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confluent love: a conversation

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(Appproximately 95,000 words)
Abstract - confluent love: a conversation

This research explores how people in Australia are going about their intimate relationships at a time when traditional gender roles are being contested, and sexuality is more open to individual interpretation. Anthony Giddens’ (1992) theory of confluent love was a starting point for the research because he provides a way of talking about love that differs significantly from existing ideals. According to Giddens (1992), romantic love is still the dominant ideal in western culture, but confluent love is emerging, because, he argues that women no longer go along with male sexual dominance. Despite the weaknesses in Giddens’ (1992) theory, he provided a way of talking about love that potentially dissolves the unequal power dynamic at the heart of romantic love, and provides a space for people to experiment with different ways of being in love. Because the sort of love he talks about is a collaborative process, it allows more egalitarian forms of relationships to come into being. Unlike romantic love, which is essentially heterosexual love, limits what same sex couples can say about their relationships. Confluent love is a way of talking about love that is more aligned with people’s diverse sexual preferences, values and aspirations.

Confluent love is an emergent phenomenon that has come about in contemporary western culture as people experiment with different ways of being in a sexual relationship, according to Giddens (1992). In this sense, confluent love is a ‘bottom up’ rather than a ‘top down’ phenomenon. Because of this, I approached the research as a conversation, in the original Latin sense of ‘wandering along together’ (Liamputtong 2007). Using qualitative methods, I looked at love as a ‘language game’ as Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889 – 1951) meant it, the aim being to identify ways of talking that might indicate confluent love. To do the research I posted nine questions on an Internet website called lovedialogue.com, asking people about their intimate relationships. I collected approximately 41,000 words in response, which I analysed as a ‘discourse’ or conversation about love in contemporary Australian culture. I used qualitative methods, including grounded theory (Charmaz 2006, 2012) and positioning theory (Davies and Harrè 1990), to understand how the people who participated in the research were navigating their intimate relationships. I identified a basic tension that participants were trying to resolve, which involved negotiating ‘being together’ and being separate’. As one respondent put it: ‘we want to be free and be in the relationship as well’. By focusing on how people resolved this tension in their relationships, a core category called ‘we share a world’ emerged. When I explored how respondents went about ‘sharing a world’, I discovered an ethic at work, which could be called confluent love.

The ethic that emerged in the research is different from existing moral theories in that it includes both an ethic of justice, or rights, and an ethic of care. Rather than these being contradictory, or opposing viewpoints, the two perspectives came together as people talked about their rights in a way that showed they cared. I do not make claims that this ethic can be generalised, and it is a procedural rather than a prescriptive ethic. While this is different from the way Giddens (1992) explains it, the research did support his claim that contemporary relationships are potentially revolutionary, in that they involve breaking away from existing ways of thinking about ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’, ways of thinking that can lead to suffering rather than happiness. I also show how this ethic could foster more democratic relationships. Importantly this research explored love as a verb, as a journey, that potentially contributes to more authentic ways of being in love, ways that heal, rather than hurt.
Preface

Jean-Paul Sartre’s (1989) depiction of hell in his play ‘No Exit’ is three people having to share a room for eternity, each in their own way having to face their hopeless existence through the eyes of their equally despairing roommates.

The characters in Sartre’s play are trapped precisely because they lack the capacity to step out of their own perspective and genuinely relate to the other people with whom they share the room. Their personal concerns cloud their minds. All they can hear are their own thoughts, their own internal chatter. Each has their own monologue that drowns out other voices. Each is stuck in emotions or feelings that belong to the past, a past that is perpetuated eternally by their lack of understanding.

For me, Sartre’s play is a pessimistic account of our human condition, but it also sheds light on the frailty of human bonds, as well as their importance. Love is how we derive meaning in life: the people, places and activities that we love, ultimately define us; ‘who we are’ emerges through our emotional engagement with other people. Each of us has a mind of our own, and our own ideas of what a ‘good’ life is about, but realizing our individual dreams and creating a meaningful life, largely depends on our capacity to relate to other people. Sartre knew this, but his philosophy, particularly his theory of emotions, including love, relies on people being conscious, or self-aware. But many people block out this awareness, and lose themselves by acting habitually, without questioning why they do things a certain way. This is a state of mind that Sartre referred to as ‘false’ consciousness or ‘bad faith’ (Fullbrook and Fullbrook 2008).

False consciousness is when we ‘dissociate’ from our own experience, or ‘subjectivity,’ and become an object for another. If someone does this for long enough they can ‘forget’ they are experiencing false consciousness, and they play the roles that other people determine for them (2008 p. 64). For example, we might not like the way someone makes us an object of their desire, but we like that they desire us, so we play along. Over time, our initial discomfort is forgotten, and we become what the other person wants us to be. For both Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir this was a moral as well as a philosophical issue, because if we ‘forget’ we are living in false consciousness, we lose the capacity to
tell the difference. If we get caught up in the world of appearances, we start to identify with it, and we fail to take responsibility for our own lives. We might be comfortable, but we would not be free. For both Sartre and de Beauvoir, ethics was about living according to rules that we make for ourselves and doing the best we can to live an authentic life (2008, p. 57). This was illustrated in their relationship, where despite their on-going affair both de Beauvoir and Sartre had other lovers. Other people judged them, but neither Sartre or de Beauvoir regarded their behaviour as ‘wrong’, rather they saw it as an act of freedom; they loved in accordance with their beliefs and their values.

In ‘No Exit’ the door to the room opened at one point but nobody took the risk to journey out of it into uncertainty. They were free to do so, but because of their shame and guilt, they chose to stay in hell. This can be likened to a default mode in our human condition, but sometimes things happen, and we are forced to leave the familiar; to step out of the illusion, and face reality. Sometimes this happens through death; it can also happen when we love another person. We are not born knowing how to love, so to some extent we rely on cultural scripts to make sense of how we are feeling. We inherit these scripts from our culture, and they shape our expectations, especially around sexual love. The problem is that love does not always go the way the stories tell us it should, so in a sense every relationship is a movement into uncharted territory with an uncertain destination.

Love is not easy, and as well as positive emotions like joy, intimate love especially can also involve violence, abuse, loneliness, betrayal, jealousy, and heartache. In contemporary culture love is also confusing, because existing narratives no longer reflect the way men and women relate to each other. Rather than just one way of being a man or a woman, there are now more ways we can perform these roles. This makes it difficult to know how to go on in an intimate context, but it is this not knowing, but having to act anyway, that ultimately determines what our individual and collective values are. For both Sartre and de Beauvoir having the courage to choose our own projects is how we change the world (2008, p. 189). For these philosophers, freedom was considered the highest good, because by exercising our freedom we inject our values into the world; through our actions and choices we decide together what is important, what is worth striving for and what is not. Love is central to this project, as I discuss below.
Introduction - confluent love

This thesis explores what people mean when they say ‘I love you’ in contemporary Australian culture. The aim was to better understand how people in Australia are experiencing intimate love in their lives, how they are navigating love at a time when sex and intimacy are much more confusing and the way forward much less clear. Mary Evans (2003) writes that the separation of sex from marriage and love has left a void, and the relationship between them is no longer clear. She says people in western culture are confused about love. She argues:

We are, as people in our culture – very active as ‘lovers’ of objects, situations and even people. But the extent to which the same word is used to cover the multitude of possibilities should also warn us of the conceptual confusion around this idea (p. 22).

I use Anthony Giddens’ (1992) theory of confluent love as a framework for this research because he claims this sort of love is indicative of a new ethics of interpersonal life, which has the potential to create a more equal and democratic society (p. 188). Giddens (1992) rightly argues that people can no longer rely on existing cultural scripts to make sense of how to ‘go on’ in an intimate context, so different ways of being in relationship are being experimented with. Jeffrey Weeks (2007) points out that these conditions are contributing to the demise of the ‘traditional’ family, a trend which he says is often cited as an indication of a society in moral decline. However, it is equally possible to see it as an opportunity for a more diverse culture to come into being, and sex is central to this. Weeks (2007) argues, ‘we are talking here about a democratization of intimate life, a revolution in everyday life, which has yet unrealised and unsettling implications for the relationship between private passions and public life’ (p. 8).

I used Giddens’ (1991, 1992) theory to frame the research because despite being over twenty years old, it is still relevant, and his views have strong support from other sociologists, including Weeks (2007, 2008, 2009), as well as Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (1995). These sociologists agree with Giddens (1991, 1992) that there are profound changes taking place in people’s personal lives in western culture, which are influencing the way people relate to each other, both intimately and otherwise.
One of the most significant features of Giddens’ (1992) theory, which he says provides evidence for confluent love, is that people no longer believe that they will meet their ‘one and only’ and ‘live happily ever after’ (p. 61). He defines confluent love as ‘active, contingent love, and therefore jars with the “for-ever”, “one-and-only” qualities of the romantic love complex’ (p. 61).

While Giddens (1992) agrees that romantic love is still the dominant ideology, or model for how people go about their intimate relationships in western culture, he points to the increasing rates of separation and divorce, as well as the increasing acceptance of same-sex relationships, as evidence of the emergence of confluent love. He explains that romantic love, as we have come to understand it in contemporary western culture, is no longer viable in a world where sexuality and gender are much of a ‘work in progress’, rather than a ‘natural’ or pre-ordained state of affairs. As Weeks (2008) puts it:

Between the 1960s and the first decade of the twenty-first century there has been a great transition in sexual values, based on the weakening of traditional institutions such as the family and authoritarian religion, giving rise to new patterns of intimate life based more than ever before on sexual agency and choice (p. 26).

In other words, intimacy, especially between heterosexual men and women, as Giddens (1992) argues, is no longer a pre-written drama which compel people to act out socially and culturally prescribed roles, but a way of creating a beautiful life, however people define that. This is happening, according to both Giddens (1992) and Weeks (2008) because sexuality in contemporary western culture has been “opened up” and people now have more choice about having sex and being sexual. In the past, sex happened, but it happened largely “behind closed doors”. Romance was an ‘initiation’ into adulthood that started with sexual desire and ideally ended with marriage, a home and children. In this sense, what we call romance was a pathway to a future life, a prelude to having a family and participating in the community. These days, in western culture at least, there is no longer a need to defer sexual activity until marriage, so having sex may be the ‘start of a fateful encounter’ or not (Giddens 1992, p. 50).

Mary Evans (2003) points out that it is the element of choice as opposed to destiny that makes modern love relationships increasingly confusing. There are also more ways people can go about
their sexual relationships, and love may or may not play a part. Sex is also much more available than it used to be, and because it is no longer inextricably linked to reproduction, women are more able to enjoy sex with or without a permanent partner. In this milieu, argues Evans (2003), existing moral codes ‘change or fragment’ (p. 6). This makes navigating intimate relationships tricky, but also increasingly important in that sense that nowadays people are more able to reflect on, and talk about, what ‘good’ sex, or a ‘good’ relationship means. In gender terms, it means people increasingly have to ‘figure out’ how to perform ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ in a sexual or intimate context, because the stereotypes that were previously considered ‘natural’ are now being contested. Negotiating these issues involves an increasing awareness of ourselves as ‘agents’, who not only consume culture, but who also actively participate in shaping it. Which is why, according to Giddens (1992), contemporary sexual relationships have political, cultural as well as personal significance.

Importantly, Giddens (1992) argues that the discussions or dialogues that ensue around ‘who does what’ in the relationship, as well as what is permissible and what is not, potentially dissolves the unequal power dynamic that continues to exist between heterosexual men and women, as well as people of diverse sexualities. This is because women especially now have more of a voice in how relationships are conducted, and both men and women are more able to enter and leave relationships, especially if they consider them oppressive or unfair. Homosexuals, both men and women, were the harbingers of modern relationships, but women, are pioneering these changes in heterosexual relationships, ‘as they confront and are confronted by changes in the nature of marriage, the family and work’ (p. 57). Giddens (1992) argues that relationships, in this sense, become the site for ‘ethical reconstruction, which relates, not only [to] sexual identity, but self-identity more broadly, to the moral concern of care for others’ (p. 200).

Weeks (2008) agrees with this. He claims: ‘…the contemporary world is a world we are making for ourselves’ as we navigate the numerous and various choices that we are faced with in our personal and intimate relationships (p.19). In our era, intimacy is not just about finding happiness, it is also about exploring our freedom: the freedom to experiment with different ways of being sexual, and different ways of being in relationships. Importantly, as I discuss in this thesis, confluent love does not override sexual difference, and being equal does not necessarily mean being the same, rather it means that everyone is able to express their genuine needs and desires in the context of an intimate relationship, in theory. Confluent love, says Giddens (1992) ‘is a version of love in which a person’s
sexuality is one factor that is negotiated as part of the relationship’ (p. 63). As he explains, in a world where men and women increasingly see each other as equals, both sexes are ‘called upon to make fundamental changes in their outlooks on, and behaviour towards one another’ (p. 7). Giddens (1992) says ‘sexuality serves as a metaphor for these changes and is the focus for their expression, particularly in respect of the reflexive project of the self’ (p. 180). In short, the Transformation of Intimacy, as Giddens (1992) describes it, changes what love means; how people go about it.

The changes Giddens (1992) talks about are not just about more or better sex, they change how people make sense of their sexual relationships, how they go about being married, and how they create and sustain a family. In this sense, Giddens’ (1992) theory points to a profound shift in the way human beings relate to each other generally. In our increasing technological and global world, there is more openness and diversity of opinions and views about what constitutes ‘good’ sex. There is also more acceptance of difference, as well as more debate and controversy. But there is also more suffering and violence.

I use Giddens (1992) theory as a starting point to explore how people in Australia are going about their intimate relationships. While there are significant gaps in Giddens’ (1992) theory, as I discuss in chapter’s two and three, a lot of what he says makes sense, because sex and gender are more fluid, and diverse sexualities are becoming more accepted. Most importantly, Giddens (1992) provides a new way of talking about love, that could provide a way for men and women, as well as for people in same sex relationships, to negotiate intimacy on more equal terms. Understanding how people made sense of love in contemporary culture was important because the choices people make when it comes to sex and intimacy, can have profound consequences. Saying ‘I love you’ to someone is, as Robert Solomon (2007) describes, an ‘explosive speech act, a bomb dropped at the feet of a relationship. With some luck and in-sight the explosion is mutually delightful, a happy moment indeed. But sometimes it is not, and friendships and work relationships are ruined forever’ (p. 4).

People still ‘fall in love’ as they always have, but these days there is more choice in terms of how a relationship “plays out”. Intimate relationships are no longer seen as ‘destined’ or ‘fated’. With the infusion of individual agency into the mix, for a relationship to last there has to be collaboration and communication, as well as more trust and respect. It is not just our individual feelings and desires that take center stage here, but what we do with those feelings and desires. Talking about our
thoughts and feelings is how relationships are sustained or dissolved, according to Giddens (1992) and how well people do this will determine whether love emerges. He explains: ‘In the realm of sexuality, emotion as a means of communication, as commitment to and cooperation with others, is especially important’ (p. 202).

Because there is more space for individual choice and agency in the way sexual relationships are conducted in western culture, the ethical focus leans more towards personal integrity and personal responsibility, and away from rules or principles that supposedly apply to everyone, everywhere. Importantly, the changes that Giddens (1991, 1992) and other sociologists talk about, force people to question, reflect on and think about what role, if any, love plays in a sexual context. Sex may be just for one night, while for others it may mean having children and buying a house together, depending on what peoples’ goals and aspirations are. If an ongoing relationship does ensue, people also have reflect on how they want to be treated, and how they want the other person to treat them.

The most important difference between traditional, or romantic relationships, and intimate relationships in contemporary culture, according to Giddens (1991) is that we no longer look to the other to have our identity affirmed, rather self-identity emerges in the process of negotiating intimacy (p. 97). This signifies a major change or shift in how we understand, and talk about, sexual love in western culture. Because there is nothing holding relationships together, trust is central, and rather than just assumed, it has to be ‘won’ (Giddens 1992, p. 96). This is one reason why personal integrity, or ‘authenticity’ play such an important role in Giddens’ (1992) theory. He says: ‘what matters is that we can rely on what the other says and does’ (p. 96).

Confluent love is not instantaneous the way romantic love is, rather it involves the gradual development of an emotional connection that is fostered by trust. Establishing this connection does not depend on how well someone plays a role, it depends on how open and honest people are towards each other. Here love is something we actively do, rather than an ideal or fantasy people aspire to or passively ‘fall into’. Giddens (1992) writes that, ‘love here only develops to the degree to which intimacy does, to the degree to which each partner is prepared to reveal concerns and needs to the other and to be vulnerable to that other’ (p. 62). He says sex plays a more central role in these relationships, however the focus is less on the ‘pursuit of pleasure’ and more about enjoying mutual pleasure (p. 62). Giddens (1992) explains that ‘confluent love for the first time introduces the *ars*
erotic into the core of the conjugal relationship and makes the achievement of reciprocal sexual pleasure a key element in whether the relationship is sustained or dissolved (p. 62). This is one of the reasons Giddens (1992) argues that, ‘the transmutation of love is as much a phenomenon of modernity as is the emergence of sexuality; and it connects in an immediate way with issues of reflexivity and self-identity’ (p. 34).

Love, says Ulrich Beck and Elizabeth Beck-Gersheim, has become a primary source of significance in a world that is increasingly fragmented and fluid. They say love relationships provide a sense of belonging in a world where family and tradition no longer provide that. Giddens (1992) agrees with this, and this is where his theory gets interesting, because while some of his ideas garner strong support from other leading sociologists, not everyone agrees with him.

Zygmunt Bauman (2003) and Eva Illouz (2007), two of Giddens (1992) most powerful adversaries, particularly disagree that contemporary relationships are potentially more ethical, in terms of people being able to live and love in ways that are more aligned to their own preferences and desires. Bauman (2003) argues that the sort of love Giddens (1992) talks about, is infused with capitalist and neo-liberal ideology, and is indicative of a more selfish and narcissistic society, rather than a more loving one (p. 21). The focus, he says, is on pursuing pleasure, rather than on establishing relationships based on trust. Long term commitments, argues Bauman (2003) are old-fashioned, and as a result relationships have become increasingly frail and superficial. He argues that “real” love – the sort of love that lasts a lifetime - has become increasingly rare in our society. ‘The widely shared, indeed commonplace awareness that all relationships are ‘pure’ (that is: frail, fissiparous, unlikely to last longer than the convenience they bring, and so always ‘until further notice’) is hardly a soil in which trust may take root and blossom’ (Bauman 2003, p. 90).

Mary Evans (2003) agrees with Bauman (2003), to some extent. She argues that in contemporary culture, love has become so entangled with capitalist ideology that it has become ‘an emasculated word’ (p. 78). She argues that: ‘in a very real and important sense…we no longer have a language of love, in that we have deconstructed love into sex and romance whilst at the same time removing it from any close or necessary association with any form of social relationship’ (p. 78). Nowadays there are dating sites, interactive sex sites, and chat rooms, where anyone can go to experience a diversity
of sexual or erotic activities. This means people are exposed to different ways of being sexual, and having relationships, and there is less pressure to stay with one person.

One of the main weaknesses in Giddens’ (1992) theory, as Weeks (2008) acknowledges, is that the processes he describes are uneven, affecting different people at different times and places…’ (p. 19). For some people tradition still plays an important role, especially when it comes to sexual relationships, and cultural narratives also limit the meanings that gay, lesbian and transgender couples bring to their relationships. Renata Grossi (2012), for example, argues that the word ‘love’ is important to same sex couples because it is how they justify marriage. However, the way sexual love is portrayed in Australia still reflects a dominant heterosexual model, which is firmly embedded in our ideas about romantic love. Grossi (2012) argues that:

Romantic love is a contested idea. On the one hand it embodies a radical and permissive ideology that says it is available for everyone regardless of origin, background, status and various other social markers. On the other hand, however, feminists have long argued that romantic love is oppressive for women, and queer theorists have argued it is a deeply heteronormative ideology, which excludes same sex intimacies from its ambit (p. 488).

This may be changing, but the important point that Smart and Shipman (2004) make, as far as my own research is concerned, is that the vision depicted by Giddens (1992) is ‘culturally monochrome’ in that it excludes ‘an understanding of different forms of marriages, relationships and intimacies which are to be found in diverse and complex societies’ (p. 494). Smart and Shipman’s (2004) own research, for example, found that people's family and cultural heritage was an important influence in how they approached their relationships, and how people negotiated these issues was different for different people. They write: ‘we encountered sisters where one wore the veil and the other wore Western dress, those who felt supported by their traditions and those who rejected them’ (p. 501). Smart and Shipman (2004) argue because of the different ways people are responding to modern conditions, we cannot just look to sociological theorists to understand the significance of the changes taking place in people’s personal lives, we need to look at how people in different contexts are experiencing these changes.
The main point here is that there is ‘no one size fits all’ theory when it comes to understanding sex, love and intimacy in western culture. That said, the changes that Giddens (1992) and other sociologists like Weeks (2008, 2009) say are taking place in our sexual and emotional lives, potentially affect everyone, albeit in different ways. Giddens (1991) writes that even a poor black, single mother, ‘however constricted and arduous her life is, will nevertheless know about factors altering the position of women in general, and her own activities will almost certainly be modified by that knowledge’ (p. 86). The main point here is that, if what Giddens (1992) says is correct, then the way we understand and use the word ‘love’ is changing, for better or for worse. This not only impacts on the way people go about their relationships, it also influences how children are brought up and the way families are structured.

Giddens (1992) is optimistic that the changes taking place could lead to a more equal and just society, and he supports this claim by showing how the conditions that make confluent love possible are already well advanced (p. 189). But he also acknowledges this is by no means a fait accompli. He says that no one can be sure what the future holds. He states: ‘Nobody knows if sexual relationships will become a wasteland of impermanent liaisons, marked by emotional apathy as much as by love, and scarred by violence. There are good grounds for optimism in each case’ (p. 197). In short, Giddens’ (1992) theory is important, but it is also difficult to agree or disagree with him about the emergence of confluent love. One of the main reasons for this is that he draws on popular psychology to justify his theory, rather than on empirical research, which I discuss below. That said, Giddens’ (1992) theory has elements that do not rely on the self help genre, so I decided to explore whether the sort of love he talks about could potentially be emerging in Australian culture. Confluent love sounded like a good idea, in theory, and it was potentially a more useful way of talking about love that better fit the way people live and love in contemporary culture, but it was not clear to me whether this sort of love could or does exist.

Chapter one: exploring contemporary relationships

In chapter one I explore Giddens’ (1991, 1992) theory more deeply. I did this so I could begin unravelling the question at the heart of this thesis, which is: if love does mean something different from what it used to, then what are the implications for the way ordinary men and women navigate their intimate relationships? Put another way: if people are experiencing an ‘unprecedented
transformation of erotic and intimate life’ (Weeks 2008, p. 13), then what does this mean in practical and political terms? Giddens (1992) claims the sort of love he talks about is more democratic in the sense of giving people, especially women, more of a voice in what our individual and collective values are. In other words, this is not just about more or better sex, it represents a major shift in the way people behave towards each other, both sexually and otherwise. Weeks (2008) argues:

The changes that have taken place have embraced all the elements that go to make up the sexual, from erotic practices to the reorganization of sexualized space, from the interactions of everyday life to religion, ethics and laws. This is a qualitative shift in human relation, not just a quantitative outpouring of more sex (p. 16).

As Weeks (2007, 2008, 2009) points out, modernity has given people more of a choice when it comes to having sex, but what they do with this freedom is something people are still coming to terms with. In 2008, when I began this research, Giddens’ (1992) theory was contentious, and despite finding support from other important sociologists, these sociologists disagreed on some important points. For example, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) argue that the new rule as far as intimate or sexual love goes is ‘there are no rules’. They write:

Love in our day is post and a-traditional, and makes its own rules out of sexual desire now unhampered by moral or legal implications. Love cannot be institutionalised or codified, or justified in any general sense as long as free will and mutual consent are its guiding stars (p. 194).

Giddens’ (1992) views are more circumspect. For him it is not so much that there are no rules, but that our culture’s norms and values are now more open to individual interpretation and this changes the way social life works. For him, love relationships open a space where both men and women are able to discard their cultural conditioning, especially the gender stereotypes that dictate how they should behave, in order to live and love more authentically. Giddens (1991) explains:

To be able to act authentically is more than just acting in terms of a self-knowledge that is as valid and full as possible; it means also disentangling – in Laing’s terms – the true from the false self (p. 79).
This argument, which I explore more deeply in this chapter one, is complex and mirrors, to some extent, what individuals and couples are having to navigate in their day to day lives. On one hand love has become the new ‘religion’ of modernity (Beck and Beck Gernshiem (1995), on the other it has become ‘a wasteland of impermanent liaisons’ (Bauman 2003). What is clear is that as a culture, we are not at all certain about what love is. According to bell hooks (2000), despite all the movies, songs, poetry, literature and advice about love – despite love being seemingly everywhere in contemporary western culture – on the most part people are either cynical or confused about it. She writes: ‘Our confusion about what we mean when we use the world ‘love’ is the source of our difficulty in loving. If our society had a commonly held understanding of love, the act of loving might not be so mystifying’ (p. 3).

This is not as easy as it sounds, nor is a common definition necessarily the answer. Speaking about the British experience, Sue Gerhardt (2010) writes that love might be the new religion of modernity, but it has also become ‘inextricably entwined with the gospel of the market’ (Jacques 2002, cited in Gerhardt 2010, p. 11). Like Bauman (2003) Gerhardt (2010), argues that it is selfishness, rather than love that defines our times, and this selfishness is something that we need to address before we can create a more ethical and loving world. She writes:

…selfishness is not just an individual failing. It is equally possible to have a selfish society, a society which sustains individualism, greed and materialism at the expense of collective interests and the needs of the social group as a whole (p. 13).

Rather than a more loving society, Gerhardt (2010) argues that we have become ‘emotionally impoverished’, the result of decades of individualism and consumerism. Szalavitz and Perry (2010) call this ‘relational poverty’ (p. 292). Speaking of the American experience, Szalavitz and Perry (2010) argue that despite long lists of Facebook friends and so called ‘connections’, people nowadays spend less time socializing, less time participating in political activities and children have less time for ‘free’ play. ‘Time spend dining with or just hanging out with friends is also on the decline’ (p. 5).

One of the most important things I discovered in the early stages of my research is that love, especially intimate love, is promoted as the ‘royal road’ to happiness in western culture, but, as hooks (2000) points out, everywhere we look, we are faced with love’s failure. Not only are people separating and divorcing more often, families are more fragmented, there is more violence including
sexual violence. There are also more people living alone than ever before. Far from living ‘happily ever after’, more and more people appear to be experiencing conflict and suffering, and much of it is a result of ‘falling in love’.

One of the reasons for the increasing sense of disappointment that many people feel in their relationships, which, according to Illouz (2007), is a result of the ‘disparity between one’s expectations and one’s experience’ (p. 96). The point Bauman (2003) makes is that the sort of freedom Giddens (1992) talks about as the main driver of these relationships, has nothing to do with moral freedom, but is the result of the increasing ‘fluidity, fragility and in-built transcience (the famed “flexibility”) [which] mark all sorts of social bonds (p. 91). Herein lies a major problem for Giddens’ theory. Because he draws primarily on the self-help genre, or therapeutic narrative, as Illouz (2007) describes it, to explain how contemporary love relationships work, Illouz (2007) and Arlie Russell-Hochschild (2003), argue the relationships Giddens (1992) talks about reflect the rise of a new form of ‘governance’ where people are ‘forced to be free’ whether they like it or not (Rose 1999 cited in Weeks 2008, p. 17). Furthermore, Illouz (2007) argues, this narrative ‘creates’ pathologies, in order to heal them. She reminds us: ‘As Michel Foucault laconically remarked in his History of Sexuality, the care of the self, cast in medical metaphors of health, paradoxically encouraged a view of a “sick” self in need of correction and transformation’ (p. 54). Because of his use of the therapeutic narrative to justify confluent love, Bauman (2003) and Illouz (2007) argue that Giddens’ (1992) theory is not indicative of a new ethics of personal life, rather it perpetuates an ideology that could work against people becoming more intimate. In many ways, says Illouz (2007), ‘Giddens’s analysis only resonates with the psychological credo that celebrates equality in intimate relationships and has failed to interrogate the very transformation of intimacy it purports to describe’ (p. 30).

To understand this better, in this chapter, I looked more closely at the cultural conditions that Giddens (1992) claims supports the emergence of confluent love. On a personal level these conditions are exemplified by what Giddens (1992) calls the ‘pure’ relationship, which he defines as a relationship of sexual and emotional equality (p. 2). He says these relationships are ‘explosive’ for pre-existing forms of gender power, because both men and women now have an equal say in how a relationship goes. Due to the loosening of social norms around sex and marriage, people now agree on how to ‘go on’, and decide for themselves what is permissible and what is not. People are also more able to enter and leave relationships, and relationships are not necessarily monogamous (p. 62).
The problem here is that not everyone agrees that this is a good thing. Weeks (2007) argues, for example, that these changes are often cited as the reason why marriage is on the decline, and with it, a weakening of social capital, or ‘the norms, values, networks that are held to sustain social trust and stability’ (p. 8).

Giddens (1992) has a different interpretation and he argues the emergence of confluent love potentially dissolves the unequal power dynamic between men and women, because rather than simply ‘going along with the gender scripts that they inherit from their culture, they negotiate their relationships on equal terms. Giddens (1992) writes:

“The involvement of individuals in determining the conditions of their association” – this statement exemplifies the ideals of the pure relationship. It expresses a prime difference between traditional and present-day marriages and gets to the heart of the democratizing possibilities of the transformation of intimacy (p. 190).

Pure relationships are revolutionary, argues Giddens (1992), because they provide a space where men and women can re-define themselves, more in accordance with the way they want to live. Personal life has become an open project, creating new demands and anxieties’ (p. 8). This is particularly the case when it comes to sex because sustaining mutual sexual pleasure, and being able to control one’s emotions, become core factors in whether the relationship is sustained or dissolved. Giddens (1992) writes: ‘Love here only develops to the degree to which intimacy does, to the degree to which each partner is prepared to reveal concerns and needs to the other and to be vulnerable to that other’ (p. 62).

Importantly, unlike romantic love, ‘confluent love has no specific connection to heterosexuality’ (p. 63). As I pointed out above, this is not just about sex, it is about having sex, or going about a sexual relationship, in a way that affirms and respects the other person as a person, rather than as a cultural ‘category’. The way Giddens (1992) explains it, in pure relationships people allow each other the freedom to define themselves for themselves: to become ‘who they are’ in the process of relating. Here the ethical imperative is to do with how we treat the other person, and rather than using them for a way to increase our pleasure, satisfaction, happiness and security, sex potentially becomes orientated toward ‘the loving embrace’ (p. 160).
While this all sounds good, it is not as easy as Giddens (1992) makes it out to be, but neither is it necessarily as dire as Bauman (2003) purports. ‘Good sex’ may or may not necessarily be the path to freedom that Giddens (1992) claims it is, but his theory does force us to consider our existing ideals and beliefs. If Bauman (2003) is right and the sort of love Giddens (1992) talks about does lead to suffering rather than happiness, it is time we reconsidered what it is we mean by the word ‘love’ in our culture, to be clear about what it is we are signing up for when we say the words ‘I love you’ to another human being.

Despite being more cynical about love, and confused about it, people still ‘fall in love’, they still get married, and they still aspire to living ‘happily ever after’, and many of our cultural representations of love still reflect that. The important point here is that if our culture’s ideas about love lead us further away from what could make us happier, however we define that, then it is time we reconsider what we mean by love. If the ‘real’ and the ‘ideal’ have become increasingly distant shores, then it leaves people without resources to make sense of their experiences. This was evident in Ann Swidler’s (2001) research, which explored how Americans talked about love. She found that while people were often critical about romance, and disillusioned by its promises, they still tended to draw on its ideology when talking about the expectations they had for their relationships (p. 128).

Simon May (2011) points out that, despite the so-called sexual revolution, people in western culture are still dominated by a ‘background picture of love’ that has not changed much since the 19th century. He says the liberation of sex and marriage over the last hundred years has not ‘freed love’ in terms of giving us fresh conceptions of it. May argues:

> On the contrary, the new liberties – flowing, above all, from divorce, contraception, and the acceptance of gay love: three of the most far reaching and still unfinished revolutions spawned by the twentieth century – have offered ever more opportunities for pursuing the same old ideal. Aided by feminism and abortion, they have meant that women and men are no longer committed to each other by pregnancy or traditional social relations but are free to go on searching for the ‘right’ person and the ‘right’ love. And that gays, can increasingly do the same (p. xiii).

In terms of my research this means that despite all the talk about new and emerging forms of intimacy, and regardless of whether we see the changes that Giddens (1991, 1992) talks about as a
'good' thing or not, romantic love is still firmly embedded in our cultural stories about love, and these stories continue to shape our personal expectations and aspirations. To understand this I had to go back to where our cultural ideas first began. Here I learned that when Giddens (1992) talks about romantic love he is not talking about the powerful feelings of desire and attraction that are the hallmarks of sexual love, rather he is talking about how people in western culture have learned to make sense of these feelings. In other words, romantic love is a story – a cultural artefact - but one that people try to emulate in their own relationships, without necessarily realizing that this is what they are doing.

Giddens (1992) explains that romantic love, as we understand it in contemporary culture, became popular at around the same time as the introduction of the novel in the 19th century. He said the novel introduced the idea of our life as a narrative. As Giddens (1992) tells it, the telling of a story is one of the meanings of 'romance', but with the introduction of the novel, this story became individualized, ‘inserting self and other into a personal narrative that had no particular reference to wider social processes’ (p. 40). Romance held out the promise of freedom – it was a way, for women especially, to give their passions free rein, if only in their imagination. In the real world however, Giddens (1992) argues, “falling in love” often meant becoming caught up or entangled in an ideology that worked against women being more themselves. He explains:

> Romantic love long had an egalitarian strain, intrinsic to the idea that a relationship can derive from the emotional involvement of two people, rather than from external social criteria. De facto, however, romantic love is thoroughly skewed in terms of power. For women dreams of romantic love has all too often led to grim domestic servitude’ (p. 62).

One of the reasons for this, as I discovered in my reading, is that romantic love is structured on the idea of complementary opposites: the woman is what man is not, and a man is what a woman is not. We are only half a person until we meet our ‘other half’ and become whole. As Martha Nussbaum (2001) explains this story, which has it origin’s in Plato’s philosophy, still has a powerful hold on the modern psyche, as it symbolizes a longing to return to our ‘original’ state. She writes: ‘the myth taps into a memory of infantile wholeness that is likely to lie deep in many, if not most lives’ (p. 483). This longing also makes love into a quest, inspired by our longing for the missing part of us. Only when we consummate the relationship can we be truly happy. It is here that intimate relationships can also become violent, because when the other person fails to live up to our expectations, our
sense of self becomes threatened, and we look around for someone to blame, or we attempt to control the other person so they do not get away.

In contemporary times this need to ‘control’ the other applies more to men than to women, according to Giddens (1992), because men have for a long time relied on women to do the ‘emotional’ work of the relationship. He writes that men are ‘driven, by means of their scrutiny of women, to search for what is lacking in themselves – and this is a lack that can manifest itself in overt rage and violence’ (p. 117). Women are now more able to leave oppressive relationships, so men are having to come to terms with their own feelings and emotions, feelings and emotions that they used to ‘project’ onto women. According to Giddens (1992) men’s reliance on women was a ‘mystery whose answer they sought in women themselves’ (p. 60) and this concealed their unacknowledged dependence on them. He explains: ‘Projection…creates a feeling of wholeness with the other, no doubt strengthened by established differences between masculinity and femininity’ (p. 61).

As I discuss further in chapter one, the increasing incidence of intimate partner violence in Australia weighs heavily on the validity of Giddens’ (1992) claim that modern relationships are more democratic. Giddens (1992) acknowledges this however he argues that the increasing violence is a symptom of the changing nature of intimacy, rather than a contradiction. He says male violence towards women has taken place throughout history, but it was mostly hidden in the “private sphere”, and stemmed largely from men thinking that they “owned” women. He argues: ‘It makes more sense in current times than it did previously to suppose that male sexual violence has become the basis of sexual control. In other words, a large amount of male sexual violence now stems from insecurity and inadequacy rather than from a seamless continuation of patriarchal dominance’ (p. 122). He says that insofar as male power is based on the subordination of women, and the exploitation of the economic and emotional services that women have traditionally provided, it is under threat. Giddens (1992) argues this has ‘truly radical implications’ (p. 27),

Giddens (1992) argues that for most women, in most cultures, sexual activity was bound up with fear; fear of repetitive pregnancies especially, and it is only in the last 40 or 50 years that women have had an opportunity to have a voice in what love and sex mean in our culture. I look at this further in chapter two where I argue that while women have made huge strides in terms of their economic and social positions in relation to men, it is still not clear that women, or men for that
matter, have the sort of freedom that Giddens (1992) claims that they do. What is clear is that the sexual revolution only went so far, and now it is up to individual men and women to decide how the future plays out.

Despite theorists disagreeing about the implications of the changes that Giddens (1992) claims is taking place, as Weeks (2009) points out, these arguments do ‘not alter the fundamental fact that the social, cultural and moral revolution of our times is fundamentally a revolution from below, and its future lies in our own hands’ (p. 19). In this sense, my research aimed to explore how people were negotiating their intimate relationships to see if I could identify ways of relating that were indicative of pure relationships. If I could do this, I could then explore these relationships to better understand how this sort of love works, and to identify the skills and strategies that foster the emergence of confluent love. But where to look?

Chapter two: the feminist critique of Giddens’ (1992) theory

Giddens’ (1992) claim that women are the vanguard of the changes taking place in the sphere of intimacy. He argues that: ‘women have prepared the way for an expansion of the domain of intimacy, in their role, as the emotional revolutionaries of modernity’ (p. 130). To explore this claim, I engaged with a number of feminist writers, including Carol Gilligan (1982, 1992, 2002), Lynn Jamieson (1999) Carol Gilligan and David Richards (2009), Roslyn Gilles (2008) and Wendy Langford (1999), Eva Illouz (2007) and Mary Evans (2003), who argue that women are not necessarily better off than they used to be, nor do they have the same freedom to express their needs and desires as men do. Lynn Jamieson (1992) agrees that men not only continue to have more power than women in heterosexual relationships, in-depth interviews reveal ‘a persistent, tenacious and phallocentric view of heterosexual sex as something that men do to women’ (p. 484).

Jamieson’s research is also over twenty years old, however the idea that sex is a male ‘privilege’ is echoed by more contemporary writers who argue that heterosexual sex continues to be portrayed in a way that gives men power over women (Pettinato 2007, Tyler 2008). Tyler (2008), for example, asked the leading sexologists in Australia what self-help books they recommended to their clients. She collated the results and analysed the top five books to elucidate the underlying ideology. Tyler’s (2008) research found that ‘the sex self-help literature encourages (and at times insists upon), the
sexual servicing of men by women, in order for women to maintain their heterosexual relationships’ (p. 364).

Eva Illouz (2007) argues that while these discourses could be an attempt to free sexuality from ‘the long shadow of power and asymmetry’, but the ideal being promoted encourages women to behave more like men i.e. to be ‘independent’ in a sexual and emotional sense, and to ‘stand on their own two feet’ both economically and socially (p. 29). Illouz (2007) argues that if we agree that ‘healthy’ relationships are all about ‘no strings attached’ sex and a ‘right’ to equal pleasure, then intimate relationships are only ‘good’ if these conditions are present.

What worries the writers that I engaged with in chapter two, is that when it comes to sex and intimacy, it is still very much a man’s world, and while the ‘rules’ of social life may be changing, the context in which those rules are made has not. Mary Evans (2003) argues that ‘Western society continues to regulate love, romance and sexuality in terms of the interests and perceptions of men rather than women’ (p. 85). Friedman (2000) agrees with this. She says:

As subordinates in nearly all social institutions, women’s own points of view about important cultural matters have been historically disregarded and systematically suppressed (p. 214).

The main point in this chapter is that while we can agree that women and people of diverse sexualities have made huge strides in their struggle for equal rights, there are still powerful forces that work against heterosexual women, and other sexual minorities, being ‘equally free’ in the context of intimacy. This is supported by statistics that show that gender inequality continues to be a key determinant in explaining violence against women, especially young women. According to Australia’s National Research Organisation for Women’s Safety (ANROWS): one in six women, over the age of 15, has been physically or sexually assaulted by a current or former partner, while one in four women experiences emotional abuse by a current or former partner (ANROWS 2014a). For Indigenous and disabled women, these figures are disproportionately higher. Men also experience violence and abuse, but the figures for female violence against men are much lower (Our Watch, 2016).
Furthermore, Carol Gilligan (1992) argues that women have been denied a voice when it comes to understanding love and sex in western culture, and Giddens (1993) draws from the same ideology that excluded them in the first place. In 1982 Gilligan discovered about a ‘masculine bias’ in mainstream psychology, which, she argues, continues to divide women from men, and men from parts of themselves. This happened, according to Gilligan, because: ‘Mind, reason, self, and culture were considered masculine and were elevated above the body, emotion, relationships, and nature, seen as feminine and like women at once idealized and devalued’ (Gilligan and Richards 2009, p. 193).

This is changing, largely because of feminist psychologists and researchers, and qualities that were previously considered feminine, such as care, relationships and emotions, have become part of the contemporary language of psychology. But as Gilligan and Richards (2009) argue, these are now promoted as ‘masculine’ strengths. We now have ‘emotional intelligence’ and the ‘relational self’, ways of talking that continue to divide people from parts of themselves. In doing this: ‘History was rewritten’, Gilligan and Richards (2009) claim, ‘erasing the origins of these insights in the different voices of women’ (p. 193). Importantly, it is this same ideology that lies at the heart of our contemporary ideas about love, positing some ways of being in love as superior, and other ways of loving as inferior, or pathological (Illouz 2003, p. 50).

Gilligan and Richards (2009) argue that mainstream psychological theories continue to suppress the ‘feeling’ or ‘sexual’ voice, which they call the ‘ethical’ voice in both men and women (pp. 19-20). This is the voice where we express our ‘natural’ spontaneity: ‘it is transparent, revealing, not describing, inner impulses of emotion and thought, directly and spontaneously’ (p. 132). It is the ‘body-mind’ or the felt sense that is being silenced, and this makes it difficult for people to voice their feelings, and to trust them (Gilligan and Richards 2009, p. 4). These writers argue that patriarchal culture introduces shame into sexuality, which extends to ‘what we desire and what our bodies tell us’ (Damasio 1999, cited in Gilligan and Richards 2009, p. 20). Furthermore, these writers argue that this obscures the very real differences that continue to divide men and women, rather than ‘heals’ them.

This is a powerful argument and if what they say is correct, then people are still being encouraged to fit their experience into pre-existing conceptions of what a ‘good’ relationship should look like, rather than follow their own feelings and desires. This might look different from romantic love, but
it is nonetheless a cultural construct. Importantly it constrains people from saying ‘what they know about love’ (Gilligan and Richards 2009, p. 241). These issues were important for how I went about my research, because if what these writers say is correct, then Giddens’ (1992) theory needed some re-working before I could use it as a framework for my research.

**Chapter three: exploring the ethics of confluent love**

In chapter three I look more closely at how Giddens (1992) supports his claim that confluent love is indicative of a new ethics of interpersonal life. He writes: ‘The model of confluent love suggests an ethical framework for the fostering of non-destructive emotion in the conduct of individual and communal life’ (p. 202). Here I point out that by drawing on an ethics of justice to explain how these relationships work, Giddens’ (1991, 1992) theory perpetuates an ethic of justice that has traditionally excluded feelings, desires and inclinations as ethically salient (Friedman 2000). What matters here is ‘my’ rights, not necessarily ‘our’ situation. The problem here is that by drawing on an ethics of justice to explain how pure relationships work, Giddens (1992) perhaps inadvertently, perpetuates an ethic that has traditionally excluded the body and which views erotic love as morally suspect because it involves feelings and desires that people supposedly have no control over. As Marilyn Friedman (2000) points out, the two main thinkers behind the justice approach to ethics, Immanuel Kant and John Rawls, defined human beings in terms of their capacity to reason and ‘emotion was regarded not merely as irrelevant but as a cause of bias and distortion in moral understanding’ (p. 209). Seyla Benhabib (1987) argues that this conception of the human being is a product of Cartesian thinking that splits people into two halves: the ‘rational’ self, which is associated with men and culture, and the ‘emotional’ self, which is associated with women and the private sphere. Here ‘mind’ is masculine and superior, and the ‘body’ and ‘feelings’ are feminine and inferior. Benhabib (1987) writes ‘the relevant “other” in this theory is never the sister but always the brother’ (p. 158).

Because Giddens (1992) draws on this philosophy uncritically, it is difficult to agree with him that confluent love signifies a new ethics of interpersonal life. Here I also discuss Giddens (1992, 1992) use of the word ‘authenticity’, because it is not clear how this works in a relational context, especially when he defines authenticity as ‘becoming free from dependencies and achieving fulfillment’ (p. 79). He says, for example that ‘self-mastery is a necessary condition of authenticity’ (1991, p. 96) but he does not explain how this works in a context where intimacy depends on being vulnerable and
emotionally open. It is the idea of autonomy, at the heart of Giddens’ (1992) theory that feminists have a problem with because it continues to obscure the different ways men and women experience the world.

To explore this argument further, I drew on Gilligan’s (1982, 1992, 2002) work to show how emotions, and relationships, were excluded from our understanding of morality in western culture. Importantly, Gilligan does not argue that men and women have an ‘essential’ self, rather she claims that women are taught to focus on relationships and issues of care, while men have been socialized to eschew relationships in favor of being independent and self-sufficient. But this is not a natural state of affairs, rather these are the gender scripts that men and women learn as part of growing up in western culture. Gilligan (1982) argued that women are socialized differently, so they experience love and sex differently. Importantly it is not about one voice being better than the other, as Elisabeth Porter (1991) argues that by including what Gilligan called the ‘female’ voice, with the ‘male’ voice, provides a way for other voices to emerge (p. 17).

This is important when it comes to negotiating sex and intimacy in western culture because, as David Richards (2013) points out, we have inherited a way of thinking that stems from Roman times, and, as far as women’s sexuality was concerned, ‘they did not exist as persons with a mind and sexuality of their own’ (p. 172). Because sons inherited their father’s place in the social hierarchy, being sure of paternity was central: ‘Indeed such control is a prerequisite of male honour in such a patriarchal system, and any attack upon it constitutes an insult that elicits and justified violence’ (p. 173). Richards (2013) argues that in contemporary western culture boys are still taught that emotions and feelings, are ‘unmanly’, and as a result, they are encouraged to suppress or ‘disown’ their more vulnerable and tender feelings in order to be a man (p. 29). The main point that Gilligan and Richards (2009) make is that while both men and women in contemporary western culture have more freedom than they ever had when it comes to sex and intimacy, there is still a long way to go before either sex can throw off the shackles of the past. They write: ‘We have come far but remain deeply flawed in our democracy, as basic rights of intimate life are in political peril, issues of racial and gender inequality persist, and economic inequality worsens’ (p. 11).

I explore this more closely by drawing on the work of Judith Herman (1992) who argues that it is only in the last 40 years that women in western countries have been able to talk about love and sex in any significant way. She argues that prior to this our cultural understanding of sexuality was
derived primarily from Sigmund Freud’s theories, which she claims were founded on a denial of women’s experience (1992, p. 19). She illustrates this by pointing out how Freud interpreted his patient’s accounts of sexual abuse. Herman writes that Freud initially believed in what his clients were saying about being abused by fathers, brothers and husbands, however he later recanted, saying these were fantasies that his patients had made up (p. 14). She argues:

Despite what he discovered about women’s sexuality, Freud went on to develop a theory of human development based on the mendacity and inferiority of women, and it is this theory that prospered and thrived, and which supported the subordination of women based on their biology (1992, p. 19).

From this discussion, it appears that while women have more choice about how to live and love, they are also heavily influenced by an ideology that defines what a good relationship is all about in masculine terms. Gilligan (2003) argues this has a powerful influence on how both men and women experience love and intimacy:

The natural difference of sex supports the imposition of a seemingly natural imagery of love: male and female, hunter and prey, king and subject, lover and beloved. Until we realize there is nothing natural to this human order: it is patriarchy masquerading as nature – it is the enemy of love (p. 209).

Despite Gilligan’s powerful critique of love in contemporary western culture, she argues that there is a way of unravelling the tension between patriarchy and democracy, which would make love less violent and more authentic. She argues: ‘Freeing love means freeing the voice so it can carry the full range of emotions and the subtleties and nuances of thought’ (p. 209). Doing this, she says, involves understanding how patriarchy creates an optical illusion ‘focusing one’s eyes in a way that makes it difficult to see its presence’ (p. 207). In other words, if people refuse to buy into an ideology which gives men power over women, then intimate relationships could become a way of freeing ourselves from an oppressive ideology. This is in line with what Giddens (1992) says when he means that ‘the more women press for an ethics of confluent love the more male emotional dependency becomes untenable; but the more difficult it may be for many men to deal with the moral nakedness which this implies’ (p. 118).
In chapter three, Giddens’ (1992) theory becomes more plausible, especially if we jettison the self-help narratives that he relies on to make his point. This is important because in drawing on these texts, he skirts over the fact that people’s emotional patterns are literally hard-wired into their brains in the first few years of life, and shaped by environmental and cultural factors that are largely beyond their control. The self-help genre, which Giddens (1992) draws on are based on the idea that everyone is born free, and that we can pretty much do what we like with our lives. But this does not make sense when it comes to love. This is one of the reasons that Bauman (2003) argues that the emphasis on ‘self-actualization’, and freedom, that characterizes Giddens’ (1992) theory is more about the freedom of the marketplace than it is about moral freedom. The ethical challenge, argues Bauman (2003) happens precisely at those moments that are not scripted, at times when we have no answers, but we still have to decide what to do (p. 93). In an intimate relationship our shared happiness requires taking the other person into account.

To stay with Giddens’ (1992) theory of confluent love as a framework for exploring love in contemporary culture, I needed to look beyond the sort of freedom promoted by the self-help genre, as well as the cultural narratives of romantic love, and show how erotic love could be a way of creating a more beautiful life. In this chapter I also show how it is possible to reconfigure Giddens’ (1992) theory to create a ‘new map of love’, which does have the potential to allow people to be more authentic, but not in the way the self-help genre explains it. Doing this involves recognizing that human beings are both embodied and embedded in a social and cultural context, and while they do have choices, these choices are always contextual. In other words, we are not free in the way the therapeutic narrative that Giddens (1991, 1992) draws on claims we are.

Here I draw on Simone de Beauvoir’s (1944) work to argue that the creation of an authentic self is not a stand-alone project: it involves other people. She argues that other people do not constrain our freedom, they help us to realize it. As de Beauvoir (1944) puts it: ‘The respect of the liberty of the other is not an abstract rule: it is the first condition of the success of my effort’ (de Beauvoir 1944 p. 112 cited in Fullbrook and Fullbrook 2008 p. 200). According to this philosophy, we do not become empowered by fostering a sense of independence, rather we become free by recognizing that other people are also free. In other words, de Beauvoir’s ethics shifts the locus of freedom from the isolated, autonomous individual, who stands alone in the world and for whom other people are simply players in their drama, to an idea of freedom that acknowledges the importance of our
relations with other people. Here freedom is something that emerges, through our interactions (2008 p. 200). It is the opposite of narcissism in that it depends on recognizing our dependence on other people, as well as our independence. While in some senses this runs counter to the dominant ideology, which values independence and self-mastery over dependence and emotional reliance on others, it opens a way for understanding love as a guide to living a more beautiful life. Here mutual recognition is the key to unlocking our agency, it also provided a way of exploring intimate love.

To better understand how mutual recognition, or ‘relational autonomy’ worked in a practical sense, I drew on the work of Susan Dodds (2000) and Elisabeth Porter (1991). These philosophers explain, how by including the ‘relational’ perspective into the moral picture, we get an ethic that includes ‘feelings’ as a way of knowing how to go on in an intimate or sexual context. Rather than jettison Giddens’ (1992) theory all together, these theorists allowed me to smooth out the structural contradictions, and find a way through the emotion/reason dichotomy that runs through the moral and psychological theories that he draws on.

These writers also helped me to understand why this dichotomous thinking fuels the unequal power dynamic between men and women. Because ‘reason’ has, for a long time, been considered the antithesis of emotion, it meant that women and other sexual minorities who did not conform to this ideal, were left out of the conversation about what our collective values are. These people were effectively marginalized from participating in public life. This emphasis on ‘justice’, as opposed to ‘care’, gave us an ethic where some voices are allowed to speak, and others were silenced. Gilligan (1992) says this meant that both men and women had to suppress ‘what it really feels like’ and replace it with what it is ‘supposed to feel like’. In doing this they silence their ethical voice, the voice that allows them to decide for themselves whether a relationship is ‘good’ or not. This silencing of the ethical voice leads to what she calls ‘dissociation’ – people become identified with a ‘false’ self; they ignore their experience and replace it with what they think they are supposed to be experiencing. She says this fuels violence and emotional suffering, rather than fosters connection and a sense of belonging (Gilligan 1992, p. 29).

As Giddens (1992) explains: ‘the communication of feelings…is not in and of itself enough for intimacy. In so far as such communication is bound up with narcissism, it is a bid for power rather than providing for the development of confluent love’ (p. 131). Confluent love, the way Giddens (1992) describes it, involves an opening out to the other. This way of understanding emotions
recognises that human beings are ‘selves in the process of becoming’ (Smart 2007, p. 5). It allows for an understanding of love which allows space for a person’s agency. Here love depends on how people go about communicating their feelings in their relationships.

Importantly it is what happens in the here and now that allow us to decide whether a relationship is ‘good’ or not. By shifting the focus from love as an ideal that we work at, to something that emerges in the process of interacting, we get an understanding of love as an on-going process of discovery. When we recognize each other as free and independent beings who are also connected, ‘sexual desire becomes love’ and ‘it connects us with the whole world and becomes a new mode of experience’ (Iris Murdoch cited in Conradi 1986, p. 259).

**Chapter four: methods**

Martha Nussbaum (2013) argues that love means many things in contemporary culture, but to call it love, it has to involve a ‘subtle interplay’ between two people (p. 180). This was important as far as my research was concerned because it meant that we cannot give an adequate account of love if we do not include how people actually experience it in their day to day lives.

The idea of ‘subtle interplay’ comes from the developmental psychologist, Donald Winnicott (1896-1971), who used this concept to describe what happens between an infant and his or her caregiver in the early years of their life. Nussbaum (2013) explains that Winnicott saw that play involved a willingness to give up control and ‘omnipotence’, and to experience other people as they are, rather than how we want them to be; or as an extension of ourselves (p. 180). In this sense, he argued, play is central to our capacity to love, both as children and as adults, because it works against our narcissistic tendencies, and curbs our propensity towards self-interest. Nussbaum (2013) points out that Winnicott suggests that ‘all love is a form of subtle interplay’ (p. 180), and necessary for human development, which for him, was an ‘ongoing process’, involving ‘the resources of play and imagination at every stage in order to reinforce trust, reciprocity, and respect for the separate world of others’ (p. 181).

This was important for how I went about the research. Winnicott’s idea of love as an on-going process, accorded in some respects with the way that Giddens (1992) talks about confluent love. For him love emerges in a relationship as people navigate often contradictory and confusing information
about what sex and intimacy should look like, and decide for themselves how to go on. The extent
to which they can do this is still not resolved however and he reflects whether the texts he draws on
to make his case, are ‘pious psychobabble? He says: ‘Perhaps, at least to some degree. Self-
contradictory…undoubtedly – although to some extent these express real contradictions of personal
life’ (p. 95).

Giddens (1992) claims that his theory is more than ‘mere wishful thinking’. He argues: ‘who could
fail to see in them evidence of, and a programme for, the democratization of daily life?’ (p. 95).
However, I could not rely on the texts that Giddens (1992) uses to understand how people are
experiencing their intimate relationships, especially given the feminist critique, so I chose methods
that allowed me to explore love as a ‘language game’ in the way that Ludwig Wittgenstein meant it,
as a way of understanding how people make sense of what they do (Pole 1958). As David Pole
(1958) interprets Wittgenstein, the meaning of a word depends on the context in which it is used: ‘If
we are asked the meaning of any word – of the word ‘red’ – or ‘love’ say…we must answer by
exhibiting its function; we must show the sort of work it does’ (cited in Pole 1958 p. 19).

Importantly, a language game has a certain structure – or grammar - that determines what can and
cannot be said in that particular social contexts; when power dynamics are involved, these dynamics
determines who speaks, as well as what they can say. For example, in a language game between a
doctor and a patient, the doctor has the authority to make statements about what is happening in the
patient’s body. In this ‘game’, the doctor has ‘expert’ knowledge which the patient supposedly lacks,
because they do not understand the language of medicine. The patient has some agency or power in
this game, but only insofar as he or she remains a passive recipient of the doctor’s knowledge. If
they decide to go to a shaman or intuitive healer, they will be playing a different language game, but
the power differential will still be there. My starting hypothesis was that if confluent love existed, if it
was more than just a theory, then this would be reflected in the way people talked about their
relationships when answering questions for this research project.

Giddens’ (1992) theory was also important for being able to differentiate ways of talking that
signified romantic love, and ways of talking that were indicative of confluent love. The way Giddens
(1992) explains it, confluent love depends on both people being able to speak and have their voices
heard. This means that both people in the relationship can agree, or disagree with what the rules are.
Here two people actively negotiate the relationship, and this is an on-going process. This is a
different sort of game than romantic love, where people play very specific roles, and have very little agency, in which case, they would talk about being ‘swept’ off their feet or ‘falling in love’. In the game of romantic love, it is all about ‘finding the one’ and living ‘happily ever after’. In this scenario, the other person becomes the means through which we ‘secure’ our happiness, and holding on to them is what gives us the ‘security’ we need to stay safe. Importantly in the game of romantic love, men and women, have complementary but opposite tendencies, but together they make a ‘perfect match’.

In short, looking at love as a language game allowed me to understand the ‘subtle interplay’ that Nussbaum (2013) claims is central to our understanding of love, in the way people talked about their relationships. I did this by analyzing how participants answered nine questions that I posted on an Internet website: ‘lovedialogue.com’, which I developed the purpose of doing the research. In all, 93 people responded to the survey - 16 males and 77 females, and I collected approximately 41,660 words that I analysed as ‘a discourse’ or conversation about love in contemporary western culture. I used Kathy Charmaz’s (2006, 2012) grounded theory and ‘positioning theory’ as explained by Davies and Harrè (1990), to do this. Importantly, these methods provided a way to in order to explore love from the point of view of people experiencing it.

My initial approach was to ‘wander along’ with participants, reading their responses and ‘listening’ carefully to what they were saying. Pranee Liamputtong (2007) reminds us that in the original Latin, conversation means ‘wandering together with’ (p. 7). Liamputtong (2007) writes that qualitative methods allow researchers to hear the voices of people who may not otherwise be heard, because they ask participants to explain things, they ask ‘how, why, what’s the process, what’s the significance’ (p. 7). In the first part of the analysis, my aim was to identify talk, or ways of talking, that indicated the participant was involved in a ‘pure’ relationship, which Giddens (1992) claims fosters the emergence of confluent love. The second part was to explore how people in these relationships talked to better understand how they saw themselves in relation to the other.

Chapter five

In this chapter I show what happened when I categorizing and coded the data using Kathy Charmaz’s grounded theory (2012). This was stage one of the analysis, which focused on identifying ‘ways of talking’ that were indicative of how Giddens (1992) describes pure relationships. The aim
here was to identify talk that was indicative of pure relationships, so I could explore how these relationships worked. To do the coding, I focused on ‘gerunds’ or ‘ing’ words. This allowed me to understand how people were relating. Gerunds are verbs that function as nouns, and are used to describe what people are doing, for example ‘we went shopping together’. In some instances, I changed the verb into a gerund to make the process more prominent i.e. ‘we had a disagreement about what sort of house we wanted to buy’, was coded as ‘disagreeing’. Doing this allowed me to explore ‘love in action’, which helped identify what sort of language game people were playing. A number of distinct categories emerged from this analysis, and I was able to compare these to operational criteria I had derived from my reading. These categories included: ‘equality’, ‘respect’, ‘working together’, ‘resolving differences’ and ‘agreeing on how to go on’, and were indicative of how Giddens (1992) describes a pure relationship.

When I had the emergent categories, I went back through the data to find specific instances in which the participant used certain words. This helped me understand not only what the disagreement was about, but also how it was resolved. Importantly it allowed me to explore how people applied words like ‘equal’ and ‘respect’ in the telling of their stories. In other words, I looked at what people said they did, as well as how they did it. Following Wittgenstein, statements like: ‘he treats me like an equal’ are abstract concepts until they are applied in a particular way, for a particular purpose. In this stage I asked further questions of the data, like what does it mean for this person to be treated as an equal? How does that work in this instance?

This allowed me to identify ways of relating that corresponded, in some respects, to what Giddens (1992) calls pure.

**Chapter six**

The next stage of the analysis involved exploring the emergent categories more deeply. The aim was to identify skills or strategies that fostered the emergence of love. In this stage I focused in on one category that emerged in the stage one analysis: ‘negotiating differences’, and I looked at how people talked about resolving differences in a way that fostered intimacy.

In this stage I drew mainly on Davies and Harrè (1990) to understand how people ‘positioned’ themselves in relation to the other. I specifically looked at how people used pronouns. This helped
me to identify whether people saw themselves as ‘superior’ or ‘inferior’, as ‘active’ or ‘passive’, as ‘dominant’ or ‘subordinate’ or as an equal. It is easy to talk about equality, and a lot of people did just talk, and analysis of this category allowed me to see how people were demonstrating being equal in the context of an intimate relationship. I started to see ways of talking that indicated that an emotional connection was being formed by the other person feeling validated, or recognized. This was more than just people agreeing on a set of rules for the relationship, it was a way of going about things that affirmed each persons’ sense of self, which was evidenced by the way ‘I’, became ‘we’ and then ‘our’, and then back to ‘I’. Here emotions and feelings were fundamental to the knowledge that people had about themselves and the other person.

This helped me see how people worked through the binary oppositions that structure gender in our cultural stories about romantic love. By talking about the other as a person, first and foremost, gender or sexual difference was less of an issue, and differences in personality, attitude or values, were more prominent. Many of the respondents talked about gender scripts, as well as cultural differences, and in some cases, these were recognized as such. People also drew on the therapeutic narrative to explain, or make sense of, their own and/or their partner’s behavior. The main point here is that gender ‘categories’ were not regarded as fixed, but ‘contestable’ or ‘fluid’ and on the most part, a barrier to understanding and communication, but also something people could address in the context of the relationship.

Through this analysis, I identified how the people who participated in the research negotiated their emotions in a way that fostered intimacy, or a sense of connection. I did this by focusing on phrases like ‘I felt’ or ‘he/she felt’ in the context of making ethical claims, i.e. deciding how to go on in the relationship. I also looked at how people talked about rights and responsibility. In this part of the analysis I was interested in exploring Bauman’s (2003) concern that in contemporary relationships people are encouraged to put self-interest before love. I explored this by looking at how people ‘positioned’ the other person in their narrative, as instrumental to their happiness, or as someone who is valued for their own sake. Here agency – a sense of being able to make a difference in their relationship, emerged as a result of the interaction, as opposed to being a ‘rule’ that must be followed: i.e. ‘you must listen to me because I have a right to be heard’. It was more like ‘please listen to me, because what I am saying matters to me, it also matters to us’. On the most part I found that the people who participated in my research were negotiating boundaries and taking
responsibility for their own happiness, while also acknowledging that they played a part in the other person’s happiness.

By focusing on feeling or emotion words in this stage of the analysis I also identified what Gilligan (2003) argues is missing from our culture’s stories about love, which is the feeling, or ‘ethical’ voice: the voice that tells things as they are. Here people were not looking for a ‘true’ self, but a way of living that felt right or true, for them, and this involved reflecting on their own as well as the other person’s perspective. It was not so much what the other said or did, but how they communicated their perspective. Here people drew on various cultural resources or languages to make sense of their reactions, especially the therapeutic narrative. There were also remnants of romantic love, although for many respondents this sort of love was regarded more as a feeling or fantasy, rather than as a concrete reality. For example, some respondents talked about wanting to be with their partner ‘forever’, but they qualified this by acknowledging that this may or may not happen. Importantly respondents showed a high degree of reflexivity in talking about how their partners’ actions made them feel, and how they communicated their own feelings with the intention of resolving the issue. Participants talked about a myriad of different scenarios, but each ‘struggle’ or tension, was resolved by both individuals coming to some agreement about how to ‘go on’ in the relationship. Here I was able to identify a mixture of both ‘rights’ and ‘care’ talk and both these ways of talking were regarded as significant in terms of knowing how to go. Importantly the analysis showed how people were reflective about how they were relating, and they talked about how they were willing to modify their actions for the good of the relationship.

A ‘basic social process’ emerged in stage two of the analysis, which made sense of the main issue that many of the respondents appeared to be grappling with: being both ‘separate’ and ‘together’. By exploring how people navigated this tension, I was able to better understand how these people resolved differences in their relationships in a way that fostered trust, and intimacy; a sense of mutuality, a sense of ‘being in it together’. This was summed up by the core category that emerged, called ‘we share a world’, and it is this category that, I believe, shows evidence of confluent love. Elisabeth Porter (1991) helped me make sense of this as an ethical process.

While the love that emerged in my research differs in some respects from the way Giddens (1992) explains it, these findings support his claim that contemporary conditions could provide the impetus for a new form of love to emerge in western culture. The way I understand it from this research,
confluent love is not a model for how relationships should go, it is a way of relating that allows people the space to decide for themselves what love means, together.

Chapter seven

In the final stage of the analysis, I show what confluent love might look like in one particular response that I identified as being the most indicative of the sort of love that I had been exploring in this research. This response was interesting because it had many of the elements that Giddens (1992) talks about as being pure. I discuss it in detail, not as an ideal to be replicated, but as a way of talking about an intimate relationship that is different from the dominant ideal. In his responses to my questions, this person talked about love being a journey where two people enter a mutual or shared space, and they use this space to figure out how to go on together, in a way that allows them to explore their individual potentialities. Importantly love was talked about as a work in progress, rather than as a destination or an ideal.

Conclusion

In this chapter I discuss the implications of my research findings, and talk about how Giddens’ (1992) theory provided a way of exploring love as something people do, rather than as something that is the case. This idea of love, as dynamic and relational, an ongoing process of discovery, dissolves the distinction between thinking and feeling as separate modes of experience. This in turn, dissolves the stereotypical ways of understanding the differences between men and women, and undermines the power dynamic that structures this difference. Whether by nature or nurture or a combination of the two, men and women have different perspectives on love, and my research allowed me to explore how these perspectives come together in negotiating differences, in a way that fostered a deeper sense of connection. By researching love as a language game, I was able to identify specific ‘skills’ or ways of going about things that promoted the emergence of what could be called confluent love. This sort of love is more authentic because it is the outcome of the ‘everyday experiments’ that people are conducting as they negotiate their personal lives. Words were the window into people’s intimate lives but it was the way people used words, especially the way they talked about ‘I’, ‘me’ and ‘you’, that was the most interesting part of the research. Here love emerged from a dialogue between these different positions, a conversation which effectively culminated in a shared understanding of what confluent love might look like.
The most important finding of the research, for me, was the way people talked about their partner as their best friend as well as their lover, and their use of pronouns demonstrated that this was how they really saw things. Being friends means regarding someone as a person whom we choose to be with because we want to, rather than because we have to. Friends are people we share experiences with, and have fun with, rather than people whose primary purpose in our lives is to support our projects, or to make us happy. We treat friends as people first and foremost, irrespective of their age, sexuality or gender. We allow them to be the author of their own story, through our listening to them, and recognizing their potential for self-determination, we support them to realize it. By affirming each other’s unique potentiality, we contribute to each other’s individual and shared happiness.

Confluent love, as I understand it, provides a way through the impasse of narcissism. It does this because by ‘opening out to the other emotionally, and psychologically’, people get a sense of being ‘in this together’. This was articulated by the core category ‘we share a world’. As Nussbaum (2013) argues, this sense of connectedness provides the necessary conditions for different forms of love to emerge; and this happens, she says, as people navigate ‘what is’, with ‘what is possible’ (p. 181). She argues that because narcissism is ongoing, the resources that make its defeat possible must also be ongoing, in the form of increasingly sophisticated forms of love, reciprocity, and play...’ (p. 182). In other words, we can not only imagine, but we can actively promote, by our individual and collective actions, a form of love that heals rather than hurts.
Chapter one - exploring confluent love

In this chapter I discuss the cultural conditions that Anthony Giddens (1992) claims provides the impetus for the emergence of confluent love (p. 62). To be clear, confluent love is not a new emotion, it is a way of making sense of an intimate relationship that Giddens (1992) argues better fits the sort of world we live in (p. 64). Giddens (1992) explains that confluent love develops in what he refers to as a ‘pure’ relationship, a relationship of ‘sexual and emotional equality’ (p. 2). He claims these relationships are ‘explosive’ to pre-existing forms of gender power, because they free sexuality from the ‘rule of the phallus’ and open up a space for new ways of understanding love to emerge (p. 2). Giddens (1992) writes that a pure relationship:

Refers to a situation where a social relation is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it (p. 58).

Pure relationships have come about because sex is no longer tied to reproduction, so both men and women are more able to define themselves for themselves in a sexual and intimate context. As Jeffrey Weeks (1986) points out, as a society, we are being forced to reconsider what we understand by “sexuality”. He says this is due to a growing awareness of ‘the tangled web of intersecting influences and forces – politics, economics, class, race, ethnicity, geography and space, gender, age, ability and disability, morals and values – that shape our emotions, needs, desires and relationships’ (p. 10).

One of the most important repercussions in all of this is the redefining of sexual or erotic love in a world where ‘for the first time in history women claim equality with men’ (p. 1). Here existing narratives, and pre-existing cultural scripts have to be re-woven in a way that fits with the idea that women are more in control of their own destinies. I explore how feminists respond to Giddens’ (1992) theory in the next chapter; the main point here is that Giddens (1992) argues that contemporary relationships potentially dissolve the inequities that exist between men and women and provide the conditions for confluent love to emerge. As I pointed out in the introduction,
confluent love is ‘active’ and ‘contingent’ and it only develops ‘to the degree to which each partner is prepared to reveal concerns and needs to the other and to be vulnerable to the other’ (p. 62).

Giddens (1992) argues that romantic love, which is still the dominant model for intimate love in western culture, is primarily heterosexual love, and it is structured on men and women being complementary opposites, forever entangled in an endless dance of togetherness. He claims this is why romantic love can lead to compulsive or addictive relationships because it depends on ‘projective identification’, a psychological mechanism whereby prospective partners because attracted to and then bound to one another. ‘Projection here creates a feeling of wholeness with the other, no doubt strengthened by established differences between masculinity and femininity, each defined in terms of an antithesis’ (p. 61).

Giddens (1992) argues that confluent love dissolves these gender distinctions because it involves people relating to each other in a way that resists cultural stereotypes. Rather than people trying to fit their experience into a pre-existing framework that tells them how love is supposed to feel, confluent love emerges in the process of relating by people being open and honest about what they are feeling (p. 61). Here sex and love are not necessarily mutually exclusive: sex is an experience, but what we call that experience, whether it constitutes a loving relationship, is something that two people need to agree on. This is what makes pure relationships democratic. As Giddens (1992) explains, both people in the relationship regard each other as:

Free and equal in determining the conditions of their association, and both are free to agree or disagree with the way the other person is treating them. ‘the imperative of free and open communication is the sine qua non of the pure relationship…Such dialogue, in turn, is the medium of the expression of individual needs, as well as the means whereby the relationship is reflexively organized (p. 194).

Reflexivity – the capacity to monitor our own and another’s actions, and make changes if required, is for Giddens (1992) is the reason why confluent love is an improvement on romantic love. This is because it allows for individual agency in a way that romantic love does not. Romantic relationships are supposed to be liberating, claims Giddens (1992) but they portray men and women in highly specific ways, leaving no room for people to be self-determining. As he tells it, romantic love begins
with the promise of liberation – the idea that love transcends social and cultural norms; the ‘pauper’ and the ‘prince’ become ‘equals’ through their love for one another, but without their actually willing it. The prevailing notion is one of cosmic fate intervening in human affairs. With the power of the gods, or ‘the fairy godmother’ the hero and heroine transcend social norms, and ‘find’ each other. Thus two ‘lost’ souls come together and live happily ever after.

Traditionally romantic relationships were a prelude to marriage, and this is where the story book version ends, and ‘real life’ begins. As Giddens (1992) explains: ‘When marriage, for many of the population, effectively was forever, the structural congruence between romantic love and sexual partnership was clear cut’ (p. 46). However, once the knot was tied, many women found marriage to be a psychological trap, because while holding out the promise of freedom - the idea that love transcends social and cultural norms, it is, as Giddens (1992) puts it is: ‘thoroughly skewed in terms of power’ (p. 62). Romantic love also promoted ‘a double standard’. Men could have sex with whomever they wanted, but only a “certain sort of woman” has sex outside of a ‘committed’ relationship. Drawing from Lawerence Stones’ history of divorce in England, Giddens (1992) writes that until ‘quite recently a rigid dual standard existed about the sexual experience of men and women’ (p. 7). He says:

A single act of adultery by a wife was an ‘unpardonable breach of the law of property and the idea of hereditary descent’, for example. The same act by a husband was considered a ‘regrettable but understandable foible’ (Lawrence Stone 1990 cited in Giddens 1992, p. 7).

Nowadays, argues Giddens (1992), the cultivation of sexual skills by both men and women becomes increasingly important in order to sustain an intimate relationship. He writes:

Confluent love for the first time introduces the ars erotica into the core of the conjugal relationship and makes the achievement of reciprocal sexual pleasure a key element in whether the relationship is sustained or dissolved. The cultivation of sexual satisfaction, on the part of both sexes, become organized reflexively via a multitude of sources of sexual information, advice and training (p. 62).

This sets up an interesting contradiction because Giddens (1991, 1992) uses the word ‘authentic’ to
describe what happens in pure relationships, but in the same passages he talks about using sexual manuals, advice and training, to understand how to go on in a sexual context. This is interesting because like Sartre and de Beauvoir, he refers to authenticity as a moral phenomenon (1991, p. 78). While he does not reference these philosophers directly, his use of this term to explain how confluent love works, has strong ties to existential philosophy. For example, to explain what he means by authenticity, Giddens (1991) draws on the ideas of R.D. Laing, who makes a distinction between a ‘true’ self and the ‘false’ self (p. 79). To be authentic, in the way Giddens (1991) tells it, means to acknowledge that we are actively involved in the project of becoming ‘who we are’, and it is only by embracing our contingency – by stepping out of our habitual ways of doing things - that we develop a moral self, the capacity to reflect on and decide upon a course in life. He acknowledges that: ‘As individuals we are not able to “make history” but if we ignore our inner experience, we are condemned to repeat it, prisoners of traits which are inauthentic because they emanate from feelings and past situations imposed on us by others (especially in early childhood)’ (p. 79).

By linking authenticity with what Giddens (1992) calls the 'reflexive project of the self' – or ‘self-actualization’, he provides a moral framework for how to go on in a sexual or intimate relationship, which he calls confluent love (p. 202). But he does so in a way that links this to the therapeutic literature, which define what sexuality means in contemporary culture. He does this, ‘not because they offer accurate accounts of the changes affecting personal life: most in any case are essentially practical handbooks. Rather, they are expressions of processes of reflexivity which they chart out and help shape’ (Giddens 1992, p. 64).

Importantly, confluent love is not instantaneous, as in romantic love, it emerges as people get to know each other, and are ‘able to reveal concerns and needs to the other and to be vulnerable to that other’ (p. 62). In other words, love happens as people learn to relate to each other as ‘independent beings’, rather than seeing the other as an extension of themselves. This is not sex where ‘anything goes’, rather the emphasis is on reciprocal (it involves giving and receiving pleasure), sexual relations (p. 160). Rather than sex being a way of expressing love, sex becomes a way for two people to explore, or become, ‘who they really are’ or authentic in the process of relating (Giddens 1991, p. 79). Giddens (1990) explains:

Erotic relations involve a progressive path of mutual discovery, in which a process of self-
realisation on the part of the lover is as much a part of the experience as increasing intimacy with the loved one (p. 122).

The main difference between romantic love and confluent love is that the latter dispenses with the ideas that love is ‘fated’ or ‘destined’, and that there is one person who we are meant to spend our entire lives with. These ideas, which are central to how we have come to think about love in western culture, are now regarded as ‘old-fashioned’ or ‘passed their used-by date’ (Bauman 2003, p. 21). Importantly confluent love applies to homosexual as well as heterosexual relationships, and it can begin as a romantic relationship, but its development depends on how two people treat each other in an intimate context. Here love depends much more on agency and choice.

The inclusion of choice and agency changes how people talk about love and sex in profound ways. Because in the past, love was something we did not have a choice about – it just happened. Importantly, the inclusion of choice forces us to question what is ‘good’ when it comes to sex and intimacy. For Giddens (1992) and Weeks (1986, 2007, 2009) this is part of a ‘remoralisation’ of society, as people start to question existing social norms and moral codes. As Mary Evans (2003) writes, ‘in this contemporary climate, “falling in love” and “being in love” acquire new meanings’ (p. 78). Giddens (1992) argues that because ‘biology is no longer destiny’, how we define ourselves, in terms of our sexuality and gender, becomes a continuous process of ‘self-construction’, the result of our reflexive engagement with the world. This reflexive monitoring of action is possible because there are different and sometimes competing discourses or narratives to draw from.

In the past there was one narrative for how people went about their sexual relationships, and people adhered to this because they did not have a choice. As far as sex and marriage was concerned social norms were dictated by religion or the state. Nowadays these discourses, while still prominent, no longer have the same power to dictate the terms of our engagements, and there are competing narratives that allow people to make sense of their desires and feelings in different ways. As Beck-Gernsheim (2013) writes: ‘there is no right and wrong anymore. It is just two people and two ideas of their life together’ (Beck-Gernsheim cited in Ravn and Sorensen 2013, para 9). Giddens (1992) argues that because of this:

…sexual love can be liberating in a double sense: when harnessed to respect for the other as
an equal, love shatters the framework of the mogogamic-patriarchal family, but also is positively compatible with wider social citizenship (p. 166).

In theory, this means increasing sexual diversity, and ideally a growing respect for difference. It also involves a period of upheaval as existing moral codes change or fragment, or as Giddens (1992) puts it, ‘bring to the surface those moral and existential issues pushed away from everyday life by the sequestration of experience. They are issues which fuse abstract philosophy, ethical ideas and very practical concerns’ (p. 197). In other words, people are more free to do what they like when it comes to sex and love, but they are no longer sure what is ‘right’ or ‘good’ anymore. This is potentially revolutionary, but also unsettling, and also one of the reasons why the self-help genre has become so popular. Beck-Gernsheim (2013) argues that this a huge change compared with just a few decades ago where the laws relating to marriage and family were often ‘very strict, explicit and unashamedly patriarchal’ (cited in Ravn and Sorensen 2013, para 30). She also points out that: ‘nowadays you have the choice but with it the potential of differing ideas, contrasting priorities and plans, in a nutshell: The potential for fighting and disputes’ (Ravn and Sorensen 2013, para 9). She

Because love is no longer tied to marriage in the way it used to be, the challenge is working out what we mean by the word ‘love’ to better fit with the times. Importantly, this makes space for people to explore what to do with their freedom as they experiment with new ways of being in relationship. Giddens (1992) points out people can no longer just go along with the way things are, because ‘the way things are’ depends on the choices we make in our personal lives. Evans (2003) argues this makes understanding love more important than ever. She says:

Establishing a morality for the ‘new’ sexuality remains a contentious issue: but in that debate ‘love’ still plays a considerable part, in that in the absence of other forms of social control it remains an informal, but generally recognised sanction (p. 7).

Before I explore Giddens’ (1992) theory further, it is important to understand where our ideas about love have come from, because, while things may be changing, for better or for worse, depending on who you agree with, the ideas associated with romantic love are still very much alive in our culture.
A short history of modern love

When Nietzsche pronounced that ‘God is dead’ he was not talking about some guy sitting up on a cloud in the sky literally dying, he was talking about how our existing ideas about God, as the final arbitrator of all things human, needed to be put aside to let new ways of justifying our existence to emerge. However, according to Simon May (2011), Nietzsche never considered how our ideas about love would change when we jettison the belief that there are eternal truths to which we are all subject, including the truth about love (p. 198). May argues that prior to the late 18th century, western culture’s ideas about good and evil, as well as our ideas about love, were based primarily on Christianity, a religion saturated with philosophical thought dating back to antiquity (p. 96). May (2011) writes that love was believed to depend on God, because God was love. On this view, he argues:

Since all genuine love is for God, when we love another person we are really loving God in her - and loving her for the sake of God. We never truly loved her for anything else about her’ (p. 90).

Love was always regarded as somehow central to morality. As May tells it, in Hebrew scripture, as well as in Judaism and Islam, obedience to God - which included loving Him - trumped every other value. May (2011) writes: ‘One must love God irrespective of considerations of welfare and in defiance of any conflicting goods that nature might offer’ (p. 27). Loving another person brought us closer to God, and the better we loved, the closer we got. ‘Love we see here, has ethical force as a relation to the source of our being’ (May 2011, p. 18). However only with Christianity did it become a moral duty to love one another (May 2011, p. 18). This was not because it led to the greatest happiness, or because it created a better society, but because we were all made in ‘His’ image. Stripped of its divine origins, with the ‘death of god’, love became more human, and irrespective of whether we believe in God or not, human beings now had to find ways of explaining love in a more human way. This gave further impetus for what we now call romantic love, which according to Giddens (1992) became a way of reconciling sublime ‘passion’ or divine love, with sexual desire (p. 39). Here the cultural narrative of romance became linked with ideas about love that pre-dated Christianity. This is the idea of soul mates, which owes its origins to the Ancient Greeks. This is the
idea that we are each of us divided souls, forever searching for that one person who can make us complete.

**Soul Mates**

This idea was first put forward by Plato in the Symposium, one of the first philosophical works on love in the western world (Taylor 1926). Taylor argues that it is from this book that ‘soul sick romanticists’ drew their inspiration (p. 209). Unlike Plato’s other dialogues, the Symposium is a series of speeches or eulogies to love. One of these speeches tells us a story about love that is still very much alive in our contemporary ideas about romantic love (Nussbaum 2001, p. 485). Aristophanes’ speech has had profound implications for the way we understand love in contemporary culture. Martha Nussbaum (2001) explains, this myth provided us with a view of love that survives to this day, and reflects a powerful longing to return to our original state. She writes: ‘This profound portrait of the roots of erotic love says in effect that love of this sort is the acting out of a primitive fantasy of restored omnipotence’ (p. 485). Aristophanes tells his audience that before humans existed in their current form, they were completely round, and had a head with two faces, each pointing in a different direction. They also had four legs, four arms and two sets of genitals. Some of these beings were born with two sets of the same genitals, either all male or all female, and some had a mix of both male and female. One day these beings launched an attack on the Gods, an act that Zeus punished them for by cutting them in half. They were left bereft and forever searching for their missing half (Taylor 1926, p. 219). According to Taylor (1926): ‘This longing for reunion with the lost half of one’s original self is what we call ‘love’ and until it is satisfied, none of us can attain happiness’ (p. 219).

More than two thousand years since this story was written, people still go looking for their ‘other half’, we call that person our ‘soul mate’, a term that retains traces of the divine. As Giddens (1992) explains it, on this story: ‘the other, by being who he or she is, answers a lack which the individual does not even necessarily recognise - until the love relationship is initiated’ (p. 45). While the story has changed over time, the basic theme remains to this day. This is the idea that there is one person (on Aristophanes myth this person can be either heterosexual, gay or lesbian) that will make our lives complete (Taylor 1926, p. 219). According to Giddens (1992) this absorption with the mysterious
other plays out in romantic love as a ‘quest’, ‘an odyssey in which self identity awaits its validation from the discovery of the other’ (p. 45).

In the 19th century, with the introduction of the novel, this quest became more contemporary, and people, largely women, found what in literature what was eluding them in everyday life (Giddens 1992, p. 40). Importantly the novel introduced the idea of a narrative into a person’s life, and people began to make sense of their lives as a story. Central to this story was the idea that they were ‘fated’ to meet the man or woman of their dreams, and live happily ever after.

The telling of a story is in some respects what romance is, according to Giddens (1992), and in the 20th century, these stories became more individual. But the basic formula, as a way of going about sexual love, was something people believed they could emulate in their own lives. In this sense romance was a way for heterosexual women and men to project themselves into the future: a future that, in some senses, was already ‘mapped out for them’ (Giddens 1992, p. 41). Insofar as men and women followed the script, happiness was not far away. Romantic love also supposedly created equals, because it is an emotional connection that transcends gender and social and economic standing. It is essentially a ‘religious’ experience, something that is outside our willing or choosing it. Two people, destined to be together, eventually find one another and through the strength of their love become ‘one’.

Some people do meet and end up living more or less happily together, but for many men and women, the dream, once realized, turns into a nightmare. Seen through a feminist framework, romance, as Giddens (1992) points out, can also be interpreted as ‘an active, and radical, engagement with the ‘maleness’ of modern society’ (p. 2). I discuss this further in the next chapter. The point that Giddens (1992) makes is that romantic love is a story – a cultural myth, and while women were and still are avid consumers of romance, the plot is one that has mostly been written by men in order to control or ‘privatise passion’ (Giddens 1992, p. 41). Not to worry that real life did not always live up to the ideal, there was always something to hope or yearn for. In this way, from the late 1800’s onwards, romance became ‘a potential avenue for controlling the future, as well as a form of psychological security (in principle) for those whose lives were touched up it’ (p. 41). On this story, our primary purpose in life is to meet Mr. or Mrs. Right, get married, have children and stay
together 'until death do us part' (p. 45). Giddens (1992) argues that this has nothing to with some sort of divine order, or with cosmic forces, rather romantic love, he argues, is a psychological and cultural phenomenon. Romantic love effectively structures sexual attraction by providing a context in which it can be expressed or normalized: ‘it is a process of attraction to someone who can make one’s life, as it is said, ‘complete’ (p. 40). Romantic love is ‘story-book love’, says psychotherapist, Robert Johnson (1983), ‘but this is a story that all of us try to live out in our own ways within the down-to-earth world of human relationships, and human practicality’ (p. 46). Johnson (1983) argues:

Most people sense this, and so they spend tremendous energy and time finding ways to keep the projections going between them, ways to keep the fantasy quality alive between them and to hang onto the feeling of superhuman intensity (p. 110).

The problems occur when the reality does not live up to the ideal. Like Giddens (1992), Johnson (1983) argues that the myth of romantic love keeps people, both men and women, from having to face parts of themselves that contradict how their gender is constructed in western society. The other person, being their complementary opposite, makes up for what they supposedly lack. The man is ‘active’ and ‘independent’, while the woman is ‘passive’ and ‘submissive’, and together they form a complete set of competencies. This works through ‘projective identification’ a psychological mechanism, whereby parts of ourselves are ‘split off’ and ‘rediscovered’ in the other person (p. 61). According to Giddens (1992) projection means that each person depends on the upon an 'alterity which the partner provides', which means that neither has to recognise and come to terms with the nature of his or her dependence upon the other (p. 90). This has different implications for men and women. According to Giddens (1992) romantic love keeps men's emotional dependence on women hidden. Because masculinity is defined as being 'cold and unapproachable' (p. 62), feelings, especially feelings of vulnerability and sadness, are projected onto women. For women projection gives them a sense of identity, the feeling of ‘being someone’, a state they were unable to achieve on their own. But again this is a trick or an illusion. Projection here only works because ‘reason’ and ‘emotion’ are defined as opposites, and ‘embodied’ in a particular sex; here love becomes a way of finding what is missing in ourselves. “And this lack is directly to do with self-identity; in some sense, the flawed individual is made whole'(p. 45).
Importantly, while the stories we tell ourselves have changed over time, the core idea that we are divided and need the other in order to be happy, remain to this day. This sets up a dynamic where people are either active/passive, strong/weak, dominant/submissive, reasonable/emotional, and these binaries are firmly embedded in our cultural stories of love, which essentially structure gender relations, according to Giddens (1992). In other words, romantic love is a fantasy but a very powerful one. And when the ‘fantasy’ dissolves, often when the demands of marriage, work and children intrude, the unequal nature of the relationship is revealed. By then the lovers are bound to each other, not because they necessarily want to be, but because our cultural stories prescribe it. As Giddens (1992) explains:

Romantic love made of *amour passion* a specific cluster of beliefs and ideals geared to transcendence; romantic love may end in tragedy, and feed upon transgression, but it also produces a conquest of mundane prescriptions and compromises (p. 45).

And despite the pain and heartache, people continue to believe in love, and it some ways it has become more important than it ever was. May (2011) explains that in western culture human, love has replaced God as the new religion of modernity. He says that love is now considered our one source of salvation, a way of making sense of an otherwise meaningless existence. He writes:

Human love…is widely tasked with achieving what once only divine love was thought capable of: to be our ultimate source of meaning and happiness, and of power over suffering and disappointment (p. xv)

The point that May (2011) makes is that while romantic love may be ‘outdated’, there are underlying forces that keep it firmly in place. This sets up an interesting paradox. As May (2011) explains it, people in modernity have more freedom than they ever had to do what they like when it comes to sex, but our culture’s ideas about love are, to some extent, still anchored in the past. In this sense, May argues:

Free love’ has not freed love - in the sense of giving us fresh conceptions of it. On the contrary, the new liberties - flowing, above all from divorce, contraception, and the
acceptance of gay love; three of the most far-reaching and still unfinished revolutions spawned by the twentieth century - have offered ever more opportunities for pursuing the same old ideal’ (p. xii).

The main point here is that sexuality freed from the exigencies of reproduction, means both men and women have more choice about sex and for the way they go about intimate relationships, but our language, our culture’s ways of talking about love still reflect ‘traditional values’. Anne Swidler (2003), who interviewed Americans about their experiences of love in marriage, found that people were skeptical about the ‘movie image’ version of love, i.e. romantic love, but they tended to use this language in making sense of their own experiences (p. 111). This may be because, as bell hooks (2000) points out, people are confused about love. She writes:

   Taught to believe that the mind, not the heart, is the seat of learning, many of us believe that to speak of love with any emotional intensity means we will be perceived as weak and irrational. And it is especially hard to speak of love when what we have to say calls attention to the fact that lovelessness is more common than love, that many of us are not sure what we mean when we talk of love or how to express love (p. xxvii).

Giddens’ (1992) theory is an interesting in this regard because he does provide a different way of talking about sexual love, which he says has the potential to dissolve the unequal power dynamic that structures romantic love. He says: ‘In a world of increasing sexual equality – even if such equality is far from complete – both sexes are called upon to make fundamental changes in their outlooks on, and behaviour towards, one another’ (p. 7). This has come about because western women are more economically and socially independent, they are also more able to enter and leave relationships that they consider oppressive or unfair. As a result, says Giddens (1992) modern intimacy is less about finding that special person and more about creating a 'special' relationship (p. 62).

**Pure relationships and confluent love**

Women's social and economic independence changes how heterosexual men and women relate to each other in a sexual and emotional sense. Relationships become more of a space to 'experiment'
with different ways of being a 'man' or a 'woman' in a sexual and intimate context. As Giddens (1992) puts it: 'the question is one of sexual identity, but not only this. The self today is for everyone a reflexive project – a more or less continuous interrogation of past, present and future (p. 30). In this context love is no longer a quest, which culminates in the embrace of the other, but a process through which we become our authentic selves. Weeks (2009) agrees with this, and says that love in contemporary culture is all about ‘asserting your desire and to live as you want to - what theorists call ‘love or relational rights’ (p. 215). Here the development of our individual potentialities becomes the primary aim of these relationships. Giddens (1992) argues this has both personal and political implications. He says:

Particularly in its connections with gender, sexuality gives rise to the politics of the personal, a phrase that is misunderstood if tied only to emancipation. The object here, he says, is not to 'politicise', in a narrow sense of that term, life-style decisions but to remoralise them’ (p. 197).

What Giddens (1991, 1992) is saying is that confluent love depends on people thinking for themselves and talking about how they want a relationship to go and they do this by reflecting upon their own preferences, desires and values, and negotiating these in a way that fosters intimacy. Because the focus is no longer on finding the ‘one’, relationships become less about the other person, and more about finding a relationship that suits a person’s lifestyle. Here the story changes from needing someone to make us feel complete, to realizing that we already are. As Giddens (1991) puts it: ‘as I raise my own self-worth, I will feel more integrity, honesty, compassion, energy and love’ (p. 79). This sort of love is more authentic, he argues, because it is based on a personal belief system, rather than being based on gender roles that people inherit from their cultural conditioning (1991, p. 80). Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (1995) agree with this, and argue that modern love transcends existing social norms and makes its own rules:

Love in our day is post and a-traditional, and makes its own rules out of sexual desire now unhampered by moral or legal implications. Love cannot be institutionalised or codified, or justified in any general sense as long as free will and mutual consent are its guiding stars (p. 194).
Giddens is more circumspect. For him, it is not that there are no rules, rather the way the rules are made is changing, in a way that allows women and other sexual minorities to have more of an equal say in what love means in an intimate context. Giddens (1992) argues that pure relationships reflect a new ideal for intimacy in contemporary western culture.

If what these sociologists say is correct, then it is important to be clear about what it is we are talking about when we use the word ‘love’ in our everyday language. Language is how we make sense of our experiences, how we communicate with each other and connect, both intimately and otherwise. Bell hooks (2000) writes that even though it appears that as a society are obsessed with love, the lack of clarity around what we mean by the word ‘love’, makes it more difficult to love. She writes:

> Undoubtedly, many of us are more comfortable with the notion that love can mean anything to anybody precisely because when we define it with precision and clarity it brings us face to face with our lacks – with terrible alienation. The truth is, far too many people in our culture do not know what love is (p. 11).

Despite the potential that Giddens (1992) says exists in the way we go about intimacy in contemporary western culture, there is also a ‘dark side’ to modern love, and not everyone agrees with Giddens (1992) that pure relationships are liberating in the way he claims they are. According to his critics, Giddens (1991, 1992) theory closely follows the ethos of the marketplace; the idea that 'more is better', especially where sex is concerned. What worries these writers is that his idea of the pure relationship is drawn mainly from therapeutic narratives that encourage a certain way of talking about emotions, including love. The point that Bauman (2003) and Illouz (2007) make is that making love and making money have become more and more entwined, making it difficult to know where one ends, and the other begins. This is what worries Bauman (2003), who says pure relationships are indicative of the increasing fragility of personal and social ties, a situation that has consequences for both love and morality (p. 91).

Bauman (2003) and Illouz’s (2007) argument puts a cloud over Giddens (1992) optimism that pure
relationships are a way of healing the division between the sexes (p. 3). I look at this more closely in the following section, where I agree that Bauman (2003) is right to be concerned. Beck and Beck-Gernshiem (1995) call love the new religion of modernity, but it could also be argued that its tenets closely follow the those of the marketplace. As Bauman (2003) points out love is increasingly difficult to achieve in a society that prefers ‘instant gratification’ and ‘quick fixes’. In our increasingly liquid modern world, ‘commitment to another person or persons, particularly an unconditional commitment and most certainly ‘till death us do part, for better and worse and for richer and poorer kind of commitment, looks ever more like a trap that needs to be avoided at all costs (p. 90).

On the face of it, it appears Bauman (2003) might be right. Families and relationships are changing and becoming more transient. There is also more violence, and more people report feeling lonely. According to the Australian institute of family studies (AIFS) Australia families are also much more diverse than they used to be. People are less likely to get married for example, than they were 20 years ago, and they are more likely to live together before they get married (AIFS 2016). This means there are more single adults than ever before.

The AIFS figures also show an increasing number of transgender, lesbian and gay couple families, and an increase in single parent families, and the AIFS estimates that the number will increase from nearly one million in 2011 to over 1.5 million in 2036 (AIFS 2016a). There has also been an increase in the number of couples without children (37.8 per cent), and an increasing number of people are living alone (24 per cent). According to one study people in Australia are still looking for long term relationships but there is also a growing realization that it may not happen. According to Carmicheal and Whittaker 2007, the process of forming relationships is one of trial and error, fueled by the hope that people will eventually find someone whose expectations of a relationship matches their own (p. 36).

There has also been a significant shift in the way people go about finding a partner, with many people turning to online dating sites like Tinder and RSVP. According to the Australian Consumers Association (ACA) Australia is Tinder’s third largest market, and RSVP has over two million Australian customers (Sheftalovich 2014). Here people get to try each other on for size, a phenomenon known as ‘hook-up culture’ (Garcia et. al. 2012). These are uncommitted sexual encounters, which according to Garcia et. al. (2102) are becoming increasingly commonplace.
amongst adolescents and young adults in North America (p. 161).

The point that Giddens (1992) makes is that what the transformation of intimacy means for our culture, is yet to be determined; nevertheless, the increasing rate of intimate partner violence especially puts a big question mark over his claim that contemporary relationships are more equal. According to Australia’s National Research Organisation for Women’s Safety (ANROWS), gender inequality is a key determinant in explaining violence against women (ANROWS 2014a). I discuss this further in the next chapter.

Giddens (1992) maintains that male violence against women is a backlash against women’s increasing autonomy, however Jamieson (1999) argues that his views are overly simplistic. She says Giddens’ (1992) theory obscures and perpetuates institutional gender inequalities that work against women being self-determining. The self-help narrative is a case in point, and it is here that Giddens’ (1992) theory starts to look decidedly suspect. As Smart and Shipman (2004) point out his theory about how people are going about their intimate lives is largely speculative, based on popular magazines and the popularity of the self-help genre (p. 493).

Giddens (1992) says he draws on these ‘texts’ or ‘discourses’ not because what they say is the truth, but because they ‘point towards changes that might release individuals from influences which block their autonomous development’ (p. 64). He also points to homosexual relationships as being the harbinger of the pure relationship for heterosexual couples. He says homosexuals showed how gender stereotypes could be subverted, with each partner 'taking up' a different role in different relationships, or both individuals sharing these roles. Importantly these ‘early pioneers’ showed that gender, which was previously regarded as fixed and immutable was, to some extent, malleable. Giddens (1992) argues that this provided the impetus for different ways of ‘doing’ gender and diverse forms of sexuality became more acceptable. He writes:

Sexuality’ today has been discovered, opened up and made accessible to the development of varying life-styles. It is something that each of us ‘has’, or cultivates, no longer a natural condition which an individual accepts as a preordained state of affairs. Somehow, in a way that has to be investigated, sexuality functions as a malleable feature of self, a prime connecting point between body, self-identity and social norms (p. 15).
As Giddens (1992) tells it describing themselves as 'gay' these individuals are an example of how “a social phenomenon can be appropriated and transformed through collective engagement” (p. 14). This not only provided a new 'public face for homosexuality', [now]’a person 'has' a sexuality, gay or otherwise, which can be reflexively grasped, interrogated and developed' (p. 14). He claims that because sexuality is more fluid, people now have to ‘negotiate’ their relationships in a way that has wider social and cultural repercussions. It is also why Giddens (1992) claims that confluent love suggests an ethical framework that allows for a revitalization of the erotic, as an aesthetic, rather than purely sexual aspiration (in the narrow sense of the term). It is mutuality that defines these relationships, both in a sexual sense, in the sense of mutual pleasure but also in an ethical sense of mutual recognition (p. 202).

This brings us to a contentious point because not everyone agrees that pure relationships can ‘free’ love from the shackles of the past, some writers claim that the self help narrative, which Giddens (1992) draws on heavily to substantiate his theory, coupled with the increasing use of Internet dating sites and the prevalence of personal communication devices, makes people less free and less able to be themselves. Illouz (2007) argues the Internet especially brings psychological language into our common speech in a way that changes how we talk about love. She writes:

> Whereas romantic love has been characterized by an ideology of spontaneity, the Internet demands a rationalized mode of partner selection, which contradicts the idea of love as unprecedented epiphany, erupting in one’s life against one’s will and reason (p. 90).

Illouz (2007) explains that the Internet creates a ‘distance’ between the textual self and the actual self, which means an increasing discrepancy between the person we are, and the way we present ourselves (p. 104). In this sense, she argues that the Internet is a ‘game changer’ as far as sex and love go. People still go looking for Mr. or Mrs. ‘Right’, but they do so in the same way they go looking for a new dress, or a new job. It is the self help or therapeutic narrative that most concerns Illouz (2007) however, because she argues, while claiming to provide advice about how to navigate the increasing confusion about love, this narrative is premised on the idea that people are in need of correction. Like Bauman (2003) she sees this as part of a ‘commodification of intimacy’.

Importantly, she argues, that because these texts draw on the language of medicine and psychology,
the ‘science of good sex’ now becomes the lens through which people measure their relationships, and how they make sense of their feelings. Intimacy becomes something we have to achieve, and get help for and regimes are offered to support this, often costing large amounts of money.

Illouz (2007) says a central focus of the self help literature is on ‘mastering’ emotions, or eliminating or transforming ‘negative’ emotions into more ‘positive’ ones. Here emotional intelligence becomes a new form of social capital (p. 65). A person’s capacity to be self aware, for example, or their ‘resilience’ becomes central to their identity (p. 64). In this way, argues Illouz (2007) a new emotional hierarchy was drawn up by psychologists, dividing people into those who are ‘self realised’ and those who suffer from a ‘panopoly of problems’ (p. 46). She writes:

But, and this is undoubtedly one of the most striking features of the therapeutic culture, at the same time it put health and self realization at the centre of a narrative of self, it also made a wide variety of behaviours into signs and symptoms of a ‘neurotic’, ‘unhealthy’, ‘self defeating’ self’ (p. 46).

The problem is not the texts themselves, but the underlying ideology, which, she argues, works against people’s capacity to make up their own mind about what love, sex and intimacy mean. Rather than encouraging people to find their own answers to the challenges they face in their personal relationships, the self help genre provides the answers for you; at a price of course. The point that Bauman (2003) and Illouz (2007) make is that love is big business, especially when it is confusing. While exact figures are difficult to find, self-help books remain the publishing world’s best selling genre. According to an article in UK’s Guardian newspaper the market for self-help books alone is worth around $11 billion annually, and 80 per cent of people who buy these books are repeat customers (Groskop 2013).

Importantly Bauman (2003) and Illouz (2007) put a cloud over Giddens’ (1992) optimism that confluent love could potentially heal the divisions between the sexes. They argue that love mixed with advertising, the Internet and the self-help market means that our cultural expectations about love become more and more fused with ‘free’ market ideology, and they say Giddens’ (1992) theory is a case in point. This is especially the case when it comes to sex, which according to some researchers, continues to be portrayed in a way that privileges men over women (Pettinato 2007,
Tyler 2008). I talk about this further in the next chapter where I look at the feminist critique of Giddens’ (1992) theory. The main point here is that these issues apparently contradict his that cultural conditions provide the impetus for a new sort of love to emerge.

**Expert knowledge and intimacy**

In his defense Giddens (1992) argues that the texts he draws on to develop his theory of the changing nature of intimacy in western culture, offer insights that are not available anywhere else. One of these insights is that like madness ‘sexuality’ exists largely because there are discourses about it, and these shape how people make sense of their desires. In this way, sex manuals and ‘expert’ advice take over where moral philosophies and religion left off. The problem with these discourses, as Illouz (2007) points out, is that issues, or challenges in relationships are framed in terms of suffering or pathology and focus is on the individual, both as the source of pathology and the primary source of its resolution (p. 41). The other person, and the relationship, becomes instrumental to one’s happiness and satisfaction.

The focus on the individual as the source of the problem downplay the social, economic and cultural factors that influence the way people see the world, and their place in it. As Smart and Shipman (2004) argue, the more a narrative leans towards ‘free’ or individual choice, the more people are portrayed as being solely responsible for their lives. They argue however: ‘In sociological terms there is a very significant different between the concepts of ‘individual’ or ‘free’ choice and contextual or relational choice’ (p. 493). This has important political ramifications because, as Heidi Marie Rimke (2000) argues, the focus on self-mastery, which is what is required for the attainment of intimacy in the self-help genre that Giddens (1991,1992) draws on, allow governments to ‘pass the buck’ when it comes to addressing important social and cultural issues. Rimke (2000) argues: ‘Self-help literature aids in the production, organization, dissemination and implementation of particular liberal modes of truth about the social world’ (p. 62). One of these truths is that we are the creators of our own ‘reality’. Gershon and Alexy (2011) argue that the neoliberal self is run like a business, and relationships are experienced as an investment, which require an expenditure of emotion in exchange for an expected return on investment i.e. security. These authors also point out that this way of thinking is regarded as morally acceptable because it fits with the idea that every person has a right to pursue their own happiness. Contrary to Giddens’ (1992) claim that the self
help genre provides a way for people to create more authentic relationships, Rimke (2010) argues that the opposite is the case because they are premised on the idea that experts acting at a distance know more about what is going on for individuals than the individuals themselves. They tell you ‘what is the case’ (Rimke 2010, p. 69). Brigid Philip (2009) illustrates this in her analysis of how the ‘self help’ genre constructs ideas about depression. While her analysis focuses on depression, her critique is applicable to our present discussion, because the ideology that runs through them is woven from the same cloth as those used by Giddens (1992) to substantiate his theory.

Talking about David Burn’s 1999 book ‘Feeling Good’, Philip (2009) argues, that he frames depression as both an illness – to be relieved through various psychological and pharmaceutical regimes – and as an ethical problem which the individual is ultimately responsible for dealing with – the problem is distorted thinking, not what is actually going on in the person’s world’ (p. 160). Philip (2009) argues that the self help genre presents ideas as both scientifically and ethically legitimate, but they are actually a form of political discipline. The aim is about ‘transforming the depressed reader into a healthy individual, that is, into an ideal liberal subject’ (p. 165).

Philip (2009) argues that portraying depression as a fault in the way a person thinks, limits what can be said about it, and influences the way governments, professionals and individuals respond to it. She writes:

Individuals who believe they are sick or inadequate in some way may be less likely to challenge practices that disadvantage them. In the workplace, for instance, a depressed individual may be more likely to accept increasing demands from employers, interpreting his/her struggle to cope with more work as a personal failing, rather than resisting and challenging unreasonable workload pressures (p. 163).

According to Bauman (2003), the infusion of political and economic rhetoric into the sphere of sexuality and love, makes sustaining a love relationship in contemporary culture a much more difficult proposition, because capitalism encourages people to see others in terms of the ‘volume of pleasure they are likely to offer, and in value for money terms’ (p. 75). He writes: ‘the promise to learn the art of loving is a (false, deceitful, yet keenly wished to be true) promise to make [the] ‘love experience’ in the likeness of other commodities…’ (p. 7).
Importantly, as Illouz (2007) points out, the texts that Giddens (1992) draws on to develop his theory of confluent love, promote the idea that only relationships that foster ‘personal growth’, or which contribute to ‘self realisation’ are healthy, and those that do not conform to this ideal, are considered pathological or unhealthy. For example, being ‘too attached’ is considered pathological because it keeps people from ‘achieving fulfillment’ (Giddens 1991, p. 79). He writes: ‘Compulsive relationships, as the therapeutic literature repeatedly states, although not in so many words, preclude the reflexive exploration of self-identity’ (Giddens 1992, p. 92). In other words ‘compulsions’ and addictions work against mastery of the self.

According to Illouz (2007) the main problem with these texts is that what counts as ‘expert’ knowledge is not being questioned, instead Giddens (1992) appears to buy into the idea that pop psychology can provide the ultimate answers to what is happening in people’s intimate lives. And the way these ideas are presented do not necessarily allow people to come to their own conclusions. Issues like having children, ‘tend to become sources of ‘inertial drag’, as Giddens (1991, p. 89), puts it. The problem here, as Illouz (2007) points out, is that the ideal for what a ‘good’ relationship should look like has already been decided. This makes people less free, and less able to decide for themselves what a ‘good’ relationship is, based on their own experience. Illouz (2007) writes that: ‘therapeutic self help culture is an informal and almost inchoate aspect of our social experience, yet is also a deeply internalised cultural schema organizing perception of self and others, autobiography and interpersonal interaction’ (p. 50).

There are two problems here. The first is that the ideology which the therapeutic narratives promote, and which Giddens (1991, 1992) draws on to develop his theory, is politically motivated. The other problem is that these texts divide people into those who are ‘normal’ and those who are not, those who are self realized, and those that have a long way to go; and they do this in a way that allows individuals no say in what constitutes ‘good’ sex or a ‘good’ relationship. Illouz (2007) argues that what used to be ‘just sex’ is now ‘an arduous goal which, for it to be reached, demands the mobilization of a large array of cultural resources’ (p. 8). In other words, the psychological narratives might give people a new language for making sense of their experiences, but it is not necessarily the ‘truth’, and it could lead people away from their authentic desires if they do not conform to what these narratives promote as the ideal.

I agree with Illouz (2007) that Giddens (1992) does not engage with these texts critically enough,
however I also acknowledge that he does this because, on his understanding of how social life works, people can decide for themselves how to interpret these texts in the context of their day-to-day lives. As far as Giddens (1986) is concerned the individual and society are not separate – society shapes the individual and the individual, in turn, shapes society. He refers to this as the ‘duality of structure and agency’ (p. 162). Society is not a ‘thing in itself’, rather it is a set of rules or norms, that tell us how we should behave in certain contexts. Through their actions people either reproduce these rules, or they change them by doing things differently. According to Giddens (1986) people are not just passive consumers of culture, they actively participate in creating it. He says: ‘As social actors, all human beings are highly “learned” in respect of knowledge which they possess and apply, in the production and reproduction of day to day social encounters’ (p. 22). The point Giddens (1986) makes is people usually know how to get around in the world, but when they are asked to explain their actions, they draw on cultural resources to make sense of what they do. The more resources at their disposal, the more ways they have of explaining themselves. He calls this the difference between ‘practical’ consciousness i.e. knowing how to get around in the world, and ‘discursive’ consciousness, being able to articulate what one knows (p. 41).

It is the freedom that people have in the way they respond or interpret these texts in the context of their day-to-day lives, that makes Giddens’ (1992) theory potentially useful, and why the relationships he talks about are potentially liberating. When we reflect on and talk about what we do, we draw on ‘discursive’ knowledge, and in doing so, we open up a space to modify what we do. For example, we can reflect on why it is that women traditionally stay home to look after the children, while men continue to go to work. If we talk about this with our partner, and agree that things could work differently, we are engaging in ‘discursive consciousness’. In that sense, Giddens (1992) says the therapeutic narrative provides ‘ways of talking’ about love and sex, that empower people to break free from traditional and oppressive ways of relating, and for this reason, they are potentially emancipatory (p. 95).

The detraditionalisation thesis

This is where Giddens links intimacy with the ‘detrationalisation’ thesis, the idea that social practices – the tradition of lifelong marriage, for example – are reflected on, questioned, discussed and sometimes abandoned. Just because things were done a certain way in the past, does not justify
why they should be continued (Gross 2005, p. 287). Here the ethical focus is on how choices are made, rather than what is chosen.

Giddens (1992) argues that because biology is no longer destiny, ‘who we are’ are any particular time depends on how we describe ourselves in language. People might draw on the therapeutic narrative to make sense of their behavior, or they might not, but according to Giddens (1986) they will have a “theoretical understanding” of their activity i.e. why they are doing what they do. ‘The reflexive monitoring of activity is a chronic feature of everyday action and involves the conduct not just of the individual but also of others. That is to say, actors not only monitor continuously the flow of their activities and expect others to do the same for their own; they also routinely monitor aspects, social and physical, of the contexts in which they move’ (p. 6).

In other words, because the therapeutic narrative is part of our everyday language, these provide discursive resources to help people go on in their intimate lives, but they do not determine what people actually do. The important point that Giddens (1992) makes is that these texts provide a language that could help people move beyond ‘story book’ love in a way that could potentially lead to better relationships and a better world. By recognizing the other person as a person, and loving them for his or her unique qualities, we can no longer see them as our ‘missing half’ or the source of our eternal bliss, and in a sense this is liberating. But only if we resist getting pulled into another story.

In other words, there is evidence of support Giddens (1992) theory and it is potentially useful, but we have to be careful because modern love is so wrapped up with the rhetoric of the marketplace so it is difficult to be clear about what it is we are talking about when we use the word ‘love’ here. Evans (2003) writes that in contemporary culture ‘love’ has become an emancipated word, and it is not yet clear whether confluent love improves the situation, or not. As Giddens (1992) acknowledges things could go either way. He says the compulsive and episodic character of male sexuality could become greater, the more women reject the gender dynamics that forces them into ways of being that they have no say in. Romantic love, as Giddens (1992) tells it, promotes gender scripts that keep men and women divided from each other, whereas confluent love is all about connection and intimacy, real intimacy, not the fantasy kind.
What is clear from the discussion so far is that the way we think about and talk about love is changing and as a culture, we are no longer sure, what it means. It is this lack of clarity that bothers some writers. May (2011) says love would make more sense if we began to ask the right questions, questions about what matters to us as individuals and as a world, questions that the ‘death of god’ have posed for our secular society (p. 93). May writes:

> Almost two thousand years – and not a single new god! cried Nietzsche in 1888. But he was wrong. The new god was there – indeed was right under his nose. That new god was love. Human love (p. xv).

This is not necessarily a bad thing, as Giddens (1992) argues, shorn of differential power, sexual love could be the means through which individuals learn to step out of their preoccupation with themselves. Giving and receiving pleasure in a sexual context could be a way of learning to co-operate in a way that promotes individual and collective flourishing. The point that Giddens (1992) makes is that people can no longer just carry on as they always have. We might not go as far as Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995), who argue that: ‘for individuals who have to invent or find their own social setting, love becomes the central pivot giving meaning to their lives’ (p. 170), but we can agree that love is still meaningful, people still ‘fall in love’, they still get married and they still wonder what all the fuss is about.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I explored the cultural conditions that Giddens (1992) argues allows for the emergence of confluent love. This sort of love, he says, emerges in the context of a relationship of sexual and emotional equality. As I explained the main difference between romantic love and confluent love is agency, which Giddens (1986) defines as the capacity for a person to make a difference in the world. Treating each other as equals is the key factor in what makes these relationships potentially liberating, because this dissolves the unequal power dynamic at the heart of romantic love, and allows people space for people to experiment with different ways of being in relationship.

The main point Giddens (1992) makes is that romantic love is based on the idea that men and
women are complementary opposites: men are what women are not, and women are what men are not. When we realize that there is nothing natural about this, it does provide a way of reconciling the very real differences that do exist between men and women, which are partly to do with their biological sex, but mostly to do with how gender has been structured in our society. This is important because it provides the impetus to rethink what love means in a way that gives both everyone a voice in deciding what ‘good’ relationship and ‘good’ sex is all about.

In this sense confluent love appears to be an improvement on romantic love, but it is still difficult to agree with Giddens (1992) that pure relationships are revolutionary in the way he says they are. Particularly problematic is his use of the self-help narrative to justify his theory because these are steeped in an ideology that has political and economic consequences. As some of the writers I engaged with in this chapter pointed out, the therapeutic narrative that Giddens (1992) draws on is infused with an ideology that fosters independence and self mastery over relationships and emotional connections. Here the focus is on being independent, which is something of a paradox when it comes to intimacy. According to Bauman (2003) and Illouz (2007) especially, pure relationships are ‘frail’ and superficial, and not the sort of soil in which real or genuine love could take root and blossom.

Because of these issues, it was important to iron out some of the more problematic aspects of Giddens’ (1992) theory before I could use it as a framework for my research. From this discussion it appears that the main problem with his theory is that he seems to take the concept of free-will too far, which does not make sense when it comes to love. Love is often not a choice, and our feelings and desires, are not always amenable to conscious control. In emphasising people’s capacity to choose, Giddens (1992) also downplays the social conditions that shape people’s lives and influence who and how they love. As Smart and Shipman (2004) point out, Giddens’ (1992) theory is premised on the idea that people are free to go about their relationships however they want, but this is not the way many men and women actually experience love (p. 493).
Chapter 2 – a feminist critique

Giddens (1992) claims that women are at the forefront of the trend towards more pure relationships, referring to women as the ‘emotional revolutionaries of modernity’ (p. 130). He says because women no longer agree with male sexual dominance, ‘in so far as male power is based on the compliance of women, and the economic and emotional services which women provide, it is under threat’ (p. 132). However, not everyone agrees that women are necessarily better off when it comes to sex and intimacy in contemporary western culture. In this chapter I discuss Giddens’ (1992) theory of confluent love from a feminist perspective, and explore how this sort of love could exist in a world where women are still regarded as the ‘inferior’ sex (Langford 1999, Gilligan 1986, 2013, Evans 2003, Gilligan and Richards 2009).

As discussed in the previous chapter, romantic love is a cultural construct, which is no longer viable in a world where sexuality and gender are more fluid. That said, it is unclear whether confluent love does represent a move towards more equal relationships, especially between heterosexual men and women, or whether it is a product of an ideology that continues to disenfranchise women, albeit in ways that are more difficult to see. The feminists I engage with in this chapter, agree that men and women, regardless of their sexuality, have more choice in how they live and love, but the point they make is that what constitutes ‘good sex’ is still being defined according to masculine values (Tyler 2008, Illouz 2007, Evans 2003, Jamieson 1999). If what these writers say is correct then the rhetoric of pure relationships, rather than being a way to liberate love from the shackles of the past, is a prime example of how patriarchy continues to dominate social norms in contemporary western culture.

According to some feminists, Giddens’ (1992) theory down plays the history of women’s oppression, and perpetrates the idea that women are expected to play along with male sexual values. Carol Smart (2007) argues that, ‘feminists have identified love as an aspect of ‘patriarchy’s ideological armament through which women became hooked into dependent relationships with men, entered into an unfavorable legal contract (namely marriage) and ultimately ended up with care of the children’ (p. 60 cited in Grossi 2012, p. 497). While Giddens (1992) argues that this is changing, the feminists I engaged with in this chapter, argue there is still a long way to go before women are treated as equal to men in a sexual context. Writers like Wendy Langford (1999) and Lynn Jamieson (1999), argue his theory fails to address the fact that women do not necessarily want
the same things that men do when it comes to love, sex and intimacy. These arguments make it difficult to agree with Giddens (1992) that women in western culture are at the forefront of the emergence of confluent love, which he claims allow both men and women more space to articulate, or express, their authentic preferences, desires and beliefs (p. 189). This does not mean that change is not possible, only that it may not be happening in the way Giddens (1992) says it is.

The main problem with Giddens’ (1992) theory, as I pointed out in the previous chapter, is the self-help texts that he draws on to substantiate his theory. Illouz (2007) argued that the ‘self-help’ or therapeutic narrative does not empower women to be more themselves in the context of intimacy, rather she says it only resonates with the …’(distinctly American) view that people could and should shape their own destinies’ (p. 43). On this view, women are encouraged to embrace their ‘rights’ and become more self-reliant, in love as in life. Illouz (2007) writes:

…what do I want? What are my preferences and personality? Am I adventurous or in need of security? Do I need someone to be a breadwinner or someone with whom I can discuss the politics of the day? If these questions haunt the advice literature, it is because women were enjoined both by feminism and by therapy to clarify their values and preferences, build relationships that conform to and suit those values, all with the goal of asserting an autonomous and self reliant self’ (p. 32).

For many women then, as Rowland-Serdar and Schwartz-Shea (1990) point out, feminism has not necessarily been empowering for women, rather it appears that ‘one type of subjugation has merely been exchanged for another’ (p. 606). These writers argue that women now have a double work load, because as well as paid work they are also expected to look after children, do the housework all the while continuing to please men in the kitchen and the bedroom. Rowland-Serdar and Schwartz-Shea (1990) argue that: ‘The ‘double day’ of work which women who have crossed the barriers into the public sphere confront (and which many women confronted before feminists publicized it) is a vivid example of the ambiguous nature of women’s progress’ (p. 606). So, while it appears that women have the same opportunities that men do, social norms continue to privilege men, and it is not just about sex. Scott Coltrane (2000), who reviewed more than 200 scholarly articles and books on household labour published between 1989 and 1999, found that men’s involvement in housework increased slightly over those years, however, ‘women still do at least twice as much routine housework as men’ (p. 1). He argues they do this not because they want to, but because
gender expectations demand it. Coltrane (2000) writes:

In general, women have felt obligated to perform housework, and men have assumed that
domestic work is primarily the responsibilities of mothers, wives, daughters, and low-paid
female housekeepers (p. 1209).

Pure relationships are theoretically ‘open-ended’, or ‘until-further-notice’, so both partners are free
to leave a relationship if they feel they no longer gain ‘sufficient benefit… to make its continuance
worthwhile’ (Giddens 1992, p. 63). The issue here is that women, especially women with children,
are less able to come and go in relationships in the same way men are. Giddens (1992) claims that
for first time in history that women in western culture claim equality with men, but the evidence
appears contradictory, as reflected in the gender pay gap. Women still earn less than men for doing
the same job. One recent study argues that women in Australia earn an average $26,527 less than
men in comparable jobs (ABC News, 2017). Women are also more likely to find themselves
financially and socially disadvantaged when their relationships end (Our Watch, 2010). In 2011 in
Australia, sole-parent families made up 19.4 per cent of all families with dependent children, and
16.4 per cent of those families were headed by a woman (AIFS, 2016), and this was not necessarily
by choice.

Importantly, these structural inequalities continue to fuel attitudes that perpetuate male violence
against women. According to the Australian Human Rights Commission one in four women in
Australia have experienced physical violence by a current or former partner, and one in five women
over the age of 15 has experienced sexual violence. One woman a week, on average, in Australia is
killed by a partner or former partner (2014). Violence against women also impacts on children.
According to the Institute of Family Studies exposure to violence in the home has a long-term
influence on a child’s health and wellbeing, influencing attitudes to relationships, as well as
emotional functioning and social development, a process of ‘negative chain effects’ which also
impacts on education and later employment prospects (2016).

The causes of domestic and sexual violence are complex – and men are also subject to intimate
partner violence, however to a much lesser extent than women – and most sources cite gender
inequality as a key determinant in domestic violence situations, ‘particularly when there is social
acceptance of narrowly constructed emphasis on traditional gender roles’ (Philips et. al. 2015). As
discussed in the previous chapter, romantic love promotes unequal gender roles by positioning men as ‘strong’, ‘active’ and ‘independent’, and women as ‘weak’, ‘passive’ and ‘emotionally dependent’. In romantic relationships there is still a master/slave dichotomy at play, which is less obvious nowadays, but which continues to influence the way men and women relate to each other. Langford (1999) points out that ‘…romantic love may have become ‘democratised’ [but] caution should be exercised in respect of any claim that the relationships which result are necessarily becoming more humane or more equitable’ (p. 9). Johnson and Repta (2012) argue that inequalities between men and women persist and ‘in almost every society in the world, men are more highly regarded than women and given greater power, access, money, opportunities, and presence in public life’ (p. 21).

Langford’s 1999 argument was supported at the time by Lynn Jameison’s (1999) research, which revealed ‘a persistent, tenacious and phallocentric view of heterosexual sex as something men do to women’ (p. 484). Referring to Jameison’s research, Langford writes that ‘far from intimacy being transformed, as was Giddens’s hope, intimacy seems to exist in an all too predictable and apparently unshakable mode’ (Langford 1999 cited in Evans 2003, p. 125).

It was important for my research to clarify this issue, because to use Giddens’ (1992) theory as a starting point for my research, I first had to identify whether the conditions for this sort of love existed. What was clear from my reading was that confluent love involves agency, but it was not clear that women [or men for that matter] have the sort of agency that Giddens (1992) claims they do. He refers to a woman’s right to initiate divorce, as well as their capacity to control reproduction, as examples of how the power dynamic between men and women is changing. He says these changes not only empower women to ‘escape from an oppressive relationship...[it] limit[s] the capability of the husband to impose his domination and thereby contributes to the translation of coercive power into egalitarian communication’ (p. 190).

While I agree that the right to initiate divorce is empowering for women, and the right to control childbirth is liberating, however it is still not clear that women have the sort of power that Giddens (1992) describes, and which is a prerequisite for confluent love, and the evidence he provides is ideologically suspect. Carol Smart and Beccy Shipman (2004) point out that one of the main weaknesses in Giddens’ (1992) theory, is that he speculates about how people are behaving in their intimate lives based on ‘the popularity of self-help texts on relationship management and breakdown rather than from empirical research’ (p. 493).
If research by Meagan Tyler (2008) is anything to go by, the self-help texts do not promote equality, rather they perpetrate the idea that women still exist primarily to please men. Tyler analyzed the five top sex self-help books that Australian sexologists told her they highly recommended to their clients. She found that the literature is promoted as being highly beneficial for women, with some author’s claiming their work is ‘feminism’s next frontier’, however she argues, they promote a sort of sexual prostitution (Berman and Berman 2001, p. xiv cited in Tyler 2008, p. 363) Tyler argues that these texts counsel heterosexual women especially, to be more available for sex or risk losing their relationships (p. 366).

While the language of women’s rights and women’s pleasure may have been widely adopted, a feminist analysis of these texts show they promote the sexual interests of men over women (p. 363).

In other words, the ideology underpinning the self-help texts, needs to be carefully considered from a feminist perspective, because despite the new freedoms that women and gays have ‘won’, there are powerful forces that seek to maintain the status quo. For many women, sexual love is still tainted by an oppressive ideology, and while Giddens’ (1992) theory provides a new way of talking about love, there is no real evidence that this is what is happening. By drawing on the self-help genre to support his argument, he also, unwittingly perhaps, promotes a way of thinking about love, that continues to disenfranchise women. He claims romantic love is no longer relevant, but as Langford (1999) argues, the ideology of romantic love goes deeper than Giddens (1992) seems to realize. She argues that many women have ‘internalised’ patriarchal values to the extent that they are no longer able to recognize their authentic desires and feelings. She cites a study by Dunchome and Marsden (1993), where women claimed to be happy in their relationships, despite overt evidence to the contrary. The authors cite Arlie Hochschild’s (1983) theory of ‘deep acting’, to explain this. This is the idea that a feeling that one believes one should have or wants to have, obscures the real or authentic feelings that a person is actually experiencing (p. 20). This ‘deep acting’ was also evident in Swidler’s (2001) research, which involved talking to American men and women about their marriages. What is interesting about Swidler’s (2001) research is that the people she spoke to recognized romantic love as a myth, but their language, the way they talked about their relationships was ‘peppered’ with metaphors that alluded to this myth.

On the most part the people that Swidler (2001) interviewed understood, based on their experience,
that romantic love does not guarantee that two people will ‘live happily ever after’. She writes that people appeared to alternate between different realities: ‘while vehemently rejecting ‘infatuation’ or ‘movie star love’, they periodically invoke images of love as all-or-nothing, certain, enduring that violate the commonsense understandings they normally use (p. 117). In other words, people recognize their reality, but do not seem to have the language to make sense of it: in which case, the ‘ideal’ and the ‘real’ have become very distant shores.

Swidler (2001) also identified a prevailing notion that ‘in discovering love, we discover our true self…’Love must thus be certain, as the core of the self is certain’ (p. 113). Here love is not about becoming ‘self-realised’ in the sense that Giddens (1992) means it as being able to chart your own course in life, rather ‘who we are’ is determined very much by the person we love. This has echoes of Aristophane’s speech, where two people, who are literally ‘made for each other’ find themselves in the gaze of the other, and become complete. Swidler (2001) also points out that many of interviewees talked about equality, which ‘is seen to arise from the pursuit of intimacy’ but ‘men appear not to pursue intimacy at all. Women do, and feel dissatisfied, yet appear keen to portray their relationships as equal anyway’ (p. 21). In other words, Swidler argues, despite the rhetoric that relationships should be equal, for many women, being ‘in love’, involves being treated as less than a man.

Importantly her work shows that people still talk about love as the road to happiness or the ultimate fulfillment in a way that contradicts what they experience.

The main point here is that while it appears that both men and women are more able to define themselves sexually and otherwise in contemporary western culture, the language that people use to make sense of our intimate relationships, is still very much anchored in the past, in the idea that love is about meeting one’s ‘other half’, and living happily ever after. While there is talk about women being treated as equals, these ideals do not seem to match the reality. Importantly it appears that women are either not recognizing this, or are confused by what equality means in a practical sense.

One of the main issues that Langford (1999) has with Giddens’ (1992) theory is that it jettisons the idea that ‘true love is forever’, while promoting a way of being happy that depends on being in a ‘loving’ relationship. The only change here is that love no longer depends on fate, it is now something that people choose, and what they should choose has already been pre-determined,
according to masculine values, as far as sex goes, this equates with the idea that more is better, and that being ‘free’ or ‘independent’ is the main aim of a ‘good’ relationship. Because of these contradictions, Evans (2003) argues, the ‘rules’ of social life in western culture may be changing, but the context in which these rules are made, has not. She argues: ‘Western society continues to regulate love, romance and sexuality in terms of the interests and perceptions of men rather than women’ (p. 85). Tyler (2008) research supports this by showing that sexism – the idea that women are the inferior sex - still happens in contemporary western culture, but in more subtle and insidious ways.

One of the main problems with the self-help narrative, which is at the core of the contemporary cultural landscape that Giddens (1992) maps out, is that the ‘self’ is an abstract, isolated self that eschews human relationships in favor of being independent or autonomous. As Rowland-Serdar and Schwartz-Shea (1990), point out, this is the neo-liberal self who is free to pursue their own happiness, and other people only matter in so far as they promote our interests. Rowland-Serdar and Schwartz-Shea (1990) argue women are taught they can chart their own destinies, that they are free to live according to their own desires, but they are also told, perhaps more subtly, that their desires are only ‘good’ if they are aligned with the interests of men. In this sense, they argue, women are still expected to be subservient. Rowland-Serdar and Schwartz-Shea (1990) write that:

…in keeping with liberal political thought, the primary role of men was to go out into the public realm; women were to play necessary but adjunct roles of serving and nurturing within the home. Women were to serve sexually (by being a desirable sexual object) and to nurture emotionally (by acting as a surrogate mother). In contrast to the instability and change of the competitive work place, women in the home were to provide stability and unconditional loving (p. 609).

These fixed positions may have changed in the last fifty years, as both Giddens (1992) and Weeks (2007) point out, and women have more choice about how to live their lives. But that does not mean that they are able to live according to their own desires. These days women can ‘have it all’, but what they really want it is something they have not yet had the opportunity to fully consider. As Giddens (1992) points out, a point he fails to explore further, is that ‘sexuality is usually described as though it were androgynous, a direct result of following a conception of libido that is anonymous in respect of gender’ (p. 169).
The main point that Rowland-Serdar and Schwartz-Łe (1990) make is that, enlightenment philosophers forgot to factor in that men and women are socialized differently, so they will experience love and sex differently. These authors argue, the idea that we are all born free and equal, does not take account of the fact that not everyone has equal access to the cultural resources needed to pursue their own ideas of happiness. These writers argue that women grow up being told that they have no power, except as sexual objects and mothers, so it is more difficult for them to ‘envision empowerment’ (p. 608).

This discussion makes it difficult to agree with Giddens (1992) that women are at the forefront of the changes taking place in the sphere of intimacy. Importantly, as Rowland-Serdar and Schwartz-Łe (1990) point out, the “self” that the self-help genre promotes is premised on the belief that ‘what is essentially valuable about human beings is a particular mental capacity’ (p. 615). It is this capacity which gives them the power to be self-determining. They argue that this view of the self fails to account for the way a person’s sense of self develops in a social or relational context. ‘People whose sense of self is secure are capable of becoming empowered through choice and the utilization of rights’ (p. 606). I discuss this further in chapter three.

For our present discussion, the ideology that runs through the self-help books, and what this means for women, meant that I needed to look more deeply at how Giddens (1992) explains pure relationships, and thus the emergence of confluent love. Here I draw on Weeks (2009), who agrees with Giddens that the transformations that are now occurring in people’s lives are potentially revolutionary as far as gender and sexuality go. I also look more closely at same sex relationships, which Giddens (1992) claims are the harbingers of the pure relationship, because they change what people in western culture regard as “normal” as far as intimate relationships are concerned. Giddens (1992) claims that homosexuals, both male and female, paved the way for pure relationships because same sex couples had to ‘get along’ without established frameworks for love and marriage ‘in conditions of relative equality between partners’ (p. 15).

In a similar vein, Weeks (2007) argues that same sex relationships opened the way for ‘more egalitarian forms of relationship and creative life experiments, as much by force of circumstances as design’ (p. 8). Giddens (1992) says heterosexual women have since taken up the mantle by exposing the myth of romantic love, as a form of patriarchal dominance, and they too are demanding the right to pursue their own interests. Giddens argues that as a result, marriage ‘in the traditional sense’ is
disappearing, and ‘it is the gays who are the pioneers in this respect – the prime everyday experimenters. They have for some while experienced what is becoming more and more commonplace for heterosexual couples’ (p. 135).

While this may be the case, one of the problems of applying the logic of homosexual relationships to heterosexual ones, is that heterosexual male and female gender roles are much more securely embedded in our cultural scripts: especially the idea that in a relationship men are ‘strong’ and ‘women’ weak. Here the unequal power dynamic is literally woven into the narrative. In same sex couples the gender divisions that structure heterosexual relations do not apply to the same extent, so gender roles become much more malleable. In this sense, gays and lesbians, as well as individuals who identify as bisexual and transgender, do have more freedom to ‘invent’ or ‘reinvent’ themselves, because they are not constrained by the dynamic that structures heterosexual relationships. In this sense, homosexual, lesbian, bisexual and transgender couples can ‘experiment’ with gender in their relationships.

As I discussed in the previous chapter, heterosexuality is structured on the idea of complementary opposites, and there is a powerful divide between the active role and passive role. In contemporary culture these stereotypes do not apply to the extent that they used to, but men are still defined in terms of their strength and women according to their lack of it (Lundgren and Amin 2015). The problem with this is not so much that one sex is different from the other, it is the way these differences came to regarded as ‘natural’. Importantly this natural order has its own hierarchy, with men appearing slightly lower than the angels, and higher than women, who like slaves, were considered less than human. This idea, called the ‘great chain of being’ can be attributed to Aristotle, and it continues to structure our contemporary thoughts about gender. On Aristotle’s conception of living well there is nothing wrong with women being positioned as subservient and obedient to men, especially if this contributes to a man’s flourishing. As Simon Blackburn (2001) men’s oppression of women is considered a normal state of affairs: ‘In such a world, the man oppressing the woman has no bad conscience, and suffers no loss of respect from those he cares about – mainly other men’ (p. 114).

The point that Gilligan and Richards (2009) make of all this, which I focus on here, and in the chapter that follows, is that times may have changed, but people in western culture still ‘play the game of love’ according to patriarchal rules, but these rules are less obvious than they used to be.
Despite Giddens (1992) optimism, these writers argue there is still a lot of healing to do before men and women can speak openly and honestly about what they want and need in the context of an intimate relationship. They argue: ‘We have come far but remain deeply flawed in our democracy, as basic rights of intimate life are in political peril, issues of racial and gender inequality persist, and economic inequality worsens’ (p. 11). This is evidenced by the increasing prevalence of intimate partner or sexual violence experienced by women worldwide, especially younger women. A recent study found that rates of sexual violence among younger people is much higher than the violence which to women over the age of 24. As Rebecka Lundgren and Avni Amin (2015) point out, ‘the magnitude of the problem among adolescents, especially girls and young women, is significant’ and ‘tragically, exposure to gender-based violence places many adolescents on a lifelong trajectory of violence, either as victims or perpetrators’ (p. S42).

Gilligan and Richards (2009) point to repression of a ‘sexual’ voice, which they argue is also an ‘ethical’ voice, in both men and women as the primary source of the problem: because it constrains people, especially women but also men, from speaking freely about sex and love. They trace this back to Roman patriarchy (p. 17). In Roman times being a woman was just one step up from being a slave, and men were expected to maintain a code of honor which involved killing their own family, if needed, to maintain political and economic power. Importantly, women were political ‘vessels’ which Roman patriarchy had to ensure remained legitimate containers for their male progeny, who inherited its power. Because of this, Gilligan and Richards (2009) argue that:

A family living under the rule of the Roman patria potestas experienced a form of oppression at the center of intimate life, including control not only over inheritance and genealogy but also over the use of force to hold people in line (p. 25).

Gilligan and Richards (2009) claim that this oppression was fueled or held in place by the introduction of shame into any sort of sexuality that resisted the strict code of behavior demanded by Roman patriarchy. They write that ‘such shame extends to what we desire and what our bodies tell us’ (Gilligan and Richards 2009, p. 20). They argue this is particularly toxic to men, who have not only been taught that their real feelings do not matter when it comes to getting along in the world, it also applies to women who are taught in a myriad of different ways, that their only legitimate desires are those that are aligned with ‘their man’ and his purpose in the world. As Gilligan and Richards (2009) tell it shame, especially to do with sexual desire, and feelings of pleasure, is a central feature
of patriarchal culture, going back to early Christianity. This is because ‘reason’ is held as the human ideal, the property that makes men superior to both women and ‘beasts’, and any departure from this was considered a step down in the world, a step into the world of women, and therefore no longer a man.

Gilligan and Richards (2009) argue that: ‘the intensity of our sexual experience [is] a mark of our loss of rationality’ (p. 104), which, in patriarchal culture, is a source of shame; something people want to cover up, or repress, and which also cuts them off from being able to reveal and speak about what they are really feeling. Shame arises for men when their feelings of needing to be loved, or being vulnerable to another person, sexually or emotionally, conflicts with their ideas about masculinity and femininity (Giddens 1992, p. 116). When masculinity is defined according to ‘reason’, any perceived divergence, is considered ‘wrong’ or ‘bad’: ‘hence sexuality and the experience of pleasure per se become demonized’ (Gilligan and Richards 2009 p. 104). Again, while attitudes may be changing, recent research, which explored how early adolescents, between the ages of 10 and 13, from around the world, talked about love relationships, sex is still seen by some as ‘dirty’ or ‘bad’ and stereotypical attitudes prevail (S. De Meyer et. al. 2017, p S45). These researchers found that the young people they interviewed in various urban areas around the world, including Baltimore and Nairobi, ‘commonly endorse stereotypical norms of masculine sexual prowess in contrast to feminine deference and lack of sexual power’ (2017, p. S45).

Rather than see these attitudes as a product of their social conditioning, men have been encouraged, by religion and philosophy, to see women as inferior. On their part, women have been forced to ‘internalise’ this opinion of themselves, and blame themselves for not ‘measuring up’. Gilligan and Richards (2009) argue:

…our sexuality is tainted by its association with woman as temptress. Indeed, our sexuality is, on this view, punishment for the Fall, the lapse of control reminding us of our primal disobedience (p. 105).

By instilling shame at the center of intimate life, Roman patriarchy set the stage for what Gilligan and Richards (2009) call the ‘traumatic disruption of intimate life’, where men and women become emotionally estranged from each other. To become truly intimate, especially for men, would mean opening themselves to feelings and desires, which they have been taught to see as shameful and
‘wrong’. While sexuality is no longer ‘sinful’ in the same way it was in early Christianity, it is still very much defined according to patriarchal values.

These days the language of sexual love has moved from being rooted in the mythical and religious, to being much more grounded in our human ‘nature’, in our psychology and our biology. An important pioneer in this was Sigmund Freud, who is said to have ‘created’ or ‘discovered’ modern sexuality, primarily through the conversations he had with women (Herman 1992). The important point about Freud is that while, in some senses he liberated sexuality from the control of religion - sex was no longer considered sinful, or something to be ashamed of, rather it became something that we needed to ‘manage’ or control for it to be a force for ‘good’. Importantly, the conversation about human sexuality, which began with Freud, led to the proliferation of sexual discourses which continued into the latter part of the 19th century, where it became medicalized. We now have a ‘science of sexuality’, which takes us away from the idea that sex is ‘bad’ or ‘evil’, and replaces it with the idea of pathology, the idea that until we will not be fully satisfied until we find the right technique, the right therapist, or the right body. The ‘science of sex’ replaced priests with therapists, and the same narrative that promises liberation, does so by framing ‘sexuality’ in terms of suffering. Sexuality is now something that we need to ‘fix’, or do something about, or to ‘achieve’ to be happy. Intimate relationships are the place where this ‘work’ is done. As Illouz (2007) tells it:

Once the notion of intimacy was posited as the norm and the standard for healthy relationships, the absence of intimacy now pointed to one’s faulty emotional make-up, for example, to a fear of intimacy (p. 46).

The idea of intimacy here is being defined in a very specific way. As Illouz (2007) explains, health is equated with intimacy, and anything that gets in the way of intimacy, is unhealthy (p. 46). Here health and “self realization”, defined as independence, go hand in hand. The language of the ‘self-help’ narrative perpetuates this by depicting “emotional mastery” as a masculine strength. Giddens (1991) illustrates this when he elucidates the idea of authenticity as being at the heart of pure relationships. He writes: “To be true to oneself means finding oneself, but since this is an active process of self-construction it has to be informed by overall goals – those of becoming free from dependencies and achieving fulfillment” (p. 79). Furthermore, he writes that on the ‘morality of authenticity’ intimate relationships are only important in so far as they help us achieve this independence.
This sets up a problem for women especially because, on one hand the therapeutic literature tells them they need a relationship to be happy, but they also need to assert themselves as sexually powerful and liberated. In consumer culture this translates into the need to invest in a new dress, new car, and even a new body to get the love and sexual pleasure they are told is their right; and if one man or woman does not work out, then another one is just around the corner.

Importantly, it was the way that Freud interpreted the conversations he had with his predominately female patients, rather than what they actually said, that shaped the way we understand sexuality to this day. Judith Herman (1992) writes that Freud’s later theories, which are the basis for our current understanding of human sexuality, were founded on a denial of women’s reality. Herman (1992) writes that Freud initially believed his clients’ stories of sexual abuse and incest, however he later recanted saying these were fantasies that his patients had made up (p. 14).

According to Herman (1992), due to pressure from his peers, Freud ended up distancing himself from what he had discovered about women’s sexuality, and went on to develop a theory of human development which supported the subordination of women based on their biology (p. 19). As Giddens (1992) explains, this had more to do with the social and political climate at the time, than it did with the actual experiences of Freud’s clients. Nevertheless, he argues, drawing on the work of Michele Foucault (1926-1984), the study of sex and the creation of discourses about it, ‘led to the development of various contexts of power-knowledge. One concerned women. Female sexuality was recognized and immediately crushed – treated as the pathological origin of hysteria’ (p. 21). Carole Pateman (1988) argued that so long as women played along with patriarchal values, they could be ‘equal’ and ‘free’. She says the now antiquated notion that a woman’s proper place was in the home was maintained through the ‘separate but equal’ doctrine, which she argued, effectively obscured the patriarchal power men wielded in both spheres (Pateman 1988, cited in Gilles 2003 p. 6).

**The disappearing girl**

Gilligan (2003) argues that the ‘game of love’, as we know it in contemporary western culture, is played out on a familiar landscape; it is ‘a cultural formation that has been built up over thousands of years...This is the story we tell over and over again, the tragic story of love’ (p. 32). This cultural landscape, she says, overlays the split in our own psyches, says Gilligan (2003), a division caused by
the ‘traumatic disruption of intimacy’ which ‘stands in the way of love’ (p. 8). By defining authenticity as ‘independence’ Giddens perpetuates this disruption by drawing on an ideology, which, as Illouz (2007) pointed out above, instills masculine values – the idea that emotions are only good if they support a person to become self-realized, or authentic. In this way, as Lorraine Code (1991) points out: ‘Linguistically, it is a man’s world, where woman’s place is defined and maintained by ‘man made language’ in innumerable subtle ways’ (p. 59).

Gilligan and Richards (2009) argue that Freud’s theory has no psychological basis, and that it constitutes a deep betrayal of his female patients. They argue that rather than support resistance to the patriarchal voice, Freud enshrined it in the psyche by making it a core feature of what came to be known as a ‘universal human psychology’. Here pathology or suffering is the price we pay for becoming civilized. As Gilligan and Richards (2009) explain:

What Freud offers us is a view of civilization. On the one hand, civilization must constrain the sexual love of men in the interest of sublimation (in consequence, “the woman finds herself forced into the background by civilization and she adopts a hostile attitude towards it”. On the other hand, civilization imposes problematic demands of loving one’s neighbor as oneself to control men’s “instinctual endowment”, including a “powerful share of aggressiveness” (p. 182).

Freud, in an important sense legitimizes male violence against women, making it a ‘natural’ part of his biology and psyche, while at the same time forcing women into the background of civilization where they are made to feel somehow ‘wrong’. Gilligan’s (1992) research also identified this. She found that adolescent girls were allowed limited agency insofar as they went along with prevailing social norms. Her conversations revealed, she argues, the ‘traumatic disruption’ that stands in the way of intimacy in patriarchal culture. Gilligan (1992) writes:

Girls’ relational knowing made our own relational compromises transparent and also revealed the relational lies that are at the center of patriarchal cultures; subtle untruths and various forms of violation and violence that cover over or lead to women’s disappearance in both the public world of history and culture and the private world of intimacy and love. (p. 21).

This ‘disappearance’ can be best understood as being denied the capacity to participate in society’s
values and institutions. Representations of love in contemporary culture, including ideas about what constitutes a ‘good’ relationship in the ‘self-help’ or therapeutic narrative, perpetuate this exclusion. They do this by giving women agency, but it is the same sort of agency that men have, the power to dominate or assert themselves. It is not so much that men still have the upper hand that worries Gilligan, it is the fact that there is an upper hand at all.

Men’s emotional reliance on women

Male power was written into our cultural narratives a long time ago, and our stories about romantic love fostered this, in part, according to Giddens (1992) because they provided a way for men to keep their emotional reliance on women hidden. It is not individual men who have done this, rather it is the way masculinity has been and continues to be portrayed in our culture. As Gilligan and Richards (2009) tell it, patriarchy requires men to ‘suppress personal voice and relationships in an identification with the patriarchal voice’ (p. 23). In a world where feelings are considered inferior to thinking, and emotional dependence is something to be ashamed of, men are not men if they love too much. According to Giddens (1992) it is the constant searching for love, while at the same time denying their need for it, that fuels men’s sexual exploits and other forms of aggression towards women (p. 127). Giddens (1992) argues the problem is not feelings per se, but the way feelings are depicted as the antithesis of reason and therefore contrary to being ‘masculine’. He writes:

It has become commonplace in the therapeutic literature to say that men tend to be “unable to express feelings” or are “out of touch” with their own emotions. But this is much too crude. Instead, we should say that many men are unable to construct a narrative of self that allows them to come to terms with an increasingly democratized and reordered sphere of personal life (p. 117).

According to Giddens (1992) the suppression of feeling in men is most poignant in the sexual realm, where, he says, they use episodic sex to escape feelings of vulnerability (p. 116). He says: ‘much male sexuality is energised by a frustrated search for love, which, however, is feared as well as desired’ (p. 131).

In other words, men are having a difficult time reconciling that idea that women are neither ‘inferior’ or ‘superior’, and that feelings, including feelings of vulnerability, are important aspects of being human, regardless of gender. There is a strong resistance by men to incorporating what they see as
‘feminine’ in their ideas about themselves, as Giddens (1992) points out, by portraying women as inferior men can retain an idea of themselves as superior.

This is evidenced by cultural representations of masculinity. In his analysis of “guy” movies, for example, Zeglin (2016) found, ‘...the most frequently displayed components of masculinity were emotional control, risk-taking, violence, and dominance’ (p. 42). Furthermore, in a study exploring the construction of ‘a certain type of masculinity’ in rap music, researchers Weitzer and Kubrin, (2009), found that ‘power over women’ was a significant theme. Examples of this included ‘derogatory naming and shaming’ as well as ‘sexual objectification of women’, ‘distrust of women’, ‘legitimation of violence against women’ and a ‘celebration of prostitution and pimping’ (Weitzer and Kubrin 2009, cited in Zeglin 2016, p. 45).

These examples do not paint a complete picture, and many men these days would not identify with this construction of masculinity. However, these studies show that our cultural scripts or gender ideals, continue to reflect a power differential between men and women, albeit ‘performed’ in in ways that are becoming more difficult to see (Richards 2013). Another example of this ‘subtle’ sexism is the way women are depicted in advertising, as being ‘powerful’ but in a way that Gill (2008) argues, erodes their capacity for self-determination. Gill (2008) points out that women are no longer presented as objects for male consumption and pleasure, rather feminine power is depicted as debasing men, while at the same time hoping to win their admiration. Gill (2008) points to an advertisement for bras, where a confident, beautiful young girl asserts: ‘New hair, new look, new bra; and if he doesn’t like it, new boyfriend’ (p 42). Here the message is all about being ‘active, independent and sexually powerful’ (Gill p. 35). Gill (2008) claims that these advertisements also promote the idea that men and women are constantly at war with each other. ‘What is implicit in all these ads is the idea that the relation between women and men is a battle, and the battle lines are already drawn, fixed and determined’ (p. 49).

Gill (2008) argues that the ‘voice’ or ‘agency’ imbibed in these representations are not the solution to the ‘missing discourse of female desire’ (p. 35). She claims: ‘Power operates here not by silencing or suppressing female sexual agency, but by constructing it in highly specific ways’ (p. 35). The possession of a sexy body for example, represents a shift away from portraying the feminine as caring or nurturing, but it does not necessarily empower women to be themselves, rather it forces them into another stereotype: the ‘sexually liberated’ woman. Importantly, these representations tell
women what being ‘liberated’ should look like (Gill 2008). They also exclude women who may not conform to the cultural ideal. This includes ‘black women, on the most part, older women, disabled women, fat women or any woman that doesn’t fit the narrow standards of female beauty’ (Gill 2008, p. 44). Gill claims these representations define power/agency in masculine terms: as one person having superiority, or being better than, the other.

Reconsidering Freud

Freud started out “not knowing” about women, and the deep sympathy he had felt with the women he worked with ‘became associated with danger and vulnerability, including the risk of appearing gullible or intellectually naïve in the eyes of fathers’ (Gilligan 2003, p. 227). Because of this he covered over the voices that he heard with the voice of his own authority. This occurred after the death of his father, according to Gilligan (2003), when Freud became totally identified with himself as a father, and thus became the ‘hero of his own tragic story’ (p. 228). He went on to develop a theory of human development which supported the subordination of women based on their biology, as well as their psychology. As Freudian scholar, Richard Webster (1995) points out, Freud’s personal views on sexuality, are rarely questioned. He writes: ‘Freud’s own attitude towards some of the commonest forms of sexual behavior, including masturbation, homosexuality and many aspects of women’s sexuality, was one of distaste bordering on disgust’ (para 13).

It was not until predominantly female therapists, like Gilligan began to listen and to believe the sexual stories that women told, that this started to change. As one of Brown and Gilligans’ (1993) research assistants observed, the women they talked to would only speak if they felt it was safe to do so: when they felt that what they had to say would be heard. She observed:

[A patriarchal culture] is filled with a dissonance that separates intellect from feeling. When there is no longer a ‘place’ or ‘room’ to strengthen their truth or practice speaking directly what they know, the girls then leave the vibrations of their speaking voice and move from breathiness into silence. In this silence, an inner cello world or resonating chamber keeps alive the energy of the initial thought/feelings, preserving an integrity that risks everything if taken back onto the speaking voice in a culture still unable to provide a resonance for such clarity, subtlety and power (p. 222).

Gilligan (2003) remains optimistic that both men and women can reclaim their sexual or ethical
voice, but Freud’s legacy remains strong. A core part of this legacy is that while boys and girls have different sexual scripts, they grow up with a view of sexuality that is essentially masculine. While agreeing that men and women are different, Freud’s opinion was ‘that the libido is regularly and lawfully of a masculine nature, whether in the man or in the woman’ (Freud 1938, p. 612). Gilligan and Richards (2009) argue that,

With this identification, psychoanalysis, initially aligned with resistance to patriarchy, incorporates an Augustinian misogyny quite foreign to its initial inspiration and moves away from its potential as a method of human liberation (p. 3).

For Gilligan (2003) freeing love from the ‘trappings of patriarchal manhood or womanhood’ means ‘undoing dissociation’, and learning to feel one’s feelings: ‘being naked in the presence of another by removing the protective clothes of masculinity and femininity, however they are culturally designed’ (p. 32). This does not mean we have to do away with gender, only that people can ‘perform’ gender in a way that acknowledges that it is not ‘who they really are’. According to Gilligan, people need to see beyond the illusion that passes as the natural order to things, before they can begin to unravel the power dynamic at the heart of romantic love (2003, p. 32).

Despite its problems, Carol Smart (2007) argues that Giddens’ (1992) theory is a step in the right direction – a step away from cultural and social determinism that has hitherto defined the sociological landscape – however the emphasis on individual choice as the defining factor in the relationships he talks about, is a problem. She points out that by premising his theory on the capacity for people to make choices, Giddens (1991, 1992) fails to acknowledge that other people matter, they make claims on us; and how we feel about them influences the choices that we make, and these choices, to some extent, determines to some extent the sort of person we are. Smart (2007) argues that ‘the individuals who inhabit Giddens’ (1991, 1992) landscapes seem remarkably well resourced and free from economic and/or social constraints’ (p. 21). In other words, Giddens (1992) does not account for the ways that our emotional attachments, our children as well as our social and economic circumstances, get in the way of people doing what they want. Sexual pleasure, or satisfaction, is not an end-in-itself the way Giddens (1992) makes it out to be, it is just one part of what makes a life meaningful.
Sex and gender

Giddens (1992) is correct in saying that story of romantic love is part of what keeps gender roles from changing, because it promotes the idea that men and women are complementary opposites, so happiness depends on finding our one and only and living happily ever after. On this story, men are portrayed as powerful and active, while women are portrayed as passive and lacking power. Evans (2003) argues:

Men in romantic accounts of ‘being in love’ had to be ardent suitors, whilst women were expected to be bashful maidens. There was little ideological space for female heterosexual desire or for the uncertainties and ambiguities of either sex (p. 46-47).

It is not these stereotypes per se, but that way that one sex is depicted as dependent on the other for being ‘who they are’. This keeps men and women locked into ways of being that work against them being able to genuinely relate to each other. However, the self-help genre that Giddens (1991, 1992) draws on continues to obscure, rather than clarify, the different ways that men and women experience love and sex. As Gilligan (2003) pointed out gender scripts traditionally encourage boys ‘to stand alone and forgo relationships, whereas femininity connotes a girl’s willingness to compromise herself for the sake of relationship’ (p. 30). She argues that this equates maturity with the ‘separateness of the individual self over its connections to others’ (2003, p. 275). In extolling the virtues of ‘self-actualisation’ or ‘self-mastery’, in these discourses, dependency is depicted as pathological or ‘abnormal’ (Giddens 1992, p. 92).

The problem here is not only that emotional reliance is portrayed as being pathological – although as Bauman (2003) pointed out in the last chapter - encouraging narcissism is hardly the soil upon which to build a relationship based on trust - it is the dividing up of experiences into ‘better and worse’, where some ways of relating are ‘normal’ and others ‘abnormal’. Giddens’ (1992) theory of pure relationships perpetuates this. As Jamieson (1999) points out,… “the pure relationship” feeds into a therapeutic discourse that has sometimes been the antithesis of empowering for women and gays (p. 490).

Importantly, in talking to both girls and boys, Gilligan (2003) saw the possibility of a new paradigm for thinking about human relationships, based on pleasure rather than pain: in doing this she points to a way of unravelling the tension between patriarchy and democracy, a way of freeing love from its
tragic past. She argues that this involves ‘freeing the voice so it can carry the full range of emotions and the subtleties and nuances of thought’ (p. 206). This happens, she says, when people let go of the need for power and control. Love becomes ‘free’ in the sense of allowing people to experience themselves in their totality i.e. as having both male and female characteristics, neither of which are ‘better’ or ‘worse’ than any other aspect of their being.

**Twilight of the idols**

If we agree with Gilligan and Richards (2009), women still lack a space for envisaging different ways of being in love. This is because, as I argued above, the conversation about love and sex is dominated by an ideology that encourages ‘independence’ over relationship. The way women are represented in the media, for example, might look different than it did even twenty years ago, but the underlying dynamics that structure heterosexual relationships in western culture is still based on a master/slave dichotomy, albeit in less obvious ways than in previous times.

Writing about the phenomenal Twilight series, Rocha (2014) argues that the love affair between Bella and Edward is a prime example of how women are ‘forced’ into the role of the submissive female who is dominated by the superior male, to the extent that she is prepared to die for him (as well as be reborn in his image). Rocha writes that the Twilight saga’s underlying ideology recognises the equality of women as individuals, but not as an equal member of a heterosexual relationship. She argues:

> ...Bella is only allowed to become a vampire and truly be with Edward after she has cemented her roles as wife and mother, adhering to the rigid, traditional female gender norms (p. 267).

Bella has agency – she has a choice – but that choice revolves around whether to become more like her lover. In another article on the same phenomenon, Bonnie Gaarden (2012) writes that Bella starts out as ‘disabled’, vulnerable and isolated, but ends up a ‘warrior goddess at the center of a devoted clan’, thanks to her man (p. 230). In other words, the underlying ideology, even though it is ‘dressed up in contemporary clothes’, promotes a way of being that is essentially patriarchal: vampires get their power by ‘sucking the life’ out of their human victims. Bella wants what Edward has and she is willing to relinquish her life as a human being to achieve this. She has choices, but she is dominated or obsessed by Edward, who symbolizes an ideal which can only be acquired by
renouncing her humanity, including the people and places that shaped who she is. Rocha (2014) explains:

The use of the words “cold”, “marble”, “stone”, and “force” associated with Edward signify him as the domineering figure in the relationship while the words associated with Bella, “softly”, and “gently”, connote a fragile nature, reinforcing Bella as the passive, controlled figure who Edward must be in control of and take care of (p. 275).

While these representations are fictional, they also reflect the way gender continues to be portrayed in our culture, and they show that while it appears women have more of a say in how they go about being a woman, this only applies insofar as they go along with masculine values.

Gilligan (1982, 2003) argues that for a woman to be regarded as an equal member of the human race they have had to conform to a male version of reality: central to this is the idea that maturity means independence and separateness, and immaturity equates with dependence, connection, love and care. Importantly this not only affects how women experience themselves – as disconnected from their own sense of what is ‘real’ – it also impacts on how men experience themselves. Because they are taught to see feelings as ‘feminine’, they distance themselves from their more vulnerable feelings, this fuels anger and violence, according to bell hooks (2004), who observes:

The way we turn boys into men is through injury: We sever them from their mothers, research tells us, far too early. We pull them away from their own expressiveness, from their feelings, from sensitivity to others. The very phrase ‘be a man’ means suck it up and keep going (p.60).

While the science of love may provide some help here, giving men a way to better ‘manage’ their emotions, it also hinders it, because it is based on a view of human nature where the less we rely on other people, the better off we are. This way of thinking is especially problematic in a theory of love that depends on trusting people, and being vulnerable in a sexual context.

**Plastic sexuality and the emergence of pure relationships**

Weeks (2009) agrees with Giddens (1992) that the ‘claiming of sexual pleasure’ by women is one of the key factors driving the ‘transformation of intimacy’ in western culture (p. 9) Giddens (1992) argues this is revolutionary given that only seventy-five years ago in Britain, unmarried pregnant
women were sent ‘in their thousands to reformatories and mental hospitals’ because they engaged in
sex (p. 77). He writes:

The Mental Deficiency Act, passed in 1913, allowed local authorities to certify, and detain
indefinitely, unmarried pregnant women who were poor, homeless or just ‘immoral’. Since
the idea was widely held that illegitimate pregnancy was itself a sign of mental abnormality,
the terms of the Act could be, and were, applied very widely indeed’ (Giddens 1992, p. 77).

Giddens (1991, 1992) and Weeks (2009) agree that thanks to more effective methods of birth
control, and the ‘loosening’ of social norms around sexuality, women in western culture now have
more say in how they define themselves sexually. However, the point Weeks (2009) makes, and this
is where he differs from Giddens in an important way, is that there is still a long way to go before
heterosexual women, as well as homosexual men and women, and people who identify as bisexual
and transgender, have the same opportunities that white, heterosexual men do (p. 75). He notes: ‘We
are in the midst…of a genuine social revolution. The revolution is unfinished, partial, uneven in its
impact’ (p. 128). Weeks (2009) makes an important point, because as he sees it, ‘sexual equality’ in
terms of diverse sexualities being equally represented in contemporary culture, is still very much a
work in progress. He argues that the emphasis on individual freedom in western culture, over the
last 50 years in particular, has, to some extent, provided an opportunity for both men and women to
move on from outdated gender scripts, but Weeks also acknowledges that the ‘pattern of male
privilege has not been broken’ (Weeks 2007, p. 43)

Patriarchy and love

We can agree that women in western culture have more freedom that they ever had in terms of how
they live their lives, but when it comes to love and intimacy, women’s voices are still not being
heard, and the basis of this, as Catherine MacKinnon (2017) argues, is ‘the lie of women’s natural
inferiority to men and men’s natural superiority to women’ (The Australian Newspaper, July 22-23,
2017 p. 18). As Friedman (2000) points out, ‘...such traditions conceive of individuals as social atoms
who realize autonomy through independent self-sufficiency and self-creation in selfish detachment
from human connection’ (p. 218).

This state of affairs is beautifully illustrated in Ibsen’s (1965) play ‘A Dolls’ House’, where Nora is
treated like a child by her ‘adoring’ husband. He calls her his little skylark, in a way that positions her
as intellectually and morally inferior. Nora agrees that she is unable to make decisions for herself, so she defers her choices and lets her husband decide what should be done. Things change when Nora decides to apply for a loan to pay for her husband’s medicine, without which, Nora feels he would die. She does not tell her husband what she does, instead she forges her father’s signature to get the loan. The way Nora sees it, she borrowed the money for love, but when her husband finds out, he judges her actions as irrational. When he gets angry with Nora she decides to leave him, saying ‘I must stand on my own feet if I’m to get to know myself and the world outside’ (p. 227). In leaving she affirms her right to her own perspective, but the only way she can do this is to abandon her home and her children to live on her own. For Nora to exist as ‘her own person’ she has had to mirror a masculine way of being i.e. become ‘independent’. When Nora’s husband asks what he could do to get her to change her mind, she hesitates, and then replies, ‘it would take a miracle’, but what she would like is for their life together to be a ‘real marriage’ (p. 232). I take this to mean that she wants to be treated as a real person, both in her relationship and in the world. She wants her husband to respect her opinion, and recognize her reasons as valid, even though he disagrees with her.

The upshot of this discussion is that while we can agree with Giddens (1992) that there have been huge changes in the way men and women relate to each other in contemporary western culture, but it remains to be seen where these changes are leading, and whether confluent love is a ‘better’ or more humane form of love, if indeed it exists at all. By exploring Gilligan’s research, I was able to show what Giddens’ (1992) theory appears to miss: a version of a human being, whose happiness is measured not by how separate they are, but one that depends on being able to speak and be heard in an intimate context. By including Gilligan’s argument that a person’s capacity to care is as much a mark of their humanity, as is their capacity to reason, we get closer to a way of understanding love that can include both these perspectives.

**Liberating love**

As discussed in the previous chapter Giddens’ (1992) theory does not add up, because on one hand he talks about freeing love from the shackles of the past, but he does this by drawing on a view of the self that is essentially masculine. In this ideology women are inferior to men. This does not mean that confluent love could not or does not exist, only that the individuals involved would need to be more aware of how they are influenced by their conditioning. By understanding love as a cultural
construction, rather than something that is inscribed in the heavens, we are more likely to keep our feet on the ground, and not get lost looking for something that is not there. As Giddens (1992) writes sexuality, minus the power deferential that has existed between men and women throughout western history, is about mutual pleasure – the key word being “mutual” (p 202).

While agreeing with Smart and Shipman (2004), that Giddens’ (1992) theory excludes different ways people make sense of being in relationship, the answer is not to jettison his theory altogether. Rather I needed to approach the research in a way that allowed for an examination of how personal freedom is expressed in the context of intimacy, and to understand this from the point of view of how people experience their relationships. Doing this meant going about my research in a way that pays attention to the emotional, embodied and relational perspective. I had to make room for other voices, and other points of view.

Pleasure, especially mutual pleasure, is not necessarily antagonistic to ethics, on the contrary, it is the ground on which new ways of being human can be experimented with. Mutual pleasure is achieved through the communication of desire, and we can only do this when we feel safe. Being listened to is what provides a sense of safety in a sexual context; being able to express desires and feelings without being ashamed to do so. Importantly, for Giddens’ (1992) theory, when we talk about what we desire, it opens up a space for new ways of ‘being in the world’ to be experimented with. Here agency is something we do when we interpret existing conditions in ways that change the way things are. Only individual men and women can do this, and they do so in the way they go about their relationships in the context of their everyday lives. Not by following the advice of the self help texts, but by being comfortable in saying what they feel, and feeling emotionally and psychologically safe to reveal themselves. According to Giddens (1992): ‘Defined in such a fashion, the erotic stands opposed to all forms of emotional instrumentality in sexual relations (p 202).

I discuss this further in the next chapter where I look more closely at the tension between love and patriarchy in the next chapter, a tension that seems to lie at the heart of contemporary love, and which, if resolved, could point the way to more authentic relationships, but not in the way Giddens (1992) explains it. In the following chapter I show how it is possible to reconfigure Giddens’ (1992) theory to better understand how this could work. In doing this I pay closer attention to Gilligan’s (2003) argument that it is possible to create a new map of love that does have the potential to make love more authentic. She argues:
…by uncovering truths about love in an ancient story, by exposing a long-standing social and literary history that leaves a knot in the psyche and exploring this knotted place in our souls, I have found a path leading to pleasure and discovered it is also a road to freedom (p. 11).

Importantly, Gilligan’s sort of love is based on the idea that human beings are both embodied – they come with a certain sort of body, and embedded in a social context, other people are an important part of the story. This view goes beyond the ideal of equality as ‘sameness’, and allows for the ways in which men and women are both equal and different. To take a page out of Schlegel’s (1799) book, this happens when:

…we exchange roles and in childish high spirits compete to see who can mimic the other convincingly, whether you are better at imitating the protective intensity of the man, or the appealing devotion of the woman. But are you aware that this sweet game still has quite other attractions for me than its own...I see here a wonderful, deeply meaningful allegory of the development of man and woman to full and complete humanity (Friedrich Schlegel ‘Lucinde’, p. 49 cited in May 2011, p. 167).

Giddens (1992) is hopeful that contemporary conditions could support greater equality between the sexes. But this could not happen in the way the self-help texts tell it because these promote an ideology that perpetuates ideas about what it means to be human, where other people can be superior or inferior, good or bad, better or worse. As Gilligan and Richards (2009) argue, this way of thinking divides rather than unites people. They argue that this rupture is a significant feature of the map of love that people in western culture have inherited, and it excludes or downgrades the woman’s perspective. This is because it promotes a view of the self that values independence and personal satisfaction over relationships. This can be seen in representations of the ‘empowered’ women in contemporary culture, which according to feminists, do not liberate women, rather they keep them stuck in ways of being that other people have decided are ‘good’ for them.

This does not mean that Giddens’ (1992) theory is wrong, only that I needed to be more circumspect about how he substantiates his theory. I do this in the next chapter where I look more closely at the ethics of personal life that Giddens (1992) claims is emerging in contemporary culture, and which he calls confluent love. I particularly explore how it is men and women have a choice
about love when our emotional patterns are literally programmed into our brains from birth, and shaped by environmental and cultural factors that are largely beyond our control.

Conclusion

This chapter showed how the stereotypes that prescribe how men and women should behave in an intimate and personal context are still very much embedded in our cultural scripts, albeit in a less visible way than they used to be. And these stereotypes continue to constrain women from having an ‘authentic voice’ in the context of an intimate relationship (Illouz 2007, Evans 2003, Jamieson 1999, Porter 1991, Gilligan 1986). This makes it hard to agree with Giddens (1992), that women are the vanguard of the ‘new emotional order’ emerging in western culture, which he calls confluent love. I decided it was not Giddens’ (1992) theory that was the main problem, rather it was the way he justifies his argument, by drawing on a view of the self that is a product of neo-liberal ideology, a self that is disembodied and disembedded from any particular social context. This ideology is especially problematic when applied to intimate relationships because it obscures the different ways that men and women experience love and sex in their lives.

As Weeks (2007) tells it the real achievement over the past 50 years is that people can now tell their sexual stories in a huge variety of different ways, and ‘inequality now has to be justified in ways it never had to before’ (p. 7). He says the starting point for this is ‘the full human equality of men and women, and from this flows all other forms of equality’ (p. 7). The problem is that this is difficult when human beings are defined in ways that exclude the body, the senses, and desire, as being part of their humanity. In this sense, the definition of what constitutes our humanity is derived from values that women have had very little say in, and the way sex continues to be talked about in western culture perpetuates that ideal (Tyler 2008). Catherine Mackinnon (quoted in Segal 1999, p. 4) argues that gender has been consolidated through emotional domination and submission: ‘the social relation between the sexes is organized so that men may dominate and women must submit and this relation is sexual – in fact, is sex’ (cited in Weeks p. 79). In the chapter that follows I discuss how I resolved this in a way that allowed me to use Giddens’ (1992) theory as a starting point for my research.
Chapter 3 - confluent love and ethics

Introduction

In the previous two chapters I explored Giddens’ (1992) theory to better understand how he explains confluent love. He claims this sort of love is replacing romantic love as a way of going about intimate relationships in contemporary western culture. In the process, I discovered that Giddens’ (1992) theory has support from leading sociologists like Jeffrey Weeks (2009), as well as Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth-Beck Gernshiem (1995). However, I also showed how his theory perpetuates patriarchal thinking by drawing on a psychology of human development which excludes the ‘voice’ of experience, the voice that tells us how things are, rather than how they are supposed to be. Gilligan and Richards (2009) call this the ‘ethical voice’ in both men and women. We suppress this voice, they says, when we rely more and more on a team of experts telling us what a ‘good’ relationship should look like, and less on our own feelings.

Giddens’ (1992) theory provides a way through the romantic love complex, which is premised on an unequal power dynamic between men and women, however it promotes a view of intimate life that depends on being able to control our emotions, or master our desires. In short, I argued that by drawing on a psychology that emphasizes disconnection, rather than on fostering connections, Giddens (1992) perpetuates a way of thinking that keeps people locked into ways of being that are the opposite of authentic. The main problem, as I discussed in the previous chapter, is the way Giddens (1991, 1992) substantiates his theory, by drawing on the self-help genre to explain how pure relationships work. This narrative promotes a view of the self where independence is the mark of a mature or healthy human being. He uses the words like ‘autonomy’ and ‘authenticity’ to describe how confluent love is different from romantic love, for example (Giddens 1992, p. 185; Giddens 1991, p. 78).

Furthermore, in explaining the ethic that he says is emerging in people’s intimate relationships, which he calls confluent love, Giddens (1992) draws on the philosophy of Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804) and John Rawls (1921 – 2002), two of the main authors of our contemporary rights-based ethic (Friedman 2000). The problem with this is that by drawing on an ethics of justice to explain confluent love, Giddens (1992) commits himself to a moral philosophy in which desires, particularly sexual desires, are considered an impediment to living a ‘good’ life (Nussbaum 2001, p. 464). It was
important to explore this, because the ‘death of God’ left us with questions about love that have not been fully resolved. The main question we were left with is: how do we explain human love without its divine origins? If we can do this in a way that provides space for women to have a say in this, it might be possible to see the way more clearly when it comes to negotiating sex and intimacy at a time where there are many more grey areas and contradictory instructions; a world where we are no longer sure what we mean by the word ‘love’.

While we can agree with Giddens (1992) that sexuality and gender are more fluid, more open to individual interpretation, it is not clear how people are navigating these issues in their personal lives, and this has important implications for our individual and collective happiness. Love is how we structure our personal lives, how we care for children and how we become a family. Intimate relationships are more important than ever because, as Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (1995) tell it, relationships provide a sense of belonging at a time when traditional kinship networks have become more fragmented. Same sex relationships are also becoming more normal, which means romantic love, which is essentially heterosexual love, no longer makes sense of the diversity of sexual experiences that exist in contemporary culture. As I discussed in the previous chapter, there is more violence and abuse in an intimate context, which makes it difficult to agree with Giddens (1992) that:

We can envisage the development of an ethical framework for a democratic personal order, which in sexual relationships and other personal domains conform to a model of confluent love (p. 188).

It is particularly not clear how this works in a society where individualism is rampant and social bonds are much more fragile. Here I engage with Zygmunt Bauman’s critique of Giddens’ (1992) theory. He says Giddens (1992) pure relationships are a pale reflection of what love used to be, and are indicative of a society in moral decline, rather than an example of how people become more moral. Bauman (2003) makes an important point because as he sees it:

The widely shared, indeed commonplace awareness that all relationships are “pure” (that is: frail, fissiparous, unlikely to last longer than the convenience they bring, and so always “until further notice”) is hardly a soil in which trust may take root and bloom (p. 90).

As Sue Gerhart (2010) argues, we live in an age of selfishness, where family bonds have become less
important and parents are spending less and less time with their children (p. 11). In this chapter, I explore the ethical dimension of Giddens’ (1992) theory more deeply to better understand his claim that confluent love has the potential to heal the divisions between heterosexual men and women, as well as help people in same sex relationships navigate intimacy. As I discuss below, it is possible to apply Kant’s ethics to the personal sphere, however Kant’s focus on universality makes this philosophy difficult to reconcile with issues to do with sex and love. As Annette Baier (1994) argues, human rights only go so far, and they do not necessarily lead to a just society. She points out that people in our society may be lonely, driven to suicide and find their lives lacking in meaning, and still have the freedom to participate in ‘civil society’. In other words, an ethics of justice does not guarantee a happier life. Baier (1994) claims:

Rights, and respect for rights, are quite compatible with very great misery, and misery whose causes are not just individual misfortune and psychic sickness but social and moral impoverishment (Baier 1994, p. 23).

While we can agree with Gilligan and Richards (2009) that love could provide a way of creating a more democratic society, it is important that we look more deeply at the way Giddens (1992) explains the ethic at the heart of confluent love. There may be a way of reconciling this sort of love with Gillian’s vision. This was important for my research, because in order to identify a new ethic of intimate life emerging in contemporary Australian culture, that includes women’s voices, I needed to clarify what this might look like in theory as well as in practice.

Autonomy and authenticity are key concepts in both Gilligan and Giddens’ work, but the way Giddens (1991, 1992) explains autonomy, which he says is the defining feature, or central principle, for understanding how confluent works (p. 195), is problematic from a feminist perspective. When I looked more closely at this, I found that it is one thing to talk about autonomy in abstract terms, but it is much more difficult to understand how autonomy is supposed to work in an intimate context. Kant’s ethics have been immensely important in western culture because he explained how people are free, and paved the way for people like Nietzsche and Sartre to develop an ethical system where the individual is the primary source of value, rather than God or the state (Schneewind 1998, cited in Marshall 1999, p. 220). This ethical system is problematic however because in emphasizing people’s rights, it focuses on ‘reason’ as the defining feature of humanity, a ‘property’ or feature of human beings, that supposedly makes them free. By aligning freedom with reason, Kant found a way to
explain morality, but it came at a cost. As discussed in the previous chapter the emphasis on reason as the defining feature of our humanity divides rather than unites people: it makes everyone the same, but leaves out what makes them a distinct person. Simone de Beauvoir (1944) identified what was wrong with this when she wrote:

The universal mind is without voice, and every man who claims to speak in its name only gives to it its own voice. How can he claim the point of view the point of view of the universal because he is not the universal? One cannot know a point of view other than one’s own (de Beauvoir 1944, cited in Fullbrook and Fullbrook 2008 p. 146).

Because Giddens (1992) draws on Kant’s philosophy uncritically, it is difficult to agree with him when he claims that the sort of love he talks about represents a new interpersonal ethic, which is emerging from the ashes of romantic love. To understand this better I went back to de Beauvoir’s work because while she agrees with Sartre that individuals create values, unlike him she did not see this as a ‘stand-alone’ project, but one that involved engaging with other people, who are also free. A person cannot claim to be free, in a moral sense, through suppressing other voices, other points of view. De Beauvoir argued that other people constrain our freedom, but they also help us to realize it (2008 p. 200). She wrote:

The respect of the liberty of other is not an abstract rule: it is the first condition of the success of my effort’ (de Beauvoir 1944 p. 112 cited in Fullbrook and Fullbrook 2008 p. 200).

Importantly, de Beauvoir’s ethics shift the locus of freedom from the isolated individual to a freedom that emerges in a situation of relatedness and affinity; freedom here is something we experience in our interactions with other people, when we each regard each other as free (2008 p. 195). At the time de Beauvoir wrote this, philosophy had little room for her ideas. As Fullbrook and Fullbrook (2008) explain, ‘the philosophical landscape in those days was defined by issues to do with how best to balance pleasure with pain, how to become self-realized, as well as concerns about power and knowledge’ (p. 194). Love, and the bonds between people, were ancillary to these concerns, and if love was talked about at all, it was in terms of how people could transcend their emotions and desires and think more clearly about moral issues.
Emotional justice

Justice, or rights, are important in the way we moderns negotiate our everyday lives in contemporary western culture, but rights are not the whole story, because justice involves transcending the personal perspective including our desires and preferences, and acting on rules or principals that operate for the greater good (Korsgaard 1996 p. 19). Emotions, particularly emotions to do with sexual love, are considered an impediment to this because they are too personal or ‘subjective’.

According to Martha Nussbaum (2001), emotions have traditionally been regarded by moral philosophers as too particular in their concern and personal attachments as getting in the way of doing our ‘duty’ (p. 466). Emotions associated with sexual love, are particularly problematic, because they lead to people behaving ‘irrationally’, in ways that are contrary to the greater good. Because of this, Nussbaum (2001) says, ‘philosophers have not often been friends of erotic love’ (p 463). Even philosophers, like Adam Smith (1723 – 1790) and Arthur Schopenhauer (1788 – 1860), who argued that emotions like compassion are integral to ethics, dispense with erotic love because it is too messy, too personal. ‘The trouble begins with the bodily experience of sexual desire, which is, Smith says, ‘perhaps, the foundation of [human] love’ (cited in Nussbaum 2001, p. 464).

In recent times, there have been moves in both philosophy and psychology to make emotions, including erotic love, more fitting to the moral enterprise. Nussbaum (2001), for example, argues that rather than being an impediment to moral reasoning, emotions are central to helping people to navigate a good life. She argues that emotions are not just ‘the fuel that powers the psychological mechanism’, but are a core factor in guiding us towards a flourishing life (p. 31-32). Emotional intelligence is also a core element in Robert Solomon’s (2007) ethical theory. Importantly, both these philosophers argue that emotions are not just irrational movements that strip away our sense of self, they are ‘intelligent’ because they involve judgements, or appraisal. Solomon says: ‘emotions also have the power to constitute reality in a certain way. They bestow value as well as appraise it’ (p. 162).

I admire the work of both these philosophers, and broadly agree with most of what they say about emotions, however I take issue on one important point. By emphasizing the ‘rational’ or cognitive component in emotions, they downplay desires and ingrained emotional patterns that are not necessarily amenable to reason, especially those to do with erotic love. Metaphors do not come out of nowhere and those that express the sheer force of feelings associated with sexual love in
particular – the way it disrupts our life in ways we cannot always control - do so for a good reason. The cognitive view of emotion is a step in the right direction away from a purely deterministic view of human behavior, but it does not account for the fact that love involves a myriad of different emotions, joy and pleasure as well as intense anger, jealousy, and hate, often for no other reason than because someone reminds us of our mother.

These thinkers do however lend support to recent trends in psychology towards a more relational perspective. They provide an understanding of the emotions as intelligent, rather than irrational, which legitimizes them in some respects, and reconciles the ‘reason’ and ‘emotion’ divide. However, while adding a ‘quantum of reason’ might make emotions more amenable to the moral enterprise, on the most part this is academic because emotions are not discrete units of experience, that happen inside us, which we can reflect on and ‘control’, they arise in and through our interactions with other people. In this sense emotions are social and relational, and they tell us a lot about what is going on between us. We experience emotions in our bodies, as well as in our brain, and we draw on our cultural stories to make sense of them.

Gilligan and Richards (2009) argue that cognitive theories of emotion neglect the interpersonal and cultural contexts in which emotions arise, or emerge in the process of interacting. As Thomas Scheff (current) writes: ‘If one ignores the context in which emotions arise, it will inevitably be difficult to understand their place in human behavior. Freud’s solution to the inside/outside problem was to ignore the outside’ (para 9). This has important implications for how we make sense of our experience: on the cognitive view, if we cannot somehow control or ‘regulate’ our emotions, there must be something ‘wrong’ with us. Gilligan and Richards (2009) point to what is wrong with this story. They argue that the cognitive theory of emotion is based on a false story about human nature, one which, they say, enforces a sort of moral slavery, rather than sets us free. They argue:

Patriarchy’s error lies in wedding us, men and women alike, to a false story about human nature and then characterising our resistance to this story as a sign of pathology or sin. The long-standing divisions of mind and body, thought from emotion, and self from relationships enforce a kind of moral slavery in that they erode a resistance ground in the core self and cause us to lose touch with our experience (p. 197).

The point these writers make is that we do not have a choice about how we feel, but that does not
mean feelings are a problem. Rather it is the way we are taught to see or evaluate our feelings, as either ‘good’, ‘bad’, ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ that is the issue. The cognitive theory of emotions confounds our capacity to accept ourselves as we are. It gives rise to shame, which according to Giddens (1992) stands in the way of men and women being able to love each other as equals. If we are taught to see certain feelings as ‘bad’ or ‘wrong’, then we will experience shame when those feelings arise. As Gilligan and Richards (2009) write shame is a remnant of patriarchal culture, an emotion that keeps men and women from being authentic in relationships. They write: ‘The toxin of shame injected by patriarchy infects the hearts of men and women alike, dividing us from parts of ourselves that would resist its gendered hierarchy’ (p. 265). These authors argue that shame begets violence, as a means of repressing what cannot be acknowledged (p. 265). Thomas Scheff (current) agrees with this. He writes, ‘Acknowledged shame, it seems, could be the glue that holds relationships and societies together, and unacknowledged shame the force that blows them apart’ (para. 77). Shame occurs when we appraise ourselves as somehow ‘wrong’ or ‘deficient’, so it arises when we are faced with feelings or thoughts that we judge as ‘bad’.

If we understand that feelings arise in the process of interacting, and they are not necessarily amenable to conscious control, we cannot judge ourselves for having those feelings. The feelings themselves are not good or bad, right or wrong, so ethical focus shifts to what we do about the feelings we have. For example, if we are in a mutually agreed monogamous relationship and feel sexually attracted to someone other than our partner, it is only if we act on these feelings in way that cause ourselves or other people suffering, that we are responsible for what we do. It is not the feelings themselves that are to blame, but our actions. If we habitually go around acting on our sexual desires without regard for how our actions affect other people, then this makes us a certain sort of person, a person that cannot be trusted and who causes suffering to the people they claim to love.

**Relational autonomy**

By drawing on an enlightenment idea of autonomy as the basis for his theory of confluent love, Giddens (1991) draws on a view of the self who needs to ‘master’ his or her emotions in the context of intimacy. He says for example: ‘In so far as the capacity to achieve intimacy with others is a prominent part of the reflexive project of the self – and it is - self-mastery is a necessary condition of authenticity’ (p. 96). Self-mastery, the way he explains it, involves a process of self-therapy:
‘nurturing the child that you were’ and ‘thinking back to a difficult or traumatic phase of childhood, the individual talks to the child-that-was, comforting and supporting it and offering it advice’ (p. 72). In other words, intimacy or love, on this story, depends on a series of “corrective emotional”.

Giddens (1991) claims: ‘A commitment to “one’s own personal recovery” is also needed if one of the partners is unable to develop the integrity demanded for the pursuit of intimacy’ (p. 95). As one writer that Giddens (1991) draws on, puts it means recognizing, ‘the harsh psychological truth…that there is no permanence in human relationships, any more than there is in the stock market, the weather, ‘national security’ and so on…” (Rainwater 1989 cited in Giddens 1991, p. 72).

As I discussed in the previous chapter, this psychology considers emotions, especially those to do with dependency, problematic and in need of correction. Illouz (2007) argues this is how the self-help genre creates ‘pathologies’ in order to heal them, often making millions of dollars in the process. She says that on this view emotions ‘can be detached from the subject for control and clarification’, which ‘in turn suggests that relationships have been transformed into cognitive objects that can be compared with each other and are susceptible to cost-benefit analysis’ (p. 36). Rather than jettison Giddens’ (1992) theory altogether, Marilyn Friedman (2000), Susan Dodds (2000), Elisabeth Porter (1991) and Onora O’Neill (2002) helped me understand how autonomy works in a relational and social sense. In doing this I retained what was useful in Giddens’ (1992) theory, while discarding those aspects of his theory that come from the self-help texts he draws on. When we understand autonomy in a relational sense, emotions are included, not as discreet units, that can be analysed and ‘corrected’, but as a way of understanding the significance of the people and things that make our lives meaningful. Porter (1991) writes that emotions, especially those that arise in a relationship, are not necessarily convertible into rational interpretation. ‘Indeed, the fact that emotions have not always been addressed by philosophers relates not only to their uncertain effect on rational choice, but also to their ambiguity’ (p. 149). Porter (1991) suggests that love means different things to different people and to understand its significance in people’s lives ‘engaged processes are necessary. Dialogue often clarifies and transforms emotions’ (p. 149).

In other words, love, if it is authentic, is not a pre-arranged destination, but something that two people ‘discover’ in the process of relating, as they come to a shared understanding of the significance of their relationship. Porter (1991) argues that this is a moral or ethical journey because, as self-interpreting beings, we work out what is significant and what is not, rather than relying on experts telling us what is important. Here we move away from the patriarchal or masculine
construct, which equates objectivity and autonomy with the need to master and dominate our emotions, rather than to simply understand them (p. 151). As Porter (1991) tells us, this understanding emerges as self-knowledge, which gives us a sense of ourselves as moral agents. Importantly this knowledge comes about as we engage with other people. Here the distinction between ‘reason’ and ‘emotion’ becomes less important, and our preferences, desires, thoughts, feelings are all important ways of making sense of how to go on in an intimate context. On this view, autonomy is not a ‘fixed’ property of a person, but something that is both embodied and embedded, and it emerges in the process of relating. On this philosophy ‘moral reasoning is…grounded in social life’ (Friedman 2000, p. 213).

Humans who think and care

The feminist philosophers I engaged with in this chapter provided a different way of understanding autonomy, which is more aligned with de Beauvoir’s idea of freedom as an emergent process, where people become free through their interactions with others. The central thrust of de Beauvoir’s ethics is that success in justifying and finding meaning for one’s existence depends on the quality of our relationships with other people. She writes: “Man can find a justification of his own existence only in the existence of other men” (de Beauvoir cited in Fullbrook and Fullbrook 2008, p. 195). While ignoring the male bias in this statement, this understanding of autonomy, as an emergent phenomenon is essentially relational, and it paves the way for an understanding of how love could provide a way of dissolving the unequal power dynamic at the core of romantic love. It also provides a view of autonomy that is essentially relational and it includes both the ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ perspectives. Porter (1991) writes, ‘If we assume the general tendency for masculinity to be defined through separation and threatened by intimacy, and femininity to be defined through attachment and threatened by separation, this descriptive difference becomes a developmental liability when maturity is defined as severe individuation’ (p. 151).

Before I explore this argument further however, it is important to point out that we know a lot more about human love than we ever did, and this understanding allows us to dispense with the gender stereotypes, and acknowledge that our ideas about human beings are based on outdated notions about masculinity and femininity. Kant was right to say that our human nature is determined by both nature and culture, but for him this meant leaving the body out of the moral equation. Here I show we no longer need to do this to prove that human beings have the capacity to decide for
themselves how they should live their lives individually and together. I then talk about what the implications of this are for understanding love and ethics from a more human perspective. By understanding that the mind/body dichotomy is an abstraction, we can argue that human beings are defined as much by their capacity to care as they are by their capacity to think. Importantly these are not different aspects of the self, and they are not necessarily gendered. They are simply different perspectives that people can use to navigate their existence.

If we are to agree with Giddens (1992) that love could be a way to creating a more ethical world, we need to look beyond the self-help books and the narratives of romantic love, which keeps gender divisions tightly in place, and explore the origins of human love. Only then can we understand an ethic that could help people work through the messiness, and emotional challenges that real love involves. Importantly this means understanding that ‘emotions’ are not separate from ‘reason’, which is something that the psychology and moral philosophies that Giddens (1992) draws on do not recognize, but which science does.

Richard Davidson (2012), a neuroscientist and pioneer in the study of human emotions, argues that, ‘emotions work with cognition in an integrated and seamless way to enable us to navigate the world of relationships, work, and spiritual growth’ (Davidson and Begley 2012, p. 89). Davidson (2012) argues that the mind/body dichotomy is an abstraction. He says people do not have emotions, they experience what we might call ‘states of mind’ and these are constantly changing and involve physical, mental and emotional experiences that emerge in and through our interactions. Importantly Davidson’s research found that: ‘A feeling permeates everything we do’ (Davidson and Begley 2012, p. 89). Here a person’s ability to navigate the social world very much ‘depends on an integration of thought and emotion’ (Gilligan and Richards 2009, p. 197). By understanding that reason and emotion are not separate, we get a human being who thinks and feels, and both these aspects are equally important in figuring out how to go on in a world where good and bad, right and wrong, no longer make sense in the same way they used to.

In the following section I explore how people have a choice when it comes to love. This does not come from distancing ourselves from our feelings, desires and inclinations, as traditional notions of autonomy require, rather it involves embracing them. Before I return to the discussion about ethics, is important to understand where our capacity for love comes from. This is especially important for understanding how erotic love could be a way of creating a beautiful or meaningful life.
Monkey love

In a short story, written by Lydia Millet (2009) about the controversial experimental psychologist, Harry Harlow, he suffers a recurring nightmare. In the story, he dreams he is standing in front of some beautiful cages he had designed himself. In each of the cages was one of the monkeys he used for his experiments. It is always the mother he is faced with in the dream. He looks into her wild, desperate eyes and recognizes that she is willing to die to protect her offspring. When he takes the baby from her arms, her panic rises so high it could rise no longer, and he wakes up hearing her scream (2009).

This account is a fiction, in real life, according to his biographer, Deborah Blum (2002), Harlow had little empathy for the baby monkeys he experimented on. When asked about his feelings, he would say: ‘Remember, for every mistreated monkey there exist a million mistreated children’ (p. 292). Harlow’s monkey studies are now well known. The monkeys who were separated from their mothers failed to thrive: some of them, who were left hanging in a dark pit, isolated and alone, displayed severe psychotic behaviour, from which they never recovered. Those monkeys that were taken from their mothers and provided with a cloth substitute, clung to this cloth and would not let go, even when they were offered food. Many of them starved to death still clinging to it. According to Blum (2002) these experiments were considered cruel at the time, however they were conducted in response to a prevailing belief among psychologists at the time that giving infants too much love and affection was psychologically unhealthy (p. 37). As she tells it, the famous psychologist and one time president of the American Psychological Association (APA), John B. Watson led this crusade. Blum (2002) claims Watson’s attitude towards child rearing was summed up in the following advice. ‘When you are tempted to pet your child, remember that mother love is a dangerous instrument’ (p. 37).

Because of Harlow’s experiments we now know a lot more about the origins of love. Unlike ‘divine’ love, human love has its basis in the interactions between a parent and infant. We also know that love is just as important than food; without love babies do not survive, or they fail to thrive. Research suggests that babies are born, needing to interact with other brains from the moment of birth, and it is the experience of being cared for that gives babies what they need to develop and to flourish as adults (Trevarthen 2001, p. 98). Importantly the neural pathways established in the first three years of a child’s life will usually repeat themselves in their adult relationships. Just like the
grooves on an old-fashioned record, or the encoded tracks on a CD, early relationships shape subsequent relationships and, to some extent determine what love means in an individual’s life. These early interactions become what psychologists call ‘internal working models’, and they shape how people experience relationships (Siegel 2012 p. 21-2). This is called attachment theory, and is the joint work of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth.

Bowlby and Ainsworth (1991) took Harlow’s experiments a step further by investigating what happens to human babies when they are separated from their primary caregiver. Importantly these researchers rejected the theory that infants only want food and warmth from their mothers, and in doing so they de-pathologized dependency (Bretherton (1997). Bowlby and Ainsworth (1991) argued that infants need the security of a loving parent in order to feel safe in the world. Bretherton explains that their conclusion was that:

…self-reliance is not viewed as opposed to attachment, but as co-developing with it from the beginning. A parent who responds sensitively to a very young infant’s attachment behaviour is not only alleviating stress, but also enabling autonomy (p. 34).

In other words, human beings learn to love through the way they are cared for as an infant. If their early experience was positive and life affirming, they develop what psychologists call ‘secure attachment’, which allows them to feel secure in a relationship, which promotes their capacity to be independent. However, if their experience was invalidating or ambivalent, this experience sets the stage for how a person will experience love in their adult lives. These people will more likely have difficult or challenging relationships because for them, love is not a source of security (Seigel 2012).

**Attachment and adult love**

Attachment theory has important implications for Giddens’ (1992) theory because he emphasizes choice as the defining characteristic of pure relationships. However if a person’s capacity for choice depends on a secure attachment relationship early on, what the emotions and desires we experience in our relationships are determined by the ‘internal working models’ that result from our early conditioning. This means that not everyone would be able to achieve the sort of security, or basic trust, that he says is necessary for confluent love to emerge. Nor is it easy to change these emotional patterns. As Seigel (2001) writes: ‘Attachment is considered a basic, in-born, biologically adaptive “motivational system” that drives the infant to create a few, selective attachments in his life’ (p. 69).
Importantly attachment behaviour is also cultural. Early attachment experience give us our internal working models, and these are heavily influenced by cultural narratives to do with gender. In this sense, the stories we learn about gender, are part of the ‘internal working model’. In this sense, as Fausto-Sterling, Coll and Lamarre (2012) argue:

...the distinction between “biological” and “cultural” is not so clear. We use the word gender to indicate strongly held but culturally specific beliefs and practices about male and female, masculine and feminine. Both sex-related characteristics and gender can become embodied, although neither need to be thought of as inborn or innate (p. 1693).

While arguing this is not necessarily universal i.e. it plays out differently in different cultures, Fausto-Sterling, Coll and Lamarre (2012) claim that sex-differentiated behaviour emerges in both boys and girls between the ages of two and three, and it is transmitted through the way they have been cared for. They argue that: ‘...by the time strong playmate preferences emerge children already have acquired significant and varied types of gender competence, including knowledge of their own gender’ (p. 1696).

We do not choose how we are loved as babies, and we do not choose our sex, and in this sense, how we relate to other people is not a choice we make, but a result of our biological and cultural conditioning. It is impossible to write about Giddens’ (1992) theory of ‘confluent love’, especially the ethical component, without taking this into account. While Giddens (1992) emphasises choice as being the central difference between romantic and confluent love, it is not clear how much of a choice we have when it comes to our sexual and intimate behavior. If our experiences as a baby and as a child impacts so strongly on our capacity to love as adults, how do we have a choice about love? Writing about his experience of being forcibly removed from his family at the age of eight, an Indigenous Australian man writes:

There is (sic) still a lot of unresolved issues within me. One of the biggest ones is I cannot really love anyone any more. I’m sick of being hurt. Every time I used to get close to anyone they were just taken away from me. The other fact is, if I did meet someone, I don’t want to have children, cos I’m frightened that the welfare system would come back and take my children (Bird 1998, p. 13).

It could be argued that this man has the capacity to love, however he finds it too distressing. This is
what psychologists call ‘insecure’ attachment. His experience has taught him that it is not safe to love, and this impacts on how he approaches it. Someone who has had a different experience, a loving and stable home, would feel more secure, and their relationships would reflect this.

**Freedom and determinism**

The sort of love that Giddens (1992) talks about is based on the idea that people are entirely conscious, and that we have the capacity to choose who and how we love. We do this by transcending our emotional conditioning. For example, in his earlier work, he argues that becoming self-realized involves ‘becoming free from dependencies and achieving fulfilment’ (Giddens 1991 p. 79). But this does not make sense when it comes to love, especially in light of attachment theory, which views dependency as a prerequisite for being able to experience intimacy. As I pointed out above, we are hard-wired for love and other people matter, not just for our survival, but for our flourishing. As Friedman (2000) puts it:

> Individuals do not create themselves; there are no literal “self made men”. All human beings must be raised and socialised by other human beings in order to survive and lead distinctly human lives (p. 217).

The aim of becoming emotionally independent is not only difficult, especially if we did not have the right experiences, it is questionable whether this would lead to happiness, even if it were possible. By arguing that personal growth depends on conquering ‘emotional blocks and tensions that prevent us from understanding ourselves as we really are’ (Giddens 1991, p. 78) promotes an ethic of individualism (p. 80). It is this ethic that worries Bauman (2003). He says in order for love to flourish it needs a trusting embrace, but in a world where everyone is concerned about being an ‘individual’, and doing so means looking out for their own interests, there can be little trust, and without trust, Bauman (2003) writes love has no nourishment in order to grow. He argues:

> If you know your partner may opt out at any moment, with or without your agreement (as soon as they find that you, as the source of their enjoyment, have been emptied of your potential, holding little promise of new joys, or just because the grass appears greener on the other side of the fence), investing your feelings into the current relationship is always a risky step (p. 90).
Importantly, when autonomy is equated with independence (1991, p. 79) and self-mastery (1991, p. 96), relationships are valued only insofar as they support people to be ‘autonomous’, which means the other person becomes a means to an end, rather than an end in themselves. Nussbaum (2001) and Solomon (2007) provide a different way of understanding emotions, but they do this by making love more rational, and as I pointed out above, this project can only take us so far. It leaves out the ‘messy bits’ and ingrained emotional patterns that can make love so difficult to navigate, even at the best of times.

The existential leap

Bauman (2003) argues that the ‘rationalisation’ of emotion makes love less moral, not more so. The ethical challenge, he says, happens precisely in those moments that are not scripted, that we have no answers for, but we have to act anyway (p. 93). Bauman (2003) writes that what makes love true, is the existential leap into the void of unknowingness, something that individuals in our risk adverse society are unlikely to do (p. 90). He says rather than take the plunge, people are more likely to mitigate the risk of ‘the fall’ by making love more amenable to reason. These days he says, people scrutinise their potential partners down to the tiniest detail, making sure they have things in common. Because people do not have to commit, and if they do, it is with the proviso it is only for as long as it lasts. Bauman quotes one ‘expert’ who advises her readers that when: ‘committing yourself, however half-heartedly, remember that you are likely to be closing the door to other romantic possibilities’ (p. 11). In other words, hedge your bets, and don’t settle on the first person who comes along. This helps mitigate against getting hurt if a relationship does not work out, but it also takes the mystery, as well as our individual agency out of the equation i.e. it encourages people to keep searching until they find the one, and because this is a rational exercise, emotions become a distraction. This sort of experience is an example of what Bauman calls constrained choice: choices induced by an external authority, the responsibility for which can be ‘deflected’. He says constrained choice denies people’s autonomy, which in turn blocks their sovereign expression of life, ‘an expression that manifests itself, first and foremost, in trust, compassion and mercy’ (Bauman 2003, p. 96).

Bauman (2003) argues that only love that springs from ‘the sovereign expression of life’ can be moral (p. 93). It is moral because we take responsibility for how we behave towards other people, and we trust that they will act in a way that recognises and respects our sovereignty: the capacity to
use our own intelligence to make sense of what a good relationship is all about. Here instead of turning to the ‘experts’ to tell us what a good relationship should look like, we learn to trust our own experience.

Bauman’s morality is only partly at odds with Giddens’ (1992). They both agree that love in contemporary culture is more fluid. For Giddens (1992) this means people have an opportunity to do things differently, but for Bauman (2003) this liquidity means we have lost the substance of things – the sense of ourselves as belonging or existing in a moral community. He says moral issues have become “mediated” – the suffering we see on television is “contained” and therefore not our immediate concern; individuals are aware of it, but are left impotent in their capacity to make a difference, apart from continuing to watch the news (p. 96).

As Bauman (2003) puts it our ethical capacity, our capacity to figure out what it means to live a good life, cannot operate in a world where ‘who we are’ has already been decided. When people fall back on psychologists or talk show hosts, to tell them what to do, it means they do not have to face the hard questions, or risk having to ‘go out on a limb’. In the context of an intimate relationship this also means not wanting to face the possibility of suffering, the idea that love might not work out, or that the person we love could ‘break our heart’. People avoid these situations, he says, so they do not have to face their own weaknesses, or take responsibility for their ambivalent feelings. He writes: ‘Without bracing oneself for the possibility of making wrong choices, there is hardly a way to persevere in the search for the right choice’ (p. 93). When we have social rules to conform to and experts telling us what to do, we do not have to figure things out for ourselves, and if something goes wrong we can always blame the other person, or the advice books, or visit a therapist.

Bauman (2003) argues that intimate relationships in contemporary culture are characterized by an avoidance of pain, and the pursuit of pleasure; but this does not add up to happier relationships. Without factoring in the ‘hard times’, love does not have a chance to take root, and relationships often end before they even begin. This is partly to do with consumerism, which promotes the idea of love as something we can acquire quickly and cheaply, and relationships as something that we can get out of as easily as we get into them (p 91).

I support Bauman’s critique to some extent, but I also agree with Smart and Shipman (2004), who argue that Bauman’s ideas are overly pessimistic, bordering on the ‘apocalyptic’. Commenting on
Bauman (2003) critique of contemporary relationships, they write:

This is a chilling perspective for not only does it suggest that the contingent nature of kinship requires constant attention in order to survive, but that we are almost certainly unwilling to put the work into sustaining these relationships because they take too much effort (p. 492-493).

Smart and Shipman (2004) argue that the problem with Bauman’s (2003) theory, like Giddens’ (1992) theory, confuses ‘individual’ or ‘free’ choice with contextual or relational choice. They argue that:

The more a narrative leans towards ‘individual’ choice the more it appears to depict the individual as solely responsible for making the choices, which are then presented as dubious, insufficiently committed or superficial (p. 493).

Moral choices are difficult, which is why we need to reflect on them and think about them. Gilligan (2003) talks about this in relation to decisions that men and women make about whether to abort a pregnancy, or care for a sick relative, or when they are required to put a loved one before their own interests. She says, these are choices where there are no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answers, and an individual’s right to choose does not take away the suffering that these choices involve. In other words, there are no ‘free’ choices here, just choices, and the need to act.

**Transforming intimacy: how it works**

Importantly, the ideal of autonomy that Giddens (1992) uses to justify why confluent love is ethical, translates into a theory of sex and love where the woman’s perspective continues to be excluded, as do other voices that do not fit the ideal being promoted. To change this, Grossi (2012) argues, ‘love must be seen as being connected rather than disconnected from agency as being connected and not subordinate to desire and importantly to be seen as something that exists outside the heterosexual scripts’ (p. 449). As I discussed in the previous chapter, despite our culture’s newfound ‘sexual freedom’, the context in which sexuality is performed is still predominantly structured according to patriarchal values.

Modernity does simply erase history, either our own, or our cultural history. From a moral point of view, it is difficult to see how, as a society, we can move from an ethic of obedience, to an ethic that
gives only some people rights, to one in which women and other sexual minorities have an equal say in how the relationship is conducted. Giddens’ (1992) theory is based on the premise that: ‘individuals have sufficient resources to participate in an autonomous way in the democratic process’ (p. 195). Not everyone does however, and it is this aspect of his theory that feminists particularly have a problem with (Friedman 2000; Evans 2003).

The emphasis on autonomy, based on our capacity to reason, not only in ethics, but also in psychology, is a reflection of western philosophy’s penchant for mind over body, and the exclusion of the subjective perspective in both philosophy and psychology. Here only ‘objective’ knowledge is true. Code (1991) explains that the objective stance – in both morals and science – is detached from the ‘particularities of time and place, from personal quirks, prejudices, and interests, and most centrally from the object itself’ (p. 51). She says splitting the world into objective and subjective, with one being a source of knowing and the other an impediment was a way of trying to ‘tame the female universe’ (p. 51).

Because people inherit this way of being human, men have had to suppress what they regarded as “female” qualities – including and especially feelings about love, and dependency. These were seen as “weaknesses” and an impediment to knowing. Women, on the other hand, had to embody these qualities, and to “internalize” attitudes, towards these feelings, which meant they came to devalue those same qualities in themselves (Lloyd 1984a, p. 106 quoted in Porter 1991, p 31). I discuss the implications of this as far as my research project goes in the next chapter. Before I do this it is important not to dismiss the idea of autonomy out of hand. Kant’s philosophy has made a hugely important contribution to western culture; it is from him, largely, that we derived the idea of basic human rights, the idea that everyone should be treated in a way that respects their capacity or potential to be self-determining. In drawing on this philosophy however Giddens (1992) encourages a view of relationship that involves women claiming ‘autonomy’, but in a way that makes her more like a man. Here autonomy is the opposite to dependency (p. 194).

When we define autonomy as relational, Giddens’ (1992) theory becomes more plausible. Because while disagreeing that people can make themselves into whatever they want, we can agree people in contemporary western culture do have more freedom to live in a way that is more aligned their individual preferences and desires. If we see autonomy as something we learn when we interact with other people then it begins to make more sense. The way relational autonomy works, it is not about
doing what we like, rather it means reflecting on the way we act towards ourselves and other human beings, and aligning our actions to match our values. One lesson we can take from Kant is the idea that we need to use our intelligence in order to become free. “Have the courage to use your own understanding!” was his motto of the enlightenment (Kant 2005, p. 119). He said:

It is so convenient to be immature. If I have a book that has understanding for me, a doctor who evaluates my diet for me, and so on, I need not make any effort myself (p. 119).

Despite his focus on the individual as the ultimate source of value, for Kant, coming to agree on what is good is something that we need to do as a community of ‘free citizens’. This is why he focuses on freedom, rather than happiness, as the highest ‘good’. He argued that people cannot be happy if they are not free. In this sense he says: ‘Moral goodness is to be achieved through the clarification of our ideas’ (2005, p. 5).

Some philosophers, like Sartre, interpreted this as an extreme form of individualism, but Kant did not mean it that way. Onora O’Neill (2002) points out, echoing de Beauvoir, that autonomy is something we do: it is a way of engaging with the world and other people. She writes: ‘A better reading of Kant’s idea of self-legislation would view the element of self in self legislation of as a reflexive term’ (p. 85). By this she means that we can reflect on a potential action to decide if it accords with the sort of person we want to be. Here there is no fixed entity called the ‘self’ that makes these decisions, the self is something that emerges when we act. Importantly in acting we draw on our social, emotional and ethical intelligence to make sense of what our experience tells us, rather than letting the experts tell us how to make sense of our experience. This does not mean that what these experts say is not ‘true’ or helpful, only that we need to reflect on and decide for ourselves whether what they say fits with the way we want to live, and love.

O’Neill’s (2002) interpretation of autonomy, as the capacity to reflect on our circumstances and decide how best to respond is more aligned with Giddens’ (1986) explanation of how social life works. He says in figuring out how to go on people draw on their ‘stocks of knowledge’, which includes knowing ourselves, our personal likes and dislikes, preferences, beliefs, and feelings as well as the cultural resources, the norms and meanings which we learn as we grow up in a particular culture.

On O’Neill’s (2002) interpretation of Kant’s moral philosophy, a person’s autonomy does not
depend on being a certain sort of person, it does not depend on “reason” as the defining feature of our humanity, rather autonomy emerges in the way people respond to their circumstances, including their attachment experience. Here we resolve the past not by “letting it go” but by taking it into account. By understanding how our experience as a child influences the way we relate to other people, we can use this understanding to temper our reactions. Autonomy here is an emergent state of consciousness, whereby we learn to take a perspective on our own perspective and it is this capacity that allows change to happen. Here, autonomy is more of a reflective pause, which provides a space for considering what to do. As Dodds (2000) explains this sort of autonomy is demonstrated when we ask ourselves how we want to live, and evaluating our choices on the basis of that.

Drawing on Diana Meyer’s procedural conception of autonomy, Dodds (2000) explains that this involves considering what sort of qualities we want to cultivate, and what sort of person we want to be, and what sorts of relationships we want to have (p. 227). This sort of autonomy depends on the context, and our personal circumstances. In other words, we are not autonomous by virtue of being human or ‘rational’, it is by being human that we become autonomous: that is, to live in accordance with what we really care about, rather than what makes rational sense from some ‘objective’ or universal standpoint. As Dodds (2000) explains, autonomy is a set of skills, something that we learn in the process of relating. The skills required to become autonomous, according to Dodds (2000) include:

...those required for self-discovery (identifying what they want, value, care about, etc.), self definition (acting on their desires, values, etc.) and self direction (correcting their actions or understanding of their values when they misidentify them (p. 227).

Importantly this sort of autonomy requires engaging with other people because it emerges through our interactions, it is embodied and relational. Here emotions are not impediments to knowing how to go on, rather we get to know ourselves by attending to our emotions, rather than trying to regulate or control them. Importantly it does not rely on fixed ways of being, but it takes gender conditioning into account. Here our sex, being a man or a woman, is epistemologically significant i.e. we take this into account when we are working out how to live, and love, because these present us with issues and concerns that are the result of our social conditioning as well as our biology. While these do not define us, they are a powerful influence in shaping who we are.
Understanding autonomy as relational, changes the way we approach ethics. Here there are no easy answers. Rather than a set of rules or principles, an ethic of ‘authenticity’, the way Dodds (2000) describes it involves negotiating the tension between what “I” want and what “you” want, and coming to some sort of agreement about how to go on together. When we bring feelings and emotions into the moral equation, we approach situations more reflectively. We might decide our lover no longer satisfies our desires, and we also recognise that we have the right to move on with our lives, but how we go about doing this, especially how we treat the other person in the process has ethical implications; not so much in terms of what is right or wrong, but in terms of what my actions say about me as a person.

Iris Murdoch (1970) argued that love inspires us to look beyond our self-interested concerns, and supports us to resist the powerful forces that keep us tethered to a false ideal of freedom. She says the sort of freedom ‘which is a proper human goal is the freedom from fantasy’. Murdoch (1970) explains:

> What I have called fantasy, the proliferation of blinding self centred aims and images, is itself a powerful system of energy, and most of what is often called ‘will’ or ‘willing’ belongs to this system. What counteracts the system is attention to reality inspired by, consisting of, love (p. 65).

Love here is about embracing “what is”, and engaging with other people in an open ended, ongoing process of discovery. As de Beauvoir argued this means other people are not obstacles that we need to get around, in order to be free, rather they help us to realize our freedom. ‘de Beauvoir, rather than saying that one “should” behave in certain ways, seeks to show why it is in fact in one’s self interest to act in ways that are generally thought to be altruistic’ (Fullbrook and Fullbrook 2008, p. 200).

This conception of autonomy also allows an understanding of ethics as something one does, rather than as a set of rules or procedures that are imposed on us from “outside”, which we passively absorb as “truth”. It also allows an understanding of autonomy that does not involve detaching ourselves from the world around us, or separating ourselves from our desires and inclinations, rather it involves embracing these aspects of the self, and using them to help make sense of how to live our lives. Most importantly by understanding autonomy as relational we can agree that there is
something in what Giddens (1992) says about contemporary relationships being a space where people can learn to be more authentic. We do this by acknowledging that our connections with other people are how we become the person we are.

**The imperative of freedom**

Importantly by understanding how we are conditioned by our early care giving experience, we can better understand how we can be free when it comes to love. In direct contrast to Jannette Rainwater’s advice that we free ourselves from the past and take ‘charge of our lives’ (cited in Giddens 1991 p. 73), Gilligan (2003) suggests that the path to authenticity involves refusing to be what we are not. This happens when:

...a young woman refuses to become an object, a stand-in for fantasy, a replacement for an older woman; a young man refuses to become Oedipus, his mother’s lover or the instrument of her revenge; a mother refuses to risk sacrificing her child, instead arming herself against monsters; and love – at its heart a seemingly impossible task – leads to the birth of pleasure (p. 229).

Gilligan (2003), like Giddens (1992), is optimistic that love could support the project of democracy. She argues that a new paradigm for conceptualising human relationships involves people talking about how they experience love in their lives, when they put feelings into words, and tell stories about love based on their own experiences rather than trying to make their experiences conform to pre-existing notions of what love should look like (p. 5).

When human beings suppress what they are feeling, they gradually lose touch with themselves; the felt sense of ‘who they are’. They became an object both to themselves and other people. They become what other people want them to be, and in doing this they deny their own ‘reality’. People do this for love; because they recognise at a deep level that they need other people. If this means deceiving themselves i.e. buying into fairy tales, and tales of romance which end in happily ever after, then they do this in order to have relationships. However, in the process they can lose the connection they have with themselves, and with each other. Gilligan (2003) calls this dissociation. She says:

> What is known and then not known remains out of reach, buried in the depths of the
psyche; an innocence and ignorance that becomes frozen in time, suspended by what Robert Jay Lifton has called ‘psychic numbing’: sustaining a false consciousness and also a false rendering of history (p. 173).

Men dissociate because they have been deeply wounded by the trauma of having to repress their more tender feelings in order to be men, and girls have had to suppress what they really want in order to conform to socially constructed notions of femininity (Gilligan 2003). Both Gilligan (2003) and Richards (2013) argue, this is why men and women in western culture find it difficult to talk about their feelings, especially in the context of an intimate relationship. Listening to boys play, Gilligan observed;

They are repeating a script, speaking in the voices of its familiar characters: the good guy, the bad guy, the partner, the robber, the cowboy, the outlaw, the police’ (p. 66)

Gilligan (2003) says this play reflects an initiation into what Arundhati Roy calls the “The Love Laws”, ‘the laws that lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much’ (Roy 1997 p. 33 cited in Gilligan 2003 p. 173). Richards (2013) explains that taking a relational perspective is an antidote to the “Love Laws”– the rigid rules that stand in the way of men especially being able to experience genuine love. He argues these rules are a core feature of patriarchal ideology, which ‘arise from the disruption of loving sexual relationships, indeed from their repudiation as unmanly by the light of patriarchal manhood’ (p. 190). Richards (2013) says the taboo on feelings, especially feelings of connection, is deeply entrenched in male psychology because it has historically been a condition of manhood to be detached, separate, controlled and in charge. Men are not born this way: ‘Quite the opposite; human babies are remarkable for their relationality, their desire for and responsiveness to human connection’ (p. 170). Richards (2013) argues that in patriarchal culture, boys are forced to experience a severing of connection in their early relationships, which they suppress because this is apparently how they become a man. Gilligan and Richards (2009) say this leads to a “loss of voice” and a diminished capacity for relating. Girls also experience a disconnection from relationships, but in a different way. As Gilligan (2003) tells it:

...as young boys take on the voices of fathers, the heroes and superheroes of their play, and as adolescent girls take on the voices of good and bad women, the angelic mother or the slut or whore, we can speak of a process of initiation that is akin to trauma in that a voice is
seemingly lost or confused with another voice that finds more cultural resonance and thus carries more authority (p. 221).

Richards (2013) argues that to move away from a love that is both tragic and destructive, we to start listening to the voice that gets drowned out by patriarchy. Importantly this involves moving beyond the idea that men and women are complementary opposites, and rejecting the gender binary between reason and emotion. It involves paying attention to our capacity for relationships as the defining characteristic of our humanity, rather than being identified with either reason or emotion.

A different sort of love

According to Gilligan (2003) freeing love from the shackles of patriarchy, means recognizing the fracture or psychological fault that the patriarchal landscape obscures, and which fuels the traumatic break in relationship on the part of both women and men. It means breaking away from the tragic story of love, the one Gilligan says ‘we tell over and over’ again in our culture (p. 32). She argues this story is tragic because women are unable to speak about what she is feeling both the public world of and culture, and in the private world of intimacy and love. Importantly Gilligan (2003) argues that:

a woman’s agency – her capacity to act – is bound up with the recovery of her voice, with her telling her story and having it heard (p. 200).

Here our capacity to speak about what we are experiencing, and being heard, is how the self develops. It is not about ‘creating a self’, in a way that requires distancing ourselves from our desires and emotions. As discussed above, Giddens’ (1991, 1992) theory of confluent love draws on a notion of autonomy that is a product of patriarchal thinking, but relational autonomy, which is what Gilligan (2003) is talking about, acknowledges human interconnectedness -the importance of our relationships for shaping who and what we are.

The important point that Murdoch (1970) and O’Neill (2002) make is that autonomy involves our whole selves, both the body as well as the mind; it involves seeing beyond how we have been conditioned to see ourselves and other people, beyond stereotypes and labels, as well as our own biases, and paying attention to people in a way that respects their differences, their particular perspective, and their points of view.
Shakespeare knew about love, says Gilligan (2003), and his plays allow us a glimpse of how we can move through suffering in a way that allows us to speak with an authentic voice. This process begins in his early plays when the hero attempts to resist patriarchy, albeit unsuccessfully. In Hamlet, the sensitive poet becomes a killer (and his lover Ophelia dies of grief). Othello sacrifices Desdemona for the sake of honor and Lear banishes the daughter who loves him the most. Gilligan (2003) writes that the ending of King Lear is a ‘requiem for patriarchy’, an acknowledgement of the insight that has been gained through suffering. In the fourth act, she says, a gentleman reminds Lear, ‘Thou hast one daughter/Who redeems nature from the general curse/which twain have brought her to’ (p 215). This daughter symbolizes the potential for redemption, says Gilligan (2003), a subject that became a core theme in Shakespeare’s later plays.

Gilligan (2003) argues that healing the wound at the heart of love involves both men and women coming back to their bodies and learning to tune into what they are experiencing. Dissociation involves a loss of memory as well as a loss of voice. It happens when we ‘forget what we know’, because remembering is too painful, or too shameful. When we suppress ‘what it really feels like’ and replace it with ‘what it is supposed to feel like’, it is as if ‘two worlds are held in place simultaneously: what you know and what you really know, what you feel and what you really feel, the story you tell yourself and the experience of what happened’ (Gilligan 2003, p. 203). When these two worlds become one, we experience ourselves as fully human, as whole.

Murdoch (1970) explains that this involves understanding the difference between reality and fantasy i.e. what people tell us is good, and what is ‘really’ good. This does not necessarily mean delving into our childhood attachment experience with the aim of trying to ‘fix’ what is ‘broken’. Real human freedom involves a commitment to knowing and accepting ourselves as we are, and focusing on what we can make of our existence. She explains: ‘It is an attachment to what lies outside the fantasy mechanism, and not a scrutiny of the mechanism itself, that liberates’ (p 66). She argues that the more we go looking for what is ‘wrong’ with ourselves, the more lost we become. This is because true self- knowledge is only available upon reflection, when we understand what moves us. Just like we cannot see the wind except as it blows through the branches of a tree, so too the self is only visible in choices we make, because these will reflect what matters to us, what we care about. We can scrutinise ourselves all we want, but ‘the “cure” does not prove the alleged knowledge genuine’
(Murdoch 1970, p. 66). It is what we do that counts.

Making sense of love in contemporary culture

Bauman (2003) argues that love involves taking a leap of faith (p. 7). There is no right or wrong here, no standard to measure up to, and nothing that needs to be fixed or achieved. Love happens when we let go of trying to understand or regulate or control what we are feeling, and learn to trust ourselves, and then and only then can we begin to trust other people. This is because our feelings, sensations and desires that spring from our interactions are what guide us (p. 96). Logic and language are indispensable, but they are not the whole story. As I discussed above, when we reconsider autonomy as relational, our agency, our capacity to make a difference in the world, emerges when we participate in the wider conversation; when we interpret existing conditions in ways that either perpetuate the way things are, or which change them. This allows for an understanding of love and ethics as something people do, rather than as things that exist outside of human action. Here love is a process, rather than a destination.

Sex is an important part of this process, but not in the way Giddens (1992) describes it, more in the way Murdoch describes it. She says: ‘When sexual desire becomes love it connects us with the whole world and becomes a new mode of experience’ (cited in Conradi 1986, p. 259). In other words, when we let go of what we think sex and love are supposed to feel like, we open a space for experiencing what it does feel like.

Conclusion

In this chapter I explored the ethics that Giddens (1992) claims are emerging in people’s intimate relationships in contemporary western culture, which he calls confluent love. I argued that by using the word ‘autonomy’ he commits him to an ethics of justice, an ethical system that has traditionally regarded desires and emotions as inferior ways of knowing how to go in a moral or ethical sense. I argued that this ethical system involves distancing ourselves from our immediate situation and seeing things from an “objective” or universal perspective. However, I also showed that this view of the human being is a fiction, an abstraction that does not adequately describe the way people live and love. I argued that there is no objective standpoint, either in love or in morals. This is supported by what we now know about the origins of human love, that it involves emotional patterns that are a result of our early care.
This early conditioning is also how we learn about gender, with boys being conditioned to distance themselves from feelings, and girls learning not to trust what their bodies tell them. By positing an ethic that involves distancing ourselves from our bodies, our feelings and our emotions, Giddens (1992) draws on an ethical theory that obscures difference, especially sexual difference as epistemologically relevant. There is no room to account for the different ways that men and women are socialized. I argued that a rights ethic is based on everyone being born equally free. But this is not the case. We are not born free, and we do not become free by distancing ourselves from other people.

In other words, rights are only part of the story. By showing how the relational, emotional and situational perspective has been left out of ethics, I was able to explore how confluent love could work. Gilligan (2003) outlines a ‘map of love’ based on pleasure, and it involves understanding love as an on-going process of discovery, where feelings and cognition are not different aspects of the self, but part and parcel of what it means to be human. The way we find our way is by men and women talking openly and honestly about how they experience love, in all its various guises. Doing this opens a space where new ways of being in love can be come into being. She says:

I write at a time when frameworks are shifting. The framework of love, the framework of marriage, what it means to be human – a man, a woman, a person, a couple, a family, a member of the human community. Collectively, we have moved to an edge of possibility ...(p. 230).

As I discussed above this involves including the relational, emotional and situational aspects of experience into the moral equation. When we do this, we get an ethic that involves both justice, and care as different ways of knowing how to go on, individually and together. In short, we get an ethic of love. In the next chapter I draw on Porter (1991) to show how this ethic works in a practical sense. When we factor in the different ways that people experience love in their relationships, we get an understanding of ethics as a process of becoming ‘who we are’. Here ethics is concerned with how we make sense of what a good relationship is for ourselves, rather than following a set of rules, or prescriptions about what we ought to do, or should do. Here what is right or good depends on how well we can navigate a situation, in a way that affirms what we care about, or which takes us further away from what really matters.
Chapter 4 - research methods

In this chapter I discuss why I went about the research the way I did, and then discuss the methods I used to explore how the people who participated in the research were navigating their intimate relationships. These methods included Kathy Charmaz’s (2006, 2012) Grounded Theory and Davies and Harré’s Positioning Theory (1990).

I used Anthony Giddens’ (1992) theory of confluent love as a starting point my research project, because despite the flaws in his theory, as I discussed in the previous chapters, he provides a way of talking about intimacy that differs significantly from existing notions. The language of human rights is central to how he explains the way people negotiate relationships in western culture, but this language can only take us so far because it excludes emotions, desires and personal preferences as being ethically salient. To explore whether a new sort of love was emerging, I needed to go about the research in a way that provided space for how people talked about how their emotions and their desires in the process of figuring out how to go on in their intimate relationships. We can learn a lot about love from literature, psychology, sociology and philosophy, but unless we explore how people experience it in their day to day lives, we cannot claim to have to an adequate knowledge of it.

To explore how people in contemporary Australian culture were experiencing love in their lives, I had to first identify relationships where people talked in a way that was indicative of how Giddens (1992) describes pure relationships; because these conditions are what make relationships contemporary. To do this I used ‘operational criteria’ developed from my reading. He mutual recognition was a key concept. By separated the different ways of talking about love, I was able to focus more deeply on the ways of talking, or categories, that were most indicative of pure relationships. I then explored how these relationships worked. To do this I drew on Porter’s (1991) theory of moral development to make sense of a way of negotiating intimacy, that includes both love and justice. Using her concept of ‘relational autonomy’, which sees agency as something that emerges through the process of interacting, I identified a process in which people were becoming more authentic, more able to be themselves, in the context of an intimate relationship. Here I looked mainly at the way people used pronouns to talk about themselves and the other person in the process of narrating their responses.
Before I discuss the research process in more detail, including what I found or ‘discovered’, I talk about why I went about the research the way I did.

Broadly the aim of the research project was to collect a body of text to explore how people talked about love in a world where gender and sexuality are more fluid, and I needed to do this in a way that allowed me to explore love as an emergent phenomenon, as something people did, rather than something that existed in the abstract. The research method also had to acknowledge that the myth of romantic love is deeply embedded in our cultural narratives, but this narrative is now being reflected on and questioned. It also had to recognize that both women and want more genuine relationships, and part of how they are doing this would be to draw from the therapeutic narrative. As Giddens (1992) pointed out these cultural resources are ways for people to make sense of their relationships, but how these played out, will depend on how people interpret or apply this knowledge in the context of their everyday lives. In this sense they do not necessarily paint an accurate picture of what is going on. He points out that he draws on these texts because they represent the ‘texts of our time in a comparable sense to the medieval manuals of manners analysed by Norbert Elias, or the words of etiquette utilised by Erving Goffman in his studies of the interaction order’ (p. 64)

In other words, the therapeutic narrative, as Illouz (2007) refers to this ideology, is only part of the story. As discussed in chapter three the authentic self emerges through our interactions with others in a social context. It is not a fixed self, but a potentiality that is always in flux; always in the process of becoming. We are essentially relational, multi-faceted and embodied beings, who are both shaped by culture and experience, and who actively shape culture, by making sense of our experiences in our own ways. Cultural representations of love influence how we see things. But the experience itself is embodied and relational. As Davies and Harrè (1990) write:

> Though artificial mnemonic devices such as books and manuals are often understood as evidence for pre-existing knowledge structures independent of any speaker, these only have meaning to the extent that they are taken up by any speaker-hearer as encodings to be attended to (p. 44).
Carol Gilligan’s (1982, 2002) work, was also important for the way I went about the research, because it provided a way to explore love from a relational perspective. Her approach was to focus on how people navigated the discrepancy between what happens, and what is supposed to happen. Like Gilligan (1982) I wanted to be sensitive to the way people talked about their emotions and desires in the process of negotiating challenging issues in the relationship. I was also interested in the different ways people talk about moral issues. Unlike Gilligan I did not speak directly to respondents, for reasons I discuss below.

Giddens (1992) argues that the transformation of intimacy could bring about a reconciliation of the sexes (p. 156), but there is more to it than that. If he is correct, then confluent love is an ethic, a way of interacting that emerges in a space of caring about another person, it is this caring that prompts us to reflect, not only on what our individual rights are, but also on what our responsibilities are towards the other person. If we do this in a way that takes account of our own as well as the other person’s desires, preferences, and feelings, as well as their sexuality and gender, the cultural background or context becomes ethically salient. In short, the reconciliation that he talks about involves allowing for multiple truths, and multiple perspectives about love. As far as sexuality is concerned, Weeks (2009) points out that in any society there are usually competing local sexual traditions, cultures and conventions, some dominant, and some subordinate. ‘Each culture makes what Plummer calls “who restrictions” and “how restrictions” (p. 23) and within that there are usually different rules for men and women, and some people make their own rules (p. 23).

Confluent love, in other words, would have to be an ethic that allows for a ‘plurality of voices’, so it would apply to same sex relationships as well as heterosexual ones. As I discussed in the previous chapter, Giddens’ (1992) theory draws on an ideology, premised on ‘masculine’ moral development; the goal or aim being to assert an autonomous as in a self-reliant self’ (Illouz 2007, p. 32). Illouz (2007) pointed out this leads to viewing other people as instrumental to our happiness. To remedy this, I drew on Elisabeth Porter’s (1991) theory of moral agency to make sense of a process, that I initially ‘discovered’ in the data, but which I could not make sense of using traditional moral theories. This is because the process I identified indicated an ethic where care and justice come together in working out how to go on in an intimate relationship. In other words, Porter’s (1991) ideas fit what I was seeing in the data. I discuss this further in chapters five and six, where I talk about what emerged as I started to code and analyse the data, and she provided a way of making
Real life experiments

For Giddens (1992) freedom is in the doing, and he is correct to say that people in contemporary western culture are faced with choices that did not exist for previous generations. They also make these choices in a context where there are more ‘grey’ areas and contradictory instructions. In making sense of their feelings and desires in a sexual context, people will be influenced by what they see in the media, or by what they read, but in deciding ‘how to go on’, they will also have to reflect on their circumstances and their decisions will be coloured by their gender, as well as their cultural values and personal experience. In other words, the interpersonal ethic that Giddens (1992) refers to as confluent love, is a ‘bottom up’ rather than ‘top down’ phenomenon: a result of the ‘everyday social experiments’ that people are conducting as they go about their intimate lives (1992 p. 182). He draws on an ethics of justice to explain these relationships, but as I discussed previously, this only takes us so far.

What was important about Giddens’ (1992) theory was that he talks about love emerging as people ‘work through’ their emotional issues in a way that brings them closer together. He explains contemporary conditions make intimate relationships more of a collaborative process, which theoretically allows space for people to be more authentic in the process of relating. Here integrity becomes a moral as well as a practical imperative, because if someone is being disingenuous, the other person becomes a ‘player’ in their drama, rather than being valued as a person with desires and projects of their own. Similarly, if someone is not aware of why they are acting in a certain way; if they are just reacting to circumstances rather than being actively involved in shaping their identity, then they are not being authentic, in the sense that I am using the term here. When we take away the ‘reason’/‘emotion’ dichotomy, Giddens’ (1992) theory becomes more plausible. As discussed in previous chapters, authenticity is not about becoming an independent or ‘separate’ self, it involves people being genuine in the process of relating; being honest about what they are thinking and feeling. In romantic love relationships people do not do this because they are acting according to prescribed ‘roles’, and the power dynamics which structured their interactions, are largely hidden from view.
Sexuality in western culture is no longer repressed, and the power dynamic at the heart of romantic love has been exposed for what it is. In contemporary Australian culture issues to do with power are being talked about and questioned. People are also asking questions about meaning, questions that have personal as well as cultural implications.

Creating a beautiful life

Giddens’ (1992) theory was an important starting point for this research, but I did not set out to prove or disprove his theory, rather the aim was to explore how people were conducting themselves in an era where the old ‘rules’ no longer apply, and women have more of a voice in what love and sex mean. While we can be circumspect about what Giddens (1992) writes about women’s empowerment, as Porter (1991) points out, ‘sociologically, we now have examples of increasing number of professional, political, managerial and academic women, who have discovered a new sense of autonomy, yet retain a strong interconnective outlook’ (p. 169). Men are also changing as they become increasingly aware that the quality of their relationships depends on being able to talk about feelings and emotions, rather than distancing themselves from them, either by repressing them, or by ‘projecting’ them onto women (Giddens 1992, p. 156).

If Giddens (1992) is correct, and a new ethic, grounded in the way we go about our intimate relationships, is emerging in western culture, then I needed to go beyond existing discourses, be they romantic, therapeutic, psychological or philosophical. This is especially the case because there is a significant contrast between the images of sexual satisfaction and happiness that love is ‘supposed’ to bring, and the actual reality that people experience. It was also important to acknowledge that love is not always ‘good’ or easy. That said, I do agree with Giddens (1992) that both men and women have more opportunity to shape their lives in ways that would have been impossible even 50 years ago. How we go about our lives in contemporary culture is something we now need to reflect on and think about. Korsgaard (1996) argues: ‘Choice is our plight, our inescapable fate, as rational beings’ (p. xi). We might choose to do nothing, but that is effectively a choice, because what we do has consequences.

As Smart and Shipman (2004) pointed out however, choice, especially when it involves intimacy, is always contextual. ‘In sociological terms, there is a significant difference between the concepts of
Simone de Beauvoir (1947) argued that our relationships with other people are central to how we become an authentic human being. She pointed out that to be a certain sort of person, one had to be recognised by others as being that sort of a person. To call ourselves a ‘teacher’ or an ‘artist’, we need students to teach, and people to appraise and appreciate our art. In the same way being regarded by others as ‘free’ and ‘equal’ is, in a practical sense, what makes a person free and equal. In other words, de Beauvoir pointed out that freedom, or human agency, is not something that exists as an attribute of a person, it is not a fixed property, it is a potential which is realized in a ‘situation of relatedness and affinity’ (2008, p. 194). In other words, she argued that moral agency develops in the process of recognising, and that ‘my’ freedom depends on ‘you’ recognising and respecting ‘my’ freedom. ‘I’ also need to respect ‘your’ freedom in the way I go about realizing ‘mine’.

This had major implications for how I approached the research because it meant I needed to explore ways of going about relationships that promoted the development of peoples’ moral identity, what Porter (1991) calls the ‘strong self’ (p. 170). In particular, I needed to identify the skills or strategies that supported the emergence of this self. As Porter (1991) puts it, this ‘strong self’ differs from the traditional notion of a separate self in that it emphasises connection, but also allows for individuality. She says, ‘this allows a vast range of character traits, differentiated not by gender restrictions, but by a conscious affirmation of the sexual component of one’s identity as a moral subject (p. 170). This meant exploring how people made sense of their gender and sexuality in a world where love is a lot more confusing than they used to be.

Evans (2003) writes that before his death, Michele Foucault observed that the idea of morals as a set of rules was disappearing. He speculated that this would be replaced by another way of justifying our existence. She explains, ‘In place of law, moral precepts, rigidity and a hierarchy of needs, Foucault proposed the ancient concept ‘the art of life’, ‘stylising existence’ and ‘developing personal qualities enabling one to make one’s own life beautiful’ (2003, p. 141). While Foucault’s ethics take us back to antiquity, to a time where women were treated as little better than slaves, the important point that he makes is that our desires and preferences, as well as the things we care about, are key ingredients in what makes a life ‘beautiful’, however we envisage that.
On Kant’s ethical theory everyone is regarded as equally valuable, so the focus of his ethics is to act on ‘rules’ that everyone can agree on. To make an exception for what we care about is considered immoral, especially if it conflicts with our duty. However, some people do matter more than others, and our relationships with the people we care about do factor into the choices we make: and this applies whether we are male or female. In other words, Kant’s ethics do not allow for the way our desires and inclinations make a positive contribution in how we go about creating a life that is meaningful.

Susan Dodds (2000) agrees with this and she argues that the importance of Carol Gilligan’s (1982) research was that it challenged the idea that ‘autonomy required distancing ourselves from other people, and showed an ethic based on interrelationships, or the connections between people’ (p. 222). In other words, we do not develop agency by separating ourselves from what we care about, or by becoming ‘self-realised’, but by acknowledging our wellbeing and happiness largely depends on how we get along with other people. Dodds (2000) argues that:

> Relationships with others, including relationships founded on chance rather than choice, are central to human existence and can be valuable contributions to people’s lives. Autonomy ought not to be conceived as independence or isolation from others; it ought to be conceived as a way to foster non-oppressive relationships of care (p. 222)

Rather than argue that an ethic of care is superior to an ethic of justice however, as I discuss below, I drew on Porter’s (1991) theory of moral identity, which shows how people can develop their individuality, or autonomy, while also taking account of their obligations and responsibilities to the people they care about. Porter’s (1991) work is important because it provided a way of understanding how we can apply Gilligan’s (1982) theory to understand how the inclusion of care into the moral framework allows for a different understanding of moral agency than the one presented by Kant, Rawls, and Giddens.

**Different perspectives**

The perspective Gilligan (1982) identified in her research shows a different way of talking about moral issues, a perspective I needed to explore to better understand how love emerges in relational
context. It was clear that Giddens draws on an ideology that promotes the idea that relationships are only ‘good’ insofar as they promote our independence, or contribute to our individual happiness. He suggests that these are core values that everyone holds, but this is not necessarily the case, especially where love is concerned. As Iris Marion Young (1990) argues: ‘Liberal individualism denies difference by positing the self as a solid, self-sufficient unity, not defined by or in need of anything or anyone other than itself’ (p. 307). Gilligan showed that people’s capacity for choice istempered by the people they care about. This means that the people we care about cannot be excluded from the moral equation because these relationships evoke special obligations and responsibilities simply because we do care.

While Gilligan’s theory was initially criticised as perpetuating existing stereotypes – the idea that women are caring and men are reasonable, Porter (1991) argues that Gilligan clarified this in her later work, where she showed how the justice and care perspectives are not in opposition, but cut across existing dichotomies. Porter (1991) writes that, ‘Care, construed within a justice framework, is ‘the mercy that tempers justice’…’similarly, justice within a care framework specifies a respect for people in their own terms’ (Gilligan 1987, p. 24 cited in Porter 1991 p. 167). Porter (1991) also points out that despite the association between care and mothering that seems implicit in Gilligan’s (1982) work, an ethic of care is not necessarily a ‘feminine’ quality, rather, it is about how people ‘can be looked at and loved without being seized and used, without being appropriated into the greedy organism of the self’ (Iris Murdoch 1971 cited in Porter 1991, p. 157). What Porter (1991) is advocating is a synthesis of perspectives, which she sees as ‘essential for an integrated notion of moral identity’ (p. 168). Porter (1991) points out that Gilligan (1983) acknowledged this and saw moral development as ‘the integrity of two disparate modes of experience that are in the end connected’ (p. 174 cited in Porter 1991, p. 168). This is different from convergence, in that it involves the ‘male’ voice, and the ‘female voice’ interacting in a way that allows ‘other voices’ to emerge (p. 170).

Porter’s (1991) theory highlights the fact that an ‘ethic of care’ is not something that applies only to women, it is indicative of the way some indigenous cultures, as well as how some men, particularly men from different cultures, understand the world. Porter (1991) points out that it appears that ‘people (men?) of African descent and (Western?) women have similar ontologies, epistemologies, and ethics’ (Harding, 1987, p. 299 cited in Porter 1991, p. 166). This ontology recognises that
everything and everyone is linked via a web of interconnecting relationships. Importantly this view extends not only to other people, but to the natural world as well. Porter (1991) argues that ‘clearly, the notion of bonds and connectedness extend beyond the supposed exclusivity of a ‘woman’s voice’ (p. 166).

Porter (1991) was a key theorist in helping me understand ‘the dialectic of human development’ (p. 167), which she talks about in terms of how people develop a sense of self through their interactions with other people. Only when we see ourselves as a person, can we see ourselves as a moral person. For Porter (1991) this is a social, rather than a purely individual process. She argues:

It is necessary to have a clearly emerging sense of self, before one can be ‘morally good’ in any situation, whether care for others, or a claim for one’s rights. How this strong concept of self-differs from the traditional individualistic ‘male voice’ is that it emphasises an individuated sense of self as connectedness with others, rather than separation from, or domination of, others (p. 17).

In other words, for a person to have a sense of themselves as someone who has agency, they have to engage with other people, who also have agency. It is what happens in these situations that determines what sort of a person we are, morally speaking. She says elucidating this helps us to understand and talk about individuation as a cultural, or social process. Porter (1991) argues that this is different from two opposing voices converging into one, rather it retains both perspectives as valid in a way that cuts across existing dichotomies. Talking about the ‘justice’, ‘care’ dichotomy, Porter (1991) argues that:

If these perspectives are part of the dialectic of human development the whole point of a dialectical understanding is to work through the struggle between seemingly opposing or overshadowing forces. The resultant synthesis is never a simplistic A + B and every synthesis alters the nature of the next dialectical interaction (p. 168).

This was important because the ethic that both Giddens (1992) and Weeks (2009) claims is emerging in contemporary western culture, involves people – both men and women - talking about how to go, and doing this in a way that allows both people perspective’s to be included. As I pointed out in the
previous chapter, for a long time women were excluded from having a voice in this process. Nowadays gender is a more fluid process, so what counts as a ‘feminine’ way of thinking or acting, and what counts as ‘masculine’ is in the process of being constructed. To factor this into my analysis of the data I looked for ideas derived from both Giddens (1992) and Gilligan (1982) in a way that allowed me to explore how these perspectives worked together.

The main point I take from the individuation theorists, especially Giddens (1990, 1991, 1992), is that when a social environment or context changes it opens a space for new meanings to emerge: and this is a process, rather than a destination. What I take from Gilligan (1982) and Smart (2007) is that human beings are relational, multi-faceted and embodied beings, and our relationships with other people are central to our conceptions of what constitutes a beautiful life.

**Exploring ‘love’ as a language game**

My basic premise for the research project was that if there was a new ethic, or a different form of love was emerging in contemporary Australian culture, then it would be evident in the way people talked about their intimate relationships. If love means something different from what it used to then we would expect these changes to be reflected in the way people talked. By exploring people’s stories, I could better understand how they were making sense of their experience; in short I could explore how the game of love was being played, how intimacy was being negotiated.

In a broad sense then I approached the research as a ‘language game’ in the way Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) meant it, as a way of understanding the multiple ways in which people construct reality through their use of language. Importantly, ‘the term 'language-game' is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or a ‘form of life’ (1953, no.23). David Pole (1958) explains:

> Our language is integrated into a way of life, and is bound up with the most basic patter of our daily behavior. The place we assign ourselves in the world, the terms in which we see it, are reflected throughout our linguistic practices (p 54).

For Wittgenstein, knowing how to get around in the world, for example, knowing how to navigate a social situation, involves knowing how a language game is played. Knowing what to say and when to
say it and how to respond to what is being said, is, in effect, understanding what a word means. He argued:

If we are asked the meaning of any word – of the word ‘red’ – or ‘love’ - say…we must answer by exhibiting its function; we must show the sort of work it does (cited in Pole 1958 p. 19).

The concept of a language-game then, links the employment of language with the ‘actions into which it is woven’ (Wittgenstein 1988, p. 7 quoted in Davidson and Smith 1999, p. 74). Because of this I chose methods that allowed me to study love as a verb – as something people were doing – rather than as a noun – as something that exists separately from the people who experience it.

I also had to do the research in a way that was sensitive to how people talked about the power dynamics in their relationships. In the game of romantic love, for example, there are two positions, which are portrayed as complementary opposites. This sets up a dynamic where there is a dominant person, and the way they achieve their dominance, is by positioning the other as inferior or ‘weaker’. It is this master/slave dichotomy that lies at the heart of romantic love, as I discussed in chapter two.

As Davies and Harrè (1990) explain romantic love, it involves:

…the male hero or prince who has agency and who usually has some heroic task to perform, and the female heroine or princess who is usually the victim of circumstance and is reliant on her prince to save her from whatever fate has done to her (p. 53).

Even when we take out the traditional gender stereotypes that these positions have become associated with, the dominant and submissive positions still exist.

**Operationalizing confluent love**

As Giddens (1992) explains it romantic love is passive, dependent on already existing cultural scripts, while confluent love is active in that it involves breaking away from traditional ‘rules’ about how men and women are ‘supposed’ to behave in an intimate context. Pure relationships involve negotiating in a way that theoretically gives both individuals an equal opportunity to participate in
that process (p. 61). In this sense, contemporary relationships are more of a collaborative process: meanings emerge in the process of relating. In a practical sense, both people decide together whether the relationship is monogamous, or whether it involves sex with other people, whether they get married or have children, and then who looks after the children. Contemporary relationships are love all about choice, and choice or agency is central to ethics, because if we do not have a choice, we could not hold ourselves, or other people, responsible for what their actions. However intimate relationships are not just about what ‘I’ want to do, or what ‘my’ rights are, and they involve emotions, desires and feelings that we do not choose, but that we experience, and reflect on and decide what to do about. Importantly, relationships involve doing this together, so it is not just about what ‘I’ should do, but what ‘we’ should do together.

In this sense, intimate relationships are part of an ongoing conversation that provides a space where both individuals actively participate in deciding what ‘love’ means, to them (Giddens 1992, p. 61). The ways in which they do this will be drawn from existing cultural artefacts, including the self-help genre, but the power dynamics – the way they go about this - determine what sort of a relationship it is. Importantly, according to Porter (1991), moral identity, or agency, emerges as we work through the issues and tensions that arise in the process of relating, and this is how I was planning to identify the emergence of confluent love.

The language I used to develop the questions, and to code the data in stage one, came mainly from Giddens’ (1991, 1992) theory. The way I approached to the research, as a language game, was also guided by the way he explains how social life works, in his structuration theory. The methods I used to collect, code and analyse the research, however were based on feminist philosophy and ethics: particularly the idea of the ‘self-in relation’, an idea of identity that goes beyond existing dichotomies that structure how men and women are supposed to behave in an intimate context.

To do this I explored the way people used personal pronouns to describe how their relationships worked; to see how people perceived ‘they stood’ in relation to the other. Before I could do this, I had to find a way of collecting enough data to make a rigorous analysis.

One of the main reasons for using the Internet to do the research was that it provided a way to collect a large amount of data in a relatively short amount of time. It also provided a contemporary space which allowed multiple voices to be heard in a single context, which is why I refer to the
research as a conversation. The methods I chose and the way I went about the research helped to identify talk that was indicative of how people approached their relationships. I identified talk that was indicative of an ethic of care, as well as talk that indicated an ethic of justice, sometimes in the same sentence. Importantly these methods allowed me to explore how people navigated these different perspectives to figure out how to go on in the context of their intimate relationships.

Researching love on the Internet

According to social theorists, the Internet has changed the way human beings communicate, the amount of information we have access to and the ways in which we actively participate in culture, including the ways we go about intimate love, it influences the way people see themselves in relation to others. According to Henry-Waring and Barracket (2008, for example, the Internet has significantly influenced the nature of intimacy in Australia. Echoing Giddens (1992) they argue:

It is our contention that dating and intimacy in the 21st century is changing due to profound socio-cultural shifts arising primarily from the processes of globalisation...(p. 14).

Henry-Waring and Barracket (2008) argue that as a society, we need to better understand the implications of this for how people go about their personal lives (p. 1). Love is central to our humanity, so if the Internet is influencing what love means in ways we do not yet fully understand, then this is something that we, as a culture, need to pay more attention to. Because the Internet is changing the way people think about and talk about love and sex, it was an appropriate context to do research about intimacy in contemporary Australian culture. Using the Internet to collect data also helped me overcome practical considerations to do with the time and cost of interviewing people in a face to face situation. In short, the Internet provided a way of generating a body of text that could be analysed as a discourse about love in contemporary culture. To generate this ‘discourse’, I developed a website called lovedialogue.com. This provided a way of engaging with a wide variety of people to ask them questions about their intimate relationships in a contemporary context. The website was a space where subjects could participate in a conversation about what love means in contemporary culture.
Advantages and disadvantages

In the early stages of the research I considered the advantages and disadvantages for using the Internet as a research tool. The main consideration was whether face to face interviews would yield more productive or ‘better’ data than a survey posted on the Internet. In qualitative research, face to face interviews are generally considered superior because they allow the researcher to pick up on body language, and subtle non-verbal ways of communicating. This provides important ‘data’ that might otherwise be missed. For example, when someone is talking about a person they loved, it may be that their eyes light up, or they may become pensive and agitated, providing the researcher with avenues to explore that might otherwise go unnoticed.

However, face to face interviews are also problematic in that they involve the researcher entering into the participants’ ‘world’, and full disclosure would depend on how much the participant trusted the interviewer. This takes time. Full disclosure, in terms of how honest participants were in answering the questions was always going to be an issue, but I reflected that participants would be more likely to “open up” if they felt it was safe to do so. Either way the issue of reliability of the data, presented a challenge, in both face to face interviews, as well as in a written survey, in the sense that people could say or write whatever they perceived the interviewer wanted to hear, or which presented them in a positive light. That said, it was not an accurate representation of reality that I was after, it was how the people who participated in the research were actively constructing their reality discursively (Davies and Harrè 1990, p. 45). They explain:

In this sense ‘discourse’ plays a similar role in our social theory to that played by ‘conceptual scheme’ in contemporary philosophy of science. It is that in terms of which phenomenon are made determinate. An important distinction, though, between the two terms, as we understand them, is that conceptual schemes are static repertories located primarily in the thinker or researcher almost as a personal possession, where as discourse is a multi-faceted public process through which meanings are progressively and dynamically achieved (p. 46).

The Internet also provided a power-neutral context to have a conversation about love. Intimate love is a sensitive subject, so I needed to be mindful of any potential negative consequences for respondents. I outlined how I would manage these as part of my application to the University of
Wollongong’s ethics committee. In my ethics application, I talked about how power dynamics can distort how participants answer questions, as well as how it could provide a less intrusive method than face to face interviews. There were also important practical considerations. For example, face to face interviews are time consuming, and would require travel, either for the participant to meet me, or for me to meet the participant.

Once I had a space for people to talk about their relationships, the next step involved developing a list of questions based on my reading and understanding of what pure relationships involved. I then recruiting participants using 3,000 postcards distributed in cafes, libraries, and other venues in Sydney and Wollongong. I also wrote to men’s groups in Sydney and Wollongong via email to invite their members to participate. Ninety-three people responded to the invitation and took part in the research. This included 16 males and 77 females. In all I collected approximately 41,660 words that I was able to explore as ‘a discourse’ or conversation about love in contemporary western culture.

Before I discuss how I did this, I talk about how I developed the questions, using Giddens’ (1992) theory as a framework.

**Asking questions about love**

In explaining how pure relationships are different from romantic love, Giddens effectively lays out the operational criteria for identifying these relationships. He argues that:

> The pure relationship is based upon communication, so that understanding the other person’s point of view is essential. Talk, or dialogue, is the basis of making the relationship work. Relationships function best if people don’t hide too much from each other – there has to be mutual trust…Finally, a good relationship is one free from arbitrary power, coercion or violence (Giddens 2000, p. 80 cited in Gross and Simmons 2002, p. 538).

I also kept in mind the feminist critique, and the difference between an ethic of care, and an ethic of justice. The questions I posed, and the rationale for asking these, are as follows:
1. **Would you mind telling me how you met your current partner?**

This question was asked to explore whether the relationship started out with ‘love at first sight’, something that would indicate romantic love, or whether the relationship developed through a process of getting to know the other person.

2. **How would you describe your relationship with your current partner?**

This question was aimed at exploring the meanings the respondent ascribed to his or her relationship. This allowed me to illicit ways of talking about love, which I expected would help me identify what sort of language game the participant was playing. I purposely used the word ‘describe’ so participants would talk about how they experienced their relationships. I was particularly interested in whether they used the word ‘love’ in their description, and what they meant by this word in practical, everyday terms.

3. **Do you love your partner? What does love mean to you?**

This question was asked to prompt people to reflect on what ‘love’ means for them, and how this plays out in the relationship. Their answers allowed me to explore how a respondent interpreted love in the context of their relationship, and the significance of this from a purely subjective perspective. It also allowed space for the respondent to reflect on their ideals were and how these influenced the way they experienced their relationships. In short, it helped me to understand what their ‘knowledge’ was as far as love was concerned.

4. **What are the expectations for the relationship – what would you like to happen in the future?**

Here I was looking to see if the relationship was open ended or whether there were clear expectations about what might happen in the future i.e. did the respondent talk about the future in ‘traditional’ terms as in getting married, having children etc. or was it more about the pursuit of their individual happiness? This question allowed me to explore the different ways people conceptualised a ‘good’ life, as well as to explore how important the relationship was in realizing this.
5. How do you show your partner how you feel about them?

In asking this question I was interested in ways of behaving towards the other that signified love for respondents. I was also interested in exploring how people talked about their emotions. Here the aim was to bring embodiment into the conversation, and talk about concrete feelings and behaviours. This allowed me to explore love in a way that brings together thoughts, feelings and behaviour.

6. Do you feel responsible for your partner’s happiness?

This question was asked because it was central to understanding the ethics at the heart of contemporary relationships. Taking responsibility for the other person shows how much people care about the other as a separate individual, as well as how far they will go in terms of their caring. Exploring the responses to this question allowed me to see how boundaries were worked out, and what if any obligations respondents felt they owed their partner, or that their partner owed them. This question was important for exploring the ethical process in contemporary relationships: how people treated the other and how they wanted to be treated.

7. Have you and your partner agreed to any ‘rules’ for the relationship? Can you give me an example of any spoken or unspoken agreements?

This question was also designed to illicit information about the ethical processes or practices that helped people navigate their relationships together. It could also help me identify responses or ways of talking that indicated people were negotiating their relationship, and how they did this. The sorts of things people agreed on, as well as those they disagreed on, and importantly what the process was in terms of making the rules, or if they thought in terms of rules at all. Here I could also explore how people exercised agency, and how they negotiated different values and cultural expectations. This question was particularly important for exploring whether both individuals were able to voice their concerns and be heard.

8. Are there any cultural differences between you and your partner? If so how do you negotiate these?
This question was specifically asked to illicit talk about differences, in gender, race, sex, class and cultural heritage. I was interested in skills and the strategies people were using, particularly how they positioned themselves in relation to the other person in the process of navigating difference. This question also allowed me to explore what difference meant to participants in the context of their relationships, and prompted respondents to reflect on how they resolve differences in their relationships.

9. Can you tell me about a disagreement you had with your partner recently? How was it resolved?

This question helped me to explore how arguments, or differences in opinion or beliefs were resolved. I was particularly interested in issues to do with agency, and how power was distributed in the relationship. By asking this question I was also interested in eliciting talk about emotions to see how people navigated emotional issues in the context of the relationship. This question would also help to identify the sorts of skills and strategies people used to navigate disagreements in a way that fostered connection.

After developing the questions, I published them on the website, which was designed in collaboration with two creative arts students at the University of Wollongong. The postcards that I distributed in cafes, libraries and book shops, and in other similar outlets, invited participants who were 18 years and older and currently in an intimate relationship to take part in the research. Once they had consented to the terms and conditions, they were encouraged to write as much or as little as they liked in response to each question. I then explored what they wrote to see how people talked about intimate love in the process of answering questions about their relationships for this research project.

Research Methods

In the previous section I discussed how I approached the research; why I went about it the way I did. In this section I discuss the particular methods I employed to code, categorise and analyse the
research data. As discussed previously, the aim of the research project was to better understand how people were navigating their intimate relationships in contemporary Australian culture. I did this by:

- Identifying ‘talk’ or ways of talking that were indicative of contemporary relationships; and classified these into emergent themes, or categories, which I then compared to the operational criteria derived from my reading.
- Exploring the themes or categories that were indicative of pure relationships to better understand how people developed agency in the process of relating.
- Reflecting on the implications of findings from an ethical perspective.

The quality of the data

I chose to approach the research using qualitative methods because this approach allowed me to understand how people were experiencing their relationships, in their own words. I chose this approach because confluent love is an emergent phenomenon which may or may not exist. In her book ‘Researching the Vulnerable: a guide to sensitive research methods’, Pranee Liamputtong (2007) talks about how qualitative methods are not explorations of ‘concrete, intact frontiers’, but a movement through a social space which takes account of the ‘personalities, perspectives and aspirations’ of the people inhabiting the ‘fluid landscapes’ being explored (Tewksbury and Gagne 2001, p. 72 cited in Liamputtong 2007, p. 7). Qualitative research is open-ended; it involves ‘wandering along with the local inhabitants’ and asking questions about their lived world (Liamputtong 2007, p. 7).

As discussed earlier, I used the Internet for gathering information because it provided a ‘safe’ space for respondents to talk about their intimate relationships. However, doing the research this way prompted me reflect on what might be missing from the respondents’ narratives. For example, in answering a question about how disagreements were settled in a relationship, a respondent may not wish to disclose that arguments were never resolved, or that the other person treated them in a way that was demoralising or abusive. Respondents might also portray their relationship in more positive terms, leaving out parts of the story that do not fit the image they wanted to convey. This may happen in face to face interviews as well, however.
To address these issues in my research I approached the analysis in two stages. In the first stage I used grounded theory (Charmaz 2006, 2012) to identify talk that was indicative of contemporary relationships. The second stage of analysis I used positioning theory (Davies and Harrè 1990) to analyse the emergent category ‘negotiating differences’. This category emerged in stage one of the research and exploring it provided a way of understanding how ‘relational autonomy’ worked in people’s relationships, especially as they navigated challenges. Positioning theory added another layer to the analysis, so I could compare what people said with the way that they say it. What matters as far as this research project is concerned is how people go about articulating their experience of intimate relationships. The different ways of talking about their relationships were a ‘doorway’ to understanding how people were negotiating their relationships. It was how people were discursively constructing intimacy that was the primary focus.

Stage One: Grounded Theory

As I discuss further in the next chapter, I used grounded theory as the primary method for organising, coding and analyzing the data. I chose this method because it allowed me to explore the transformation of intimacy from the perspective of how people were experiencing it. Charmaz’s (2006) version of grounded theory was especially useful because she emphasises a social constructivist approach. This fit the idea of the research being like a conversation, where multiple perspectives could emerge in a single space. This approach recognises that ‘people construct selves, society, and reality through interaction’ (p. 189). It also recognises that meanings arise out of actions, and that individuals are active participants in that process (Charmaz 2006, p. 189). In that sense, this research aimed to better understand how people were experiencing love in contemporary Australian culture by having a conversation about it. It is not about exploring what love is, rather it is about clarifying what love might mean in contemporary culture: what people were doing when they used the word ‘love’ in an intimate context. I chose grounded theory because it is allowed me to focus on how people were interpreting their world. Unlike other qualitative methods, grounded theory focuses on how people make sense of their actions. Charmaz’s (2006, 2012) version of grounded theory was an especially good fit for my research project in that it is a collaborative process, and new meanings emerge in the process of doing research. It does not aim for an accurate representation of an existing reality, rather it provided a way of exploring an idea about love that might lead to better relationships and more enduring forms of happiness. Charmaz’ version of grounded theory
recognises that people exist in a shared linguistic reality which draws on, and reflects back onto existing cultural representations. In this sense, it also fit nicely with Giddens’ (1992) structuration theory, which also acknowledges that society and culture are not separate from the individual; rather individuals recreate or change social reality in the way they go about things. They can either go along with existing social and cultural norms, or they can decide to do things differently. Because language structures thought, by talking about things differently, we can change the way things are. Language plays a crucial role in grounded theory and it provides a way for the researcher and participants to explore meaning in the process of doing research.

Some grounded theorists advise the researcher to start with a ‘clean slate’ in terms of theory. Others focus on the concept of ‘theoretical sensitivity’ (Kelle 2005, p. 1). Kelle (2005) argues that one of the main purposes of grounded theory, as developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), was to challenge the practice of beginning a research project with clear-cut theories or hypotheses. The aim, they argue is to make sense of data, without making it conform to pre-conceived ideas (p. 2). This is a complex discussion and I do not go into here, however I did have to reflect on whether using Giddens’ (1992) framework would unduly influence the results. I concluded that the therapeutic narrative that Giddens espouses, was already part of our cultural vocabulary, and so too was romantic love. Charmaz (2006) advises approaching the research with an open mind, but also recognises that ‘researchers hold prior ideas and skills’ (p. 48), which inevitably become part of the research process. I have an interest and knowledge of ethics, and Giddens’ (1992) theory provided a way of understanding how love and ethics could co-exist.

**Organising and coding the data**

Open coding provided a way of engaging with the data in a rigorous and systematic way, in that it allowed me to become sensitive to what people were saying, while the theoretical framework kept me focused. Before I coded the data, I transferred the responses from my email account and put them into a tabled word document. While I did this I read through each response, and when I had around 50 responses I started coded them. Coding is not about getting at the truth of a matter, rather it a way of engaging with the data in a systematic way. Codes are words or phrases that account for each line of data, and they provided a way of making sense of what people were saying.
At first I colour-coded responses to identify the different ways of talking about love. I show how I do this in the next chapter. This allowed me to identify and become sensitive to different ways of talking about love. I then did line by line coding, paying attention to verbs and gerunds - words ending in ‘ing’ i.e. ‘liking’, ‘loving’, ‘giving’, ‘receiving’ (p. 5). Charmaz (2012) writes that ‘this type of coding helps us to see our data anew. Line by line coding, especially, helps ‘researchers actively engage with data and begin to conceptualise them’ (p. 5). These initial codes were later sorted into categories, based on what people were doing i.e. ‘arguing’, ‘forgiving’, ‘taking time out’, ‘agreeing to disagree’ etc. This process was guided by Charmaz (2012) who reminded me that something ‘kinesthetic’ happens with coding (p. 5). I experienced this as I stayed engaged with the process as it unfolded.

During the line by line coding process, I noticed certain phrases or words kept being repeated, as well as noticing words that had similar meanings. I grouped these words categories, which then became more substantive as I continued with the coding. For example, the category ‘agreeing to disagree’ became part of the category ‘negotiating differences’ and ‘equality’ became ‘treating each other as equals’. I outline the results of stage one in the following table which shows ways of talking that are consistent with Giddens (1992) theory. This was significant, because it showed that some of the people who participated in my research were talking about their relationships in a way that was indicative of contemporary relationships, as he defines them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Giddens’ Theory</th>
<th>Emergent Categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>▪ Both partners see themselves as equals</td>
<td>▪ Treating each other as equals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Trust is central</td>
<td>▪ Developing trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ A process of emotional give and take</td>
<td>▪ Talking about emotion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(emotional democracy)</td>
<td>▪ Telling each other everything</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Rules (agreements about how the relationship works)</td>
<td>▪ Making rules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>are negotiated by both partners</td>
<td>▪ Negotiating difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Involves an opening out towards each other –</td>
<td>▪ Respecting the other person’s point of view</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>establishing an emotional connection</td>
<td>▪ Caring about the other’s happiness and wellbeing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Taking responsibility for own happiness

Resolving disagreements by talking.

This was not necessarily a finding that could be generalised, and the significance eluded me, and I wrote memos to myself about what might be happening: were people simply expounding already existing cultural texts i.e. the self-help or therapeutic narrative, or were they actively interpreting these discourses in the process of relating? This was important because if confluent love was just another ‘social construct’ which is replacing romantic love, then we could not talk about agency, in the sense of people having the capacity to be more self-determining.

To explore this further I continued with the grounded theory method, focusing more on identifying ‘relational autonomy’, the process through which people develop a moral identity (Porter 1991). Charmaz (2012) says, ‘coding allows us to see processes that might otherwise remain invisible’ (p. 5). I did further coding, this time focusing on ‘ways of talking’ that I had identified were indicative of contemporary relationships. This provided a way of exploring how the people who participated in the research negotiated intimacy. Now that I had found talk that was indicative of contemporary relationships, I could explore this talk to see how these relationships worked in a practical, everyday sense. At this stage I supplemented the grounded theory method with positioning theory. Here I mainly looked at pronouns, how people talked about themselves and the other person in the process of relating. As well as positioning theory, I also used theoretical coding to understand the significance of what people were doing. Charmaz (2006) explains this involves going back to the data to look more closely at issues that emerged in the previous stage. She explains that: ‘Grounded theory coding requires us to stop and ask questions of the data we have gathered’ (p 42

Stage Two: Positioning Theory

My aim at this stage was to focus on how people negotiated differences in a way that led to greater intimacy. To illicit this information I had to ask new questions of the data, and this involved going back to the responses to see how people applied the words I had identified as being indicative of
pure relationships. In other words, I was interested in how these respondents ‘played the game’ of love, how they discursively constructed their relationships.

Here I focused mainly on how people narrated ‘moments of choice’, these were aspects of the story where the respondent talked about how they worked through difficulties in situations where there were multiple ways of responding. Here I identified a tension that many of the respondents appeared to be grappling with: ‘being separate’, and ‘being together’. A key category emerged from this analysis: ‘we share a world’. This category came directly from the data and made sense of how respondents negotiated being both together and separate. By exploring how people were going about sharing a world, looking at how people positioned themselves and their partners, I identified an ethical process at work, which helped resolve this tension. In the next two chapters I take the reader through the analysis as it unfolded in stage one and stage two, and I show how the core category ‘we share a world’ emerged in the process of understanding how people resolved the basic tension between being an individual and being a couple. Before I do this, I discuss the limitations of the methods I used.

**Limitations**

The primary aim of this research was to identify ways of talking that were indicative of contemporary relationships, the way Giddens (1992) describes them, and then to explore this talk to see if I could identify talk that may point to the emergence of confluent love. These aims were achieved, however, there were limitations. The most important of these is that I was not able to talk to both people in the relationship. This would have provided much richer data in terms of how people were negotiating their relationships. It would also have helped me identify discrepancies in the way one person talked, and the way the other person perceived the relationship. The premise being that the less discrepancy between the two accounts, the more it would indicate a ‘pure’ relationship, one in which confluent love could or was emerging.

Another limitation was that I was not able to talk to respondents face to face. In the initial research proposal, I said I wanted to choose one response that was most indicative of a pure relationship and then request a face to face interview with the respondent, to explore his or her relationship in more detail. Due to time and budget constraints this did not happen. I was however able to identify one
response that appeared to be indicative of a pure relationship and I analysed this response in more depth. I discuss this relationship in chapter seven.

I also did not collect demographic data, except for people’s ages and their gender, so I was unable to explore how people from different socio-economic groups talked about their relationships. Because of this the sample may have been skewed towards people who were discursively competent. Discursive competence is an indicator of contemporary culture, so this also helped to narrow the sample. The fact that 66 women and only 17 men responded to the survey, despite my approaching men’s groups specifically to ‘balance’ the research data, was also a limitation but this also supported Giddens (1992) claim that women are at the forefront of the emergence of confluent love (p.130). The fact that fewer men chose to take part, even after I actively sought men’s involvement, was also indicative of Giddens’ (1992) claim that men are less likely to talk about their emotions (p. 125).

Nor did I ask people about their sexuality. This was intentional because I wanted to leave space for people to identify themselves for themselves in the process of narrating their responses. This was in line with Giddens (1992) claim that the contemporary self is ‘reflexively’ made. I was interested to see whether people in same sex relationships, for example, identified themselves as bisexual, gay, lesbian or transgender. I also wanted to see if heterosexual respondents made a point of saying they were heterosexual. In most cases, people from same sex relationships did not describe their sexuality directly, however it was obvious in the way they talked about their partners. In response to the question which asked about cultural differences, which I wanted to leave open to how people interpreted difference, people talked about what nationality they were, what country their parents were from, and what religion they ascribed to, when answering this question. The main point here is that I was more interested in how ‘difference’ factored this into their thinking, and how they negotiated these differences in their relationships.

The fact that they chose to respond to the invitation was an indication that someone had something to say about their relationship, and this was indicative of the ‘reflexivity’ that Giddens (1991, 1992) talks about as being a core factor in what makes a relationship contemporary. In this sense, it was not how people described themselves, it was how they went about constructing an identity in an intimate context, that I was interested in. I was interested in this because ‘reflexivity’ as a process through which people ‘make themselves’ and this represents a move away from patriarchy, and
indicated ‘relational autonomy’ – the development of what Porter (1991) calls a ‘self developing within an intersubjective framework’ (p. 170). For example, talking about how episodic sexuality can either be a compulsion to avoid intimacy, or a lifestyle choice, Giddens (1992) writes that when someone reflects on how to perform their ‘sexuality’, regardless of what they choose, it represents the self as a ‘work in progress’, and affirms what ‘taken for granted phallic power denies: that in, modern social life, self-identity, including sexual identity, is a reflexive achievement’ (p 147).

What I brought to the research was also something I had to reflect on: whether being a woman mattered, whether my own experience of relationships mattered, as well as my whether my interest in the ethical component of Giddens (1992) theory mattered. I concluded that it all mattered, and, in this sense, the data went in the direction I wanted it to go. In choosing the methods, and deciding where the research would take place, I was also instrumental in constructing the context and I developed the questions using Giddens’ (1992) theory as a framework. All of this would have influenced who took part in the research, as well as what I looked for in the responses. To some extent, participants would also most likely have been owned a computer, and they would have been interested in disclosing details of their private life to a stranger. All these factors were accounted for in designing the methodology, and again were all indications that the people who participated in the research were discursively competent.

I went about the research the way I did because confluent love is an emergent phenomenon and therefore studying it required casting the net quite wide. Giddens (1992) refrains from saying how far confluent love is a ‘real’ or actual phenomenon, so exploring whether it existed or not, in a practical sense, was challenging. Giddens (1992) provided the terminology that allowed me to identify people who relationships were most indicative of the changes that he says are occurring in contemporary western culture. I was then able to explore this talk more deeply to see, what, if anything was going on. I did find something going on, which I talk about in chapters five, six and seven, where I discuss what I ‘discovered’ as I engaged with the research data.

Discussion

I particularly enjoyed using grounded theory as a way of doing research. However, this method was also difficult, and I found it particularly tricky in the early stages of the research when I had a lot of
data, but was not sure how to make sense of it. It look a long time to code and classify the data, and I understand there are software packages that do this, but I wanted to stay engaged with the data: to ‘listen’ to what was being said, as well as how people were saying it. There were times of uncertainty, and during these times I read Charmaz (2012), who encourages the researcher to trust the process. Importantly this method allowed me to understand how people were making sense of love in their lives. In this sense, the results were a co-construction, because participants’ interpretations guided the research process in a way that allowed them to have a voice in what emerged. In this sense making sense of intimate love in this research project was a participatory process. While the findings cannot be generalized, they point to a way of going about relationships which could allow space for people to create more authentic ways of being in love.
Chapter 5 – results: stage one

Introduction

The aims of this research were to identify ways of relating that were indicative of pure relationships, and then to explore these relationships to better understand what it means to say, ‘I love you’ in contemporary Australian culture. In the next three chapters I discuss the results of the research as they emerged through three distinct stages of analysis. In this chapter I talk about what I found in the first stage, where I used grounded theory to code the data. A number of distinct categories emerged from this analysis, which I then compare with the ‘operational criteria’ derived from my reading of what contemporary relationships might look like.

Stage One: Evidence of pure relationships

The aim of the first stage one was to analyse responses to identify ‘talk’ that was indicative of contemporary relationships, what Giddens (1992) calls pure relationships. This was important because according to Giddens’ (1991, 1992), these relationships provide the conditions in which confluent love emerges. Here the main indictor of pure relationships was the extent to which a relationship was ‘internally referential’ or ‘negotiable’. Giddens (1992) explains this as the main identifier or the ‘characteristic movement of modernity’ as far as intimate relationships are concerned (p. 185). He says these negotiations refer,

…not just to the initiation of a relationship, but to the reflexivity inherent in its continuance – or its dissolution. Not just respect for the other, but an opening out to that person, are needed for this criterion to be met (p. 190).

Pure relationships involve people communicating their preferences, beliefs and values in a way that acknowledges both people’s perspectives are valid. To identify responses that were indicative of this way of relating, I explored what respondents said about their relationships: how they described them.
Organizing the data

When each respondent had submitted their response on the website, I received it in my university email account. At no stage were responses posted on the website. When I had received the response, I recorded the person’s email address and their name, and put this into a locked file for safe keeping. I then dis-identified the respondent. I then transferred each response onto a tabled word document, and numbered each response. The first response was number 1, and the first question of the first response was 1.1, and the second question was 1.2 and so on. This allowed me to keep track of the data in the process of analyzing responses.

Identifying different ways of talking about love

During this process, which involved reading each response as I transferred it to the word document, I started to identify different ways of talking about relationships. When I had about 50 responses I decided to highlight these ‘ways of talking’ using different colours. This allowed me to identify and compare different ways of talking about love. I used the colour pink for ways of taking that that indicated ‘romantic’ love, red was for ‘passionate’ or sexual love, light blue was for ways of talking that indicated ‘friendship’, and dark blue was potentially ‘confluent’ love. I chose these colours randomly. Most of the data fit into these four main categories.

This simple analysis allowed me to ‘road test’ the grounded theory method, to see if the initial codes could be substantiated with the incoming responses. It also helped me become sensitive to different ways of talking about love. As Charmaz (2012) explains, coding does more than just sift through the data, ‘it breaks the data up into their components or properties and defines the actions that shape or support these data’ (p. 5).

Most responses were a mixture of different colours. There was evidence of romantic love, and this was indicated by metaphors about ‘finding the one’ and ‘being together forever’. There was also evidence of passionate love, which was identified by talk about desires, in particular, the desire to merge, fuse with, or possess the other person in a sexual way. Again, this indicated romantic love. As Giddens (1992) reminds us, confluent love is an emergent phenomenon in western culture, and romantic love is still the dominant ideal (p. 2). However there were some responses which were more indicative of confluent love or pure relationships.
The following is a good example of a response which included all the ways of talking about love that I had identified, except for friendship. This respondent was from a 23 year-old woman, who said the ‘love’ she was feeling was a ‘recent thing’, however the expectation was for a longer-term commitment:

I envision marriage and children in the future. However ideally the passion [sexual], respect [confluent] and desire [sexual] to be with one another will continue to be there [romantic] (2.4).

At first it was not clear what sort of relationship this was. However, when I read this response again, it became clearer. In response to another question she also brings in friendship, so all the ways of talking about love were now present:

I could see myself falling in love [romance] with him…it’s quite a recent thing though. To me, love means incredible respect [confluent] for the other person, wanting to be best friends [friendship], knowing when to (and wanting to) compromise [confluent], never deliberately hurting the other person, wanting to be just with that person [romantic], wanting to constantly make love to that one person [sexual] (3.3)

Because this was a new relationship it was not yet clear where the relationship was headed, and at this stage it was not clear where the research was headed. The different ways of talking about love were interesting because they showed that the language people use to describe their relationships is changing. Words like ‘respect’ and ‘compromise’ were the main indicators of this change because in romantic love relationships people see themselves as passive, and this is indicated by their use of words like ‘wanting’ or ‘falling’, whereas in confluent love relationships, the way Giddens (1992) describes them, the focus is more on agency and making choices, as indicated by words like ‘compromise’ and ‘respect for the other person’.

At this stage I had fragments of a bigger story, but not a clear sense of where this was going. Again I stuck with the process and decided to explore the data using line by line coding to see whether I could identify a process, a way of going about relationships that was indicative of confluent love.
Talking about romance

To explore these ways of talking in more depth, I separated the ‘ways of talking’ that indicated romantic love (what I had highlighted in pink) into one category called ‘romance’. In this category I identified three main themes, or ways of talking. These were, ‘being together forever’, ‘he or she is the one’, and ‘the other half of my soul’. One respondent, a 24 year old woman, Cartia, summed up a common theme in the romance category, the idea of being together forever:

We have been together for two years now, and we know we are going to remain together forever (5.4).

While another was more circumspect:

I would like it to remain forever and to be strengthened by time and endurance. I try not to have expectations, just desires (56.4).

In this response, it was the respondent’s desires that were center stage, which indicated passionate love, the way Giddens (1992) describes it as an idealising of the other that also ‘projects a course of future development’ (p. 45). Another respondent, Vicky, a 20 year old woman, who met her partner on an Internet dating site, also projected herself into the future, saying she would like to be with her partner for the ‘rest of my life’ (76:4), and talked about the ‘whole shebang, including ‘kids, house in the suburbs, puppy, wedding, not necessarily in that order’ (76:4). Another 26 year old woman, in a similar vein, said: ‘I expect to live the rest of my life with my partner, have children, and live a full life together’ (13:4). This woman had met her partner through speed dating, and described him as ‘my best friend’. Her expectation was that ‘we will love each other always’ (17.7). Here I noticed that she described her partner as her best friend, which could also be indicative of a move towards confluent love. One response, in particular, encapsulated the romantic/passionate ideal: Emma, a 36 year old married woman writes:

…we fell in love over the Great Gatsby, he has taught me so much about art, and that there is no such thing as a grey sky. What has our journey been? I guess we travelled from the chaos of feeling like the world impounded upon us, to the peace that comes from a life more
quiet, less ordinary, our lives are not fettered by reality, but our hearts. It is the right place to be (23:1).

There was a strong element of fantasy in this response i.e. ‘our lives are not fettered by reality’, and ‘we’ve a love that lasts a thousand years, a love that even death will not tear apart’ (23:4), that was indicative of romantic love. Giddens (1992) writes that in romantic love, ‘absorption by the other’ is ‘integrated into the characteristic orientation of the “quest”, where a person’s self-identity ‘awaits its validation from the discovery of the other’ (p. 45). Here we see echoes of the sort of love that Plato’s Aristophanes writes about, where two people, who were severed from each other, come together as a unity, which is experienced as completion or wholeness. Giddens (1992) explains that: ‘the other, by being who he or she is, answers a lack which the individual does not even necessarily recognise – until the love relation is initiated. And this lack is directly to do with self-identity: in some sense, the flawed individual is made whole’ (p. 45). Importantly this sort of love is defined by the partners turning away from the world and being ‘absorbed’ in the other. This is indicated where she writes that:

…we are the sun, the air, the reason to live for each other. We live isolated from many of our friends, my husband works alone – but we don’t seem to need other people (23.2).

During this process, I became more sensitive to ways of talking that were indicative of the different sorts of love that people experience, in particular I was able to see what makes confluent love different from romantic love in a practical, everyday sense.

**Until further notice**

Zygmunt Bauman (2003) laments the idea of ‘til death do us part’ because he says contemporary relationships are too easy to enter and exit, which works against people trusting each other. He says, ‘rather than more people rising to the high standards of love on more occasions, the standards have been lowered’ (p. 5). In this way, he says pure relationships reflect a ‘de-learning of love: a “trained incapacity” for loving (p. 5).
Giddens (1992), on the other hand, argues that the demise of romantic love is a positive development because it is ‘thoroughly skewed in terms of power’ (p. 62). Confluent love, because it is dependent on how the relationship goes, ‘jars with the ‘fore-ever’, ‘one and only’ qualities of the romantic love complex’ (p. 61). This ‘contingent’ quality was articulated in the following response from a 30 year old woman, who met her partner on ‘friendster.com:

I would like to be with my partner for as long as possible. I don’t know that there is a forever, but we will stay together as long as we are happy and still in love (4.4).

This last comment was particularly expressive of Giddens’ (1992) claim that pure relationships only last as long as the relationship is making both people happy (p. 58). The following comment, by the same respondent as above, reflected this ideal. In her answer to question 3 she wrote:

Yes, I love my partner. I wouldn’t bother with someone past three months or so if I didn’t (4.3)

This process was interesting, and by going back and forth from the data to the theory, I became more attuned to different ways of talking about love, however the significance of these ways of talking was not yet clear.

Coding the data line by line

When I had collected all the responses, I analysed the data using line-by-line coding to see if there was something going on that I had not yet identified. Charmaz (2012) explains, ‘codes are short labels that we construct as we interact with the data’ (p. 5). In line by line coding you label each line of data with a word or phrase that best sums up what people appear to be doing. On the most part I chose words that came directly from the data. This provided another opportunity to engage closely with each response, without forcing it into a pre-existing category. Rather the categories emerge through the process. Charmaz (2006) explains:

Staying close to the data and, when possible, starting from the words and actions of your respondents, preserves the fluidity of their experience and gives you new ways of looking at it. These steps encourage you to begin analysis from their perspective (p. 49).
For this part of the analysis I focused on gerunds or ‘ing’ words. When appropriate I changed a word from a verb to a gerund by putting ‘ing’ on the end of it. A gerund is the noun form of a verb, which ‘turn these actions into topics’ (p. 49). For example, if a respondent wrote ‘we enjoy each other’s company’, I labelled it, ‘enjoying each other’s company’ and later just ‘enjoying’, or if a respondent wrote, ‘it took some talking but we eventually came to an agreement’ I labelled this ‘talking’ and ‘agreeing’. This process allowed me to see how people were going about their relationships. Charmaz (2012) writes ‘coding in gerunds allows us to see processes that might remain invisible’ (p. 5).

Comparing codes with theory

In this stage I also paid attention to words that indicated that respondents might be negotiating their relationship, and as the coding became more focused, I started to see how people were ‘playing the game’ of love. This was most evident when people talked about what they did in times of uncertainty or when they talked about working through challenges in the relationship. It was also evident when people talked about how they agreed on the ‘rules’ of the relationship. Not only were some of the rules that people agreed on interesting, this analysis showed that some people were actively participating in negotiating the ‘rules’. Some of these ‘rules’ were explicit, others were implied; and as one respondent put it there are ‘no rules but we do have agreements on some ways of being’ (37.7).

Some of the rules involved whether the relationship was monogamous, or whether there was room for other people to be involved; other rules were more practical, to do with house work or the way a couple argued. By focusing on words like ‘expressing’, ‘talking’, ‘negotiating’, ‘listening’, ‘arguing’, and ‘agreeing to disagree’, I identified the sorts of things people were doing as they negotiated their relationships. This helped me to identify ‘relational autonomy’, specific skills, or ways of going about things that helped people develop a stronger sense of themselves in the relationship.

Writing notes to myself

By the end of this analysis I had a list of words, and while some of them appeared to be indicative of contemporary relationships, I was not able to get a clear idea of what the significance of this was,
other than showing that the research, so far, seemed to support Giddens’ (1992) theory. Until this point I had been working mainly on the computer, and as an experiment I decided to write each code word on an index card, and sort through these manually, putting words or ‘ways of talking’ into categories. Sometimes this involved going back to the response to understand how a respondent was using a word, and then going back to the operational criteria I had derived from my reading of Giddens. This process allowed me to substantiate the categories theoretically and also to better understand what these words meant in a practical, everyday sense: it helped me understand what ‘work’ the word love was doing.

For example, one respondent, a 24 year-old woman, Alison, who described her relationship as being in the ‘honeymoon phase’ and used the words ‘express ourselves’ while discussing difficulties in resolving issues in their relationship. Alone these words could indicate a pure relationship where she felt free to talk about her emotions, or it could indicate a romantic relationship, or a mixture of both. She writes that ‘we both find it difficult to express ourselves when we do fight which means any problems aren’t usually addressed very well’ (1.9). The point here is that the words were only meaningful when they were re-embedded in their original context. Rather than being able to express themselves emotionally, which would be an indicator of a pure relationship, the respondent found it difficult to express herself. Another respondent used the word ‘expressing’ when talking about the importance of non-verbal ways of relating. ‘You know that song ‘you say it best when you say nothing at all’? Well, I believe in the importance of non-verbal cues…of course expressing verbally what one feels is very important but the power of the touch, a hug, a smile etc. is often underestimated’ (2.5).

In a very important sense then understanding the context in which a word was used was the key to understanding its significance. The following response illustrates this well. Here a 35 year-old, married woman Leoni, writes about the challenges in her relationship, particularly those that stem from her upbringing. Here she talks about ‘expressing’ how she feels in the relationship in a way that indicates confluent love. It is interesting that when I first coded this response, there was a lot of dark blue, and not much pink or red. She writes:

I often tell him I love him. I’m not sure I do enough showing. My family was always “just get on with it” types and I seem to have this weird rule that too much display of emotion is all a
bit wanky. Our sexual relationship started great and has gone down over the years. But there are occasions when I will express to him sexually how I feel because I know this is what he really loves. I like to touch my husband. Run my hands on him and under his beard. I used to do a lot more when we were courting and in first years - lots of long letters and naughty webcam conversations (as he was overseas for a long time) (14.5).

This response was interesting because she indicates that expressing how she feels in a sexual way is one of the ways she shows her partner that she loves him. This has echoes of what Tyler (2008) talks about in regards to women having sex with men to keep the relationship together, however what is distinct about this response is that the respondent does not have sex because she feels she has to, but because she knows ‘this is what he really loves’. It is her knowledge of her partner as a person that motivates her to act this way. She also acknowledges that her upbringing has an impact on how she relates to her partner, and in this sense, she draw on the therapeutic narrative to help her move beyond her conditioning that ‘too much display of emotion is all a bit wanky’, and she acts in way that is more aligned with how she wants to be in the relationship. By acknowledging that she has this ‘weird rule’, she indicates a degree of reflexivity. This accords with what Giddens (1992) says about contemporary relationships that they ‘help prise the individual’s actions away from an unconsciously organised power game’ (p. 193). She recognises that there is a ‘pull’ away from acknowledging her emotions, but she has become aware of this in the process of relating.

During this process I was able to substantiate the existing categories, and a number of clear categories emerged in this stage. These included: ‘treating each other as equals’, ‘negotiating differences’, ‘talking about feelings’, ‘trust’, ‘respecting the other person’s point of view’, ‘making rules’, ‘being friends’, ‘being myself’, ‘taking responsibility for own happiness’, and ‘caring about the other person’s wellbeing’. All of these categories were indicative of how people were negotiating their relationships in contemporary Australian culture, and exploring them helped me understand ways of going about relationships that help people become more intimate, while at the same time developing a sense of themselves as a moral agent in the way Porter (1991) describes it, as developing a ‘strong sense of self’ (p. 170).

As I discuss below, identifying this process was not straightforward, and it took time to understanding that the words people use do not necessarily equate with what was actually going on.
Treating each other as equals

Treating the other person as an equal was one of the most important indicators of a pure relationship from a theoretical point of view. In practice, however, defining equality was not straightforward. For example, one respondent said:

I believe we have a very equal relationship, with no one party loving the other more or overpowering the other. We are both independent and have our own interests and can spend time apart from each other. We respect, trust and support each other (13.2).

On the face of it this appears to be a relationship based on the ‘principle of equality’, however it was difficult to substantiate this because in the question that asked how differences were resolved in the relationship the respondent replied:

We rarely disagree (13.9). We don’t have any rules. We have similar standards, morals etc. so everything that has happened to date has been natural with no boundaries (13.7).

Here the word ‘equality’ meant having similar values rather than a meeting of two independent minds, which meant this was not evidence of a pure relationship because there was little evidence that this respondent and her partner were involved in ‘determining the conditions of their association’ (p. 190). Giddens (1992) writes for the emergence of confluent love a relationship ‘has to reflect a meeting of autonomous and equal persons’ (p. 194). While we can agree with Porter (1991) that this is not something people necessarily come to the relationship with, the way this respondent described the relationship, there were few opportunities to identify how she was negotiating her autonomy in a relational context.

Another respondent, an 18 year old woman, also used the word ‘equality’ to describe how the relationship works, and this time there was evidence that the relationship was more equal in terms of how she communicated with her partner. She writes: ‘We are a perfect team – we treat each other as equals, talk about everything, and are honest with each other’ (26.2). When I looked at her responses to the other questions, she explains what equality means to her in the context of talking about what she thinks love involves. She wrote: ‘I believe that love encompasses having a close relationship with
a person that makes you want to support them, openly talk about everything with them and to ‘face the world together’ (26.3). This did provide evidence of how equality played out in the relationship in terms of actions, and it shows she is able to talk about equality in a way that was personally meaningful for her. ‘Facing the world together’ for this respondent indicated that she regarded the relationship as a safe space from which to face the world, and that the relationship was open to negotiation. For example, talking about the way she and her partner resolved disagreements, she said:

Disagreements between us are exactly that, as opposed to ‘arguments’ or ‘fights’; that is, we discuss each view and together come to a conclusion of what is the best solution (26:9).

This response was indicative of the ‘rationalisation’ of emotion that Illouz (2007) talks about. Importantly this gave her a ‘sense of self’ which came about as a result of her and her partner’s interactions. Porter (1991) explains that moral identity emerges from ‘recognising each other’s dignity’ (Benhabib, 1987 p. 169 cited in Porter 1991, p. 19).

For this respondent, dignity meant resolving disagreements without fighting or arguing.

Another respondent, a 26 year old male, Daniel, also described his relationship as ‘equal’ and he talked about equality in terms of being ‘best friends’ with his partner, a theme that came up frequently in relation to the word ‘equality’. He wrote:

I believe ours is an equal relationship. It is one based on mutual respect and trust of the other. Of course, she is the best friend I ever had, but it feels more than that (34:2).

Here the phrase ‘it feels more than that’, alludes to something which he is not able to put into words, but it brings in a feeling tone which was not present in some of the other responses.

Being best friends appeared to be an important indicator of pure relationships, so I reflected on this from a theoretical point of view. According to Giddens (1992) intimate relationships in contemporary culture, including marriages, tend to look more like friendships (p. 155). He writes that in contemporary relationships ‘both partners treat the marriage as a relatively secure environment from which they issue out to face the wider world’ (p. 155). Importantly, the Kantian
philosopher, Christine Korsgaard (1996) argues that friendship is a moral relationship in that it involves ‘frank conversation and the sharing of sentiments’ (p. 199).

Friends are also open about what they are feeling, and they can talk about their experience openly, knowing the other person will respect their confidences, and validate their opinions. There is a sense of reciprocity in friendship, a mutual respect that characterise these relationships.

**Being friends**

Being friends was a strong category that emerged in the first stage of analysis. Friendship was also an important identifier of more egalitarian relationships, because friendship implies an equal power dynamic. In friendships people choose to be together rather than being obligated or coerced. Again, I looked at how people used this word to understand what friendship meant for respondents in a practical sense. One respondent, a 42 year old woman, who had been with her partner for over 8 years, described friendship like this:

> We are excellent friends first and foremost. Our relationship has a very practical nature of support and trust. We find in each other the sort of person we can easily spend a lot of time with and have children with, which is important to us. From the outside we have the sort of relationship others see as strong and happy. Sexually we are perhaps not each other’s ideal when we compare the kind of "chemistry" we have felt with others in the past. Sometimes, this creates a lack of momentum so our sexual relationship is something we must nurture to keep things in balance (54.2).

The significance of friendship in this relationship was that the respondent felt supported. She also talked about being able to trust her partner, which provided a sense of safety. Her comment that their sexual relationship lacked momentum means this is something the respondent has talked about with her partner and it was an element of their relationship that they ‘must nurture’. This has elements of confluent love because not only does the respondent see her and her partner as equals, she talks about love as;

> providing the space and acceptance for your partner to feel free to be themselves. If you are happy with who you are, you can grow and evolve and help others do this too (54.3).
This last response has elements of the therapeutic narrative in the sense that growing and evolving are important. However the relationship also appears to be ‘internally referential’ because they have obviously discussed their ‘lack of chemistry’ in the sense of what has occurred in previous relationships, for them both. There is also a sense that this person feels free to be herself in the relationship, which was different from the sort of freedom that Giddens (1991) talks about in terms of the ‘achievement of an authentic self’ (p. 80). Here it is about the relationship providing ‘space’ and ‘feeling free to be themselves’ in the sense of ‘being happy with who you are’ (54.3). Here there is nothing to be achieved, rather it more about not being false or superficial in the relationship. Nor did this indicate the sort of narcissism that Bauman (2003) argues characterise contemporary relationships. The significance of friendship on a practical level then involved this respondent feeling free to be herself, and both her and her partner accepting each other the way they were.

Another respondent who described his partner as being ‘the best friend I have ever had’ (34.2) also talked about giving each other ‘room to grow’. This person, a 26 year old male, had been with his partner for at least six years at the time of writing. He writes about feeling comfortable with his partner. He then qualified this by talking about how they communicate about the relationship regularly.

I think both of us have looked for companionship in relationships, and in Sophie I see someone who I am completely comfortable and at home with. We communicate about the relationship regularly, and try to give each other the room to grow and to be flexible. We realize that life is fluid and move with it (34.2).

For this respondent being friends meant being comfortable with his partner, which he qualifies by saying he feels ‘at home’ with her. The relationship is ‘internally referential’ because they talk about the relationship regularly. I particularly noted that he said ‘we realize life is fluid’ meaning that there is no sense of what might happen in the future. Friendship for this respondent also meant sharing the load in terms of housework as well as listening to her when she brings up an issue.

I listen to her when she brings up an issue. I try to address things I do that might upset her. I share the jobs with her and will go out of my way to help in her times of need. I try to give
her the space to do her things. I try to not be mean, rude, dismissive or neglectful. Actions speak a thousand words (34.5).

This is not just about her rights or his rights, rather it is about the way he goes about caring for his partner that defines love for him. It is the way he feels that drives what he does.

Friendship came into participants’ narratives at different points of the conversation. For example, Helga, a 23 year-old woman, wrote about how she had been friends with her partner prior to becoming intimately involved, then ‘one day we both expressed our love for one another’ (59.1). For this respondent friendship was a prelude to love, and a core feature of how she currently sees her partner as ‘my best friend’ (59.2). Another respondent, Susan, aged 44, talked more about how they are best friends after 25 years of being together. She wrote:

After 25 years together, we are best friends – there is no one in the world I would rather spend my time and my life with. I feel quite sure I can say the same thing for him (33:2).

Susan’s response had a sense that she continues to choose to be her partner, and they are able to be together in a way that she describes as being intimate ‘on all levels – physical, emotional and spiritual. This love involves being known and knowing, on a deep level that brings security’ (33.3). This indicates confluent love because, as Giddens (1992) explains it, this sort of love does not just happen as in romantic love, it emerges as two people ‘reveal concerns and needs to the other and to be vulnerable to that other’ (p. 62). In other words, it emerges as people get to know each other.

Friendship for many respondents meant being able to trust that the other person would be there for them, and that they would consider ‘your partner’s happiness in the same way that you consider your own’ (32.3). Angelina, aged 27, writes that being friends is what has helped keep her relationship together.

As my husband has said before, we are above all things, the closest of friends, so therefore we need to still treat each other as friends do when all else fails, and that has been our saving grace many a time (36.7).
For this respondent friendship had a moral element, it was a way of treating the other; there was a sense that friends are loyal to each other no matter how difficult or challenging the relationship becomes.

There was a strong sense in the above relationships that each person was responsible for their own wellbeing, but this was something that had to be worked out. As Tom, aged 50, puts it: ‘Happiness is a choice…a common error that many couples [make] is to expect our spouse to meet all of our needs (84.2). Tom and his partner had been married for 29 years at the time of writing, and he says the other mistake is to think that ‘we are personally responsible for everything that happens in our lives, in terms of creating ‘health, happiness, healing, purpose, fulfilment. My wife and I learned this a long time ago – it has to be one of the most important life lessons that we know and teach others (84.6).

Being responsible for one’s own wellbeing or happiness was an important indicator of autonomy in the relationship, and this was something that many respondents were in the process of working out. Angelina, for example, also talked about people being responsible for their own happiness, but she puts this more in a relational context by acknowledging that when either of them is unhappy, it impacts on the relationship. In this sense, the relationship is included in her perspective, it becomes an ‘intersubjective’ space, one that involves negotiating emotions in a way that makes ‘our happiness increase 10-fold as a result of sharing experiences together’ (36.6). She writes:

> Generally, we both know that we are responsible for our own happiness, but if one of us is doing something that makes the other unhappy, we are able to discuss it and work out a solution to solve the problem, as we have come to realize over time that when either of us is unhappy, our relationship tends to suffer, so we try to fix it asap (36.6).

This response was indicative of how pure relationships support the emergence of an ethic where love and happiness go hand in hand, in a way that supports Giddens’ (1992) theory. He argues that confluent love represents an ethical framework for the ‘fostering of non-destructive emotion in the conduct of individual and communal life’ (p. 202). It is precisely because of the frailty of human bonds, as Bauman (2003) puts it, that love becomes so important. As Giddens (1992) points out,
‘…emotion as a means of communication, as commitment to and cooperation with others, is especially important.

The way people used the word ‘friendship’ in describing their relationships also also an indication that they felt safe in the relationship, and they felt they could talk to their partner openly about whatever was bothering them. Importantly they expected their partner to respond in a way that validated or affirmed them. This was consistent with Giddens (1992) own conception of modern intimacy as ‘formed through mutuality rather than through unequal power (p. 202). Here when we get a glimpse of Giddens’ (1992) theory beyond what the self help texts say and what he says makes sense in terms of what I was seeing in the data.

The element of reciprocity that characterizes friendship in the above responses, can be contrasted with another response, which is more indicative of romantic love, not just because she uses the word ‘romance’ but because of how she writes this plays out in the relationship. Cartia, aged 24 writes: ‘We are a perfect match for each other in every single way’ (5.2.). She qualifies this by saying: ‘I like to show my partner that I care about him by helping him as much as possible when I can see he needs help, by doing spontaneous romantic things, and most importantly, working with him to iron out the kinks in the relationship’ (5.5). Cartia uses the words ‘soul mates’ (5.3) to describe her relationship and writes that she has been with her partner for two years, and ‘we are going to remain together forever, however cliched that sounds (5.4). What was interesting about this response was her use of pronouns. She establishes the relationship with the pronoun ‘we’ in the first sentence, but then she uses ‘I’ a lot to talk about what happens in the relationship. She then brings it back to a ‘we’. Here it appears she is doing a lot more of the work in the relationship and defining it according to what she believes love should look like.

This can be further contrasted with another response that starts off with her talking in a way that indicates that she is doing most of the work in the relationship, but she goes on to indicate a more reciprocal dynamic, where she recognises that both of them have a part to play. Heather, aged 33 wrote that she shows that she loves her partner by:

…being accepting and non-judgemental, understanding him and supporting him through hard times, supporting him to achieve what he wants and needs, acknowledging my role in
our difficulties and being willing to play my part in addressing issues, cooperating and negotiating with him to reach mutually agreeable outcomes, and having and working towards shared goals (10:5).

This response indicated that mutuality was still very much a work in progress, but there was progress being made. In the first part of the response it appeared that she was doing a lot of the emotional work, however in the second part of the response the relationship becomes more of a two-way street i.e. ‘working towards shared goals’. There was further evidence of mutuality, when she talked about ‘shared responsibility for chores and financial outlays’ (10:6) and when she talked about there being no ‘rules’ for the relationship, apart from fidelity. She writes that ‘we have discussed fidelity and both agree that it is very important, but there are no ‘rules’ (10.7). This indicated that the relationship is to some extent ‘reflexively organised’ because they have talked about fidelity, rather than just assumed the relationship would be monogamous. The fact that they have talked about fidelity shows reflective engagement.

To me the discussion about fidelity pointed to an ethical process at work, a working out, of how they would treat each other in the relationship. This was further indicated when Heather went on to talk about how she considered her partner as being responsible for his own happiness. She wrote: ‘he has primary responsibility for doing what he needs to do to make himself happy, but I try to support him in this’ (10.7). This was also an indication of relational autonomy, because it shows her exercising her agency by setting boundaries around the extent to which she was responsible for his happiness.

The key to better understanding the ethics that was emerging involved looking more closely at relational autonomy. Now I had identified this in the data, I began to look at other responses through this ‘lens’, and explored what it was that made these ‘ways of talking’ ethical. Leah, a 25 year old woman said that when she and her partner disagreed about something; ‘each person gets their chance to speak while the other listens’ (11:9). Another respondent, Christina, aged 37, talked about her ‘defacto’ relationship as a collaborative process. ‘Our relationship is a collaboration between the both of us to make each other’s lives happier (44:2) and another respondent talked about the relationship involving ‘compromising with everyday life’ (19:3) and ‘sharing your life’ (3:3).
At this stage it was clear that words like ‘equality’ and ‘friendship’ meant different things to different people. For some respondents, equality meant being able to voice concerns, and to be listened to, for others it meant sharing practical tasks, and for others it involved working through issues to come to a shared understanding; or ‘facing the world together’, and importantly being able to be themselves in the relationship. Here the ethical process emerged in the way people related. It was an attitude, a way of seeing the other person, and a way of being in the relationship. As Wendy, 42, explains, the relationship was a key to getting to know herself. She writes: ‘I had previously been single for three years prior to meeting him and you can do all this work on yourself, but it is really only tested when you are actually in a relationship’ (91.2).

**Being yourself**

Wendy’s response was indicative of the therapeutic narrative, however she points out that people get to know themselves, not by doing therapy, through their interactions with other people. This accords with the idea of ‘relational autonomy’. One of the most common ways that people articulated this was when they talked about being ‘themselves’ in the context of the relationship. As one respondent put it: ‘Love means being able to truly be yourself’ (21.3). Here ‘being yourself’ was a way of being with another person. Ashley, aged 24, put this a little differently, but the main theme, the idea that people can be themselves in a relationship was evident.

He puts up with me and my mood swings and I put up with his lack of conversation, we support each other. We are even supportive of each other’s spiritual life despite being very different (24.2).

Ashley makes it clear that there are certain things that she and her partner do not necessarily agree on, but they are both supportive of each other. For Ashley, the process of negotiating being together was a big part of what love meant to her.

When you love someone you take them on all of your rides and they take you on all of theirs. But even when they’re not so fun, you still automatically sit next to them (24.3).
The word ‘automatic’ here was indicative of a lack of reflexivity, however relationship was not about being ‘together forever’, or him or her being ‘the one’, it was more about sharing the ‘ups and downs’ in life, and moving through these challenges together. Importantly, Ashley talked about this as a process, rather than as a destination. Again, authenticity was a way of being in the relationship, rather than an achievement. Kim, 23, articulated that this when she wrote that being herself, or being authentic, in the relationship meant allowing herself to be vulnerable, and reaching out when she is struggling with this. She says:

My last relationship was difficult because I'm naturally a really private person - I have trouble talking about how I feel, so what I try for with J. is to just talk to him, to tell him about myself, and just be myself without trying to hide. On a smaller level, I like to touch him when it's not entirely necessary, to brush his hand in public (50.5).

This last sentence showed both the ‘frailty’ of the bond, but also a commitment to sustaining the connection by talking to him about how she feels even though she finds this difficult. By ‘brushing his hand’ in public, she alludes to what Giddens (1992) talks about when he defines confluent love as involving an ethic which emerges ‘through the cultivation of feeling, expressed in a communicative context; an art of giving and receiving pleasure’ (p. 202). While Giddens (1992) meant this in a sexual context, for Kim, brushing her hand against her partners’ is a public act, that exposes her vulnerability, but which also affirms her sense of being in the relationship. Kim had only been with her partner for five months, so she was still tentative about where the relationship was going. She wrote:

We're in the early stages of a serious relationship - it's at a point where I'm not sure exactly what the relationship is. It's a lot of fun, we don't make too many demands on each other's time, and we're taking it casually because I just came out of a long-term relationship. I don't know what the future holds for us, and I try not to worry too much about it - I care deeply about J. (my partner) but I'm not sure whether or not I can commit to anything serious right now. That said, I can't imagine being with anybody else (50.2)
Here she talks about being open to whatever happens, and there was also a strong sense of agency; a sense of wanting to be in a relationship in a way that was aligned with her preferences and desires. This echoes what Giddens (1992) says when he claims that ‘the more confluent love becomes consolidated as a real possibility, the more the finding of the ‘special person’ recedes and the more it is the ‘special relationship’ that counts (p. 62). This respondent also talks about not knowing what the future holds, which means the relationship is open ended, but she qualifies this by saying she ‘can’t imagine being with anybody else’ (50.2).

This was indicative of a theme that I was becoming more aware of as I continued with the analysis; the idea that you can be an effective agent by being ‘true to yourself’ in a relationship. This also came through strongly in the following response, where the respondent articulated how she negotiated this tension in relation to her and her partner’s different backgrounds. She said:

> We’re both hippy spawn and grew up on communities but his childhood was influenced much more by a culture of artistic creation, substance use/abuse and individual freedoms whereas I came from a no drugs, eco-warrior background where the ethic was to work for the common good. When issues arise because of this we usually try to respect the differences (87.8).

Here there was a clear tension between working for the common good – the relationship - and being ‘who you are’ in the process of relating. I explored this tension more deeply in the category called ‘negotiating differences’. This also showed evidence of relational autonomy at work.

**Negotiating differences**

This was evident in Heather’s response where she talks about a disagreement she had with her partner over money. Here being comfortable was an indicator of being authentic in the process of relating.

> We discussed it, and I explained why I was uncomfortable with it. We discussed what would need to be different for me to be more comfortable, and whether he would be willing and happy to live that way. He could see the reasons for my concerns, and respected that I was
not just trying to control him, but that I was thinking about our shared future. I think we ended up coming to some kind of middle ground, although not formally (10.9).

Heather’s response was also indicative of the way Giddens (1992) talks about pure relationships as providing a space where people can speak and be heard (p. 194). She felt uncomfortable, and was open about her feelings in a way that provided a space for them to resolve the matter. They discussed it, and he could see her reasons. Here reason and feeling are not antagonistic, they are working together.

In the following response, Jenni, 30 year old woman makes it clear that when negotiating differences in her relationship, respect and care go hand in hand.

We care very deeply for each other and respect each other so are open and discuss any difficulties that arise. It is a very caring, loving, equal relationship (12.2)

This response was evidence of both an ethic of justice and an ethic of care working together in the context of an intimate relationship. I wrote a memo about this, and kept focusing on the data, this time I explored how people used the word ‘respect’. I did this because respect is indicative of shared power in a relationship. Respecting the other person means you acknowledge them as a person, rather than purely as a man or a woman.

**Respecting the other person’s point of view**

Respect was also a key skill in negotiating disagreements because it indicated that there was space for people to be ‘themselves’ in the relationship. One respondent said:

We support each other, sometimes challenge, respect each other, and see the other person as an individual (40.3).

It was not until I delved deeper into this response, by looking at the whole of it, that I was able to understand what this respondent meant by the word ‘respect’ in terms of how it played out in her relationship in a practical, everyday way. She writes: ‘I like watching TV heaps more than she does. I
try to limit it a bit, and I’ve learned not to force her to watch shows just because I like them. She likes classical music, I like horror movies – we just do that separately’ (40.8). Here respect meant that both of them have the freedom to do what they enjoy, but not necessarily together. This did not detract from intimacy, rather it appeared to strengthen it.

The word ‘respect’ was used a total of 50 times in the responses. It was usually discussed in terms of preferences and desires, either in terms of respecting the other person’s needs and wants, or in terms of having one’s own needs and wants recognised. This was important in an ethical sense because it involves embracing desires, emotions, feelings and thoughts, rather than distancing oneself from them. It was a moving towards, rather than a moving away from the emotions and desires that was interesting from an ethical perspective. This is evident in the following response where the respondent talks about sex. She said that if her or her partner got to that point of wanting to be with someone else, they would tell each other and, ‘work through the problem and get help if required. We talk about sex and what we want in the bedroom so that both of us are satisfied’ (27.7).

Here respect was a way of showing the other person that their desires mattered. Acknowledging that they might become attracted to other people was not something they would have to deny, or struggle with. It would not necessarily create a division in the relationship, unless they both agreed that it would. By giving her partner this space, she shows that she cares about his happiness, and she shows this by respecting his freedom.

In the following response, respect was articulated in terms of respecting each other’s different spiritual beliefs. The important thing was that their different beliefs were not considered a threat to the relationship, but something they could talk about. Ashley writes:

We are always very careful when we speak about our differences. We have once discussed what would happen if we had a child (e.g. how would we raise him/her spiritually) and we basically concluded that we have to have full respect for each other’s faith all the time, and that as long as the child knows he/she is loved and that god loves them – whatever happens will not matter. I think the biggest factor in ‘negotiating’ differences is respect (24.8).
Ashley makes an interesting point about how two people can hold different opinions, or have desires that may not align with what the other person wants, without either of them being right or wrong. The implication here is that there is ‘psychological’ space in the relationship for each person to retain their individual identity while also being together. With Ashley, authenticity was articulated in the way allowed each other to believe what they wanted. This reflects the values that they both agree are worth pursuing, that is, having freedom to pursue happiness in their own way.

This indicates that through working out how to go on in the relationship, individuals develop skills in personal autonomy (the capacity for self-determination) and they do this in a way that shows they care about the other person. This shows relational autonomy at work because it includes and an ethic of justice, and an ethic of care, working together

**Resolving disagreements**

The word ‘respect’ was used in different ways, and it was important in terms of how people resolved disagreements in a way that fostered connection as well as a sense of agency. This was articulated in the following response:

> I try not to cause him unwarranted grief or stress within the relationship by simply being a reasonable human being and showing him respect (10.6).

For Giddens (1992) this is what intimacy is all about. He says, ‘the guiding principle is clearly respect for the independent views and personal traits of the other’ (p 189).

Respect was also indicated by respondents’ communicating in a way that recognised their own and the other person’s agency; their capacity to be self-determining, to be able to choose how to be in the relationship. In practical terms this means recognising that neither person has authority over the other, and being able to communicate in a way that does not hurt or upset the other person. As Tori put it:

> Instead of yelling at one another, we resolve our anger by confiding in one another, in private. I don’t believe in one person in the relationship telling the other what to do or what
not to do. Instead my partner and I believe in talking about things, presenting our individual stances on the topic, and then making a mutual decision about what we both want (58:9).

The idea that it is not ok to tell the other person what to do, is evidence of both autonomy – in a relational sense – and authenticity, in terms of being in the relationship in a way that feels right for both of them. It is also democratic because each person has an opportunity to have a say, and be heard.

**Working as a team**

Respect was also evident in another category called ‘working as a team’. The way one respondent articulated this was:

> We are a perfect team – we treat each other as equals, talk about everything and are honest with each other (26.2).

By exploring the category ‘working as a team’ I was able to make sense of the way respondents resolved disagreements in a way that brought them closer together. Here there were no winners and losers, rather the emphasis or the ‘aim of the game’ was figuring out what was best for the relationship. It was not so much what they decided - the outcome - but how they went about it, that showed the ethical process at work in these relationships. One respondent said working as a team meant ‘we always have each other’s interests at heart’ (26.9).

For example, Tahlia, aged 18, talked about how ‘working as a team’ helped her and her partner resolve a disagreement about a family member. She describes her and her partner as ‘a perfect team – we treat each other as equals, talk about everything and are honest with one another’ (26.2). Further on she writes:

> We might initially approach a situation from different angles, but we discuss each view and together come to a conclusion of what is the best solution (26.9).
This indicated a capacity to move through challenges together in a way that shows both an ethic of justice. There is less evidence for an ethic of care, but care is shown in the way that each person’s perspective is taken into account in the process of working out how to go on in the relationship. Angelina expressed this when she wrote that seeing themselves as being part of a team helps keep the relationship together through hard times.

We have our ups and downs just like everybody else, but we always come out on top because we work together as a team & try to help each other and our relationship at all times (36.2)

Angelina also wrote about the different ways her and her partner approached love. She says her experience of love growing up involved physical and verbal abuse. Working as a team was important to her because it gave her confidence to face future challenges, and feel secure. Talking about growing old together, she wrote: ‘I know it would require a lot of work on our behalf, of keeping our love strong and facing challenges to our relationship together as a team (36.4).

Working as a team was also mentioned in relation to shared goals for the relationship. Talking about their plans to finish university and start a family with her partner, the following respondent said:

We have already spoken about it and both desire to have a family… and we will make sure [we] both reach that goal together (31:4).

Reaching goals together was an important indicator of the changes that has taken place in how men and women especially relate to each other in that it involves being in a space which allows for doing things differently. For one respondent, for example involves being sensitive to the difficulties that her partner has in being able to express his feelings. She wrote:

I had a very sheltered and stable lifestyle and family culture whereas his was quite chaotic, distressing and potentially damaging. I think this may have had an effect on his ability to experience, articulate and express feelings and emotions, which can sometimes be difficult because I am a very open person generally. We respect these differences within each other but I do try to get him to open up a bit by asking questions (66.3).
This aligns with Giddens (1992) claim that women are at the forefront of the trend towards more confluent relationships (p. 117). He says women are no longer willing to shoulder all of the emotional work in a relationship, and are insisting that these be shared; that men ‘own’ what they are feeling. This respondent acknowledges her partner’s difficulties, and she helps him to open up by asking questions.

Women are also recognizing autonomy in terms of their bodies. In the following response, Emma, aged 36, talks about how her and her partner approached the issue of them finding out that she would need to have a surgical procedure in order to have children. She wrote that it was to ‘her body’, and ‘her decision’ to have the surgery, despite him not wanting her to go ahead with it. She wrote:

He respects that it is my body, and so I am having the surgery - although it is not dangerous - he just said he loves me more than he needs a child. I believe he can have both (23.9).

This is a good example of how relational autonomy works in that she recognises that her partner’s perspective is important, and she cares about what he thinks and feels, but she also recognises that it is her body, and ultimately her decision to make. The key to being able to work through these issues in a way that led to intimacy, was trust. This was the second most frequently used word after respect, and it was a major factor in respondents feeling they could communicate openly and honestly in the relationship.

**Developing Trust**

Because contemporary relationships are more open-ended, trust becomes an important element in being able to sustain a relationship. Giddens (1991) writes that in contemporary relationships, trust goes hand in hand with the development of intimacy. He writes: ‘In the pure relationship, trust is not and cannot be taken as ‘given’; like other aspects of the pure relationship, it has to be worked at – the trust of the other has to be won’ (p. 96).

The way Giddens (1992) explains it trust is necessary in order for people to feel safe in the relationship. In traditional marriages trust was secondary to the legal/ institutional/ social
frameworks that held relationships together. These frameworks provided a sense of ontological security – a feeling of belonging. Today emotional ties are forged in the cauldron of experience, so trust in the other person becomes a core condition for the emergence of confluent love. Giddens (1992) argues that: ‘Trust must somehow accommodate itself to the different trajectories of development that partners might follow’ (p. 140). This is also how many of the respondents talked about it as well. One respondent put it like this:

We have discussed honesty as an important factor for the development and maintenance of trust, which I believe has been the core underlying foundation of our relationship. This is a spoken agreement. Unspoken agreement would be to never cheat on each other, or hurt each other in any other way (78.7).

In this response, honesty was important for this respondent feeling that her partner had her best interests at heart. In some responses trust was talked about as ‘unspoken’ in some relationships, while other respondents talked about it as a work in progress. As one respondent wrote, being able to trust that her partner was committed to working through issues allowed her to risk disclosing her feelings, and this has made a difference to the way she interprets her relationship.

Disagreements are very loaded for us. For me it was because I feared them because my last partner used to 'run' but I learnt to trust that this guy wasn't going to do that. For him it is because his previous partner/s used to yell and scream etc., which he hated. And I don't do that, which I think he prefers but it does make him feel 'unfamiliar' and not sure how to react (43.9).

Trusting the other person, for some respondents, was not always easy, as the following respondent points out:

I've learnt to show that I am hurting and to talk straight - he gets that and will listen and try to understand. When that happens issues are resolved but the big issues, the underlying issues remain unresolved. I don't think he tells me when he disagrees with something I do or say - he closes up and brushes it off, but then stew about it - and that is an issue because he isn't being honest and I know it is building up. I worry about that (43.9).
This response shows that she does not feel safe because she cannot be sure that he is being honest in terms of what he is really thinking and feeling. She does not ‘know’ him in a subjective sense, and therefore she does not feel secure in the relationship. Here we can see the different emotional styles at work, her needing him to be open about what is going on for him, and him not wanting to go there.

While many respondents spoke about how trust was integral to their continued involvement and the development of intimacy, others, like the respondent above, identified the lack of trust as being problematic, contributing to insecurity and feelings of jealousy. Michael, aged 58, wrote:

I feel jealous with my partner having lots of male social networks and going out with other men socially. I reminded her that I did not like it by letting her know how it impacts on me and my sense of insecurity in the relationship. She responded that I had no right to tell her who she should see or not see. Especially since officially I am still married to someone else. It was resolved by her contacting me a few days later and initiating a contact. We agreed to go away for a weekend. The problem is not resolved but the feelings of anger are not there on the surface. When I have social contacts with other women, whether professionally or personally (non-sexually) she too feels jealous and reacts to it. The problem is neither of us feels we have tenor in the relationship with each other so this is a tension point between us. We want to be free but in the relationship as well (71.9).

The tension between free and being in the relationship as well was something that other participants also appeared to be struggling with as well and trusting the other person’s integrity was central to this, as the following respondent discusses.

Love is a reciprocal emotion. To love truly one needs an understanding, trust and knowledge of a person that comes about only through opening up to another person and having them open up to you, to take that risk of finding someone who can complement you as a person and continue to do so while you continue to engage with the world and grow. Love is never instantaneous. It is an emotional bond that needs time, trust and acceptance (34.3).
In other words, trust meant knowing that the other person had their best interests at heart. This sort of trust comes from experience. As one respondent put it, ‘Love…involves a willingness to work through difficult times and invest in the relationship. Sometimes I think I feel love physically, as a kind of bursting sensation in my chest’ (10.3). Michael talked about the importance of trusting that his partner cared about his wellbeing, and this was central to what love meant for him. He wrote: ‘Having a fundamental trust that she cares for my wellbeing and I care for hers without having to think about it’ (71.3).

Caring also meant different things for different people, but this category showed how care is just as much a part of contemporary relationships as respect, or rights or negotiation. As one respondent describes showing you care about the other person is important for the development of trust:

We both try to make obvious efforts to show each other that we care & appreciate each other, i.e. going out for dinner or a movie, buying small presents for the other like chocolates or other foods, & just spending money on the other. But we are always trying to save money, so a lot of the time we do things that don't require money & also come from the heart (36.5).

Trust is also central to contemporary relationships, because as Giddens (1992) explains, relationships are not necessarily monogamous, and sexual exclusiveness has a role to play only insofar as people deem it desirable or necessary (p. 63). This was articulated by one respondent when talking about how she and her partner talked about what to do about potential sexual encounters with people of the opposite sex. She said:

A spoken rule that we developed a few years ago was that if either of us wanted to socialise with someone of the opposite sex, it would be appropriate that we would all go out together. Over the years we have both had people from the opposite sex attracted to either myself or my partner so this rule was developed to avoid any confusion or hurt it may cause either of us. However, we have not had to carry out this rule!(44.7).

Another respondent spoke about how she and her partner had a rule about other people sharing their bed.
Only that it must be someone we don’t know and they never stay the night. I suppose we have a rule that we are never to lie to each other (39.7).

Another respondent wrote that she and her partner had agreed not to have unsafe sex outside the relationship. (63.7), and another talked about what happened when she ‘broke the rules’ by kissing another man when she was out alone at a social gathering. She said she was ashamed and remorseful, and she did not want to lose her partner or his respect for her.

We have resolved this by being kind to each other. Between his depression and my drunken night we have both tried to bite our tongues and be reasonable and not enter into ‘saying things you can’t take back’ in the heat of the moment (54.9).

This response showed how trust is fragile, but it is the way people go about repairing these breaks in trust that seem to make a difference to how people go on together.

Conclusion

The results of stage one provided evidence that people were talking about their relationships in a way that was indicative of ‘pure’ relationships in the way Giddens (1992) describes them. The most important indicator of pure relationships was the way in which respondents negotiated their relationships. Here becoming a person was an emergent process that depended on how people negotiated the relationship. Most significantly I identified the basic tension that participants seemed to be grappling with, the idea of being separate and wanting to be together. This was how the ethical process emerges, as people work out how to go on, separately and together. Here happiness was both an individual and a shared endeavour, and it recognises both agency and interdependence.

These results so far were promising, however, before we can agree with Giddens (1992) that these relationships have the potential to indicate that a new sort of love is emerging which is inherently ethical, I needed to focus more on the dynamics of these relationships: how people went about negotiating the relationship when things got tough. In this stage, the aim was to identify talk that was indicative of contemporary relationships. The aim in the next stage was to explore these
relationships to better understand how people were working out how to be both separate and together.

To do this analysis, I chose one particular category to focus on more deeply ‘negotiating differences’, and I supplemented the grounded theory method with positioning theory (Davies and Harré 1990). A core category emerged from this analysis called ‘we share a world’, which made sense of how people resolved the tension of being both together and independent or free.

I discuss how this emerged in the next chapter.
Chapter 6 - Stage two: theoretical coding

In stage one I had identified ways of talking that were indicative of contemporary relationships in the way Giddens (1992) explains them; and showed how the emergent categories from the grounded theory analysis support his claim that contemporary relationships provide the conditions for the emergence of a new ethics of personal life, which he calls confluent love (p. 62).

The next step was to understand the significance of what I had found. I especially reflected on how these findings fit with existing moral theories. The way Giddens (1992) explains contemporary relationship is by drawing on a Kantian ethic; an ethics of justice. But as I discussed in chapter three, this ethic only takes us so far. I also pointed out that Christine Korsgaard (1996), a Kantian philosopher, shows how Kant’s ethics apply to personal relationships, however she still relies on universal principles to explain this. Desires are inclinations are an ‘incentive’ for acting, but only morally good if they are freely chosen. She writes: ‘An inclination by itself is merely an incentive, and does not become a reason for action until the person has adopted it freely into her maxim’ (p. 165).

A maxim is a law, or principle we make for ourselves. This is difficult to reconcile with the feelings and emotions that arise in a sexual relationship, because we do not always have control, or conscious awareness of why we are feeling a certain way, or why we do what we do. It is only on reflection, and through talking about it, that we can sometimes figure that out. For example, I could make it a principle to always act according to what I most desire, but I might not know what it is I most desire. When it comes to sex, our desires arise in our interactions with other people, who may or may not, have similar feelings, so my principle may interfere with what other people desire.

Korsgaard’s ethics are interesting but they do not include a feminist or ‘relational’ perspective, where the ‘voice of experience’ – what it really feels like – factors into whether a situation is ‘good’ or not, rather than just the voice of reason. I chose to go with Porter’s (1991) ethics because she provided a way of reconciling Gilligan’s ethic of care, with an ethic of justice by talking about autonomy, or moral identity, as emerging in the process of relating. Feminists, like Marilyn Friedman (2000) point out that this way of understanding autonomy reflects the way people actually live. Friedman (2000) argues an ‘awareness of oneself as a self and the related capacity for self-reflection require a context of other selves from whom one learns to differentiate oneself both numerically and qualitatively’ (p.
217). This also accords with the way Simone de Beauvoir described human freedom. She argued that other people both constrain and promote our freedom (2008, p. 195).

Importantly Porter’s (1991) ethic fit with what I was seeing in the data. Charmaz (2006) writes that initial coding generates the bones of the analysis, while ‘theoretical integration will assemble these bones into a working skeleton’ (p. 45). As Charmaz (2006) explains it, theoretical analysis involves substantiating the emerging categories by gathering more evidence. ‘Study your emerging ideas’ she advises (Glaser, 1978, cited in Charmaz 2006, p. 47). In the first stage of the analysis the focus was on what people were doing, in this stage I focused more on how they were doing it. In this stage of the analysis I focused on how participants went about resolving disagreements, and I also paid particular attention to how they talked about themselves in relation to the other person. Charmaz (2006) writes:

As we learn how our research participants make sense of their experiences, we begin to make analytic sense of their meanings and actions (p. 11).

A core category emerged from this analysis called ‘we share a world’. We share a world made sense of how the other categories fit together, and allowed me to understand an ethic that includes both ‘justice’ and ‘care’ as ways of knowing how to go on in an intimate relationship. As well as talk about rights, people also wrote about how they negotiated their emotions, inclinations and desires to arrive at a place that both partners could agree was ‘good’. Importantly this ethic does not dissolve differences rather it supports both individuals to flourish. With respect to Giddens (1992) I continue to call it confluent love, even though it differs in some respects to how he talks about it. This is because it includes the relational perspective, what people did together, how they navigated the space between them.

**Making sense of modern love**

First I went back to the memos I had written during stage one. These were the ideas and ‘hunches’ that emerged during the initial coding process. The main issue I identified was to do with how participants were working out how to be both an individual (separate) and in an intimate relationship (together). This was a significant issue in the stage one analysis. As one respondent put it, ‘We want
to be free, and be in the relationship as well’ (71:9). The aim now was to explore how respondents resolved this tension in the process of relating. This meant going back to the data with new questions. My main question at this stage was how the people who participated in the research went about resolving differences in their relationships, how they resolved the tension of being both separate and together. Here I focused on ways of talking that indicated an ethics of ‘rights’ as well as an ethic ‘care’. Here I looked at how people talked about their emotions, feelings and desires, in the process of trying to resolve issues in their relationships. For example, one respondent, Sophie, a 42 year-old female, wrote about how her partner wanted to stay in email contact with his ex-partner. His reasoning was that he had a right to do what he liked. She explains that it was not about his rights or her rights, but more about her feeling safe in the relationship. She writes:

I argued that he was not considering my feelings when making that decision. For me it was about feeling secure in the relationship and for him it was not having me dictate to him. I told him he did have a right, but that his decision would affect how I perceived his feelings for me and I would then have the right to act on those feelings (35.9).

I noted how she drew on her feelings as a way of establishing this issue as a concern for her, and she told him how his actions were affecting her. In effect she is saying, ‘I care about you so I will respect your right to stay in touch with your ex-girlfriend, but if you care about me you won’t do that’. Here the participant acknowledges that her partner is free to do as he likes, but she reminded him that his actions would have consequences for the relationship. By drawing her partner’s attention to the relationship, she draws on both rights and care language. In traditional rights-based ethics we are directed to act in a way that recognises both our own and the other person’s independence, while an ethic of care recognises our connection. The way the above respondent talked about resolving the disagreement involved both these ways of talking. In doing this she was contesting, or challenging his right’s based ethic by pointing out the consequences of this way of approaching the issue. Importantly she did this by telling him what she was doing; and she pointed to the impact this would have on their relationship.

As I pointed out in chapter two and three, the sort of autonomy Giddens (1992) talks about does not include feelings and desires as being ethically salient. Sophie’s response was indicative of relational autonomy the way Porter (1991) describes it. Porter (1991) explains the ‘mutual awareness
of self and other develops as an interdependent process’ (p. 111). The antithesis of autonomy for Bauman (2003) is constrained choice, when people do things habitually, or automatically without knowing why, or they do what other people tell them to do, without reflecting on whether it is something they really want. He says this might make for a comfortable life, but the risk is that we end up ‘drowning in a life where one individual imitates another’ (p. 95). In other words, when we abdicate our own authority, or let others do what they like without speaking up, we give other people the authority to make the decisions for us. ‘The self stays thereby wholly on the receiving side; the self is a sufferer of the other’s action rather than an actor in its own right’ (Bauman 2003, p. 95).

Moral freedom for Bauman (2003) is the opposite of constrained choice. It requires recognising that we have a choice even though these choices might be ‘excruciatingly difficult’ (p. 97). It is when we face the unknowable that we allow for the ‘sovereign expression of life’ to emerge (p. 97). This involves taking risks, perhaps saying what you are thinking and feeling, even when that is difficult. Taylor (1991) argues:

> To come together on a mutual recognition of difference – that is, of the equal value of different identities – requires that we share something more. Recognising difference, like self-choosing, requires a horizon of significance, in this case a shared one (1991:52).

For Sophie, the respondent above, the relationship was a shared horizon, and she factored this in to her discussions with her partner, providing a third perspective. Importantly, as far as love goes, the moment our focus shifts from an individual perspective to a shared one, we are no longer complementary opposites, with one being inferior and the other superior, and both perspectives are equally valid. To explore this further in the data, I focused specifically on question nine because this question explored how people go about resolving differences in their relationships.

**Analysing questions eight and nine**

I started this analysis by putting all the responses to questions eight and nine in a separate document and then I used line by line coding as a way of focusing. Like before, I coded each line with a word or phrase that best described what respondents said they were doing. These words summed up the
sorts of skills and strategies the respondents were using to negotiate difference and resolve disagreements. These words included:

‘agreeing’ (sometimes agreeing to disagree),
‘saying sorry’,
‘taking responsibility’,
‘talking it through’ (being open about how they were feeling, and what they were thinking),
‘listening’ (trying to see things from the other person’s perspective),
‘respecting’ (awareness of their partner’s autonomy),
‘compromising’ (not being so fixed in the way we want things to go),
‘negotiating’ (giving reasons for why we want things to be a certain way),
‘taking time out’ (letting emotions settle before discussing the issue),
‘being mindful’ (being aware of the other as other),
“trusting”, and
‘finding middle ground’ (being willing to explore commonalities as well as differences).

I then went back to the responses, and looked at how people were applying these strategies in specific situations, situations where both perspectives were potentially valid and they had to work out how to go on together. This was illustrated by Chris, a 44 year old man, when he talks about how he and his partner negotiated their different preferences when looking to buy a house. He wrote:

[we had] a disagreement with choosing a house - my wife wasn't positive about the choices I was exploring. Disagreement was resolved by allowing me to communicate fully my feelings on it. She thought she was being controlling and thought she could be more open (69:9).

In this response Chris shows how he and his partner negotiated being separate and being together by him articulating his feelings ‘fully’, and being heard. It was talking about how he felt that made the difference, and because he did feel heard, change happened. His partner affirmed that his feelings mattered by changing the way she behaved toward him. This also gave him a sense of agency, and importantly it opened up a space where the couple could talk about what a ‘good’ house looked like together. In other words, this respondent’s feelings were not an impediment to moving forward, they were a guide for knowing what needed to change for he and his partner to ‘go on’ together. In talking about how he was feeling this man brings what Giddens (1986) calls ‘discursive
consciousness’ to the way he and his partner went about looking for a house. He defines discursive consciousness as being able to ‘put things into words’ (p. 45).

As Giddens (1992) explains it, talking about feelings is a way of moving out of relativism (our first-person perspective about what is right or good) in a way that does not necessarily resolve the issue, but which fosters mutual understanding (p. 194). Doing this involves speaking and being heard. This is what Gilligan and Richards (2009) call democracy, and it happens when people let go of how they think they ought to act and feel, and say what they are really feeling. As Gilligan and Richards (2009) explain this as having a ‘voice’, which is our ethical voice. They write:

Sexuality and sexual voice are integral to the human psyche, expressing desires that not only give us the greatest pleasures in loving association and living but also contribute to a healthy sense of our bodies and appetites, our creativity, indeed our intelligence, including our ethical intelligence’ (p. 20).

Gilligan and Richards (2009) argue that when people suppress this voice they lose a sense of what they are really feeling, and this can lead to them asserting a ‘false’ self by suppressing other people’s voice. They argue that this is how relationships can become violent, especially for women. Porter (1991) agrees with this. She writes: ‘With this split, the exaltation of the abstract, or rational, as characteristically human is separated from the physical, which is rejected as less important and projected onto women’ (Porter 1991, p. 30).

Chris did not just go along with his wife’s controlling attitude and try to assert himself in other ways, he talked about how he was feeling and pointed out how her behaviour was affecting him. By doing this he was developing what Gilligan and Richards (2009) would call his ethical voice.

**Becoming a person**

For many of the respondents, both men and women, developing relational autonomy was, in many respects, an exercise in negative freedom: it involved refusing to be ‘determined’ by the other person. As Eileen points out in her response to question eight:
His mother was Filipino and his father from Yorkshire both places where women have a very low social status. I make sure that I stand up for myself, my intelligence and refuse to do ironing or be the only one to clean the bathroom (57:8).

Her statement, ‘I make sure I stand up for myself’ is a recognition of her agency, and she exercises this by refusing to be positioned as inferior. Importantly she does it in a way that acknowledges the relationship is a shared space. She sees it as a space where they can negotiate being together in a way that was different from the way her parent’s related. This is a negative freedom in the sense of resisting being stereotyped, and is the first step towards a more positive conception of herself. By saying what she is not, she allows space for her to become ‘who she is’ and this happens in the process of relating. In an important way, this response demonstrates how intimate love can be a road to becoming a more authentic human being.

Deciding on what is ‘good’ together

Figuring out how to go on in a relationship meant respondents were forced to think beyond gender to more fundamental questions about what mattered to them as individuals and as a couple. As Giddens (1991) puts it: ‘the more we reflexively ‘make ourselves’ as persons, the more the very category of what a ‘person’ or ‘human being’ is comes to the fore (p. 217). This is because the more we have to choose how to act in certain situations, the more we see ourselves as having the capacity make a difference in the world. The self that emerges in this process is not fixed or static, rather as one respondent put it, ‘we evolve by learning from each other’ (5:2). This is relational autonomy in the way Porter (1991) and Friedman (2000) explain it, as recognising that we become a distinct self ‘with a particular identity only through interpersonal relationships with other persons’ (Friedman 2000, p. 218).

The focus in these relationships then involved working out how to be together in a way that both people could agree is ‘good’, because in the doing this they create a shared space where both individuals can be more confident in their capacity to be themselves. As one respondent put it:
We have both expressed dislike for the rules and regulations of 'dating'—however, we have both made the choice to deem our relationship as “seeing one another”, rather than 'boyfriend/girlfriend' at this stage (58:7).

This respondent makes a seemingly small, but important point because she recognises that the ‘rules’ of ‘dating’ and ‘relationships’ are not only more fluid, she is also saying that she and her partner have the capacity to decide what their relationship means for themselves. They do not necessarily do this by rejecting existing norms, but they decide together whether these norms apply to their relationship, and agree how to go on. These responses helped me understand why the individuation thesis is flawed; it only tells half the story. These theories downplay the importance of other people, especially the role that the people we love play in our individual and collective flourishing. Charles Taylor (1991) argues that individuation, in the way Bauman (2003) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) talk about it:

…forgets how our understanding of the good things in life can be transformed by our enjoying them in common with people we love, how some goods become accessible to us only through such common enjoyment. Because of this, it would take a great deal of effort, and probably many wrenching break-ups, to prevent our identity being formed by the people we love (Taylor p 34).

In other words, other people are integral to the process of our becoming an ‘authentic’ person because they invite us to talk about what we are experiencing and this leads to a greater awareness of self and other. As Porter (1991) explains ‘mutual recognition acknowledges give and take between two subjects as the prerequisite for both love and knowledge’ (p. 117).

**We share a world**

Sharing a world meant different things for different people, but importantly it involves acknowledging the other person as an independent being, and recognizing the relationship as something they share. This is important because it acknowledges that what one person does impacts on the other person, and this constrains our individual freedom, but it also makes happiness something both people play a role in creating or sustaining. As one respondent put it, ‘if he is
unhappy then I am unhappy. We share a world’ (23.6). When I first read this response, it did not register as significant, but when I went back to the data to substantiate the ethic that I was exploring in the data, it made more sense. What this respondent is saying is, in effect, is ‘I recognise that how ‘I’ am affects you and how ‘you are’, affects me, because we exist in a shared space. Here I also noted the use of ‘he’ and ‘I’ in the first sentence, and the ‘we’ in the second. This signified a progression from a first-person perspective to a shared or third perspective. In this space individuality does not collapse, it enlarges each person’s sense of self.

When I looked at the phrase ‘we share a world’ more closely, it provided a way of looking at the rest of the data in a way that was not initially obvious. It also made sense of how the categories fit together, they were all ways that people went about sharing a world. Sharing a world, or ‘being in relationship with’ made sense of the ethical process that emerged in stage one. Sharing involves reciprocity, as well as an acknowledgement of each other’s individual needs and desires. It involves treating each other equally in a way that embraces, rather than obscures difference. When we go out with a friend to share a meal we decide together what sort of restaurant we want to go to, and then each of us chooses what we want to eat. Choosing the restaurant is something we do together; it is a shared space that allows for different preferences. Ellen, a 38 year-old woman, articulated this when writing about what love meant to her. Here she talks about how she relates to her partner as a separate person, who also ‘brings out the best in her’. She hopes this is reciprocal. She wrote:

I love Lilli for who she is and she feels the same about me. We support each other, sometimes challenge, respect each other, and see the other person as an individual. I think Lilli brings out the best in me and I hope I do the same for her (40.3).

This shows how we can be both separate and together, and how through negotiating this tension, we create “our” world, the world we share. This also acknowledges that the world we have created, depends on both of us actively playing a part in its continued existence. To extend the restaurant example, to get our individual desires and needs met, we first have to agree on where to go for dinner. If we can do this in a way that recognises that both our preferences are valid, then we get to eat out together. If not we go our separate ways. In other ways ‘sharing a world’ means ‘making decisions about your shared life in light of each other’ (35:3). Or creating ‘shared goals’ (10:7) or sharing worries or concerns (21:2). These are all ways of going about things that allow space for
‘being with’ in a way that respects both people’s agency. The following respondent articulates this clearly in a “tongue in cheek” sort of way:

I think we also have an unspoken rule that I am allowed to buy as many dresses as I want, and he can spend as much time as he wants playing computer games (things that seem to annoy and cause conflict with other couples), because there is no point getting annoyed with someone doing what they consider to be fun (1.7).

In other words, she does not have to think about what he might say every time she wants a buy a dress, and he does not have to think about the consequences on their relationship when he wants to play computer games. They are both separate and together in a way that involves a mutual understanding, a “shared” knowledge of what they both like to do. Here sharing a world did not mean that the relationship was a merger, or a unity i.e. it did not mean they had to like the same things, rather it was a way of relating where people are free to ‘do their own thing’ and be together.

This was particularly important in understanding how intimate relationships can contribute to individual and collective flourishing. One of the main problems in Giddens’ (1992) theory is that he does not address how people in pure relationships negotiate their disagreements in situations where both people have rights but these rights conflict. To better understand how people were navigating this I looked at how people went about resolving disagreements in a way that gave them a sense of agency, as well as a sense of belonging. As Sharon, aged 21 pointed out: ‘We share a life, but are able to lead our own lives too’ (30:2). To better understand how this worked in the relationships I was analysing, I looked at how people went about resolving disagreements in a way that gave them a sense of agency, I supplemented the grounded theory analysis with positioning theory (Davies and Harré 1990). I specifically looked at personal pronouns: ‘I’, ‘we’, ‘his’, ‘hers’, ‘ours’, ‘us’ to help me understand how people perceived themselves in relation to the other: how they went about creating a shared world.

As Davies and Harré (1990) explain it, the way someone positions themselves and other people tells us how they see themselves in relation to another person. It is how they construct their identity ‘discursively’ in the process of relating (p. 1). In everyday life, if two people are living out some version of the romantic love narrative then they would engage in the discursive practices through
which romantic love is made into a lived narrative (p. 11). As discussed in chapter one romantic love is based on complementary opposites, where one is ‘passive’ and the other ‘active’. Pure relationships are more equal, so there is space to resist these positions, and in doing so, challenge existing stereotypes. The process that I had identified in stage one, involved a back and forth movement from an ‘I’ position (autonomy/separateness) to a ‘we’ (relational/togetherness) to an ‘our’ position (a shared world). At the time, I made a note of this noted this, now I reflected more deeply on the significance of this.

When I went back to the data to explore this further using positioning theory, I noticed that the ‘I’ position was reflective of the participants’ subjective perspective or position, including their feelings, preferences and desires: this was how they saw the world from their personal perspective. This position was articulated by the first person pronoun “I”. In the context of an intimate relationship it is reflective of what Gilligan and Richards (2009) call our ethical intelligence: it speaks from experience.

The “we” position is a recognition of the relationship – the shared space. This is an “intersubjective” space, where our different life-worlds come together, and the ‘our’ position symbolizes the shared understandings that two individuals create together, their shared world. The movement or dance between the different positions effectively constitutes the relationship. The significance of this process is that it allows people to go beyond existing ways of relating. The beginnings of this can be seen in the following response from Nora, a 23 year-old woman, who reflects on her and her partner’s different world-views. She is unsure whether to attribute these differences to gender, so she leaves it open. The focus here is the act of reflecting, and acknowledging that their views are different. She writes:

I'm not sure if our differences are cultural or gender differences. That sounds funny. But things that have come up have not necessarily been because our backgrounds are different (they are very similar) but because we come to the relationship with different worldviews based on our genders (64.8).

Here the respondent acknowledges her subjectivity by using the pronoun ‘I’ at the beginning of the statement, but then she is ‘not sure’, so her sense of ‘knowing’ is tentative. She then reflects on their
shared understandings, or lack of, which is indicated by her use of the pronoun ‘our’ in the process of reflecting on their different backgrounds. Here the ‘our’ does not dissolve differences, rather it seeks to clarify it: it allows a ‘coming together’ of different perspectives. Here awareness is the first step in being able to navigate their differences in the relationship, and this involves clarifying these aspects of themselves to see how they ‘play out’ in the relationship.

Another respondent talked about the misunderstandings in the relationship, and reflected on how these might be cultural. Here the focus is on the ‘we’ and again the process involves an awareness of difference, and reflecting on how best to go on. Like the response above, this response showed that the shared knowledge, or mutual understanding is only starting to emerge.

We have differences in humour and I actually think they are cultural. The sarcasm and dryness - he doesn't read it. We often get in trouble because he thinks something is being said seriously. We don't negotiate them well - we usually end up in an argument. He is regularly saying “I don't know whether you are joking or not” (14.8).

Here there is a sense of not knowing each other well enough to share a world; there is no “our” position. The lack of mutuality was evident in the way she said ‘we usually end up in an argument’. However there was also movement towards mutuality as she looks at the space between them to better understand their differences. In doing this she positions herself as someone he does not get, and in doing this she is getting to know herself better. This allows for a view of relationships as a “working out” space. Sophie’s response illustrates how talking about differences in this space can lead to a shared understanding of what love means in a relationship.

The whole food aspect of our cultural differences has been the easy part, but the part that has been more difficult is our upbringings, we both had strict fathers, but mine was much more so, also J's parents did not give him a lot of affection, his mum did more so than his dad, but overall they were not obvious in showing it, whereas my family was very touchy-feely & freely gave affection or said 'I love you' a lot, we kissed each other hello & good bye every day when going to work, school, whereas J didn't have that with his family, so earlier in our relationship I used to think that he didn't care about me or love me as much as I loved him, but that wasn't the case, he just wasn't used to showing it as much as I did (35.8).
In this response, there was a strong sense of two ‘I’s creating a shared space where both people could be more themselves. It was not a question of him changing to please her, but rather it was about her and her partner understanding themselves and each other better. This was evident by her use of the pronoun ‘our’ at the beginning of the response, which signified the shared understandings which were being reflected on in the relationship. The use of ‘we’ was in the context of working out how they were different, and the ‘I’ at the end of the response indicated that she had a stronger sense of agency and security because of this discussion. This shows why knowledge of the other is a prerequisite for intimacy, because when we are aware of what might be going on for ourselves and/or the other person, we are able to take this into account in our interactions; we know better how to go on together.

This process was also evident in the following response, particularly how he chooses to “constrain his own freedom” to show his partner that he cares about her.

She felt that I was not doing enough in household chores. I felt that I was doing more than enough, just that she had ‘crazy’ standards. She wanted me to do more, more than I wanted to or saw fit to do. However, I knew if I didn’t it would just make her unhappy. There wasn’t a way to compromise this time, so I just did more for her. We usually compromise on things, but sometimes you can’t (31:9).

Here I noted the way he said: ‘She felt’, ‘I felt’. This indicated that he was considering both his own and her feelings in figuring out how to go on in this situation. In other words, both his and her feelings mattered in their shared space. At the end of the day, he decides the relationship matters more than his views about what was ‘enough’ as far as the household chores were concerned. He enlarges his perspective to includes hers for their mutual happiness; (the relationship) matters more to him than what is right or ‘good’ as far as housework is concerned. The way this respondent talked was also indicative of the care and justice perspectives working side by side, rather than being two opposing positions. Importantly the process of working out what to do involved taking account of feelings and perceptions. This was demonstrated by the interplay between the ‘I’ and the ‘we’. The shared understandings are still a work in progress, nevertheless he is beginning to get a sense of how to go in the relationship, and he does this by taking his partner’s preferences, as well as his own, into account.
This capacity to take the other person’s perspective into account was emerging more strongly as a central skill in the ethical process I was exploring. Being able to talk about feelings was also a key factor in deciding how to go on. As seen in the above response the way he resolved the situation was not by distancing himself from his emotions, rather there was more of a reflective pause, a ‘stepping back’ from his own point of view to include the other person’s perspective, and considering the situation in terms of what was ‘good’ as far as the relationship was concerned. Here his feelings were central but it was the act of reflecting on his feelings that enabled him to better understand what was important and what was not. This shows how reason and emotion are not two distinct dimensions of experience, and autonomy is not about ‘distancing oneself from one’s feelings’ or trying to undo our emotional and social conditioning, rather it involves taking them into account. This can also be seen in the following response where Cartia talks about how she became aware of the differences in the way she and her partner dealt with conflict. By focusing on how they were arguing, rather than what they were arguing about, they were able to come to a shared understanding of how to go on together.

Sophie wrote:

I have a tendency to become very angry very quickly and as a result of this I will often stop thinking rationally. My partner was very cool and collected and rational in disagreements which often leads me to believe he doesn’t care enough about me to have a proper argument. This is of course not true – he just has a different way of resolving things. Our disagreement over this was resolved when we both agreed to keep in mind the other’s way of arguing. I am very hot tempered, and he rarely gets very angry (5:9).

In acknowledging the different ways that she and her partner react to conflict – he keeps a cool head, while she tends to anger quickly – Sophie has learned how to accommodate their differences in the relationship. She recognises that keeping a cool head does not mean her partner does not care, it just means he has a different way of showing it. Instead of trying to change him, she embraces it as part of who he is. Whether the difference is conditioned or innate is not the issue here, rather her concern is how to be together in a way that allows for both of them to be ‘who they are’. They resolved this by agreeing to keep the other person’s emotional style in mind when they argued. Here the ‘our’ emerges as a result of the conversation.
This was also evident in the following response, which illustrates the idea that developing relational autonomy is a work in progress, and both people need to be open to allowing this in order to move forward in the relationship. Again, the key is mutual recognition, the capacity, and willingness, to take the other person’s perspective into account, even though we might disagree with it. The following respondent, a man, had been married to his wife for 27 years, and he experienced her growing independence in a way that initially created a rupture in the relationship. By reflecting on both her and his own perspectives, he came to see her more as a person in her own right. He explains how this happened:

Three years ago I wanted my wife to come to Mount Buller, even though she doesn't ski, as it was a family reunion to celebrate my sister's 50th. I was really disappointed that she decided not to come and felt her excuse was pretty lame; 'too many extroverts in one place crammed together'. We got on with life but my respect for her had been affected; usually she is such a giving person and will put herself out. It wasn't until I experienced the weekend without her that I understood and respected her decision. It was more than crammed - it was claustrophobic. That was her real fear - I should have read between the lines. I acknowledged it to her and agreed not to push her in future. (At this stage we were only together 27 years - still much to learn) (84:9).

This is a good example of how his wife is attempting to affirm her own needs and preferences in a relational context that does not initially seem to provide space for her to do that. The way he talks about this, it involves resolving a tension between her being ‘separate’ – having a mind and feelings of her own, and being ‘together’ – being someone he thought he knew. He had trouble navigating because it involved a change in his understanding of her, as a person. It also involved a change in their relationship. However by empathising with her perspective, by literally seeing things from her eye’s, he understood her feelings, and he was more able understand her choices. Here we can also see the unravelling of patriarchal authority, which is happening because his wife resists his way of them being together. In doing this she forces him to include her perspective in his perspective, and this changes the way he relates to her.
Her feelings about not wanting to go skiing, and his reflecting on her feelings, signified a commitment to cooperation, in a way that shows how ‘mercy tempers justice’ (Gilligan 187 p. 24 cited in Porter 1991, p. 167). As I observed in the data, the process involved reflecting on what ‘I’ am feeling and being able to talk about this in a way that acknowledges the other person is also feeling something. It is this coming together of both perspectives that leads to knowing how to go on together. Amy, a 25 year old woman described it like this:

We both like to say what is upsetting us and say what we feel at the time. When we are both hurting we have some space and end up thinking about what was said before we can see each other’s side of the argument, and then we acknowledge their feelings and remember why we love them!! (25.9).

Here the focus is very much on the ‘we’, and is driven by a mutual love for each other. There is no ‘our’ yet in this relationship, but there is a sense of having a shared space which allows each person a separate space to do their own ‘thinking’ and a coming back together in a way that acknowledges their continuing connection.

The main implication of this analysis was that in the process of resolving the tension between being together and being different an ethical process emerges that involves people resolving disagreements in a way that enlarges both their perspectives. This allows an understanding of an ethic that aligns with the way Porter (1991) describes the development of moral identity, which includes but also goes beyond traditional moral theories. She argues, ‘the key to moral identity likes in arduous but worthwhile dialogue to determine shared values, common purposes and the conditions whereby human potential might be realised’ (p. 166). Here love and ethics come together in a way that helps people more easily navigate the complexities that living and loving in a world where there is more freedom, but also a need for belonging.

**Love and change**

The analysis so far showed that the people who participated in the study are going about things in a way that allows for a different understanding of both ethics and love. This understanding involves recognising that having different perspectives does not necessarily pose a threat to togetherness. It is
a sense of mutual recognition, which involves both partners including the other person’s perspective in their own, in a way that appears to foster a sense of connectedness or belonging. What makes this process ethical is that it recognises that ‘I’ have a right to have my voice heard, so do ‘you’, and if we are to figure out how to go on together we need to agree on how we do that. This is not always easy, as was evident in the following response where Amanda, 52 year-old woman describes how she attempted to resolve a situation where her agency was being challenged by the ‘patriarchal’ voice, a voice that says ‘it is my way or the highway’, and there was no clear way forward.

This response was interesting because the pattern I had identified as being indicative of ‘sharing a world’ was not evident. By analysing how this response was different to other responses, I identified a core skill that potentially allows for the development of a more equal way of going about relationships. I discuss this further below. Amanda writes:

My 16 year-old daughter announced she wanted to leave home and move interstate because her relationships with her friends have soured. My husband’s approach is to just forbid her to leave and keep telling her what an unrealistic escape fantasy it is and how it would put her back in life (60:9).

Here the father’s voice attempts to dominate without regard for his daughter’s feelings, or for the development of her sense of agency. Nor does he listen to Amanda: he fails to acknowledge her perspective as well. The way she talks about it suggests a psychological distance, as well as a moral one. This is evidenced by her use of the pronoun ‘I’ in narrating the story, and her reference to her husband as ‘my husband’ indicating a possessiveness. She recognises her husband has a perspective but resists it to do what she feels is best for their daughter. She also uses language that indicates that she sees her husband as an adversary rather than as someone she shares a world with. Writing about how she attempts to resolve the issue with her daughter, she writes:

I don’t want to lay down a ‘put up with it and get on with it’ demand and so cut off all options (or the only option she can see right now) because she has already said that she’ll kill herself if we make her stay.
Here the respondent understands that her partner's approach is too rigid and she reflects on her daughter's perspective. Rather than argue with her partner, or try to get him to see her point of view, she continues to reflect on what is best for her daughter.

So I am saying I will not stop her, but at the same time I am suggesting all sorts of other compromises for her to stay home e.g. moving schools, showering her with love, and organising a counsellor. My husband is scathing of all this (he equally hates psychiatrists and the idea that young people have to decide their own lives) (60:9).

By pointing out that her husband ‘hates’ that people can decide their own lives, she is resisting the dominant voice, which suggests there is only one way forward. In doing this she retains a sense of being an agent, as being able to make a difference, but it is not relational autonomy because it doesn’t give her a sense of safety, a sense of being in a shared world. In the relationship with her husband a dominant/submissive power dynamic is in play, and in her relationship with her daughter she engages with an ‘ethic of care’, but there is no dialogue around this with her husband, she does not try to change his mind.

She explains that she does not engage with her partner directly because her relationship with her daughter is more important than ‘being heard’ in this situation. In doing this she turns away from her husband’s feelings and ignores his perspective, even though she disagrees with it. She is also aware that despite him being opposed to her suggestions she “knows” he will leave it up to her to decide. Again there is a sense that dialogue is not allowed and she must either submit or dominate. This is a reversal of the “active” man, “passive” woman roles. It is also an example of the uncertain nature of contemporary moral issues, where there is no clear “right” or “wrong”, just different opinions, and the need to figure out how to go on in a way that takes account of everyone’s perspective. This respondent writes that it is up to her to figure out what to do and to do this she has to ‘stand’ in her own space and say nothing, even though she thinks that what he is doing is unfair. There is no communication around what each of them is feeling, so there is no intimacy, no sense of being together in a shared space. This is reflected in what she writes:

It’s not really a resolution, just an unspoken expectation that I will make the call, but that I also have to wear all the responsibility for it going well or going badly. I do not think this is
fair, that I’m likely to be blamed later if things do go wrong. If I tried to opt out and say he had to make the call, and he had to be here to oversee it and enforce it, he would immediately retract and refuse to take the lead – he actually does not trust his own decisions and would rather defer to me. The issue is too important for me to swallow my own sense of what is the best way to deal with it, so I could not make myself surrender to his response anyway (60:9).

The last part of the response was the most telling: her wanting to surrender to her husband’s way of dealing with the situation, but not doing so because her daughter’s wellbeing was too important. The point here is that she did not feel safe enough to negotiate this matter with her husband because her daughter’s predicament was too important. This response is also telling in that she uses the pronoun ‘I’ in a way that appears to give her agency, but it is not agency in a relational sense. There is no ‘we’ and no ‘our’.

On a very basic level the basic process I identified in the data, involved not only being able to speak, but also being heard. When we listen to the other person’s side of the story, we are allowing their perspective, especially their feelings, to influence our own. Doing this literally changes our world. This was clear in the following response, which differs markedly from the one above in the way she uses personal pronouns. Maddy, a 20 year old woman talks about how she resolved a disagreement that is less complicated than the one above, but which illustrates the ethical process more clearly. Maddy writes:

There is a mutual friend of ours that the majority of our friends find extraordinarily irritating and frustrating and my partner is pretty close with him. My partner gets quite frustrated by all of us having such a problem with this person and so I’m basically not allowed to bitch about him. But this person really dramatically affects the way I feel and I had to make that pretty clear to my partner because him not wanting to hear it made me feel like I had to hide how upset he makes me. Once I made it clear we talked about it and he agreed to be able to listen to me without feeling like he had to defend him and just make it about listening to me.

Here the respondent starts the negotiation from what she sees as their shared space, indicated by her use of the pronoun ‘our’. She further qualifies this by saying ‘mutual friend’ and the ‘majority of our
friends’, again affirming she is taking his perspective into account. This is a relational perspective, and it does not dissolve his perspective, rather she includes it, while also reflecting on how her partner’s approach makes her want to hide her real feelings. By her telling him how his behaviour is affecting her she moves from being passive in the relationship - ‘I’m basically not allowed to bitch about him’ - to being more active in a way that invites further discussion i.e. ‘I had to make that pretty clear…’.

Importantly by beginning the narrative from a shared space – the ‘our’ – she conveys a sense of the relationship being a safe space, a space which allows her to speak and to be heard. She is also testing that out in the process of reflecting on what happened by moving from talking about the way he shuts her down, and then by her engaging him in a dialogue in a way that allows her to maintain her integrity, and feel safe. By her communicating how she experienced the situation and by him validating her feelings, her partner allowed her perspective to be included in his thinking and this provided a way of moving forward together. At the end of the response, she comes back to the first person pronoun ‘me’ in a much more secure position. Here the pattern was: ‘ours’, ‘my’, ‘my’, ‘I’m’, ‘I’, ‘I’, ‘my’, ‘I’, ‘we’, ‘me’. Here the ‘me’ emerged from a ‘we’ space, and showed how this respondent negotiated the tension between being separate and being together in a way that provided an emerging sense of self. Importantly she felt safe to have this conversation because the ‘our’ space already existed.

In the following response a similar dilemma was recounted but this time it had to do with the way the respondent wanted to get married. This response showed a similar process to the one above in that the respondent negotiated the ‘we’ space in a way that allowed for a shared understanding of how to go on together. She writes:

We had a disagreement about religion. He is a Catholic and I am an atheist. We resolved it by saying we respect each others choices, and we would not argue over it again. Neither of our beliefs effect our daily life – we do not throw it in each other’s faces. He does not go to church, and I do not actively participate in secular activities. We have even come to a compromise with our wedding ceremony – an outside ceremony, but with a priest conducting (78:9).
In this response both perspectives are acknowledged as important, and in the process of negotiating this shared space they created a mutual understanding – the ‘our’ space, which was the shared understanding the provided the ‘platform’ for their marriage. It was the dialogue that helped them to create mutuality in a way that affirmed their independence.

That said, it is difficult to sustain an emotional connection in a world where the other person is free to do what they like. The following respondent illustrates this when he talks about telling his partner that her ‘freedom’ is making him feel insecure and jealous. In doing this he is better able to understand his own emotions, and work through an issue that is making it difficult to feel comfortable in the relationship. While this respondent liked the idea of being free, he also needed a sense of connection to feel secure in that freedom. He writes:

I feel jealous with my partner having lots of male social networks and going out with other men socially. I reminded her that I didn’t like it by letting her know how it impacts on me and my sense of insecurity in the relationship (71:9).

On one hand this respondent acknowledges that both he and his partner are ‘free’ to have friends of the opposite sex, but this makes him feel insecure rather than liberated. This respondent makes an important point because when we define freedom in a certain way i.e. independence, then we commit ourselves to a certain way of being free. But this is not true freedom because it does not allow for other people. This is not love either because there is no reciprocity: there is no relationship, or if there is, it clearly does not matter. When relationships are reciprocal – when each person takes the other into account - it allows both individuals to flourish. As Porter (1991) writes: ‘with reciprocal relations, it is not just individual selves considering each other, but a true interconnection between self and other, mutually reinforcing each other’ (p. 166). This is a more realistic version of freedom than just being able to do what you like. Love here is not an escape from reality into fantasy, but a way of negotiating relationships in a way that leads to a greater sense of self.

In other words, it is being recognised that gives people the sense of security that May (2011) argues people need to be able to step out of their narcissistic preoccupations and experience another
person as sovereign or ‘beyond their grasp’. In this sense: ‘self-love and love of another are… two sides of the same coin’ (p. 10).

Conclusion

In this chapter I showed how the core category ‘we share a world’ emerged in the research, and discussed how this allowed me to make sense of a basic, social process that I identified in stage one of the analysis. This process involved respondents figuring out how to be both together and separate in an intimate context. By exploring how people resolved this tension in their relationships I discussed how this represented an ethical process at work, a process that included both care and justice perspectives working together in a relational context. Importantly this also shows how much has changed since Gilligan (1982) first identified the ‘self’ that the psychological profession had defined as an abnormal subset of humanity (p. 20). This was the self that was bound up in a network of close relationships’ (Robb 2006, p. 21), and who lacked the power ‘to do something in the world’ (Gilligan 1982, p. 66 cited in Robb 2006. p 365).

In the next chapter I look at one response that stood out as being the most indicative of the ethical process I identified in stage one and two. Not only does this response include many of the elements that I had identified in stage one as being indicative of a contemporary relationship, the way this person talks about his relationship was also indicative of the ethical process that emerged in stage two. I do not present this relationship as an ideal to be replicated, rather it illustrates a way of going about intimacy that leads to both people feeling both liberated and secure. It is a shared journey, navigated by love.
Chapter 7 - stage three: pulling it all together

In the previous two stages of analysis I had identified ways of relating that were indicative of pure relationships in the way Giddens (1992) describes them. I was then able to explore how the game of love was being played, as respondents went about negotiating the tension between being separate and being together in an intimate relationship. During the analysis, an ethical process emerged that articulated how people negotiated differences in a way that fostered a greater sense of intimacy and agency. This ethic involved talking about justice, or rights, as well as talking about care. Both these perspectives were drawn on as people figured out how to ‘go on’ in an intimate context. Importantly this process provided a space for people to develop a sense of themselves as agents, a sense of being able to make a difference in their relationship. In stage one I only saw fragments of this. In stage two I substantiated emergent process, and made sense of it using Porter’s (1991) theory of moral development. I still only had fragments of the story, so I wondered if there was one relationship that fit all or most of the categories, especially the core category ‘we share a world’.

One response stood out to me as the most indicative of confluent love. Other responses had some of elements of what Giddens (1992) talked about, and these fragments helped me make sense of an emergent process, but none of them was as ‘pure’ as this one. Interestingly this respondent was a man, Daniel, aged in his late 20’s. Analysing this response provided a way of substantiating the core category. In describing his relationship this respondent acknowledges that life is constantly changing, and this includes a person’s beliefs, feelings, moods and aspirations. In other words, he sees life as ‘fluid’ and love as something that emerges as two people navigate their lives in a way that is aligned with their authentic preferences and desires.

Question 1: Would you mind telling me how you met your current partner?

I met my wife Sophie while we were both teaching English in Japan. I got to meet with Sophie more often and gradually came to know her more. We became a couple in December 2006.

This was indicative of confluent love in that they had spent time getting to know each other before establishing a relationship. I also noted that while he used the possessive pronoun at the start of the response to refer to his wife, he subsequently used her first name, indicating that he regarded her as
a person in her own right. I also noted the progression from ‘I’ to ‘we’, which indicated that the relationship was central to his conception of himself. In ‘we-mode’ people do not necessarily lose their individual agency: they are ‘co-ordinating’ their actions in a way that allows them to ‘act together’ (Galloti and Frith 2013, p 160). This acting together is called shared intentionality or ‘enactivism’ (2013, p. 160). On this view, making meaning or making sense of our experiences is participatory, and inherently relational. It is by interacting with physical and social objects, including the minds of other people, that the world becomes meaningful to individuals (2013 p. 161). This fits with the idea of relational autonomy, as Porter (1991) explains it. This was indicated by how the respondent described the relationship as a process.

**Question 2: How would you describe your relationship with your current partner?**

_I believe ours is an equal relationship. It is one based on mutual respect and trust of the other. Of course she is the best friend I have ever had, but it feels more than that. I think both of us have looked for companionship in relationships, and in Sophie I see someone who I am completely comfortable and at home with. We communicate about the relationship regularly, and try to give each other the room to grow and to be flexible. We realize that life is fluid and move with it. Incidentally, we are married, but if Sophie was Australian (she is American) I would not have married her. This takes nothing away from our relationship – I just don’t see that marriage is that important in an emotional sense. It is tokenistic and traditional, and I only respect those things, when they are relevant. For me, the emotional and intellectual bond between two people (ANY 2 consenting adults) is what matters, not the title._

In the first sentence, Daniel mentions the word ‘equality’ to describe his relationship, which he qualifies using the words ‘mutual respect’ and ‘trust’. These were two main elements that I identified in stage one as being indicative of a pure relationship. I also noted the use of the pronoun ‘our’ in this sentence, indicating that their ‘shared world’ was already constituted to some extent. The relationship also provided space for both of them to ‘grow and be flexible’.

Daniel also talks about his partner as being ‘the best friend he has ever had’ and qualifies that by saying he feels ‘at home’, or safe with her. This establishes the ethical framework as one of authenticity – where ‘the freedom to be’ is present in a way that acknowledges their individual preferences ‘both of us have looked for companionship’. In this sense, there was a ‘coming together’ of people with like minds who have similar values, and they have agreed on what constitutes a ‘good’ relationship by reflecting on what works for them. The fact that they communicate about the
relationship regularly means it is, to some extent, ‘internally referential’, it is a space where they can both speak and have their voices heard, at least that is how he perceives it. I wondered whether his partner saw things the same way.

In saying that ‘we realize life is fluid, and we move with it’ he acknowledges that the relationship, and life, is constantly changing. Here the intention appears to be to be in harmony with ‘what is’, but also to resist ways of being that do not align with his beliefs; his ideas of what a good life is all about. This was evidenced in the way he explained their reasons for getting married, which indicated that the couple had reflected on marriage and found it was not meaningful for them, except as a way of staying together due to her visa restrictions. As he put it, it is the ‘the emotional and intellectual bond’ that matters. Here he is pointing to the emotional as well as the intellectual aspects of the relationship, which are integrated, and equal: one is not inferior to the other. Here he describes the relationship as a meeting of hearts and minds.

The use of pronouns in this response also indicated a way of talking that exemplifies how pure relationships work: he starts out with ‘I’, moves to the use of ‘we’ and then comes back to the ‘I’ with a stronger sense of self. This indicates the process through which moral identity emerges. This was also indicative of a feminist view of autonomy as relational, as emerging from understanding and affirming our connection with other people. It was also indicative of the relationship supporting their different potentialities. Porter (1991) writes this is a ‘positive empowerment in that it repudiates separateness, control or domination’ (p. 117). The above respondent exemplifies this view of agency in the sense that he recognises the situational and relational aspect of his experience. Here agency is contextualised, and his moral identity emerges as someone who can make a difference in the world by living in accordance with his chosen values as best he can.

Daniel also affirms his connection to the world by acknowledging what Taylor (1991) calls the ‘shared horizon’, the social context which makes it necessary for him and his partner to marry, despite his belief that it is tokenistic. In doing this he acknowledges existing social norms, but does not feel compelled to conform for the sake of it. This is an example of being faced with a ‘constrained’ choice, and negotiating it in a way that stays true to his values. He says they married because it was a way for them to stay together. They did it for the sake of the relationship; for love. By only respecting tradition ‘when it is relevant’ this respondent articulates his moral identity in a way that acknowledges he has a choice about how to go about his relationship, but it is contextual
choice, it includes his feelings towards Sophie. This shows that individuality does not necessarily mean independence or being emotionally distant. Here Daniel is talking about how to go on in the relationship, but he is not talking just about his own happiness and satisfaction, but rather their shared satisfaction and mutual freedom. This is relational autonomy in action, as Porter (1991) explains it, as the ‘self and other develops as an interdependent process’ (p. 111). In this way, mutuality and interdependence become vehicles for moral self-growth, and ‘autonomy is rescued from its propensity toward the denial of the recognition of others’ (p. 111).

By pointing out that is it the ‘emotional and intellectual bond that matters’ rather than a piece of paper, this respondent is articulating his agency, and shows how it develops in a relational context.

This response is also an example of someone working through the tension of doing what one likes (freedom), and acknowledging the social context as a constraining force (determinism), and deciding how to go on in a way that allows them to be authentic. Marriage, for this couple was not so much a demonstration of their love, but it did express his desire to stay connected. Here the ethic of self-interest folds into itself; self-interest is apparent, but it is through his relationship that he affirms his interests. In this sense he demonstrates his freedom, his autonomy, in the way de Beauvoir (2008) describes it, as a ‘sense of freedom which realizes itself in engagement with and for others’ (p. 194).

His reference to the relationship being a place where they can both ‘grow and be flexible’ can be interpreted here as an encouragement of difference, an indication that difference is not a threat to the relationship, and that individual flourishing is encouraged in the context of the relationship.

Question 3: Do you love your partner? What does love mean to you?

Love is a reciprocal emotion. To love truly one needs an understanding, trust and knowledge of a person that comes about only through opening up to another person and having them open up to you, to take that risk of finding someone who can complement you as a person and continue to do so while you continue to engage with the world and grow. Love is never instantaneous. It is an emotional bond that needs time, trust and acceptance. Yes, I love my partner. I love her more than I have ever loved another being.

The point this respondent makes is crucial for an understanding of how love and ethics meet in the context of confluent love. As a reciprocal emotion, love emerges through a process of give and take. Here it is about shared power rather than power over or power to. Here intimacy depends on two
people being subjects, rather than objects to each other.

Daniel uses the word ‘trust’ twice in this response indicating that it is a core feature in what makes the relationship ‘safe’ for him to be emotionally open. The respondent also acknowledges that there are risks in being open, but he implies that taking this risk is central to the process of finding that person with whom he can be in a relationship with. The risk here involves being vulnerable to suffering, but it is also a demonstration of the ‘sovereign expression of life’ (Bauman 2003, p. 93). It is also, according to Bauman (2003) where morality starts because there is no certainty that the relationship will work out. ‘Far from being a major threat to morality (and so an abomination to ethical philosophers), uncertainty is the home ground of the moral person and the only soil out of which morality can spring shoots and flourish’ (p. 93). This is a primary difference between confluent love and romantic attachments, because in romantic love relationships people follow pre-existing scripts and therefore deny their capacity for spontaneity, and therefore authenticity. Romance, if we stick to the script, is a way of conforming to patriarchal authority; it is a way of ‘not being’ in a relationship.

When we take risks in the process of getting to know someone we also acknowledge our fallibility and sometimes we will make mistakes. But this is part of the learning how to be a person. In the context of an intimate relationship it means being open to an uncertain future, but one that allows our moral capacity to emerge in the process of figuring out what to do. Here ‘immediacy’ and ‘proximity’ are central to knowing what is the right thing to do (Bauman 2003, p. 93). It also means we may not always act in alignment with our chosen values. ‘The point is, though, that blunders and right choices arise from the same condition – as do the craven impulses to run for cover that authoritative commands obligingly provide and the boldness to accept responsibility’ (p. 93).

The moral knowledge that we acquire in this process is experiential: it is a knowledge that comes from lived experience, from being in a situation and not knowing what to do, but having to act anyway. Daniel also points out that trust needs time. It comes from knowing the other person, and being able to understand their moods and idiosyncrasies. When we know someone we understand what a particular facial expression means, and we know how they are likely to react in certain situations, for example, being photographed. It is the little things that someone knows about you that make a difference, and which help the relationship to “flow”.
We could read a million books about intimacy, but none of them would come close to the actual experience of loving and being loved, as it is happening: it is a dynamic and creative process that is different for everyone, and always changing. The relationship is open-ended, and a work in progress, and it supports flourishing in both an individual and social sense.

The respondent’s comment about finding someone who can complement him as a person has traces of romantic love, but in romantic love relationships people are ‘absorbed’ by the other. Daniel does not say he wants someone to complement him as a man; rather he refers to himself as a person. He implies that his ideal for a relationship is being with another person whom he can relate to as a person, consciously and actively, while continuing to ‘engage with the world’. This reminded me to de Beauvoir’s (2008) claim that: ‘...in denying women equal rights and opportunities, societies also deny most men the opportunity of sharing their lives with women they see as their equals’. “He would be liberated himself in their liberation” (p. 196). This perspective was beautifully articulated in the participant’s response to the next question. It was not so much what he says that I found particularly interesting, but how he said it.

**Question 4: What are your expectations for the relationship – what would you like to happen in the future?**

I would very much like for us to continue to pursue our personal goals for achievement, wherever we live and whatever we pursue jointly, and for us to continue to love and support each other. I want to be able to grow with this amazing person and to always be working on and improving our relationship.

Here there was a strong sense of the self-help narrative. For example, he writes that he wants to ‘always be working on and improving our relationship’. Illouz (2007) explains that the goal of ‘self-realization’ is a core feature of the therapeutic narrative, which at the same time as espousing this as the ideal or aim of a meaningful life, does so by premising it on suffering. She says that ‘at the same time that it put health and self-realization at the center of a narrative of self, it also made a wide variety of behaviours into signs and symptoms of a “neurotic”, “unhealthy”, “self-defeating” self’ (p. 46). There is a good reason then that this language has become pervasive in our capitalist society, and it has spawned a global industry that is valued in the trillions of dollars. But he is not just parroting this, and I noted that he used the pronoun ‘our’ at the end of this sentence, so it was more about creating a relationship, a space where they could both flourish.
This interpretation is supported by the pattern I had identified in stage two of the analysis, as indicative of how people went about ‘sharing a world’ in the data, and which, for me, was evidence of a more egalitarian form of love. This form of love differs from the way Giddens (1992) explains confluent love, however I continue to use the term to distinguish it from romantic love. This emerging form of love is evident in Daniel’s response to question 4. In the first sentence, he uses the pronoun ‘I’ to discursively constitute the relationship ‘us’, and he uses the word ‘our’ to include their individual as well as their shared activities. This was a good example of how freedom works in the context of intimacy. One is free to pursue individual projects (to be oneself) because the relationship supports that. Here freedom is not a property of a person but a way of understanding or knowing ourselves that emerges from ‘a situation of relatedness and affinity’ (Fullbrook and Fullbrook 2008, p. 194). As de Beauvoir put it, it is ‘the perpetual intentionality within and towards the world and others that decides what “self” and “other” are to be’ (cited in Fullbrook and Fullbrook 2008, p. 194).

This idea of freedom is supported by the recurring pattern: ‘I’, ‘we’, ‘our’. He positions his wife as an independent person, the relationship is a safe place, and he acknowledges the relationship as a collaborative process. Importantly, in referring to his wife as a person this respondent goes beyond gender in a way that bestows value on her as she is, rather than being valuable in terms of contributing to his happiness. He refers to her as ‘an amazing person’. Here he conveys a sense of wanting to share a world with her more than anyone else. His intention is to be together for however long it lasts. This way of talking respects differences, and freedom as well as valuing connection and intimacy.

When asked in question five how he showed his partner how he felt about her, the respondent’s answer was a good example of how two people go about sharing a world in a practical, everyday sense. Importantly it was not just through actions or words that he conveys his love, it is the consistency between his actions and his words. This was clear in the following response.

**Question 5: How do you show your partner how you feel about them?**

*I tell her everyday. I listen to her when she brings up an issue. I try to address things I do that might upset her. I share the jobs with her and I will go out of my way to help her in times of need. I try to give her the space to do her things. I try to not be mean, rude, dismissive or neglectful. Actions speak a thousand words.*
Here the emphasis is on the ‘I’, but the ‘I’ is in in connection ‘her’ all the way through the response. To me this was an indication of relational autonomy. He is recognising their interdependence by acknowledging that what he does in the relationship matters to her wellbeing. It also shows kindness. Not only is this respondent communicating with his wife on a verbal level by telling her how he feels, he also listens to her, and he reflects on how his actions might affect her. By trying not to be ‘mean, rude, dismissive or neglectful’ he acknowledges that he has a part to play in her happiness. In other words, he recognises his wife as someone who matters, and he shows her this by the way he behaves towards her. This is a moral process, as Porter (1991) points out:

To acknowledge that our moral identity is intrinsically connected to the inhibition or growth of significant others is to place identity within a dynamic position (p. 196).

In this narrative, he is showing how he reconciles the tension between being together and being separate. He resolves it by taking her perspective into account, and in doing this, he adjusts his behavior in a way that shows he cares for her. This is not caring in an oppressive way, although only she would know this, because it indicates a recognition of their both their individuality and their connection. He realizes that he has a choice about how to behave towards his partner, and he also acknowledges that his behavior and his emotions, can affect her in a positive or negative way. However, he chooses to behave a certain way because he cares about her and this, in effect, is how he exercises his agency, and the nature of his choices show that he is someone who respects her right to do her own thing, while also caring about her. Daniel also provides a sense that he can be trusted to be there for Sophie, if she needed him to be, but he also respects her autonomy or separateness by ‘giving her space to do her things’.

Thinking about how his actions might affect his wife is also a good example of what Porter (1991) talks about when she discusses how the contextual and the abstract aspects of moral reasoning can work together without being relativist. She says:

An appreciation of the interpretive, contextual basis of moral judgement does not invite moral relativism, but it is predicated on some mutual appreciation about meanings. The more intimate a relationship between people, the broader their range of shared understandings, the more similar are the meanings and priorities they attach to significant features of life (p. 149).
She goes on to say that identifying what is significant in people’s lives requires engaging with the other person in a dialogue that deepens understanding and knowledge. Not doing this keeps people in separate corners unable to move forward because they cannot or will not take account of the other person’s perspective. This is what kept Sartre’s characters in hell.

Porter (1991) makes an important point regarding moral relativism and to show that the ethic emerging in modern relationships is workable in a wider cultural context, it is important to address this. Relativism is the idea that everyone has their own idea of what is good, and that these conceptions can co-exist. The main problem with relativism is that everyone thinks they are right, and everyone else is wrong, and they have to constantly defend their positions. This idea however does not acknowledge what happens when two worlds collide; when two people have different conceptions of good that contradict, or where one person potentially violates another person’s freedom. For example, I am pregnant and want to have a baby, but my partner, and the father of the child, does not want me to. We can say these positions are relative but at some stage we will need to decide how to go on, and this means we either agree to compromise, or we go our separate ways. Either way there are consequences which we will both have to live with, and they could involve both suffering and joy. The point here is that when we have a universal ethic based on abstract reasoning, is relativism a problem. But this is not the way life works. We might have different beliefs about what is the right thing to do, but if we are to move forward together we need to talk about how to do that. The ethic that is emerging in this research is not relativist because it is content free: it allows for people to make sense of what a good life or a good relationship is for themselves, while allowing for multiple truths or perspectives to co-exist. The ethical component is the way they go resolving this when it comes to moving forward: when they have to act. When people do this in a way that acknowledges and respects the other person as a separate and unique individual, it fosters a sense of connection.

Importantly the ethical process I identified in the data, which came from the way people resolved differences in their relationships, includes the situational, caring, and subjective perspective, as well as abstract principles of justice, the ‘masculine’ voice and the ‘feminine’ perspective, without dissolving either of them. Porter (1991) explains that this ‘synthesises individuality and sociality’ (Gould, 1978 cited in Porter 1001, p. 169). It ‘takes into account the self, others, the context, and the contextual self’ (p. 169). In other words, this ethic takes account of the things that matter to both of ‘us’ and in doing this it establishes ‘common ground’. It involves sharing our feelings and reasons
and concerns, as well as our desires for wanting things a certain way, in a way that cares about the other person. This recognises that people are responsible for their own happiness, but they also each contribute to a shared happiness. This was illustrated by Daniels answer to question 6.

**Question 6: Do you feel responsible for your partner’s happiness?**

No. That is her responsibility. I hope that I could make her happier, and I think I do, but in the end, one cannot rely on another person to supply their happiness and life fulfilment. If I was single, I would still be happy because I am happy with myself.

This response shows the respondent has a clear sense of himself, and as well as feeling secure in the relationship, this comes from ‘being happy with myself’. By not taking responsibility for her happiness, he acknowledges her autonomy, but he does this in a way that cares about her wellbeing. This is the opposite of ‘happily ever after’, where happiness is reliant on finding the man or woman of our “dreams”. In romantic love happiness is built in to the script, but in real relationships happiness is both an individual project, and a shared one.

Hoping that he could make her happier shows the respondent cares about her, as well being committed to their shared happiness. It also reflects his intention to do what he can to make their shared space one where they can both flourish. By saying that one cannot ‘rely on another person’ to supply their happiness and life fulfilment, he shows traces of the ‘self-realisation’ narrative, however he does this in a way that acknowledges that they are both in it together.

The way the respondent answered question seven was particularly indicative of how a pure relationship works in the way I understood it from analyzing the data in stage one.

**Question 7: Have you and your partner agreed to any ‘rules’ for the relationship? Can you give me an example of any spoken or unspoken agreements?**

I can’t think of anything specifically, except for the fact that we always try to talk about things as soon as they become issues, because we believe that allowing wounds to fester over time is a bad idea.

This response showed a shared meaning or understanding about how to go on in an intimate context. By saying ‘we’ believe, he indicates that they have talked about, and agreed about how to approach issues and challenges in the relationship. He says ‘we always try to talk about things as soon as they become issues’ showing a shared understanding of how to go on. Again this has traces
of the therapeutic narrative where people are encouraged to communicate. As Illouz (2007) points out, quoting from a Redbook article: ‘Communication is the lifeblood of any relationship, and any love relationship particularly requires communication if it is going to flourish’ (p. 34). The issue here is not that he necessarily buys into this ideal, but he draws on it as a reason for doing what he does. In this sense, he is being self-determining because he justifies his actions; he sees that allowing wounds to fester ‘is a bad idea’, and this is something that they have talked about, and agreed on. This is indicated by his use of the pronoun ‘we’. As Giddens (1992) points out, it is not what we do that determines whether a relationship is ‘pure’ or not, rather it is how we negotiate the relationship; how we decide on what the ‘rules’ are. He writes: It is the involvement of individuals in determining the conditions of their association – this statement exemplifies the ideals of the pure relationship’ (p. 190).

In other words, people draw on existing stocks of knowledge to make sense of how things are, but they do this in a way that acknowledges that they have choices about how to proceed, and this is something they need to agree on. It is the agreement, and the process of negotiation that makes relationships pure.

**Question 8: Are there any cultural differences in the relationship?** There are some very minor ones. She is American and I am Australian. We joke about the differences and reflect on the positives and negatives. None are serious.

In this response, Daniel talks about their cultural difference in a playful way i.e. ‘we joke’. He is also able to reflect that these differences can be ‘positive’ or ‘negative’. In talking about their different worldviews, he is not making any claims that one point of view is better or worse, just different, and the positives and negatives are contextual, they are not objectively good or bad. This attitude was also evident in the way he answered question nine.

**Question 9. Can you tell me about a disagreement you had with your partner recently? How was it resolved?**

I can’t think of any specifically, but we usually seem to resolve issues by listening to and trying to engage with the other person’s perspective in order to understand why they feel that way. And then we address it. Once you understand where someone’s coming from it’s a lot easier to meet them halfway.
This shows the relationship is democratic in terms of how they go about resolving disagreements i.e. they include the other person’s perspective to better understand why each of them feels the way they do. This emphasis on feeling here was important because it showed an integration or synthesis of an ethic of justice and an ethic of care, in the way Porter (1991) explains it. She points out how this is different from convergence in that it includes both perspectives, and it goes beyond what either of them think or feel, allowing new perspectives to emerge in a shared space. In other words, ‘there is an emphasis of the self as developing within an intersubjective framework’ (p. 170).

This was indicative of confluent love in that it signifies that knowledge of the other person is needed in order to know how to go on together, and this happens not by intellectualizing the other but through our experience of them.

Conclusion

By analyzing Daniel’s responses to the questions I was able to substantiate the basic, social process that I had identified in stage one and stage two. In this sense, his response was indicative of confluent love, the way I understood it from the research. It has all the elements of a pure relationship in the sense of being ‘internally referential’, and the respondent talks about this in a way that indicates he really does sees his partner as his equal. He also considers her to be his best friend, and the person he loves most in the world. Importantly the response shows how a pure relationship works. The relationship is ‘its own forum’ as Giddens (1992) puts it (p. 194). There is also evidence of relational autonomy, and reciprocity: a sharing of feelings, beliefs, attitudes, desires and preferences in a way that fosters a spirit of togetherness, but which allows each of them to be themselves, however they are making sense of that at any particular time. The way Daniel describes it, the relationship provides the space for both of them to pursue their own projects, but there is also a strong sense of flowing together, which provides a sense of security and belonging.
Chapter 8 - conclusion: the birth of pleasure?

In this thesis, I explored how the people who participated in my research were navigating their intimate relationships. I did this to answer the question that was at the core of this thesis: what does it mean to say ‘I love you’ in contemporary Australian culture? I explored this by engaging in a conversation with participants, as well as leading social theorists, philosophers, feminist writers, and producers of mainstream culture. It was a conversation in the sense that it involved a back and forth momentum between different perspectives in a single context. Christopher Barker (2002) defines a conversation as ‘the circulation of ideas, concepts, meanings, attitudes, beliefs, and so forth’ (p. 41).

I facilitated this conversation by using Giddens’ (1992) theory as a starting point, and then developed an Internet website called ‘lovedialogue.com’ to do the research. This provided a way of exploring how people were making sense of their intimate relationships. Using qualitative methods, I then analysed the responses as a discourse on love in contemporary Australian culture. By approaching the research as a ‘language game’ - by exploring what respondents were doing - I identified ways of talking that were indicative of contemporary relationships the way Giddens (1992) describes them. The most important identifier was the extent to which relationships were ‘internally referential’ in the sense that both people were actively participating in negotiating the relationship. Equality was a core theme, but it was not equality in the sense of an even distribution of resources, it was equality based on how people perceived the other person in relation to themselves.

By exploring how these relationships worked, I found evidence of an ethical process emerging which is not precisely confluent love in the way Giddens (1992) explains it, but which I refer to as confluent love to distinguish it from romantic love. Using the term confluent love is also a way of drawing attention to Giddens’ foundational work on this topic. In doing this I am not making general claims about whether, or to what extent, this sort of love exists, however I can say that the way people talked about their relationships in this research showed evidence of a way of relating that is indicative of a new ethic of personal life.

The ethic I identified in the research contradicts, to some extent, what the self-help narratives promote. As discussed in chapter one, the self-help texts that Giddens (1991, 1992) draws on perpetrate a way of being where the aim is to become ‘free from dependencies’ (Giddens 1991, p.
Gilligan (2003) argued that this ideology draws on a conception of the self that involves distancing or disconnecting from other people. Gilligan and Richards (2009) describe this as an initiation into patriarchal rules that require both men and women to silence their own voices and ‘take on’ the dominant cultural narratives that tell them who to love, and how much. Doing gender differently is one of the ways individuals undo or resist this. Gilligan and Richards (2009) argue:

> We are struck by the fact that discussions of gender are often dismissed now as passé – that the darkness associated with gender, the patterns of loss, traumatic rupture of relationships, repression of an ethically resisting voice and also of what be called sexual voice continue into the present, at times with increasing fervor, despite or perhaps because of the gains toward equality and liberation that women and men have made over the past decades (p. 4).

The sort of freedom espoused in the self-help books is part of what constrain people from being authentic. As Gilligan (2003), and other feminist writers point out, being free to do what one likes is not real freedom because it does not factor in the people that we care about (Friedman 2000, Dodds 2000). In traditional moral theories, the onus is on the ‘self’, but this is an individualistic version of the self, where we are basically free to do as we like, and other people are ‘obstacles’ or ‘objects’ that we have to find our way around. Understanding freedom from a relational perspective means asking ourselves how we want to live our lives, and making choices that align with those values. Importantly it is how we negotiate our freedom in a relational context that determines the sort of person we are. Here ‘good’ is always an open question, which involves talking about and reflecting on what matters to us as individuals, as a couple, a family and as a community, and doing this in a way that gives people a sense of being heard; recognizing that what they have to say matters, even if we disagree.

Understanding autonomy as relational and dynamic was the key to understanding how contemporary relationships worked, and it provided a way of exploring love from the point of view of the people who took part in my study. I explored this by looking more closely at ‘ways of talking’ which I identified in stage one of being indicative of pure relationships, the way Giddens (1992) describes them. Here I discovered a process which made sense of what participants appeared to be doing, that is, negotiating the tension between being ‘separate’ and ‘together’. As one respondent put it, ‘we want to be free, and be in the relationship as well’ (71.9). By exploring how people positioned the other person in their stories, I ‘discovered’ a process, or way of talking’ that fostered intimacy.
Here I identified that a ‘good’ relationship was one where there was a balance between independence and togetherness. This was not a static position, but one that was always ‘in play’. Relational autonomy was evident when people ‘played the game’ of love in a way that gave them a sense of independence, as well as a sense of belonging. In the relationships I explored, people felt safe to be themselves so they felt more free to explore their individual potentialities. The indicator that pointed to confluent love was the extent to which people felt they were able to be themselves in an intimate context, the extent to which they could voice their concerns, and be heard. Here intimacy was strengthened by the conversations people had about their differing points of view.

**An emerging theory?**

Confluent love, as an ethical process, was exemplified by the core category that emerged in stage two of the analysis, called ‘we share a world’. In this ethic, emotion and reason are not antagonistic, as in traditional ethical theories, they are ‘ways of talking’ that come together in the process of dialogue, where both rights and responsibility are being negotiated in a way that demonstrates love. To better understand how this works, I drew on Porter’s (1991) theory of moral development. She helped me make sense of what I was seeing in the data, a way of going about intimate relationships that acknowledges an ‘ethic of justice’ and ‘an ethic of care’ are not contradictory, they are different perspectives, which work together in guiding people through the complexities that modern intimacy involves. For example, one respondent talked about her feelings being a reason for her partner to cease talking to a friend of his that she did not like. She was aware of his right to see this person, but she felt that in doing so, he was not taking account of how this made her feel, and this impacted on the way she felt about him. By acknowledging her feelings, he validated her point of view and they carried on with the relationship in a way that they could both agree on. This shows how feeling are not antagonistic to rights or justice, but part of the bigger picture.

Explaining the ethic at the heart of confluent love, Giddens (1992) refers to an ethic of justice approach. While agreeing with Giddens (1992) that a rights-based ethic, or ethic of justice, is important for understanding the changes taking place in the sphere of sexuality and intimacy, it does not tell the whole story. Importantly this perspective does not take account of how people experience their relationships, and the importance of the people we love in terms of both our freedom and our happiness. Furthermore, in our rights-based culture, caring has been regarded as a secondary, or inferior way of navigating our existence. Relationships, especially close, personal
relationships were secondary to doing our duty, or doing what is morally right. This has led to a society where compassion and empathy become “second class citizens”, a situation that Maia Szalavitz and Bruce Perry (2010) call ‘relational poverty’ (p. 292), which they measure by a decrease in the amount of contact we have with other people. They write:

We believe that concurrent advances in technology, the high mobility of our populations, ongoing instability of families and communities, and compartmentalization of educational, work, and living environments have contributed to a reduction in the number and quality of human interactions below that which is necessary for the full development of our capacity for compassion (p. 292).

This leads us back to the main problem with Giddens’ (1992) theory. By using the word ‘autonomy’ to describe how contemporary relationships works, he perpetuates a view of the human being that is defined according to abstract, universal principles that supposedly apply to everyone, everywhere. But in making everyone equal, it also makes them indifferent. In other words, it leaves the concrete individual ‘out of the picture’, so a person’s hopes and dreams, their aspirations and struggles become less significant, than doing what is considered the “right thing”. Importantly with psychology what is right depends on who is “calling the shots”. As I showed in chapter three JB Watson used to breach that babies do not need love. I pointed out, this is a remnant of a way of thinking where our feelings and desires, our personal attachments, do not matter when it comes to working out what is right or just.

The way of talking about love that emerged in this research, is both similar and different to how Giddens (1992) explains it. It is similar in that love emerges over time, as people get to know each other in the process of relating. It was different in that it involved ways of talking that indicated both justice and care were both important “ways of knowing” how to go on together. As I showed in the results chapters, respondents, both men and women, talked about feelings as well as rights in the process of resolving differences. Feelings, including feelings of anger and sadness, pointed to what needed to be addressed in a relationship. In this sense, Giddens’ (1992) theory had a structural fault that needed to be bridged to make sense what I was seeing in the data. Yes, there were ways of talking that were indicative of an ethic of justice, but in the same context, there were also ways of talking that were indicative of an ethic of care. Importantly these ways of talking were present, sometimes in a single sentence, and some men talked about feelings more than rights, while some
women talked about rights more than they did about feelings. Rather than being gendered, these ways of talking were indicative of how both men and women talked when telling me about how they resolved issues in their relationships.

The ethic that emerged could be described as emotional democracy as Giddens (1992) refers to the transformation of intimacy in western culture (p. 182). This way of relating is democratic in so far as it involves each person taking account of the other person’s thoughts, feelings, and values; as well as their own and the other person’s gender, cultural background and personal history, in the process of negotiating shared or mutual understandings. Importantly, in doing this people’s subjectivity, their ‘I’ position, their sense of themselves as a person, was strengthened by this, rather than diminished. It was not ‘freedom’ per se that differentiated confluent love from romantic love, but how people went about exercising their freedom in a relational context, that was significant from an ethical point of view; it was when two people differed in their views but had to resolve this for the ‘good’ of the relationship that provided ‘evidence’ of confluent love. Here relationships were not about two opposites becoming ‘one’, rather it was more of a shared journey into uncharted territory. If one person wanted to go one way, and the other wanted to go in a different direction, then the couple needed to figure out a resolution to go on together. People’s rights were central, but the ethic I identified, which was represented by the core category that emerged in the research ‘we share a world’, was more about how people negotiated their rights in a way that led to a sense of being in it together.

**Sexual freedom**

This research provides a way of understanding contemporary relationships that, to some extent, contradicts the self-help texts, with their emphasis on ‘mastering emotions’ and ‘independence’ as a sign of psychological maturity. As I argued in chapter two this ideal is a remnant of a psychology based on male psychosexual and social development. It is a way of thinking which until recently regarded feelings, the body and women as inferior to men, independence and rationality (Gilligan 1980, 1982, 2003; Porter 1991, Illouz 2007). Here the experts decide what is ‘good’ as far as sex and intimacy are concerned. Illouz (2007) argued this represented a new emotional hierarchy, or boundary that has been ‘drawn by psychologists’ between ‘self-realized’ individuals and those who struggle to become so. In other words, unless people measure up to some ideal way of being human, they are somehow deficient (p. 46). This leads to suffering rather than happiness, because when
people try to live up to these ideals in their everyday lives, they generally fail, which is considered further evidence of their pathology. Here shame fuels more therapy and more striving to achieve. This psychology, as I showed in chapter two, is premised on male psycho-social development so it also encourages women to be more like men in both their private and their public lives. It also disenfranchises women by promoting the idea that there is something wrong with ‘feeling too much’ or being dependent on other human beings for emotional and psychological safety. Giddens’ (1992) theory perpetuates this, to some extent, by drawing on this psychology to explain contemporary relationships.

While the therapeutic narrative was evident in some of the responses, how this knowledge was being applied was different for different people. It was how they did this, in a way that made sense of what was going on that constituted agency, not living up to some ideal. Importantly when these narratives were drawn on, it was about staying connected, rather than as a way of becoming more independent or ‘self-realized’. The relationships I identified as being indicative of confluent love were ethical, not because they allowed people to become more ‘authentic’ in terms of being a ‘law unto themselves’, it was because they involved paying attention to another person in a way that affirmed the other person’s value as a unique person. This sort of attention comes close to what Kant would call respect, but respect for Kant was more to do with valuing a person’s rational nature. What I observed in the data was more the way Simone Weil explained respect, as being ‘for the whole’ person (cited in Teuber 1982, p. 223). Here a person is treated as valuable not just because they are able to reason, but because they exist. There shows an important distinction between an abstract ethic and one that is grounded or embedded in a particular situation. Teuber (1982) writes:

Where Kant grounds respect for persons in a point of view concerned primarily with their capacity to make and give laws freely to themselves, Weil sees respect for a person as a way of regarding them from a point of view (to borrow a phrase from Bernard Williams) which ‘is concerned primarily with what it is for him to live that life and to do those actions (p. 224).

In the relationships I explored, a person’s moral identity was being forged in the cauldron of experience. I demonstrated in the research, using Porter’s (1999) theory as a guide. By understanding autonomy as relational, and dynamic, I showed how the people who participated in my research developed a sense of themselves as having agency in the process of relating. The main skill that I
identified in terms of how people went about creating more loving and equitable relationships, involved acknowledging or pointing out, that the relationship was a shared space. This space provided a sense of belonging, which was an incentive for change to occur. In this sense, love could be a force for change but only if we jettison the patriarchal story, the idea that some people are stronger, better, more rational or more caring than other people. It means realizing that men and women both think and care, but that caring has been left out of our moral framework, which has influenced the way we think about both ethics and love. Importantly, by resisting the feminine and masculine stereotypes that Gilligan and Richards (2009) argue, perpetuate patriarchal culture, people can actively contest the power dynamic that has existed between men and women for centuries.

As Gilligan (2003) explained the history of love in our culture is a story of sacrifice, a story that divides people from each other and from parts of ourselves. In romantic love, inequality and violence are part of the story, because it is structured on complementary opposites, the idea that we need the other person to fill what is lacking in ourselves. To move on from this, Gilligan and Richards (2009) argue that people can conduct their relationships in a way that resists ‘the gender binary and hierarchy that define patriarchal manhood and womanhood, where being a man means not being a woman and also being on top’ (p. 4).

By drawing on more recent developments in psychology and neurobiology, Gilligan and Richards (2009) pointed out, that people are born to connect, but in western culture they are ‘conditioned’ to see themselves as separate. This is a product of an ideology that splits ‘reason from emotion, mind from body, and self from relationships’ (p. 4). Importantly this is not grounded in ideology, ‘but in what might be called human nature’, in the fact that ‘we are inherently relational and responsive beings’ (p. 4).

Importantly the ethic I identified in the research was not a ‘top down’ ethic, it came from the way people described their relationships. Love means different things to different people, but it is how people treat each other in an intimate context, that indicates whether a relationship is a loving one. The sort of love I identified in the research is more fluid than romantic love, in that it involves people navigating the discrepancy between what is and what ‘should’ be, in a way that allows them to be more themselves. Rather than being a sign that a relationship is in trouble, disagreements and disappointments were opportunities for people to reflect on and talk about what was going on between them. In doing this they clarified their individual values and figured out how to go on
together. This is how shared understandings were arrived at, and how intimacy developed.

The key to sustaining intimacy in contemporary culture, according to the people who participated in this research, is about being able to connect with part of our humanity that has been left out of our cultural stories about love. This is the part of us that is sensitive to what own feelings are telling us; how we are experiencing in our relationships. Rather than focusing on what is ‘wrong’ or ‘right’, we focus on what Damasio (1999) calls the ‘feeling of what happens’, as opposed to our ‘autobiographical self’; ‘the self that is wedded to a story about ourselves’ (Damasio 1999, cited in Gilligan 2003, p. 8). When we allow feelings to emerge spontaneously, rather than trying to fit them into a pre-existing patterns or ideals, we are resisting the divisions that the patriarchal love story promotes. Here the experience of shared pleasure becomes the measure of whether a relationship is good or not, and this is an embodied experience, as well as a discursive one i.e. it depends on our capacity to put feelings into words. Gilligan (2003) explains that ‘pleasure is a sensation written into our bodies, the emotions of joy and delight’ (p. 8). However, in patriarchal culture people can lose touch with the capacity to experience delight in the presence of others, because they are forced to act in ways that involve repressing their more vulnerable feelings. She argues that this happens in both men and women, when the voice that speaks from their experience, a voice that registers what is happening in the body, is silenced by a voice that tells them what they should be experiencing. In her work with couples, Gilligan (2003) writes, that she was struck by the extent to which people ‘sealed off love, the deals they have made and the compromises stuck, always for good reason but often at enormous cost’ (p. 31).

This research supports the view that intimacy is changing, and that men and women are more able to be themselves in sexual relationships, and they do this by actively reflecting on, and talking about, how to go on together. Despite the constraints that continue to work against men and women relating to each other authentically, over the course of my research I explored how people could play a more active role in interpreting and producing culture as they go about their relationships. It was the interplay between being an individual and existing culture that gave substance to Giddens’ theory of confluent love. By being more aware of how gender and sexuality are constructed, individuals are more able to reflect on how gender stereotypes influence their behavior. They could then choose to act in ways that either conformed to or which challenged existing norms. This was shown most prominently in chapter seven where I explored one response that was the most indicative of confluent love. Despite believing that marriage was ‘tokenistic’, the couple had their own reasons for
doing it, and the reason was love. ‘For me, the emotional and intellectual bond...is what matters, not the title’ (34.2). Here we get a picture of social life that makes sense of the core category ‘we share a world’: when people are more themselves, rather than trying to conform to gender stereotypes, love becomes more fluid, more of a process than a destination.

This understanding of agency is more aligned with the way the feminists that I engaged with in chapter two and three explain it, as dynamic and relational, an understanding that allows us to move away from the idea that we are separate isolated beings constantly looking for our other halves, in order to be happy. By understanding love as an on-going process of discovery, where feelings and cognition are not separate modes of experience associated with a particular gender, we undo the value distinction between thinking and feeling. In this sense, confluent love involves a more integrated and fluid way of understanding intelligence, one which includes both the heart and the mind.

Importantly this gives us a view of love that is more aligned with the way people experience their relationships, in the sense of being embodied and contextual. It is a way of relating that allows a person’s authentic self, what Porter (1991) calls, their ‘strong’ or ‘moral’ self, to emerge (p. 170). This is real empowerment, Porter (1991) argues, because it involves mutual recognition based on valuing the whole of a person, rather than just their ‘rational’ nature, narrowly defined as the antithesis to feeling. The ethic ‘we share a world’ leads to individual and collective flourishing because it affirms our own and the other person’s humanity. Because of this confluent love has the potential to reduce inequalities that contribute to intimate partner violence because it leads to both people having a sense of empowerment. Power here does not come from dominating or controlling, it comes from an understanding of ourselves as relational beings, always in the process of becoming. Porter (1991) argues that the need to exert control through violence is an attempt to assert the self, which is experienced as lacking. She writes: ‘The alternative – taking pleasure in another’s autonomy and inclinations – provides evidence of a sense of self defined simultaneously in relation to and in differentiation from others’ (p. 118). In other words, when people see each other as ‘interdependent’ it allows space for them to explore their different potentialities, in a way that feels safe. This is mutual recognition, based on seeing the other person as ‘capable of engaging in and valuing certain (yet to be discovered) forms of self-development’ (Lukes 1984, p. 146 cited in Porter 1991).

The ethic that I identified in the research is not just about having choices, but being able to make
choices that reflect ‘who we are’ at any particular moment in time. This cannot happen in romantic love relationships because individuals become “locked” into ways of being are pre-determined; we act according to scripts which tell us what we should be thinking and feeling. In this way, romantic love perpetuates a way of being in love that people think they need to emulate in order to be loved.

I argued in this thesis that romantic love constrains real choice, because it is based on the idea that there is a perfect person out there who, once we find him or her, will make our lives complete; or we aspire to be that perfect ‘other’ in a way that works against being ourselves. In short, romantic love works against relational autonomy because the other person becomes instrumental to our satisfaction or happiness: we need them to be a certain way, so we can feel complete or whole. And because they make up for what we lack, we need to possess or control them to feel secure. The opposite extreme, which the self-help narrative promotes, is that we do not need anyone else, and relationships are only ‘good’ if they contribute to self-realization; the realization of a separate, independent self. The ethic here is the ‘individual acknowledges that ‘his first loyalty is to himself’ (Giddens 1991, p. 80).

Confluent love, is another story, but it is one that makes more sense in contemporary culture, because love is more fluid, more open to individual interpretation. In confluent love relationships love develops to the degree that people are open and honest about what they are experiencing, and they go about expressing this in a way that shows that they genuinely care about the other person. That is not to say that people who do not relate this way are not in a loving relationship, only that it is not confluent love. Importantly this sort of love is more of a collaboration because it depends on people being able to come to a shared understanding about what love means for them, and this is something that happens in the process of relating. Understanding love as a shared journey, rather than as a coming together of complementary opposites, means the relationship becomes an on-going concern for both individuals, and the emergence of love depends on what happens when they are together. This is the opposite of trying to make our experiences conform to pre-existing notions of what is supposed to happen, in confluent love relationships we let things happen, and make sense of these experiences together.

By emphasising ‘co-presence’ as a key factor in what makes a relationship loving, Illouz (2007) argues that it is the experiences that people have together that sustains the connection, and promotes intimacy. She argues that when people interact face to face, ‘the information they give off,
despite their best self so to speak, is very much dependent on the ways in which they use their body (voice, eyes, body posture, etc.)’ (p. 97). As I showed in the research when people share a physical as well as psychological space, the meanings that ensue from that space are shared in the sense that they emerge from their interactions. Listening to someone telling their side of the story means letting that person’s perspective pervade our consciousness. This is an embodied experience. When we are physically present with another person we get a sense of what is going on between us, and this, in turn influences our physiology, and shapes, to some extent, our reactions and responses. The way this happens is largely out of our control. For example, we do not control who we are attracted to, but what we do with these feelings is something we do have a choice about. We can act on our feelings, or talk about them. We can reflect on them and decide what to do about them. It is what we do that determines who we are, and this includes how we make sense of our feelings and desires.

The most significant finding in the research, for me, was the way people talked about their partner as being their best friend. This was the element that dissolved the power differential that structures romantic love, and was, for me, evidence of a new ethic of intimate life. As I discussed in chapter three, friendship is a ‘moral relationship’ because each person regards the other with the sort of attention that bestows value. Friends regard each other as the author of their own lives, but they also support each other’s projects and care about each other’s wellbeing as a matter of course. Friends also be trusted to act in ways that have the other person’s best interests at heart. In this sense friendship supports the development of agency because we respect a friend’s choices even if we disagree with them, but we also support their interests, and they can also trust us to act accordingly. We each have our own perspective, but we openly share our thoughts and feelings in a way that fosters a sense of mutual understanding.

**Love as an integrating process**

Importantly understanding love as something we do together, brings the cultural, the psychological and the physiological or biological aspects of love together in a way that makes sense of how people can be both free and determined. A person might be ‘conditioned’, either by nature or nurture, or a combination of these, to act in certain ways, but there is also space for them to decide how this conditioning plays out. They do this by embracing their circumstances, including their gender, and interpreting these in ways that are more aligned with their values and aspirations, as well as their individual preferences. For the people who participated in this research there was an awareness that
people come to the relationship with an existing knowledge derived from their experiences, but there is also an acknowledgement that one can go beyond their conditioning in the process of relating. This happens when people can talk about what they are experiencing and trust that the other person will hear them. Here intimacy is not about acting according to pre-existing scripts that one has to conform to, it depends on the integrity of the individuals to speak and act in ways that reflect their real feelings and intentions.

Giddens (1992) points out that in the context of the pure relationship ‘integrity retains a fundamental role, but becomes an ethical attribute which each partner presumes of the other’ (p. 84). The ethic that emerged in the research had elements of what Robert Solomon (2007) describes as emotional integrity, which lends itself to the idea that contemporary relationships allow people to be more authentic. The way Solomon talks about integrity is different to how some existentialists, including Sartre and Camus, define it, as overly individualistic, bordering on narcissistic. In many respects, Giddens’ (1991, 1992) references to authenticity echo these. Solomon (2007) argues that emotional integrity involves ‘fully embracing our being with others, as well as our need to live in accordance with our (and others’) values’ (p. 268). This ‘suggests an ideal of transcending ourselves by becoming the person we most want to be’ (p. 268). Here happiness is a key factor in determining whether a relationship is good or not, but it is not the sort of happiness that comes from satisfying our desires. The way Solomon (2007) defines it, happiness is not an emotion or a feeling of subjective wellbeing, it is ‘the sum of all our other emotions, the way they add up in our lives and the life they add up to’ (p 266). Here happiness is not just about how we feel – feelings change - it is about how we evaluate the course of our lives, given our aspirations and our values.

Insofar as love inspires us to reach beyond our pre-conceived ideas of who we are it could lead to a sort of happiness that runs contrary to the idea perpetrated by consumer culture, which is more about the satisfaction of desire. With the sort of happiness that Solomon talks about, there is no destination, no ideal to be achieved, our happiness depends on how we make sense of our experience. In short, being happy or being in a loving relationship involves reflective awareness - the recognition that one is happy, or that one is in love. As Solomon (2007) argues ‘one might say it is the reflective component that completes the emotion’ (p. 265). Here happiness and love are not dependent on the other person being what we want her or him to be, it depends on both individuals respecting and supporting their own and each other’s potential in a way that fosters a sense of belonging, a sense of sharing a world.
How love might change the world

Exploring how people talked about love in the context of this research allowed me to better understand how what we do in our interpersonal relationships could contribute to a more democratic society. However, not in the way Giddens (1992) explains it. Here I agree with Bauman (2003) who says our moral identity emerges when we are faced with a situation where there are no clear answers, but we have to act regardless. It is in the action that we develop a sense of ourselves as a certain sort of person. This was evident in the response where a woman talked about how she went about resolving the issue with her husband and daughter. She stated that ‘the issue is too important for me to swallow my own sense of what is the best way to deal with it’ (p. 60.9). In other words, she saw the best way forward and this involved resisting her husband’s demands, but this meant separation and division, rather than a stronger connection between the two of them.

Conversely, in relationships where people did feel they were able to talk about what they were experiencing, even and especially when they disagreed with each other, there was a sense of them becoming more connected, a sense of both people feeling safe to be themselves. I observed how this process supported a sense of ‘relational autonomy’ as people learned to go on together; how they resolved disagreements in a way that included both their perspectives. This showed how relationships are discursively constituted through an interplay of different positions people take up in the process of dialogue: moving from the ‘I’ to the ‘we’ and in the process creating an ‘our’ perspective. The ‘I’ position denotes agency (separateness), the ‘we’ is the inter-subjective space where people negotiate being ‘together’ and being ‘separate’, and the ‘our’ is the shared understandings, or ‘knowledge’, that emerges from these negotiations.

The main skill that supported this process involved expanding the ‘I’ perspective and including bodily states, feelings, memories, and preferences, to include what was going on for both people: this was represented by the ‘we’ perspective. In doing this the other person becomes part of our world, and we become part of their world, but not in a way that dissolves individuality, rather it expands it, as evidenced by the ‘our’ perspective. This perspective represented the shared understandings that emerged from negotiating the tension between ‘I’ and ‘we’ in the process of reflecting on interactions and this ‘our’ space allowed people to feel comfortable being themselves;
they felt safe to discuss their opinions and desires.

This is especially important in a contemporary sexual context because intimacy is predicated on the achievement of mutual pleasure. If people do not feel safe to express their true feelings and desires, then they become passive in the relationships and vulnerable to potential exploitation and manipulation. Intimacy in contemporary culture depends being able to trust that the other person is who they say they are, and to feel confident that will do what they say they are going to do. This is how the moral or ethical self emerges, what Gilligan and Richards call the ethical voice, which is also the sexual voice.

Giddens (1992) explains that when someone reflects on how to perform their ‘sexuality’, they are seeing themselves as someone who has a choice about this, this affirms what ‘taken for granted phallic power denies: that in modern social life, self-identity, including sexual identity, is a reflexive achievement’ (p 147). Acting out of compulsion, or without including the other person’s perspective, is the opposite of this, because it denies the other person a voice, a chance to agree or disagree with what we are proposing. For confluent love to emerge in a relationship, the willingness to say what one is really feeling or experiencing, and the capacity to voice concerns and preferences, needs to be a two-way street. When someone treats the other person as an ‘object’, something that they can control for their own purposes, the relationship is no longer reciprocal: one person is holding back, and the other person is not sure what is going on. This diminishes both people’s agency in the way that Porter (1991) conceptualizes it.

Moral development, as Porter (1991) describes it is a process of becoming a ‘strong’ self, p. 171). She writes: ‘how this strong concept of self differs from the traditional individualistic ‘male voice’ is that it emphasises an individuated sense of self as connectedness with others, rather than separation from, or domination of, others’ (p. 170). I identified this in the research data when I explored how people reflected on their own actions and reactions in the process of relating, and deciding how to go on in light of this reflection. According to Solomon (2007) the act of reflection allows people to see beyond their own immediate concerns; it provides an opportunity to step out of their self-centered, or first person perspective, to see things from a different or bigger perspective. In other words, rather than being fixated on their own concerns and anxieties the way the character’s in Sartre’s play were, they walk through the door when it opens. Solomon (2007) describes this as ‘opening one’s heart to the universe’ in a way that appreciates our uniqueness as well as our shared
humanity. By expanding one’s perspective to include the perspective of others, he argues, one comes to appreciate the beauty of the whole, while still participating in personal projects and passions. Engaging in a process of mutual exploration in a way that respects different perspectives is what Solomon calls, spirituality, which he says is ‘an ideal expression of emotional integrity’ (p. 270). Importantly this way of understanding love means we are more likely to arrive at a place that both of us can agree on; with this sort of love there is no map, and ‘getting there’ involves tempering our narcissism by including the other person in our conception of ourselves. This is what fosters a sense of travelling together for however long that lasts.

**Areas for further research**

One of the most interesting things to come out of this research for me was Gilligan and Richard’s (2009) claim that the root cause of male violence, both domestic and international violence, stems from sexual insecurity, and the need to control or suppress their more tender feelings. They write:

> Nothing is more intimate than sexuality, and no greater humiliation can be experienced than failure over what one perceives to be one’s sexual role. Such failures are often the basis of domestic violence (p. 253)

According to Giddens (1992), men are threatened by women’s increasing sexual freedom because it means they are no longer in control. Women are more in control over reproduction, and this gives them more control over how they live their lives. For some men this means they have to experience and express feelings that go against patriarchal scripts. The remedy for this, according to Gilligan and Richards (2009) is for men and women to break the taboo against speaking about love in both their private and public lives, and to acknowledge the importance of other people for realizing their individual hopes and dreams. If they do so in a way that repudiates the idea that love between equals is somehow ‘unmanly’, then this frees love from its patriarchal tendencies, and provides space for more democratic relationships to come into being.

This research supports the Giddens (1992) and Weeks (1986, 2007, 2009) claim that intimate relationships are the site where new moralities are being experimented with, which is changing the way men and women, as well as women and women, and men and men, relate to each other, sexually and otherwise. In gender terms this could be revolutionary, but it impacts differently on different people. When I was putting the finishing touches on my thesis, I met a local Aboriginal
Elder, known colloquially as Aunty Lorraine. She is a well-known painter. While she was showing me her art works, I noted that she used pastels as well as the browns and ochre that have traditionally defined Aboriginal art. She said the inclusion of pale blue, green, pink and purple, were reflective of the way she experiences her world. ‘People say that it’s not traditional, but it is the world I see around me’.
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Appendix A

Postcard inviting people to logon to lovedialogue.com (from a painting by Michael Harris)
Appendix B

A copy of the first page of lovedialogue.com

Thank you for your interest in this research. Lovedialogue.com has been set up to explore how people are going about their intimate relationships in modern Australian culture. It does this by looking at how people talk about love.
Appendix C

A copy of the questions for the research on lovedialogue.com