrong, and I am still fooling myself, but I think this. But, at a certain point I could have seen and instead I clung so much to that beautiful part that I wanted so much to continue having it, that then I started to project my thoughts really.	The respondent thinks that some of her exes conned her into believing they were people they were not. In addition, she thinks later she could have seen this, but instead, she clung to the beautiful memories of the beginning.	I wonder what she means what I started to project my thoughts. Perhaps, she wanted that reality so badly that she imagined it would be back? She clung to the beautiful times even when they had completely gone, hoping they would come back.	*'I clung so much to that beautiful part that I wanted so much to continue having it that then I started to project my thoughts really'*