# Navigating intimacy with ecstasy: The emotional, spatial and boundaried dynamics of couples' MDMA experiences

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# Abstract

MDMA (3,4-methylenedioxy-methamphetamine or 'ecstasy') is well-known for its empathic and sociable effects (Bogt, Engels, Hibbel & Van Wel, 2002). Indeed, there is a body of work that discusses the role the drug plays in social bonding (Beck & Rosenbaum, 1998; Duff, 2008; Farrugia, 2015; Hinchliff, 2001; Solowij, Hall & Lee, 1992). However, there has been extremely limited research looking at MDMA's impact specifically on romantic relationships (Vervaeke & Korf, 2006). Hence, this thesis explored couples' experiences of intimacy on MDMA and how this intertwines with their relationship. Semi-structured interviews with ten couples, using visual methods (Reavey, 2011; Del Busso, 2009; Majumdar, 2011), and eight individual written diaries (Kenten, 2010) were analysed using a thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A 'bubble' (Sloterdijk, 1999 cited in Klauser, 2010) is argued to organically form around couples on MDMA, producing a distinct affective atmosphere of muted fear, worry and shame and heightened feelings of safety and love, which mediates emotional and discursive 'practices' of intimacy (Gabb & Fink, 2015). Movement, spaces and objects are also argued to facilitate intimacy, producing new subjectivities which alter boundaries: between self and world; within the self; and between self and other (Brown & Stenner, 2009). Yet beneath the seeming 'flow' to MDMA experiences, couples construct clear, symbolic boundaries, segmenting these experiences from both everyday life (Douglas, 2001), and other people (Stenner, 2013). The research is argued to have key implications for drug theory and practice, namely that drug use is not only an individual act (Duff, 2008) but also relational in nature – its meaning partly determined by how it interweaves with important relationships in people's lives.

# Preface

I was introduced to electronic music by a close friend many years ago and since that point have been fascinated by the dance music scene. MDMA (or 'ecstasy' as it is more commonly known) has become an integral part of dance culture (Pilcher, 2008), and the drug has even been claimed to have inspired this style of music (Rietveld, 1998). The diverse, nuanced accounts of MDMA use given by people I knew and by non-academic books – experiences that were both meaningful and often a positive force in people's lives – defied the representation of MDMA within mainstream epidemiological drugs research in which the dominant narrative is a largely negative one; centred on harm, risk and addiction. Such a contradiction propelled me into exploring memories of 'change' and 'openness' in relation to individuals' MDMA use at masters level (Anderson & McGrath, 2013).

As I embedded myself further in the literature during my masters, I came across more complex accounts of drug use in qualitative studies. For example, Beck and Rosenbaum (1994) highlight how users reported the 'deepen[ing] of relationships' (p59) as a key motivator for use and the women in Hinchliff 's (2001) study describe MDMA use as permanently easing anxiety and enhancing social interactions. These studies illustrated to me how mainstream drugs research abstracted MDMA experiences from both the contexts within which they took place and the meanings of those experiences for the individuals concerned. Moreover, it seemed that by failing to respect the way people engage in meaning-making practices, drugs research also failed to understand why people take a drug like MDMA in the first place. Indeed, it seemed that MDMA created a space for certain kinds of things to happen, transformations of self and relationships, which were not taking place in everyday society, and made me question the logic behind shutting down such possibilities.

One of the most key relationships in people's lives was strangely absent from the nuanced, qualitative research – romantic connections. Considering the centrality of intimate relationships to everyday lives, Jamieson (1998) argues that they have replaced the family as the primary site of intimacy, the ramifications of ecstasy use

within this context seem especially significant. This realisation planted the seed for what would later develop into this PhD project exploring couples' use of MDMA. And it was these more complex accounts of drug use in combination with excellent critical social psychology teaching and supervisory guidance which set the tone for the approach of this thesis i.e. a commitment to exploring MDMA experiences as multiple and meaningful, as both structured by and influencing the intimate relationships within which they take place. The thesis is organised as follows:

**Chapter One** provides the empirical background of this project; reviewing key debates in the intimacy literature as well as explaining why MDMA use might be an interesting context for intimacy. The way drug use has been thought about and studied will also be considered.

**Chapter Two** outlines the theoretical orientation of this thesis, grounded in process theory as interpreted by British social psychologists. In particular, attention is drawn to how embodiment, emotion and space might be reconceptualised within this framework.

**Chapter Three** presents the methodological and analytical approach of the work, informed by the voices of drug users themselves and deep empiricism. The two empirical studies of the thesis are outlined: the first, performed with couple interviews and visual methods and the second, involving individual written diaries and optional interviews. The thematic analytical approach used with the data is also outlined.

**Chapter Four** is the first analytical chapter and proposes that couples find themselves in a protective bubble where more 'negative' emotions are kept at bay and 'positive' emotions proliferate. Within this bubble, they feel more emotionally in tune with one another, can disclose relationship concerns and leave behind difficult feelings.

**Chapter Five** explores how subjective experience is materially as well as discursively distributed. In particular, different patterns on movement within MDMA spaces are proposed to produce distinct subjectivities: playful, embodied and merged; a process mediated by shifting boundaries within and beyond the self.

**Chapter Six** examines the role of symbolic boundaries in couples' MDMA experiences. This involves exploring how MDMA use is spatially and temporally

segmented from everyday life as well as the borders couples construct to keep other people out of their experiences.

Chapter Seven discusses the overall findings of the thesis in addition to engaging in reflexivity regarding the research process. The implications of these findings for drugs research are also considered.

# Chapter One – Intimacy and MDMA

the single best use of MDMA is to facilitate more direct communication between
people involved in a significant emotional relationship

(Greer & Tolbert, 1986, p326)

Over thirty years have passed since Greer and Tolbert (1986) made such a bold claim
yet little ground has been made towards determining its merit. MDMA (3,4-
methylenedioxy-N-methylamphetamine or 'ecstasy') was made illegal in the United
States in 1985, but prior to this Greer and Tolbert had been administering MDMA to
referred patients. The pair rarely initiated therapeutic interaction during sessions,
preferring to leave individuals or couples to determine their own experience in a
supportive environment, but were available to respond to requests (Greer & Tolbert,
1998). Despite Greer and Tolbert (1986) framing their most significant finding as the
drug's interpersonal effects – 28 out of the 29 participants reported improvements
in their personal relationships in the days, weeks and months after taking MDMA –
in the years since, research exploring the intersection of MDMA and, in particular,
*romantic* relationships has been scant. In fact, there have been only three studies
where couples' use of MDMA is a significant feature and these are not particularly
detailed (Rodgers et al., 2006; Topp, Hando, Dillon, Roche & Solowij, 1999; Vervaeke
& Korf, 2006). This thesis seeks to redress this omission; arguing why MDMA might
be an interesting context for intimacy and how this might foreseeably influence a
couple relationship.

Due to the lack of existing research on MDMA use in couples, this chapter will
examine two distinct bodies of literature, in turn: drugs research, spanning
epidemiology, psychology, cultural studies and anthropology, and intimacy research,
which draws from mainly psychology and sociology. First, it will be argued there is a
split in the way drug use has been conceptualised within academic research. On the
one hand, epidemiological studies frame drug use in terms of harm and risk with
pleasure largely absent, and, on the other, cultural studies portrays drug use as part
of a youthful postmodern search for identity and embraces ideas of pleasure (Hunt,

Moloney & Evans, 2009). However, while this is still a useful heuristic in thinking about the field of drug studies, two further caveats will be added, drawing on more recent MDMA research. The link between MDMA and intimacy will be outlined, considering both the drug's acute prosocial qualities and more long-term bonding effects, before pointing to why couple relationships will be focussed on.

This chapter will then turn to the intimacy literature to provide a framework for how to think about intimacy on MDMA. In particular, this section will explore the disclosing model of intimacy advanced by Giddens (1992) and contrast this model with Gabb and Fink's (2015) practices approach to intimacy – the latter argued as better able to explain the inherent diversity of people's lived experiences of intimacy. From this point, how intimate practices are shaped by social and cultural frameworks will be explored in more depth; examining how the Euro-North American context idealises specific kinds of intimacy, and how other factors, such as gender, intersect with this cultural context.

## 1.1 MDMA

It is argued here that the recreational consumption of MDMA could feasibly intertwine with intimacy within a romantic relationship. In order to understand why this might be so, research examining the social effects of MDMA use will be explored. Prior to and in order to contextualise this body of work, a brief general introduction to MDMA will be given and how academic research has framed drug use will be examined.

In the UK, MDMA is listed as a Class A drug under the Misuse of Drugs Act (1971). This is considered to be the most dangerous category of substances and, as such, carries the harshest penalties: seven years for possession and up to life in prison for supply and production. While the USA made MDMA illegal in 1985 and still categorises it as of absolutely 'no medical use', it was banned even before that in the UK, in 1977. The drug is most known for its energy-enhancing, social and euphoric effects (Bogt, Engels, Hibbel & Van Wel, 2002), which have been suggested to explain its central position on the illicit drug scene for the past 30 years (Home

Office, 2016). While ecstasy is most strongly associated with the dance/rave culture from the late 1980s onwards, before the drug's wider dissemination it was known as 'empathy' to a group of American psychotherapists in the 1970s who used it to facilitate their sessions with patients (Greer & Tolbert, 1986), including relationship therapy (Ronson, 2016). When MDMA was made illegal the majority of this therapeutic work came to a halt, though some went underground (Stolaroff, 2004), but has been revived in the past decade or so in clinical trials for the treatment of mainly PTSD (Mithoefer et al., 2012; Sessa, 2011).

**1.1.1 Terminology: MDMA or ecstasy?**

Before embarking on a review of the drugs literature, it is worth considering the distinction between 'MDMA' and 'ecstasy'. Both are often used interchangeably in popular and media discourses as well as within the research community, though this is generally with qualification in the latter. This is because the two are, in theory, synonymous, with MDMA referring to the chemical compound (3,4-methylenedioxy-N-methylamphetamine) and ecstasy used as its street name – where the compound is usually presented and sold in a particular way i.e. compressed into small pills. Historically, however, while MDMA has been sold as 'ecstasy', ecstasy has not always just consisted of MDMA. Other, very chemically similar compounds such as MDA (3, 4-methylenedioxyamphetamine) and MDEA (3,4-methylenedioxyethylamphetamine, also known as MDE) have been sold as ecstasy in addition to ecstasy pills containing a range of substances other than MDMA such as: amphetamine (speed), caffeine, ketamine and even the potentially fatal PMA (para-Methoxyamphetamine) (Parrott, 2004).

Arguably, if we are trying to explore meanings of drug use in the context of intimacy, then it seems fitting to incorporate the terms people use to describe their experience. Ecstasy or sometimes 'E' is still the most commonly heard term from users (Banta-Green et al., 2005). Although there have been suggestions that the term 'MDMA' is becoming more popular and that the term is associated with the 'purer' crystal form of the drug (Edland-Gryt, in press). Therefore, due to both the

importance of the social context within which ecstasy is embedded and employing terminology that users self-identify with, this thesis will treat the terms MDMA and ecstasy as synonymous.

### 1.1.2 Approaches to understanding drug use

Academic discussion around drug use has been described as split into two main threads: epidemiology and cultural studies (Hunt, Moloney & Evans, 2009). A quantitative, epidemiological approach tends to focus on harm and risk, while largely ignoring the pleasures or benefits of drug use and has been the dominant paradigm within drugs research for several decades (Moore, 2008; Mugford, 1988). In contrast, cultural studies views drug use in the context of a youthful, postmodern search for identity and pleasure and has employed qualitative methods. While this split still provides a useful heuristic, the neatness of this distinction has frayed in recent years and requires two further caveats. Firstly, there has been a raft of quantitative, experimental studies exploring how the acute effects of a number of illicit drugs have therapeutic potential (Baggott et al., 2016; Frye, Wardle, Norman & de Wit, 2014; Hysek et al., 2013; Wardle & de Wit, 2014; Wardle, Kirkpatrick & de Wit, 2014; Schmid et al., 2014). For example, LSD's enhancement of emotional empathy and prosocial behaviour was hypothesised to explain its usefulness in LSD-assisted psychotherapy for anxiety in patients with a life-threatening illness (Dolder, Schmid, Müller, Borgwardt & Liechti, 2016). There is a large body of research particularly concerning the therapeutic usefulness of MDMA, as this has received the most attention when performing clinical trials, which will be examined later in this chapter regarding the social effects of MDMA use.

Secondly, there is a growing body of research mapping the socio-material relations of alcohol and other drug consumption (AOD). Whereas the cultural studies approach tends to focus on how drug use intersects with youth cultural practices within the dance scene, socio-material AOD research concentrates on 'the variety of actors and forces that interact to produce AOD use subjects, practices and contexts in unpredictable and locally specific ways' (Bøhling, 2014, p362). In practice, this

means greater heed is paid to the places and spaces of drug use and the social and affective forces which interweave with them, with researchers drawing on theoretical sources such as Giles Deleuze, cultural geography and affective theory (Keane, 2011). It is suggested these studies still broadly sit within a cultural studies approach as defined by Hunt, Moloney and Evans (2009), but merit individual attention due to how they enrich understandings of how drug experiences are produced. Before exploring these caveats further, the literature around epidemiology and cultural studies will be examined, with a particular focus on MDMA use.

Academic research of ecstasy has largely functioned within the 'pathology paradigm' (Mugford, 1988) of epidemiological studies, focussing on the acute and long-term health consequences of taking the drug, rather than trying to understand why people use it (Holland, 2001). Concerns within these studies are threefold: determining the numbers of people using ecstasy in the general population, pinpointing defining features of ecstasy users and identifying the problems that use causes (Hunt et al., 2009). It is estimated that 9.4% of adults in the UK have ever taken MDMA in their lifetime (Home Office, 2016). In the past year, 1.5% of surveyed adults reported they had taken the drug, amongst those aged 16-24 the usage rate rises to 4.5% (Home Office, 2016). The rise in popularity of the recreational drug – with usage rates peaking in 2001-2 – is often linked to the prevalence of rave culture which begun in the late 1980s (Measham, 2004). Since that point there had been a decline in the numbers of people using the drug, until 2013 when usage rates once again rose and have been flat since that point (Home Office, 2016). This means there has been no significant increase or decrease in ecstasy use from 1996 to the present day, with MDMA remaining the third most consumed illegal drug, after cannabis and cocaine (Home Office, 2016).

Secondly, there is an extensive body of work investigating risk factors for ecstasy use. These studies tend to highlight personal characteristics, generally treated as benign, and a range of behaviours, construed as undesirable. Studies have found greater usage rates among club and party-goers (Teter, McCabe, Boyd & Guthrie, 2003), younger people (Webb et al., 1996; Measham, Parker & Aldridge, 1998), and people who self-identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual (Boyd, McCabe &

d'Arcy, 2003; Rosario, Hunter & Gwadz, 1997; Stall & Wiley, 1988; Signorile, 1997). In turn, behaviours associated with ecstasy use are investigated to add to this risk profile e.g. unsafe sexual practices and a greater number of sexual partners (Klitzman, Greenberg, Pollack & Dolezal, 2002; Klitzman, Pope & Hudson, 2000), use of other illicit drugs (de Win et al., 2006; Pedersen & Skrondal, 1999; Zimmermann et al., 2005; Turner, Russell & Brown, 2003; Adlaf & Smart, 1997; Measham et al., 2001) and novelty-seeking behaviour (Dughiero, Schifano & Forza, 2001).

Finally, there has been a plethora of research identifying the harms of MDMA use, including short-term issues such as low mood (Peroutka, Newman & Harris, 1988), anxiety and fatigue as well as acute effects like water intoxication (hyponatremia) (Campbell & Rosner, 2008), over-heating (hyperthermia) (Green & O'shea & Colado, 2004), kidney injury, liver injury (Campbell & Rosner, 2008) and heart attack (Nutt, 2012). While more long-term harms tend to focus around cognitive problems like memory decline (Blagrove et al., 2011), depression (Roiser & Sahakian, 2004) and other mental health issues (Lieb, Schuetz, Pfister, Von Sydow & Wittchen, 2002) and potential neurotoxicity (Curran, 2000; McCann, Ridenour, Shaham & Ricaurte, 1994).

Some effects are relatively well-established, for example there is a large body of research examining cognitive deficits in ecstasy users (Blagrove et al., 2011; Montgomery, Hatton, Fisk, Ogden & Jansari, 2010; Gouzoulis-Mayfrank et al., 2000; Morgan, 1999; Parrott, Lees, Garnham, Jones & Wesnes, 1998), with heavy users experiencing more serious issues (Bolla, McCann & Ricaurte, 1998; Parrott and Laskey, 1998). Other effects have attracted far more debate – such as whether MDMA is neurotoxic. Animal studies have indicated this might be the case (Fischer et al., 1995; Ricaurte et al., 1985), with neuronal recovery occuring in rats but only partially in larger primates (Ricaurte et al., 2000). Human studies have also shown damage to the serotonergic neurotransmitter system (Benningfield & Cowan, 2013), as serotonin, which regulates mood, appetite and sleep, is one of the main neurotransmitters affected by MDMA use. However, the relevance of these studies to humans has been questioned (Saunders, 1997). With studies criticised for allegedly giving disproportionately large dosages of MDMA to animals (Doblin et al., 2014; Schmidt et al., 1986). Furthermore, if MDMA-induced neurotoxicity is related

to metabolic disposition, then if is species-dependent as has been claimed, there would be limited generalisability of cross-species analysis (Baumann, Wang & Rothman, 2007; de la Torre & Farré, 2004). To sum up, some researchers continue to argue there is sufficient evidence to class MDMA as neurotoxic (Parrott, 2013), while others state that whether MDMA is neurotoxic is still open to question and suggest that it may still be the case that damage caused by consumption is reversible (Cowan, 2007; Green, King, Shortall & Fone, 2012).

Cases of extreme harm, including death have been recorded, however, the number of fatalities caused by MDMA is actually relatively low: it is implicated in 37–50 deaths and viewed as solely responsible for 10–17 deaths every year in the UK (Advisory Council for Misuse of Drugs, 2009). The 50 deaths per year from ecstasy (500,000 users) are dwarfed by the 40,000 deaths per year from alcohol (40 million users) ('Most dangerous drug?' 2014): it translates to a 0.0001% rate of fatality for ecstasy use versus a 1% fatality rate for alcohol. This means that, on average, someone is 10,000 times more likely to die from drinking alcohol than from taking ecstasy.

An alternative understanding of MDMA use centres around the meanings and pleasures people derive from using drugs and the spaces within which they use them, classed under the rubric of cultural studies by Hunt, Moloney and Evans (2009). This has historically come from within the cultural studies domain but also includes research from disciplines such as sociology, anthropology and psychology. These approaches largely focus on young people's use of MDMA within dance culture; the cause of the drug's rise in popularity at the end of the 1980s and its now global reputation as a 'party drug'. The suitability of its use within the context of dance culture is emphasised: MDMA is energising to the point of inducing people to dance, connects you to others and has been described as enhancing music (Bogt et al., 2002).

The practice of young people using MDMA at dance parties has been variously described as: a post-industrial rite of passage (Northcote, 2006), a rebellion against social norms (Jordan, 1995), a social and leisure activity (Hunt & Evans 2003; Olsen, 2009) and an expression of a neo-tribal lifestyle (Brookman, 2001). Young people's use of MDMA as related to a search for a more adult identity is described

by Northcote (2006)'s study, where nightclubs are conceptualised as 'liminal spaces' with transformative potential (Turner, 1987). Combined with drug use, nightclubs become places where everyday social structures are suspended, and social relationships are temporarily reformulated (Northcote, 2006). Young people can craft their own independent identity, mimicking adult-type friendships and partnerships in an intimate and free 'practice' environment (Northcote, 2006). This playing with the possibilities of adult life, albeit in the hedonistic context of music, sexuality and dance, is suggested to play an important role in the biographical transitions of young adults (Northcote, 2006). While historically MDMA users have been viewed to be members of a deviant subculture (Jordan, 1995), some researchers argue that this ignores the heterogeneity of ecstasy users and the way in which drug users have become mainstream: they are 'normal people with full rounded lives, who also happen to use Ecstasy' (Solowij, Hall & Lee, 1992, p10). This angle of research has been termed the 'normalisation thesis' (Parker, Aldridge & Measham, 1998; Measham & Shiner, 2009). Ecstasy use is no longer the preserve of a particular, cohesive group, Olsen (2009) argues, but fits into late capitalist leisure and consumption patterns, with ecstasy meeting a need for a quick-fix provider of desirable social qualities: energy, sociability and openness.

As outlined earlier, there is a growing body of work tracing the socio-material relations constitutive of what people do on drugs (e.g. Bøhling, 2014; Dilkes-Frayne, 2014; Duff, 2008, 2014; Farrugia, 2015; Fraser & Moore, 2011; Keane, 2011; Malins, 2004; Potts, 2004; Race, 2011, 2015). Notably, these studies redefine context and describe it in terms of the ways human and non-human bodies interrelate in specific, local contexts, rather than equating context with the wider structures of economics, politics and culture (Duff, 2007). This has manifested in considering how AOD practices are: affectively modulated by the organisation of people in club spaces (Bøhling, 2014); continually unfolding and mediated by people and objects within a music festival setting (Dilkes-Frayne, 2014) and entangled with the layout of city space (Malins, 2004). In addition, drug use has been argued to facilitate greater intimacy, communication and friendship for young men along with particular spatial-material arrangements (Farrugia, 2015) and be intertwined with online sex apps

which gives rise to new modes of interaction between men who have sex with men (Race, 2015).

In the work of Bøhling (2014) it is highlighted how different levels of business and social interaction on nightclub floors are preferred over others. For example, some participants emphasised the energy and uplift from being in a crowd of people while others preferred the spaciousness of the dance floor and the more diffuse organisation of bodies occurring later in the night. Bøhling (2014) draws attention to how, through these distinctions, 'two distinct but intertwined affective dynamics [are] crystallized' (p379). The first was primarily alcohol-driven and revolved around social interactions: dancing, talking, cheering and clapping, while the second was drug-driven and involved less obvious signs of sociality and a greater focus on the movement of ones' own dancing body. These affective dynamics were also temporally staggered, with the drug-driven dynamic emerging later in the course of the night, though the two phases should still be understood as porous and overlapping. The utility of this kind of analysis is outlined by Dilkes-Frayne (2014) as enabling a shift in focus from *who* is acting to *what* is occurring. This, in turn, widens the scope of harm reduction from attempting to constrain action or remove actors to considering how opportunities for acting in non-harmful ways could be mediated by drugs, spaces and objects.

This socio-material body of work seems to be a fruitful evolution of qualitative drugs research. It acknowledges the multitude of elements, such as the spaces and objects of drug use, which coalesce to produce drug use experiences, and how these spatial-material contexts might shape (though not determine) the pleasures and/or harms of use. The wider purpose of this approach is nicely summed up by Bøhling (2014, p379) as 'stress[ing] the need to subtly map these differences' in socio-material relations in order to avoid attributing to certain elements – such as the drug itself, the crowds of bodies or dance music – 'specific (context independent) capacities'. In other words, portraying a particular drug as solely responsible for a particular kind of experience. Socio-material studies recognise the importance of the specific way in which people and objects are entangled with one another and thus avoids reducing drug use to simplistic categories of risk, peer pressure or benefit. However, in narrowing focus to the 'event' (Dilkes-Frayne, 2014) or 'local context'

(Duff, 2011) of drug use, this body of work could be seen to neglect how individual histories, desires and the character of personal relationships shape the possible socio-material relations enacted, and their value. Thinking about individual biography as an example, how adolescent shyness might contribute to the meaningfulness of the free-flowing communicative capacities experienced on drugs (see participant 'Kate', Hinchliff, 2001, p461) or how a traditional upbringing might enhance the pleasures of ecstasy (see Duff, 2008, p388). In fact, it could be argued such biographical emphasis is in keeping with the very specific focus of mapping socio-material relations, but provides a way to consider all relevant factors to any drug experience, including temporally and spatially distant memories and feelings. This line of argument will be picked up again in the next chapter, when considering how the theoretical approach of this thesis would conceptualise drug experiences.

Common to the socio-material framework outlined above, and the broader cultural studies approach within which it arguably sits, is a sense that drug use is not just pathological, but is embedded meaningfully within people's lives, forming part of their social networks and activities; rather than being an isolated, risky activity separate from the rest of life, as depicted by the epidemiological approach. Epidemiological approaches to drug studies have been accused of 'pleasure erasure' (Moore, 2008; Duff, 2008): stripping research of drug use from the pleasures which often motivate their consumption. This emphasis could risk producing a distorted picture of drug use, which exaggerates the risks involved and arguably makes it harder to target effective harm reduction interventions (Duff, 2008; Foster & Spencer, 2013). For example, Foster and Spencer (2013) make the case that upholding normative understandings of drug use as purely dangerous invites resistance from young people who see drug use differently: as dichotomised into responsible 'just social' (p229) and irresponsible use. Taking a risk-only orientated approach to the study of MDMA thus could be argued to have the potential to derail the goal of harm reduction and prevention initiatives. Instead of a didactic portrayal of clubbing and raves as spaces of 'excess risk' (Moore & Valverde, 2000, p528), the cultural studies discourse attempts to tap into the motivations and spaces of drug use and the voices of drug users themselves.

It is noticeable that the representations of many studies within the cultural studies approach (excluding the socio-material body of work) emphasise the social identities – understood here as the group memberships which define an individual – intertwined with MDMA use and, indeed, often only those within the dance culture setting. Experiences of MDMA in Northcote's (2006) study were discussed in relation to participants' identity as young people and how clubbing could be viewed as a transitional, liminal space between childhood and adulthood. In a similar vein, Brookman (2001) considers how MDMA consumption can facilitate an individual to claim an identity within the neo-tribe of 'raver', which is focussed on shared musical appreciation, pleasure and (often) specific consumer goods. Yet, MDMA use takes place in a variety of contexts (see Olsen, 2009) and operates beyond the level of social identity. MDMA is also well-known for its impact on personal relationships, dubbed the 'love drug' (Saunders, 1997), yet this aspect has received comparatively little attention. Indeed, MDMA users discuss the drug's entactogenic qualities, experiences of emotional communion, oneness, relatedness, emotional openness, as a crucial part of the desire to take it (Farrugia, 2015; Hinchliff, 2001; Vollenweider, Gamma, Liechti, & Huber, 1998). The repercussions these effects might have on a 'significant emotional relationship' (Greer & Tolbert, 1986, p326) were highlighted at the beginning of this chapter and will now be explored in more depth.

## 2.1 Social effects of MDMA use

MDMA is documented as producing a wide variety of psychological and physiological effects, most commonly characterised by enhanced mood, sociability, openness, energy and empathy towards others (Bogt et al., 2002). As can be seen, many of these effects are prosocial in nature. Sociable behaviours, such as increased confidence and friendliness, have been reported by both recreational users (Bogt & Engels, 2005; Sumnall, Cole & Jerome, 2006) and under controlled, experimental conditions (Vollenweider, Liechti, Gamma, Greer & Geyer, 2002; Kirkpatrick et al., 2014). Indeed, MDMA was ranked the most sociable drug in an international survey of drug users, with 'feeling closer to people/empathy' the most frequently

highlighted aspect of increase in sociability (Morgan, Noronha, Muetzelfeldt, Feilding & Curran, 2013). Another study found up to 90% of people said that MDMA made them feel closer to others (Peroutka, Newman & Harris, 1988) and users cite prosocial effects as a motivation for use (Bravo, 2001; Sumnall et al., 2006).

Since therapeutic, clinical research into MDMA has been revived (see Mithoefer et al., 2011; Sessa, 2011), experimental efforts to determine the 'psychological mechanisms' (Roberts & May, 2014, p1503) underlying MDMA's affiliative effects have picked up speed (e.g. Baggott et al., 2016; Frye, Wardle, Norman & de Wit, 2014; Hysek et al., 2013; Wardle & de Wit, 2014; Wardle, Kirkpatrick & de Wit, 2014; Schmid et al., 2014). Improvements in interpersonal relationships have also been spoken of in relation to the drug in both anecdotal reports (Adamson, 1985; Beck & Rosenbaum, 1994; Greer & Tolbert, 1986; Holland, 2001) and qualitative studies (Farrugia, 2015; Hilden, 2009; Hinchliff, 2001; Solowij, Hall & Lee, 1992). Thinking about romantic relationships in particular, the data is limited and the resulting picture mixed but it includes findings that MDMA's influence is potentially lasting and beneficial (Rodgers et al., 2006), with over a quarter reporting improved relationships; detrimental (Topp, Hando, Dillon, Roche & Solowij, 1999), 40% of their 329 ecstasy users described ecstasy-related relationship problems in a 6 month period; and ambiguous (Vervaeke & Korf, 2006), depending on whether ecstasy-using partners were still together or not.

There are several conceptualisations of the drug's social effects at work in the literature: firstly, MDMA is irrelevant or damaging to social relationships (Topp et al., 1999), secondly MDMA has acute prosocial effects (Frye, Wardle, Norman & de Wit, 2014; Baggott at al., 2016) (positioned as valuable within the psychotherapeutic context) and finally, the drug has the potential to fortify interpersonal bonds (Beck & Rosenbaum, 1994; Farrugia, 2015). In fact, the presumption of relational harm is sometimes built into studies, which set out to measure drug-related problems including intimate partner violence (Topp et al., 1999). However, more common, is the total omission of relationships from studies of MDMA use, even those examining long-term consequences (see Parrott, 2001). And, when the impact of the drugs use on relationships is included, analysis does not venture beyond considering whether normal relationship 'functioning' can be

maintained (Vervaeke & Korf, 2006) or go beyond making a broad acknowledgement, and barely elaborated, account of individual improvements in 'interpersonal functioning' (Soar, Parrott & Turner, 2009).

The second notion, that MDMA has acute prosocial effects, which are valuable within the psychotherapeutic context, is played out in recent, experimental studies. A range of potential mechanisms underlying MDMA's sociality are identified, including: increased emotional empathy (Hysek et al., 2013; Schmid et al., 2014), an increase in perceived reward regarding sociable behaviour (Wardle, Kirkpatrick & de Wit, 2014), positively altered evaluation of the self (Baggott et al., 2016) and reduced social inhibitions, social anxiety and impact of social rejection (Frye, Wardle, Norman & de Wit, 2014; Baggott at al., 2016; Danforth, Struble, Yazar-Klosinski & Grob, 2016). Within these experimental studies, MDMA's social mechanisms are repeatedly contextualised by their therapeutic benefit. For example, participants taking MDMA had a lower perceived intensity of social rejection and this was hypothesised to account for greater openness when speaking about issues during psychotherapy; the reduced sense of social rejection had a less negative impact on mood and self-esteem following difficult sessions (Frye, Wardle, Norman & de Wit, 2014). Likewise, the increased comfort participants felt disclosing emotional memories was hypothesised as a boon to the therapeutic relationship, which can involve a lot of autobiographical discussion (Baggott et al., 2016). These studies take a different tone from many epidemiological accounts of drug use – considering the possibility of beneficial effects and what this might mean within the therapeutic context – and thus begin to fragment the epidemiology/cultural studies dichotomy which has been viewed as characterising the field (Hunt, Evans & Moloney, 2009). Nonetheless, it could be argued these experimental studies still do not significantly step outside of this pathological mode of thinking as it still medicalises the use of MDMA just instead of pathologising MDMA in itself, it is now framed as a way to *treat* medical problems – but ultimately this still results in the same 'erasure' of pleasure from the discourse around drugs (Moore, 2008).

Importantly, these studies rarely consider how the acute social effects of MDMA use might intertwine with romantic and friend relationships in people's lives; the social impact of MDMA in its common, recreational setting. Some studies

acknowledge the 'attractiveness' of the discovered social effects to its recreational users but do not elaborate on it (Wardle, Kirkpatrick & de Wit, 2014). A limitation of many studies is noted by several researchers to be their artificial laboratory setting (Frye, Wardle, Norman & De Wit, 2014; Wardle & de Wit, 2014; Schmid et al. 2014). Despite this acknowledgement, this research has not yet sufficiently specified crucial features of what would make a more naturalistic social setting and how this would be created. For example, Wardle and de Wit (2014) draw attention to a previous study which found some of the subjective and behavioural effects of alcohol to vary depending on whether the participant was tested alone or with others. Specifically, participants reported feeling more intoxicated and stimulated when they were tested with another person (Kirkpatrick & de Wit, 2013). This opens up questions about the isolated nature of experimental MDMA studies and whether this might affect subjective and behavioural effects of the drug. Furthermore, the social stimuli used in these studies tends to be digital or pencil-and-paper, such as asking participants to rate their emotional reactions in response to a series of photographs (Schmid et al., 2014) rather than involving face-to-face interactions (c.f Wardle & de Wit, 2014); again this could be a crucial determinant of experimental outcomes. Taking this line of questioning a step further, another crucial consideration might be the differential impact of *known* social stimuli. The vast majority of people who take MDMA do so with their friends and/or partners and it would therefore seem crucial, if we are considering social effects of the drug, to investigate not only how we interact differently with strangers or simulated social scenarios, but also how prior relationships intertwine with MDMA experiences.

The final way research has conceptualised MDMA use is an enhancement to more long-term social bonds. This research is qualitative in nature, spanning psychology, sociology and cultural studies, and questions the lack of attention paid to how use of the drug is integrated into people's lives. Beck and Rosenbaum (1994) were the first scholars to discuss MDMA and interpersonal relationships in detail, highlighting the enhanced connection and communication users reported. Participants whose initial draw to MDMA was to 'get high', spoke about continuing use for other reasons like the drug's bonding effects, which were perceived as therapeutic in nature. Others described their use of MDMA as 'therapeutically'

motivated and valued the drug facilitating emotionally intimate conversations, which helped stop them from being as 'closed' as they usually were (Hilden, 2009, p149) and created 'enduring ties' (p157) between them and their friends. These bonding effects were repeatedly spoken about as permeating beyond the time and place of ecstasy use; leading to changes in well-being and social behaviour (Hunt, Evan & Kares, 2007; Hinchliff, 2001), and solidifying friendships (Bahora, Sterk & Elifson, 2009). For example, a young woman in Bahora, Sterk & Elifson's (2009) study spoke about her ecstasy-using friends as family, emphasising the emotional power of ecstasy and how these shared experiences added to connections long-term.

Farrugia's (2015) work suggests that gender might also play a role in the value of social experiences on MDMA. Young, male users of MDMA enjoyed being able to express their feelings more freely in intimate conversations and be more physically affectionate on the drug, which deepened existing friendships. They presented such ways of being as unattainable in their day-to-day lives. Farrugia argues that approaches focussed on 'risky young masculinity' (p250) obscure how men are playing with the affective possibilities of social life on MDMA and how this might transform their affective capacity more broadly. The practices they highlight – touching, talking, and emotional intimacy – are normatively feminine and they might feel constrained from engaging with them in everyday life.

For the participants in Lynch and Badger's (2006) study, the welcoming ambience of the clubbing community was key, examining the putative religious significance of dance music events where there was widespread use of MDMA. Participants highlighted the value of friendships formed within this environment, although the authors point to how attendance was usually with a pre-existing group of friends who then mediated the formation of new friendships. Clubbers did acknowledge the superficiality of some of these new connections but emphasised how going clubbing and taking drugs with good friends could deepen the trust and intimacy in those relationships, particularly when the effects of ecstasy had worn off and they still felt close to each other.

The findings of these studies provide an insight into how feelings of intimacy and closeness might become entangled with MDMA use; with drug use part of the crucial social connections which shape our lives. The integrative approach of these

researchers stands apart from studies which do little to elaborate on the role of sociality in the reasons people take MDMA or decontextualise the prosocial effects of the drug from the friendships they are experienced within by the vast majority of recreational users. However, research examining how these social effects might intertwine with a *couple* relationship is scarce (see Vervaeke & Korf, 2006). Romantic relationships are central to people's lives to the same, or arguably even to a greater, degree than friendships (Perel, 2007). These relationships have been argued to replace the family as the key site of intimacy (Jamieson, 1998) and form the bedrock of how home life is organised (Beaumont, 2011). Furthermore, an investigation into how intimacy is experienced by couples on MDMA could be seen to answer Gabb and Fink's (2014) call to more fully research factors which sustain rather than endanger relationships; they argue that research is largely concentrated on articulating 'stressors' for and the consequences of relationship dissolution (Walker, Barrett, Wilson & Chang, 2010), despite the value and prevalance of these relationship in people's lives (Korobov & Thorne, 2006; Office for National Statistics, 2014). For both of these reasons – the lack of MDMA research looking at couples and the need to examine research contexts which might support couple relationships – this thesis aims to seek out how the entactogenic and sociable properties of MDMA are experienced by couples and how the impact of these might become embedded in their relationship.

## 3.1 Intimacy

To conceptualise how MDMA might entwine with a couple relationship, the concept of intimacy will be used. In particular, the framework of intimate relating practices will be drawn on (Gabb & Fink. 2015; Gabb, 2011; Jamieson, 1998; 2005; 2012), argued as more sensitive than the disclosing model of intimacy to the socio-cultural relations which shape contemporary Euro-North American societies and the diversity of ways people experience closeness. However, this approach will be argued to benefit from a focus on non-ordinary contexts for intimacy and the conceptual tools

of modern drugs research, such as the focus on the spatial-material 'local context[s]' (Duff, 2011) of experiences.

### 3.1.1 Defining intimacy

Intimacy invokes the idea of being close to someone and sharing a special affinity with them. This often manifests itself as living connected lives (Smart, 2007) and some level of physical closeness, though not necessarily of a sexual nature (Jamieson, 2012). In the past several decades, the language of intimacy has become prevalent in the social sciences, which previously spoke of 'primary' relationships (Jamieson, 2012). This has been argued to represent a shift from emphasising the *status* of a relationship to highlighting relationship *quality* (Majumdar, 2011). There are many different understandings of what intimacy means and a great deal of overlap with other ideas of closeness and love. Intimacy can refer to romantic or sexual relationships, it is not exclusive to this context and is also used in association with friends or family members. However, this thesis narrows its focus to couple intimacy in particular.

Romantic relationships have been argued to be the most central relationships in our lives, apart from our children (Perel, 2007) and have been continually found to act as a buffer against stressful life experiences such as the birth of a child (Collins, Dunkel-Schetter, Lobel & Scrimshaw, 1993), a child's illness (Hobfoll & Lerman, 1988) and personal illness (Coyne & Smith, 1991; Kornblith et al., 2001). Indeed, relationship breakdown can have a lasting impact on life satisfaction (Lucas, 2005), and relationship problems are associated with and thought to lead to decreased life satisfaction (Gustavson, Røysamb, von Soest, Helland & Mathiesen, 2012). Despite the popularity of the term intimacy within academic research, there is little to suggest that this has trickled down into everyday language – anecdotally, being close or in love are much more commonly heard. In addition, scholars often treat the two terms as synonymous, for example, 'the quality of 'closeness' that is indicated by intimacy' Jamieson (2012, p1). For these reasons, intimacy and closeness will be

used through this thesis to better encompass the language of both the non-academic and academic spheres.

### 3.1.2 A disclosing model of intimacy

One of the key debates in the intimacy literature is around the extent to which the disclosing model of intimacy has come to dominate our relationships. It will be argued here that while disclosure seems to be an important strand for how we understand intimacy, it cannot encompass the totality of how intimacy is lived (Jamieson, 1998). Several researchers have argued that contemporary socio-economic conditions have facilitated a fundamental shift in how we feel intimate with others, so that increasingly the onus is on self-expression and self-reflection (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Bauman, 2003; Giddens, 1992; Sennett, 1998). One of the most notable advocates of such a reading is Giddens (1992). In his *Transformation of Intimacy,* he argues that people now seek the 'pure relationship' where mutual trust is built through disclosure, in particular disclosing 'what is kept from other people' (Giddens, 1992, p138-9). This pure relationship is created and sustained only so long as it is beneficial for both partners – rather than maintained due to external laws or social expectations – and are liable to be dissolved if this mutually beneficial exchange ceases. As a result, Giddens (1992) argues that modern relationships experience greater fragility but are also more democratic, equal and fulfilling. Jamieson (2005), a critic of Giddens, has termed the pure relationship as involving 'disclosing intimacy' (p1) for its emphasis on partners revealing personal information to one another. Indeed, disclosure does seem to be an important constituent of intimacy for many: 64% of divorced respondents mentioned wanting 'someone to talk things over with' as the most important factor in deciding to get divorced (Kitson & Holmes, 1992). Self-disclosure in relationships has also been linked with increased relationship satisfaction, love and commitment (Sprecher & Hendrick, 2004), as well as opening the door to new relationship models built on continual, honest communication, like polyamory where partners have multiple, loving relationships (Klesse, 2006).

Yet, within the literature, the dominance of this disclosing form of intimacy has been soundly criticised (Brownlie, 2014; Charles, Davies & Harris, 2008; Crow, 2002, Duncan & Smith 2006; Gabb & Fink, 2015; Jamieson 1998, 2005; Irwin, 2005; Smart, 2007; Smart & Shipman, 2004). These scholars generally acknowledge there has been a shift in how relationships are lived but suggest the extent of this change has been exaggerated. Jamieson (2005) argues that disclosing intimacy is 'more of an ideological construct than an everyday lived reality' (p189): there is a distinction in what people feel they should be doing and what they are actually doing. Certainly, people feel as though they should be disclosing in their relationships, 68% of respondents agreed with the statement 'it is important to me to be able to talk about my feelings' in the annual British Social Attitudes Survey (NatCen, 2007). However, also drawing on the same survey data, Brownlie (2014) found that this does not always carry over to how intimacy is experienced – emotional support for many people did not mean 'listening, talking, giving advice, and helping people to put their own lives in perspective (Finch, 1989, p33) but 'being there' for someone physically and practically. Being there for someone could be about (theoretical) reachability, who you could ring in the middle of the night, or about being physically present in someone's life: these shared experiences accumulating a special knowledge of each other (Jamieson, 1998). Couples might also consider this to mean doing things for one another: sorting out finances, helping in the moving process or looking after children (Brownlie, 2014).

The key importance of practical care in intimate relations is highlighted by research (Jamieson, 1998). For example, being made a cup of tea by their partner was a frequently mentioned source of intimacy for mothers (Gabb & Fink, 2015). In addition, inequalities in the amount of practical care performed by men and women illustrate that we are not living completely egalitarian pure relationships (Giddens, 1992). Rather, our relationships still intersect with wider socio-cultural relations such as gender. Indeed, inequalities in household work are one of the top five reasons for couple conflict (Parrott & Parrott, 2013), with married women still spending significantly more time than married men on domestic chores (Fuwa 2004; Fuwa & Cohen, 2007; Knudsen & Wærness, 2008; Lincoln, 2008) despite the split in household labour becoming more egalitarian in recent decades (Bianchi, Milkie,

Sayer & Robinson, 2000). This practical inequality has been shown to erode marital quality for women (Amato, Johnson, Booth & Rogers, 2003; Frisco & Williams, 2003; Pina & Bengston, 1993) and can even lead to separation (Frisco & Williams, 2003; Jamieson, 1998).

In addition, socio-economic conditions have been posited as the reason modern relationships might appear more 'fragile', rather than the fact these relationships are based on mutual disclosure and dissolvable when this exchange becomes unsatisfying (Giddens, 1992). For example, the lack of social support and binding economic ties better explains why some relationships, such as cohabitation, are less stable (Jamieson, 1998). Indeed, couples who were re-marrying prioritised creating a support network for their step-children and other family members (McCarthy, Edwards & Gillies, 2003); illustrating how relationships do not exist as isolated, standalone units but are embedded in a larger web of social ties that include children and other kin (Duncan, Edwards & Reynolds, 2003).

Researchers have also outlined how mundane exchanges function to build intimacy (Duck, 1998; Alberts, Yoshimura, Rabby & Loschiavo, 2005), and not just deeper exchanges of personal thoughts and feelings. Casual talk such as commenting on plans, a radio show or the weather might appear trivial but go towards 'maintaining a sense of shared reality and reinforcing the continuity of interactions that create a relationship' (Alberts et al., 2005, p302). Significantly, within these routine, everyday experiences couples experience intimacy through non-verbal means of communication (NVC) such as gestures, physical distance between people, body language and eye contact (Duck, 1998). The importance of NVC to intimacy is illustrated through the spatial metaphors we use to describe the process of becoming more or less intimate with someone: 'getting closer' and 'growing apart' both conjure up images of physical space being lost or gained. Touch is also an important precursor and signal for intimacy (Thayer, 1986), for example one partner in a long-distance relationship in Holmes' (2004) study laments the loss of physical affection and comfort sought in the form of 'hugs' (p196), rather than personal disclosures.

### 3.1.3 A practices approach: 'Doing' intimacy

Within the preceding discussion, intimacy has been shown to be contingent upon a variety of other elements, such as practical care (Gabb & Fink, 2015), social networks (Duncan et al., 2003), everyday small talk (Alberts et al., 2005), physical touch (Duck, 1998; Holmes, 2004) and 'being there' for each other (Brownlie, 2014). This seems to imply that disclosing intimacy (Giddens, 1992) cannot account for the continued significance of socio-cultural relations such as gender and the diversity of ways in which intimacy is experienced. Although it does mark the beginning of a shift whereby intimate disclosure has taken a more prominent position in the discourse around what we think we *should* be doing in relationships (Brownlie, 2014) and, of course, this will influence people's private lives (Jamieson, 1998). Indeed, disclosure does seem to be of value to partners (Kitson & Holmes, 1992; Klesse, 2006), and linked to greater contentment (Sprecher & Hendrick, 2004), despite its incompleteness as a conceptualisation of intimacy.

In response to the incompleteness of disclosing intimacy, a practices approach has been argued to be more appropriate for the study of intimacy (Gabb & Fink, 2015, Gabb, 2011; Jamieson, 1998, 2005, 2012). Rather than thinking of a monolithic entity which *is* intimacy for all people, at all times and within all contexts, a practices approach entails thinking in terms of *practices* or acts of intimacy, the things people do to 'enable, generate and sustain' a subjective sense of special closeness (Jamieson, 2012, p133). This idea draws from how Morgan (1996, 2011) attempted to sidestep pre-conceived ideas of what 'the family' *meant* within sociology by focussing on what families *do*. Gabb and Fink (2015) argue that a *practices* approach could be helpfully extended to couple relationships; claiming there is a knowledge gap about the diversity of things couples do together, from going on date nights or carrying out acts of practical care, to talking about deeply buried secrets. Thinking about intimacy as a dynamic and diverse collection of practices also makes room for greater precision when it comes to discussing closeness between couples: we can identify which contexts support which practices and how these practices interact with one another (Jamieson, 2012).

This conceptual framework of relating practices (Gabb, 2011) has been used in Gabb and Fink's (2015) couples study and underpins how intimacy is understood in this thesis. While much of the literature advancing the disclosing model of intimacy have been criticised for a lack of empirical support (Brownlie, 2014), it is difficult to make the same claim against Gabb and Fink's (2015) study which is well-grounded in data and is notably broad in scope – involving 50 participants (qualitative) and 4494 participants (quantitative). An array of intimate practices are identified and grouped by the researchers into the following categories: relationship work, communication, sex and intimacy and unsettling coupledom; of which the first two will be examined here in further detail.

**Relationship work**

Relationship work practices comprise the things couples do to build and sustain their relationships. This work is conceptualised by Gabb and Fink according to the history of nineteenth century ideas of labour and capital and feminist theories of domestic labour and emotion work while also 'keeping a keen eye on the intensity of emotions' (Gabb & Fink, 2015, p18). For example, the work of household chores, childcare and providing emotional support – emotion work (Erickson, 1993) – are viewed as a 'gift' when performed by men, since this is outside their normative gender roles, but not when women engage in such tasks. However, it is important to stress that relationship work practices, like a thoughtful gesture, a cooked breakfast or offering support in times of hardship, did not *feel* like work to couples, but were rather viewed as part of creating and maintaining a long-term relationship (Gabb & Fink, 2015).

**Communication**

Gabb and Fink (2015) bring a diverse array of practices under the rubric of communication, including what the authors describe as a 'deep knowing, beyond words' and the practice of talking and listening, which most closely resembles Giddens (1992) concept of disclosing intimacy. This embodies how couples can draw on their knowledge of each other to appreciate what might be considered unusual or inappropriate ways of relating, for example, explaining why a partner sometimes

withdraws. Sharing jokes, being playful and acting silly were also important to partners, with women rating 'laughing together' as what they liked most about their relationship (Gabb & Fink, 2015). Communication is proposed as a key part of some couples' intimacy and, correspondingly, non-disclosure was also raised as a barrier to intimacy. However, communication was delimited by two factors: gender and life stage (see also Brownlie, 2014). Partners in later stages of their relationship placed less emphasis on confession of feelings and more on 'appreciating the way dialogue, in its distinct *knowing* form, keeps the relationship alive and vibrant' (Gabb & Fink, 2015, p40) and, indeed, self-disclosure was less associated with relationship quality (Sprecher & Hendrick, 2004). Thus, for older couples, emphasis was placed on shared understandings and knowing of their partner, rather than the continual, mutual disclosure of personal thoughts and feelings, as most closely fits with the idea of disclosing intimacy (Giddens, 1992). Gabb and Fink (2015) also found that male partners were less likely to disclose, however they make the case that this should not be read as 'poor' communication (p42), but rather a different way of investing in the couple relationship e.g. by not wanting to further burden their partner.

Therefore, it is argued a practices approach is more sensitive to how socio-cultural forces shape intimacy – for example through its appreciation of how age and gender influence tendencies towards disclosure. In addition the wide scope of practices considered – thoughtful gestures, emotional support, cooking dinner, joking, talking, deep knowing of the other – showcase the limitless variety of how intimacy is lived. Yet, it is suggested, the approach could benefit from two further additions. Firstly, a greater consideration of other, non-ordinary contexts of intimacy. Gabb and Fink (2015) firmly frame their research project in the everyday minutiae of couples at home together, yet intimacy also takes place in a variety of (non-ordinary) contexts like holidays, trips out, special occasions and, keeping in mind the purpose of this thesis, drug use. It seems reasonable to think that different contexts will enable different intimate practices. Of particular relevance to this research project is the lack of emphasis in Gabb and Fink's (2015) work on the repertoire of emotional practices, which may feature more prominently on MDMA: a drug uniquely characterised as an 'empathogen' (Bedi, Hyman & de Wit, 2010; Sumnall, 2006) for the experiences of emotional communion, oneness, relatedness

and emotional openness users describe on it (Beck & Rosenbaum, 1994; Farrugia, 2015; Hinchliff, 2001; Vollenweider, Gamma, Liechti, & Huber, 1998). Gabb and Fink (2015) only briefly discuss the 'unburdening of feelings' (p41) in relation to younger relationships and do not emphasise this as an important communicative practice.

Secondly, while Gabb and Fink (2015) attend to the impact economic constraints and socio-cultural conditions have on practices of intimacy, it is suggested they might not pay sufficient heed to 'local context' (Duff, 2011). As described earlier in the chapter, this is a concept from drugs research which emphasises how specific spatial and material arrangements co-constitute experiences of drug use. For example, the small, contained environments of a garage and a bathtub were suggested to co-produce the intimacy of young men's conversations on MDMA (Farrugia, 2015). Gabb and Fink (2015) do discuss the material composition of couples' homes, and how this interweaves with other elements: a small, overcrowded home exacerbated a lack of employment opportunities and financial resources, building familial tension. Yet how the particular material conditions of the space, such as design, lighting, and objects, shape experience and feeling are not attended to. When objects were discussed, such as gifts, their content and capacity to mediate connection in specific ways (Dilkes-Frayne, 2014; Duff, 2007; Keane, 2011) was glossed over, with only the thoughtfulness they represented paid any heed. Yet, despite these additions, the value of Gabb and Fink's (2015) work must still be stressed: it offers a deep, rich view into the complexity and 'messiness' (Daly, 2003; Gabb, 2009, 2011) of everyday experiences of couple intimacy.

**Shared emotions**

One of the motivations behind MDMA use has been described as increased emotional communion, openness and communication (Farrugia, 2015; Hinchliff, 2001; Vollenweider, Gamma, Liechti, & Huber, 1998). While such emotional sharing are discussed to a degree in Gabb and Fink's (2015) work, they are less emphasised and not distinguished as separate practices. Perhaps they are simply less relevant for a study centred on the mundane acts and gestures which sustain intimacy or perhaps Gabb and Fink's (2015) critical stance towards disclosing intimacy makes

them keener to place their emphasis away from the revelation of personal feelings. However, the wider relationship literature is more helpful in this regard, with concepts such as partners being *emotionally attuned* to one another (Jonathan & Knudson-Martin, 2012; Jordan, 1986; Siegel, 2007). Attunement has been described as opening oneself to and understanding another's emotional experience (Greenberg & Goldman, 2008; Jordan, 1986; Schafer, 1959; Siegel, 2007) and is a reciprocal process (Curan, Hazen, Jacobvitz, & Sasaki, 2006; Porges, 2009). In fact, this process has been suggested to form the basis for love between partners (Scheff, 2011) and has been linked to greater relationship contentment (Connolly & Sicola, 2005; Curran, Hazen, Jacobvitz & Sasaki, 2006; Gottman, 2011). Of course, how couples conduct their relationship and what they value is shaped by cultural context (Duncombe & Marsden, 1995; Jackson & Scott, 2004). Alain de Botton (2015) has argued that the philosophy of romanticism has views relationships rooted in 'wondrous reciprocal feeling' (p49), an idea which will be explored later in the chapter.

The focus here has been on relationships at the local, micro level – the everyday interactions, gestures and practices couples engage in that build and sustain intimacy. However, these practices intersect with and are performed within a broader socio-cultural context. An understanding of Euro-North American culturally idealised intimacy scripts will thus be able to further ground and clarify the nature of intimate experiences for the purpose of this thesis.


**4.1 The Euro-North American context for intimacy**


There is a danger when considering any concept that those thoughts will be presented as a-historical and a-cultural: as simply *the way things are,* rather than the way things are in a particular socio-cultural context (Burr, 1995). Yet a recognition of socio-cultural influence co-exists with the idea that culture does not *determine* a person's experience of love and closeness: society may provide norms of action and thought but the extent to which these are adhered to depends on the person in question (Watts, 2001). Indeed, the degree of 'seriousness' with which scripts are

enacted is key: although we subconsciously internalise norms, we can also choose to draw on cultural scripts and use them to justify and excuse our actions (Gordon, 1990). Keeping this in mind, this section will first interrogate how culture can be defined in the contemporary period of increasing globalisation. Subsequently, the intimacy 'rules' (Barker, 2012) of the socio-cultural context within which this research is performed will be clarified before considering how gender feeds into the ways couple intimacy is performed. Finally, the ways in which sexual practices and perceptions might be shaped by intimacy ideals, including gendered expectations, will be explored. It is hoped this will provide a window into the socio-cultural scripts couples are aware of, employ and resist as they navigate intimacy together.

### 4.1.1 Defining cultural context

Culture has been described as the shared customs, beliefs, practices and discourse between people living in a similar place, at a similar time (Kenrick, Neuberg & Cialdini, 2010). However, geographical similarity does not guarantee cultural similarity, this is complicated by multiple distinctions such as ethnicity, religion and class and the increasingly global transmission of information and movement of people, indeed 11.4% of the British population were born abroad (Rienzo & Vargas-Silva, 2011). One of the ways research has approached culture is through the lenses of the collectivist 'East' and the individualist 'West', which has been argued as setting up an unhelpful dichotomy between the two concepts (Schwartz, 1990). Within this framework, the West is thought to promote the self and the needs of the individual above those of the collective, and Eastern countries purportedly prioritising being part of a group and deferring to the needs of the collective (Earley, 1993; Hui & Triandis, 1986; Mattila & Patterson, 2004; Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk & Gelfand, 1995). Societies that fall under an 'individualist' classification are mainly found in North America and Europe whereas 'collectivist' countries are located in Asia, South America and parts of Africa (Gire & Carment, 1993).

In an increasingly globalised world where new technologies allow unprecedented levels of communication and connection, stable, independent

'zones' of culture, such as East and West seem less relevant (Hermans & Kempen, 1998). All forms of media are 'machineries of meaning' (Hannerz, 1992, p147), allowing for both the creation of new systems of meaning and the widespread dissemination of ideas and values. If culture is taken as local and homogenised, these layers of complexity are missed (Hermans & Kempen, 1998). Furthermore, to set up such an opposition between individualism and collectivism has been described as 'culturally monochrome' (Smart & Shipman, 2004, p5): neglecting the differences in the ways intimacy is managed and experienced across society. In accounts from people of transnational families (who had lived in the UK for five years or more but had close kin in other countries) there was not a straightforward resistance to individualism or an embracing of collectivism, or vice versa; rather, there was a blending of individualist and collectivist elements. For example, the co-existence of a desire for personal choice alongside the valuing of tradition and strong familial ties was expressed by several participants – one participant wants a love marriage but one that is arranged and approved of by her parents and another participant emphasises the importance of being part of a wider Hindu culture but is also determined to marry his girlfriend who, while Indian, is from a different religion. These accounts illustrate that neither autonomy nor being embedded within wider social networks can solely characterise people's experiences and that such a one-dimensional approach fails to capture the differences in how people from the same cultural background manage commitments to tradition, family and freedom of choice.

However, distinctions between eastern and western values might still be seen to have descriptive merit on a broad level – providing generalisations about the things people value and the way people live their lives – as well as underscoring the idea that all research is informed by locally variable social and cultural conditions. It is therefore worth emphasising the discussion of intimacy within this thesis is situated within 'Euro-North American' (c.f Jamieson, 2012) ideals, used over 'western' due to its greater specificity, and cannot yield universal interpretations of what it means to be intimately connected to another person.

### 4.1.2 The 'rules' of intimacy

'Online ads invite us to click for the top ten ways to find our perfect match…Reality TV shows advise on how to fix our relationships. Pop songs tell us how to feel when falling in and out of love…All day long we are bombarded by rules about relationships: who to be in order to get and keep one, what to expect from one, and how to know it isn't working anymore.'

(Barker, 2012, p1)

Indeed, the multitude of cultural scripts or 'rules' (Barker, 2012) about love and relationships in Euro-North American society appear invisible the majority of time as they are 'just real life' (Swidler, 2001, p.19). Social rules are defined by Barker (2012) as ways of doing things many take for granted and are trying to follow. Examples of commonly held social rules include the belief that a woman should wait a certain number of dates before having sex if she wants a man to commit to a relationship or the idea that when you are in a relationship, it is morally wrong to have sex with anyone other than your partner. Underpinning these norms is the assumption there is a *right* way to go about conducting relationships, which can be destructive for those who consciously keep outside of the rules, such as queer or non-monogamous couples, or those who are inside the rule system yet struggling to stay within its bounds (Barker, 2012). This section will explore two such cultural scripts: rules around work in relationships and rules around relying on instinctive feeling within relationships, which will both provide valuable context when considering the intimate landscape couples (unconsciously) traverse in their everyday lives and MDMA experiences.

**Working on a relationship**

The idea of working at a relationship has become ubiquitous in modern life, evident in self-help literature (e.g. Chapman, 2014; McKay, Fanning & Paleg, 2006; see Barker, Gill & Harvey, 2015 for a critique), professional relationship and family support (Chang & Barrett, 2009), academic research (Halford, Lizzio, Wilson & Occhipinti, 2007) and even on reality TV shows which show what Eldén (2011) calls a

'popular therapy' approach (e.g. *Married at First Sight, Seven Year Switch*). As, Eldén (2011) argues, this popular therapy approach is portrayed as necessary for: 'the good couple' which: 'consists of two equal partners, constantly communicating about their selves and their relationship, always there for each other, and respecting each other's individuality' (p150). In order to achieve this delicate balance of communication, 'thereness' and respect for individual selves, the idea of working at the relationship has become pervasive. Within this 'working together' discourse, the expert is supposed to provide the route map for how to achieve this status of being a 'good couple', however Eldén (2011) still emphasises it is up to the couple themselves to effect this change.

**Emotional Intuition**

Yet, the relationships as work discourse is counterbalanced with another predominant cultural ideal, which de Botton (2016) describes as the philosophy of romanticism. This views relationships as built on feeling: 'when two people belong together, there is simply – at long last – a wondrous reciprocal *feeling* that both parties see the world in precisely the same way' (p49, own emphasis). As part of this discourse, being lead by intuition is presented as key in the enterprise of love: when people belong together they simply *know*. This seems comparable to Shotter's (1993) knowing of the third kind: a knowledge we *feel* rather than discursively articulate, what might be more commonly referred to as a gut feeling or instinct.

These two cultural scripts, relationships as based on work and relationships as based on intuitive agreement between people, seem to be in conflict. However, cultural rules are not necessarily followed, or only partially; creating a split between what couples perceive they *should* be doing, and experiential accounts, the messy reality of what they *actually* do (Gabb & Fink, 2015). This split between cultural ideal and lived reality was discussed earlier in relation to disclosing intimacy (Jamieson, 2005). Now, using the language of scripts or rules (Barker, 2012), the issue with disclosing intimacy becomes clearer. It is not that disclosing intimacy (Giddens, 1992) is not an important cultural thread, but rather that it takes one script, 'intimacy as self-disclosure' and amplifies it to obscure the whole range of intimate relating practices. Neglecting that people enact scripts to different degrees (Watts, 2001)

and that these scripts often exist in tension with one another, contributing to the messiness and complexity of lived relationships.


### 4.1.3 Gender and intimacy

Relationships are intensely private and personal, taking place between people who feel strongly for one another, yet they also play out against a much more public stage – that of pre-existing rules, but also of pre-existing notions of gender (Dryden, 1998; Gabb & Fink, 2015). It has been argued a 'token effort' to think about and include gender as part of discussions of relationships is insufficient (Dryden, 1998), since intimacy is always and inevitably gendered in heterosexual relationships, which are the focus of the present project. Hence, gender must be threaded through any deliberation of what intimacy and love look like, and indeed has already been part of earlier discussions in this chapter concerning the importance of practical care for intimacy (Jamieson, 1998), and the inequality in how it is often performed (Fuwa & Cohen, 2007), as well as the differing emphasis placed on disclosure by men and women (Brownlie, 2014; Gabb & Fink, 2015). Within this work, gender is conceptualised as a helpful orientation to how men and women relate, rather than a deterministic category which 'fixes' how men and women behave. Due to MDMA being known as an empathogen (Bedi, Hyman & de Wit, 2010; Sumnall, 2006), this section is focussed on how gender relations relate to emotion in particular.

Women tend to be more involved in the 'emotional dimension' of life than men (Dryden 1999). This manifests firstly in women taking on more responsibility for maintaining relationships than their male partners (Jonathan & Knudson-Martin 2012). Feminist scholars have argued the work necessary to sustain a relationship requires more than the physicality of household chores and childcare but the provision of emotional care to family members (Dryden, 1998). This might involve the management and enhancement of others' emotional well-being as well as providing reassurance or listening to problems and this predominantly falls to women (Duncombe & Marsden, 1993; Erickson, 1993; 2005). Several researchers have argued for the inclusion of emotional care within domestic labour and,

correspondingly, came up the term 'emotion work' to describe this (Erickson, 1993; 2005; Hochschild, 1975; Strazdins & Broom, 2004). Such a redefinition seeks to make visible all aspects of gendered labour and disputes the idea of emotional support being intuitive and as always being a spontaneous expression of love. Rather, such a concept downplays the time and effort involved in such practices and the way emotion work impacts on personal well-being (Hochschild, 1983) and perceptions of relationship quality (Erickson, 1993).

Moreover, greater emotion work from a male partner is linked to relationship satisfaction (Erickson 1993; Duncombe & Marsden 1993) and the lack of emotional intimacy from a male partner as one of the key reasons women give for separation (Jamieson 1998). Men's incapacity or inability to engage in emotion work and women's primary role in managing emotion within the private sphere ties in with another well-documented phenomena: the tendency of men to discuss and express their emotions less than women (Strazdins & Broom, 2004). It should be noted that the emotional distinction between men and women takes place on the *expressive* rather than *experiential* level. There is no difference in in the frequency of self-reported emotional experiences between men and women (Simon & Nath, 2004) but the social sanctions that exist around violating emotion rules are much higher for men (Brookes & Good, 2001). This leaves us with a seeming mismatch between how men and women deal with their own emotions and the emotions of others, which, moreover, seems to impinge upon their experience of romantic fulfillment in a heterosexual relationship. This mismatch also collides with research on the personal benefits of being emotionally open and expressive (Pennebaker, 1995), including the ability to more fully connect with others (Brown, 2012; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Laurenceau & Kleinman, 2006), which has its own positive repercussions on well-being (Siedlecki et al., 2014) and health (Umberson & Karas Montez, 2010).


**4.1.4 Sex and intimacy**

Images of sex abound in popular culture, from advertisements to films, and pornography is more freely available than ever (Barker, 2011). Sex is considered as

part of a 'complete' life and to admit to not having an active sex life has become a taboo (Cline, 1993). Across sexual advice columns, self-help books and lifestyle websites, sex is presented as a crucial pivot point for any relationship and a builder of intimacy (Barker, 2011). It appears that intimacy is becoming sexualized, and that this is a relatively recent phenomena, only having really started to take root in the 20th century, as Seidman (1991) notes that sexual attraction is now interpreted as a symbol of love and that having sex with someone as a way of cementing a relationship.

Shows like Sex and the City and sex shops such as Ann Summers set limits for the kind of sex 'hot, adventurous people should be having' (Barker, 2011, p.2): for the average couple the incorporation of some kinky practices into their intimate life is encouraged (Scarlet magazine, 2005) but the paraphenalia of what is seen as more 'hardcore' BDSM is demonised (Storr, 2003). Sex itself is often taken to mean heterosexual, penetrative sex (Rothblum, 1994) but such a constrictive definition is insensitive to many people's lived, sexual experiences. The first time a woman 'go[es] all the way' with a man (Loulan, Rothblum & Brehony, 1993) holds a powerful place in women's accounts of sexual experience. Accounts of the first time are remembered by individuals and and rendered for the consumption of others, irrespective of the pleasure involved, and disregarding other, often more pleasurable experiences, that did not involve penetration (Rothblum, 1994).

Social norms around medically 'healthy' sexual functioning are easy to fall foul of according to the 2000 UK National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles: 35% of men and 54% of women reported some kind of sexual 'dysfunction' (Macdowall et al., 2006). This poses questions for the pre-occupation with 'correct' and 'healthy' sex, when sexual experience no longer seems to fit into the traditional abnormal/normal dichotomy set up by disorder definitions due to its expansion in areas like light BDSM (Barker, 2011). Elliott and Umberson (2008) notes that the frequency of sex was a potential source of conflict. A lack of sex is construed as a threat to both relationship satisfaction and longevity (Michael, Gagnon, Laumann & Kolata, 1994; Rubin, 1990), with an expectation that partners will work at maintaining passion in their relationship (Elliott & Umberson, 2008). The required emotion work in producing passion, according to Elliott and Umberson (2008), tends

to disproportionately fall to women since their male partners desired more sex. In particular, women described the authenticity and spontaneity required of their passion as draining and could build resentment (Elliott & Umberson, 2008). Gender is also still a factor for how loss of virginity is experienced, although its significance is diminishing, especially amongst younger cohorts (Carpenter, 2002).

Therefore, while sexual experience often falls outside of the boundaries of what is considered 'functional' (Macdowall et al., 2006) and gender differences in the frequency of sex desired are a source of friction within relationships, sex remains, for many, the 'barometer to a good marriage' (Ellliott & Umberson, 2008 p403).


## 5.1 Thinking about practices of intimacy on and off MDMA

This chapter has explored the link between intimacy and MDMA. The drug has entactogenic properties, like increased empathy (Hysek et al. 2013), sociability (Kirkpatrick et al., 2014) and greater feelings of closeness (Peroutka, Newman & Harris, 1988), which seem to at least partially account for the ways ecstasy use has been described as becoming entangled with personal relationships (Greer & Tolbert, 1986). Most of the relevant drugs research is concentrated on the bonds of friendships, with less than a handful of studies examining couple relationships, in particular (Vervaeke & Korf, 2006). Consequently, the purpose of this research project became to explore how couples' meanings and experiences of closeness intertwine with their MDMA experiences. In order to provide a framework for how to think about closeness in this context, the intimacy literature was reviewed. In particular, the disclosing model of intimacy (Giddens, 1992) was critiqued and the practices approach to intimacy suggested as a productive alternative (Gabb, 2011; Gabb & Fink, 2015; Jamieson, 2011, 2012). The practices approach has been argued as better able to incorporate the diversity of elements couple intimacy is contingent upon, such as practices of relationship 'work' like cooking and couple time (Gabb & Fink, 2015), practical care (Jamieson, 1998) and emotional closeness (Jonathan & Knudson-Martin, 2012). It also makes room for the idea that intimacy can be done

differently, in different contexts and MDMA use was proposed as an extension to the project; examining intimacy in a non-everyday context. From a careful examination of the literature, the main and sub-research questions were devised. These will be considered from a theoretical perspective in the next chapter, before turning to how they can be answered practically and methodologically within the research project in Chapter Three. They are as follows:

1. How do couples experience closeness in their everyday lives and ecstasy experiences?
   a. What kind of activities, spaces and emotions are productive of couple intimacy?

2. How do people understand their relationship as influenced by their MDMA use?
   a. Are there aspects of the relationship they feel are enhanced by their ecstasy use?
   b. Are there aspects of the relationship they feel are constrained or harmed by their ecstasy use?

## Chapter 2 – A psychosocial process account of experience

The previous chapter outlined how drug use should be thought of not as a peculiar catalogue of potential harms, as framed by the epidemiological model, but as contextualised by a multitude of other factors e.g. (often pleasurable) bodily experience (Duff, 2008), moving through spaces (Duff, 2008; Bøhling, 2014), closeness with others (Beck & Rosenbaum, 1994; Foster & Spencer, 2013), gender norms (Hinchliff, 2001; Farrugia, 2015) and socio-economic factors (Foster & Spencer, 2013). Hence, this thesis is positioned within a growing body of work which seeks to map the socio-material relations of drug use (e.g. Bøhling, 2014; Dilkes-Frayne, 2014; Duff, 2008; Farrugia, 2015) and recognises that the things people do on drugs are key to the pleasures and meaning of drug use (Duff 2008). Being close to others was highlighted as a core part of drug experiences, particularly MDMA which is known for its empathic and sociable effects (Bogt et al., 2002). Gabb and Fink's (2015) practices approach was used to conceptualise intimacy as the things people did to build a 'special sense of shared closeness' (Jamieson, 2012, p1), rather than something a relationship either had or did not have. These practices ranged from small acts of practical care, like making a cup of tea, and planning special couple time to sharing jokes and grievances about a long work day.

Both the socio-material approach to drug use and the practices approach to intimacy have a focus on everyday actions, as constrained and enabled by socio-cultural forces, which intertwine with the environments we move through to produce lived experience. In this chapter, it will be argued that such an emphasis can be best developed and extended within a psychosocial process account of experience. This account involves an engagement with the work of seminal thinkers such as Alfred N. Whitehead, Henri Bergson and William James, mainly as interpreted by British social psychologists (Brown & Stenner, 2009; Brown & Reavey, 2015; Brown, 2012; Cromby, 2007; Stenner, 2008, 2013). From this perspective, the world is viewed not as made up of things, qua a substance ontology, but 'begins in the middle': viewing relations and processes as ontologically fundamental (Association for Process Thought, 2017). Experience is therefore viewed as a product

of the relationships between a multitude of intersecting processes, like the biological, the social, the psychological and the spatial and all structures and systems are viewed as 'the effect of a coordinated streams of events' (Association for Process Thought, 2017). First, the psychosocial process approach will be examined in greater depth, outlining how it can answer certain questions more productively than two key approaches within psychology – cognitivism and social constructionism. Next, multiple threads which have been inadequately conceived of within these two key approaches will be picked out: embodiment, emotion (with reference to boundaries), space (with reference to memory). These threads will be discussed in dialogue with process psychosocial theory before providing a final thought on the kind of framing of drug experiences a psychosocial process account provides.

## 2.1 Why a psychosocial process account?

In order to understand how a psychosocial process framework can help explain experience, it is first helpful to consider how experience has been traditionally conceptualised. This section will use the discipline of psychology as its starting point, reviewing how it has thought about people and their experiences; broadly categorised under the cognitive tradition and social constructionism. Moreover, this section seeks to draw attention to the gaps in both schools of thought, which lead to a host of reductive binaries, and argue that these issues can be better addressed within a psychosocial process account.

### 2.1.1 The psychological context to people and their experiences: Two very different stories

While there have been many different schools of thought within psychology – biological, behavioural, phenomenological, psychoanalytic to name a few – cognitive and social constructionist psychology will be examined here. This is because cognitive psychology is generally viewed as the dominant paradigm in the field (Gough, McFadden, McDonald, 2013) while social constructionist psychology

represents the most significant point of departure from and, arguably, challenge to this paradigm. Of course, it is not possible to speak for *all* cognitive psychologists or *all* social constructionists, however, it is suggested these two categories or 'camps' (McGhee, 2001) can provide a useful orientation in understanding how psychology has thought about experience.

In the late 1800s Wilhelm Wundt performed experiments to identify common human mental processes. These experiments were predicated on the idea that these characteristics, such as perceptual capabilities, are natural objects, existing independently of experimenters (Danziger, 1990). These ideas would be revived in the cognitive revolution in the 1950s: a driving assumption of which was the fundamental similarity between a computer and the human mind. Developments in computer science paved the way for using computational functionality to map out how we understand mental processes e.g. memory storage and retrieval (Anderson, 2010). This became cognitive psychology, also referred to in this chapter as 'cognitivism' and 'mainstream psychology', which is still argued to dominate the field today (Gough et al., 2013). This focus on cognition within psychology led to the identification of the person with the mind. This has caused scholars to speak of cognitivism as embracing a 'Cartesian subject' (Cromby, 2004, p798): prefigured by Descartes' dualism which similarly identifies the person with the mind and sees a schism between the mental and the physical. While Cartesian dualism couched this in the religious language of the 'soul' compared to materialist, mainstream psychology's talk of the 'mind', the repercussions are similar. Both theories seem to lead to a 'disembodied' subject, divorced from the material bodies with which we experience the world. In addition, the soul or the mind is viewed as the seat of consciousness and associated with our capacity to reason, whereas emotion, or the 'passions' as Descartes referred to them, are associated with the body. This sets up another dualism between reason/emotion, in which reason is supposed to control emotion; securing it a privileged position. This leads Brown and Stenner (2001) to argue that:

> Cartesianism interiorizes or individualizes the emotions, which thereby become merely symptomatic of more or less tolerated "leakages" in the rational

disciplining of our individual lives. (p86-7)

From the perspective of the rational Cartesian subject of mainstream psychology, not only are emotions reduced to mere 'leakages', errors in a supposedly rationally ordered system, there is also a process of 'interioriz[ation]' and 'individualiz[ation]'. We are considered a bounded, individual subject, distinctly separate from the world around us. This prompts yet another binary between individual/society (or person/world), where experiments within mainstream psychology try to abstract away the influence of society in controlled, laboratory conditions or otherwise conceive of 'social influence' as a kind of corrupting force for the workings of the pure, individual subject.

In response to the interiorised focus of mainstream psychology, social constructionism flourished in the 1970s. Social constructionism has been described as 'a school of thought [that] presents "knowledge" as a social product, the outcome of specific relationships and practices within the research context' (Gough & McFadden, 2001, p3). Hence, psychological phenomena are viewed not as fixed, objective categories of analysis but as socially constructed: through language, history and culture (McGhee, 2001). Such a conceptualisation challenges earlier cognitive understandings which frame psychology in individualist and nomothetic terms (Gough & McFadden, 2001) and, in doing so, offered a radically different and insightful way of understanding the field. Its scholars are arguably more diverse than cognitive psychology and share a commonality more akin to a 'family resemblance' (Burr, 2005, p2).

Constructionist ideas challenged mainstream psychology's search for immutable facts through a focus on the localised, mutable meanings of language; a key site of social interaction and, thus, knowledge construction. Within this perspective, language does not simply reflect an objectively knowable reality, but *creates* reality. This was a significant challenge to common-sense ideas that language was little more than a 'bag of labels' (Burr, 2006, p22) ready to be assigned to pre-existing internal states and external features of the world. This means that what we consider to be personhood (e.g. having a personality, experiencing emotions and being motivated by desires) is only possible with language and doesn't somehow

pre-date it, and that what we mean by personhood can be constructed differently, using different language (Burr, 2006). This does not just mean that different languages produce different ways of being a person, though that is certainly part of the picture, but that there are many different versions of personhood possible *within the same language,* in different socio-historical contexts. Attention to the active and constructive role of language prioritised how people construe their own experiences rather than how those experiences are constructed by the 'expert' experimenter and therefore functioned to question the objectivity of 'expert' research that often bears little resemblance to experience (Hazen, 1994). Things that had been naturalised as objective fact according to mainstream psychology were viewed as cultural and social constructs within social constructionism, formed through the language people use e.g. the 'weakness' and consequent oppression of many groups such as women, people of colour and LGBT people (Brown, 1973). Furthermore, this focus on socio-cultural context thwarted the focus on the cognitive individual and reintroduced the importance of 'the social', of other people, back into the realm of psychology.

However, social constructionism brought its own, seemingly intractable, issues. The emphasis on how our experiences were constructed through language was often extended to the point of denying any connection to the spaces of the world 'out there' (Hibberd, 2001; Maze, 2001). This resulted either in an ontological agnosticism, we cannot know what 'objectively' exists, or a linguistic relativism, where language can never refer to an external reality, both of which refused to recognise any properties of objects that went beyond their discursive construction (Nightingale & Cromby, 2002). This strongly goes against what we experience in each moment of our existence: of us impacting on the world and it impacting on us, before and beyond talk. Moreover, it sets up an implicit privileging of discourse over the body, so that the body becomes an impotent 'surface' upon which discourse is written (Price & Shildrick, 1999), further entrenching a dualistic perspective of the world, where discourse, a placeholder for the mental in cognitivism discussed previously, is held in a heirarchical relationship with the physical. The theory has also been critiqued for failing to provide a compelling account of what constitutes personhood, the person being portrayed as little more than the chooser of

discourses (Burr, 2006), and ignoring the complexity of personal experience, as encompassing more than the discursive but *also* the emotional, the biological, the biographical and the cognitive. This reifies 'the social' and omits the person, creating a 'depopulated psychology' (Billig, 1998). By failing to properly theorise individuality, social constructionism could also be seen as reductionist in nature: just as mainstream psychology reduces the social world to individual characteristics such as cognitive processes or personality, constructionism 'reduces the rich texture of embodied human life to its discursive expression' (Cromby, 2004, p799). Part of this 'rich texture' are feelings, which Cromby (2007) argues are seen as less fundamental than language and discourse, despite feelings being our default method of engaging with the world and underlying our ability to use language. Thus, social constructionism still reinforces the individual/society binary, which cognitivism set up (but props up the reverse hierarchical relation between these binaries: where 'society' is elevated above an inadequately theorised 'individual').

Therefore, it is argued, despite cognitivism and social constructionism telling two very different stories about experience, both theories seem to entrench the same unhelpful binaries: mind or discourse/body (referred to hereafter as simply the 'mind/body' binary), individual/society, person/world, reason or discourse/emotion (again, 'reason/emotion' will be used). This bifurcation means that we get the mind *versus* body, individual *versus* society, person *versus* world, reason *versus* emotion. This oppositional stance then often leads to a privileging of one binary over the other e.g. reason *over* emotion, mind *over* body etc., and the reduction of experience to that one category e.g. we are our minds or we are the discourses we take up. Such a reductive outcome produces an inadequate framing of experience by: failing to take seriously the materiality of our embodied selves and the world we live in; downplaying the role of emotional life to make room for a blanket focus on either the rational or the discursive and abstracting away either the individual or society. These are not issues that psychology can afford to brush to one side, rather they underlie key aspects of human experience – we are always embodied and feeling as we move through a world comprised of material settings and objects; a world in which we are fundamentally part of yet distinct from.

**2.1.2 How does a psychosocial process account encourage us to think?**

Here, Brown and Stenner's (2009) and Stenner's (2013; 2008) interpretation of the work of the mathematician/philosopher Alfred N. Whitehead (1927–1928/1985, 1926/1985, 1938, 1966) will be used to argue for a process-relational ontology. This ontology lays the groundwork for a psychosocial process account which employs a non-binary mode of thought, and can thus address the problematic binaries outlined above. It does so by maintaining that an *actual occasion* is the fundamental unit of reality – not a substance, but an *activity* of realisation. An actual occasion is a unity of objective and subjective aspects of the world, and provides the basis for a 'deep' kind of empiricism (Stenner, 2008), which radically extends the domain of subjectivity. Thus, fragmenting the dichotomisation of the world into subjective human knowers and objective meaningless matter. Crucially, this process-relational ontology differs from both the substance ontology which underlies cognitivism, and the linguistic relativism or ontological muteness which has been argued to structure many social constructionist accounts (Nightingale & Cromby, 2002).

The two fundamental ontological principles required to explain Whitehead's non-binary way of thinking are, according to Brown and Stenner (2009):

1. Things (whatever they are: biological, cultural, psychological) are 'definable as their relevance to other things and in terms of the way other things are relevant to them' (p12-13). In other words, they have *relational* essences (own emphasis)

2. 'Things do not exist independently of time but are constituted by the history of their specific and situated encounters (their *process*). Every actual thing is 'something by reason of its activity' (Whitehead, 1927-8/1985, p26) (own emphasis) (p13)

Throughout history, the natural and social sciences as well as the humanities have attempted to provide standalone definitions; capturing the *essence* of things. This hails back to Plato's Forms in Ancient Greece, which were supposed to be the perfect, standalone embodiment of what it meant to be something e.g. there are

many trees in the world but the Form of treeness contains the common essence of all of the trees in the world. In contrast, rather than trying to pinpoint a concept in an isolated state, the first relational ontological principle maintains that things (whether biological, psychological, cultural etc.) can only be defined by their relation to other things. In other words, they have *relational essences* (Brown & Stenner, 2009)*.* Language is a good example of this: a word is only definable using other words. A process ontology is thus web-like in nature, focussing on shifting connections and relations instead of connecting points qua themselves. Turning to the second principle, the world is viewed as constituted through process, 'as something by reason of its activity' (Brown & Stenner, 2009). Following this idea, things can only be defined in the context of their past activities and not understood as existing in some isolated moment in time.

Taken together, these principles comprise a process-relational ontology, sharply contrasting with the way Western, cognitive thought frames the world as made up of independent, unchanging 'things'; a substance ontology (Brown & Stenner, 2009). It could be argued that being so culturally and historically engrained it is hard to see outside of these terms; they frame our whole way of viewing the world. Whitehead (1926/1985) termed this the *fallacy of misplaced concreteness:* the mistake of reifying what is actually a high-grade abstraction of thought. This is the idea that reality is fundamentally a 'succession of instantaneous configurations of matter' (Whitehead, 1926/1985, p63), composed of inert matter with the property of simple location: belonging to a particular point in time (contra to being constituted through *process*) and space (contra to being *relationally* definable, as their relevance to other things). Whitehead argued that a substance ontology was completely at odds with quantum theory: there weren't unchanging, inert pieces of matter existing in external 'containers' of space and time but, in its place, a 'spatial universe as a field of force or incessant *activity*' (Brown & Stenner, 2009, p23) where space and time were 'considered as relative to the system in which the measurement was being made' (Kraus, 1997, p20). This motivated the philosopher and mathematician to create a comprehensive metaphysical vision which would incorporate the understandings of modern science. A process-relational ontology was born.

Through this ontology, Stenner (2008) argues Whitehead 'provides us with a "deep" form of empiricism, which will be explored later on, grounded in the notion of the "actual occasion" of experience and in the temporal and spatial co-assembly of multiplicities of such occasions' (p90). But what is an 'actual occasion of experience'? And what does experience mean in this context? Defining an actual occasion requires us to 'stretch' terms we are familiar with: allowing terms to accommodate a slightly different meaning than we would ordinarily associate with them. This is because our object-orientated language, where we talk in terms of 'things', leaves little room for articulating a process ontology (Mesle, 2008). In this instance we need to stretch 'experience'. An actual occasion is considered to be a 'drop' of experience but not in the usual sense of the term i.e. as the preserve of human, and possibly certain forms of animal, life. Rather than thinking of experience as connected to consciousness, consider this drop of experience as more akin to a perspective on the world. Each actual occasion is a perspective, which comes into being momentarily, and then fades away, and these actual occasions comprise everything in the world: from subatomic particles to rocks, and from trees to people. These actual occasions are not a substance or a material but an *activity of realisation* and are thus in a state of continual *becoming*. This core idea has been interpreted, notably by Massumi and Deleuze, as giving rise to a universe in continual flux, where stability is ignored or unimportant. However, Brown and Stenner (2009) have argued that a process account also acknowledges the stability existing in the world. For example, the perceived stability of books and people are a result of the spatial-temporal groupings of actual occasions patterned in less (e.g. book) and vastly more complex (e.g. person) ways.

As well as thinking about an actual occasion as being a drop of experience which is continually being actualised, there is a second crucial facet of this concept. An actual occasion, or 'event', is neither object nor subject, rather 'subjective and objective aspects are fused together in each occasion of actuality' (Stenner, 2008, p98). There is not a schism between objective material bodies on one side (the chairs, trees and fox in a garden) and perceiving subjective consciousness on the other. Rather, both garden and person are:

complexes of ongoing processes, each of which entails numerous chains of unfolding events in which 'subjects' (experiences) organize the data of their 'objects' (expressions), before themselves 'concrescing' as objects (expressions) for the experience of the next 'subject' in the process (Stenner, Bhatti & Church, 2012, p6)

Therefore, subjective experience is just as much a part of 'objective' nature as the chair or the fox and basic forms of subjectivity are also present in the continually unfolding events which comprise the garden. The relation between these subjective and objective aspects of the world is characterised by Whitehead as one of 'concern' and this is significant for how a psychosocial process account can re-engage with the materiality of the world and our own bodies; topics constructionist thought has been criticised for bypassing (Cromby, 2004; Nightingale & Cromby, 2002). A subject comes into being through its objective concerns or, in other words, objects always co-constitute subjectivity. This way of thinking fragments the subject/object, person/world binaries. A process account centered around a cosmology of actual occasions allows us to say that objective aspects of the world are crucial to subjective aspects through a relation of concern, unlike other schools of thought which have championed subjectivity *over* objectivity e.g. social constructionism which has been argued as ignoring 'objective' reality (Cromby, 2004) or psychoanalytic branches of psychosocial theory which emphasise (unconscious) subjectivity (Stenner, 2008). A process account also allows us to maintain the distinctive qualities of human subjectivity, arguably obscured by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) and actor-network theory (Latour, 2005) who reconnect with the material and the body at the expense of 'flatten[ing] out' (Stenner, 2008, p92) the differences between human and non-human bodies. Stenner (2008) terms this refiguring of subjectivity and objectivity 'deep empiricism'.

Deep empiricism has a lineage rooted in William James' radical empiricism and Deleuzian plural empiricism and is contrasted with shallow empiricism (Stenner, 2008). The latter being what is normally meant by 'empiricism': an objective reality composed of valueless matter only knowable via the subjective sensory experience of a human knower. This strips out subjectivity from the world and nature and places

it all in the human knower. To the degree which the human knower only perceives things which can be perceived by all human knowers, their knowledge is considered objective, rather than subjective e.g. this is the logic underlying experiments based on sense perception. However, deep empiricism 'radically extends and refines the domain of subjectivity' (Stenner, 2008, p94). Deep empiricism does not recognise the object as the primary 'stuff' of the universe as in materialism (the cosmology associated with cognitivist thought) or the subject as the fundamental core of the universe as in idealism, including linguistic relativism (one of the cosmologies associated with social constructionist thought). Rather, the most primary aspect of the world is an *actual occasion*, which is a fusion of subject and object. Now, we turn to the ramifications this idea of an actual occasion has for our understanding of experience.

### 2.1.3 A reframing of experience

'Ask not what's inside your head, but what your head's inside of' (Mace, 1977)

Deep empiricism is more in keeping with modern scientific understandings of the world as 'incessant activity' (Stenner, 2008) and our interconnected experience where we are both mind and body, subjects but concerned with objects. Furthermore, the concept of actual occasion allows us to explain the difference and continuity between humans and the rest of the world (Stenner, 2008). Humans, animals, trees and even rocks are all made up of temporal-spatial orderings of actual occasions, yet the patterning of actual entities involved in human life is vastly more complex than that involved in, say, a table. This means we are fully part of the natural world and we cannot be abstracted from it, there is no fission between person/world, mind/matter, subject/object, mind/body; or, in other words: 'The psyche is never disembodied and the body is never de-worlded' (Stenner, 2008, p106). We can also leave behind the troubling view of the natural world as devoid of subjectivity, which becomes extremely difficult to maintain when considering certain organisms, particular high-level animal life (Stenner, 2008). The integral,

interdependent relationship of mind to matter, person to world, subject to object, also faciliates a more encompassing vision of reality, which can account for the ways in which aspects of reality are intertwined with one another. This discussion has taken place at a relatively abstract level, laying the groundwork for a more in-depth discussion of what this might mean for our everyday experience as embodied beings who move through space, think, feel and remember.

In a psychosocial process account, experience is produced through the intersection of multiple processes, such as the biological, the psychological, the social and the spatial. Experience is the *becoming* of objective reality, realised through 'an interlocked plurality of modes' (Whitehead, 1926/1985, p87 cited in Brown & Stenner, 2009, p31). Process theory 'begins in the middle' (Association for Process Thought, 2016) and so to consider an aspect of the world, is to ask – what mediates it? This means psychologists are not confined to one aspect of experience, such as the cognitive or the discursive, but can 'follow the psychological wherever [it] lead[s] us' (Brown & Stenner, 2009, p5). Drawing on the two ontological principles outlined in the previous section, nothing 'can be abstracted from its broader scheme of relationality and process' (Brown & Stenner, 2009, p37). This means an aspect of experience can never be considered in isolation from its process, its history of specific and situated encounters, or its relationships. Practically, drug use cannot be carved out of human experience and examined as a separate category, existing in isolation from the rest of the world or the stream of events which lead up to it, as the epidemiological model discussed in the first chapter seeks to do. This can be seen more clearly in an example, taken from a participant's written memory of taking MDMA:

> He is excited, buoyed by the atmosphere of the group…This will be his first time on MDMA, and his first time dancing in a club. At theatre school, he had always been among the worst in his dance class - frequently reprimanded for his lack of rhythm and seemingly unable to enjoy any aspect of dance or dance music.

It takes a little while before they're inside the club, but once inside his fear begins to dissipate. He feels more and more at ease as he takes in his surroundings, the music reverberating through his body – dirty, pulsing sawtooth sounds that remind him of the music his father used to play. A really funky, uplifting, energising kind of music.

Everything feels so easy. Far from being unsure of how to move, he is compelled to dance as the bass takes hold of his body and forces him to rock in time with the beat…

He would never have dreamed of moving like this in front of other people but it feels so right – he's Michael Jackson, he's Justin Timberlake!

He overhears a girl in the group attracting the attention of one of her friends. 'Don't you think he's a good dancer?' she asks, and as they both stand watching him, he beams in the knowledge that he needn't ever have worried.

(Anderson & McGrath, 2013, Toby, Memory 1)

This experience is crucially shaped by the 'history of situated and specific encounters' (Brown & Stenner, 2009, p13): the 'dirty, pulsing sawtooth sounds' his father used to play, which make the alien environment of the club feel more familiar and the anxiety he felt previously around dancing, 'he had always been among the worst in his dance class' contextualises the significance of his now 'easy' movements. In addition, being on MDMA cannot be cut out from the relationships within which it is enmeshed, how it is connected to the 'energising' music and the way it 'reverberat[es] through' and 'takes hold' of his body, the uplifting space of the club, the 'atmosphere' of the group of friends he goes with, the conversations of his companions, '"Don't you think he's a good dancer?"' and his feeling of success, 'he's Michael Jackson, he's Justin Timberlake!'. While socio-material approaches to drug use (e.g. Bøhling, 2014; Dilkes-Frayne, 2014; Duff, 2008; Farrugia, 2015) map the relational elements of drug use, they could be argued to overlook the importance of

the 'history' of encounters leading up to the drug experience, such as biographical or relationship histories.

Finally, a note about how deep empiricism can alter our understanding of experience. As previously described, deep empiricism views experience and feeling as dispersed into the the world, rather than located solely within us. This entails an understanding of subjectivity as always co-constituted, produced in concert, and therefore frames feelings, sensations, memories and perceptions as inseparable from the circumstances and settings which prompt them (Langdridge, Barker, Reavey & Stenner, 2012). Experience cannot be adequately explained with reference only to the 'psychology of an isolated individual' since circumstances are always '"folded into"' the experience (Langdridge et al., 2012, p15). This is a significant statement, particularly with regard to the discipline of psychology. For example, considering anger, it is not only the particular subjective experience which determines the ascription of anger but a sense of rejection felt in an empty flat after being cancelled on by a new beau, sheer hopelessness at breaking a favourite mug at the end of an awful day or incredulity at another unbelievable political result. The psychological, the social and the material are all necessary in understanding these experiences, for example the empty flat (material) physically embodies and emphasises the evening of loneliness ahead, accentuating the rejection felt (psychological) after a cared-for person prioritises something or maybe even *someone* else (social).


## 2.3 Mind and body: Two attributes of the same process


Throughout Western history a fission between body and mind has existed (Bordo, 2003; Drew, 1990; Burkitt, 1999). The body has traditionally been subjugated to the ethereal soul or, since the enlightenment, our mental faculties, which comprise the unitary, rational subject of cognitivism. This mind/body binary has been argued as further entrenched by social constructionism which replaces the mind with discourse and the body is formulated as inscribed-upon 'surface' (Nightingale & Cromby, 2002; Cromby, 2004). Yet, people are always embodied beings. We learn all we know

through seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling and touching the world around us; possible only due to our embodied perspective. Furthermore, the bodies we have (their gender, colour, (dis)ability) make certain experiences possible and constrain other potentialities (Bayer & Shotter, 1998). Life is fundamentally different if you are male or if you have a chronic disease: the physicality of our existence shapes the way we interact with the world and the way it interacts with us, continually (re)forming our sense of self. A tenable theoretical framework must fully flesh out the relationship between our consciousness and our embodied-ness. A commitment to the terminology of *embodiment* rather than *the body* has been argued as important (Del Busso, 2009). While the latter separates off the body as a separate 'thing', the 'tool' implied in social constructionist thought (Grosz, 1994) or 'appendage' of Cartesian rationalism, embodiment represents an integration of two previous binaries (discourse/body or mind/body) and an implicit recognition that our whole way of life is embodied (Weiss & Haber, 1999). Such a commitment to embodiment will be adhered to in this work, except when the argument makes it necessary to distinguish between the mind and the body.

The work of Spinoza (1677/1993), as interpreted by Brown and Stenner (2009), and the arguments of Johnson (2008) will be used to explore the relationship between the mind and the body. Process thought and phenomenology have a shared heritage in Spinoza, however phenomenological ideas will not be the focus here, rather how Spinozist concepts have been developed by process thinkers. An argument will be made for the crucial role our bodies play in our experience and knowledge of the world. The relationship of the mind to the body will be sketched out in a Spinozist fashion, his parallelism allowing for an equal weighting of these two aspects of experience. The central role of the body in producing experience will be further emphasised through Johnson's work which explores how even things which have been cast as completely disembodied, e.g. conceptual meaning, are still grounded in the body's movement within and manipulation of the world.

Under a Spinozist reading of embodiment, 'we do not know "the world" but rather the *way in which the world affects us*' (Brown & Stenner, 2009, p114) (emphasis in original) and, crucially, this 'we' includes our bodies. Spinoza dispensed with a Cartesian notion of the body-as-machine, secondary to the vacillations of the

mind; instead seeing this process of being affected as primarily mediated by our bodies. It is worth noting the significance accorded to this felt relation of being affected, an emphasis that will be taken up in the next section concerning emotion. Instead of viewing the mind and the body as binary opposites, two different substances, Spinoza thought of the mind and body as different *attributes* of the same substance. Thus, thought (distinguishing consciousness from objects) is one attribute of a single substance and extension (the physical field of objects) is another. Individual minds and bodies are then seen as finite modes of thought and extension, respectively. This approach is argued to retain a distinction between mind and body while also making redundant the heirarchical mind/body binary (Brown & Stenner, 2009). Spinoza terms this single substance Nature or God but Whitehead's (1927–1928/1985) process ontology might provide a more satisfying account. If process is ontologically fundamental then the single substance, of which mind and body are two aspects of, would not be a 'substance' at all but a process. More specifically, this unity could be the underlying activity of occasions or events being actualised, as outlined earlier in the chapter as the process of the *becoming of actual occasions.*

Whereas Cartesianism, and the cognitivist thought which arose from it, identified the body as inherently passive and controlled by the active mind, for Spinoza activity and passivity can instead be associated with either attribute 'since both attributes are "expressions" of the underlying unity of these unfolding scenes of activity, encounter and transformation' (Brown & Stenner, 2009, p117). Spinoza's 'parallelism' allows him to describe that a body's diminished power to act as a result of an encounter is, when that body is conceived under the attribute of thought, also a less powerful mind. This has two advantages. Firstly, there is no need to envision a point of connection between mind and body, there are different registers of the same, underlying unity. Secondly, it realises the importance of the body in what it means to be human. A Spinozist approach recognises our nature as embodied beings and how fundamental this is to our existence: our bodies, along with our minds, mediate all experience and knowledge of the world. This idea can be strengthened by looking beyond Spinoza's arguments to a modern understanding of embodiment. Johnson's (2008) work will be used to buttress the argument for body as mediator,

exploring in more detail how this process takes place as well as explaining how a concept usually considered as totally disembodied, conceptual meaning, is grounded too in an embodied being in our world.

### 2.3.1 Our experiencing, meaning-making bodies

'A person is not a mind *and* a body. These are not two "things" somehow mysteriously yoked together. What we call a "person" is a certain kind of bodily organism that has a brain operating within its body, a body that is continually interacting with aspects of its environments (material and social) in an ever-changing process of experience.'

(Johnson, 2008, p11)

Johnson's (2008) core argument is that the body is the starting point to our experience and, moreover, that our body's movement within and manipulation of the world forms the basis for all meaning – what he correspondingly calls *embodied, immanent meaning*. This contrasts with the cognitive view of the world which associates the mind and language with meaning and, as such, gives us a propositional understanding of meaning where concepts are organised in an orderly fashion through grammar and expressed in statements like 'The delivery will be late', 'she is the friendliest person I have ever met' and 'we live in uncertain times'. To understand why meaning originates in the body, we need to return to an insight from Whitehead's (1927–1928/1985) process philosophy: we are fully part of the natural world; different in degree, not kind. Instead of a 'top-down' process where meaning originates from the supernatural and disembodied mind and is imposed upon the body, embodied meaning is built from the 'bottom up', from the continual interaction of a biological organism with its (social and material) surroundings:

it sees meaning and all our higher functioning as growing out of and shaped by our abilities to perceive things, manipulate objects, move our bodies in space, and evaluate our situation. (Johnson, 2008, p11)

This is crucial. Since we are not just *in* our environment but *of* it, meaning must itself be a naturalistic process. It is our existence as a biological organism moving through and interacting with our environment that allows us to learn and understand what things mean or, in other words, how something connects with something else. The bodily basis of meaning is pointed to by how we make sense of ourselves through bodily movement:

> *We literally discover ourselves in movement*. We grow kinetically into our bodies. In particular, we grow into those distinctive ways of moving that come with our being the bodies we are. In our spontaneity of movement, we discover arms that extend, spines that bend, knees that flex, mouths that shut, and so on. We make sense of ourselves in the course of moving. (Sheets-Johnstone, 2011, p117).

To be alive is to move, we are only truly still in death. We are in constant, sensuous contact with our world; 'we' and the 'world' are not separate but always intertwined (Johnson, 2008; Sheets-Johnstone, 2011). A further demonstration of this continual organism-environment interaction which underpins embodied meaning-making comes from babies. They do not deal in statements or propositions or concepts, yet we would still say they are learning about the world and what their actions mean through the use of their bodies and its capabilities – its perceptive abilities, coordinated motor functions, bodily expression etc. (Johnson, 2008). For example, babies learn about object permanence, that objects continue to exist when they cannot see or hear them, through placing a favourite toy under a blanket and then feeling it is still there when they reach back for it. Johnson (2008) claims that this embodied, preconceptual meaning-making doesn't end when we become adults but in fact underlies all our conceptual understanding.

The propositional understanding of meaning previously discussed, of concepts organised by grammar into statements, has been synonymous with 'meaning' for centuries. This has been largely at the expense of emotions and feelings which have been almost entirely divorced from the realm of conceptual

meaning; considered 'subjective' and too difficult to handle. Yet, Johnson (2008) argues, this is a fatal error. Feelings and emotions are crucial to our ability to experience meaning and to reason. From the discipline of neuroscience, Damasio (2006) provides examples of patients who experienced trauma to emotional centres of the brain and then couldn't reason on an even a very basic level. He describes a patient who was incapable of deciding which of two dates would be best for their next appointment, going over and over minute details for and against the alternative dates for half an hour before Damasio intervened. Johnson uses the example of someone who is doubtful of his claims to further reinforce this idea of meaning as grounded in our bodily, felt experience. He instructs the reader to ask themselves what such an experience of 'doubting what Johnson is saying' amounts to. He draws on the pragmatists, who will also prove crucial to the understanding of emotion sketched by the sociologist Burkitt (2014) in the next section, to describe how our experience of doubt is:

> a fully embodied experience of hesitation, withholding of assent, felt bodily tension, and general bodily restriction…Doubt retards or stops the harmonious flow of experience that preceded the doubt. You *feel* the restriction and tension in your diaphragm, your breathing and perhaps in your gut (p53).

As will be explored with Burkitt, these embodied feelings do not merely go along with your doubt, they *are* your doubt. Thus, the strong bias against thinking of cognitive meaning as grounded in emotional experience in Western culture comes from the way we are thinking about this conceptual, cognitive meaning: as abstracted and disembodied in propositional statements. But, as has been shown, concepts are embodied processes of appraisal and relation: we feel our doubt in our bodily tension and a baby grasps causation through the use of its motor functions, to push one toy car into another, and perceptive faculties, to see the other car move off with force, which allows the baby to draw a causal connection between the two events. Meaning is grounded in our emotionally experiencing bodies, first and foremost.

Through a psychosocial process framework, we are embodied, thinking, feeling people, rather than seeing the body as a thing-like tool controlled by the mind as in cognitivism, or inscribed with discourse, as in social constructionism. Brown and Stenner's (2009) reading of Spinozist (1677/1993) thought was used to argue that minds and bodies are modes of two different attributes of a single substance. Whitehead's (1927–1928/1985) cosmology was used to convert this idea of 'substance' into a process ontology, with mind and body different aspects of the the same underlying activity of realisation, the continual becoming of actual occasions. Practically, this entails a greater appreciation for and receptivity to both the way our embodied self impacts and is impacted by the world, as body is no longer subordinate to an active mind. The role of our bodies in mediating our experience of the world was further highlighted through the person-environment interaction which is the basis for all our experience and, indeed, all meaning (person is understood here as meaning both mind and body). This fragments old dichotomies between mind and body, person and world; these are seen as abstractions of the same organism-in-environment process. Instead of associating our body with only the biological body, the physical 'thing', and seeing everything else as external to it, we should appreciate that environment, culture and social relations are deeply interwoven with our embodied self (Johnson, 2008). This should precipitate a move away from seeing embodied, emotional experience as outside the privileged domain of cognitive, conceptual meaning. Both need to be taken seriously and this means we need to attend to the meaning-making structures of the body as well as those embroiled in syntax and propositions, the traditional reserves of conceptual meaning. After establishing the fundamental unity between mind and body and the body's central role in meaning-making, this chapters pans its focus outward to consider what it means for a body to be affected.

## 2.4 Being affected

'we do not know "the world" but rather the *way in which the world affects us*'

(Brown & Stenner, 2009, p114) (emphasis in original)

It could be argued that feelings are our default method of engaging with the world: we are taught how to speak, but we are born feeling (Cromby, 2007). Babies use bodily and facial cues to express their emotions long before they can communicate with language (Holinger & Doner, 2003). We first learn how to navigate through our world by what we feel, these sensations orientate us and give meaning to the situations we encounter, forming part of the body's meaning-making structures, as previously outlined (Johnson, 2008). Furthermore, without feelings and emotions 'nothing would attract or repel us and motivate us to act' (Fuchs, 2013, p13), the world would hold no meaning for us. For example, it is the feeling of comfort you get when you eat ice-cream that keeps drawing you back to the freezer and it is the sense of accomplishment you feel when a student understands something for the first time that makes teaching worthwhile.

Therefore, it seems fair to say we are 'feeling bodies' (Cromby, 2015, p1): searching for and managing feeling is fundamental to human life, from basic survival to living a contented life. It seems surprising therefore that mainstream, cognitive psychology operates with the idea of a rational subject, where emotions are little more than 'leakages' (Brown & Stenner, 2001, p87) under the control of a rational system. Indeed, if it is investigated a little further this opposition between reason and emotion becomes completely untenable. As was discussed in relation to embodiment, damage to the emotional centres in our brain precludes the ability to reason on even a very simple level (Damasio, 2006) and our embodied feelings crucially constitute our experience of and ability to reason (Johnson, 2008). By reducing experience to discourse, social constructionist thought has been argued to ignore feelings, which are embodied states (Cromby, 2007). For example, a blindfolded person feels something put on their tongue, they are told it's a cherry but may be doubtful. It is only when they bite into the cherry and feel the juice flow across their tongue that they are certain. This is a felt, sensuous way of knowing which is different from knowledge communicated through the medium of language. Furthermore, this is continuous with Shotter's (1993) more complex concept of 'knowing of the third kind'. This is what might be colloquially referred to as a 'gut feeling' or 'instinct', his argument is that this is not simply a random occurrence but

an embodied record of many other encounters and outcomes: a knowledge we *feel*, rather than discursively frame or reason through, when presented with a scenario.

In the past decade or so, there has been an 'affective turn' within the social sciences, emphasising 'the dimension of feeling and…the experience and expression of emotions' (p1-2) as well as issues of, perhaps unconscious, influence such as suggestibility, social influence and contagion which go into people's affective lives (Stenner, 2013). This turn to affect has been concerned with what cannot be expressed in discourse and or adequately explained by existing ways of thinking (Stenner, 2013). If feelings are such as core part of our experience, why then has a focus on feeling and emotion taken so long to gather momentum? In answer, Cromby (2007) points to the ineffability of emotional experience, a point Fuchs (2013) reinforces: 'The phenomena in question are generally fleeting, diffused, hardly delimitable and even harder to describe' (p2). It has been easier to focus on that which can be more clearly communicated, our linguistic thoughts and their discursive expression, or the collection of thoughts into rational statements, rather than the difficult translation and conceptualisation of bodily sensations and feelings (Cromby, 2007; Fuchs, 2013). This section will use the scholars Burkitt (2014) and Stenner (2013) to sketch out an understanding of emotion as both embodied feeling and produced through systems of relations. Before looking at their arguments in more depth, it is helpful to define the main terms of the affective domain.

### 2.4.1 Defining feeling, emotion and affect

'Emotion', 'feeling' and 'affect' are all well-established in the academic world that peers into our experience. These terms will be separately defined but the phrase 'affective' will be used in this thesis to encompass any and all of the above. Affect is defined here in a Spinozist manner, as interpreted by the psychosocial, process thinkers Brown and Stenner (2009). Under this reading, affect is a 'modification' of the body by which its 'power of action…is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and at the same time the idea of these modifications' (Spinoza 1677/1993 cited in Brown & Stenner, 2009, p119). In other words, an affect is an

arrangement of the relations between bodies from which a determination to act emerges. This is very similar to a Deleuzian understanding of affect as an 'augmentation of the body's capacity to act' (Deleuze (1988, 1992) does describe his philosophy as 'Spinozist'), although there are differences between the positions, e.g. Deleuze makes no distinction between different bodies, which has been argued to ignore a crucial distinction between humans and non-humans (Stenner, 2008). These modifications of affect occur in the encounters between bodies (even when only the image of a body is present) and the kinds of modifications possible depend on the complexities of those bodies. It is also important to note that, for Spinoza, there can be no knowledge without affect, 'we do not know "the world" but rather the *way in which the world affects us*' (Brown & Stenner, 2009, p114) and our bodies mediate this process of affect, acknowledging our status as embodied beings compared to the disembodied psyche of Cartesian thought (Cromby 2004).

Emotion and feeling have both been referred to so far in this chapter, but they are not interchangeable. In fact, there is a widely accepted distinction between them – the essence of which will be maintained in the definitions outlined here. Emotions are considered to be more complex than feelings (Fuchs, 2013; Cromby, 2007), constituted both by an embodied response and a motivation to act in particular ways (De Sousa, 2010). There is widespread philosophical support for emotions having an 'aboutness' to them, they are directed towards events, situations and people yet: 'this intentionality is of a special kind: it is not neutral, but concerns what is particularly valuable and relevant for the subject' (Fuchs, 2013). In contrast, feelings 'are not directed at specific objects or situations; thus, they lack intentional "aboutness"' (Fuchs, 2013, p5) and have been characterised as being more 'raw'; the phenomenological aspect of the more complex emotional state, which organises and motivates action (Cromby, 2007). Hence, feelings will be defined in this thesis as the 'bodily sensation which is central to all experiences of emotion' (Burkitt, 2014, p7), such as the sensation of pleasure, while emotions are bodily feeling as well as the social meanings we ascribe to these experiences and the contexts within which they emerge, such as guilt. This means that all emotions involve feelings but not all feelings involve emotion. While to say emotion comprises feeling and the social meaning we accord to that feeling is relatively uncontroversial,

the final part of Burkitt's (2014) definition – for emotion to be identified with the contexts within which they emerge – is much more divisive. It is Burkitt's emphasis on the contextual embeddedness of emotion, where emotion emerges from patterns of *relationship* between a person and the the world (including other people), which will be focussed on here and which is argued to make his approach suited to a dialogue with a psychosocial process account.

## 2.4.2 Relational patterns

The relational embeddedness of emotions and feelings is emphasised in this thesis and conceptualised using Burkitt (2014) and Stenner's (2013) work. Both scholars contest the way cognitive psychology has considered emotions and feelings to be substances, prompted by some external cause, that exist 'inside' of us; more specifically, they reside in our head, confined either to our mind or brain, while the body is little more than convenient container. This idea has been solidified by our object-orientated language where names (anger, jealousy, sadness) encourage us to think of feelings and emotions as *things in themselves* (Burkitt, 2014). This painting of emotion as intrapsychic state is advanced by the way psychological literature variously conceptualises emotion as: an attachment style, a way of thinking, a genetic predisposition and a personality trait (Stenner, 2013). Instead, they view emotions as produced through 'patterns' (Burkitt, 2014) or 'systems' (Stenner, 2013) of relationship. While Burkitt's account of affective life is relatively comprehensive, including the relationship of feeling to emotion, Stenner focusses on the paradox behind how such systems are created.

Beginning with Burkitt (2014), he makes the claim that when we discuss how we feel we are expressing our relationship to someone (or something). To say you are in love, for example, is to say something about your (special) relationship with an object or person that exists in the world. Indeed, if the world is fundamentally made up of interrelated, dynamic process and events, then an event can *only* be understood through its relation to other events (Brown & Stenner, 2009; Whitehead, 1927–1928/1985). Emotions and feelings thus emerge from '*patterns of relationship*

between self and others, between self and world' (Burkitt, 2014, p2, emphasis in original), where these relations are themselves fluid and dynamic; continually unfolding processes. There are no things in themselves called emotions which can be separately cut out and examined, rather they emerge from and thus can only be understood within relational processes. Emotion is not a thing that moves us to act, but rather 'as movement itself within relations and interaction' (Burkitt, 2014, p9). If emotion is inseparable from a vast entanglement of relations, then we need to appreciate emotion as a thoroughly contextual phenomena. Burkitt (2014) suggests we can think of emotion as embedded within: the situation within which it arises, people's personal history and socio-cultural conditions, each of which will now be expanded on in turn.

Emotions are products of the situations within which they develop, the specifics of situations shape the emotion produced and the meanings ascribed to it. For example, a husband's jealousy cannot be separated from the kiss he witnesses between his wife and his sister, which violates both his values of faithfulness and familial loyalty. His jealousy would be fundamentally different if he saw a picture of his wife with her arm around her colleague or if he thought his wife was flirting with the waiter. Furthermore, the personal biography of the people involved in any situation is important: their past experiences produce embodied dispositions to feel and behave in a certain way and orient them in any given situation (Burkitt, 2014). Burkitt gives the example of a child whose father taught him that an act of violence could restore dignity and then goes on to violently assert himself in response to a perceived slight in adulthood. Furthermore, to see this purely as a conditioned cognitive-behavioural style, Burkitt (2014) argues, ignores the socio-cultural conditions within which such acts take place. Namely, cultural ideas around masculinity (the man as protector of kin and his own honour (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), regardless of legal ramifications (Marsh, Rosser & Harré, 1978) and the lack of resources people from poorer socio-economic backgrounds have (violence, however, is an attainable method of restoring dignity). Thus, emotion itself is not 'the primary unit of analysis' (Burkitt, 2014, p18), rather this approach sees the meaning of emotion through location in social relations, which are always unfolding as continual, dynamic processes. Though this is not to say we

should reduce emotions only to these factors since they are fundamentally *felt* too. As Burkitt (2014) summarises:

> without the body-mind we could not *feel* our situations and patterns of relationship with others, yet without the social meanings of these relations and situations our feelings and emotions would be random and meaningless (p15).

What Burkitt (2014) refers to as 'patterns' of relationship in situations emotion emerges from, Stenner (2013) speaks of as 'dynamic micro-social systems' (p53), of which emotion is an attribute. For example, jealousy names the relationship between a subject and a rival they want to exclude. This rival threatens to interrupt a (real or imagined) relationship between the subject and the object of their affections. This subject-object-rival triad is the micro-social system and 'in this sense jealousy is as much a 'location' or a 'position' as an individual experience' (Stenner, 2013, p46). The fundamental continuity between Burkitt's and Stenner's account is this dual emphasis on emotion as an 'individual experience' (Stenner, 2013, p46), or how emotions are fundamentally *felt* (Burkitt, 2014, p15), and emotion as a location in social relations. What Stenner (2013) adds to this is a consideration of how these social relations are produced, specifically via thirdness or what is desired as *excluded* from the system, rather than what is included:

> Jealousy and envy can be understood as attributes of psychosocial 'systems' that are produced and re-produce themselves through the mechanism of the excluded third (p45)

Jealousy is a function of a subject's desire to exclude the third (the rival) and this is what Stenner means when he says it is produced through 'the mechanism of the excluded third'. Yet his argument goes beyond the rival simply interrupting an existing relationship between a subject and an object. Rather, his assertion is that the relationship between a subject and an object is *mediated* by the rival, the 'excluded third', in what he calls *foundation by exclusion*. While he uses emotion as

an example, this idea applies to all phenomena; inviting us to think about how they are created and maintained not only through what is included but what is *excluded,* its 'thirdness':

> 'it is through a relation to the exclusion or expulsion of 'the third' or of 'thirdness' that unity and identity are created and maintained. The implication is that behind the foundation of something unified (something that might be described as a *system*) there lurks expulsion and exclusion, and that this exclusion is necessary (rather than incidental) to the ongoing constitution of the system.' (p3)

'System' is used here broadly to refer to a social system, an organism, a system of experience or of knowledge; therefore we can conceive of a couple and their MDMA experiences as systems in this sense. Initially, let us think about the couple as a unified, ordered system and how this might be related an exclusion of 'thirdness'. At first glance, coupledom is all about two people: their meeting, coming together and establishing a more long-lasting connection. However, on closer inspection, we can see thirdness or, indeed a specific 'third', loom large. Historically, romantic togetherness has been been predicated on a 'unified, exclusive…dyad' (Finn, 2012, p2): the couple only exists as a social system because others are kept out (sexually and/or emotionally). In this way, the excluded third can be said to *mediate* between the two positions in the system and thus actually be creative of the system. A mediator is easy to overlook since it is the very thing that *must* be overlooked in order for a relation to be formed through it. Take as an example a sexually monogamous couple: the relationship between the two partners is mediated by the others they are not sexually intimate with. If these non-sexually intimate others were not 'included *as* excluded' (Stenner, 2013, p3, referencing Agamben) then what would unify the couple as a system?

However, just as a system is mediated and thus created via the excluded third, it can also be *interrupted* and destabilised via the excluded third. To say we have become aware of the mediator is to say it has interrupted the relation it was previously mediating. As Stenner (2013) explains, we are rarely aware of the

mediating role of language in communicating with one another. This changes though if we speak a foreign language, suddenly the formerly invisible mediator disrupts our communicative efforts and, in doing so, becomes very visible. It is easy to see how this might apply to the previous example: a drunken liason, the excluded thirdness, could interrupt and potentially destroy the couple system, showing just how crucial its exclusion was to the unity of the sexually monogamous couple. Therefore, 'the relationship of the system to the thirdness of its noise is…fundamentally ambivalent' (Stenner, 2013, p25), being both productive (third-as-mediator) and disruptive (third-as-interruptor). If such oscillations take place, then thinking of any system, including the micro-social system from which emotion emerges, would seem to open up questions like: where does the border lie between third-as-*mediator* and third-as-*disrupter*? How does this vary from person to person, from relationship to relationship? Psychosocial process theory is concerned with the spaces and borders between systems for this very reason: they are areas of transformation, where 'something new is created' (Stenner, 2008; Brown & Stenner, 2009), in this case where a system is unsettled.

To sum up, it was argued that previous understandings of emotion focussed too much on an individual's psychic experience, at the expense of a consideration of the relationships within which emotion is embedded: social relations which were, in turn, contextualised by wider cultural conditions and personal histories (Burkitt, 2014). This entails seeing emotion as *patterns* of relationship (Burkitt, 2014). The way in which social relations are (re)produced was elaborated by Stenner (2013) as via the excluded third. His argument that a social system is constituted by what is included-as-excluded was shown to be helpful in framing how emotional transformation can take place – when third-as-mediator becomes third-as-disruptor, jealousy is produced. Even emotions produced through patterns of relationship that seem to concern only two people, such as love, were argued as mediated via an excluded third e.g. the exclusion of 'all others'. Paradoxically, this concern with thirdness and what is excluded can reveal much about how a system is constituted, and how it can fragment.

## 2.5 A relational understanding of materiality

The social theorist Bruno Latour (1996, 2005) argues there has been a widespread neglect of the material world – objects, spaces and settings – in the social sciences due to the structuring effects of the person/world, subject/object binaries. Latour is speaking specifically about sociology, his disciplinary home, but his claims could be seen to extend to (cognitive and social constructionist) psychology as well. The material world has been identified as 'objective' and therefore requires the attention of the natural sciences, split from 'subjective' humanity which is the proper focus of the social sciences. This schism portrays subjective human endeavours as spoiling objective, natural scientific enquiries and vice versa, resulting in the neglect of materiality Latour speaks of. There have, however, been multiple efforts to reconnect with the material world in social theory (Stenner, 2008): Latour's actor-network theory (ANT) being one key example of a trend which also includes feminist and queer theory and Deleuzian post-structuralism. These theories tend to trace socio-material relations in processes of assemblage and, in doing so, unsettle clear subject/object distinctions and raise questions about the nature of subjectivity. Stenner (2008) praises these moves but contends that, in the process of reconnecting with the material, these theories have a tendency to 'flatten out' (p92) the distinction between human and non-human bodies. This thesis intends to retain a process-relational, binary-eschewing approach to materiality while simultaneously acknowledging the obvious and crucial distinction between people and things. This dual focus will be referred to as 'psycho-material'. How this would work from a metaphysical perspective has already been discussed earlier in the chapter. To reiterate, the domain of subjectivity is extended outside of the 'head' in a psychosocial process account since the fundamental unit of the world, an actual occasion, is considered to be a fusion of both object and subject (Stenner, 2008). This explains the continuity between humans and the rest of life, everything is constituted by the becoming of actual occasions, yet also the distinction between them: the patterning of these occasions becomes vastly more complex with respect to human life (Brown & Stenner, 2009).

How this psycho-material focus operates empirically in relation to the spatial and material aspects of human experience will be explained in this section. Firstly, it will explore a psychological framing of space, Kurt Lewin's (1936) 'life-space'. Psychosocial theorists Steve Brown and Paula Reavey use Lewin's work to reconsider how spaces and objects can matter to people's lives through the 'feelings of affordance' they can offer, particularly in the context of memory. The scholars Bruno Latour and Michel Serres will be used to supplement these ideas further and explore the active role objects take in 'allowing' and 'forbidding' action (Latour, 2005, p72) and slowing down and stabilising human relations (Serres, 1995), while leaving to the side problematic ideas about the equivalence of all (human and non-human) bodies. Combined, these theorists make a strong argument for the ways materiality makes a difference to our experience and, as a result, subjectivity is approached here as materially as well as discursively mediated (Foucault, 2000a, 2000b, 1988, 1987 cited in Brown & Stenner, 2009). Finally, the threads of emotion, embodiment and space discussed throughout the chapter will be brought together in the concept of 'affective atmosphere' (Anderson, 2009), which emanates from but is not reducible to the relationships between (human and non-human) bodies. Together, these arguments once again disrupt simplistic binaries to show how subject and object, person and world are not oppositional but co-constitute our experience.

## 2.5.1 Spatial affordances

'Space' brings to mind many things: the infinite vastness of the world outside the Earth's atmosphere, the physical spaces of home, work and the outside world and the more metaphorical 'space to think'. To call it a nebulous concept then, potentially referring to any form of dimensionality, would seem apt (Massey, 1994). Space has rarely been viewed as a focal point; instead seen as the backdrop to the activities of life (Massey, 1994, 1999; Lefebvre, 1991). This is the traditional 'container' understanding, where space is an inert frame within which events take place, argued as an abstraction of how spaces really work by the Marxist philosopher Lefebvre (1991); different spaces actually mean different spatial practices. For

example, the space of a shopping centre emerges from the practices of buying and selling, the relationships between consumers and shop owners in addition to the shop owner's positioning in glass shopfronts. The space of the shopping centre is not conceived of as passive but composed of active, spatial practices. Space is similarly understood here as relationally produced, but framed within a process account.

The container model of space could be seen as very much aligned with a substance-orientated view of the world: space is a static 'thing'. In contrast, a process-orientated view sees the world as made up of interlocking processes. Thus, space is not an external thing we are *in* but a process; it interweaves with other threads (embodiment, emotion, cognition, social relations etc.) to produce experience. In other words, our lives don't take place *in space,* rather they are *spatial.* Another way of thinking about this distinction is in terms of intensive and extensive terms. Extension is that which extends, which has measurable, physical dimensions – the space of maps, buildings and playgrounds – and can be easily divided (DeLanda, 2005). On the other hand, intensive properties are that which cannot be divided, such as processes of perception, emotion and memory. Extensive properties are synonymous with our folk understanding of 'space'. Kurt Lewin (1936) developed an understanding of space that was based on *intensive*, rather than extensive connections i.e. as incorporating the full range of connections that make situations meaningful for people, like memory and emotion, he calls this 'life-space'.

Life-space expounds on the Whiteheadian idea of relational essences: suggesting it is intensive *relationships* between things that give them their meaning, rather than 'simple location' in time and space. It does this by showing how important connections that go over the boundaries between mind and body, person and world, people and things, space and time can be. Lewin (1936) developed the concept of life-space in response to what he perceived as inadequacies with the Euclidean model of measurement of extensive properties: it was too rigid and fixed to explore psychological, spatial experience (Tucker, 2017); space as it is for us as acting, thinking beings (Brown & Reavey, 2017). Instead, life-space can consider all actual and possible 'connections that link the immediate scene to other spaces and actors, which are crucial to understanding any given psychological event' (Brown & Reavey, 2015, p50). This allows us to consider less physical or material concerns e.g.

the ways in which the past or imagined futures are folded into and have an impact on the current situation. As a result of being less concerned about temporal or spatial distance than about the connectedness between human and non-human bodies, it is possible to better understand the spaces of 'any given psychological event'. For example, Brown and Reavey (2015), draw on Lewin's (1936) example of a woman who has argued with her husband that morning and is now working at a factory loom:

> Relationships 'outside' work can then be said to have an effect on and shape the woman's conduct 'inside' the workplace. We might say that the quarrel, which happened earlier that morning, is still, in a sense, ongoing. It has been prolonged into the day, where it forms part of how the woman manages the problem of the broken thread… The woman may be imagining other things she might have said, or perhaps is finding new things to be angry about in the words her husband spat at her. The past is still acting on the present, through the work of recollection. (p50)

Key to Brown and Reavey (2015)'s argument here is that while we can break up our time into discrete units, this is secondary, 'our lives flow, only subsequently do we add in the breaks and punctuations' (p5). If our experience 'flow[s]' then to explain the argument's influence in terms of an intermediary effect on the woman's mood does not make sense, since this would 'create an artificial distinction between past and present' (Brown & Reavey, 2015, p50); our past is, in a sense, still ongoing in the present moment and that includes the woman's argument with her husband. These past recollections are suggested to influence present possibilities for action, for example, she may overreact to the situation of a thread breaking at her loom. Therefore, it is the relationship the woman has to an earlier scene which is crucial to understanding the event and the range of possibilities for action within it, rather than temporal or spatial distance.

Drawing on the concept of life-space also alters our understanding in two further ways: firstly, when we think in terms of relationally defined space, continuity over time looks quite different and, secondly, it illustrates the way material

arrangements can afford certain feelings, thoughts and actions. Brown and Reavey (2015) discuss life-space particularly with regard to memory. They argue for an 'expanded' view of memory, where remembering is facilitated by the setting within which one remembers. In contrast to a cognitive view of memory where the mind is a computer, retrieving previously stored information, an expanded concept of memory sees the process as not confined to the head but part of a wider field which also does the work of remembering. Therefore, the spaces and objects of memory are crucial. They employ James Gibson's concept of affordance, which describes the relationship between an organism and its environment, to make this clearer. His ecological psychology emphasised how an organism and its environment evolve together, through the exchange of meaning. These meanings are 'behavioural… signs to an organism that actions are possible' (Pickering, 2007, p72). Therefore, an affordance is an action made possible to an organism through its environment and may be embodied in natural objects, nuts that may be picked and pools that may be drunk from, or cultural objects, cupboards to store items in or a pathway to walk down. Humans can also detect 'higher grade' affordances which are shaped by cultural knowledge (Brown & Reavey, 2015) e.g. the strong cultural stories around water as a place of transformation, for example baptism, shape how we might understand a pool in the middle of a forest as a space of reinvention and purification. As such, spaces and objects not only afford possibilities for acting but also for thinking, feeling and understanding. This makes the person/world binary no longer tenable: the two are intricately interwoven within such an ecological, relational approach. It places spatial affordances as a complementary addition to our arsenal of psychosocial process concepts. Human experiences or mental events are not simply 'triggered' by an external environmental cause, rather they are co-constituted with a particular environment.

Brown and Reavey (2015) discuss spatial mediation of experience with respect to memory, how a material affordance (or 'higher order invariance') can alter the flow of past to present and structure current possibilities for action and feeling. The way in which this affordance persists through time, or as Lewin (1936) understands time: changes in life-space, cannot be understood in extensive terms where measurement is extrinsic to the surface, a grid placed on top as in a Euclidean

understanding of space. Rather, measurement is intrinsic to the surface itself, about the consistent relationship between points. To make this clearer, let's consider an example. In this instance a girl/wall/adult invariance persists through countless alterations in life-space to afford certain present understandings of agency during an interview with Bella who was sexually abused for a year as a child (Brown & Reavey, 2015). As Bella recalls sitting on a wall with her close friend at the time, the abuser's daughter, she oscillates between asserting her own agency – she continued this important friendship, despite the abuse – and calling her own agency into question – she recalls the sexualised way the abuser lifted her down from the wall, compared to how he lifted his own daughter down '*like you do with a child*' (Brown & Reavey, 2015, p93) (emphasis in original). The wall here is suggested to '*condense…*and *simplif[y]* the dynamics of power' (Brown & Reavey, 2015, p92) (emphasis in original) as it presents a more powerful adult, who can easily navigate the height of the wall, and a powerless child, who cannot.

This girl/wall/adult spatial arrangement thus forms an invariance for the woman as she seeks to negotiate her possibilities for agency around it in the present: as witnessed in the way her subject position shifts from agentic (in relation to choosing to continue being friends and sitting on the wall) to powerless (as the abuser unacceptably sexualises her as he lifts her down from the wall). This girl/wall/adult invariance is crucial, Brown and Reavey (2015) argue, as it shows the ambiguity often erased from memories of child abuse in which people are told the only subject position open to them is one of powerless 'victim'. This is problematic as such ambiguity, e.g. a sense of choice, however limited, could take on significance and open up an enhanced sense of agency and possibilities for action in the present e.g. I made choices despite the abuse, so I can make choices now. A relationally-defined space of possible actions (i.e. life-space) can be seen as having implications that go beyond the context of memory to psychological experience more generally. Material arrangements can afford certain feelings and actions, as shown by the way the girl/wall/adult invariance structured feelings of agency – confirming the significance of the material world for co-constituting our lives. Furthermore, life-space shows how continuity over time can be seen to arise not from extrinsic measurement, where space is a container, but intrinsic measurement, from the

relationships between people and things. And space as relationally produced fundamentally unsettles the person/world binary, which proved so troublesome earlier in the chapter for explaining our lived experience.


**2.5.2 Objects**


There are both human and non-human – animals, objects, material settings, plant life – bodies in the world, yet the social sciences have tended to focus on humanity alone. In order to further explore the materiality of existence and understand how objects can play an active role in our experience of the world, we turn now to Latour's ANT. While Lewin's concept of life-space provides an encompassing vision of the importance of intensive connections and how these transform experience, ANT details the points of connection themselves, the objects or non-human bodies that are doing the connecting.

Latour (2005) views the gravest mistake of the social sciences as the conceptualisation of the 'social' as a static, pre-existing thing, which can be used to explain any given state of affairs. According to Latour, something was understood to be 'social' or to 'pertain to society' when it could be defined as not having certain properties such as being completely natural, economic or biological and as having other qualities: it must attain, support, sustain, reproduce or destabilise the social order in some way. The 'social' then becomes the glue holding everything else together, which produces the bizarre scenario where the 'social' is invoked to explain social life. In contrast, Latour argues that the social is not a pre-existing thing but is constituted by the associations between human and non-human 'actors': the social is what is glued together by these many other connectors. The task of the social sciences then becomes the tracing of these associations. We can see comparisons here between Latour's understanding of the social and Lewin's understanding of life-space. This speaks to the two theories' overlapping focus: they see the world not in terms of passive frames, such as extensive space or a reified conception of the social, but as dynamically produced through relationships, or 'associations' in Latour's language.

The tracing of connections between human *and* non-human actors allows ANT to more deeply engage with objects, embodiment and materiality. As part of this program, Latour appreciates the power of objects, which 'don't sleep' and make 'associations which don't break down' (p70), unlike more fragile social ties. He also asserts that he will treat objects as 'full-blown actors' that have agency. This is a highly controversial claim – agency has been treated as a special reserve of humanity – and was criticised earlier in the chapter for 'flatten[ing] out' (Stenner, 2008, p92) the distinction between human and non-human actors. Agency does feel like a counterintuitive choice of word, yet, perhaps, Latour isn't attempting to negate the clear differences between humans and non-humans, but is (overzealously) responding to the social sciences' long omission of non-human actors and seeks to reaffirm their crucial position in the production of the social world. Regardless, we don't have to accept that objects have agency in the same way as humans in order to appreciate the way in which they:

> might authorise, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid, and so on. (Latour, 2005, p72)

Within this understanding, objects play an active role, they 'authorise' or 'encourage' or 'forbid' action and are thus intrinsic to how events are managed and negotiated. Under a reading of Latour, objects are not inert background but important figures in people's experience, acting as 'non-human participant[s]'. They make possible, restrict, encourage, point to, lead, halt and magnify different outcomes, activities and experiences. For example, within a mental health ward, the tinted glass and visibly locked doors facilitate observation of its patients and materialise their status as 'risky' individuals who require containment. One participant describes how the flimsy curtains of a high-risk room and translucent glass create a feeling of 'being constantly watched', an experience she refers to as 'awful' (McGrath & Reavey, 2013, p13-14). In fact, large, visible locks in mental health wards have actually been found to increase violent episodes (Bowers et al., 2006).

The French philosopher Michel Serres builds on Latour's central idea of the active role of objects while maintaining a more credible distinction between objects and people. Like Latour (2005), Serres sees objects as crucial mediators of human relationships and, as such, jointly productive of human experience. Serres (1995) describes objects as slowing down and stabilising social relations – without them such relationships would be 'as airy as clouds' (p87) – while also being culturally encoded with multiple meanings, as the roles they play can shift. Thus, there is no hard dichotomy between the social world and the material world: objects are social and the social is material. In addition, there is not an insistence of the equivalence of objects and humans, rather the slow, anchoring role objects play is noted for its differentiation from more 'airy' (Serres, 1995, p87) human social relations.

### 2.5.3 Materially mediated subjectivity

The significance of the spaces and objects of the material world to our experience has been illustrated. Now, how this feeds into how we think about subjectivity, traditionally conceived as opposite to materiality, will be considered. Brown and Stenner (2009) adopt Foucault's (1988) 'art of living' to explore how subjectivity is constituted through the multiple, overlapping processes of our experience: discursive, material and social. Brown and Stenner (2009) see Foucault's later work as offering a shift from viewing subjectivity 'as something "implanted" or "inscribed" on the body" (p172) to looking at unfolding practices, 'technologies of the self' (Foucault, 2000a), which are culturally and historically situated. These practices form the connection someone has with their own subjectivity, such as: thinking about the events in their life and how they felt, moving their bodies, expressing emotions or personal reflections with others, working in a particular industry or area, accumulating specialised knowledge and recognising (or being recognised) as a member of a particular social group e.g. man, transgender person, mother, teacher, employee, friend. The self is therefore described as: 'the shifting form which both contains our sense of self and continuously interacts with and is marked by the forces which sustain living' (Brown & Stenner, 2009, p172). These 'forces' include

discourse, cognition, emotion as well as material forces such as embodied movement, objects and other material features of the world. The self is thus conceived of as materially as well as discursively distributed and contextualised, as well as actively formulated with and through material spaces. Within this understanding, objects are integral to but not deterministic of the subjective self (Stenner, 2008); according with a relational understanding of our spatialised experiences (Lewin, 1936; Latour, 2005). Therefore, space and materiality will be viewed within this work as consisting of overlapping processes which constitute our experience and as a contributory thread to the active formulation of subjectivity, providing the setting for 'technologies of the self'.

### 2.5.4 Affective atmospheres

> 'we do not live in a merely physical world; the experienced space around us is always charged with affective qualities.' (Fuchs, 2013, p2)

A crucial way in which emotion, space and embodiment can be seen to overlap is in the concept of 'affective atmosphere', which can be thought of, again, as relationally produced. Drawing on Marxist and phenomenological insights, Anderson (2009) describes an affective atmosphere as:

> indeterminate…dynamic…[and having] singular affective qualities that emanate from but exceed the assembling of bodies. (p77)

It is the 'assembling' or connecting of human and non-human bodies that is pivotal, how they 'affect...one another as some form of 'envelopment' is produced' (p80). The relations between 'multiple types' (p80) of bodies produce an atmosphere, though in its production it 'exceed[s]' those relations. This 'envelopment' seems to take on a kind of diffuse spherical quality, though this is indeterminate and shifting. Anderson's definition may seem ambiguous and it is, willfully so, since ambiguity is at the heart of the phenomena. There is a sense in which an atmosphere is very

much *present* and strongly felt: we have all experienced the inexplicable power of an atmosphere whether that be the cosiness of home, the electric tension in a room after an argument or the chilling feel of a deserted, poorly lit industrial space. We also experience atmospheres in a spatial way, as emerging from a particular context, from cities and places to an interpersonal atmosphere that emanates from a particular collection of bodies: for example, the dyadic, affective resonance between a couple (Sloterdijk, 1998 cited in Klauser, 2010).

Emotion and feeling are central to this understanding: an atmosphere has a 'singular affective qualit[y]' which is striking to whoever encounters it; felt as a 'bodily resonance' (Fuchs, 2013, p2) since all emotion emerges with and through bodily feeling, as argued earlier with regard to a psychosocial process account of emotion (Burkitt, 2014). We are drawn into atmospheres as we perceive them to be emanating from a particular space or interpersonal environment, they affect and move us without our consent, seeming to come from 'outside' of us. Many people can also experience the same atmosphere emanating from the same space to the extent which we might consider them as having an 'objective' level of continuity (Fuchs, 2013). Indeed, there are whole professions, such as set design, landscape gardening and architecture, which focus on the arranging features of the environment, e.g. sounds, lights, objects, in order to intensify and shape atmospheres (Böhme, 2006). Yet despite this potency, atmospheres also seem to linger just outside of 'rational explanation and clear figuration. Something that hesitates at the edge of the unsayable.' (Anderson, 2009, p78). The emphasis here is on affective atmosphere as paradoxical:

> [they] hold a series of opposites – presence and absence, materiality and ideality, definite and indefinite, singularity and generality – in a relation of tension. (p80)

Once again, there is a troubling of traditional, pre-held binaries. They both exist and do not exist in that they 'belong' to the perceiving subject, atmospheres cannot be present without someone there to perceive them, and 'belong' to objects, atmospheres emerge from the relationships between the different material

elements that constitute them. Atmospheres are quasi-autonomous yet not free-floating, rather a supervening quality on the environment and bodies that produce them. This mixing together and troubling of the distinction between the objective and the subjective is what makes the atmospheric concept so interesting – recognised as neither one nor the other: neither subjective nor objective, neither personal nor impersonal, neither singular nor vague – and potentially fruitful when dealing with the indeterminacies, contradictions and tensions of human existence.

**2.6 Conclusions**

A psychosocial process account has been elucidated and argued to better situate human experience: specifically, our emotional, embodied and spatial experience. Such an account views the world as constituted through interconnected processes and can be seen to disrupt reductive binaries between person/world, individual/society, mind/body, subject/object, viewing them as interdependent rather than oppositional. The metaphysical groundwork for this position was described as the Whiteheadian concept of an actual occasion as the fundamental unit of reality, which is neither subject nor object but a fusion of the two.

Within this account, our understanding of emotion is transformed from an isolatable, interior substance to arising from the 'patterns' (Burkitt, 2014) or 'systems' (Stenner, 2013) of relationship between ourselves and others, between ourselves and the world. Emotion is thus a thoroughly contextualised phenomena and we need to consider the web of relations from which emotions arises, which Burkitt narrows to: the particular situation, the personal history of the person/people involved and broader socio-cultural context. Yet, emotions are also fundamentally embodied and *felt* – bodily feeling is central to all experience of emotion (Burkitt, 2014). This means that emotions are now longer 'in' us but occur through an interaction between us and the world, they are distributed affairs. This has the advantage of releasing them from their bonds of being purely 'subjective', with no relevance to the 'objective' world of matter and facts. It has also been argued as important to consider what the systems of relationship which give rise to

emotion exclude (Stenner, 2013). The answer to this question about what thirdness is excluded from the system can reveal much about the constitution of phenomena. Going forward, this means drawing out the personal, affective experiences of couples as well as practicing a careful awareness of the relational web which produces emotional experience, rather than focussing on emotion as a unit of separable enquiry in and of itself. More broadly, attention will be paid to what is being excluded in order for phenomena (e.g. emotions like love and jealousy as well as couple relationships) to flourish.

Turning to embodiment, our bodies were argued as equally important as our minds, the former responsible for all experience and meaning. Spinoza's (1677/1993 cited in Brown & Stenner, 2009) parallelist thought was argued to provide a useful way of thinking about the mind and body as modes of two different attributes (thought and extension) of a single process; the process of the becoming of actual occasions. This framing was reinforced by Johnson's (2008) more modern understanding of experience as an organism-environment process of interaction, which both 'body' and 'mind' were abstractions of. The fact that we are fully part *of* the natural world, rather than simply *in* it (a process ontology views humanity as different in degree not kind from other phenomena) suggests that meaning is also natural, resulting from the interrelation of a biological organism and the socio-material world. This places even things that have previously been considered well outside of the bodily arena as fundamentally embodied phenomena, such as conceptual, cognitive meaning. Carrying these ideas forward within this thesis, attention must be paid to our whole, embodied selves as well as to what our bodily feelings can tell us about the meaning of experiences.

Finally, space has been described in this chapter as dynamic and relationally produced; not as an external container we are *in* but a process, intertwining with the embodied, emotional, cognitive, social and biological to produce our experience. Hence, our lives do not take place *in space*, but are *spatial*. Lewin's (1936) concept of 'life-space' was discussed as providing a helpful lens through which to view our spatial experience: as focussed on the intensive connections, such as memory, perception and emotion, crucial to any given situation, rather than extensive measurement. In addition, Brown and Reavey's (2015) exploration of difficult

memories using life-space was argued to show how material arrangements can afford certain ways of being and feeling. Latour's (2005) and Serres' (1995) ideas were used to strengthen how, respectively, objects can 'allow' action and stabilise 'airy' human relations. Together, these scholars were claimed to make a strong case for how our subjectivity is materially modulated (Foucault, 2000a, 2000b, 1988, 1987 cited in Brown & Stenner, 2009). Finally, both human and non-human bodies coalesced in the production of an 'affective atmosphere' (Anderson, 2009). This concept ties together the strands of emotion, embodiment and space: it is both strongly felt, as the eerie atmosphere of a dimly lit park, and yet strangely diffuse; emerging from but exceeding the collection of bodies which give rise to it and also experienced as occurring spatially, within a particular context such as a room, city or in the space between two people. Incorporation of affective atmospheres calls for careful heed to paid to the paradoxical nature of our experience and how this hovers between ourselves and our environments, neither quite separate from the other. It will also be important to consider the fundamental role materiality plays in co-constituting subjectivity, agency and action.

Thus, we are left with a richer, psychosocial process account of experience which sees us as enmeshed within a relational web, out of which arises our emotional experience. And yet we also personally *feel* this relationship web in our meaning-making bodies as they move through active, intensive space.

# Chapter Three – Methodology

The theoretical boundaries of the thesis have now been delineated. In this chapter, how these framed the methodological and analytical process will be discussed. The chapter can be seen as structured into four areas. The first details the concerns, namely of voice and power, that informed the research project and the research questions arrived at. The second section examines how these concerns shaped methodological decisions and provides detailed reasoning for the research design of the two studies performed: couple interviews and diary solicitation. Thirdly, the full procedures followed during recruitment and the data collection process will be detailed and the ethical issues which informed these explored. Reflexivity and validity will be addressed in the final chapter of this thesis. In the final section, 'Analytical steps', the framework and process of analysis is examined. Thematic analysis was used and the ontological and epistemological decisions that underpinned this process will be articulated. This will be followed by a thorough exposition of the different stages of analysis and the approaches used to interrogate the data.

## 3.1 Talking to drug users

> Almost every psychoactive drug has been regarded by some society as a dire threat to public order and moral standards, while a source of harmless pleasure by others. Almost every society has one drug whose use is tolerated, while others are regarded with deep suspicion. (Saunders, 1997, p17)

Drug use is an enduring fact of almost all cultures, in all time periods (Jay, 2012). As the words of Nicholas Saunders, author of numerous books on ecstasy use and culture, show, different drug perceptions are little more than a twist of the cultural kaleidoscope away. Within Euro-North American culture, the use of alcohol, caffeine and, to some extent, tobacco is 'tolerated' while cannabis, MDMA, cocaine, LSD, heroin and psilocybin mushrooms are 'regarded with deep suspicion'. This schism

could be seen as reproduced in alcohol and tobacco research which frequently include discussions of pleasure in contrast to illicit drugs research where these are largely absent (Moore, 2008). In order to understand why these illicit drugs are seen as a 'dire threat to public order and moral standards', it is vital to consider who is saying so.

Voice and power are fundamentally entangled: whoever has voice, has power and whoever has no voice, has little power. If this is so, we have to ask whose voice is legitimised when it comes to drugs? It is proposed there are several institutions/populations who have the most say: the Government, 'experts' in the field - usually found in the disciplines of psychology, medicine and epidemiology (Moore, 2008), the media and the (concerned) public. Moreover, while there some exceptions, by and large, each of these subordinates the voices of drug users themselves. This is so even in academic research that seeks to explore alternative conceptualisations outside of drugs as 'dire threat'. David Nutt, a well-known neuropsychopharmacologist within illicit drugs research, famously said horse riding was more dangerous than taking ecstasy (Nutt, 2009) and emphasised the ubiquity of drug use in society, even amongst the highest ranking politicians (Nutt, 2015). Yet, he still positions his research as free of the 'bias' of drug users themselves, publicly declaring he does not and has never taken drugs (Nutt, 2015).

Thus, the voices of drug users remain illegitimate in almost all quarters (Moore, 2008; Móró, Simon, Bárd & Rácz, 2011). There is a striking similarity here with discussions of mental distress (for why 'distress' is more suitable than 'illness' see Cromby, Harper & Reavey, 2013), where the voices of service users have also been ignored in favour of psychiatric explanations of distress (McGrath, 2012). However, recently the experiences of service users have become more visible, for instance, service users must now be represented on all mental health trust boards and be part of service evaluation (D. O. H., 1999), though there are still questions raised over the extent to which they can actually affect change (Beresford, 2002). Drug users have not experienced the same change in fortune. Turning to the field of drugs research particularly, we can see the struggle for voice as underpinned by what Moore (2008) terms 'research capital' (p354). This research capital controls access to the resources within the field, like funding and policy/practical influence.

Moore emphasises the serious health risks drugs research competes with, such as cancer and heart disease, and suggests that within this climate it makes sense to emphasise drug-related harms. In addition, the 'evidenced-based' approach of Government and health organisations is more suited to the hard, objective 'facts' of quantitative research, rather than the contextually situated, interpretative findings of qualitative research, which has included the views of drug users (e.g. Beck & Rosenbaum, 1994; Bahora, Sterk & Elifson, 2009; Duff, 2003, 2008, 2009; Farrugia, 2015; Foster & Spencer, 2013; Hinchliff, 2001; Hunt, Evans & Kares, 2007; Levy, O'Grady, Wish & Arria, 2005; Moore & Miles, 2004; Moore & Measham, 2008; Olsen, 2009; Solowij, Hall & Lee, 1992). Politically too, there are risks in being considered 'pro-drug' or not taking the harms of drug use seriously. David Nutt, mentioned previously, is a prime example: he was sacked as chairman of the Government's Advisory Council for the Misuse of Drugs after criticising the decision to increase penalties for cannabis use (Travis, 2009).

However, drug users have not simply been silent or powerless. There is a long history of published works discussing personal experiences of drug use such as Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an Opium Eater* and Aldous Huxley's *Doors of Perception* as well as many books detailing drug users' views from a secondhand perspective (Pilcher, 2008; Saunders, 1997). It has also been argued that key thinkers, such as Freud, Sartre, Foucault and Deleuze, developed their theories as a result of their encounters with drugs – ideas which have gone on to vitally shape modern understandings (Boothroyd, 2006). Drug use has always intermingled with the arts: featuring in some of the most well-known cult movies e.g. Pulp Fiction, Trainspotting, American Beauty, and music e.g. Happy Mondays, The Beatles, The New Order; even coming to be an intrinsic part of whole musical genres such as acid house, reggae, punk and drum'n'bass. Drug users have also effected their own change. Johann Hari (2015) tells the story of injecting drug users in Vancouver who were tired of the high number of overdoses and took matters into their own hands – creating their own harm reduction services and eventually winning the support of local government. Drug users have also set up advocacy organisations such as the *International Network of People who Use Drugs*.

This is not to say that drug users' voices are the only voices that matter, but that they are part of a spectrum of drug use understandings and, as such, deserve to be heard. Indeed, deserve to be at the centre of drugs research, policy and practice. We consult patients on the level of medical care they receive and their experiences of health and illness, customers on the quality of a product or service and students on their university experience. People who are on the receiving end of a service tend to be very much in the picture when it is designed, developed and delivered. Of course, there are exceptions to this, such as prisoners within the criminal justice system. The criminalisation of drug use thus serves to place drug users in a marginalised position of immorality and unworthiness, though there have been a multitude of voices in recent times to officially regulate (The Global Commission on Drug Policy, 2014) or decriminalise drug use (e.g. Ireland, Portugal and Czech Republic all have policies of decriminalisation), including, notably, the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2014), a branch of the United Nations. Furthermore, many aims held by, say, research disciplines might actually be better facilitated by a deeper understanding of drug user's experiences e.g. health interventions may strike more of a chord if couched in the language of drug users themselves, recognising *their* interpretation of harm. The top-down imposition of institutional ideas of harm may serve to alienate the very people they are trying to reach (Foster & Spencer, 2013).

## 3.2 Research design

The research project was qualitative in design, with data gathered through two methods, couple interviews and individual diaries/interviews, and subsequently amalgamated for analysis. The analytical chapters therefore draw on the whole data set, organised thematically. Issues of power and voice identified previously within drugs research shaped the research design. Arguably, qualitative methodology itself is particularly suited to addressing these concerns since it focusses on personal meanings within an exploratory context, rather than dealing in pre-defined categories, as found in quantitative research paradigms (Willig, 2001). Thus, qualitative research concerns itself with the generation of participant-focussed

understandings, so could be seen as aptly placed to facilitate divergent ideas which challenge existing models of, for example, the 'pathological' (Mugford, 1988), 'immoral' (Goode, 2000) or 'irrational' (Pennay & Moore, 2010) drug user.

This commitment to keeping participant voices at the centre of the research was advanced by the data collection methods chosen. The interviews were all semi-structured and centred on participants' self-selected items in order to give participants more room to steer the interview process (e.g. Reavey, 2011). Diaries also offered an insight into participants' lives and an opportunity for them to tailor, edit and cut out content, in order to tell the stories they *wanted* to tell (Plummer, 2001). Yet, it is recognised that research cannot straightforwardly 'give voice' to participants, rather researcher influence is omnipresent, for example the selection of particular participant quotes in analysis amplifies some voices and understandings and silences others (Fine, 1992; Keane, 2011).

### 3.3 Couple interviews

The first method of data collection was semi-structured couple interviews. Whether or not to interview couples together or apart has been the subject of methodological debate (Bjørnholt & Farstad, 2014). With the decision sometimes framed as a truth-seeking exercise, underpinned by the assumption that one interviewing style provides a window into the 'real' relationship (Bjørnholt & Farstad, 2014). Such understandings were eschewed within this research, where different interactional contexts were recognised as shaping the accounts produced (Heaphy & Einarsdottir, 2013). The choice was made to interview couples together here for several reasons. Firstly, a joint interview can provide rich data. It can, for example, allow a glimpse of couple dynamics in practice, rather than the dynamic as told by one partner in an individual interview. Indeed, it has been argued that the individual is not a sufficient unit of analysis in research that purports to be centred on *the couple* (Duncombe & Marsden, 1996). Joint interviews have been highlighted as particularly appropriate when 'studies focus on negotiations between partners or shared relationship construction' (Heaphy & Einarsdottir, p56); and this research was concerned with how couples constructed, negotiated and interpreted MDMA experiences and

closeness. This technique has been employed by a number of researchers working within the broad remits of relationship and family research (Bjørnholt & Farstad, 2014; Dryden, 1998; e; Gabb & Fink, 2015).

The richness of couple data can also be seen in the ways partners elaborate on and contest each other's accounts. The response of a listener can guide what is remembered (Pasupathi, 2001) and couples have been found to jointly construct memories, the details of which may not have been remembered in individual settings (Harris, Sutton & Barnier, 2010). There is also the possibility for partners to interrupt and contradict each other, providing alternate perspectives. Such sites of dispute can be illuminating, particularly when considering how meanings are negotiated between couples (Dryden, 1998). Furthermore, the comfort of participants is arguably enhanced: being interviewed with a partner you know and trust can make the interview process feel more manageable. A couple can present a united front and navigate the interview questions together.

Finally, joint interviews can also be justified from an ethical perspective. Bjørnholt and Farstad (2014) point out how information might be revealed in an anonymous, interview situation that would not be revealed to a partner or family members. Preserving anonymity of such disclosures is often not possible in research projects where both partners or several family members are interviewed separately, since such data is clustered together in the analysis. If both partners are there, couples can consent (or not) in the moment to a disclosure and are aware that they are speaking in a 'public' setting (Bjørnholt & Farstad, 2014).

However, there are disadvantages to conducting interviews in this manner. One partner may dominate the conversation, speaking over or for the other person and disclosure can be constrained (Beitin, 2008). Individual diaries were used as a separate method of data collection to counterbalance these possibilities and provide an outlet to speak freely, if that was needed.

**3.3.1 Visual methods: objects and timelines**

The psychosocial process perspective taken within this research advocates for a *deep empiricism* where the domain of subjectivity is radically redefined, avoiding the bifurcation of the world into meaningless, objective reality and value-laden subjective experience (Stenner, 2008). As Stenner, Bhatti and Church (2012) elaborate:

> Experience is central to this account, but experience is emphatically not limited to the modes of conscious subjective experience associated with human beings, and it is never separated from its 'objects'. Indeed, following Whitehead, they define experience as the process of assembling and patterning objects (what Whitehead calls prehension). (p9)

Thus, experience is fundamentally entangled with objects; indeed, experience is produced through many, interrelating threads (e.g. perception, memory and the discursive domain) of this 'process of assembling and patterning objects'. It is not possible to abstract experience away from its embodied, material and social context. Therefore, objects, embodiment and the material world are not secondary aspects of the world but crucial to our experience, the two intertwined with one another: subjectivity is within the natural, objective world and we are only subjects through our object-related concerns. This re-engagement with materiality has been facilitated by researchers through the use of visual methodologies such as photo production and elicitation (Del Busso, 2009; Majumdar, 2011), videos (Pink, 2001; Holliday, 2004; Shrum, Duque & Brown, 2005), spatial interviews (McGrath & Reavey, 2015; McGrath, 2012) and emotion maps (Gabb & Fink, 2015).

Therefore, visual methods were incorporated within the interviews: couples were asked to bring five objects or photos (Del Busso, 2009; Majumdar, 2011), each item representing a time they had taken MDMA together. These were explained as prompts to help them talk about their experiences and would not be kept by the researcher. In the latter half of the interview, couples were also asked to draw a timeline of their relationship which was retained (c.f Iantaffi, 2011). The decision to use visual methods reflected a concern with the materiality of existence (Reavey, 2011), the world of tables, doors, rooms and bodies; an aspect some social

constructionist schools of thought have been argued to neglect (Brown & Stenner, 2009; Burkitt, 1999; Bordo, 1998; Cromby & Nightingale, 1999; Csordas, 1999; Gillies, et al., 2004; 2005; Nightingale & Cromby, 2002). However, materiality is a crucial constituent of the psychosocial process perspective taken in this work; we exist within interconnected social and material webs (Stenner, 2008). This does not indicate a return to the 'real' or 'objective' world of positivist scientific paradigms, however, but a recognition that neither objects or subjects are what the world is made up of. Instead, the primary 'stuff' of existence is a fusion of the two, with subjectivity coming into being through its objective concerns (Stenner, 2008).

Visual methods also clearly accord with the multi-modal nature of our experience: we deal in words, images, smells, tastes and kinaesthetic feelings (Reavey, 2011). Indeed, visual images can be especially evocative in research settings; accessing different aspects of an experience (Willig, 2001). The recent surge of interest in visual methods within psychology (e.g. Barker et al., 2008; Cromby, 2012; Del Busso & Reavey, 2013; McGrath & Reavey, 2015; Reavey & Johnson, 2008; Tucker & Smith, 2013), hails from a history of visual modalities in social science disciplines such as anthropology (Pink, 2001) and sociology (Prosser, 1998; Knowles & Sweetman, 2004). Asking participants to select items has been argued to shift the power dynamic between researcher/researched because it gives participants the opportunity to reflect on and bring what they feel is relevant to their experience and thus shape the focus of the research encounter (Harcourt & Frith, 2008; Radley & Taylor, 2003). Facilitating the research to be more participant-led was a core concern when making methodological decisions, as outlined earlier in the chapter. Using visual prompts, like objects and the timeline, can also provide a safer method of communication – acting as an intermediary between researcher and researched, something for participants to speak through and to (Boden & Eatough, 2014). In addition, such physical prompts might further help participants ground their accounts in 'concrete experiences' (Silver & Reavey, 2010, p1643), lending specificity and detail to the discussion while avoiding generalised talk *about* their experiences (Reavey, 2011). This generalised talk has been argued as more prone to repeating rehearsed narratives, which have been glossed over and represented in a standard format (Reavey & Johnson, 2008). Photo production, rather than elicitation, was

dismissed on two grounds: heightened anonymity concerns due to the illegality of drug use and the additional requirement of continuing MDMA use this would impose.


## 3.4 Writing diaries


The second method of data collection was solicited individual diaries and optional interviews. Participants were asked to write daily entries for a week, several days before taking MDMA with their partner and several days afterwards. They were intended to capture everyday minutiae that might be omitted, glossed over or simply forgotten as well as providing an outlet to communicate sensitive or less positive information. Diaries have been used in social science research, particularly in health research (Kenton, 2010) and can be used as part of qualitative (Elliott, 1997) or quantitative research paradigms (Corti, 1993).

Everyday moments, while argued to form the fabric of how couples relate to one another are often paid little heed in relationship research (Gabb & Fink, 2015). Diaries, by recording events much closer to when they take place, can therefore be seen as capturing details other forms of data collection might miss (direct experience sampling also captures data in 'real-time' as participants responds to assessment cues e.g. mobile phone notifications, but is more intrusive and onerous in nature than the diary format (Scollon, Prieto & Diener, 2009)). Particularly referred to here is the interview, an extremely popular qualitative method (Turner III, 2010), which has been critiqued for providing standardised, generalised narratives (Haug, 1987). Discursive psychology emphasises how the things we say are drawn from the range of discourses that society makes available to us (Henriques, 1984; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Parker, 1992) and tend to generalise (Edwards, 1994) and normalise (Graham & Slee, 2007) our experience. The more frequently recalled or culturally significant the experience, the more generalised a story gets e.g. stories about 'loss of virginity' resulted in glossed over, standardised stories whereas 'initiating' and 'touching' prompted more diverse, revealing depictions of sexual events (Kippax, Crawford, Waldby & Benton, 1990).

Relationships could be seen as fertile ground for the exposition of standard narratives of experience (Alea & Vick, 2010): with couples rehearsing stories of 'big' moments such as first meeting, the beginning of cohabitation or marriage as well as familiar stories of relational progression e.g. the honeymoon period, commitment uncertainty, becoming comfortable with one another. This was borne out in the interviews conducted, it was often difficult for couples to talk about *everyday* moments or the details of *specific* events, rather than a general sense of their experience. Drug experiences may not be considered as rehearsed in the same way, the range of dominant drug discourses is narrow, with pathology and immorality at the forefront as well as hedonism. There are, of course, other drug discourses such as drugs as a normal part of life (the 'normalisation' thesis: Parker, Aldridge & Measham, 1998) and tools for self-improvement (Beck & Rosenbaum, 1994). But the continued marginalisation of drug use through its illegal status and ostracism within the political sphere and mainstream media means that participants may feel they have to resist prevalent discourses. Again, resulting in standardised talk. Such resistance was, understandably, found in the interviews. Researchers can be associated with authority or authoritative ways of thinking, therefore participants could have associated me with the authoritative position on drugs. Certainly, several went to lengths to assure me that they were not going to decry drugs (implying that might be what I wanted them to do) and rebutting notions of drug use as 'bad' and 'fake'. Furthermore, the discourse of drugs as outside of normal lives, deviant or pathological, combined with the tendency to generalise within interview scenarios anyway, meant it was difficult to get a sense of how drugs were embedded into the everyday lives of participants. In contrast, diaries could contextualise these experiences, how they were prepared for, what came after, 'provid[ing] a better understanding of the natural flow of various behaviors and their interrelatedness' (Stopka, Springer, Khoshnood, Shaw & Singer, 2004, p74).

Diaries were also used to capture sensitive (Kenton, 2010) and less positive (Corti et al., 1990) details of participants' lives. For example, sex can be seen as sensitive; with research marking an 'intrusive threat' to a usually private area (Lee, 1993, p4). It is suggested that diaries are an easier method through which to divulge sensitive information, perhaps due to the lessened visibility of the researcher. This is

not to say that the researcher's presence is not felt, the women of Pini and Walkerdine's (2011) video diary study asked questions to the camera, 'is this what you want?'; there was still a sense of performing for an audience but at a distance. Furthermore, the diary is a confessional device (Harvey, 2011) – a well-understood concept in post-modern media (Foucault, 1979) – which can enable greater reflection than alternative methods (Holliday, 2004). Unlike interviews, which require almost immediate responses to particular questions, participants have space to think when writing a diary and are more free to either simply not answer a question (as was the case with participants who missed days of the diary or ignored particular questions) or determine what they want to talk about. For this study, questions were included as a guide in the diary as well as participants being encouraged 'to write about anything that feels important to you about MDMA use with your partner.' (Appendix Seven). Moreover, the opportunity a diary affords to go back over and edit what you've written also provides a space for reflection. This process is helpful as well in centring on the voices of drug users and what they want to say, one of the concerns of this research, as they have greater 'editorial control' over what is finally presented to the researcher, than in a traditional interview (Holliday, 2004, p1603).

### 3.4.1 Diary interviews

When invited to take part in the diary research, participants were also made aware of an optional diary interview they could complete. These interviews took place after the diary-writing week and were structured around what was written in the diary. Kenton (2010) advocates strongly for this diary, diary-interview method due to the depth of understanding it can provide. A participant can clarify, elaborate or retract elements of their diary as well as providing much-needed context, such as the broader significance or prevalence of the events or feelings contained therein. Indeed, it was found that these interviews provided rich, contextualised data, shedding new light on the diaries. However, unlike Kenton (2010), it was decided that the diary interviews would be an *optional* part of the interview process. The

accompanying interview was not stipulated as a requirement for two reasons. Firstly, to accommodate people who did not want to talk face-to-face for whatever reason – due to the illegality of the activity under discussion, for instance – and, secondly, for the more pragmatic reason of not wanting to overburden voluntary participants. Diaries take a reasonable amount of time and effort to fill in daily; an additional interview might push participants beyond the bounds of the commitment they were prepared to offer. This was particularly relevant to this research, where the eligible sample was already very small and it was thought prudent to offer manageable ways of taking part.

**3.5 Participant recruitment**

Participants were recruited through advertising (22) and word-of-mouth (6). The research was advertised primarily through online sources. The online discussion forum reddit.com, using the subreddits 'drugs' and 'MDMA' (8), and the harm reduction website rollsafe.org (8) proved the most successful avenues. The research also garnered participants through the Students for Sensible Drug Policy facebook group (2) and bluelight.org (2). In addition, a facebook page 'Couples and MDMA Research' was set up, which received 211 likes and several messages asking for further information, however this did not translate into participation. Outside of the online sphere, a classified was placed in the Big Issue (2) and recruiting via word-of-mouth involved asking people I already knew if they would be willing to participate (4) or if they knew anyone that met the inclusion criteria and might be interested (2). The adverts used for both studies are included in Appendices One and Two for reference.

The demographic details of the participants from both studies are listed in the tables below:

Study One – Couple interviews

| Names | Age | Location | Relationship length | Relationship status |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Kara and Liam | 33/36 | UK | 13 years | cohabiting, engaged |
| Jenny and Mark | 30/33 | USA | 8 years | cohabiting, engaged |
| Eva and Lars | 27/29 | EU | 18 months | cohabiting |
| Emily and Dan | 40/40 | USA | 24 years | married with children |
| Rachel and Joe | 60/51 | UK | 20 years | cohabiting |
| Helena and Jakub | 29/34 | UK | 6 years | cohabiting, married |
| Leanne and Matt | 26/26 | UK | 7 years | cohabiting |
| Ayesha and Sam | 25/25 | UK | 18 months | cohabiting |
| Abby and Ryan | 40/42 | UK | 21 years | cohabiting with children |
| Clara and Nick | 26/35 | USA | 2 years | cohabiting, engaged |

Study Two – Individual Diaries

| Name(s) | Age | Location | Relationship length | Relationship status | Diary interview? |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Tomàs | 33 | EU | 5 years | cohabiting, married | N |
| Karl | 27 | EU | 3 years | cohabiting | Y |
| Ethan | 27 | UK | 6 years | cohabiting | N |
| Effy and Aron (completed together) | 29/33 | USA | 5 years | cohabiting, married | N |
| Ken | 37 | EU | 6.5 years | cohabiting, married | N |
| Carrie | 24 | EU | 2.5 years | cohabiting | Y |
| Melanie | 27 | UK | 4.5 years | cohabiting | N |

As can be seen, although the participant group was varied in age (25 - 62), geographical location (UK: 14; USA: 8; EU [outside of UK]: 6) and relationship length (18 months - 24 years) in other ways it was demographically alike e.g. exclusively

heterosexual and largely middle class. Furthermore, the research was voluntary, which might have further exaconerbated the middle class concentration of the sample, since financial compensation for their time might be less needed. It is also important to consider that the majority of participants were recruited through online sources (20), forums mainly for the discussion of drug use and harm reduction, but also sometimes policy. Participants recruited through these means are likely to have more knowledge around drugs or be more concerned with safety than the general population of drug users (Chiauzzi, DasMahapatra, Lobo & Barratt, 2013). This was reflected in how some participants spoke about developments in drug research, the frequency with which harm reduction practices were brought up and the strength of participants' views regarding the illegality of drug use. Though still, this was not the case for all participants. This is mentioned not to question the validity of their experiences, which I am extremely appreciative of and have illuminated this topic, but to highlight how the recruitment strategies employed may have led to a particular kind of sample.

To garner a more demographically diverse sample, face to face recruitment, such as outside or inside nightlife venues, with financial incentives may have been a viable, additional strategy. The targeting of different geographical locations has also been found to produce participants more varied in terms of their class and sexuality (Duff, 2005). However, this was a 'hidden' (Duff, 2005) population group in terms of the small sample size and reluctance to discuss illegal activities so could be considered particularly hard to access.


**3.6 Ethical considerations**


The research followed the ethical guidelines set out by the British Psychological Society ("Code of Ethics and Conduct," 2009) and the London South Bank University (LSBU) Code of Practice. It was approved by the LSBU Ethics Committee before any data collection took place. The major ethical issues that were raised by the project, and how they have been addressed, are outlined in detail below.

### 3.6.1 Confidentiality

Due to the sensitive nature of the research, particular care was taken to retain confidentiality. The steps taken to protect anonymity were outlined in detail to participants informally over email and website message systems and formally through the Participant Information Sheets (Appendices Three and Four) and at the beginning of the interview. All interview recordings were stored on my private, personal laptop, which is password protected, and transcribed into password protected word files. Any physical materials produced through the couple interviews, such as demographic sheets and relationship timelines, were stored in a locked filing cabinet at LSBU.

Confidentiality was further ensured by me alone having access to participants' real names and contact details. All identifying information (including names of people and places) was changed, with pseudonyms assigned by me at the data transcription stage. A participant's real name was also not linked to their data in any way, with each interview or diary assigned a successive participant number. Again, only I listened to the interview recordings, with just the two project supervisors having access to the full, altered interview transcripts and diaries. No details were passed onto third parties, like the police, and participants were aware of this. The limitations of maintaining confidentiality were also communicated, while simultaneously reinforcing the seriousness of breaking confidentiality: it is something only to be undertaken in exceptional circumstances. For example, a serious concern about the risk of significant, physical harm to the participant or someone else. In the event of a need to break confidentiality, participants would have been informed of this, unless the urgency or circumstances of a situation had made this untenable. In actuality, there was nothing that any of the participants said that suggested breaking confidentiality might be the appropriate course of action.

### 3.6.2 Informed consent

Securing informed consent was a fundamental part of the recruitment and data gathering process. The majority of participants were recruited via online advertisements; autonomously volunteering to be part of the research. This, combined with the lack of any financial incentive to participate, could be seen to help ensure free, informed consent. The voluntary nature of participation was emphasised, particularly for participants recruited through word-of-mouth, lest they feel any kind of personal obligation to take part. All participants were also told they could withdraw at any time (which was restated at interview). This was especially reinforced in the diary study, since completing the diary was tied to use of MDMA in the future. In order to avoid compelling future illicit drug use three measures in particular were used. Firstly, participants were asked to complete the diary when they 'next happen[ed] to be taking MDMA with your partner' so as not to encourage participants to take MDMA solely for the purposes of the study. Secondly, in my first contact with a potential participant after they had initially expressed interest, there was no presumption of participation e.g. 'If you decide to take part, let me know - I will send you the diary guideline and we can go from there.' Finally, when they had agreed to take part, it was made clear that such an agreement did not obligate them to actually complete the diary.

Each participant was also fully informed about the purpose and nature of the research. This was communicated informally via email, where participants were given study details and invited to ask questions, and in the Participant Information Sheets (Appendices Three and Four) and Consent Form (Appendix Five) which were sent after initial expression of interest. The Information Sheets allowed potential participants to consider more closely what involvement would mean and get back in touch if they wished to take part. The absence of a stipulated time limit meant they could reflect over the decision at will. The Consent Form contained details of conditions under which a break in confidentiality would be deemed permissible, which it was felt important to provide participants with at an early stage. Official consent was obtained through signing the Consent Form, prior to any data collection. At the beginning of the interviews and via email before the diaries, informed consent was further ensured by repeating several key points: they could withdraw participation at any time (even if post-interview or diary writing, their data

would still be removed if requested before the write-up stage), the whole interview would be recorded and they didn't have to answer any questions they didn't want to.

### 3.6.3 Interviews

The time and location of interviews was purposely kept flexible in order to make the research process as convenient as possible. Interviews were conducted at all time periods: in the evenings, during weekdays and at weekends, whatever suited their schedule. Due to the dispersed locale of participants, Skype interviews were presented as an option. Both the individual diary interviews and three of the couple interviews were carried out in this way; with all participants at home at the time of the interview. For the face-to-face interviews, a number of different locations were suggested, such as a private room at LSBU, the participant's home or another convenient location. Only one couple chose to be interviewed at LSBU, two couples were interviewed in private, rented spaces and four couples selected their home as the place of interview.

Qualitative research is known for its flexible approach to data collection: often going where participants feel most at ease. The comfort level of participants, important in any study, was considered particularly crucial for this research project due to the illegality and personal nature of the issues under discussion. It was important that passersby could not overhear the interviews, since this might inhibit participant disclosure or, more seriously, potentially compromise participants' professional and personal lives. Hence public spaces like cafes, sometimes used for qualitative interviews (Herzog, 2005), were not provided as an option here. While a private space was available at LSBU, this was not always suitable due to the geographical dispersal of the sample. In these instances, the research grant provided by LSBU was vital to securing private meeting spaces in which two of the interviews took place: one due to concerns around the proximity of the couples' home to other significant places in their lives and one because the couple preferred meeting me outside of their home, since we had never met before.

My personal safety was also catered to when conducting interviews. Whenever I went to an interview, a friend was informed of my whereabouts and given a time by which I was to contact them. No issues were experienced in this regard.

**3.6.4 Participant protection**

Care was taken to ensure participants were not exposed to risks to their psychological or physical well-being and health. Participants were made aware that interviews would explore their relationship more broadly, as well as MDMA experiences, to ensure they would be comfortable with this. Due to the sensitivity of experiences being discussed, it was thought participants might experience discomfort or perhaps even distress. To minimise this risk, several measures were put in place. Individuals were fully informed about what the research would involve before they took part (the Information Sheets details the study in full and can be found in Appendices Three and Four). It was also communicated that participants do not have to answer any questions they would prefer not to and consent was explicitly sought in the interview to discupss particularly sensitive topics, for example, sex. Furthermore, in the debriefing, it was made clear that participants were welcome to contact the researcher with questions or any issues that might later come up. As events transpired, one participant did become visibly distressed, at one point on the verge of tears, and the offer was made to pause the interview but they decided to carry on. Another couple also showed signs of distress as they delved into painful past memories. In this context, their freedom to not answer questions, or to leave out any details they wanted to, was re-iterated. Both of these experiences show the importance of considering how best to protect participants, physically and emotionally, during their research participation, and to be mindful of visible and less obvious signs of distress or discomfort.

In addition, as already detailed, pressure was not put on participants to engage in potentially harmful, illicit activities. To this effect, no direct financial compensation was offered, lest this provided an incentive for this behaviour. Instead

individuals were not left 'worse off' for their participation in the study: refreshments and travel expenses were provided, although none of the participants chose to accept the latter offer.


## 3.7 Analysing the data thematically

Thematic analysis was decided upon as the analytical approach for this work, employing Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines, bearing much similarity to 'thematic decomposition' (see Stenner, 1993; Bower et al., 2002). It has been described as a rarely acknowledged but often used method of qualitatively analysing data (Boyatzis, 1998; Roulston, 2001). In fact, even claimed to be a foundational method in some sense since searching for 'thematizing meanings' (Holloway & Todres, 2003, p347) is one of the few commonalities across many qualitative analytthical methods. The research's focus on specific, concrete experiences and the material aspects – bodies, spaces and objects – that coalesce to produce them, as discussed previously, discounted narrative and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) and discourse analysis.

Both narrative and discourse analysis have been criticised for reducing all human experience to the discursive or 'text' (Nightingale & Cromby, 2002). The materiality of the world 'out there' is ignored or denied in favour of how it is constructed through our talk (Gergen, 1994; 1999). The process-relational ontology at the heart of this research recognises the discursive as one among many, interlocking strands of experience, but also pays heed to the material world within which we live (Stenner, 2008); an aspect narrative and discourse analysis do not expressly cater to. Furthermore, narrative analysis focusses on how people make meaning from the stories they tell about their life, or a particular topic such as illness (Riessman, 2003) or gender and sexuality (Mair, 2010), as well as the fallout from when these stories cannot be reconciled or resolved. However, this does not lend itself to a focus on extra-discursive elements to experience, such as embodiment and materiality which have been emphasised within deep empiricism (Stenner, 2008; Stenner, Bhatti & Church, 2012). Furthermore, this lends itself more to a general

account of experience, rather than the focus on specific experiences this research hoped to generate. IPA, while it has been used to consider embodied experience (Eshtehardi, 2014; Larkin, Eatough & Osborn, 2011), again pays little attention to the spaces and objects that co-produce our experience. It could also be considered quite a rigid form of analysis: tied to a particular theoretical orientation (a hermeneutic, phenomenological account of experience) (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and purely 'data-driven', not allowing for theoretical concerns to guide coding of the data.

In contrast, thematic analysis has an inbuilt flexibility regarding epistemological and ontological position, for example, it can be conducted from either a constructionist or a realist perspective and can either be data- or theory-driven. The flexible approach of thematic analysis is well suited to accommodating the theoretical positioning of the data e.g. the analysis of materially-situated experiences within a process-relational ontology, which, to recap, views the world as constituted through interrelated processes (Brown & Stenner, 2009).


### 3.7.1 Making analytical decisions

Braun and Clarke's (2006) understanding of thematic analysis was drawn on. Thematic analysis is described as involving the search for themes or patterns within the data and the authors outline a systematic process to enable this search. Furthermore, a theme not only 'represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p82), but is also concerned with more than prevalence, 'captur[ing] something important about the data in relation to the research question' (p82). There are multiple choices to be made before conducting the analysis. Firstly, the focus of the analytical coding must be considered: either providing a rich description of the entire data set or an in-depth account of one particular aspect. Secondly, the coding performed can be inductive and data-driven or deductive and theory-driven. Thirdly, semantic meanings can be searched for in the data, that do not go beyond explicit or surface meanings of what participants have said. Alternatively, latent meanings may be looked for, which go beyond what is explicitly said to what is inferred or implied; in other words, what

underpins the semantic content of the data. Finally, an epistemological choice must be made. On the one hand, realist/essentialist ideas see language as simply *reflecting* an external reality, and thus people's experiences as straightforwardly related to the data. On the other hand, a constructionist approach considers reality as socio-culturally situated and *constructed* through language, with the data a socio-cultural, contextual product. The first series of alternatives tend to be found together – descriptive of the entire data set, inductive, semantic and realist – as do the second series – focussed on one aspect of the data set, deductive, latent and constructionist (Braun & Clarke, 2006); the former often resembling IPA (e.g. Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) and grounded theory approaches (e.g. Charmaz, 2011) and the latter bearing likeness to discourse and narrative analysis (e.g. Wetherell, Taylor & Yates, 2001; Mair, 2010).

While this research is more closely aligned with the second series of theoretical choices Braun and Clarke (2006) outline, it does not do so straightforwardly. The research was conducted from a critical realist perspective, which could be seen to straddle the realist/relativist boundary, since it acknowledges l) (Willig, 1999; Burr, 1995). Indeed, the process-relational ontology that informed this research embraces a paradoxical way of thinking that questions the binary choice of realism *versus* relativism. Rather than viewing such opposites as separate and contradictory, process-relational thought understands them as part of a unified, interdependent process (Mesle, 2008). This also translated to the coding process, which attempted to span the divisions set up by Braun and Clarke (2006), though, as previously said, could be characterised as falling more on the latter 'side' of the debate: whole data set vs. specific focus; inductive vs. deductive; semantic vs. latent; realist vs. constructionist. The coding was performed with a specific focus in mind, namely how couples experienced (or didn't experience) closeness. Other aspects of the data set were still coded, however, in recognition that a researcher cannot always, particularly from the outset of analysis, identify every relevant piece of data for a distinct focus. The distinction between inductive and theoretical analysis was not considered as sharp as Braun and Clarke (2006) presented it to be: theoretical concerns informed coding as well as codes being produced from immersion within and close study of the data that were not affiliated with any particular theoretical

position. However, throughout the analytic process, research and theoretical literature was sought, reviewed and applied to the data; therefore theoretical concerns can be viewed as key to the meanings garnered. This meant that latent meanings were looked for within the data; how comments revealed underlying assumptions and conceptualisations that participants held. Thematic analysts tend to work 'primarily' at one level (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which might be considered in this case to be the latent level, though, again, content was also coded semantically for the explicit, surface meaning of comments. Some of these semantic codes were only interpreted later, either in the co-ordination of initial or superordinate themes or in the write-up process itself.

Lastly, the analysis was performed within a process-relational framework, which can be considered broadly constructionist (Stenner, 2008). Accounts or meanings individuals present are viewed as being positioned from a certain context, namely the particular way they have engaged with the social, cultural or economic conditions they are in, and thus not seen as expressing a definitive 'truth' (Burr, 1995). In contrast to most constructionist positions, however, which advance the primacy of language and discourse, a process-relational approach views our experience as made up of interlinking processes, which encompass the discursive as well as the material and the emotional (Stenner, Church & Bhatti, 2012). This concern with materiality and emotion reflects two recent academic developments: the 'material turn' (Brown & Reavey, 2015; Latour, 1996, 2005; McGrath, 2012; Serres, 1995; Stenner, 2008), which acknowledges how our experience is grounded in the material structures of the world, and the 'turn to affect' (Clough & Halley, 2007; Cromby, 2007, 2012; Wetherell, 2013, 2015), that seeks to highlight the vital role of feeling in human life. The practical application of these conceptual shifts involved more than paying attention to what participants were doing with their language, but also traversing the material context of and the emotional undercurrent to their experience. The ways in which these theoretical concerns shaped the process of analysis will now be explored.

Firstly, influential to my understanding of material and spatial settings is the material turn within critical social psychology, including scholars such as Steve Brown, Paula Reavey, Laura McGrath, Bruno Latour and Michel Serres. For example,

Brown and Reavey's (2015) work around memory and spatial affordances in dialogue with Kurt Lewin's (1936) concept of 'life-space' proved particularly fruitful. Using this approach involved considering all connections relevant to any given experience participants described, no matter how temporally or spatially distant e.g. how imagined futures or memories of the past were 'folded into' that present moment. Furthermore, the intensive connections between human and non-human bodies, such as a bathtub or cushions, were explored and how material arrangements afforded particular possibilities for action e.g. a clean, tidy flat afforded new possibilities for movement and dance. McGrath's (2012) integration of Latour's (1996, 2005) and Serres' (1995) understanding of objects was also a crucial element. Latour's (1996, 2005) actor-network theory sees human and non-human actors as capable of mediating our experiences, however rather than assign full-blown agency to objects, which might be seen to ignore the crucial distinction between humans and objects (Stenner, 2008), the relationship between them was viewed more as one of stabilisation and co-production, in line with Serres (1995). A complementary approach advocated for by McGrath (2012). Using this approach involved identifying the relevant human and non-human actors of a described scenario, these could be inanimate objects like baths or hula hoops or animals. Following this, I reflected on how the experiences of my participants were mediated by these actors. When thinking about non-human actors in particular, I referred to Latour's description of how such entities can 'authorise, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible [and] forbid' particular actions (Latour, 2005, p72). In addition, I considered the ways in which these objects could slow down and stabilise (Serres, 1995), intangible human relations and the cultural meanings with which such objects were encoded. Anderson's (2009) work on affective atmospheres was also useful when analysing the data. He emphasises the singularity and ambiguity of atmospheres: at once strongly felt yet just beyond 'rational explanation and clear figuration' (Anderson, 2009, p78). An atmosphere seems to belong to the collection of human and non-human bodies it arises from but also seems to exceed them, producing something quasi-independent. Again, the analysis sought to trace the intensive connections between humans and non-humans entities but now thought was also given to the atmosphere that emanated from these interweaving

elements and how this is informed by cultural stories, such as water as a place of transformation (Brown & Reavey, 2015).

Secondly, our feelings and emotions are key to how we affect and are affected by our world and Burkitt's (2014) relational approach was instrumental in translating this into the analytical process. He argues that emotions do not exist 'inside' of us but emerge from 'patterns of relationship between self and others, between self and world' (Burkitt, 2014, p2, italics in original). In turn, we also *feel* these relational webs within which we are enmeshed. Since our world is made up of interconnected processes, we cannot disentangle emotion from this relational web, rather it is always deeply contextualised in: the situation it emerges in, personal biography and socio-cultural conditions (Burkitt, 2014). These different elements were used as filters to colour my thoughts when analysing the data. First, care was paid to the situational context of the described emotion, this included the material-spatial surroundings and the social environment, since experiences can never be abstracted from their socio-material contexts (Stenner, Bhatti & Church, 2012). Then, how the expressed emotion could be seen as a continuation of personal and relational history was considered before paying heed to our socio-cultural constructions of that emotion, for example modern conceptualisations of love as 'work' (Eldén, 2011). Finally, the felt nature of emotion was honed in on; how these feelings were experienced on a bodily level. Stenner's (2013) work, argued to share the same dual focus of emotion as a social location and an individual experience, was also instrumental in the analysis. The 'triangular structure of relations' (Stenner, 2013, p1) necessary for jealousy between an object, subject and rival was noted and consideration was paid to the role 'the third' played e.g. whether it silently mediated, disrupted or reinvigorated the couple system. Each theoretical concern discussed here was therefore applied to and shaped the course of the analysis: Brown and Reavey's (2015) consideration of people and aspects of the material world which may be temporally and spatially distant from the present situation, Latour's (1996, 2005) focus on how objects could 'encourage' and 'block' particular actions, Anderson's (2009) understanding of atmospheres emanating from collections of (human and non-human) bodies and Burkitt's (2014) and Stenner's

(2013) framing of emotion as arising relationally and therefore deeply embedded in social context.

## 3.6.2 Step-by-step process

The interviews were transcribed into separate Word files and the diaries were all received digitally as Word files. Coding was initially performed in Word, using the 'review > comments' feature, with each code successively numbered and entered into an Excel spreadsheet. Within Excel, the codes were clustered into a set of initial themes. These initial themes were then drawn out into a mind-map format and compared across the whole data set, producing superordinate, encompassing themes. Once this was completed, data extracts were collated for each superordinate theme and again entered into Excel.

The six steps described by Braun and Clarke (2006) in relation to thematic analysis were used as a guide. Since thematic analysis is rarely explicitly acknowledged, it has tended to not follow a thorough, methodical process as other methods have. The systematised approach outlined by Braun and Clarke were therefore used to lend rigor to the analysis. Immersion in the data is a primary principle of qualitative research (Pope, Ziebland & Mays, 2000). It began here with independently transcribing each interview (Riessman, 1993). Transcription was verbatim, while it did not follow the strict conventions of approaches like conversation analysis, additional details were included to aid contextualisation and understanding of what participants said. For example, non-verbal information like laughter, pauses (longer than three seconds), alterations in tone and pitch or significant emphasis on particular words were noted. The recordings were then played all the way through and the transcripts checked against them.

After the transcription process, I further immersed myself in the data by re-reading and making notes on the transcripts. Instead of coding the entire data set, coding was performed within a specific frame: I was searching for how participants made sense of and constructed *closeness* within their relationship and MDMA experiences. Initial ideas were discussed with the supervisory team and relevant

literature investigated. This literature then helped informed the second stage of analysis, identifying codes for the data. A code represents the most basic element of the data that is interesting to the analyst in some way (Boyatzis, 1998). What was 'interesting' about the data was inductive in that it was firmly grounded in the data yet theoretical in the way it drew on literature identified in the first stage, such as Sloterdijk's (1999, cited in Klauser, 2010) concept of the 'bubble' and Ben Anderson's (2008) understanding of 'affective atmospheres', as well as the general theoretical concerns outlined earlier: a focus on feelings and the material world. Different categories of codes included but were not limited to how partners conceptualised their relationship, 'separate lives' vs. 'intertwined lives', 'relationship as inevitable'; how couples managed their emotions together, 'open and understanding communication', 'deeper connection, more than love', 'felt understanding'; the role of spaces and objects, 'ritual preparation of space', 'objects enriching experience', 'physical world mirroring internal world'; the ways MDMA was variously perceived, as: 'relationship aid', 'therapy', 'fun shared experiences', 'foundational to the relationship' vs. 'not foundational to the relationship' and understanding of the self and how this shifted over the course of the relationship and MDMA use, 'authentic self' vs. 'inauthentic self', 'emotional sense of self', 'changes to the self', 'best possible self'.

The next and third stage of analysis involved searching for themes from the codes collected. Coding was performed for each interview transcript or diary separately to retain the distinctness of the experiences and allow for couples' constructions of closeness on MDMA to be linked to their constructions of closeness within their relationship in everyday life. For each interview transcript or diary, codes were clustered into potential themes. These were tampered with and re-worked, eliminating repetitive codes, for instance, before data extracts corresponding to all the codes for a particular theme were collated. Each theme was then named appropriately, according to the codes within it. Thematic maps of the data were drawn by hand for each interview or diary, providing a sense of how the themes were interrelated and which ones were sub-themes of another, main theme (see Appendix Eight for an example). The thematic maps for each interview or diary were then compared and contrasted. This allowed me to draw a thematic map which

covered the most prevalent or pertinent themes for the whole data set. This was redrafted several times and compared to the collection of individual thematic maps to check for accuracy of representation.

Next, the fourth analytical stage reviewed and finalised themes. The collated extracts for each theme were read together to check for intra-theme cohesiveness: sometimes the data extract(s) did not fit with the overall theme and was removed to form a new theme or there was simply too much diversity within the data extracts to cluster them as a theme. A revised thematic map was drawn at the culmination of this process. The whole data set was then re-read to explore whether the themes decided upon were a 'good fit' for the data set as a whole. This step is considered particularly important as with any form of analysis that seeks to interpret data, there is a danger of abstracting too far away from the data itself – the intuitive link between data and analysis then lost. The fifth stage was to describe each theme and consider the overall story that I was making from the data. Literature was again sought to help make sense of the narrative, for sub-themes like attunement (from the superordinate 'Inside the bubble' theme) and playful space (from the superordinate theme 'Shifting boundaries, (un)moving bodies'). The final stage involved selecting the quotes that would represent the themes the best: either because they were striking, 'I want to love you even more, let's take MDMA', an interesting turn of phrase perhaps, like 'never drop without your significant other cause that way lies ruin' or embodied the commonality of what participants had said.

While this is presented as a step-by-step analytical process, it wasn't always performed so rigidly. There was movement between stages, for instance reading the collated extracts of a theme might prompt a memory of a similar comment in a previously analysed interview or diary, which was then coded for. Or a code could inspire investigation of a theoretical connection – participants spoke of *feeling* rather than knowing a concept, which was linked with Shotter's (1993) 'knowing of the third kind'. In addition, describing the story of each theme and how the overall story might piece together was not left to the final stages but mentally considered and worked up in notes throughout.

Early in the analysis I became interested in how movement on MDMA was intertwined with the way couples were feeling. This interest prompted discussion of Sloterdijk's 'theory of spheres' in a supervisory meeting: as we move through life, Sloterdijk argues, we move through 'spheres' of 'intimate' and 'enclosed' spaces; the product of 'joint inhabiting' (1999, p1011, cited in Klauser, 2010). Sloterdijk uses the metaphor of a 'bubble' to refer to the most intimate spaces of human togetherness and this became the 'emotional bubble' of the first theme. Much further along in the analytical process, when revising the final thematic map, it became clear how inhabiting spheres, of space and of emotion, underpinned all three superordinate themes: the second theme focussed on atmospheric spheres that were related to movement in some way and the third on the protective boundaries of these spaces. Thus, the final superordinate themes were:

1. **Inside the bubble: An emotional safe haven**

Discusses the distinct emotional pattern of MDMA, and how this is shaped by and shapes couples' everyday interactional dynamic. In particular, the grounding of these experiences in gender relations and the disclosing model of intimacy is explored.

2. **Shifting boundaries, (un)moving bodies**

Explores how movement, spaces and objects coalesce to produce new subjectivities, which can fragment the limits of the self.

3. **'*Never drop without your significant other. That way lies ruin*': The boundary work of couples who use MDMA together**

Discusses the boundaries couples construct around their MDMA experiences and how these impact, and often enhance, the intimacies experienced.

Each of these three superordinate themes underlies an analytical chapter in the thesis. Chapter Four will describe in detail the concept of the emotional bubble and how couples' MDMA experiences can be framed by and understood through it. Chapters Five and Six are interested in how MDMA experiences influence boundaries: of the self in Chapter Five and of the drug experience in Chapter Six.

Both will consider how the material conditions of MDMA use – the spaces, objects and movement of bodies – impinge upon the experiences of couples and what this might mean for our understanding of closeness on MDMA.

# Chapter Four – Inside the bubble: An emotional safe haven

The German philosopher, Peter Sloterdijk, morphologises social togetherness in his 'theory of spheres'. As we move through life, he argues, we move through 'spheres' of 'intimate' and 'enclosed' spaces; the product of 'joint inhabiting' (1999, p1011, cited in Klauser, 2010, p4). He invokes several spherological types in the explanation of this theory, one of which is the 'bubble' metaphor. The bubble represents the most intimate spaces of human togetherness, 'the fragile space of resonance between people as we find it in symbiotic relations' (1998, cited in Klauser, 2010, p4). The 'fragile space of resonance' of Sloterdijk's 'bubble' provides an apt metaphorical lens through which to see the affective quality of couples' MDMA experiences. Moreover, the bubble draws attention both to the separateness of the affective atmosphere within it – MDMA feels like a safe haven for many couples – as well as symbolising, through its transculent exterior, how everyday lives, histories and cultural contexts still influence this space.

The analysis presented in this chapter explores the emotional bubble that couples described on MDMA and how it augments possibilities for closeness within and beyond the drug experience. Since couples are what they *do* (Gabb & Fink, 2015)*,* practices of closeness will be focussed on and how they were entangled with this distinct emotional dynamic. Moments of attunement couples experienced will be explored first, which involved sharing in and responding to their partner's emotional state. These moments will be described as grounded in the more stereotypically 'positive' patterns of relating such as love, safety and happiness and the greater connection participants felt to their own emotions and to the emotions of others within the bubble. The latter empathic effect being consistently reported by recreational users (Morgan, Noronha, Muetzelfeldt, Feilding & Curran, 2013) and under controlled conditions (Hysek et al., 2013; Schmid et al., 2014).

Secondly, the bubble's capacity to insulate couples from more 'negative' emotional patterns like fear, anger, shame and worry while enhancing feelings of safety will be highlighted; again reflecting current experimental studies that have shown MDMA to impair recognition of negative emotionality while increasing the

ability to pinpoint positive emotions (Hysek, Domes & Liechti, 2012; Hysek et al., 2013). This emotional readjustment is proposed to allow couples to disclose more freely; in particular the sharing of relationship issues and personally distressing memories. Finally, entering this new emotional space will be outlined as tied to muting of emotion in a slightly different way: the erasure of previous tensions, a 'clean slate' on which couples could relate to each other anew.

## 4.1 '*We're just on…the exact same wavelength*': Moments of emotional attunement

The term attunement suggests multiple elements being *tuned* to a common chord, like notes on a piano (Fuchs, 2013). While Fuchs discusses this in terms of the alignment between self, body and space that takes place when we are in a certain mood, he is drawing on Heidegger's concept of *mitbefindlichkeit*: people being attuned with one another. In the literature around couple relationships, attunement has been described as sharing in a partner's emotional experience and responding sensitively to their emotional state (Greenberg & Goldman, 2008). As discussed in Chapter One, the literature frames attunement as a positive quality of a relationship (Curran, Hazen, Jacobvitz & Sasaki, 2006; Gottman, 2011; Jonathan & Knudson-Martin, 2012), which it either has or does not have but can be worked towards (Jonathan & Knudson-Martin, 2012). However, this work takes a different perspective. Seen through the lens of a practices approach to intimacy (Gabb & Fink, 2015) set within a process ontology (Brown & Stenner, 2009), a relationship does not exist within a binary state of being attuned or not attuned but is comprised of *events* or *moments* of attunement. These moments arise and fade, woven into the overall patterning of practices which form the fabric of the couple relationship.

Two overlapping threads will be elaborated on in the analysis which follows. Firstly, couples seemed to experience moments of attunement on MDMA, and, for many, their value was mediated by gendered ways of relating. Secondly, these experiences of attunement were produced through multiple, interconnected layers of experience, rather than only the affective mode (Stenner, Church & Bhatti, 2012).

One couple that spoke repeatedly about such moments were Mark and Jenny – both in their 30s, engaged and together 8 years. Jenny details how experiencing strong, positive feelings in tandem on MDMA contributes to a unique sense of closeness:

> *Mark: I mean it's the greatest feeling you could imagine. I think that's the thing with it cos I had never experienced that kind of happiness before...It's completeness, that's what you feel*
> *Jenny: erm, and I think it's also just being next to someone, knowing they are feeling the same thing and kind of knowing that you don't need to say anything...and that, like, we're just experiencing this together and it's just kind of we're existing in the same space and it's almost like we're just on the feeling of being on the exact same wavelength with another person, erm, is just deeply...feel really connected to them (Couple interview: Mark & Jenny)*

It is the mutuality of 'feeling', a word she repeats several times, which is at the heart of her description. Such empathic attunement is conventionally understood as bridging the emotional gap between people; a process of 'tuning into' another's feelings, distinct and different from your own (Siegel, 2007). Yet in the experience Jenny describes, there doesn't seem to be a process of tuning into each other, her and Mark's emotional experience already feels aligned: she believes they are on '*the exact same wavelength*' and '*feeling the same thing*'. The explanation of this unusual way of being could be traced to the abundance of positive feelings which exist in the bubble – MDMA produces '*the greatest feeling you could imagine*': an organic '*happiness*' and '*completeness*' (Mark). Indeed, such feelings of elation are frequently self-reported in studies of MDMA use (Davison & Parrott, 1997; Harris, Baggott, Mendelson, Mendelson & Jones, 2002; Klitzman, 2006). Hence, the drug's capacity to produce such intensely positive feelings might be seen to provide a guarantee that '*they are feeling the same thing*' (Jenny).

However, it could be argued that there is more than the affective dynamic of MDMA at work here, other experiential layers are woven into how attuned Jenny feels to Mark. She explains how part of it is '*just being next to someone*', '*existing in the same space*' and '*knowing that you don't need to say anything*'. Spatial and

conceptual 'modes of order' (Stenner, Bhatti & Church, 2012, p9) could be seen as linked here. It is something about the two of them occupying the same physical location (spatial) while imagining the futility of communicating verbally (conceptual) that feeds into this close, connected moment. MDMA is often associated with increased sociability and verbal expressiveness (Bedi, Phan, Angstadt & De Wit, 2009; Hess & DeBoer, 2002), yet here it is the capacity to dwell in silence together, '*you don't need to say anything*' that is depicted as powerful. Jenny's description is reminiscent of one of the ways people describe 'being there' for someone: physically *being alongside* (Brownlie, 2014). Brownlie argues that emotional support has been portrayed too narrowly and too overtly linked to 'listening, talking, giving advice, and helping people put their own lives in perspective' (Finch, 1989, p33, cited in Brownlie, 2014), and that while the importance of these practices is explicitly emphasised, the ways in we are 'there' for someone actually vary far more in reality (NatCen, 2007). Brownlie argues that *being alongside* is another significant form of emotional closeness, taking place in everyday activities such 'watching TV or going for a drive' (p137) that often involve inhabiting a 'knowing or acknowledged' (p138) silence. In these everyday contexts, attention is directed towards other activities like reading or driving, the silence is, in some sense, populated by activity. However, in the context of MDMA, this 'knowing or acknowledged' (Brownlie, 2014, p137) silence takes place without such practical mediators. Rather, this silence stretches over physically being with someone, '*existing in the same space*' and is interwoven with the affective atmosphere of MDMA, to produce a strong sense of connection, '*just deeply…feel really connected*'.

Emily also talks about a moment of '*total connection*' with her husband, Dan, who she has been with for over twenty years, since they were teenagers; the couple now have two young children together:

> *Emily: [laughs] and almost every talk ends up in, one of my favourite things is just sitting face to face with him and just putting my hand on his chest to just feel really, really connected…and just like this, visceral memory I have so it's just a, a strong thing that sticks with me*

*Interviewer: mmm. How does that, can you describe what that feels like when you're sat there and you have your hand on his chest?*

*[pause]*

*Emily: [laughs] I mean just, it's just like a total connection, of being understood and feeling safe (Couple interview: Emily & Dan)*

A distinct affective space is also described by Emily on MDMA, filled with positive patterns of relating – connection, understanding and safety – and, just as for Jenny, this is overlaid with the spatial, embodied mode of experience. Feeling '*really, really connected*' is wrapped up in where she is in the world, she is sitting '*face to face*' to Dan with '*[her] hand on his chest*'; almost as though she is trying to anchor herself to the emotional epicentre of Dan's being. Connection can seem ethereal but touch is tangible and, as such, can seem like 'the most basic way of connecting with another human being' (Johnson, 2008, p4). Touching Dan's chest could therefore physically ground and inspire the '*total connection*' Emily feels: it is an immediate, materialised relatedness. Furthermore, it has been suggested that the power of touch dwells in its inescapable mutuality: as soon as you touch someone, they touch you back (Gabb, 2011) and this reciprocality might further underscore emotional connection (Gabb & Fink, 2015), explaining why it '*sticks with*' Emily in such a strong way.

Moreover, the physical connection between Emily and Dan is not only a momentary bodily orientation but lingers on in a '*visceral*' bodily resonance. Memory is not only explicit but also implicit, situations and sensations experienced by the body can function as 'implicit memory cores', which in, certain situations, can release their contents (Fuchs, 2012, p9); perhaps explaining the longevity of Emily's '*visceral*' memory. Therefore, while the moment of closeness and attunement is a complex of elements: produced through the heightened emotional, and likely sensory (Gouzoulis-Mayfrank, Hermle, Kovar & Sass, 1996; Kolbrich et al., 2008), intensity of MDMA coupled with bodily closeness, touch and '*talk*', the fact it is through her bodily experience, this '*visceral*' memory, that this moment '*sticks with*' her could be seen to reaffirm the centrality of bodily feeling in making sense of and forming connections in our world (Johnson, 2008; Burkitt, 2014).

The interconnection of a multitude of elements can once again be seen as crucial to producing the attunement Carrie describes:

*Carrie: you can feel the love that I have for him and I can feel the love that he has for me…a complete feeling of both giving and receiving…and because uh it feels like I can feel what he feels…and it feels like he can feel what I feel so that creates like, that brings us closer because we won't worry: are you thinking of something different or are you hiding something?*
*Interviewer: how is that love communicated between you?*
*Carrie: uh, I think it's communicated through like words. We're good at appreciating one another when we are on MDMA… we always like [to] say thank you for being [laughs]…there with me…of course touch and feeling and kissing and holding hands and like touching each other's body…are part of it um. And just like being without having to say something.*

Once more, attunement seems to involve more than the affective layer of experience: Carrie's feelings cannot be disentangled from their social and material circumstances (Stenner, Bhatti & Church, 2012; Langdridge et al., 2012). Carrie and her partner can both feel what the other is feeling, in particular their love for each other, yet this loving attunement is produced through the threading together of multiple modes of experience. Namely, the discursive ('*we always like [to] say thank you*), the embodied ('*kissing and holding hands and like touching each other's body*'), and the conceptual ('*we won't worry: are you thinking of something different or are you hiding something?'; 'just like being without having to say something*'). While the couple mutually feel and verbally articulate their love, it is also manifested in not having to say anything at all, simply *being alongside* one another (Brownlie, 2014). Just as for Jenny, there is a power and depth of connection in being silent together. Honing in on the conceptual layer further, Carrie also describes a lack of worry that the other is '*thinking of something different or…hiding something'.* This sneaky sense evoked by '*hiding*' could be seen as born from the total personal openness required by the disclosing model of intimacy, discussed in the first chapter of this thesis. A key advocate of this model is Giddens (1992) who sees intimacy as primarily composed

of the reciprocal sharing of personal thoughts and feelings. Here, the attunement experienced by Carrie on MDMA seems to act as guarantor for the ultimate permeability of personal thoughts and feelings between partners, a way of realising what might be seen as an impossible cultural script.

As well as emotional attunement being produced through an 'experiential mosaic' (Stenner, Church & Bhatti, 2012, p9), rather than the affective mode principally highlighted in the literature (e.g. Jonathan & Knudson-Martin, 2012), its meaning was often mediated by gender. Since emotion emerges from patterns of relationship, rather than a thing existing 'inside' of us (Burkitt, 2014; Stenner, 2013), locating emotional experiences within wider social relations and the patterns of relationship within which someone has lived can be helpful. Indeed, it will be argued that macro gender relations can clarify the emphasis Jenny places on the feeling of being '*on the exact same wavelength*' as Mark, and Emily puts on '*being understood*' by Dan, specifically men's reputed lesser involvement in the emotional dimension of life (Dryden, 1998). Indeed, Mark's inability to connect with Jenny on an emotional level has been a source of strife in their relationship, '*there's a lot of turmoil over, um, that stuff…*', and Jenny recalls how she would '*take it personally*' when Mark didn't open up to her. Mark reflects on the difference MDMA made to the dynamic between him and Jenny:

> *Interviewer: how different do you think you are together when you're not on MDMA compared to when you are?*
> *Mark: I don't have much empathy in normal daily life. I don't get upset at funerals, I don't err express emotion very well and so I think, erm, that switches me to actually feel empathy for another person so I think that I am a much better listener, erm, for Jenny. I understand what she's saying on a level that I can't when I'm not on the drug. It feels like I get what she's saying as opposed to just thinking about it […]*
> *when you're on MDMA, you feel like the other person truly understands you*
> *(Couple interview: Mark & Jenny)*

While Mark's described lack of emotion might seem extreme, '*I don't get upset at funerals*', it is an extension of the well-documented phenomena of men's reluctance to discuss and express their emotions (Strazdins & Broom, 2004), '*I don't err express emotion very well*'. Equally, Mark not '*hav[ing] much empathy in normal daily life*' is representative of the tendency for men to be less empathetic than women (Mestre, Samper, Frías & Tur, 2009), though again a more extreme variant of it. Yet, on MDMA, Mark '*actually feel[s] empathy*' and becomes a '*much better listener*' for Jenny, understanding her '*on a level that [he] can't when [he's] not on the drug*'. Hence, MDMA seems to unsettle gendered behaviour in ways which make attunement more possible – the empathetic level Mark experiences leaves him better placed to share in and respond to Jenny's emotional experience. However, this is not a one-sided process, Jenny also reaches a new '*understanding that Mark expresses his emotions in a different way…now I know he's not like hiding anything or closing me off.*' Before taking MDMA, she recalls feeling insecure about Mark's inexpressiveness in everyday life. However, feeling so attuned on MDMA seems to build her trust in him and she believes he has a different (i.e. a more minimal) way of emotionally relating and is not simply '*closing [her] off*'.

Attunement has been linked to greater relationship contentment (Cohen, Schulz, Weiss & Waldinger, 2012; Connolly & Sicola, 2005) and such moments of attunement could build up and form part of the fabric of couples lives, improving how they relate to each other both on and off MDMA. Yet, this does not seem to be combined with a shift to a more empathic sense of self for Mark: '*I don't know if it really has made me more empathetic not on the drug'.* Rather, these experiences ripple out through a deeper level of understanding, '*it's given me the ability to understand what that empathy means.*' If not able to better share and respond to Jenny's everyday emotional state, this understanding might help him give greater space to Jenny's emotions.

The value of attunement for Emily and Dan might also been seen as contextualised through reference to gender relations, although this is not framed as a contentious issue in the way it was for Jenny and Mark:

*Dan: Yeah, well, I would say I'm more cerebral in my thinking and sometimes, I could even say I was a little cut off from my emotions and certainly like the E connects you to your emotions pretty powerfully*

*Emily: yeah…I would agree with that…I'm a lot more emotional but they're kind of willy-nilly sometimes and the E can bring em to kind of one thing […]*

*Interviewer: and is that, being able to sort of connect with your emotions more, how does that affect like how you're interacting with each other, with Emily?*

*Dan: um…I don't know. Probably makes her feel happier.*

*Emily: it does*

*Dan: I'd guess*

*[pause]*

*Interviewer: so Emily you, so you sort of, uh, would you say that you enjoy Dan being more emotional?*

*Emily: absolutely, yeah I do…he's not an unemotional person but he's guarded with his emotions…even still. Not to any detriment but it's always nice to hear…nice, mushy affectionate things [laughs] (Couple interview: Emily & Dan)*

Emily describes Dan as '*not an unemotional person*' but someone who is emotionally '*guarded*'. However, for Dan, MDMA '*connects [him] to [his] emotions pretty powerfully*' and eases expression of them, of which Emily particularly enjoys hearing the '*nice, mushy affectionate things*'. Emily's presentation of herself as '*a lot more emotional*' again fits into the standard discourse of women's enhanced emotional expressiveness (Strazdins & Broom, 2004). While the couple are talking about greater connnection and expression of their own emotions, it seems as though connecting with the self on an emotional level would also help with sharing in and being able to appropriately respond to another's emotional state: the fulcrum of attunement (Greenberg & Goldman, 2008). Whereas Dan's usually '*cerebral*' approach might hamper genuine understanding of and responsiveness to Emily's cues and needs. Indeed, a link has been reported between emotional expressiveness and empathy (Roberts & Strayer, 1996). Furthermore, if someone is more expressive

of their emotional state, it might be easier to share in their emotions. Therefore, perhaps Dan being less guarded with his emotions on MDMA could also provide another avenue through which attunement might become more possible.

Helena and Jakub, married and together for 7 years, performed a similarly gendered emotional script, though they were more explicit in their awareness of it:

> *Helena: I think that was, that made us more, much, much stronger as a couple and me kind of trusting you, um. Because I could relate to, share with you, uh, my kind of childhood traumas, I could describe to you how things were and kind of trust you and kind of feel the empathy, feel that you, you trust, that I can trust you and also that you care. You kind of mirror my feelings, it's not just 'ok' but 'oh, oh, that's so horrible'…it feels natural… It feels safe […]*
> *Jakub: but I spontaneously started talking about my parents, you know, my emotions…I think like the fact that I was talking about my emotions made you interested in it*
> *Helena: yes, yes, absolutely (Couple interview: Helena & Jakub)*

Helena describes the empathic attunement, '*relate to, share with…my kind of childhood traumas…feel the empathy*', and nurturing responsiveness, '*it's not just "ok" but "oh, oh, that's so horrible"*', from Jakub as crucial to building trust and strengthening coupledom (Greenberg & Goldman, 2008). This fits with research emphasising the connective power of partners being attuned to one another (Connolly & Sicola, 2005; Cohen, Schulz, Weiss & Waldinger, 2012). The way the couple relate to each in other in everyday life also seems informed by traditional cultural scripts. Jakub embodies several traditionally masculine traits across the interview such as being initially attracted to Helena based on her physical appearance, wanting to '*fix things*' rather than sharing in problems and viewing marriage as a gesture for his partner, rather than something he was primarily motivated to pursue. The fact that him '*talking about [his] emotions*' sparked Helena's interest in MDMA and the emphasis she places on him being able to '*mirror…[her] feelings*' suggests a gap between his previous ability to emotionally

engage and the emotional connection she desired. All of these elements together reinforce the idea of attunement as mediated by gender. Moreover, the affective haven of MDMA seemed to allow Jakub to emotionally attune to Helena beyond gendered, cultural restraints: a practice that echoed out into their everyday lives, making them '*much stronger*' as a couple; perhaps allowing both partners to feel loved and cared for as found in the attunement literature (Greenberg & Goldman, 2008).

While feeling attuned might come across as an instantaneous process, this is not the whole story; there seems to have been a journey to reach this shared, emotional plane. This is best illustrated through Mark's metaphor for attunement:

> *Mark: I think it's kind of like, erm, I don't wa-, cos it's not a funny thing, how you would conceptualise an inside joke, where we're getting it, we're just getting how the world works and you see people around us and it's kind of like, you know, this experience is just ours like no one else…it's that feeling that it's so unique…so great because other people don't have this feeling.  And…nobody can take that away…*
>
> *Jenny: I was just, ah, I like what you said about it being an inside joke.  I think that's*
>
> *Mark: but it's not funny*
>
> *Jenny: yeah*
>
> *Mark: but it's almost like an empathetic inside joke (Couple interview: Mark & Jenny)*

Emotion is conceptualised in this work as a process, emerging from a particular situation, socio-cultural context and personal biography (Burkitt, 2014). Here, we can see how feeling emotionally attuned is embedded in the history of the couples' everyday lives. Mark describes this feeling as '*so great*' due to its '*unique[ness]…other people don't have this*'. Both Jenny and Mark talk about themselves as unconventional and the fact that they '*didn't fit [the] mould*' was part of what initially drew them together. The exclusionary nature of this attunement '*this experience is just ours like no one else*', could therefore be seen as a continued

affirmation of their distance from others. They may only be 'inside' a small group of two but there are special things to be understood from this vantage point that the outside simply does not have access to. Such a sense of belonging and validation of our identity has been suggested as one of the ways in which attunement enhances personal and relational wellbeing (Siegel, 2007; Greenberg & Goldman, 2008).

Feeling so attuned is also about their in-depth knowledge and experience of each other. The fact they are '*just getting how the world works*' implies a shared world view; while its content is not explicitly defined in the interview, it is alluded to by the way they describe themselves as sharing something in common that was different from others, '*I think everybody else in in our class just presumed we would find each other*'. Couples frequently emphasised how MDMA only enhances a pre-existing sense of connection and it's helpful to consider the fact that Jenny and Mark had been together for six years before they took MDMA living '*intertwined lives*' where they do almost all of their '*daily activities*' together. This is not to imply that moments of attunement were dictated by the number of years a couple had been together but that MDMA cannot fabricate connections; instead, just as in everyday life, these connections are thoroughly contingent. Therefore it is suggested that despite MDMA's reputation for prosocial effects such as feeling close and more empathetic (Morgan et al., 2013), moments of emotional attunement might still require a history of interpersonal closeness. Certainly, emotional attunement on MDMA was not described at the start of relationships, though several of the couples described their shared MDMA use as instigating their romantic relationship.

Furthermore, since emotions are viewed as deeply contextual phenomena, (Burkitt, 2014), being emotionally tuned into and understood by your partner is not seen as pre-cultural or pre-social but as interwoven with how Western societies conceptualise relationships. It has been argued that this culture privileges the couple above all else: an exclusive dyad which is a haven from the outside world (Finn, 2014). Similarly, this moment is about just the two of them '*we're getting it*' and is fundamentally protected from an encroaching outside world, '*nobody can take that away*'. Thus, this experience of emotional attunement is about more than feelings of deep connection but also how these feelings are contextualised as '*unique*' and how they reaffirm both their shared experience on the fringes of '*normal*' society and

socio-cultural norms around love. Additionally, it is not only the '*feeling*' that's crucial to this experience but a certain amount of shared understanding, '*just getting how the world works*'. As argued in the first chapter, one of our guiding cultural scripts is of romanticism: relationships are built on feeling, precisely: 'a wondrous reciprocal *feeling* that both parties see the world in precisely the same way' (de Botton, 2016, p49, own emphasis). This understanding seems to map neatly here onto Mark's conceptualisation of attunement as '*an empathetic inside joke*': part feeling, part shared view of the world. In this way, emotions experienced on MDMA can be seen not as somehow cut off and set apart from the world but a continuation of it. Or, to be exact, a continuation and affirmation of our romantic ideal of love.

We have seen how moments of attunement are produced through a multitude of interconnected layers of experience: a distinct affective dynamic, bodily presence in shared space, conceptual appreciation of the absence of talk, and discursive communication. Being emotionally attuned has been linked to increased relationship contentment (Connolly & Sicola, 2005; Cohen, Schulz, Weiss & Waldinger, 2012) and it is suggested the sharing in emotional experience that took place on MDMA produced valuable moments of closeness, whose worth was grounded in and framed by gendered relational differences.


**4.2 Disclosure: 'you can [say] whatever you want'**


The affective atmosphere of MDMA seemed to both encourage partners to disclose and to respond to disclosures in helpful ways. The heightened feelings of safety and muting of fear made it is easier to talk, while the dampening of anger and heightened positive affect, like feelings of love and safety, made it easier to receive and accept these disclosures. Participants spoke repeatedly about how they felt more free to talk:

> *Dan: It's like, no matter what she said, it was like everything made me love*
> *her more and more [...]*

*you could say like most of it but obviously it's a lot more work…And so instead of doing that stuff, it's, it's the safe tree you're in and so you can [say] whatever you want (Couple interview: Emily & Dan)*

*Ayesha: you know one person's going to be really honest and the other person's going to listen and accept…I think that's actually a very safe environment to chat through stuff  (Couple interview: Ayesha & Sam)*

*Mark: It's that it allows you to be completely nonjudgmental and talk about issues that are very very difficult…it forces you to actually talk about them calmly, without any fear or...the feeling of, erm, being insecure or that you're gonna be judged (Couple interview: Mark & Jenny)*

The sense of protection offered by MDMA's affective atmosphere is striking; akin to an emotional safe haven. Dan's image of '*the safe tree you're in*' encapsulates this: he is removed from the world, so high up as to be untouchable. The ground in this image seems to be an analog for the everyday consequences of things you might say, like dealing with someone's emotional hurt when you say the wrong thing. MDMA seems to take participants out of these messy, affective repercussions; it removes the feeling that '*you're gonna be judged*', which, in turn, makes you feel '*safe*' so you can talk about things '*calmly, without any fear*'. All these aspects coalesce to make it much easier '*to say harder things*' or '*talk about issues that are very very difficult*'. Looking particularly at Ayesha and Mark's descriptions of this affective atmosphere, reciprocity is also brought to the fore. Ayesha describes this as one person '*being really honest*' while the other '*listen[s] and accept[s]*', creating a '*very safe environment*' for conversation. Furthermore, the role an abundance of positive emotions might play in fashioning an aura of acceptance is indicated by how Dan recalls everything his partner said '*made [him] love her more and more'.* Mark emphasises how MDMA '*allows **you** to be completely nonjudgmental*' (own emphasis) as well as to feel that you yourself '*won't be judged*'. These kinds of open conversations were also rarely premediated: '*it just comes out. I never thought about "oh, do I have some more problems I want to talk about?" [laughter]' (Eva).* The

spontaneity of this relational style was particularly emphasised by many couples: it felt like an organic process. These were difficult, complex conversations in themselves, it would likely be a relief not to also anxiously anticipate their onset. This reciprocal safe space produced an array of disclosures, from relationship issues to traumatic memories. These could be significant, and at times resonate outside of the bubble, into the rhythms of everyday life.

### 4.2.1 Relationship disclosures

The emotional safe haven of MDMA provided a place to disclose about relationship matters for many of the participants. Dan describes a conversation him and his partner, Emily, had on MDMA where they both revealed they had committed infidelity:

> Dan: you feel like you're floating in a warm tub of, warm goo...like a protective barrier around your, yourself so you say all things that you wouldn't say otherwise...I don't think we would ever say 'em. As close as we are and all the rest of it. There's things that you just worry about someone's reaction to things and all that...it got everything out and um it's funny though cos then the MDMA wears off...and that shit's all out there though. Then, you know, it was all processed in its own time and, um, yeah, so it's great though cos I suppose if we weren't meant to be together, it still would have been great. Cos that would have been out there and it was an honest thing. But, it was out there and we worked through it (Couple interview: Dan & Emily)

The muting of negative and accentuation of positive emotion within the bubble can be seen to be mirrored in the description of a '*protective barrier*' forming around Dan, shielding him from his own anxiety about other people's reactions, and how he '*float[s] in a warm tub of warm goo*' totally at ease. In this state, Dan can '*say anything*'; things that '*you wouldn't say otherwise*' irrespective of how '*close*' a couple they are. It is clear that he values honesty as part of intimacy, even at the

expense of relationship longevity: '*if we weren't meant to be together, it still would have been great...it was an honest thing.*' It also seems apparent that everyday ways of relating are not always conducive to this level of honesty – the worry he feels over Emily's response inhibits his disclosures. However, he feels MDMA can provide this open and honest space, where everything is '*out there*' between the couple. A lack of interpersonal barriers and emphasis on honesty could be seen as reminiscent of the disclosing model of intimacy discussed in Chapter One and mentioned earlier in this chapter. This was argued to be a simplification and exaggeration of the process of building and sustaining intimacy (Charles et al., 2008; Crow, 2002, Duncan & Smith 2006; Gabb & Fink, 2015; Jamieson 1998, 2005; Irwin 2005; Smart 2007; Smart & Shipman 2004), yet, it was maintained, there does seem to have been a cultural shift in how we think about intimacy. This can be witnessed here in the emphasis Dan places on full disclosure and, indeed, in that same emphasis placed throughout this section by many different couples. Perhaps, how couples do intimacy on a day-to-day basis does not reflect such an emphasis on disclosure (Gabb & Fink, 2015), but the affective atmosphere of MDMA is more primed for this kind of intimate practice. This is not to say the bubble is idyllic. Emily elsewhere comments she felt safe during their conversation but it '*didn't make [her] feel great'* and, as Dan notes, '*the MDMA wears off*' but '*that shit's all out there*'. The protective casing wears away. Indeed, these revelations of infidelity led to painful consequences – distress and turbulence between the pair in the days after and then a year-long separation.

Yet, Dan still seems to be framing this as a part of a wider process of moving forward, in an honest way, and that the emotional fallout was entangled with this. Indeed, difficult feelings and frustration have been suggested to be a sign of processes of transformation (Bjergkilde, 2017). Of course, it is crucial to contextualise this idealisation of honesty in Dan and Emily's life circumstances at the time – they had been together a number of years but were not married and did not have children. Perhaps such a disruptive disclosure might not have been so welcome in a later life stage. However, extramarital infidelity is a significant secret to keep, 91% of surveyed American adults described it as morally wrong in a nationwide, representative survey from Gallup (2013). It does not seem too great a leap to think someone would want to know if their partner was having an affair. Given the high

moral acceptability of divorce – 68% of American adults felt divorce was tolerable (Gallup, 2013) – information about a partner's infidelity can now be acted upon; in contrast to previous periods in history when divorce was simply not seen as a viable option.

For other participants too, it seemed that MDMA could provide an affective relational space amenable to significant relationship disclosures; but rather than inhibiting '*worry*' as Dan spoke of, the dampening of fear and shame proved crucial:

> *Mark: we've been struggling with, now that we've been in a relationship for seven years, just somewhat struggling with the concept of monogamy…and dealing with the trust issue and all of this stuff and this is why this drug is so great. It's that it allows you to be completely nonjudgmental and talk about issues that are very, very difficult…it forces you to actually talk about them calmly, without any fear (Couple interview: Mark & Jenny)*

> *Jakub: Even like when you're talking about positive things about your fantasies…which you may feel guilty about…it just feels like…This is me, this is where I am and it's ok to be here…*
> *Helena: no fear and no shame and I think that's really important, the shame, um, the feeling of shame just disappear and um, the funny thing is that you don't feel ashamed the day after MDMA either (Couple interview: Helena & Jakub)*

For Mark, being able to discuss '*very difficult*' issues together, like non-monogamy, stems directly from the '*completely nonjudgmental*' bubble of MDMA, where the fear of raising such topics in everyday life has been allayed. Non-monogamy is a problematic and often morally loaded topic for many couples (Reibstein & Richards, 1992) and is consistently rated less positively by both monogamous individuals and, surprisingly, by non-monogamous people too (Conley, Moors, Matsick & Ziegler, 2013). Yet other's acceptance of us is crucial: to belong and be accepted within a social group is one of our most fundamental needs (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Comparably, Helen and Jakub detail an absence of guilt and shame as facilitating

dialogue about their sexual fantasies. Jakub is capable of greater self-acceptance, '*it's ok to be here*', and Helena talks about how '*shame just disappear[s]*' on MDMA in the context of sharing sexual fantasies. Shame originates from internalising 'the gaze and voice of the other' (Fuchs, 2002, p240) and encapsulates the frustration of our deep need to belong. Acceptance could be seen as the locus of the difficulty in discussing both of these topics, and the safe haven of MDMA provided a way to discuss contested concepts like non-monogamy or particular sexual fantasies, without invoking culturally-sanctioned and visceral emotional scripts e.g. anger or disgust.

Additionally, both of these accounts engage with a particular interpersonal standard for a high level of honesty and disclosure (Klesse, 2006), termed the disclosing model of intimacy (Jamieson, 1998) where partners engage in an all-encompassing but fragile emotional intimacy: only committed to as long as both parties derive enough satisfaction from it (Giddens, 1992). Yet, many scholars (Jamieson, 1998; Gabb & Fink, 2015; Smart, 2007) have extensively criticised this notion for its neglect of other vital components to love such as practical care, social networks and couple time together not focussed on conversation. Once we step outside of this lens, it is possible to question the wisdom behind such a 'tell all' approach, which could be seen to contextualise the value many couples derived from their MDMA disclosures. A total lack of barriers might be seen to disallow private, mental lives and propose an unattainable and undesirable standard for what intimacy looks like. Certainly, for Ayesha and Sam there was a complex mix of liberation, second thoughts and coming to terms with the things they had revealed. They describe disclosing things that were '*very private*' (Ayesha) and '*quite personal*' (Nick) which for day(s) afterwards they were doubtful they should have disclosed: '*I did talk about things that the next morning I thought, I really don't think I wanted to say*' (Ayesha, having spoken to a group of friends, including Sam); '*the next day or kind of a couple of days afterwards, you kind of feel like "oh, I just feel like a bit of an idiot"*' (Sam, having spoken only to Ayesha). However, when pressed whether she regretted what she'd said, Ayesha pushed back, '*I almost felt a bit liberated I'd say... I bonded a lot better with my friends by telling them things*'. Along the same lines, Sam recalls coming to terms with the disclosure through realising that:

*the people you've sort of shared it with kind of care about you and don't judge you...so, in the end, you actually, I think it feels probably quite good in the long-term*

There seems a sense then in which such unbridled honesty can underscore the value of existing relationships. Both Ayesha and Sam were initially worried about their disclosures distorting people's opinions of them, but witnessing these fears as unfounded confirmed the strength of these bonds. Once more, acceptance by others seems to be the touchstone by which a disclosure's worth is measured. In this manner, sharing things about yourself on MDMA opens up an avenue to having parts of your self accepted that you would never think (or want) to share in the first place.

However, at another point, Sam comes across as less effusive – he mentions how sharing this information has '*not really kind of served [him]*', it was not something he felt he had to '*get off his chest*'. Although he seems to have come to terms with the disclosure, the discomfort involved with this process is not framed as an essential part of moving forward, as it was for Dan when he managed the painful consequences of revealing infidelity. Instead, Sam seems to question the disclosing model of intimacy (Giddens, 1992) and whether it really benefitted him or his relationship in this instance. It is an important consideration that MDMA might, in some circumstances, enable disclosures which are not desired. Jenny describes a similar feeling:

*I guess sometimes I get this feeling like was I too vulnerable the day before? Did I share too much?...I don't know now that I feel regretful for having shared anything but almost like kind of overly exposed... but then, you know, I think about the experience on the whole and I realise that it was actually a positive thing. (Couple interview: Mark & Jenny)*

Jenny details a kind of emotional exhaustion in the days directly after using MDMA, she feels '*overly exposed*' and interrogates the value of disclosing so much, '*did I share too much?*' but is hesitant to ascribe regret to her experience, ultimately

concluding, '*it was actually a positive thing*'. Jenny might take up the cultural script of intimacy as disclosure to a greater degree than Sam, or perhaps she does not have the same incentives to contain her thoughts and feelings as Sam does due to the way masculinity is perceived in society (Seidler, 2007). Whatever the case, the production of a more open, honest way of relating on MDMA does have repercussions outside the space and couples should be aware of the potential for spontaneous disclosures.

The safe haven of disclosure was not just confined to the space and time of MDMA use, but rippled outwards into everyday life:

> *Jakub: Once you break the taboo of talking about something, it's that much easier to talk about it again by simply recalling a conversation you had (Couple interview: Helena & Jakub)*

> *Helena: I always felt like MDMA was allowing us to talk about issues that we were obviously unable to talk about without MDMA. But then after a few times, we were able to talk about things without using the MDMA…It was actually something that we were able to take away from the experience and actually use it outside' (Couple interview: Helena & Jakub)*

The concept of life-space (Lewin, 1936 in Brown & Reavey, 2015) can be helpful here. As discussed in Chapter Two, life-space allows for a consideration of the ways in which past memories or imagined futures are folded into the current situation (Brown & Reavey, 2015). Past conversations can be very much ongoing in the present; these intensive connections of memory go out and over the boundaries of time and space and, in this way, the disclosures on MDMA can be seen to weave into and become part of how they relate to each other on a day-to-day level. Jakub emphasises how he can '*simply recall*' a previous conversation had on MDMA; this intensive connection indelibly shaping the range of possible actions in his present (Brown & Reavey, 2015). Helena adds that it became about more than a process of remembering, the couple became able to enact a different, more candid style of relating in their day-to-day lives, opening up entirely new topics for discussion, '*after a few times, we were able to talk about things without using the MDMA*'. Again,

what takes place on MDMA is not confined to the space and time of that experience but ripples out to construct different everyday practices of intimacy.

Yet it is not quite this straightforward. In their interview, Helena and Jakub oscillate between attributing this new style of relating to MDMA or to the personal therapy they had been receiving around that time. The question is clearly ambiguous in their minds, with Jakub hinting at a reciprocal relationship between MDMA and therapy:

> *it's hard to say how much impact MDMA had in preparing me for opening up so much [in therapy]. Because it wasn't hard at all – it just happened (Couple interview: Helena & Jakub)*

This is a sentiment echoed elsewhere by Helena who describes how taking MDMA at the weekend could leave her more open in her therapy session during the week. This suggests another context in which a more open way of being on MDMA could transform practices of intimacy outside of the drug experience: the therapeutic relationship. If Jakub has already experienced a profound sense of openness on MDMA, it might become easier to recreate that with his therapist, which might be considered a conducive environment to therapeutic practice. An important thing to note is that while moments on MDMA may be couched in idyllic language, couples also conceptualise these experiences as involving a degree of difficulty and effort, such as the psychological 'work' of therapy, as for Helena and Jakub, or the 'work' required to sustain relationships, as in Mark's account:

> *Mark: the first couple of times we would think at the end 'oh, that just solved all our problems'. And then we would find, no, when we would go back to our daily lives and we still have to work on those issues. It brings them up for us to talk about and gets the ball rolling but, no, it doesn't, it doesn't resolve the things, you still have to work after the fact to really make it happen. (Couple interview: Mark & Jenny)*

For Mark, a temporary utopian aftermath where he felt MDMA had '*solved all their problems*' soon dissipated. Rather, he pinpoints the role of MDMA to help '*bring issues up*' and '*get…the ball rolling*' but that he still had to put in the '*work*' to resolve them. Mark seems to draw on the relationship as work discourse (Chapman, 2014; McKay, Fanning & Paleg, 2006) to underscore the difficulty of integrating difficult disclosures into his relationship, '*[MDMA] doesn't resolve the things, you still have to work after the fact to really make it happen*'. He could be seen to draw on the strong cultural narrative of the 'good couple' who 'work hard to achieve a healthy relationship' (Eldén, 2011, p150). Eldén has termed this a popular therapy approach, where labour is conceptualised as the continued reflection on and discussion of the relationship: what works well and what does not and where it is going. While Eldén critiques this popular therapy narrative for individualising issues and deferring to expert definitions of what constitutes the good couple, it could be seen to play a valuable role for Mark. Having to work at a relationship offers a counterbalance to the affective idyll of MDMA. This discourse primes him for having to actively deal with the emotional aftermath of MDMA, rather than romanticising its potential for his relationship.

### 4.2.3 Remembering together

While the safe, reciprocal space of MDMA facilitated a wide range of disclosures, it allowed several participants to dwell on personal, distressing experiences in particular. The 'expanded' view of memory will be employed here, where memory is understood as a distributed system of feeling rather than all 'in the head' (Brown & Reavey, 2015, p43), to illustrate the relationality of this disclosing process. Karl describes the trauma of being involved in a car accident in which a 'very close friend' lost their life:

> *Karl: um it's a hard thing to explain, like I could say like imagine you're stuck with an experience and you can't really tell anyone because you know they won't understand and you also don't want to go deep into it because they*

*might find it annoying or hard or difficult um. So you're stuck with that, you*
*can't really talk to anyone about it um except for in the past I've talked to like*
*a psychiatrist about it but being able to share it with someone who's really*
*close to you, a friend or even a lover, it, it's um…you lose a lot of weight on*
*your shoulders when you do that. It's um, yeah [chuckles], it's something you*
*don't usually share and it is, it is a big and important part of my life so I'm*
*happy I can share it with her.... it makes my life a lot easier. It's actually*
*changed a lot for me um, before that I, I think I had nightmares pretty much*
*every other day and since then that's pretty much stopped…because of the*
*MDMA um, you don't feel the pain and the bad feelings…and um, um I feel*
*less of those bad feelings it was a bit of uh traumatic for her as well. Um, she*
*has told me many times that she's really glad that she did. It's a small price to*
*pay.*
*Interviewer: mmm. And how, and how kind of important was MDMA in*
*helping you tell your girlfriend about it?*
*Karl: um…that's quite hard. I think it was very important um, it's not so much*
*that the M-, that I was holding back um, the MDMA was more to let*
*myself…um I don't think I would have been able to force myself to relive those*
*events without um the help of MDMA…I would just start getting too sad and*
*too uh emotional, that I would just stop… [chuckles] and I wouldn't see a*
*point in trying to talk (Diary interview)*

He had to '*force [him]self*' to relive this experience, something he found possible
inside the protective bubble of MDMA due to the way it dampened his '*sad[ness]*'
and '*bad feelings*'. His description fits with the emotional effects – reduced fear
response and increased feelings of relaxation – that have been proposed as an
explanation for the use, and success, of MDMA-assisted psychotherapy for
conditions including PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) (Mithoefer et al., 2012;
Sessa, 2011). The language he uses is striking: of blockages, '*you're stuck*', and
burdens, '*a lot of weight on [his] shoulders*', which permeate deep down into his
subconscious mind, '*I had nightmares pretty much every other day*'. This halting and
burdening of his experiencing of the world can be better understood through a

process-orientated view of memory. The question of forgetting is crucial for what Brown and Reavey (2015) term 'vital memories': 'memories that become pivotal to trying to make sense of a life' (p3), which are often distressing or difficult. Karl's memory of the car accident he was involved with could be seen as a vital memory, it seems to have left a mark on his life and structured his experience in a profound way. Bergson understood forgetting as a protection against the domination of the present by the past. For Karl, we could see this particular vital memory as having an unwelcome level of dominion over his present: it's an '*important part of [his] life*' that he alone was '*stuck*' with and was still causing him distress in the present. Brown and Reavey (2015) describe the kind of 'active, selective forgetting that goes on around vital memories…as a form of *displacement*, an effort to redirect the flow of experience while retaining the connection' (emphasis in original, p72). Sharing these tragic events with his partner could be viewed as such a displacement: it is no longer a '*weight*' he alone must bear, it becomes a shared memory between the two of them; a part of who he is that can be seen by someone '*really close to [him]*'. It also follows in the footprints of a therapeutic understanding of the self (Brownlie, 2014; Illouz, 2008): Karl ties his well-being to the talking through of this memory with his girlfriend. Restraining expression of the event was causing him a great deal of distress, he had nightmares '*pretty much every other day*', yet this was completely excised through talk, '*it makes my life a lot easier*'.

While perhaps not considered vital memories, other participants also pointed to a rupture in their experience as a result of distressing events or situations. For Eva, this was an estrangement from her mother:

*Eva: and I had, uh, some problems with my family or with my mother and this was like, um…I haven't talked to her since years. I don't know when, when was the last time. And it was like, every few weeks I thought about it and then we took MDMA together, I think it was fourth time or third time, something like that [Lars: yeah] and then I started talking about it and it was like 'ok, now I'm free. I, I can deal with this. No problem. I live with this, it's part of my life. It's no problem for me anymore.' And since then I, I thought about all this stuff, like two or three times and it was one and a half years ago or one year*

*ago. It was like a therapy and I was so glad that he was the person I can talk*

*to about it and after, the next day, I was like, I was free. Because it was a part*

*of my mind. It was a barrier in my mind and the barrier's gone. I was and this*

*was part that I'm the person, who I am now.*

*I didn't realise it as a problem I had. It's just that I thought every few weeks*

*about it and then sometimes I was like 'oh, I don't want to think about it'. It's*

*just like came, I don't know where it came from…I just really wanted to talk*

*about it, I don't know why. I think it was important that he knows it and he*

*knows me, like who I really am. And I learnt who I really am and it was nice*

*to share it (Couple interview: Eva & Lars)*

Similarly to Karl, Eva speaks of past events obstructing her experience: the estrangement from her mother, '*I haven't talked to her since years*' was like a '*barrier in [her] mind*'. This '*barrier*' seemed to act to cordon off these memories and prevent their integration into a cohesive sense of self; in other words, they were in her mind but did not feel part *of* her mind. After she speaks to her partner, '*the barrier's gone*' and the experience becomes part of '*who [she is] now*'. Again, we could see her talking through of this situation as allowing for an 'active, selective forgetting' (Brown & Reavey, 2015, p71) of past events, she recalls how she used to think about it '*every few weeks*' though she did not '*want to*' but afterwards this constricted to '*like two or three times*' in the space of a year or so. This selective '"canalisation" of the past' (Brown & Reavey, 2015, p71) allows for only the parts of the past that can produce a greater sense of agency to flow uninterrupted into the present. Perhaps this might involve acknowledging the ways in which this distance from her mother has made her into the (strong, resilient) person she is, certainly her forgetting seems to enhance her present agency: she feels a sense of liberation, '*I was free*'.

Helena also recalls talking about distressing childhood memories on MDMA with her partner, Jakub:

*Helena: I think that was, that made us more, much, much stronger as a*

*couple and me kind of trusting you, um. Because I could relate to, share with*

*you, uh, my kind of childhood traumas, I could describe to you how things were and kind of trust you and kind of feel the empathy, feel that you, you trust, that I can trust you and also that you care. You kind of mirror my feelings, it's not just 'ok' but 'oh, oh, that's so horrible'…it feels natural. It feels like, it's so easy to say it. And like I remember very often like even telling him 'oh my god, it does feel so weird to be able to say it just like that. It just happens' [Jakub: yeah] and then you have this kind of process, kind of, you're reflecting on it, thinking 'oh my god, how am I able to do that? How's it happening?' Like it's so nice. It feels safe, it feels, um, normal, it feels good to be able to do that. And it also makes you wonder 'why haven't I done that earlier?' Like why haven't I said it like, I don't know, like last year or something? [Jakub: yeah] you know why did I need to wait that long. Um, so yeah, I don't know what you feel but, for me, it just feels so natural, it just very faultless, like it just flows (Couple interview: Helena & Jakub)*

Helena places less emphasis on personal liberation from distressing memories than Eva or Karl do. Though this is perhaps due to the '*personal breakthroughs*' she had around these memories occuring initially in therapy. Here, her disclosure is contextualised within her connection to Jakub, '*that made us…much stronger as a couple*'. The authenticity of his empathic response, '*you kind of mirror my feelings, it's not just "ok" but "oh, oh, that's so horrible"*' to how '*shar[ing] [her] kind of childhood traumas*' builds the '*trust*' between them and is real evidence of the '*care*' he has for her. Helena feels Jakub is genuinely sharing in her painful emotional experience, tapping into the importance of feeling your partner is emotionally attuned to you, as discussed in the previous theme. Emotional attunement has been linked to feelings of belonging and closeness, and greater relationship satisfaction (Connolly & Sicola, 2005; Cohen, Schulz, Weiss & Waldinger, 2012). The benefit Helena derives from talking to Jakub and his empathic receipt of her feelings is underscored through how '*it just feels so natural*'. Moreover, her words echo the language of obstruction found in Karl and Eva's accounts – he is '*stuck*' in an experience, she has a '*barrier*' in her mind – but from the other side. Instead of talking about blockages, Helena's description mimics the release you feel when there

are no more obstructions, '*it just flows*'. Yet, this is in the context of her relationship, as though she felt the undisclosed memories were holding them back; artificially blocking a point of connection. This draws on ideas of closeness as grounded in mutual disclosure, a 'telling all' approach (Giddens, 1992), The affective atmosphere of MDMA – the feelings of '*safe[ty]*', enhanced connection to your own emotions and ability to respond in an emotionally sensitive way – could be seen to collaboratively weave a more conducive pattern to a positive experience of, even difficult, disclosures.

Whereas Helena frames her experience of disclosure in how it connected her to her partner, Eva and Karl's accounts seemed to lean more heavily on what the disclosure did for *them*. Talking about distressing memories was argued to allow them to engage in an 'active, selective forgetting' (Brown & Reavey, 2015, p71) of events that opened up greater possibilities for agency in their present. Yet, for all the participants, sharing memories from their past could be argued to serve a social function too. Studies have found sharing personally meaningful, autobiographical memories builds on and maintains intimacy (Alea & Bluck, 2003; Barnier, Sutton, Harris & Wilson, 2008; Thorne, Cutting & Skaw, 1998); indeed, it has been suggested that the fundamental reason to share autobiographical memory is social in nature (Bruce, 1989; Nelson, 1993). All of the memories described could be considered as personally meaningful, they have all left a 'mark' on Helena, Eva and Karl's lives in some way (Brown & Reavey, 2015). Therefore, the sharing of such memories on MDMA could be seen to inspire closeness, as well as tapping into the personal benefits of disclosure allowing them to 'selective[ly] forget' (Brown & Reavey, 2015, p72).

**4.3 Emotional erasure: The power of collaborative forgetting**

We have seen how distressing events and feelings flowed into couples' conversations. Just as remembering difficult things together could fortify a couple's bond, so too could *forgetting* together. Dan and Emily talk about this as a communicative '*clean slate*':

*Emily: the E just helps you stay focussed on the task at hand. That is probably just a big part of it, just not having those other defence things you have: the attitude or the little personal quirks during an argument...those are gone, all totally gone and you're seriously just dealing with the issue. Like Dan and I can start talk-, arguing normally some day and 95% of the time, we'll be arguing about arguing [laughs] like arguing about the way we're arguing, rather than the issue...*

*Interviewer: what do you mean by that, like arguing about the way that you're arguing?*

*Dan: um, a big part of communication is non-verbal so just a certain tone of voice...can set the whole thing off so...the E makes you talk totally different then [Emily: yeah] so it's like, it's a whole fresh, clean slate of communication that is kinda difficult to access (Couple interview: Emily & Dan)*

So far, the MDMA bubble has been described as muting 'negative' feelings like anger and fear, but here this is manifested in a peculiar way: as a break with past patterns of hostile communication. The use of '*whole, fresh, clean*' forms a powerful triad, underscoring the purifying effect of MDMA. The normal way they relate to each other can be bogged down with '*personal quirks*' or an '*attitude*' that produces tension; they often end up arguing about *how* they argue. A '*certain tone of voice*' or other non-verbal cues can be more preoccupying than the content of the argument. In contrast, all the things written on their interpersonal '*slate*' are, on MDMA, forgotten which enables them to '*seriously just deal...with the issue*'. Emily and Dan seem to speaking here about their dynamic, what Fuchs (2013) calls their *interpersonal atmosphere*. He uses this term to draw attention to the encompassing, felt quality that arises between two or more people and while he refers to this kind of 'affective climate' (p8) in the context of psychopathology, it could be equally applied to the 'in-between' created through everyday interpersonal dynamics. Part of what creates this is our bodily 'resonance': our tone of voice, facial expression, bodily gestures and demeanour. The couple can be seen to portray their interpersonal atmosphere as sometimes blocking clear communication and fostering

a degree of hostility. Emily talks elsewhere about sometimes needing to psychologically defend herself from Dan due to the nature of his work, '*I feel like he's using [the tools of his work] on me sometimes*', manifesting here as a defensive '*attitude*' perhaps. In addition, Dan mentions how instrumental a '*certain tone of voice*' can be in '*set[ting] the whole thing off*'; another aspect of our bodily resonance (Fuchs, 2013).

In contrast, Dan sees them as being able to communicate afresh on MDMA, unencumbered by past dynamics, a state '*difficult to access*' in ordinary life. They describe the atmosphere between them on MDMA as nonjudgmental and safe and that this '*makes you talk totally different[ly]*'. In keeping with the therapeutic cultural script that 'it's good to talk' (Brownlie, 2014), remembering and talking through past difficulties tends to be encouraged while the practice of relational forgetting can be viewed with suspicion; perhaps framed as a 'sweeping under the rug' of what needs to be openly addressed. However, there is a body of work in memory studies that emphasises the power of forgetting (Brown & Reavey, 2015; Harris, Sutton & Barnier, 2010; Middleton & Brown, 2005). The domination of the computer model of memory, where we are supposed to take in information and then accurately reproduce it, further cements the equation of forgetting with failure but this misses the ways in which forgetting can be desirable. For example, the selective forgetting of distressing events can create better possibilities for how we can act in the present (Brown & Reavey, 2015). Just as remembering can serve social functions such as teaching others, eliciting empathy or developing and sustaining intimacy (Alea & Bluck, 2003), it has been argued that forgetting, too, can serve a social purpose (Harris, Sutton & Barnier, 2010). For example, forgetting the relationships of the past can be helpful to a couple at the beginning a new relationship (Brown & Reavey, 2015). Indeed, the forgetting that Dan and Emily describe on MDMA seems rooted in its social function: it allows them to better communicate with one another and build on their intimacy. This is not a total erasure of how they communicate, rather it is a selective forgetting of the '*personal quirks*', '*attitudes*' and '*tone of voice*' that have in the past soured their dynamic. This forgetting helps construct a different interpersonal atmosphere between them: one of greater acceptance and clarity so they can stay '*focussed on the task at hand*',

rather than getting sidetracked into the grooves of a defensive or tense pattern of communication.

For two other couples, taking MDMA also seemed to facilitate an 'active forgetting' of the past (Brown & Reavey, 2015, p13). Both cases involved a dissipation of more intense present-moment anger and, again, seemed to bring couples closer:

*Joe: taking E and then, yeah, the next thing you remember is that you're sat next to each other on the rug…we'd go from being 18 foot apart to 2 cm apart down there. That's my image of it…you just move like that and it never fails. However much rowing we'd done, it never failed once. There wasn't once when it carried on…into that space. That wipes it away (Couple interview: Rachel & Joe)*

*Helena: It was really cold…um, so he borrowed me his hat and then after a while he wanted to have it back and I don't want him to take it back. So we started like arguing, um, and we were walking through the bridge, um, and he just, you just basically threw it into the water, the hat...I remember like I was really pissed off with him…and then I couldn't actually process everything that was going on, I couldn't actually make sense of why, why I was feeling so pissed off with him, so hurt. Um, and we didn't talk till we took MDMA but during the process I remember spontaneously thinking about this event. It wasn't something I was intending to do but I remember thinking about it and all of a sudden…realising how much I stepped, I was stepping over your boundaries and behaving like a child who was very needy and wanting you to be my parent…and I think that was a very significant shift in my way of thinking about this and noticing how my own issues were affecting our relationship…One of those moments where you kind of realise, um, things and so something on the cognitive level and on the emotional level that changes, that we've noticed. (Couple interview: Helena & Jakub)*

The affective atmosphere of MDMA is clearly demarcated by Joe, '*that space*', which is '*wiped*' clean of its murky, argumentative build-up and the hostility and anger that surely accompany it. This emotional cleansing '*never fails*' and is physically manifested in the way him and his partner of 25 years, Rachel, used to '*go from being 18ft apart to 2cm apart*'. For Joe, taking MDMA seems to be like pressing a reset button: the anger and frustration interrupting their closeness is removed and they can once again come together physically and emotionally. Due to the embeddedness of our emotions in our personal biographies (Burkitt, 2014), it is important to note these experiences took place in the emotionally turbulent early days of their relationship. They had both left their partners to be with each other but while Rachel found the separation bearable, Joe was struggling with guilt over leaving his ex-partner. He was '*still kind of in a relationship*' with her, though he describes this as rooted in a belief in '*fairness*' rather than stronger depth of feeling. In this context, a joint forgetting could be seen as socially functional: the removal of anger and hurt originating from a particular set of circumstances, rather than their dynamic, allows them to re-experience the bond that brought them together. Crucially, a more intense bond than they experienced with their previous partners. This is not to suggest that those difficult events were simply forgotten, they spent a long time discussing them on MDMA, but their emotional association to these events *was* altered. Emotions are a large part of what give events and situations their meaning (Fuchs, 2013; Cromby, 2015) and if MDMA helps produce positive emotional associations and dims negative ones, then the meaning of information, like your partner's connection to someone else, might change. This is also suggested to be contextualised by their particular scenario e.g. a deep connection to one another which outshone previous relationships. This emotional erasure enabled the couple to have '*incredibly painful conversations…that weren't painful*' and do so enveloped in an emotional closeness manifested by their '*2cm apart*' bodies.

Yet, there is another lens through which to see this emotional erasure. Despite the way Joe frames his continued relationship with his previous partner as out of '*fairness*', the fact remains that in a, likely monogamous, relationship with Rachel, he was being unfaithful. This does not seem to be the sole focus of their arguments but, certainly, a part of them. Rachel states that she does not think they

would still be together if not for taking MDMA at that point in their relationship. Perhaps MDMA, then, can be seen as creating an affective space that overrode hurtful behaviour which otherwise might have caused to them to break up. This could be seen as prefigured in some of the literature, for example, the 'instant marriage' syndrome of MDMA coined by Timothy Leary is a similar concept but in reverse: couples who might otherwise never become romantically involved, do so under the blur of intensely positive and muted negative emotionality. This softening of the pain associated with infidelity from a partner could be potentially problematic since sexual (and often emotional) fidelity is often considered a non-negotiable part of a couple relationship (Finn, 2012). Therefore, taking MDMA might be seen to promote relationship longevity at the cost of personal boundaries and pain. However, it is worth noting people do value fidelity to different degrees (e.g. the consensual non-monogamy movement) and this took place in the very early days of their relationship, which has now continued for over twenty years and which the couple frame as central to their lives.

Helena also seems to describe MDMA performing an emotional 'resetting' after an argument. Yet, while this immediately draws Joe and Rachel back together, for Helena closeness only comes after she has reached a new understanding of the situation. She emphasises how she was '*really pissed off*', '*so pissed off*' and '*hurt*' with her partner that they '*didn't talk*' until taking MDMA; even though she couldn't, at the time, '*actually process*' why she felt so intensely. MDMA acts as a neutralising agent for her anger, removing it from the interaction - she doesn't mention it again and converts to cognitive terms such as '*realising*' and '*thinking*'. The removal of strong, negative emotions aids in a clearer examination of the situation where Helena considers her own behaviour and how she '*stepped…over [his] boundaries*' by behaving in a childish way, which precipitates a '*very significant shift in [her] way of thinking about…how [her] own issues were affecting [their] relationship*'. This kind of newly acquired insight or ability to embrace other perspectives has been described previously as part of MDMA use (Duff, 2008; Hinchliff, 2001). Helena realises it is not purely about what Jakub's done to her; also recognising how her own behaviour feeds into his, creating a behavioural feedback loop. This taps into a recognised change process in couples therapy: of taking personal responsibility for

relationship experiences (Kurri, & Wahlström, 2005; Greenberg, James & Conroy, 1988). The idea is that we can only change ourselves, not others, so taking responsibility highlights something which is within our power to potentially change i.e. our own behaviour. This awareness is the first step to actually focussing on that personal behaviour, thought pattern or emotional response and creating the desired change. For Helena, MDMA's muting of her overwhelming anger facilitates a recognition of her child-like neediness and how she was constructing Jakub as her parent, rather than her partner. Within this context, Jakub's gesture of throwing the hat into the river could be construed as him (perhaps overzealously) resisting the unwanted parental role being thrust upon him.

In fact, both Helena and Jakub have been to individual therapy so it's unclear whether Helena taking responsibility in this way on MDMA was a spontaneous process or more linked to her experiences there. As discussed earlier in the chapter, they both wrestle with assigning weight to the input of therapy vs. MDMA, pulling in both directions before Helena comes to a balanced conclusion:

> *I think for our relationship it was just a combination of us both going through individual therapy, and having MDMA experience. Like this, these both factors kind of influence each other (Couple interview: Helena and Jakub)*

MDMA and therapy took place at the same time and '*influence[d] each other*'. The former seems to lay the emotional groundwork for the latter as Helena explains how lingering '*emotional fragility*' from weekend MDMA use would work to '*facilitate breakthroughs in [her] therapy*'. Research has suggested MDMA to be a catalyst to, rather than a replacement for, the therapeutic process: Montagne (2001) referred to a therapist who equated a single MDMA-assisted session with 5 months of non-assisted therapy. One of the suggested mechanisms through which this is accomplished is by helping in the 'processing [of] difficult emotions that have a deep component of fear and/or anxiety' (Doblin, 2002, p10). For the couple, this might make discussion of painful things on MDMA more bearable, indeed earlier in the chapter Helena discusses how she appreciates Jakub being with her and mirroring her feelings as she discusses traumatic childhood memories. Similarly, a leftover

sense of emotional openness from previous MDMA use might feasibly have had a comparable if less exaggerated effect in Helena's personal therapy sessions. 'Afterglow' effects from MDMA have been recorded as being felt for several days post-MDMA use (Freye, 2009; Beck & Rosenbaum, 1994).

Arguably, Joe and Helena's accounts speak to the social nature of memory. As discussed previously, in the same way that sharing memories has been found to help maintain relational intimacy (Alea & Bluck, 2003), forgetting is also argued to serve a social goal. This is not a total forgetting as 'the past in its entirety is never erased' (Brown & Reavey, 2015, p72), but highly selective: for Joe and Helena, the details of past events are remembered on MDMA but the visceral nature of their anger regarding them disappears. Similarly, for Dan and Emily it is hostility, the defensive and judgmental '*tone of voice*', that is stripped out of their experience. This partial forgetting allows couples to maintain their connection with these experiences while only remembering the parts which can help shape better possibilities for intimacy in the present. As Brown and Reavey (2015) conclude perhaps 'we need to learn how to actively forget, just as much as we need to learn how to recollect' (2015, p75).

## 4.4 Conclusions

MDMA produces an emotional safe haven for couples: one largely protected from fear, anger and shame and populated with happiness, connection and safety. There is also a greater connection to one's own emotions and an increased capacity to express them. This is reflected in experimental research where MDMA increases the ability of participants to recognise positive emotions (Hysek et al., 2012) while their ability to recognise negative emotions is impaired (Bedi et al., 2010; Hysek et al., 2012); and MDMA increases emotional empathy (Schmid et al., 2014) a shift that is thought to go some way in explaining the associated prosocial effects (Kirkpatrick, Lee, Wardle, Jacob & de Wit, 2014). These effects create an altered emotional dynamic between couples, changing what they did and the meaning of the practices they engaged in.

Firstly, couples seemed more emotionally attuned to one another, which has been linked with increased relationship contentment (Cohen, Schulz, Weiss & Waldinger, 2012; Connolly & Sicola, 2005). This was suggested to hold particular significance due to the way attunement on MDMA recalibrated gender roles, in particular men's increased emotional expression and responsiveness. In addition, this attunement was argued as produced through a multitude of interrelated modes – affective, conceptual and spatial. Secondly, the nonjudgmental affective atmosphere of MDMA helped participants to disclose their thoughts and feelings more freely. This facilitated a range of relationship disclosures, which were argued to be constrained by day-to-day life and the honesty of which was highly valued. However, these disclosures were not without cost or discomfort. In addition, distressing memories were disclosed. Remembering together allowed participants to engage in an 'active, selective forgetting' (Brown & Reavey, 2015, p2) of these past events, opening up new possibilities for personal agency in the present and was suggested to strengthen the bond between partners (Alea & Bluck, 2003). Finally, the distinct affective space of the bubble could erase past feelings of anger and reconstitute a couple's interpersonal atmosphere (Fuchs, 2013). The dispersal of anger could assist in recognising personal responsibility in disputes or invoke a joint forgetting of painful circumstances. Alternatively, this erasure wiped away a tense interpersonal atmosphere, which was inhibiting clear communication. In all of these cases, selective forgetting seemed to allow for couples to re-establish their understanding and closeness.

Thus, as many scholars have persuasively argued (Brownlie, 2014; Gabb & Fink, 2015; Jamieson, 1998; Smart, 2007), there were a range of practices that made couples feel close, from being in physically proximity and on the same emotional wavelength to revealing secrets about themselves and their relationship. The next chapter will build on the multiplicity of things couples did that made them feel close on MDMA, turning attention to their movement through and interaction with spaces.

## Chapter 5 – Shifting boundaries, (un)moving bodies

In the previous chapter, MDMA produced an organic, affective atmosphere of love and connection, which mediated emotional and discursive practices of closeness. Another key mediator of intimate practices, the spatial, embodied mode of experience, will be explored in this chapter. In particular, the intertwinement of this spatial mode with boundaries *between* self and other and *within* the self will be considered while, in the next chapter, the focus shifts to boundaries couples draw *around* MDMA experiences, separating these experiences from their everyday lives and other people.

The relational understanding of space taken in this work appreciates how space is produced through intensive connections, like emotion, memory and perception, to objects and people encountered in the past or imagined future (Brown, 2012) *and* extensive, material features of space (DeLanda, 2005). As couples moved in and through spaces and interacted with features of these settings, different possibilities for action were opened up, reformulating and reproducing subjectivity (Brown & Stenner, 2009). These subjectivities seemed to be entangled with a sharpening or shifting of the boundaries within and beyond the self. Firstly, couples' sporadic movement through and interaction with settings on MDMA will be discussed. This pattern of movement produced playful subjectivities, which underscored the individual identities of partners and the alien nature of the objects that popped up in the experience. In contrast, continuous motion led to a blurring, rather than reinforcement, of boundaries *within* the self. This boundary is argued as entrenched by both cognitivism and social constructionism and exists between discourse/mind and body (Cromby, 2004) – movement on MDMA seemed to tug at this divide, producing a whole, embodied subjectivity for participants. Finally, couples also spoke of a lack of movement, sitting together in material arrangements that locked in physical closeness. From these settings emerged a new sense of shared subjectivity as arguably the most crucial boundary of all, between self and other, became hazy.

## 5.1 Defined boundaries and playful subjectivities

The boundaries between self and other, self and world in some MDMA experiences remained strongly defined. In these memories, couples moved through urban, natural and home settings, their attention regularly diverted by objects and other material features of the spaces, which they would stop to explore. This suspendable forward momentum seemed primed to produce a landscape of adventure and discovery, experienced by Mark and Jenny when they took MDMA with another couple:

> *Jenny: we took the MDMA in downtown [city 1], erm, and we walked around, they had an outdoor art exhibit, which was really cool…*
>
> *Mark: it just works so seamlessly that, erm, you don't know how it happens, erm at one point we found a piano outside and we were playing piano and walked around inside of a drugstore, umm…and it, just a whole bunch of many experiences just seemed like the greatest thi-I think if anyone was watching that they would think that we were just completely boring but I think it's kind of funny that the playing piano experience was really, err, a highlight of the evening and were were just, you know, we don't know how to play piano but we were playing piano [chuckles]*
>
> *Jenny: they had all these, err, big pianos outside that anyone could play, it was little thing going on in [city 1]. Yeah, I mean we just kept finding various, fun outdoor stuff like that. There was just, the weather was like perfect and, umm, it was really nice (Couple interview: Mark & Jenny)*

Mark and Jenny recount walking around the city encountering '*various, fun outdoor stuff*'. There is a sense of playful exploration as they '*seamlessly*' move from one thing to another; magnified by the spontaneity of their discoveries, they '*just kept finding*' things. This playfulness, where results matter less than the pure fun of the moment (Perel, 2007), is showcased further by how they '*d[id]n't know how to play piano but [they] were playing piano*' and the humour with which this story is retold, '*[chuckles]*'. The movement of their bodies through the space and the objects they

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encounter embodies all aspects Brown (2009) sees as defining a state of play: 'Stepping out of a normal routine, finding novelty, being open to serendipity, enjoying the unexpected, embracing a little risk, and embracing the heightened vividness of life.' (Brown, 2009, p173). They embrace the unknown and the serendipitous, they have no plan for the evening's activity and instead respond to the unusual things they come across, and there is a little risk too, being in a public space on an illegal substance. The novelty, in fact, seems crucial as Mark emphasises how '*there's no going back to the first or second time that [they]'ve taken it*' with the other couple, Luke and Rebecca; '*there's no way to recreate*' the depth of enjoyment the couple experienced when taking MDMA with others was entirely new.

Couples who took part in a novel, exciting activity together have been shown to behaviourally express and experience increased relationship satisfaction compared to couples who did something familiar and enjoyable together (Aron, Aron, Norman & McKenna, 2000). This suggests that Mark and Jenny being open to the unexpected and engaging in activities they have never done before, '*we don't know how to play piano*' and taking MDMA with other people, might refresh their connection. Certainly, they speak about the night with affection. Mark describes the experience as '*so good*' and Jenny describes it as '*bringing [them] all together*'. She was worried about feeling like an '*outsider*' in the group: things with Luke, Mark's best friend, had been strained and she had never met his partner, Rebecca, before. She goes on to talk about how her '*relationship with Luke strengthened a lot*' and how it was '*an instant bonding experience*' with Rebecca; the two couples have also met up several times and completed several projects together since. Therefore, Jenny's experience indicates how playful movement on MDMA might help build and re-form non-romantic connections too. Since the couple is not a segmented unit but embedded in social networks (Smart, 2007; Gabb & Fink, 2015) which can offer support in sustaining a relationship, Jenny and Mark's connections to others are still important for them as a couple. Friends and family can provide vital support for relationships in times of difficulty (Gabb & Fink, 2015): support Luke might be better placed to provide now the tension between him and Jenny has dissipated. There is a cultural recognition of the need to work at maintaining relationships, though this often doesn't *feel* like work to partners (Gabb & Fink, 2015). To add to this

relationships as work discourse, perhaps this work is about more than simply spending time together, rehearsing a mutually enjoyable, if familiar routine. Rather, it is also about couples adventuring together as well as with others, taking a leap into what feels like an unknown or unexpected world.

The way in which MDMA can help promote this 'open[ness] to serendipity' (Brown, 2009, p173) can be further seen in the following description from Mark and Jenny:

> *Mark: oh, it's a very strange thing because we might have a plan for saying we're just gonna walk to this place to see this. But you find that you just start walking and you get into these neighbourhoods or things you've never seen before and you never would have come across just in your everyday…*
> *Jenny: we end up finding unexpected things like…like, there's this like this staircase…we'd never know that there was like a staircase there, err*
> *Mark: we've walked by it hundreds of times*
> *Jenny: yeah, we walk by it hundreds of times and it seems like when (indistinguishable) walked by and like 'woah, there's stairs there'There's something about the, erm*
> *Mark: opens your mind (Couple interview: Mark and Jenny)*

Even when they '*have a plan*' to go somewhere in particular, they find themselves waylaid. Moving through space becomes an unpredictable event, '*But you find that you just start walking and you get into these neighbourhoods or things you've never seen before*'. A purposeful trip becomes a more poetic wandering and journeying; it is this sense of absorption and seeming purposelessness that is argued as central to play (Brown, 2009) and not always deemed valuable by our modern society where the focus is often on productivity or benefit (Perel, 2007). The way in which we make sense of ourselves and our world through movement (Del Busso, 2009; Johnson, 2008; Sheets-Johnstone, 1999) is on display here as the couples' planned walk morphs into spontaneous play. This adventuring is not only about discovering places that are actually new to them but looking at places they '*walked by…hundreds of times*' a-new, noticing what they have never noticed before, '*"woah, there's stairs*

*there'*". Thus, we can see how the difference in state that MDMA produces *combined* with movement through and interaction with the spaces of drug use can open up an adventurous, exciting vista of experience.

This sense of play and adventure, even in familiar surrounds, is carried through in Eva and Lars' description of walking around the city suburbs where they live. It is a '*nice neighbourhood*' with '*small gardens*' and '*a small zoo*' on the edge of a forest. As they move through this landscape, they jokingly adopt an object for the evening to '*share*' their experience with them:

*Eva: everytime I'm taking MDMA, I have a new best friend for the evening…so sometimes it's a chestnut or flower [laughter] or branch and the, when we are going home, I release my new best friend back to the nature [laughter]. It started, I don't know, with the glowsticks*

*Lars: no, it was the thread was the first thing. The red thread.*

*Eva: red was it?...*

*Lars: we had found, I think I found it in my pocket. It was a long, red thread and we, it bounded round my wrist, it bounded round her wrist and I was like [puts on silly voice] 'oh, the thread connects us now…' [laughter]… but they become a tradition…*

*Eva: I think it started when we went to a party in another city and then there was, there were some other people and then on MDMA you think 'everybody is my new best friend' just like and then I think I transfer it to some strange item that I think 'ok, we have a nice timeWe should share our nice time with something, I don't know'*

*Lars: with the chestnut [he laughs]*

*Eva: with the chestnut, with the glowstick and then sometimes I talk to it, 'well look at this, look at this'… a bit crazy but like, really like a child….it's not serious*

*Lars: it's the thing you do on MDMA because, you know, like sometimes you do stuff and like 'oh yeah, you're my new best friend, come with me!' It's just*

*Eva: it's just, we don't take it seriously (Couple interview: Eva & Lars)*

In a similar way to Mark and Jenny, their attention is captured by separate features of the material world they encounter, which go on to shape their experience. The movement of their bodies through this setting is again crucial to the pleasures they experience as they take a part of the natural world, '*a chestnut or flower [laughter] or branch*' and carry it with them to '*share [their] nice time*'. Once again, this tale is recounted with '*[laughter]*', generously sprinkled through their re-telling, which helps express and produce a lightheartedness. Yet, while this play is full of child-like silliness, underlined by Eva's insistence, '*we don't take it seriously*', it could also be seen as *child-accommodating* due to the manner in which they interact with the things they encounter. In other words, the object selected is treated much like a person or, more specifically, a child: it is placed within the network of social ties, '*my new best friend*', carried with them throughout their journey and spoken to, '*"well look at this"*', in an attempt to engage it with the world around them. Eva's attempt to involve the adopted object with their surroundings is the same kind of strategy parents employ to engage their children with the outside world: drawing attention to salient points in order to develop language use and awareness (Callanan, 1985). Eva further expands on her thought process around incorporating the objects, '*ok, we have a nice time. We should share our nice time with something, I don't know*'. The idea of '*shar[ing] [their] nice time with something*' again seems to chime with a parental identity. Langdridge, Connolly and Sheeran (2000) found the most frequently advocated reasons for wanting a child could be seen as 'satisfying a need for the couple to share and commit to something that belongs to both of them' (p327). The objects procure joint involvement from the couple, seen most vividly in the way Lars jokes, '*It was a long, red thread…it bounded round my wrist, it bounded round her wrist and I was like [puts on silly voice] "oh, the thread connects us now…" [laughter]*'. Thus, the objects acts to '*connect [them]*' together, though the boundary between self and partner remains sharp. The very fact they need the '*long, red thread*' to connect them implies there is a distance to cross, unlike the experiences couples described of merging together on MDMA, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Thus, it could be argued that Eva and Lars are engaging in a particular form of imaginary play for 'grown-ups'; the couple are playing at what it would be like to be

parents. In the first analysis chapter, we saw how couples talked through feelings, memories and relationship issues, whereas here other forms of negotiation come to the fore. Through and with these natural objects, Eva and Lars experience an embodied, affective sense of what it might be like to parent together and consider whether this is something they would like to try for real. Gabb and Fink (2015) found their participants used pets in a similar way: as substitute children who could help couples imagine and play out how parenting might be in the future. These kinds of imaginary play can render potent topics like having children safe to some degree: there is no need to state an explicit position and it is a benign environment within which to trial such a drastic change.

Beyond connecting *with* the object, Eva and Lars might also be seen to connect to each other *through* it. This kind of mediated connection has been shown in Gabb and Fink's (2015) wide scale study of long-term relationships, where a participant describes bonding with her partner through playing with their pet hamster. In both of these cases, the mediation of the couples' experience by an animal/object, treated as having some level of awareness, opens up new possibilities for interaction (c.f Latour, 2005). If joint verbal and physical engagement with their pet allows Gabb and Fink's (2015) participant to 'bond' with her partner, then the same kind of interaction with an object might mimic the same benefit for Eva and Lars. Certainly, a greater sense of playfulness appears to be licensed, as Eva and Lars behave '*like a child*' doing '*little stupid things*'. Perel (2007) characterises play as 'carefree and unselfconsious' (p216-7), a capacity innate to children that generally disappears as we come into adulthood. Researchers have emphasised the importance of play not only for children's development (Ginsburg, 2007) but also for the wellbeing of adults (Brown, 2009; White, 2012). Indeed, the object play draws the couple in on multiple occasions, it '*became a tradition*' and is '*fun*'.

For couples, playing together has been suggested to help rekindle relationships and enhance emotional intimacy (Brown, 2009). Brown collected hundreds of 'play histories' and of the couples he spoke to who were experiencing difficulties in their relationship, he says the 'defining factor' of couples able to reconnect was 'find[ing] ways to play together' (p158). He also suggests that it is play's indefatiguable capacity for silliness that allows couples to 'drop their guard'

and 'be fully *with* each other' (p158)(emphasis in original). There is limited research examining the link between playing and relational quality, though the studies that have been done show it as positively associated with relationship satisfaction (Proyer, 2014; Aune & Wong, 2002) and its impact mediated by other factors like humour (Driver & Gottman, 2004). For example, cultivating playfulness has been linked to the capacity to employ humour in a conflict scenario, which has been found to predict future relationship quality (Driver & Gottman, 2004). Despite the promising beginnings of such research, the significance of play for adults is rarely acknowledged (White, 2012). Indeed, the purposelessness of play seems at odds with 'our culture of high efficiency and constant accountability' (Perel, 2007, p217) or in, other words, our tendency always to think in terms of benefits of doing something e.g. playing squash for our cardiovascular health. This is showcased by the declining rates of play even for children over the past 50 years (Gray, 2011), with many kindergartens allocating between 2 to 3 hours for maths and reading and as little as 30 minutes per day to unstructured play (Alliance for Childhood, 2009).

MDMA is a crucial constituent of this ludic space for Lars, '*it's the thing you do [on the drug]*'; an assertion supported by experimental studies where participants self-report a significant increase in playfulness (Bedi & de Wit, 2011; Wardle, Kirkpatrick & de Wit, 2014). However, play has not been emphasised within MDMA research, with explorations of this more playful state largely limited to particular social contexts within clubbing culture (Malbon, 1999; Northcote, 2006; Thornton, 1995). These spaces could be described as 'liminal' (Turner, 1984; Stenner, 2016; Stenner & Moreno-Gabriel, 2013; Stenner & Greco, 2017), as transcending everyday social structures and allowing for club goers to play with different identities (Malbon, 1999), particularly adult identities in the transitional period from adolescence to adulthood (Thornton, 1995, Northcote, 2006). The latter is facilitated by the acting out of adult activities, such as sex and drug-taking, on a 'voyage of discovery' (Northcote, 2006, p7). This seems very different from the kind of play that Eva and Lars engage in, which is centred on the light-hearted silliness of childlike play, rather than the carnival atmosphere and spectacle of rave culture. Additionally, the couple are in their late 20s and are mired in financial commitments such as renting a flat and are in full-time employment. This contrasts with the younger age range spoken

about in some MDMA research, who are in a more transitional stage of their lives; in limbo between being cared for as children and the responsibilities of adult life.

However, there are similarities that could be drawn between the playfulness associated with rave culture (Malbon, 1999; Northcote, 2006; Thornton, 1995) and Eva and Lars' MDMA experiences: the couple are still temporarily playing with their identity within a protected space. In addition, their play is similarly contained by their drug use spaces. This ludic exploration is not a chaotic state but carefully contained within the geographical limits of outside space: the object tends to be a part of the natural world, '*a chestnut or flower…or branch*' and is '*release[d]… back to the nature*' before they return home. This cordoning off could be argued to render their play 'safe' as it is physically delineated from their home and tied to the natural contexts of many of their MDMA trips. This could apply equally to distinguishing childlike play from their adult world as well as drawing a line around playing at parenthood before returning to their more carefree, early adult lifestyle. Equally, the haphazard way in which they come across the object could be seen to make the exploration less threatening; it doesn't have the sweaty anticipation of 'The Talk', which couples might plan ahead of time.

As outlined in Chapter Two, process thinkers emphasise environments as affording certain possibilities for acting, thinking and feeling (Brown & Reavey, 2015). The organism and its environment are intricately entwined within such an ecological, relational approach and spatial affordances are therefore wrapped up in the dynamics of drug use contexts too. Turning to the physical features of the space, it can be seen how they afford the playful practice discussed previously: it is planned, semi-urban space and therefore easily journeyed through. In contrast, Eva and Lars point out that not all spaces are a good fit for MDMA experiences e.g. they describe being disorientated on MDMA and getting lost in a nearby forest. It is also important to take into account the socio-cultural background of where they live and the practices this allows and prevents (Duff, 2007). It is a '*nice…quiet*' suburban neighbourhood, which gives them access to certain sorts of space that might not be so readily available in other areas e.g. '*scenic*' gardens and other natural features that they draw their objects from, '*a chestnut or flower…or branch*'. Other neighbourhoods might either not have these spaces or they might be rendered

practically unusable due to issues with violence or intimidation (Holt et al., 2009). Furthermore, city spaces are more likely to be surveilled and policed by both state and commercial parties (Chatterton & Hollands, 2002), making suburban spaces a less risky environment within which to consume drugs. It might also mean the couple feel less regulated in the space and therefore greater feelings of freedom are afforded. Therefore, moving through picturesque, ordered and unsurveilled spaces on MDMA affords a sense of adventure for Eva and Lars that might not be so available to other couples and has real protective consequences against the legal ramifications of drug use.

The same playfulness that came through in Eva and Lars' and Mark and Jenny's experiences was also recounted by another couple, Leanne and Matt. Conversely, however, Leanne and Matt journey around their home and not through outside space. This might be seen as partially responsible for the way in which being playful seemed disruptive as well as productive for social connection, since other people share this space with them:

> *Leanne: we were up all night one night and we ran out of rizzlers so we started finding new things we could smoke and at first, 'ah, finding like books that would be funny to smoke' …and faces that would be funny to smoke, um, from magazines and things. And at that time no one had any money apart from Matt had had this big injection of cash because he'd been in this car accident so we were all just spending that basically*
> *Matt: [laughs]*
> *Leanne: but we only had ten pounds left and Matt had promised it to Rich, um, so he could get to work the next day. And, but 4 in the morning we were like 'let's smoke the tenner. That'll be funny'. So we smoked this tenner [laughs] (Couple interview: Leanne & Matt)*

Their focus on '*finding new things*', rooting through their possessions, gives an exploratory sense, though more contained as they are inside their home. Leanne and Matt are imbued with a childlike silliness, trying to outdo each other in finding '*faces that would be funny to smoke*'. At first they start with '*books*' and '*magazines*'

before hitting upon a '*tenner*' and smoking that too. These objects, like the piano for Mark and Jenny or the chestnut/flower/branch for Eva and Lars, are integral to their experience (Latour, 2005). The playfulness the couples engage in is only possible with and through these objects: without the books there is nothing to playfully repurpose, the piano offers up the skill that Mark and Jenny haphazardly approximate and without the branch, there would be nothing for Eva and Lars to entreat to appreciate the world around them. This provides a practical glimpse of how being a subject depends on object-related concerns (Stenner, 2008). In a process ontology, subjects are not cordoned off from objects but *interdependent* with them. As Stenner, Bhatti and Church (2012) argue, this argument has much wider implications than simply troubling the subject/object dichotomy (for further details, see p9) however, for our purposes here, this attitude of interdependence allows us to see how experience is never abstractable from its spatial, material circumstances. The playful subjectivity that participants take up on MDMA depends on the objects they encounter.

We can also think about these objects as more than passive intermediary but an active *mediator* (Latour, 2005). An intermediary, according to Latour (2005), 'transports meaning or force without transformation: defining its inputs is enough to define its outputs' (p39), while with a mediator its 'specificity has to be taken into account every time. Mediators transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry'. The ten pound note does not merely reflect or transport meaning or what Latour calls 'force', therefore it is necessary to pay heed to the *specificity* of what is doing the connecting. For example, the meaning of this event takes on a force of its own with regard to their relationship with their housemates. The ten pound note had real-world value for their housemate, Rich, who needed and was promised it *'so he could get to work the next day'*. The casual destruction of it is named by Leanne as '*symptomatic of why we ended up falling out with our housemates*' yet it is seems more than 'symptomatic' or symbolic of this rupture: it is productive of it. Not having that money for their housemate adds to and extends the crack forming between the priorities of the couple and their friends at the time: the former were concerned with each other and

having as much fun as they could whereas the latter had ties to university work or jobs, taking life '*more seriously*', as Leanne comments elsewhere in the interview.

So far in this chapter, the use of MDMA has only been spoken about as a binding force for relationships. In the case of Leanne and Matt, it is possible to see again how the objects encountered afford an adventurous and playful experience, which, in turn, can transform connections. Yet the effect is, unusually, conflicted. While a return to childlike silliness could have aided in building their intimacy as a couple in the early stages of their relationship, it distorted other important connections in their lives: their friendships. While exploring the possibility of a 'dark side' of play, where playing too much can morph into a destructive force, as with excessive gamers and gamblers, for example, Brown (2009) suggests that some of these cases are where 'play is being used to deal with difficult emotions' (p177). It is suggested this idea can help to better illuminate the couple's experiences, in combination with a relational, psychological understanding of space (Brown & Reavey, 2015). The process-orientated thinkers use Lewin's (1936) concept of 'life-space' to conceptualise space as produced through intensive connections, of memory and perception, between people and objects, people and places, people and other people. The focus here is on the connections which link a scene to other times and places, such as a bathtub in a museum connected to the bathtub of an old woman's childhood (Brown & Reavey, 2015), rather than how temporally or spatially distant these times and places are. First, we need to look at how Matt describes their use of MDMA at the time:

> *Matt: in, in the house we'd been…we must have been awake for 2 nights… I remember really consciously going to brush my teeth in the mirror and knowing that I should go to bed…I remember feeling really like it was a waste cos I feel this kind of, this feeling…that I've built up over such a long time, the minute I go to sleep, I'm going to wake up and I'm going to feel like it's gone. Do you know what I mean? And I felt really like it was a waste but actually, you have got to go to sleep, haven't you? (Couple interview: Matt & Leanne)*

Despite the extreme exhaustion Matt must have felt, '*been awake for 2 nights*', paralleling the compulsive behaviour of a video gamer who just keeps on playing, he feels like going to sleep would be a '*waste*' of the '*feeling…[he'd] built up over such a long time*'. Following the concept of life-space according to Lewin (1936) as the 'set of connections that links the immediate scene to other spaces and actors, which are crucial to understanding any given psychological event' (Brown & Reavey, 2015, p50), we might see connections to the past and the anticipated future as having particular purchase for Matt here, as having a *presence* despite their spatial-temporal distance. Matt describes going through '*dark times*', where he would express his pain in sometimes visceral ways, such as '*razoring on [his] arm*' and that taking MDMA '*was the first time he was happy*'. This link to the distressing feelings of the past also opens up a connection to an imagined future: where he feels that distress again. Thus, we could see the reality of his past and his imagined future as, in some sense, 'folded into' (Langdridge et al., 2012, p15) his life-space when he stares at his, exhausted, image '*in the mirror*'. This shapes his possibilities for action, bubbling up in how he clings to what he describes as the '*beauty*' of MDMA experiences in comparison to some of the '*shit*' he's experienced in his own life. Therefore, it might be seen that 'difficult emotions' (Brown, 2009, p177) contribute to this sense of the play going slightly awry and culminating in an alienation of their housemate.

In addition, the lack of boundarying of the couples' MDMA use, which may, again, have been shaped by the distress they describe, could have contributed to play crossing over into a more negative force. They were taking MDMA several times a week together, which might be described as a heavy pattern of use (although studies tend to distinguish this in terms of lifetime prevalence rates e.g. using MDMA on more than: 30 occasions (Parrott, Sisk & Turner, 2000), 50 occasions (Reneman et al., 2001), and 100 occasions (Parrott et al., 2002)). This pattern of use took place at university, where Leanne and Matt describe having copious amounts of free time. Meeting each other in this scenario made '*their default state together play*', to which they describe '*drip-feeding*' jobs and other commitments over the years. In contrast, Eva and Lars and Mark and Jenny only start taking MDMA together when they are older and already in employment. These responsibilities could be viewed as

constraining their use of MDMA to a much lower frequency (once a month or less), as has been found in other research (Peters, Kok & Schaalma, 2008); their playfulness does not overspill into the concerns of their life in the same way. External commitments are sometimes portrayed as threatened by MDMA use (Topp et al. 1999), yet here the opposite effect seems to occur, where external commitments keep MDMA use *in check*. We will leave this idea for now but return to it in the next analysis chapter, which examines boundaries around use in greater detail.

It has been argued that the fluid, meandering texture to couples' MDMA movement through space produces playful subjectivities. The objects afford such adventure by virtue of their distinctness: they are separate from the couples and seem to unexpectedly pop up in their experiences. Playfulness was argued as a generally ignored facet of couple relationships; the vast majority of research, and the advice from psychological professionals, focusses on analysing what's *wrong* with a relationship and how that can be mended (Gabb & Fink, 2014). In these couples' accounts, we see how MDMA can help 'actually *produce*…joy' (Brown, 2009, p173). The material features of the space and the opportunities this affords for navigation and interaction produced a novel, exciting landscape of adventure for couples, where moments of silliness, child-like exuberance and imaginary play shaped and refreshed their connection.

## 5.2 '*Getting your body flowing*' in motion: A whole, embodied self

It has been argued in this thesis that despite their differing theoretical orientations, both cognitivism and social constructionism create a schism between the body and the mind/self (Cromby, 2004). Mainstream, cognitive psychology was argued as part of a Cartesian dualist legacy which was also presented as structuring our lived experience (Gillies et al., 2004; van Manen, 1998): we identify our selves with our mind, separate from our 'tool-like' secondary bodies. This creates a boundary *within* our self, fragmenting our 'body-mind' system (Dewey, 1925/1981, cited in Johnson, 2008) into body and mind. However, it will be argued in this section that by engaging

in certain bodily practices on MDMA, this body/mind boundary begins to lose distinction and blur, allowing participants to experience themselves as whole, embodied selves. Rachel and Joe describe the ball game they would play with friends when coming up on MDMA:

> *Joe: to stop him [doing housework], he said, 'right, let's hit a ball around' and it's just become a very big part, the way I've described that shows where people's minds are, it's interesting. It shows who the conscious people are, [simultaneously]*
>
> *Joe: who the people who've got problems with each other are*
>
> *Rachel: and we have that. I've got a house full of bits and pieces [simultaneously]*
>
> *Rachel: that we never broke anything*
>
> *Joe: cos you can't pass to them or you won't pass to them…*
>
> *Rachel: we've never managed to break anything*
>
> *Joe: no, we've come very close, I think we've come very close to breaking limbs and things but*
>
> *Interviewer: [laughs]*
>
> *Rachel: getting over-zealous and yeah, you find like that your arms are 8ft long all of a sudden cos [ball game] does get the adrena-, cos you're not at a rave so, lots of people at raves would be dancing and that's a similar thing cos you're getting your body flowing…that's what we do instead of dancing for half an hour, isn't it? (Couple interview: Joe & Rachel)*

Joe describes initially using the ball game to combat his friend's anxiety during the come-up instead of '*just sit[ting] around*' but it has become '*a very big part*' of how the couple take MDMA with their friends. Rachel compares the practice to '*dancing*' at '*raves*', the most well-known setting for ecstasy use (Bogt et al., 2002): both serve the purpose of '*getting your body flowing*'. The effortless *flow* of their bodies is mirrored by many other participants who describe: '*flow[ing]*' (Mark), '*feel[ing] a lot more fluid*' (Abby), '*natural flow of movement*' (Clara) and a bodily '*limberedness*' (Leanne). Their movement is contained – each player takes up a different point in

the room – and focussed – it tracks and only occurs in concert with the ball; unlike the meandering journeys of the previous theme. Unusual changes seem to be happening within Rachel's bodily experience, she describes it as '*flowing*' and how '*your arms are 8ft long all of a sudden*'. To describe something as a flow invokes water imagery: an indivisibility of flesh and being. Her body also becomes more visible and powerful, extended into the world, '*8ft long*' and filled with '*adrena-[lin]*', whereas our bodies usually fade into the background, being that which all our perceptual capacities point *away* from (Mesle, 2008). She uses the same language later to describe dancing:

> *Interviewer: So when you were dancing together, how did it feel in your body, if you remember?*
> *Rachel: yeah, can't describe it though*
> *Interviewer: [laughs] yeah, this is tricky for people*
> *Rachel: fluid, uh…better than fluid, um, I want to say coordinated but I don't mean, that's quite a cold [chuckles] way of describing itUm…*
> *Joe: free*
> *Rachel: yeah, one very easy, at one with the music, um, flowing (Couple interview: Joe & Rachel)*

Again, she feels '*fluid*' but even '*better than fluid*', '*at one with the music*', illustrating Duff's (2008) emphasis on how crucial the things people *do* on drugs are to the pleasures experienced. Here, it is movement in dance that allows her to '*flow*' and be '*at one*': there is no separation between the thinking mind and controlled body, as has been argued to be the case in cognitivist thought and its dualist heritage (Brown & Stenner, 2001). She rejects the language of '*coordinat[ion]*' for its '*cold[ness]*' and instead alights on being '*at one*'. Co-ordination could be seen to imply a top-down control of limbs and movements whereas '*one[ness]*' speaks to a lack of dictation and separation, a wholeness to self and body. We need to return to the ball game and introduce the work of Serres (1995) to get a sense of why this might be.

Serres (1995) describes objects as slowing down and stabilising social relations – without them such relationships would be 'as airy as clouds' (p87) – and are thus culturally encoded with multiple meanings. Like Latour (2005), Serres sees objects as crucial mediators of human relationships and, as such, jointly productive of human experience. One of the most salient cultural meanings of a ball is play and it is suggested this allows for the '*flowing*' embodied experience described. At a point of anxiety in the drug trip, the ball collects the friends together in an unthreatening social interaction, guided by specific cultural scripts e.g. catching/holding/passing. It could be seen to co-produce and stabilise (Serres, 1995) a more embodied sense of self, where everything flows and perhaps, as Joe's later comment suggests, you feel '*free*'. The interaction with and movement of the ball and body could thus be seen as an active, and effective, strategy to produce a less anxious subjectivity in the come-up, one of the most frequently reported negative side-effects of MDMA across the entire data set, and emphasises the active nature of subjectivity as it interacts and is reformulated with the material world (Brown & Stenner, 2009).

It is evident that this continuous, flowing body-mind state is bound up with the movement Rachel and Joe describe and how that movement is *contained*. Their attention isn't pulled from one feature to the next, as was the case for couples playfully journeying through landscapes, but honed in on this physical focal point. As will be illustrated, this is not dependent on a particular form of extensive containment, certain physical boundaries or border configurations, but an intensive connection between (human and non-human) bodies (DeLanda, 2005). Other participants described similar experiences of the body/mind boundary becoming more fluid but in very different contexts: Abby and Ryan are massaging each other on a sofa inside a nightclub and Clara is hula hooping outside on the deck of her friend's garden:

> *Abby: well you're that much more mentally focussed on it um you know*
> *when, if you're giving me a neck rub at home, you know, the telly might be on*
> *or my mind might be thinking about something that's happened that day or,*
> *you know, I'll be focussing on it but not the exclusion of everything*

*else…whereas if you give me a neck rub at a club when we're coming up, I am 100% focussed on the sensations of you touching me in the environment of the music and the drug effects*

*Ryan: and it's sort of, it's a lot, it feels a lot more natural how you doing it…you know when I've sort of given neck rub, 'am I doing it in the right place?'*

*Abby: yeah*

*Ryan: you know it's 'am I getting the right lumps?' You sort of*

*Abby: it feels*

*Ryan: you flow with it*

*Abby: it feels a lot more fluid, yeah…everything comes extremely natural…*

*Ryan: yeah, that comes with the drug as well. It's like…dancing, you lock into dancing and it feels the most natural thing. In the same way, giving you a neck rub feels the most natural thing (Couple interview: Abby & Ryan)*

*Clara: I mean, when, you're on, whether it's on acid [LSD] or mushrooms or molly [MDMA] and you're hooping like you get so completely lost in what you're doing like it is just the most like natural flow of movement …and especially with the lights on um on the hula hoop like you get transfixed on what you're seeing cos you're just seeing light trails literally all over your body…like you have no thought about anything else that's happening like outside of the hoop which is around your body which is really cool. Uh, it's making me miss hooping right now, I want to go do that [laughs]…it's super relaxing and also like super stimulating at the same time cos of the lights and how the lights affect your, you know, eyes when you're like on a substance um so it's, yeah, it's awesome… whether it's on your shoulders or your legs or your waist um but you just kind of feel like your limbs just kind of keep continuing cos everything, cos you're moving like so, even if you're not moving quickly just kind of all feels like a blur like mixed together um as far as like whether you're like you know passing it from hand to hand or moving it up and down your body (Couple interview: Clara & Nick)*

All the participants experience a fluid physicality, '*feels a lot more fluid*' (Abby), '*you flow with it*' (Ryan), '*natural flow of movement*' (Clara) in relation to their embodied practices, and the way they interact with another human/non-human actor (Latour, 2005). Clara describes how, due to the constant movement involved in hooping, where the hoop ends and her body begins becomes unclear: '*everything…feels like a blur like mixed together*'. Her '*limbs just kind of keep continuing*' out beyond their usual fleshy boundaries: losing all definition. The fuzziness between her body and the hoop is reinforced by her description of being physically marked by the LED hoop's light patterns, '*seeing the light trails literally all over your body*'. This language of '*continuing*' '*mi[xing]*' and '*flow[ing]*' evokes a lack of distinction and separation. If things are '*mixed together*' or if they '*flow*' like water, they are indivisible: a complete whole. This is reinforced by how Clara describes, '*you get so completely lost in what you're doing*'. The sense of a separate self that is '*you*' gets '*lost*' in the embodied activity; it ceases to exist as independent from the body but becomes *part of* the broader body-mind system which is us (Dewey, 1925/1981, cited in Johnson, 2008). Dualist thought has been argued to make people feel their mind is 'watching' the body; creating a fission between them (Gillies et al., 2004) – and although this study was also performed with women, there is no indication that dualist ideas might not also structure men's experience of their embodiment. Indeed, the dualist fission between mind and body has a long cultural history, from the identification of the self with the ethereal, immortal soul by Descartes to the reincarnation of this idea in modern psychology where the self is the cognitive-processer mind, and is expressed with eloquence by Bordo:

> Mind/body dualism is no mere philosophical proposition to be defended or dispensed with by clever argument. Rather it is a practical metaphysic that has been deployed and socially embodied in medicine, law, literary and artistic representations, the psychological construction of the self, interpersonal relationships, popular culture and advertisements. (1993, p14)

For example, the vaunting of 'mind over body' is a common refrain with the world of self-help and dieting (Spitzack, 1990). While dualism can be a functional concept:

creating distance between self and body can be helpful in managing pain, for instance (Gillies et al., 2004), certainly it seems unproductive and unnecessary to divide our selves in this way. We are our bodies, just as much as we are our minds and a division between them leads to an incomplete and partial view of our experience. Movement has been been found to fracture the dualist scaffolding of our embodied experience (Del Busso, 2009; Chisholm, 2008) and it is suggested that the heightened physical sensations experienced on MDMA (Duff, 2008) might allow participants to more easily experience embodied pleasure through a moving body.

A sense of a whole, embodied self could also been as jointly invoked by Abby and Ryan in their description of a '*neck rub*', although they draw more specifically on the language of water, '*flow*' and '*fluid*'. It '*feels a lot more fluid*' for Abby; liquid cannot be cut up and divided like you would a solid substance, it flows intrinsically *whole*. It could be argued that on MDMA this wholeness is precipitated by a greater connection to her body: instead of her '*self*' coordinating disjointed fingers and arms, it just '*feels fluid*': her body-mind is one. Ryan's description of how '**you** *flow with*' (own emphasis) the massaging movement is telling. It is '*you*', the self, which flows with and the body: again pointing to a reintegration of separately experienced body/self. This is affirmed with the contrast Ryan makes with his usual, cognitively interrupted, experience, '*"am I doing it in the right place?"..."am I getting the right lumps?"*'. Abby also describes the act of massaging as distancing herself from her everyday, reflective, subjectivity, '*where you're 'thinking about something that's happened that day*'. Thus, this distancing from the thinking self together with the fluidity of the self could be argued to represent the process of the joining together of the body and mind to become one 'whole' embodied self (Del Busso, 2009). This was described as one of the ways in which women embodied pleasure in Del Busso's (2009) research; when they experienced a 'joining together mind and body and becoming "one"' (p166). Indeed, Abby's use of '*sensations*' and '*natural[ness]*' to describe the neck rub evokes a pleasurable scene, sensation being strongly associated with physiological pleasures (c.f Duff, 2008).

Subjectivity has already been described as produced with the materiality of the world (Brown & Stenner, 2009). The embodied, mindful subjectivity experienced here could be seen as entangled with a specific actor. In Clara's account, the hoop

can be seen to mediate her experience of her body by 'afford[ing]' and 'render[ing] possible' (Latour, 2005, p72) the messy entanglement of her '*limbs...like a blur like mixed together*'. Grosz (1994) discusses how Merleau-Ponty saw as part of this process of continual self-world interaction, the world impacting on and transforming the fundamental materiality of the body e.g. lifting weights builds muscle, reconstituting bodily composition. Another example of Merleau-Ponty's that Grosz draws attention to is the stick used to scratch an itch that cannot quite be reached, 'from this point...the stick is no longer an object for me but has been absorbed or incorporated into my perceptual faculties or body parts' (1994, p91). In the same way, we can understand the boundaries between Clara's body and the hoop as not fixed at the skin, but the hoop as being folded into her body, '*continuing*' with her body as she is '*passing it from hand to hand or moving it up and down*' and 'allow[ing]' (Latour, 2005, p72) everything to '*blur...together*'. Similarly, Ryan's body could be seen as impacting on and being absorbed by Abby's as she massages him. This is grounded in the visceral realities of touch and its inescapable mutuality: as soon as you are touched, you touch the other person back (Gabb, 2011). For Rachel and James too, '*getting your body flowing*' turns on the ball in their game and how its cultural meanings allow them to experience their bodies differently.

'*You're getting your body flowing*', '*flow[ing] with*' the movement, '*feel[ing] a lot more fluid*': all the participants' bodies' just seem to effortlessly *flow*. This fluidity was experienced within an embodied activity, which engaged another (human or non-human) actor. This actor provided a physical focal point around which the heightened sensory world of MDMA could pivot and co-produce an embodied subjectivity. This shift to a whole, embodied self broke down the self or mind/body boundary culturally encoded through dualist thought. This reaffirms other findings that link movement to experiencing an embodied sense of self (Del Busso, 2009; Chisholm, 2008) but also extends them in the way in which human and non-human bodies can mediate and transform this embodied becoming (Latour, 2005). Namely that another person or object can provide a focal point for movement, enabling the cognitive stream of experience normally regarded as the self to get '*lost*' in the embodied activity. This integration of mind and body into a broader body-mind system (Dewey, 1925/1981, cited in Johnson, 2008) was also experienced as

*pleasurable*, a concept sorely neglected in discussions of drug use (Duff, 2008; Moore, 2008). It appears that movement on MDMA in concert with other bodies can blur boundaries within the mind/body; as well as emphasising the distinction between self and world, as discussed in the previous theme. The boundary between self and other, in concert with particular material and affective settings, can also be reformed by MDMA – partners begin to blur into one another – as will now be explored.


## 5.3 Merged selves: Becoming one in stillness

In the previous chapter, partners described feeling deeply emotionally attuned with one another on MDMA. Three couples experienced a more extreme sense of 'oneness', where they describe feeling as though they had become the same person. It could be argued that Western culture actually endorses an understanding of love as a merging with the other (Perel, 2007). Within this framing, love is all about getting closer and reducing the distance between two people, as leading 'intertwined lives': each partner orientates towards the other and, in doing so, is completed. The language we use for romantic partners such as 'other half' and 'soulmate' is one manifestation of this. We are only 'half' of a thing that needs its 'other half' to make it whole again while the connection to our romantic, sexual 'mate' is so overwhelming that it is forged through our very 'soul'; the historic seat of consciousness. This communion is total - emotional, mental and sexual - and feeds into discourses around the desirability of monogamy (Barker & Langdridge, 2010), precluding physical and more nebulously defined 'emotional' affairs.

In couples' descriptions, merging on MDMA was not a gradual progression towards the other but a transient and transcendental phenomena, yet still tied to pre-existing feelings of closeness. Material settings and objects were crucial to ensuring the stillness and bodily closeness that seemed to prefigure such experiences: couples were always encased together in an intimate material arrangement, for example, Eva and Lars discuss being '*fused together*' while in a bathtub on MDMA:

*Lars: we had the whole bathtub, that was great*

*Eva: and it was very specialIt was a special bonding, I don't know…and it was like being in his head and I don't know…we were not two person, we were one person… really strong*

*Lars: it was good ecstasy […]*

*Lars: I don't know, I can't describe it…because there was the water and the water was between us and everything and skin [he chuckles]*

*Eva: warm and floating*

*Lars: of course it was dark in in the bathroom. We just had a light in the main room and it was shining a bit*

*Eva: and glowsticks… I had glowsticks with me*

*Lars: it was, it felt like we were fused together, I thinkLike one piece.*

*Eva: it was really crazy…I just think I lost a little bit of myself or not, I don't lost it [sic], I was absolutely open with myself…and I just felt that he was the only person who can know who I really am… when he sat behind me in this warm water…I was, like, flying to the music (Couple interview: Eva and Lars)*

The events unfold in a hotel bathroom, from the focal point of the bathtub. It becomes an important figure in the story, a 'non-human participant' (Latour, 2005); intrinsic to how events are managed and negotiated. Indeed memories are often recollected around a central object (c.f Reavey & Brown, 2015). The bathtub creates a physically close, fluid space, where there is only '*skin*' and '*water*'. Everyday barriers to embodied contact and a sense of physical distance cease to exist as boundaries are seemingly '*liquified*'. The fact that it was '*dark in the bathroom*', with the light from the next room just '*shining a bit*', also seems to contribute to the fuzziness of the physical boundaries. There were '*glowsticks*' too, gently illuminating this '*warm and floating*' world. Through the juxtaposition of light, darkness and water, Lars and Eva jointly construct an ethereal realm, prefiguring the almost mystical character of their emotional experience, '*it felt like we were fused together*'. The concept of an 'affective atmosphere' could open up our understanding of how this process of merging occurs. Anderson (2009) describes an affective atmosphere

as '[having a] singular affective qualit[y]' (p79) yet as 'indeterminate' (p80), as detailed in Chapter Two.

The paradoxical nature of affective atmospheres is fully present in Eva and Lars' memory which might be best described as 'hold[ing] a series of opposites' (Anderson, 2009, p80): as both otherworldly yet tied to the earthy fleshiness of their bodies and skin. This emanates from the way the room is lit, the water, their naked, loving bodies together and the music. The blurring possibilities of the water and the '*dark[ness] in the bathroom*' punctuated only by the dim light of '*glowsticks*' builds a sense of mystery and unknown possibilities forming. This sense of potentiality could be seen as aided by the higher grade affordance the bathtub offers (Brown & Reavey, 2015). Affordances are actions made possible for an organism through its environment, such as a nut that can be eaten, and higher grade affordances are shaped by cultural knowledge; in this case water as a place of transformation, often through a process of being purified e.g. baptism. The expanse of '*skin*' invites an impression of innocence and naturalness as well as visceral, bodily experience, set apart from the strictures of ordered society, while the music propels them into soundscapes outside of our earthly existence '*flying to the music*'. These are also two people deeply in love, they are '*one piece*' and know who each other '*really [is]*', feelings which would have undoubtedly coloured their experience and which strike anyone about their memory of it. The weaving together of all these different elements creates a felt sense of otherliness, which could help explain how such an unusual and contra-rational event of '*fusing together*' can take place. This otherwordly/earthly atmosphere seems to be a collective property of the different elements yet not solely reducible to them and quasi-autonomous. The way the atmosphere exceeds the bodies and objects within it while being intrinsically tied to them speaks again to the intrinsic ambiguity of the concept (Anderson, 2009).

The fluidity of the material space manifests itself not only in the physical but also, metaphysically, as a deep sense of closeness, '*it was a special bonding*'. The sense of closeness it creates is so profound that the most fundamental boundary of all is blurred: that between self and other, '*we were not two person, we were one person.*' Yet, despite initially painting this as a loss of selfhood, Eva is quick to distance herself from that idea, '*I don't lost [sic] it*'. Her reaction here could be seen

to express the cultural tension between love as total union and the approbation that might be visited upon someone who has 'lost' themselves in their partner. For women, this might be viewed as particularly salient since relationships tend to be construed as 'women's business' (Dryden, 1998) and, indeed, historically a woman was largely defined by her marital status e.g. only some, married women could vote in the UK before wider voter enfranchisement was introduced in the early 20th century (Heater, 2006). Indeed, here we see a further reflection of this gendered distinction as Eva's focus is firmly on the '*special bonding*' but Lars reinterprets this in neurochemical rather than relational terms, '*it was good ecstasy*'.

Rather than a disappearance of selfhood, Eva frames the experience as revealing a greater connection to her sense of self, '*I was absolutely open with myself*' and to Lars, '*he was the only person who can know who I really am*'. Instead of attempting to iron out the apparent contradiction between feeling as though her and Lars were '*one person*' while reasserting her separate selfhood, '*absolutely open with myself*', this tension might be viewed in a more productive light. Specifically, as providing resources for different kinds of narrative which make room for more powerful versions of present agency (Haaken, 1998). Her experience of a separate self while also experiencing their selves as '*one*' could be seen to speak to an attempt to balance dyadic closeness and distance. She is simultaneously herself but part of a wider whole with him: neither subject position is elevated above the other, rather they exist *in balance*. This tension between distance and closeness was something expressed by many of the participants in this research. They told stories about 'intertwined lives' which later became more distinct or posed rhetorical questions at interview about whether they were too distant or entangled with one another. This balancing act between closeness and distance might be seen as significant act of negotiation in a relationship (Ben-Ari & Lavee, 2007a; Lavee & Ben-Ari, 2007b). Ben-Ari (2012) argues that closeness and distance are not opposed poles of the same continuum but can be understood as a multidimensional, unified concept. Couples can reach a shared understanding of what distance and closeness means to them, like one partner acknowledging the other partner's need to be alone without feeling threatened by it, and this becomes an expression of a higher-order closeness. Ben-Ari describes his approach as informed by dialectical thinking, which

is suggested to resemble psychosocial process thought which views objective reality and subjective experience as integrated, both part of the process of the becoming of actual occassions which underlies the world (Brown & Stenner, 2009). Perhaps then, this ambiguous, contradictory sense of joint/individual subjectivity could be seen too as an expression of 'higher-order closeness'; a productive tension which allows for greater personal agency while still being together as a couple. Eva is both fully her individual self, yet part of a greater interconnected whole with Lars.

The experience of merging on MDMA, where boundaries between self and other seem to '*melt*' (Matt), was spoken about by other couples within the research. Rachel and Joe, together over 20 years and in their early 60s/late 50s respectively, describe their experiences of the phenomena:

> *Joe: taking E and then, yeah, the next thing you remember is that you're sat next to each other on the rug down, we used to do E in the corner of the room quite a lot cos it's full of beautiful cushions that we could lounge around on…we'd go from being 18ft apart to 2cm apart down thereThat's my image of it…that happened all the time, all the time…*
>
> *Interviewer: How would you feel when you were sitting there, together?*
>
> *Rachel: like we were one little ball…we were one thing, really*
>
> *Joe: very quickly […]*
>
> *Rachel: lots of, lots of hippy-dippy stuff happenedLots of stuff like we see the same things, I heard once, we were sitting very close, actually we were in the bath, weren't we?  Very close and I heard music…and I couldn't work out where the music was coming from, this sounds so daft, and I went, I told Joe and he, you'd, you'd, had some, you'd made up a song in your head*
>
> *Joe: the best, the best indie song, ever, yeah*
>
> *Rachel: yeah and I, I can hear what he was making up sort of thing so that's*
>
> *Joe: what I described*
>
> *Rachel: often kind of, I do not believe in telepathy or a lot of things like that but there were moments where we were on the one, that's how I put it*
>
> *(Couple interview: Rachel & Joe)*

They were '*one thing*' on MDMA together. This total indistinctness is further reinforced by the image of being '*one little ball*': a '*ball*' or circle being the only shape that has an infinite number of angles and no natural points of division. How they are but '*2cm apart*' on the floor, implying a completely intertwined mess of flesh, reinforces this lack of precision between them. It is also telling that they become a 'little *ball*'. If you add one thing to another, the end result would usually be expected to be *larger* than both individually. However, when two things completely merge there exists a fusion of properties that belies simple addition, making the fact they are such a '*little…one thing*' more conceivable.

The second experience of merging or becoming '*one*' once again unfolds from the bathtub, however its peculiar qualities e.g. surrounding water, skin-to-skin contact do not feel as crucial as they did previously. The possibilities present in this 'situation' (Lewin, 1936) do not flow uniquely from the bath as such; it is no 'spectral object' (Brown & Reavey, 2015, p127). Rather, the possibilities for embodiment it affords seem to be key to understanding how Rachel felt she was '*on the one*' with Joe. They are physically close, Rachel describes them both as '*sitting very close*', and then emphasises again, '*very close*'. Presumably, they are also relatively still – for two adults, a bathtub generally provides little room for large movements. These interactional possibilities are also afforded by other objects – a seating area of '*beautiful cushions*' on the floor in the first extract. This illustrates that it is less the physical dimensions of the space (a Euclidean understanding of space where measurement is an extrinsic grid mapped onto the environment) that are crucial or the particular objects at play. Rather, it is the connections between objects and people (where measurement is taken as intrinsic to the environment itself) that lends continuity or 'invariance' to these experiences (Lewin, 1936; Brown, 2012; Brown & Reavey, 2015).

It could be argued that the powerful emotional connection between Joe and Rachel is gifted stability through the objects (the cushions, the bath) of their MDMA memories and the possibilities for bodily connection they afford (Serres, 1995). Joe emphasises the physical mirroring of their emotional dynamic, '*we'd go from being 18ft apart*' when they were arguing to '*2cm apart down there*' on the cushions after they'd taken MDMA. Similarly, Rachel seems to use physical proximity to help

explain mental proximity as she juxtaposes the two, '*sitting…very close [in the bath] and I heard music*'. The cushions being '*down there*' on the floor could also be seen to add further solidity to the dramatic shift from negative to positive affect. Their bodies move not only closer together but onto a whole different physical perspective. This provides a shift in visual perspective and places them in an area separate from the everyday uses of the space: the sofa is usually the focal point of activity in a living room. These spatial shifts could help to ease and reaffirm a transition in the way Rachel and Joe are relating, even minor differences in spatial setting have been shown as impactful in other studies, for example women who could see trees from their tower blocks in Chicago reported their personal difficulties as less severe (Kuo, 2001). Thus, the space and objects could be seen to perform a visible anchoring of an experience that is full of the intangible. They could assist couples in making sense of and integrating these unusual experiences into their overall worldview, particularly for Joe and Rachel, who repeatedly disavow what they describe as '*hippy-dippy*' things. They take care to distance themselves from any such label throughout their interview, shown here in the definitive way Rachel states she '*do[es] not believe in telepathy or a lot of things like that*'. Indeed, the interaction within these physically close, material arrangements produces a joint subjectivity that, in its mysticalness, would likely never be available to this staunchly non '*hippy*' couple in their everyday lives. Elsewhere in the interview Rachel also links feeling '*at one*' with Joe to feeling at one more broadly, with the natural world:

> *Joe: that was pretty amazing, um, yeah. At one with nature…*
> *Rachel: well, also, we were always at one with each other. I never felt, I always felt safeAlways, always, always. In whatever, well obviously at home I felt safe but in whatever situation we were in – I never felt unsafe… and that had a lot to do with being completely at one with Joe (Couple interview: Joe & Rachel)*

Joe discusses being '*at one with nature*', which Rachel links back to being '*always at one with each other*': the two seem, for her, irrevocably intertwined. Thus, the production of a joint, merged subjectivity where she is '*completely at one*' with Joe

could be seen to linger on: in everyday life, '*we were always at one with each other*' and in other MDMA experiences. Many of the MDMA experiences they talk about occur outside, in unusual situations, perhaps meriting the provision, '*whatever situation we were in – I never felt unsafe*', such as camping alone on the top of a hill, being surrounded by fireflies and swimming in the sea with jellyfish, and their connection with nature is underscored. It is suggested therefore that collapsed self/other boundaries opened Rachel up to broader experiences of diffuse boundaries, such as a oneness with nature. Furthermore, such an identification with nature has been found to mediate the link between psychedelic drug experiences (e.g. LSD, psilocybin, mescaline) and increased concern for the environment and ecological practices (Forstmann & Sagioglou, 2017); perhaps a similar process could be work at here with MDMA.

It is also important to consider why the space is an appropriate context for their MDMA use and the features that afford this '*one[ness]*' they describe (Brown & Reavey, 2015; Duff, 2007). Their experiences of merging takes place in private space, in the home they shared together at the time. They portray taking MDMA and having sex as inseparable during this period, an entanglement that is only made possible by the privacy of the space they inhabit. They also take care to emphasise the spaciousness of the flat, 'really *big flat in…plenty of floor space…really, really big living room, high ceiling*', which feeds into the dramatic physical narrative of going from being so far apart to so close together on MDMA. The amount of free space in a room and having access to a private living space rather than just a bedroom could feasibly evoke a different atmosphere, perhaps more conducive to the experiences they describe. The importance of privacy for couples is underscored by Eva, who discusses booking a hotel to take MDMA in as a way of avoiding unwelcome interactions from Lars' flatmates, '*we hadn't had our peace because…there were people every time…they wanted to talk to us'*. It is notable that both couples' access to private space hinges upon a certain measure of economic power: Rachel and Joe could afford to rent their own flat and despite a lack of ownership over their living space at the time, Eva and Lars had the power to (at least temporarily) buy privacy. The experiences of couples who do not have such economic freedom would be an important adjunct here to determine whether the lack of private living space and

possible intrusion from others dampens the possibilities for such intense experiences of '*being one*'.

## 5.4 Conclusions

This chapter has made two main arguments: that subjectivity is materially, as well as discursively, distributed and composed (Brown & Stenner, 2009) and that MDMA experiences can refigure key boundaries within and beyond the self. Firstly, we have seen how the ongoing practices of the self interact with the material settings of the couples' MDMA use. Journeying through (usually outside) spaces brought up a host of objects and material features which could be engaged with. These interactive possibilities produced a playful sense of self, allowing couples to (re)connect in a carefree, joyous way. A different kind of movement – continuous, contained and in concert with an object/person – formulated a whole, embodied sense of self. The object/person acted as a focal point to the bodily experience, encouraging and cementing this subjectivity. Finally, interaction with certain material set-ups – a bath or cushions – where there was a lack of movement produced a very peculiar kind of 'merged' subjectivity, a total sense of '*oneness*'.

These material settings and bodily practices, and the subjectivities produced, then mediated participants' experiences of boundaries. Defined boundaries went hand-in-hand with playful subjectivities: the sporadic nature of movement and novelty of the objects encountered underscored separation between self and partner, self and the world. MDMA has rarely been seen as a ludic space, but here this playfulness was key to the pleasures couples experienced; play being linked to adult well-being generally (Perel, 2007), as well as providing a conduit through which to revitalise closeness (Brown, 2009). Continuous, contained movement (usually) around the focal point of an object/person produced a blurring of boundaries within the self/mind and body. This fragmented the dualist logic which has been found to structure our experience of embodiment (Gillies et al., 2004; Van der Manen, 1998) and produced an experience of being a whole, embodied self. Such an embodied subjectivity was also seen as distinctly pleasurable (Del Busso, 2009). Finally,

physically close material settings and a lack of movement gave rise to a merged subjectivity, where the couple felt '*as one*'. These hazy boundaries were argued to lead to an elusive sense of closeness: the total merging between self and other that our culture seems to applaud (Perel, 2007). Yet, the repercussions went beyond this: to an actual balancing between self and couple identity and communion with nature as well as with your partner. The emphasis placed in this chapter on materality is not to 'reduce' MDMA experiences to the tangible, rather to show how these elements are bound up with the remarkable subjectivities and experiences produced. Indeed, there seem to be a paradoxical sense throughout that these experiences: they are full of the tangible, of fleshy bodies close together, physical sensations and solid objects, yet seem to produce something bordering on intangible, a fluidity of embodied experience and merging of selves. Together, this shows the continued humanity of drug experiences, which have been marginalised, both legally and socially (Moore, 2008), and yet also how they go *beyond* and expand the boundaries of our living, experiencing bodies.

# Chapter 6 – *'Never drop without your significant other. That way lies ruin'*: The boundary work of couples who use MDMA together

In previous chapters, MDMA experiences tended to be portrayed as unstructured and spontaneous: flowing naturally from one conversation, place or activity to the next. Yet in this chapter, we will look to the symbolic boundaries within and beneath this 'flow'. Process philosophy views what happens at the borders of systems as crucial to their constitution (Brown & Stenner, 2009) and, as such, this chapter will use the ideas of anthropologist Mary Douglas and psychologist Paul Stenner around order, disorder and what lies at the threshold between the two. Both scholars have an interest in the ordering of systems but, importantly, might seem to approach this from 'the other way up'. By this, it is meant that instead of first looking at what constitutes the system, how things are ordered, their gaze immediately falls to what is *excluded* from the system. For Douglas (2001), this means exploring what a culture considers unclean and dirty to understand the purity and order that culture is striving to create, and for Stenner (2013), a consideration of who might be shut out in order for a relationship to flourish.

Many of the participants described carefully assembling the spatial-temporal boundaries of MDMA experiences. These functioned not just to control their use and distinguish themselves as responsible drug users, but to enable and constrain certain kinds of intimate interactions and feelings, as found in other studies (Foster & Spencer, 2013; MacLean, 2015). The first two themes examine how boundarying MDMA experiences as 'special' and set apart from everyday life modulated the experiences of couples: enhancing enjoyment and the love they felt for each other. Correspondingly, the exclusionary boundaries drawn to keep others out of this space worked to preserve the intimacy and fun had on the drug for the benefit of the couple, as explored in the final theme.

## 6.1 Assembling the temporal borders of *'special'* MDMA space-time

Couples actively constructed boundaries between 'special' MDMA space-time and the everyday. 'Space' in this chapter will refer to the material spaces of MDMA use, whereas 'space-time' will be used to distinguish the experiential borders of MDMA use. Certainly, there were exceptions to this practice of segmentation: three couples spoke about how MDMA had been part of the rhythm of their everyday lives – reflected in their at least weekly use of the drug for several years (though for all three the level of use had since decreased dramatically). However, for most, MDMA use was an anticipated event that jutted out from the flow of daily activities. In fact, the word 'special' itself frequently emerged as a descriptor: '*taking the MDMA is like a special event*' (Tomás, diary); '*Nowadays I save MDMA for special occasions*' (Ken, diary); '*makes it more like special*' (Carrie, diary); '*it's a special thing for us*' (Eva, couple interview); '*those entire 2-4 hour windows [on MDMA] are so special*' (Nick, couple interview). These boundaries often had a temporal aspect, marking out certain times within which they would take MDMA:

> '*I feel excited. We don't take this often at all (maybe 2-3 times a year) so taking the MDMA is like a special event*' (Tomás, diary)
> '*We have both been waiting for this day for a long while*' (Karl, diary)
> '*We take it around 3 times a year… I found that taking it [too] much [in the past] reduced the emotional value for me, it tended to become more about getting high and fucked up.*' (Ken, diary)

MDMA should be used '*[not] often at all*' – this mirrors the general sense among couples that the passing of a certain amount of time between use (usually one to four months) legitimised their drug use. Thus, the borders between acceptable and unacceptable use became manifest; with use that was '*[too] much*' and seen to neglect health looked down on. Karl sums up the attitude of the majority of participants when he says, '*any "smart" human being knows they did something that was stressful on their body and should take some time off*'. What begins as a testament to health seemed to have become something more, with Tomás drawing a direct line between not taking MDMA '*often at all*' to the experience feeling like '*a special event*'. Keeping an event occasional can serve to build excitement around it:

bank holidays would hardly be so anticipated if they were weekly events. Karl might describe it as '*a bit of pain*' waiting so long between using MDMA but it is arguably hard to imagine quite the same levels of '*excitement*' he reports in the preceding days if taking MDMA were more intertwined with the pattern of his daily life.

However, infrequency does not automatically romanticise an event, it is something *about* MDMA experiences combined with occasional use that hits just the right key. In a similar vein to Tomás, Ken finds that narrowing the acceptable times to take MDMA retains the '*emotional value*' of the experience for him. He talks about the '*peak*' period of his use (once a fortnight) as fundamentally dangerous, in retrospect, and something he attributes to the folly of being '*younger*', a finding echoed across other studies showing how ecstasy use decreases with age (e.g. Van den Eijnden, 1998 cited in Vervaeke & Korf, 2006). He has also grown to value the emotional aspect of MDMA, which he sees as diminished by more intense patterns of use where it is more about '*getting high and fucked up*'. While taking MDMA together was special to couples for many reasons, the way it made them *feel* was a main thread running through their accounts. For Ken, being on MDMA reminded him and his partner '*how we feel for one another*' – something that was always there yet '*life and the workday*' could sometimes '*get in the way*' of. And this feeling was only preserved when MDMA was a rare, anticipated event. Karl, too, '*feel[s] closer*' to his partner and Tomás speaks about how the drug '*allowed us to connect more than we do normally*', crucially not fabricating but *enhancing* their connection, '*just feel what I already felt but more*'.

The specialness of these experiences was further delineated through coordinating MDMA use with important life events. Like when Eva returns home from several months abroad and she takes MDMA with her partner as a kind of '*homecoming party*' or when Karl describes his girlfriend having her '*last exam today*' as the '*perfect*' time to do MDMA. Other less significant but still out-of-the-ordinary events were also linked to use such as seasonal changes, Carrie uses MDMA '*one time during each season*' to mark '*the end of something or the beginning*', and '*a close friend…visiting from out of town*' (Ken). This shows how MDMA use is integrated into couples' lives, but instead of falling into everyday or even weekly routines, it seems to be part of another, distinct thread comprised of 'special'

moments (Larson & Bradney, 1988). This both further constricts when MDMA might be used – relying on the alignment of external factors such as careers, natural changes and social calendars – and amplifies the feelings experienced, since couples are likely to have a positive 'mindset' (Zinberg, 1986), well-established as an influential force for how drugs are experienced.

Therefore, casting MDMA use as special and outside of the norm went hand-in-hand with framing certain times of use as unacceptable. In contrast to research which depict the couple either as a kind of cage, locking partners into cycles of problematic drug use (MacRae & Aalto, 2000) or a factor to be considered in interventions attempting to regulate individuals' use (Fals-Stewart, O'Farrell, Birchler, Córdova & Kelley, 2005), relationships here seemed to act to *control* drug use. Couples tied MDMA use to certain time frames and significant, infrequent events in their lives. Aside from being inadvisable on a health level, they found too that overuse could take the (emotional) shine off.


**6.2 Eliminating and enchanting everyday life: Ritualised practices of separation**


As well as having a temporal dimension, a sense of specialness became manifest in what the couples *did* to mark out these experiences (Gabb & Fink, 2015). This is in keeping with other researchers interested in spirituality and ritual such as Holloway (2003) who speaks of a need to shift attention away from 'an (already) ordered division' and 'toward[s] a heterogeneous ordering that relies on a practice of differentiation' (p1968). In other words, instead of thinking of boundaries (or what Holloway calls 'divisions') as pre-existing – they simply *are* – we should think of boundaries as emerging from boundary-making practices, or 'practice[s] of differentiation' – they are *enacted*. This is directly comparable to the 'practices' approach to intimacy discussed earlier (Jamieson, 1998, 2012; Morgan, 1996, 2011; Gabb & Fink, 2015), which precipitated a framework shift from what intimacy is to the practices people use to do intimacy.

On the whole, MDMA experiences became part of a ritualised process for couples; these rituals not only expressed couples' values, such as care for health and

prioritisation of their relationship, but also modified the nature of their experiences (Douglas, 2001). Key to the ritualistic boundarying of MDMA experiences was a pushing out of daily concerns. This was often performed through practices that engaged with the materiality of the world: couples reordered spaces, objects and their own bodies. This 'rhythm and choreography' (Holloway, 2003, p1962) of spatial and material elements can be seen in Carrie's description of the build up to taking MDMA with her partner of two and a half years:

> *Carrie: Like we ate healthier the days before and we've taken a nap […or maybe do some yoga or meditate to like calm myself down…] and like we're ready to, uh, engage in this activity. Uh, and I find it nice that it's like: I am clean, the house is clean. We have actually made an effort to make it easy or like, or make the trip as good as possible…like before we take the MDMA, I'm like 'ok, the bed should be made. We should have flowers there, ok, kettle on'…uh, we have some chewing gum, like set the scene but like on MDMA. And it's important that we have like a water bottle with us… I think like the idea of how we're going to do it makes it more important to set the setting than while actually on it*
> *Interviewer: what kind of scene are you trying to set?*
> *Carrie: a scene where like we can be together and like, uh, talk without there being anything other that disturbs us…and that's why I turn off my cellphone, for example, because I know it won't disturb me if it's off (Diary interview)*

Her preparations seem all-encompassing and bestow a real sense of occasion; MDMA being treated here as an important guest. She performs what is arguably a secular ritual of purification, which Douglas (2001) defines as involving 'separating, tidying and purifying' (p2): she *purifies* her body and mind, '*ate healthier*', '*we've taken a nap*', '*some yoga or meditat[ion]*', '*I am clean*'; *tidies* her home, '*the house is clean*', '*the bed should be made*', '*we should have flowers there*' and *separates* out MDMA space-time, '*set the scene*', '*we can be together…without there being anything other that disturbs us*'. Moreover, the actions she engages in to reshape her body and her environment are crucial to the special space-time produced; the

body is thus seen to be actively engaged in making sense of the space and bordering it from its everyday uses (Kong, 2001; Holloway, 2003). While less elaborate, some cleansing process was spoken about by several participants: '*We took some vitamins, had food, cleaned the apartment*' (Effy & Aron); '*we take some vitamins and magnesium and drink juice…and we clean the flat and…we take a bath*' (Eva & Lars); '*we'd given [the room] a quick hoover and tidied anything that looked out of place until it was firmly* in *place*' (Melanie).

Ritual can shape our experience by actively reformulating the past and returning us to an earlier state of cleanliness and purity (Douglas, 2001; Balee, 2016). For example, for some Southeast Asian Muslims, coming into contact with a dog, even accidentally, requires ritual bathing to restore their former, unpolluted state. This example illustrates how the rescripting of the past that takes place within cultures is incurred by a specific polluting event. In relation to Carrie's experiences, reformulating the past could be seen to occur in a slightly different way. Rather than purifying the polluting influence of something particular, it is everyday life which she seems to find polluting. She invokes a purer, simpler state, where her and her environment are cleansed of the dirt of the everyday and not subject to its endless tasks and complications. This dirt of the everyday is both the visible dirt of an unclean home and the figurative dirt, which can accumulate within the body and mind, purged through yoga, healthy eating and meditation. The latter conceptualisation could be understood as the intersection of current discourses around healthy living (Roy, 2008) and the rise of Eastern practices in the Western world, coming to mainstream popularity particularly in the past decade e.g. almost two thirds of GPs in the UK think it would be useful for their patients to learn mindfulness meditation skills (Halliwell, 2010) and 13.2% of the American population have practiced yoga in their lifetime (Cramer et al., 2015). This purification ritual thus marks a boundary between MDMA space-time and everyday concerns and fluctuations in mood. This could also set the tone for what is possible within this space: a restoration to a simpler, perfected kind of intimacy.

The idea of accessing a simpler, idealised intimacy on MDMA could be seen as reinforced by Carrie's later interview comments:

*Like I also find it easier to understand what he needs because like instead of being concerned about what I think about it, it's easier to like open up the empathy and try to understand what he needs… I can focus all my attention on him…without like extra noise around it. Like in everyday life I feel like my mind is getting in the way or things I should do is getting in the way…or like circumstances getting in the way. Uh so it's easier to be like uh on only one track without anything else to think about (Diary interview)*

The fact that Carrie is talking about empathy here comes as no surprise – it is one of the most well-known effects of MDMA (Bedi, Hyman & de Wit, 2010; Dumont et al., 2009; Hysek et al., 2013). However, added to this is the suggestion she modulates empathy in important ways through her performance of ritual. It becomes clear that it is her everyday, cognitive self that she has worked so hard to exclude, it is the '*noise*' of her '*mind*', normally associated with our thoughts, that '*get[s] in the way*' and obstructs the free flow of her '*empathy*'. Such mental noise is barricaded from MDMA space-time through her ritualistic diligence: a dirty flat could act as a visible reminder of the '*things [she] should do [that] get…in the way*', yoga and meditation have been found to calm rumination (Kinser, Bourguignon, Whaley, Hauenstein & Taylor, 2013; Deyo, Wilson, Ong & Koopman, 2009) and separating the space from the intrusions of others and pre-empting physical needs by resting and eating properly means that '*circumstances*' can't possibly '*get…in the way*'. All these practices cultivate a barrier around MDMA space-time, which her thinking self cannot cross and where her compassionate, feeling self can blossom; opening up an idealised, simpler kind of intimate space where she can focus only on her partner.

Hence, the MDMA space-time that Carrie constructs with her ritualistic separation of this space from everyday life makes room for non-everyday ways of feeling and being: an unselfish, giving love. Yet, in addition to this ideal of love, the value of the experience is also embedded in everyday relationship practices that pivot around the importance of quality couple time (Gabb & Fink, 2015). 'Date night' has become a ubiquitous concept and something regularly touted as a salve for ebbing relationship connection and excitement. Couples in Gabb and Fink's (2015) research spoke about the importance of this negotiated time for the couple to be

together. This could be relatively unstructured and part of the everyday or 'strictly rule bound, to separate it from daily routines and make such time feel special and especially meaningful' (p30), as is the case for Carrie. Date nights were part of 'relationship work', practices that strengthened and sustained couple intimacy in long-term partnerships. Hence, the quality time Carrie carves out for her and her partner on MDMA, where outside distractions are methodically eliminated, could be seen as part of a broader spectrum of relationship work practices that prioritise time together. In other words, MDMA use could be seen as a particular kind of date night. For Carrie, this covered well-worn territory such as catching up with her partner, discussing personal and relational issues as well as simply feeling the love she had for him on a more visceral level, '*instead of just like loving with your heart, you're loving with your fingers as well*'.

This ritualistic preparation and separation of MDMA space-time was performed in a different way by another couple; purifying and enhancing their surroundings and selves:

> *Eva: So, we take some vitamins and magnesium and drink juice and we buy some wheat beer and we have ginger tea because of our stomach, it's brilliant. And we clean the flat and…we take a bath and stuff.  It's just for all the preparation. And this…it's a special thing for us…*
>
> *Lars: it's like a ritual…that we do like, cleaning and everything is good. And we don't want to have like any negative influences on, uh, on our trip. Not, not an untidy flat or something…*
>
> *Interviewer: would that, if you had, if like the flat was dirty or something how would that influence your experience of taking MDMA?*
>
> *Lars: I would, urgh, I wouldn't feel so comfortable…if there are clothes everywhere and, I don't know, a suitcase standing around and then you get up and you're not very coordinated and you walk into a chair [laughter] or you trip over some clothes or, say you want to dance or something and the whole floor is nuts…and it's not pretty*
>
> *Eva: yeah, it should be pretty. It's important to have some candles and we have some tapestries we hang on the walls…and, um, what we have*

*additionally is something like massage oil because we like to get massages*
*and glowsticks, I love glowsticks [laughter] (Couple interview: Eva & Lars)*

Once more, there are acts of self- and environmental purification, '*we take some vitamins*', '*we take a bath*', '*clean the flat*' but beyond this, MDMA space is marked out as '*a special thing*' in another way: through the inclusion of celebratory items. The adornments of '*tapestries*', '*glowsticks*' and '*candles*' alter their surroundings and make visible a kind of carnival atmosphere; reinforced by how the couple later describe taking MDMA together as '*a little celebration of our relationship*'. One of the ways ritual modifies experience is by sharpening focus: it can frame an experience in a particular way and thereby invoke expectancies e.g. how a bedtime story settles a child into the calmness needed for sleep. Eva and Lars could be said to be performing a temporal-spatial 'framing' (Milner, 1955 cited in Douglas, 2001) where the acts they perform fashion a symbolic frame. Inside this frame are desirable elements – warmth, cosiness and celebration – and held outside are undesirable elements, '*any negative influences*' – everyday disorder and '*untid[iness]*' – the grime accumulated on and within their bodies and home. Hence, whenever they perform all these acts together, it could be argued they are weaving a familiar frame, shifting their state to one of freshness and festivity; opening up new ways of being and connecting in the re-enchanted, familiar space of home.

Many of these aspects, though differently described, relate to the spatial rearrangement of their environment. Thus, the visual appearance of their living space seems crucial to symbolically marking out the space from its day-to-day functionality. The explanation of why this is so relates to James Gibson's concept of affordance, which describes the relationship between an organism and its environment, previously outlined in Chapter Two. His ecological approach emphasises how, by means of an exchange of meaning, an organism and its environment evolve together. These meanings are 'behavioural…signs to an organism that actions are possible' (Pickering, 2007, p72). An affordance then is an action the environment makes feasible for an organism and may be exemplified in natural objects, berries that may be eaten and trees that may be sheltered beneath, or cultural objects, cups to drink from or churches to worship within.

Therefore, it could be said that the couple are so committed to rearranging and sculpting their living space because this offers up different affordances, different possibilities for action, which they might want to take up on MDMA. For example, there is the opportunity to '*dance*' since all errant items have been tidied away and to walk through the space with ease when you might '*not [be] very coordinated*'. Humans can also notice 'higher grade' affordances which are shaped by cultural knowledge (Brown & Reavey, 2015) e.g. the strong cultural stories around water as a place of transformation, for example baptism, shape how we might understand a pool in the middle of a forest as a space of reinvention and purification. The way Eva and Lars modify the light with '*candles*' and '*glowsticks*' could also be seen to offer them new possibilities for being. This muted lighting seems to imitate firelight, around which exists a rich, cultural history. A point for communities to gather around together; to relax, hear stories, sing songs and enjoy themselves. This sense of cosy togetherness could alter how the couple behave and feel by relaxing them and bringing them closer together. Similarly, the '*tapestries*' they use draw on a long history of people adorning their environments to make visible a celebratory atmosphere, which might imbue the space with new possibilities for festivity and fun.

Ritual can also be seen to modulate couples' experiences as they initiated friends into MDMA use. These 'rites of passage' (Turner, 1987) were carefully constructed affairs, centred around making the transition from non-user to user as smooth as possible; with the couple working together to produce the right kind of intimate space. As Ken describes:

> *It is … [Rob's] first time, so I'm obsessively planning out the experience for him. I plan to give him halves of a tablet, 20 minutes apart to smoothen out the come-up. I myself will drop later on, only after he's hit and rolling well. I want to be sober in case anything happens […]*
> *Jittery, and having second thoughts, but this is usual…I remind myself that I've properly prepared for this, and thought through the several scenarios how tonight might play out…I don't know how many people I've introduced to MDMA in the past, but nowadays the answer is 'practically never.' There's a*

*lot more shit drugs going around and coupled with age it's just made me a lot more cautious in general. That said, we'll be a tight group of friends, in a controlled environment, and the stuff I'm giving them was tested and bought off a DNM. [...]*

*We've gone over the logistics, and the playlist. Most we've discussed is how we'll deal with the newbie later tonight, we're both gonna bring our friendly and cool A-game to put him at ease and hopefully have himself a great drop. Topics to avoid and push, what to do if he gets anxious, That's it. (Diary)*

Ken's parting phrase, '*That's it'*, is not intended to be ironic but could feel that way after he describes his '*obsessive…planning'*, precise calculation of dosage administration and prepping of conversational topics. His actions demarcate the experience as a significant event and construct a particular kind of boundaried, safe, positive space. There is nothing for Rob, the '*newbie'*, to worry about or consider: all the '*logistics'* have already been taken care of. Ken takes preventative measures against the '*shit drugs'* that might threaten the safety of the space by '*test[ing]'* and buying MDMA through a '*DNM'* (dark net market website): both recognised harm reduction practices (Allott & Redman, 2006; Buxton & Bingham, 2015). There is also a science-like precision with his division of the complete dose and '*20 minute'* time spacing to '*smoothen out the come-up'*. Furthermore, by positioning himself temporarily at the borders of this space, '*in case anything happens'*, him and his '*sober[iety]'* act as a watchful guard, protecting the peace.

The space-time Ken and his partner construct is not only physically safe, but also *emotionally* safe; there is a real sense here of the 'emotion work' they are performing. Emotion work is a term originally used by Hochschild (1983) to refer to the additional 'invisible' labour performed by flight attendants and involves the management of one's own feelings to create an observable facial and bodily display. The idea has since been adapted for familial and relationship contexts, where 'this work tends to involve the enhancement of others' emotional well-being and the provision of emotional support' (Erickson, 1993, p888). The enhancement of Rob's emotional well-being seems to be the primary mover behind Ken and his partner's collation of a discursive agenda, '*topics to avoid and push'* and their brainstorming of

strategies to combat any possible anxiety from Rob speaks to their readiness to provide emotional support, should it be needed. Furthermore, their moulding of their own emotional appearance for the benefit of Rob, '*we're both gonna bring our friendly and cool A-game*', maps onto the observable facial and bodily displays Hochschild (1983) represents as key to the performance of emotion work. Thus, these emotion work practices open up a safe space where Rob can feel totally '*at ease*': people are '*friendly*', conversation is tailored to a thought-out script and anxieties are detected and responded to.

The deep sense of mastery on display throughout Ken's account seems akin to watching the film of a great director: there appears a natural transition from one scene to the next, the tone is seamlessly set and then shifted and all the while a narrative organically emerges. Yet, while the film may appear free-flowing, this belies the countless hours of scripting, rehearsing, re-filming and editing that went into its production. It is this free-flowing experience that Ken tirelessly constructs: he places Rob front of house, witness to the collective assemblage of his vision of '*ease*' and emotional well-being while shielding him from the backstage preparatory work. The anticipation and, indeed, priming for emotional intimacy gives the sense of a rather sanitised emotional space. It is quite out of the norm to have your personal emotional well-being so painstakingly considered and catered to. Perhaps this might limit the possibility for certain types of emotional growth experience, which are often considered to be tied to the experience of a certain degree of adversity or struggle, and incompatible with excessive intervention from others (Brown, 2015).

Ken '*remind[ing] [him]self that [he's] properly prepared*' could be seen as a self-soothing strategy for managing his anxiety. In emotion-focussed couples' therapy, to self-soothe means drawing on internal resources to regulate personal distress, and has been found to be as important for relationship satisfaction as it is for easing individual suffering (Greenberg & Goldman, 2008). While not in a therapeutic environment, Ken's self-directed reminders do seem to overlap with this concept and constitute an attempt to self-soothe. His anxiety is emphasised in particular in relation to the '*newbie*' but is also a regular feature of taking MDMA: '*Jittery, and having second thoughts, but this is usual*'. Control is a key strategy for managing anxiety and with the level of careful management on display in Ken's

account, it seems likely he might often engage in practices that frame the experience for calm. It should be noted how much of a joint strategy the process is, 'we' is repeated several times. This suggests the couple might participate in mutual soothing, where both partners attempt to alleviate the distress of one another (Greenberg & Goldman, 2008), as they help to prepare each other for the ingestion of what is a powerful, psychoactive drug.

Of course, not all couples prepared to the same degree that Ken, Eva and Lars, and Carrie did. For those who didn't wholly rearrange their space or who took MDMA outside the home, an object could embody a certain kind of mood. This is the third avenue by which ritual can alter experience, what Douglas (2001) calls the 'method of mnemonics' where an external symbol helps co-ordinate feelings, thoughts and actions: Douglas gives the example of an actor whose performance is tied together by a new prop. For example, Karl buys '*glowlights*' to provide some psychological breathing space. They punctuate the continuous '*busy talking*' and inspire a state of play, where he can just '*lay back…enjoy the show*'. Similarly, Jenny brings a '*blinky ring*' to her and Mark's joint interview, which is '*fun to play with*'. She never interacts with it apart from when they take MDMA, and coming across it in her bag is a '*fun surprise*': prompting some joviality and lightness to the otherwise rather serious business of '*dealing with all the issues that [they] have*'.

Thus, it is suggested that the ritualistic preparations couples perform – gathering supplies and objects for use, cleaning/adorning their homes and themselves, working out how the night will work on a practical level, calculating dosages and calming themselves through yoga or reminding themselves they've '*properly prepared for this*' (Ken) – serve to both control their use and to enhance the way they *feel*. Everyday tasks, items, bodies and spaces are repurposed and become part of a ritualistic, preparatory process. In doing so, couples physically embody a sense of specialness as well as acting it out through a constellation of objects: the ordinary becoming 'enchanted through the enactment of the sacred' (Holloway, 2003, p1968) or, what it is referred to here in a secular context as the 'special'. This can be seen as representing how the boundaries couples construct should not be envisaged as simple segmentation of special MDMA space from the everyday, rather that MDMA space is made special *through* the everyday. This is

reflected in how they talk about a revival and reinvigoration of existing feelings of love and connection:

> Lars: It was like 'I want to love you even more, let's take MDMA' [...]
> it's like celebrating, yeah, that's really good because that's what we do.  We
> celebrate our relationship on [a] level that you just can't celebrate if you're
> sober because it's just not chemically possible (Couple interview: Eva & Lars)
> We feel closer and we feel more connected (Karl, Diary)
> It makes us flash back to that night [we got together], and the weeks
> immediately after, when we were starting to realise our feelings for one
> another (Ken, Diary)

Being on MDMA doesn't construct entirely new ways of relating and feeling, it *extends* and *enriches* existing feeling: early feelings are '*flash[ed] back to*', there's '*more connect[ion]*' and '*even more*' love; yet it does so in powerfully novel ways that are otherwise '*not chemically possible*'. Ritualistic production of MDMA space combined with the particular empathic qualities of the drug allow couples to feel their familiar, assumed love at a greater level of intensity. Lars speaks for many of the (male) participants when he frames the experience firmly within a neurochemical discourse, but how he and his partner, Eva, attempt to shape the atmospheres of their MDMA spaces betrays their understanding of other influences. This was mirrored across both studies, with all couples describing some attempt to control and influence the atmosphere of their MDMA experiences: whether that is through rearranging their space, physical and mental cleansing, planning out music/activities or bringing in particular items.

It is argued then that couples mark out MDMA space-time through and with the everyday; both temporally and corporeally. They carve out acceptable times of use – sometimes tying these to the high points in their lives – in addition to completing chores, taking baths, decorating their home and going shopping for supplies. In contrast to other research that portrays the couple relationship as an obstruction to regulated drug use, couples here seem to help boundary and control their MDMA experiences together. Yet, more than this, MDMA use seems to inhabit

a special zone, where familiar spaces, selves and connections can be reformed and re-enchanted. Sometimes the hum of daily life muffles how couples *really* feel for one another, sometimes MDMA provides the space for a more compassionate, less analytical self to emerge or, perhaps, the couple just want to feel even more in love.

## 6.3 Policing the intimate borders of MDMA space-time: just the two of us?

So far, we have been thinking about MDMA space-time as effortfully assembled by couples. Their ritualised ordering of spaces, objects and selves seemed to serve to control the experience so that the *right* kind of (emotional and physical) environment could be produced – for themselves and others. A re-enchantment of the everyday was performed: the familiar space of home was transformed through ritualised process and existing feelings of love enriched. This assemblage also involved a pushing out of the everyday and its concerns; and it is this exclusionary perspective that the present theme will build upon.

Spoken about particularly was the exclusion of *others* from couples' MDMA experiences: limiting who was invited in and in what way they were part of the experience forming a much needed barrier around this emotionally fertile space. Paul Stenner's (2013) ideas around what he calls *foundation by exclusion* are helpful in exploring these barriers further; he discusses how we can think about phenomena as being created and maintained not only through what is included but what is *excluded*:

> 'it is through a relation to the exclusion or expulsion of 'the third' or of 'thirdness' that unity and identity are created and maintained.  The implication is that behind the foundation of something unified (something that might be described as a *system*) there lurks expulsion and exclusion, and that this exclusion is necessary (rather than incidental) to the ongoing constitution of the system.' (p56)

'System' is used here broadly to refer to a social system, an organism, a system of experience or of knowledge. Therefore, we can conceive of both a couple and their MDMA experiences as systems in this sense. Initially, let us think about the couple as a unified, ordered system and how this might be related to an exclusion of 'thirdness'. As discussed in Chapter Two, others (in the case of a monogamous couple, this would perhaps be 'all others') are 'included *as* excluded' (Stenner, 2013, p58, referencing Agamben) or, rather, the excluded third mediates and is creative of the couple relationship. However, as well as the excluded third being creative of the couple system it can also destabilise it. An extra-dyadic romantic tryst can interrupt the couple system, exposing the previously invisible mediator (of 'all others'); the excluded third which was necessary for the relationship to function.

Therefore, 'the relationship of the system to the thirdness of its noise is…fundamentally ambivalent' (Stenner, 2013, p78), being both productive (third-as-mediator) and disruptive (third-as-interrupter). If we apply the principle of the excluded third, along with corresponding notions of mediation and interruption, to the system of experience constitutive of MDMA space-time, interesting questions emerge. Who is being excluded from MDMA space-time and why? At what point does third-as-mediator cross over into third-as-disruptor?

## 6.3.1 Who is being excluded from MDMA space-time and why?

Regarding the first query, while the 'who' varies from couple to couple, it will be argued the 'why' is the same: MDMA use becomes part of exclusive, shared couple space and thus mandates protection. Most often, participants saw taking MDMA, to some degree, as a couple 'thing'. Coupledom is predicated on the inhabitation of a space which is just 'for us' (Finn, 2010): this symbolic territory including favourite hobbies and past-times, inside jokes, places and, often, sex (Gabb & Fink, 2015). Couples would incorporate MDMA experiences within this couples' space, so that MDMA use became a thing the couples *did* together and formed part of the story of their relationship. This was performed by couples in different ways: the majority were content to practice a less visible exclusion, others could be present but their

partner had to be there too, while a few didn't want anyone else physically present when they took MDMA together. This was the case for Carrie; she takes MDMA with '*[her] boyfriend, and only him*':

> *I guess our roommate will be home, watching TV and stuff, and I guess that's ok. As long as she doesn't behave as strangely as she did last time…wanting to smell the MDMA and giving us allergy / anxiety pills for the come down. I guess that freaked me a little bit out, and is why I'm not that keen being in the same room as her while we trip. […]*
>
> *For me, it's important to do it alone with Erik. I find it important because he's my favorite person, and I guess I've gotten used to it. I've taken MDMA alone twice and together with some friends once, but the way I and Erik do it, is the way I most appreciate. I feel safe with him. There's no drama. I trust him, and I also know what to expect from the experience, since we've done it a couple of times. As I said, I trust him, so if anything uncomfortable should rise to the surface, something I, he or we need to talk about, I don't fear it. […]*
>
> *I don't know exactly what to expect. I hope it will be a calm and cosy night. I hope that we'll both come home from work, relax for a while, make a pillow fort in our bedroom and stay there till the night comes… (Diary)*

Carrie describes wanting a separate space for her and her partner to take MDMA: '*I'm not that keen being in the same room as [housemate] while we trip*'; '*it's important to do it alone with [partner]*'. The extent to which this is the result of explicit negotiation between the couple is unclear; what is clear, however, is her '*appreciat[ion]*' and fervent implementation of this principle. Others are barred from entering this sacred, couples' space: her housemate intrudes on their experience with '*strange*' behaviour, which to an observer might not seem all that strange (such as '*smell[ing] the MDMA*': users are known to inspect drugs before taking them e.g. Van Hout, 2014), and she speaks at interview about '*uncomfortable circumstances*' arising when she took MDMA without her partner and an accompanying '*overwhelming*' sense of '*sadness or…frustration*'. Again, the fact there's '*no drama*' with her partner indicates there is '*drama*' with others. Moreover, not only is the

physical presence of others unwelcome, even their virtual presence is carefully excluded as Carrie recalls '*turn[ing] off my cellphone…nobody's going to call you, nobody's going to come and nobody's going to like pop up*'.

This blockading of others is manifested perfectly in their bedroom '*pillow fort*', which places them psychologically and materially behind a protective barrier. Mark Finn's (2005; 2012) ideas around the discursive construction of coupledom are helpful in illuminating what might be going on here. He discusses how: 'the emotionally and sexually connected dyad [of the couple] is prioritized as *the* context for a full expression of intimate closeness and as that which contributes most to relationship satisfaction, unity, and thus stability' (Finn, 2012, p614-5) (emphasis in original). It could be argued that, for Carrie, MDMA space-time acts as a particular instance of the 'full expression of intimate closeness' that Finn claims defines contemporary ideas of coupledom. In the previous theme, the way Carrie ritualises the process of taking MDMA was discussed: her orchestration of space, objects and her embodied self enables the production of what could be seen as a purified, idealised intimate space-time. Here, we can see how others are conceptualised as little more than potential interruption to this intimate flow, she doesn't want anyone else '*in the same room*' or even '*popping up'* virtually via mobile phone.

The reasons behind Carrie wanting to take MDMA alone with her partner are ostensibly about the inadequacy of sharing the experience with others: there is too much '*drama*' where difficult emotions like '*sadness*' and '*frustration*' can appear. However, it is suggested that excluding others from MDMA space-time also acts as a way of reserving the positive qualities of that experience purely for the benefit of the couple. Carrie discusses MDMA as enabling a deep level of connection: she is able to '*focus all [her] attention on him*' and '*what he needs*' as well as deep-rooted concerns of hers being able to rise to the surface in unexpected ways, '*we're on the MDMA and like 'oh I want to talk about this. This has been bothering me but I didn't know before now*'. If 'intimacy [is seen] as a form of "inner" exposure' (Finn, 2012, p615), for which the couple is the ultimate context, and MDMA facilitates such exposure, it makes sense to limit and place barriers around the experience. On the one hand, a space so full of possibilities for intimacy can be an exciting and rejuvenating place to be for a couple but, on the other hand, there might be a

danger of someone who is not your partner crossing an intimate threshold. Coupledom is predicated on the inhabitation of a space which is just 'for us' (Finn, 2010) and Carrie seems to be incorporating MDMA experiences within this couples' space. Thus, these potentially boundary-crossing experiences are contained and can be used as a shared resource for maintaining their bond (see also Gabb & Fink, 2015).

The borders of MDMA space-time for Carrie might therefore seem generated by the general exclusion of 'all others'. However, this belies the very specific third excluded from their MDMA experiences and relationship: her partner's ex-girlfriend, Ida. Carrie describes how Ida became:

*this totem of insecurity so every time she was mentioned or I saw her, I remembered those feelings from when like I and Erik started hooking up and insecurities about like "are we going to be together or are we not going to be together?" (Diary interview)*

The emotion on display here, although not explicitly named by Carrie, seems to be jealousy: her insecurities about the possible loss of Erik, '*"are we going to be together or are we not going to be together?"'*, are tied to his ex-girlfriend, a conceivable rival for his affections. Jealousy has often, along with emotions more broadly, been considered an intrapsychic experience: a character trait or a way of thinking (Langdridge et al., 2012). However, the process-orientated perspective taken in this work views emotions as attributes of systems (Stenner, 2013) or patterns of relationship (Burkitt, 2014), rather than things existing inside of us. This is particularly apparent with jealousy, which 'names the troubled relationship of a subject to a rival they wish to exclude' (Stenner, 2013, p53). Its inherent basis in patterns of relationship is hard to deny since it is unable to form without at least three figures: a subject, an object of desire and a rival for that object; a 'triangular structure of relations' (Stenner, 2013, p75). Thus, jealousy could be seen as a location within these relations, rather than purely as an intrapsychic experience (Stenner, 2013); although we do of course *feel* our patterns of relationship to others as well (Burkitt, 2014). In the initial, uncertain stages of their relationship, '*when*

*[they] started hooking up*', Carrie (subject) sees Ida (rival), unfairly or fairly, as threatening to interrupt the fragile connection she has formed with Erik (object) and therefore wishes to exclude her. She seems unable to shake this jealousy and the '*insecurities*' wrapped up with it; even when their relationship becomes more stable, she still '*remember[s] those feelings*'. The solidification of her diffuse feelings into a '**totem** *of insecurity*' (own emphasis) could be argued to illustrate their depth; the material world has traditionally been seen as unchanging, more real than the immaterial (Brown & Stenner, 2009). Indeed, feeling jealous towards Ida seems to have been a significant undercurrent in Carrie's life, *'[it was a] huge drama for over two years…I was despising her*'. What Carrie describes could also be seen as similar to the psychoanalytic defence mechanism of 'splitting': an unconscious attribution of our own negative qualities to another (Grosz, 2013). If Ida is the container for all of Carrie's insecurities, then Carrie no longer has to deal with these issues. Since the shameful parts of herself belong to someone else, she can see herself as good.

This jealous undercurrent plays out in various ways in relation to Carrie's MDMA experiences. All the borders Carrie puts up to exclude others from the couple's MDMA space-time might be considered more specifically to exclude Ida in particular, she is part of their social circle '*every time we meet at a party or like a birthday*', and thus could potentially '*pop up*' virtually or be part of a wider group if they took MDMA with friends. Perhaps the unconscious thinking here is that there can be no problem with the third if they are not allowed in in any way. Despite this blanket exclusion, the presence of Ida as excluded third has still been felt in past MDMA experiences:

> *Carrie: Because I'd been talking about [Ida]…[on] a MDMA trip with Erik in May…like last year. I said the same thing 'she is the not the problem. It's what, like, I've made her the problem.' Like even though I said it, I didn't like realise it…uh, so it took like half a year then I was like 'oh, that's what I meant. Oh, ok.'… I know what I meant cos I can like feel it and understand it…it was like [clicks fingers] (Diary interview)*

Discussing '[Ida]…[on] a MDMA trip with Erik' brings clarity and foreshadows a process of taking responsibility for Carrie, 'she is the not the problem… I've made her the problem'; mirroring reports of MDMA as an agent for increased clarity and contemplation (Vollenweider et al., 1998; Sessa, 2007). This could be understood as having two very different impacts, depending on the system considered. Jealousy has been framed as an attribute of a psychosocial system produced via the excluded third (Stenner, 2013), which, in this case, seemed to be Ida. Yet, Carrie here seems to remove Ida from the position of 'rival' for Erik's affections, 'she is not the problem'. In doing so, the triangle of relations necessary for jealousy cannot form and the system collapses; rendering the third obsolete.

In contrast to the dissolution of a system that gives rise to jealousy, the virtual presence of the third appears *productive* for the constitution of the MDMA experiential system. This fits with how the third can reinvigorate a system and that a system without any interruptions becomes stagnant (Stenner, 2013). In the context of a romantic relationship, jealous awareness of the third can make someone remember what was so special about their partner in the first place (Perel, 2007). Despite all of Carrie's careful boundary construction to exclude others from the couples' MDMA experiences, the third still crosses over, albeit on a virtual level. Interestingly though, this interruption doesn't damage the system but rather revitalises it. The couples' MDMA space-time is not somewhere she simply cycles through the same positions she has always maintained or somewhere that requires the wholesale exclusion of (certain) others in order to be a positive experience. Instead, consideration of the third leads her to a powerful realisation of her own culpability; often considered a first step on the path to change, since acknowledging personal responsibility leaves the door open to changing one's own actions or mindset in some way (e.g. couples therapy: Kurri, & Wahlström, 2005; Greenberg, James & Conroy, 1988).

Carrie's realisation plays out mainly within MDMA space-time, in phases. She at first '*said it [but] I didn't like realise it*' on a MDMA '*trip*' with Erik, then '*half a year later*' says the same thing but this time she '***feel[s]** it and understand[s] it*' (own emphasis). Only when she *feels* the understanding is there a light bulb moment, '*it was like [clicks fingers]*', highlighting again the vital role feelings play in grasping and

moving through our world (Solomon, 2008). After this point, Carrie '*sent [Ida] a message, we took a cup of coffee and talked out. And what had been a huge drama for over two years, was for my part gone after that revelation. That was pretty nice*'. Thus, this personal revelation echoes out of MDMA space-time, into the everyday world, where Carrie acts to resolve what had been a very lengthy issue, '*for over two years*'. Carrie's shift in perspective and the repercussions of this reinforce how the effects of MDMA experiences are not contained within that immediate space-time; they linger on. Just as the traces of MDMA's bubble could still be felt for days, weeks and perhaps months after the original experience, so too can the impact of a boundary being (even virtually) crossed.

Other couples enacted an emotional border around their MDMA experiences: while others could be present, their partner was always there too. Thus, in effect, still 'reserving' the MDMA experience for the couple in some way. Abby and Ryan, who used to take MDMA together but stopped after having children, describe this:

> *Abby: We pretty much always hang out together…you know we wouldn't be 'oh Ryan's off in that room, I'm off in this room.'*
> *Ryan: yeah if we went with a group of friends*
> *Abby: yeah*
> *Ryan: it would be us two and a group of friends*
> *Abby: yeah*
> *Ryan: so if our friends wanted to go and dance in another room and we wanted to dance in this room, it would always be*
> *Abby: we'd stay together…you know if he goes off to the loo, I'd stay put until he got back (Couple interview)*

While they go out with their friends, their night revolves about being with each other, '*we'd stay together*'. They also look out for one another, prioritising each other's musical preferences and dutifully waiting if one of them goes '*off to the loo*'. They do this because they '*always want to spend our time together*': just as this is true in their everyday life, it extends to MDMA space-time too and emphasises how

drug experiences are continuous with and incorporated into people's lives. In contrast to the separate, isolatable phenomenon the epidemiological paradigm has arguably painted drug use to be (Foster & Spencer, 2013). Taking MDMA becomes a thing '[they've] done together', compared to a 'really amazing, once-in-a-lifetime holiday with your boyfriend or girlfriend', and part of the 'shared life' they see as essential for maintaining a close relationship. This maps onto the findings of other research, where couples saw making time to do special things together as a crucial part of relationship 'work' that sustained their connection (Gabb & Fink, 2015). Many participants emphasised the value of having MDMA use as part of the roster of shared couple experiences due to the way it magnified their feelings for one another and fun had together. Bringing MDMA use inside the borders of exclusive, couple space thus allowed couples to lay claim to these fun, bonding experiences as *theirs,* something that could be used as a shared resource to bond them together (Gabb & Fink, 2015)*.*

The *emotional* content of MDMA experiences was articulated as a particularly rich resource, and one that needed to be guarded against others outside the couple unit. This is illustrated by Ken's description of a more explicit boundary around MDMA experiences as something belonging to the couple and which partners cannot, on their own, share with others:

> *It's essential that my wife be present. Since we first got together, neither of us has ever partied when the other wasn't. This is not a rule we agreed upon, it just turned out that way. Personally, if my wife wasn't around, I doubt I'd be in the mood to party. Back when I was starting to drop, a friend told me the best thing was to never drop without your significant other. That way lies ruin. May sound dumb but 10+ years later, turns out its pretty good advice.*
> *[…]*
> *When I was single the best advice I ever got on using X was, don't talk to the same girl the entire night, because you WILL fall in love with her. For a week, and you'll be torn up about it the entire time. Much better to talk to multiple people, keep moving around, don't over expose yourself to any single soul for too long. (Diary)*

While this boundary is presented as organic, not '*a rule we agreed upon*', and part of a passive process, '*it just turned out that way',* this belies how the idea's origin is later located in his friend's '*good advice*'. The cordoning off of MDMA as couple's space in fact seems to be a reasoned-through, if rather opaque, decision: '*That way lies ruin*'. This melodramatic turn of phrase further hinting here at the potential danger of MDMA experiences for couples if not boundaried to some degree. It is initially unclear why it is '*essential*' that his wife be with him on MDMA, to '*drop*' without her would cause '*ruin*', but the threat becomes apparent when discussed in the context of being single. Ken is wary about '*over expos[ing]*' himself to '*any single soul*' since this will form an intense, albeit not long-term, connection, '*you WILL fall in love with her. For a week…*'. This echoes what Timothy Leary coined as the 'instant marriage syndrome' on MDMA; repeated in humourous tales of caution against falling 'in love' with strangers by Beck and Rosenbaum's (1994) participants. The emotional connection forged by MDMA is considered so strong, Ken must '*keep moving around*'; using the restless movements of his body to order the social space (Holloway, 2003; Kong, 2001) and erect an emotional barrier, cutting off the depth of intimacy in his interactions. The danger of taking MDMA is palpable: you could feel '*torn up*' for a week afterwards.

It is a small leap to consider how this danger might be magnified if already part of a couple, described as 'a unity', a 'little cosmos', a 'field' emerging from what it excludes (Stenner, 2013). It is this sense of a special, shared space inaccessible to those outside this unity that is so crucial to coupledom (Stenner, 2013; Finn, 2010); and, it seems, in fortifying the stable, couple structure against the possibilities for reconfiguration found within intimate MDMA experiences. This special, shared space for Ken and his wife on MDMA seems to be centred on emotional intimacy: others can be physically present but the level of intimacy wrapped up with MDMA is only to be experienced when *both* partners are there. This was typical for many of the participants we spoke to who only ever took MDMA with their partner there: Melanie writes how she '*wants [her partner] there*', calling him '*an integral part of the MDMA architecture*'; Eva and Lars refer to MDMA as '*a little celebration of our relationship*' and have only taken it together since becoming a couple; Mark and

Jenny only take MDMA together since they're '*using it for relationship and therapeutic reasons*'; Effy describes it as '*very important*' for her partner to be with her on MDMA.

The danger of navigating MDMA space without your partner is keenly felt by Ken, '*that way lies ruin*'. While other couples did not verbally articulate the emotional dangers of taking MDMA without your partner, their actions, always taking it together and often staying physically close to each over the course of the experience, could be argued to tell the same story. There are two notions of the couple that inform this viewpoint. The first is that exclusivity is a pre-requisite to the couple relationship. As argued previously, a system is created through what it excludes and a certain degree of emotional exclusivity has been well-established as entangled with a couple relationship. For example, Giddens (1992), in his influential work *The Transformation of Intimacy,* makes a case for the necessity of exclusionary practices to build the trust which is crucial for intimacy, 'the disclosure of what is kept from other people is one of the main psychological markers likely to call forth trust and to be sought after in return' (p138-9). Couples spoke repeatedly about the deep level of connection found in MDMA experiences. And if deep intimacy is seen as a preserve of the couple, then always having your partner with you on the drug could be seen to provide some kind of insurance against destabilising emotionally exclusive coupledom.

The second is that our romantic partner is the person we are supposed to experience our most intense feelings with (de Botton, 2016) and with whom the level of intimacy is the deepest, beyond all other connections: friends, parents and other family members (the only exception being children) (Perel, 2007). Couples very much *did* articulate the emotional power of taking MDMA, like an intensification of positive and muting of negative feelings, as discussed in the first analysis chapter. Arguably, partners might want to share such intense feelings with their partner or they could be worried about the impact of themselves or their partner sharing such intense feelings with someone else – jealousy is a frequent bedfellow of romance (de Botton, 2016). Thus, MDMA experiences are subsumed within the vast array of other things, places and practices that make up special, couple space; with partners rarely traversing this emotionally potent territory alone.

**6.4.2 When does third-as-mediator become third-as-disruptor?**

For other couples, who was being excluded from MDMA space-time was less clearly defined. In contrast to the explicit boundaries Carrie and Ken drew and the boundaries implied by Abby and Ryan, the experiences of Karl and his partner, Ana, highlighted the possible invisibility of the mediating third. Thus, these experiences are suited to answering the second question posed at the start of this section: what is the tipping point between third-as-mediator and third-as-disruptor? Karl openly discussed his desire to experience MDMA with others. To this end, he and Ana had invited a mutual female friend to join them, prior to this they had only taken it alone together. Karl begins his diary by saying:

> *We will be using MDMA together with [Olivia] (female, same age as girlfriend). The plan is to get closer connected as friends and find a way to bond beyond normal friendship (not in a sexual way, more towards soul mates). (Diary)*

He hopes MDMA will help him get '*closer connected*' to their mutual friend, Olivia, and emphasises elsewhere how he wants to experience this '*much deeper level*' of connection with more of his friends. He is also explicit that this bonding will '*not [be] in a sexual way*'; suggesting that the couple haven't discussed boundaries around extra-dyadic sex (or they have and it is not an expected part of the experience). Boundaries are described as key for rendering the potentially disruptive third safe in non-monogamous contexts: not through the specific content of the boundary but by the very existence of some prior, mutually-agreed upon position (Finn, 2010; Stenner, 2013). On MDMA some '*sexual moments*' do take place, though Karl's involvement seems limited, '*mostly my girlfriend and her that were… trying a couple of things: kissing, um, touching a bit*'. The day afterwards, Karl '*woke up to the girls chatting and we were all very happy, a little tired but generally feeling great*' and

describes how close he feels with his girlfriend and how they cuddled the whole night in bed together.

However, a couple of days after use a different tone comes through in Karl's girlfriend's experience of the night:

> *My girlfriend on the other hand had a pretty bad nightmare about me dating other girls. So i guess she is feeling worried about losing me. Since she doesn't currently live with me i guess that using the mdma and being so close with me, and then not seeing me for a day must have been a bit bad. […]*
> *One thing i did not expect did happen today, my partner asked if we could use MDMA again "soon". In about 2-3 weeks. She felt like she had to hold back a bit with our friend. Mostly when it comes to her self expression and enjoying music. (Diary)*

It is striking that Karl connects Ana's '*bad nightmare about me dating other girls*' purely with the contrast between their intense closeness on MDMA, '*being so close to me*', and physical separation afterwards, '*then not seeing me for a day must have been a bit bad*'. It seems like a more direct line could be drawn between another person in their sexually intimate space for possibly the first time and her worries about Karl's fidelity. This could stem from her own eagerness to explore her sexuality with someone else, it is Ana and Olivia who most of the '*sexual moments*' are between. Dreams have long been considered a haven for unconscious feelings by the psychoanalytic perspective (Freud & Bonaparte, 1954). It is not necessary to fully ascribe to the psychoanalytic approach, however, to appreciate that we might not be fully conscious of all our feelings, particularly those feelings we feel troubled by the expression of in our everyday lives. And feeling jealous and experiencing doubts about your faithfulness or your partner's could indeed be seen as unsettling and problematic to manage.

There was no intention on Karl's part to bond '*in a sexual way*' with Olivia, but there were '*sexual moments*' between '*mostly*' Ana and Olivia; implying there was some level of sexual encounter between all three of them. Jealousy has been discussed earlier in the theme as a psychosocial system produced through the

excluded third (Stenner, 2013). Ana's desire to exclude the third can be seen in her request to '*use MDMA again "soon"*' with just her partner, Karl, breaking their established pattern of longer gaps between use, and how she '*had to hold back*' when Olivia was there. The triangle of relations necessary for jealousy to form is also present: Ana's (subject) '*pretty bad nightmare*' about Karl (object) being with other women could betray how she felt threatened by some of the '*sexual moments*' that developed on MDMA; leading her to see their mutual friend (rival) as potentially disruptive to the valued subject-object connection. Alternatively, it might be the shadow of Ana's own desire for their friend, Karl recalls how '*my girlfriend kind of has a huge crush on [Olivia]*', on MDMA that reminds her that Karl too might have desire for others (an as-yet-unidentified rival). The normalcy and naturalness of monogamy is a taken-for-granted cultural rule (Pieper & Bauer, 2005). Therefore, irrespective of the possibility of non-monogamous paths to coupledom, encroachment of this ideal might have unsettling repercussions and, of course, non-monogamous experiences can prompt jealous feelings (McLean, 2004). In addition, the apparent lack of pre-determined boundaries might have contributed to a failure to categorise the experiences on MDMA in a way which would protect the unity of the couple (Barker & Langdridge, 2010). This could be understood as telling us about two issues: the hidden boundaries around MDMA experiences for Ana, which was shown up by the unexpected shift from third-as-mediator to third-as-interrupter and the narrow threshold between third-as-productive (an object of desire in this case) and third-as-disruptive for couples within MDMA experiences and life more broadly.

First, let us turn to the boundaries of MDMA space-time. If behind the unity and order of a system of experience, like MDMA experiences, necessarily lies expulsion (Stenner, 2013) then we might deduce different answers to the question of *who* exactly needs to be excluded for Karl and Ana. For Karl, the experience was '*a lot of fun*'; he had '*really wanted to have more people involved with our MDMA use*' and this seems to have been the partial culmination of that desire. Furthermore, when asked at interview about whether there was anything he missed about taking MDMA just with his girlfriend, he responds '*there wasn't really anything I missed. I didn't feel I had to hold back anything*'. Perhaps the thirdness for Karl that needs to be excluded to constitute the system of MDMA experiences would be those he does

not feel close to; he laments particularly his friends' negative perceptions of drug use, *'[they think] you're obviously ruining your life'*, since he wants to take MDMA *'with a lot more of a [sic] friends.'* The idea that you can only become aware of the mediating third when it interrupts seems helpful in understanding who is excluded from MDMA space-time for Ana. The free-flowing, emotionally open 'bubble' of MDMA use seems to have been interrupted for Ana by the presence of the couple's friend, *'[Ana] had to hold back a bit with our friend. Mostly when it comes to her self expression and enjoying music'*. Implicit here is an acknowledgement that when it is just the two of them, Ana can express herself freely and appreciate the music however she feels like: it comes so naturally that the mediator is not noticed, just as language is invisible in communication between two fluent speakers (Stenner, 2013). However, when someone else is included in MDMA space-time it seems to interrupt the system and Ana becomes aware of that which was mediating it in the first place: the exclusion of 'all others'.

This seems to be a story about what happens when boundaries are unknowingly encroached and tells us that just because couples do not openly delineate barriers around their MDMA use, does not mean they do not exist; 'the absences, the unexpressed, are as significant as the spoken' (Brownlie, 2014, p132). As stated previously, there are two systems which the third seems to interrupt: the couple relationship itself and the couple's MDMA space-time, though these are intertwined. Firstly, the unexpected, sexual parts of Ana and Karl's MDMA experience with their mutual friend have been argued to disturb the couple system; giving way to an emotional aftershock for Ana in the form of *'bad nightmares'*. It could be argued that the free-flowing, intimate character of MDMA experiences might present particular challenges to coupledom, as the concept is widely understood e.g. as a monogamous dyad. Although the role of MDMA in producing this experience is ambiguous, it is a space-time where things seem to flow organically, attention is often present-focussed and more negative emotional responses tend to be muted. Indeed, the experience has been described as involving heightened sensuality (Zemishlany, Aizenberg & Weizman, 2001). Perhaps events could transpire here in a different way.

Secondly, the presence of someone outside of the couple seemed to interrupt the unity of the MDMA experiential system for Ana. However, this differed from Karl's experience, who didn't seem to miss taking it just as a couple. Ana's feelings also did not seem apparent to him, he was surprised when she wanted to take MDMA again, just the two of them: '*One thing i did not expect did happen today, my partner asked if we could use MDMA again "soon".*' It seemed that boundaries around who to exclude were not just made by couples but *appeared* to them, a third which once acted as a mediator could suddenly become an interruption. Thus, it is suggested that it might be helpful for couples to more explicitly acknowledge *who* the third is in the context of their MDMA experiences and why and to take steps to minimise any disruptive potential. The non-monogamous community advises negotiating boundaries first (Veaux, Hardy & Gill, 2014; Taormino, 2013; Easton & Hardy, 2009), and the same principle might apply to couples wanting to take MDMA together.

## 6.4 Conclusions

This chapter has illustrated the ways in which couples draw boundaries around their MDMA experiences: segmenting them from everyday life and from the intrusions of others. Taking MDMA with a partner encouraged a desire to make the experience special, and infrequent; controlled use entangled with the couple dynamic. Boundaries around special MDMA space-time were embodied through the orchestration of self and space (Holloway, 2003; Kong, 2001). Rituals of purification and celebration produced an idealised kind of space; simultaneously capable of pushing out everyday concerns and re-enchanting familiar feelings. There is also a remarkable sense of control on display in these preparatory accounts, setting up a stark contrast with the idea of chaotic, reckless drug use.

It was suggested that shared MDMA experiences can modulate and enhance existing feelings of closeness, forming part of the broader spectrum of relationship 'work' practices that sustain couple relationships. As argued by Gabb and Fink, it's important to throw the spotlight on the factors that *sustain* rather than endanger

relationships (Gabb & Fink, 2014). Here, couples subsume MDMA experiences into the things they enjoy doing together, that refresh and revitalise their connection to each other. As such, it seems that MDMA might not just be a treatment for mental health issues such as PTSD (Mithoefer et al., 2011) and social anxiety in autistic adults (Danforth et al., 2016), but could also work as an *enhancement* for couple relationships. Not a standalone magic bullet, but rather something far less extraordinary: a very particular type of 'date night' where feelings of love flow freely and more intensely inside an ordered, boundaried space.

The chapter's final theme dwelt on how MDMA space-time is constituted not only by what it includes but also by what it *excludes,* or, more specifically, *who* it excludes. This exclusion of 'the third' or 'thirdness' is part of the ongoing constitution of the system, a concept Stenner (2013) terms *foundation by exclusion*, and is used to frame the boundaries couples delineate around who is invited into this special space. Through this lens of boundaries and barriers, and how they shift, we see thorny issues such as jealousy and (in)fidelity come to light. Jealousy was both dissolved by and emerged from MDMA experiences. For Carrie, the multiple barriers designed to exclude others from the couple's MDMA space-time were still virtually perforated by an old rival. Yet rather than being unwelcome, a new understanding was reached and old jealousies laid to rest. In contrast, inviting a mutual friend into Karl and Ana's MDMA space-time proved disruptive for Ana: prompting a jealous aftershock of emotion and exposing a hitherto invisible boundary for their relationship and MDMA experiences. While Ken and his partner invited others into their MDMA space-time, they practiced a level of explicit emotional exclusion which protected the couple unit from too much intimacy with others, maintaining emotional (and presumed) sexual fidelity. In fact, for all these couples, MDMA space-time seemed laced with powerful and sometimes dangerous levels of intimacy that needed containing, if the experiences were going to be productive for the couple. These thresholds were sometimes consciously defined, sometimes not, but always eventually made themselves apparent.

# Chapter 7 – Discussion and conclusions

## 7.1 Summary of findings

This thesis has explored how couples experience intimacy on MDMA and how these experiences interweave with their relationship. The three previous chapters have presented couples' MDMA experiences as: an emotional safe haven, spatially modulated, and boundaried. Following Gabb and Fink (2015), it was theorised that couples made and re-made intimacy through their interactions on MDMA, what they did and felt together. The emotional safe haven of Chapter Four was characterised as a 'bubble' for its protective qualities and distinct relational dynamic: comprised of enhanced positive emotional patterns (Burkitt, 2014), such as love and joy, and muted negative emotional patterns, such as fear and sadness; and also involved a greater connection to a participant's own emotions and those of their partner. Within the MDMA bubble, particular practices of intimacy were facilitated: couples were first described as experiencing moments of emotional attunement, of sharing in and sensitively responding to their partner's emotional experience (Greenberg & Goldman, 2008); these moments being grounded too in their embodied presence in the world, like the inescapable mutuality of touch (Gabb, 2011). These were suggested to weave into the fabric of how couples related to one another and perhaps garnering some of the intimacy benefits previous research has linked to the prevalence of attunement in romantic relationships (Connolly & Sicola, 2005; Cohen, Schulz, Weiss & Waldinger, 2012; Jonathan & Knudson-Martin, 2012; Reid, Dalton, Laderoute, Doell, & Nguyen, 2007). Being attuned emotionally was also argued to unsettle gender norms, with men becoming more emotionally responsive: an effect valued by themselves and their female partners.

The second intimate practice examined was the process of talking and listening to a partner. The distinct emotional profile of the bubble – an increase in positive feelings and a decrease in negative feelings – was posited as the reason why partners felt more able to disclose; although disclosure was not always without consequence, regret or emotional difficulty, exposing the limits of this safe haven.

The worry, fear, shame and judgement felt in everyday life was argued to constrain certain conversations about a variety of relationship issues including infidelity, non-monogamy and sexual fantasies. The sharing of distressing memories on MDMA was also focussed on. Remembering these difficult times with a partner was argued to allow for 'an active, selective forgetting' (Brown & Reavey, 2015, p72) of events, which where overwhelming the present. Finally, the practice of collaborative forgetting between partners was explored. The bubble was argued to help re-make couples' 'affective climate' (Fuchs, 2013, p8); their everyday way of relating to one another as well as allowing for the erasure of intense feelings of anger; allowing them to talk through and think about their anger from a different perspective, recapturing physical and emotional closeness.

Practices of closeness were also argued as mediated by space and movement in Chapter Five. A psychosocial, process account has argued for subjectivity as materially, as well as discursively produced (Brown & Stenner, 2009), spaces and objects co-constituting new possibilities for agency. This was borne out in the way participants described three patterns of movement on MDMA as reformulating subjectivity; a process mediated by shifting boundaries within and beyond the self. Intermittent movement through and interaction with material settings reinforced boundaries between self and other and produced a playful subjectivity. The novelty of the objects and environmental features encountered added to a sense of fun and lightheartedness (Aron, Aron, Norman & McKenna, 2000). Such playful subjectivity was suggested as a possible enhancement to couples' intimacy (Brown, 2009; Perel, 2007) and as a means of 'playing out' different alternatives for the future, such as having children (Gabb & Fink, 2015). However, for one couple, Leanne and Matt, a 'dark side' of play was unearthed (Brown, 2009), as their silliness interfered with important friendships in their lives. The second subjectivity which could be seen as materially composed was a whole, embodied sense of self, rather than the fragmentation between body and mind fostered by cognitive thought (Dewey, 1925/1981, cited in Johnson, 2008) and argued as structuring lived experience (Gillies et al., 2004; van Manen, 1998). This body/mind boundary within the self seemed to blurred on MDMA through continuous motion. This movement pivoted on an object or person, an 'actant' (Latour, 2005) that co-produced and 'stabilised'

(Serres, 1995) participants' experience of a fluid physicality, their body seemed to '*flow*'. This experience was not dependent on extensive properties but a certain, intensive connection between (human and non-human) bodies (DeLanda, 2005): with participants describing similar disruptions of the body/mind boundary while playing a ball game, hula hooping and giving their partner a massage. This seemed to be distinctly pleasurable, a concept often lamented as absent from much drugs research (Moore, 2008; Duff, 2008), and reaffirms other findings that link movement to experiencing an embodied sense of self (Del Busso, 2009; Chisholm, 2008); while also extending them in the way in which human and non-human bodies can mediate and transform this embodied becoming (Latour, 2005). Thirdly, a lack of movement within material settings that provided some sort of containment – a bath, a pile of cushions – could weaken the boundary between self and other, producing a 'merged' subjectivity. Partners experienced this as a profound sense of closeness; a total communion which was argued to adhere to strong cultural ideals around love (Perel, 2007). These diffuse boundaries were also suggested to open up broader possibilities for agency: this was in the form of a simultaneously strong individual/couple identity for Eva and connection to nature for Rachel.

Finally, couples' experiences of intimacy on MDMA described in the previous two chapters were argued as modulated by the symbolic boundaries couples constructed around their drug use. A theoretical lens, in the form of Stenner's (2013) and Douglas' (2001) work, concerned with what is *excluded*, rather than included, from a system was used to reveal the boundaries separating off couples' MDMA experiences from, in the first instance, other times and spaces, and, secondly, other people. Couples were argued, on the whole, to carefully assemble spatial-temporal boundaries of use; segmenting MDMA time as 'special'. Temporal boundaries were fashioned through infrequent use, sometimes tied to other rare life events like seasonal change or the end of exams, and functioned to control couples' experiences with the drug. Boundaries were also enacted materially: through the reordering of spaces, objects and bodies (Holloway, 2003). For example, Carrie engaged in lengthy preparation the days prior to taking MDMA: she cleaned her flat, ate healthier, made sure she was well-rested and showered, gathered items for ease of use such as water and flowers for decoration and meditated. While other participants did not

organise themselves and their surroundings so avidly, almost all engaged in some kind of preparation: from the collation of a music playlist to calculating the desired dosage. These processes were framed as ritualistic acts, which not only expressed couples' values, such as health and responsible drug use, but also modified the nature of their experiences (Douglas, 2001). Specifically, the construction of these boundaries was suggested to enhance the way couples felt on the drug: the sense of specialness serving to re-enchant familiar intimate connections. As such, MDMA experiences were argued to form part of 'relationship work' practices which sustain and enhance couples' connection: for Ken this was time and space apart from the interference of everyday life and for Eva and Lars a way of feeling even more in love. In addition to the expulsion of everyday life from MDMA experiences, *who* was excluded also appeared to be an important constituent. The intimate closeness necessitated by the exclusive couple dyad (Finn, 2012) and faciliated by MDMA use was preserved for the benefit of the couple through excluding others emotionally and physically, the 'excluded third' – that whose exclusion the formation of a system is predicated upon (Stenner, 2013). However, the excluded third still crossed over, virtually and physically, into MDMA space, with vastly differently consequences: from heralding the collapse of jealous relations to the formation of them; pointing to both the potential productivity and danger of others entering couples' MDMA space.

### 7.1.1 Research questions and key insights

As an adjunct to chronologically summarising the analysis, it will also be helpful to consider the research questions directly and how they might be answered. The main research questions of this thesis were defined as follows:

1. How do couples experience closeness in their everyday lives and ecstasy experiences?
   a. What kind of activities, spaces and emotions are productive of couple intimacy?

2. How do people understand their relationship as influenced by their MDMA use?

   a. Are there aspects of the relationship they feel are enhanced by their ecstasy use?

   b. Are there aspects of the relationship they feel are constrained or harmed by their ecstasy use?

From the previous summary of findings, it is apparent that being close forms an important part of MDMA use for couples and that these experiences interweave with their relationship. It can also be seen that closeness is not a monolithic entity which can be captured by a once-and-for-all definition but a dynamic array of practices which couples do differently in different contexts and at different times, as similarly argued by Gabb and Fink (2015). For example, sharing secret desires fostered intimacy, drawing on disclosing models of intimacy (Giddens, 1992) but so too could what was left unsaid (Brownlie, 2014). Equally too, an act of intimacy could be co-produced (Latour, 2005) with objects couples encountered – like the laughter induced by a branch adopted as the couples' 'best friend' for the night – as well as consisting of an intense mutuality of feeling. Intimacy, as well as being a spontaneous occurrence, was also actively managed by participants who became architects of their home's atmosphere (Anderson, 2009) or constructed exclusionary barriers to keep out less intimate others (Stenner, 2013). These practices were presented as mediated by a multitude of intersecting processes, for example, in experiences of emotional attuement couples' shared feelings of happiness and love interwove with physically being 'there' (Brownlie, 2014) for a partner, socio-cultural norms around gender, relationship history and personal disclosure to produce experiences of closeness that were difficult to access in their everyday lives together. Closeness was also shown to be definable in relation to what it excluded. For example, the physical and metaphorical 'dirt' (Douglas, 2001) of everyday spaces and life was ritually cleansed to produced an ordered, controlled experience of intimacy. Hence, it is suggested these findings can be situated within a modern psychosocial understanding of a process-relational ontology (Brown & Stenner, 2009; Brown & Reavey, 2015; Brown, 2012; Stenner, 2008), where nothing 'can be abstracted from

its broader scheme of relationality and process' (Brown & Stenner, 2009, p37). The experience of closeness on MDMA cannot be cut out or 'abstracted' from the relations within which they are embedded, like the relationship of MDMA experiences to: the excluded third (Serres, 1980/1982 cited in Brown & Stenner, 2009; Stenner, 2013), social connections (Beck & Rosenbaum, 1994; Hunt, Evan & Kares, 2007; Lynch & Badger, 2006; Foster & Spencer, 2013) or the space of use (Duff, 2008; Farrugia, 2015). Neither can practices of closeness on MDMA be considered apart from their process, the history of situated and specific encounters which give rise to them, such as past intimate practices of relating within a couple or the ritualised process of preparation (Douglas, 2001; Holloway, 2003). Rather, experiencing intimacy on MDMA, and indeed intimacy more broadly, is always the product of multiple, intersecting relationships, such as the biological, the psychic and the social and has atomic foundations which are in a continual process of renewal (Brown & Stenner, 2009).

To recap, space has been conceived of as dynamic and relationally produced; borrowing from Lewin's (1936) topological understanding of space (Brown & Reavey, 2015). Topology treats the *relationship* between any two points as significant, rather than the measurable distance between them. This relationship is an intensive connection – intensive properties are that which cannot be divided, such as processes of perception, emotion and memory – in contrast to extensive properties, that which *extend* – measurable, physical dimensions, which can be easily divided (DeLanda, 2005). This concept is called 'life-space' and is an unfolding process, produced through these relationships, rather than a static 'container' of life events as in the traditional understanding of space (Massey, 1994). The particular intensive properties of drug use spaces have been argued as crucial to the pleasures experienced (Duff, 2008); this was particularly noted with regard to the 'intensely energetic and uplifting' nightlife spaces. This argument was continued here through the emphasis on how objects could, in combination with sporadic, journeying movement, produce a playful subjectivity. Again, it was not extensive properties of space (being both inside and outside, urban and suburban) that seemed significant but the intensive connections couples formed with the objects they encountered. A lack of movement in close quarters e.g. a bath or small stack of cushions, was also

argued to produce a 'merged' subjectivity, an experience of oneness. Farrugia (2015) found the containment of a small garage or bathtub could also be the setting for deeper experiences of intimacy for young men but for couples in this study such settings went beyond this: producing a total communion of mind and body. In line with Duff (2008) and Farrugia (2015), it is suggested that the intensive qualities of spaces, such as the otherworldly feeling of a dimly lit bathtub or adventurous serendipity of urban sprawl, are crucial to the pleasures experienced on drug use and that close attention must be paid to the objects and other material organisations of settings. The concept of 'affective atmospheres' (Anderson, 2009) is also suggested as a useful adjunct in detailing 'unique "intensive" properties' (Duff, 2008, p388) and elucidating the way in which an intensive quality arises from yet is not reducible to the human and non-human bodies which constitute it.

Furthermore, the private spaces of home are argued to be distinct in this work in terms of the possibilities for active engagement on behalf of participants: they could be cleaned, decorated and arranged in a ritualistic fashion (Douglas, 2001). In this way, participants created certain atmospheres which were argued to enhance the intimacies experienced therein: a cosy, carnival atmosphere to celebrate their relationship (Eva and Lars), a clean and ordered environment, closed off from the rest of the world where partners could focus only on each other (Carrie) and an emotionally sanitised space for a first-time user (Ken). In this way, the specialness of MDMA experiences can be seen as manifested spatially and, through these material organisations, participants can be seen as actively engaged with shaping their drug experience; not only to reduce harm but to maximise the pleasures and intimacies experienced therein.

Regarding the second research question, the connection between MDMA use and couples' relationships was not straightforward. To reiterate, this thesis views relationships as materialised through everyday practices of relating, which are themselves shaped by cultural and material constraints (Gabb & Fink, 2015). This conceptualisation has been argued to align itself with a process ontology where existence is realised through a continual activity of *becoming* (Brown & Stenner, 2009), rather than fundamentally comprised of permanent, stable substances. In other words, a relationship is an ongoing process, rather than a unitary object with

fixed attributes. Certainly, a fixed essence was not reflected by the oscillating remarks couples made about MDMA use in connection with their relationship: from affirming they would still be together without the drug to questioning whether they would; from insisting their relationship would be the same to deciding it would be quite different. Ultimately, many felt taking MDMA had made a difference, brought them closer in some way, but were also quick to point out they didn't *need* it, perhaps in order to maintain a 'positive' impression of their relationship (Dryden, 1998). Intimacy has been defined in this work as 'the quality of close connection between people and the process of building this quality' (Jamieson, 2012, p1.1); the process comprising of the things people do, their 'practices' of intimacy (Gabb & Fink, 2015), which 'enable, generate and sustain' a subjective sense of special closeness (Jamieson, 2012, p1.2) e.g. spending time together, sharing secrets, making a cup of tea. This means that intimacy is 'done' and 'felt' instead of something a relationship either 'has' or 'does not have' (Smart, 2007). In their largescale study of long-lasting couples relationships, Gabb and Fink (2015) identified communication as one of four primary strands of how couples related to each other, encompassing multiple elements under this rubric such as: talking and listening, emotional closeness, a deep knowing, arguments and humour. It is here argued that being on MDMA with your partner can facilitate these kinds of communicative practices and, therefore, 'generate and sustain' closeness within couple relationships. For example, humour was encouraged by the ludic mentality of MDMA in combination with the objects encountered moving through spaces. However, mainly it was the emotional safe haven MDMA could provide which became a communicative cornerstone. Emotional closeness was fostered as, on one side, there was an ability to share in and respond to a partner's emotional experience and on the other, a greater clarity about one's own emotional experience and ability to express it. This was contextualised within gendered patterns of relating, where women are more involved with the emotional dimension of life (Dryden, 1998). This didn't often translate to a different relating style outside of MDMA space, but did give partners experiences of feeling understood on a deep level and, for many, offered '*a point to reflect back on [to] work as a reminder to be like that*' (Emily). Beyond this, the protection the bubble offered from negative affect

and judgement forestalled or resolved arguments and made talking and listening to each other easier, particularly on difficult topics. Revealing something on MDMA could break the taboo of speaking about it again or air an issue couples felt needed to be aired.

Indeed, the total of couples' experiences of talking and listening on MDMA could be argued to construct everyday life as constraining disclosure in certain ways. The worry, fear, shame and judgement felt in everyday practices of relating seemed to inhibit difficult conversations couples felt they needed to have about a variety of issues including infidelity, non-monogamy and sexual fantasies. Gabb and Fink (2015) consistently emphasise the importance of paying attention to everyday relating practices and detail talking with and listening to a partner as one of the myriad practices long-term couples engage in which sustains their relationship. These mutual exchanges were presented as one of the few places where a partner felt their voice was heard and could freely express how they felt and what they thought (Gabb & Fink, 2015). Yet, this everyday space, perhaps largely consumed with recounting details and events of that day, is portrayed by the couples in this study as having certain limits, in particular very emotive or relationally difficult topics. However, the expansive, affective space of MDMA redefines these parameters. Within the bubble, significant disclosures and conversations are made and a new way of relating, very much outside of the everyday, is drawn on; pointing attention to how out-of-the-ordinary contexts might be able to promote and transform our capacity for certain practices of intimacy.

More broadly, MDMA experiences are also claimed to become part of the special pleasures which build and sustain couple relationships, another thing '*[they've] done together*' (Abby). There are less studies focussed on relational practices which can help 'actually *produce*…joy' (Brown, 2009, p173)(emphasis in original) – the focus in research being more on relationship breakdown than maintenance (Gabb & Fink, 2015) – but the playfulness, laughter and embodied pleasures of MDMA showcase one such avenue. Indeed, these experiences are argued to become part of exclusive couples' space just 'for us' (Finn, 2012) in the same way a '*really amazing, once-in-a-lifetime holiday*' (Abby) or a '*special song or restaurant*' (Ken) might. In particular, MDMA use is argued to form part of a

spectrum of relationship 'work' practices which sustain the emotional intensity of the couple connection. Taking MDMA together functioned as a kind of date night where couples could be with each other apart from the rhythms and demands of everyday life, to get '*closer connected*' (Karl), to '*love [their partner] even more*' (Lars) or to remember how they feel for each other without the work day '*getting in the way*' of that process (Ken). Participants enacted spatial-temporal boundaries to construct MDMA use as 'special' and segment its emotional, physical and playful pleasures from everyday life and, to varying degrees, from others (Stenner, 2013).

The focus of this research has been on how MDMA might enhance intimate relationships due to the absence of this from previous research. However, there were also ways in which MDMA use acted to constrain relationships. There was a certain amount of ambivalence regarding the personal cost of some disclosures, the emotional exhaustion and exposure it took, and its necessity in cementing bonds. In addition, it was speculated whether the more intimate and sensual character (Zemishlany, Aizenberg & Weizman, 2001) of MDMA experiences might have had a hand in facilitating an experience of non-monogamy and the apparently jealous feelings which followed. The ludic space of MDMA was also shown to contribute to the disruption of other relationships in the couples' lives. Ostensibly this seems outside of the scope of their relationship, but friends and family have been found to be a vital support for couples (Gabb & Fink, 2015), so a diffusion of these connections might have an indirect impact. In addition, broader, less desirable effects of MDMA were spoken of (e.g. fatigue in the days after use, anxiety during the come-up) but these were not presented as relational in nature.


## 7.2 Implications for drug theory and practice

The starting point of this thesis was the drugs literature, rather than intimacy on an everyday level, and hence will be the focus here when reflecting on the implications of these findings. In order to consider the findings' wider repercussions, it is necessary to return to how research has conceptualised drug use. As outlined in Chapter One, there have been two main forces in drugs research: epidemiological

and cultural studies (Hunt, Moloney & Evans, 2009), which still operates as a useful heuristic despite more recent research disturbing the clarity of this distinction (e.g. Baggott et al., 2016; Wardle & de Wit, 2014; Wardle, Kirkpatrick & de Wit, 2014). The epidemiological model depicts drug use as a separate, individuated phenomenon whose 'risk' is determined largely by pharmacology (Foster & Spencer, 2013). This means that drug use is understood as largely isolated from the rest of life – personal histories, relationships, spaces, feelings and pleasures – and promoted as a peculiar category of experience, manifesting varying degrees of harm. In contrast, the cultural studies approach emphasises agency, pleasure and context in relation to drug use (Hunt, Moloney & Evans, 2009). As Duff (2008) argues:

> participants described drug related pleasures that obtained primarily in the *range of activities and practices that the consumption of these drugs facilitated*. Participants here insisted that the consumption of different drugs in different contexts transforms individual behaviour and individual practices (p386)

The findings of this thesis suggest two further caveats. Firstly, the consumption of MDMA within different contexts also transforms *relational* behaviour and *relational* practices, and indeed, this is an enduring part of the drug's appeal. Such relational practices of closeness involved: becoming more playful, revealing past transgressions, opening up new conversations (e.g. sexual fantasies/non-monogamy), expressing affection verbally and physically and feeling romantic love at a more intense frequency. These practices were both continuous with everyday life, though enhanced and intensified (e.g. a deepened feeling of love, feeling safe to disclose with a partner), and entirely new (e.g. merging together as 'one', knowing you are feeling exactly the same thing). Thus, MDMA is suggested as a facilitative context for a range of relational practices, which weave into the unfolding of couples' intimacy. Indeed, relational practices also seem to have an impact on how much people use the drug as couples tied their MDMA use to certain time frames and significant, infrequent events in their lives. Secondly, practices, whether relational or 'individual', cannot be understood apart from their broader context. Previous

research broadly aligned with the cultural studies approach have highlighted the role of local spatial contexts (Duff, 2005, 2008), gendered dynamics such as the importance of intimacy for men (Farrugia, 2015) and freedom from the male gaze for women (Hinchliff, 2001), socio-economic factors (Foster & Spencer, 2013), a motivation to control use (Bahora, Sterk & Elifson, 2009), the values of late capitalist consumerist society (Olsen, 2009) and the desire for personal growth (Beck & Rosenbaum, 1994) in understanding and appreciating the meaning of drug use. This thesis adds to the previous body of work through arguing that people's romantic relationships (and their particular relationship histories) situate the meaning, motivation and benefit of their MDMA use. For example, how the acceptance of painful memories by someone you love gives the telling its significance and the way in which a traditionally gendered emotional division in a relationship could ground the value of men becoming emotionally attuned to their female partners. Therefore, even without intentional relationship use, an individual's intimate relationship might contextualise and explain some of the meaning around their use of MDMA.

If MDMA use facilitates a range of intimate practices and if these are, in turn, contextualised by personal and relational histories, then the complexity of the lived experience of drug use must be acknowledged (Duff, 2008). Certainly, this does not entail a shift to seeing MDMA use as some kind of 'magic bullet' for intimacy, but as one thread in an ongoing relational process where couples make and re-make their intimacy together (Gabb & Fink, 2015). Moreover, the findings show how MDMA experiences can, and are, being managed by couples: spatial-temporal boundaries segment drug use from everyday life and unwelcome others are excluded from this emotionally potent space, minimising any fallout (though, of course, these boundaries are not absolute). Through taking these steps, participants show an awareness of the risks *and* pleasures of MDMA use and a willingness to self-regulate, which has been reported but not necessarily always emphasised by contemporary drugs research.

Of course, a reconsideration of MDMA use is more than simply a theoretical exercise; it has implications for drug policy and practice. The current UK Government policy towards drugs summarises the 'issue' of drug use on the gov.uk website as follows:

Between 2011 and 2012, an estimated 8.9% of adults used an illegal drug. For young people aged between 16 and 24, the figure was 19.3%. Although this is the lowest level of drug use since we started collecting figures in 1996, drug misuse continues to have a negative effect on the health, wellbeing and quality of life of too many people ("2010 to 2015 government policy", 2015).

Instead of imposing an idea of drug use as inherently risky, 'drug *mis*use' (own emphasis) which has a 'negative effect' on 'wellbeing' and 'quality of life', it is suggested that drug policy should develop a more nuanced, processual view of drug use: as emerging from the patterns of activity and feeling people experience on them (Cromby, 2017). If we look at the patterns of activity that have been identified alongside MDMA in this work, we can see that taking MDMA can form part of relating practices which forge and fortify a relationship, while not always described as being easy or sustainable, these practices crucially can be a part of the unfolding of a couple's relationship. The credibility of harm reduction initiatives which do not engage with users' understanding of risk and pleasure has already been cast into doubt (Foster & Spencer, 2013). The UK Government also emphasises the provision of 'accurate information on drugs and alcohol' (Department of Health and the Home Office, 2015). It is here specifically argued that this might entail information of more 'messy' forms of emotional harm, which have hitherto been absent from harm reduction information and was raised in this research e.g. being too emotionally (and sexually) intimate with someone other than your partner, regretting the things you might reveal. Taking seriously the recommendation of Foster and Spencer (2013) that harm reduction initiatives use the terms of drug users in order to better resonate with them, it is suggested that use might be regulated through harnessing users' desires to preserve its 'specialness', which many participants emphasised as important to them. As well as encouraging couples to be explicit with one another about their boundaries around MDMA use – who they want to take MDMA with them and why – which has been described as instrumental in the navigation of other practices such as non-monogamies (Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Easton & Hardy, 2011; Taormino, 2008).

**7.3 Validity and reflexivity**

One of the main criticisms levelled at qualitative research is that 'anything goes' (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It is implied that since qualitative research is not under the same strictures as quantitative research, it might be compared to the wild west: an unordered domain where researchers can perform, and get away with performing, studies in any way they want. This careless chaos is indeed a sobering image. However, there have been multiple efforts to conceive guidelines for thinking about validity in qualitative research: what makes 'good' or 'better' qualitative research (e.g. Elliott, Fischer & Rennie, 1999; Parker, 2004; Seale, 1999; Silverman, 2000; Yardley, 2000). While some scholars tacitly assume that qualitative research can be evaluated using the same ideas as quantitative research (for example, with measures ensuring inter-rater reliability e.g. Belser, 2016), most within the field acknowledge the need for separate evaluative criteria, though there might also be room for overlap (e.g. Elliott et al., 1999). This is largely justified due to the different epistemological paradigm of qualitative research which views knowledge as situated and contextual (Parker, 2004). This was certainly an underlying assumption of this work. However, as stated in Chapter Three, this argument is often extended to mean that all knowledge is 'subjective' and discursively constructed (Nightingale & Cromby, 2002): an argument not endorsed by the process-relational perspective informing this thesis. Rather, discourse is viewed as one strand among many, interconnected processes which produce experience, including the material world (Brown & Stenner, 2009; Stenner, 2008).

For this work, the guidelines provided by Elliott et al. (1999) were broadly adhered to due to their applicability (across methods and theoretical investments) and accessibility (through their provision of clear examples). Their seven guidelines can be grouped into three areas: reflexivity, transparency and coherence. The analysis produced should be coherent so that it 'fits together to form a data-based story' (Elliott et al., 1999, p223) – by seeking the opinion of another researcher, comparing it to another piece of qualitative research and/or asking if the analysis

resonates with people who have had similar experiences. The involvement of the supervisory team, two senior researchers, in the preliminary discussions and analysis of the data was considered to fulfill this requirement. Their academic experience allowed them to point out inconsistent and fragmented aspects, which were impeding the overall flow and 'fit' of the analysis. Being transparent about who your participants were (e.g. including demographic information such as gender), what kind of research question you were answering and how the data extracts fit into the story you are telling was another key aspect to validity. To this end, demographic information was included when discussing methodology in Chapter Three. Transparency about the kind of empirical project embarked upon is argued to be showcased through the clear elucidation of research questions in Chapter One and their answering in this chapter. In addition, the research was carefully situated in terms of existing academic literature, theoretical orientation and methodological decisions made in the opening chapters. Finally, what Elliott et al. (1999) refer to as 'owning one's own perspective' (p221), more commonly known as reflexivity, is consistently highlighted as a cornerstone of 'good' qualitative research (Parker, 2004; Yardley, 2000; Harré, 2004). For a qualitative researcher, this involves an awareness of one's own theoretical and personal perspectives on a subject matter as well as how these develop through the research process and the role they play in the findings produced (Elliott et al., 1999). Of course, an openness to new understandings and differing perspectives of participants' is also essential. It is worth noting too how scholars emphasise the flexibility of these guidelines, albeit in different terms, 'not rigid' but 'explicit' (Elliott et al., 1999) and 'closed enough to guide evaluation and open enough to enable transformation of assumptions' (Parker, 2004). My engagement with validity and reflexivity will be categorised here in two parts: further detail about who the participants were and what this means for the scope of the findings and the influence of my own assumptions and experiences, as primary researcher, upon the data 'story' told (Mays & Pope, 2000).


**7.3.1 Situating the sample**

As outlined in Chapter Three, two studies were conducted, involving semi-structured couple interviews and written diaries with optional diary interviews. Couple interviews were chosen due to the richness of the data they could provide: a glimpse of couples' dynamics in practice, where partners could query, disagree, affirm and interrupt each other (Bjørnholt & Farstad, 2012; Duncombe & Marsden, 1996). Written diaries were used to capture everyday minutiae around taking MDMA with a partner that might be glossed over or forgotten, and as an outlet for more sensitive topics, like sex (Kenten, 2010). These methodological choices necessitated the study criterion of having taken MDMA five times or more with a *current* partner. While qualitative research is not concerned with sample representativeness in the same manner as quantitative research, it does seek to situate the sample and provide details on information about the participants that might help define the scope of findings' generalisability (Elliott et al., 1999). Indeed, people still in a relationship with a partner might have greater reason to present their relationship, and the things they've done together, in a positive light. While anecdotes from people who did not qualify for participation in the research gave similar presentations of MDMA use with past partners (e.g. 'We would just talk, bond, and say how we *really* feel about things…Regardless, we just broke up last month. We hadn't taken ecstasy for about 7 months and things just stopped working out.'), Vervaeke and Korf (2009) found their respondents divided over the influence of MDMA on intimate relationships – with all those convinced this influence was positive currently in a steady relationship and those who described both positive and negative effects largely not in a relationship (7 out of 10 respondents). These results suggest that relationship status could be key in shaping results produced although the limited data available makes it hard to draw a more substantial conclusion, making it of interest for future work, as discussed at the end of this chapter.

The participant sample were diverse in terms of age (23-62), gender (13 women and 14 men) and geographic location (UK, USA and the EU) but were alike in terms of their sexual orientation, being exclusively heterosexual. Again, the fact that all participants were heterosexual could be seen to provide a relevant contextualisation of some of the findings produced. The data coded for the emotional attunement theme in Chapter Four was understood, due to the literature

around emotions, relationships and gender, as hinging on gender. Namely, that women felt more able to express their emotions in everyday life than men, a well-documented phenomena (Strazdins & Broom, 2004), and were often more empathetic (Mestre, Samper, Frías & Tur, 2009). However, same-sex relationships have been found to be more egalitarian – in terms of both the division of household labour and the responsibilities of relationship maintenance – than heterosexual relationships (Connolly, 2005; Gottman, 2011; Knudson-Martin & Mahoney, 2009; Solomon, Rothblum & Balsam, 2005) and, furthermore, more intentional about facilitating emotional attunement with one another (Jonathan, 2009). It is suggested then that these findings may not be applicable to same-sex couples who take MDMA together: an important consideration since those who self-identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual are at least three times as likely to take ecstasy than heterosexual individuals (Home Office, 2016; Boyd, McCabe & d'Arcy, 2003). A sample which included LGBT couples therefore might have showcased different ways the emotional dynamic of MDMA altered their relating practices.

Although class and ethnicity were not explicitly recorded, from the available information e.g. cultural background/profession/face-to-face interviews, it can be reasonably inferred that the majority of participants in the first study were middle-class and white. Intersectional theory maintains that multiple social categories jointly influence experience, often summarised as *race-class-gender*, and this applies to both disadvantaged and privileged groups (Cole, 2009). Since psychological research has been argued to overrepresent those who are white and middle-class (Reid, 1993), this might also be a concern for this sample. Yet, the predominantly white sample reflects the ethnicity of MDMA users as a whole: 95% of people who take ecstasy in the UK are white (Home Office, 2016; Office for National Statistics, 2011). Similarly, ecstasy users are more likely to be middle-class, there is approximately 1.64 times the number of middle-class people who use ecstasy than their working class counterparts (Home Office, 2016; Caci, 2010). Yet, there is still a class gap in terms of MDMA users nationwide and the current sample. The more middle-class nature of the sample may well have increased participants' access to resources, for example the ability to rent private homes within which to take MDMA and live in less surveilled neighbourhoods, as discussed in Chapter Five, as well as

music events and festivals, which were described by many. Without access to these environments, keeping in mind the co-constitution of experience with spaces and objects (Brown & Stenner, 2009; Latour, 2005; Serres, 1995), couples' experiences of taking MDMA together might have been very different.

Recruitment for the project was mainly conducted online, a strategy already called into question in Chapter Three. It was suggested that people using websites relating to drug use might be more aware of both the effects of MDMA and steps to reduce harm, perhaps crucially distinguishing their experiences from MDMA users as a whole. Indeed, two of the online sources, rollsafe.org and bluelight.org, present themselves as a 'MDMA harm reduction guide' and 'online harm-reduction community' respectively, and 10 out of the 28 participants were recruited here. Furthermore, almost all of the diary participants highlighted the steps they took to minimise harm, such as spacing apart their use (e.g. maintaining gaps of one month or more), and they were recruited almost entirely from the harm reduction site rollsafe.org. There are, however, two points to keep in mind when 'judging the range of persons and situations to which the findings might be relevant' (Elliott et al., 1999, p221). Firstly, there were eight participants who didn't appear to employ extensive harm reduction practices and several more who were not explicit about their intent to reduce harm, indicating some variety in the sample. They may have engaged in strategies on MDMA to mitigate harm such as drinking water and 'cooling down' but these were not specifically enquired after. Furthermore, there seems to be a reasonable prevalence of harm reduction practices within the ecstasy-using community: all the participants in Allott and Redman's (2006) study employed some kind of harm reduction practice: 95% drinking water on the drug, 70% curtailing their use and 53% taking vitamins or other natural products (often referred to as pre- and post-loading). Other studies also report a broad range of harm-reducing strategies of a largely preventative (e.g. spacing out use) and behavioural (e.g. taking breaks while on MDMA) nature (Panagopoulos & Ricciardelli, 2005; Gamble & George, 1997; Hansen, Maycock & Lower, 2001; Moore, 1993; Shewan, Dalgarno & Reith, 2000). However, there is limited data available on the prevalence on harm reduction practices and samples are not intended to be representative of the general population or the drug-using community. Correspondingly, the lack of representative

data makes it difficult to properly situate this thesis' sample, although from the studies so far conducted it appears like their awareness of how to mitigate harm is not disproportionate with other users who take part in psychological research.

**7.3.2 Reflecting on my own assumptions and experiences**

Guiding the research was an assumption that closeness with a romantic parter was desirable and that taking MDMA as a couple might enable closeness. The idea of MDMA use as facilitative of social bonds was built up through my own conversations with people who used MDMA as well as previous academic (particularly, Beck & Rosenbaum, 1994; Duff, 2008; Greer & Tolbert, 1986; Hinchliff, 2001) and non-academic reading, 'The rest of the night was glorious. I grew extremely close to [my boyfriend], and we are still together to this day' from *E: The Incredibly Strange History of Ecstasy* (Pilcher, 2008, p37). Particularly after transcribing and coding the first couple interview, I became aware of the lack of attention paid to exploring other threads of MDMA use:

> *Kara: like, erm…, like we'd argue – if we'd go clubbing the night, the week.. If we'd go clubbing that week, the week after we'd definitely have an argument, wouldn't we?  About something…he'd only have to say something slightly and I'd get really upset about it, we'd have a row, wouldn't we?*
> *Liam: hmm*
> *Kara: but I do think though like cos I know you were saying about this whole like forgetting stuff, I think that it's difficult to take out the MDMA and the alcohol because we were heavy drinkers, weren't we at the time? (Couple interview: Kara & Liam)*

For Kara and Liam, '*go[ing] clubbing*' was intertwined with ecstasy use. The link Kara draws between this activity and '*definitely hav[ing] an argument'* the week after opens up a less rosy vista of ecstasy and closeness. She mitigates this with their alcohol consumption as '*heavy drinkers*' and I do not probe further, allowing the

conversation to tail off. In fact, studies have pointed to polydrug use as a significant factor in the long-term effects of ecstasy use (Soar, Parrott & Turner, 2009). When transcribing and coding this initial interview, I became aware of other instances where I did not pursue more ambiguous comments on closeness and MDMA, prepped as I was with assumptions of relational harmony, rather than dischord. As a result, questions were added to the interview schedule for the first study intended to bring out these aspects (e.g. 'tell me about any times you felt distant from each other while on MDMA?'; 'describe to me an MDMA experience that was difficult for you in some way') and within the second, diary study (e.g. 'what parts of the experience are you not looking forward to?). My experiences and investments could also be seen to shape the research findings in almost the inverse direction: a failure to notice 'responsible' drug use. I have been part of a harm reduction organisation and, through supervisory discussion, realised my familiarity with the practices involved was dulling the significance I accorded them in the analytical process. They had become unremarkable to me and, as a consequence, I initially overlooked their role in the boundary-making processes described by participants, which would eventually form the basis of Chapter Six. This scenario reinforces the importance of performing a 'credibility check' (Elliott et al., 1999, p222) on the data story.

Returning to my hesitancy around probing Kara and Liam further, it is clear to me from my research journal that this reluctance was complicated by my worries around power dynamics within the interview context. Aware of the implicit power exercised by the researcher, who occupies a position of relative authority and control since they are asking the questions and directing the 'investigation' (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2005; Wilkinson, 1998), I sought to rebalance the scales. This was done by following the participants' lead in what they wanted to talk about and ensuring their comfort by not asking too many 'difficult' questions. However, this approach seemed to have the opposite effect. Kara and Liam attempts to ask for clarification throughout the interview and highlighting their concerns over the meaningfulness of their participation at the end of the interview (e.g. '*Cos I was saying "oh, like, I don't know what we need to say or what we need to like bring or like, what you, what would be most benefical to you I guess. That was what I was most mindful of*'') tell a different story. Indeed, my own discomfort at not being able

to steer the interview enough towards *romantic* relationships and MDMA use would likely also have been perceptible by them, constricting the interactional dynamic. As the interviewing process progressed, it became clear that taking more of a lead increased participants' comfort levels and that when I was more open to the idea that couples might be ok with presenting a non-perfect image of their relationship, many spoke openly about the difficulties they had experienced together.

Linking up with my initial reluctance to disquiet participants by asking them hard questions was a reticence on my part to ask about or discuss sex in the couple interviews. Practically, this meant certain avenues were left unexplored. Mark and Jenny, the second couple I interviewed, spoke about non-monogamy but this was quickly steered away from due to my own impression that it was 'couples' business'. Similarly, Joe and Rachel spoke about the deep entanglement of sex and MDMA ('*[sex was a] huge, massive part of…our taking E together*' (Rachel)) but, again, this was not delved into too deeply. This is not to say that sex should be *made* part of the conversation but that I was letting my own comfort levels, rather than those of my participants', become the determining factor. In fact, interviewing couples together has been argued to hold an ethical advantage over interviewing partners alone. If both members of a couple are present, consent can be sought in the moment over whether a disclosure can be made to the researcher (Bjørnholt & Farstad, 2012). This was the case with Mark and Jenny, as the following exchange shows:

> *Mark: Yeah, are you looking for details? (he laughs)*
>
> *Interviewer: I mean, whatever detail you feel comfortable in sharing, really*
>
> *Mark: [says something to Jenny]*
>
> *Jenny: oh, if you want to share, that's fine*
>
> *Mark: Yeah. I mean we've been, we've been struggling with, now that we've been in a relationship for seven years, just somewhat struggling with the concept of monogamy (Couple interview: Mark & Jenny)*

As a result of these reflections, and similar comments from my supervisors, I engaged more when sexuality came up in interviews. For example, my clarification, 'when you say like fantasies do you mean like sexual fantasies or other things?',

prompted a longer discussion about how '*sex was one of the things we really worked on MDMA*' (Helena). In addition, a specific question was included in the second study, in the written diaries: 'were there any differences in your sexual relationship with your partner?'

Transcribing and analysing the couple interviews from the first study also made me aware of the extent to which self-disclosure and communication foregrounded my understanding of intimacy. For example:

> *Kara: yeah, as I say, like me and Beth used to spend the Saturday night together, didn't we? We'd have a curry and then we'd just sit at hers and we just wouldn't really talk that much, we'd just like sit close to each other*
> *Interviewer: yeah*
> *Kara: maybe hold each other's hands, I don't know-*
> *Interviewer: sorry, what would you do then during the night that you were together?*
> *Kara: listen to music really. Just have music on and sit there and just be in the moment together, I guess (Couple interview: Kara & Liam)*

Kara's description of not '*really talk[ing] that much*' and '*just…sit[ting]*' with her friend are met with my confusion and unfair incredulity, '*sorry, what would you do then during the night that you were together?*' An absence of talk being regarded as not enough to occupy a whole night's worth of ecstasy use. Similarly, my understanding of intimacy as built through talk can be seen as shaping the follow-up prompts I used in couple interviews; after Emily recounts sitting with her partner on MDMA, I ask, '*and what happens when you're, when you're sat there: are you kind of talking while this is going on or are you just, what's, what's happening?*' Despite attempting to end the question on a more neutral keel, '*just…what's happening?*', my initial assumption, '*are you kind of talking*' reveals my own, culturally normative ideas around intimacy. Hence, while the initial questions used were open-ended (e.g. 'can you tell me about this experience?'; 'tell me about a point in the (last) experience where you felt (particularly) close to each other?'), further, unscripted prompts were shaped by my own concept of closeness e.g. as verbally produced and

might have subtly revealed to participants how I thought they 'should' be doing closeness. Over the course of the research process, I came across and specifically sought out alternative views, particularly from Jamieson (1998), Brownlie (2014) and Gabb and Fink (2015). These readings were instrumental in reformulating my idea of intimacy and highlighting to me the subtle ways in which disclosure and communication, which more closely matched my own presumptions, were capturing my attention not only in interviews but also in analysis of the data. For example, the emotional attunement theme in Chapter Four was initially organised around the verbal communication of emotion but, after careful re-reading of the data, other aspects of their emotional experience came to the forefront, such as the significance of simply 'being there' physically and having a strong sense of a mutual, emotional experience without this always being grounded in talk (Brownlie, 2014). Indeed, my gender and personal experiences of sometimes not being emotionally 'heard' in hetrosexual relationships may also have influenced the decision to include this as a main theme. At the beginning of the PhD, I also had strong ideas about experience as an intrapsychic, cognitive phenomenon played out solely 'in the head'. Through readings (particularly Brown & Reavey, 2015; Brown & Stenner, 2009) and discussions, my two supervisors were crucial to opening up my understanding of experience as not confined to the head but materially mediated: composed of objects, spaces and our own embodied interactions. This resulted in the findings of Chapter Five around spatially distributed subjectivity, such as the application of the diffuse concept of an 'affective atmosphere' (Anderson, 2009; Fuchs, 2013), which emerges from both human and non-human bodies in a non-deterministic manner.

**7.4 Future research and concluding remarks**

It has been argued in this thesis that couples engage in and value practices of intimacy while on MDMA together, and these practices intertwine with the continually unfolding process (Brown & Stenner, 2009) of their relationship. The methods employed sought to explore couple dynamics in practice (couple interviews) and everyday minutiae around the time of taking MDMA with a partner

(written diaries). Both approaches performed their intended role: the semi-structured interviews provided a glimpse of how partners related to each other (within and outside of MDMA experiences) and how this changed over time, while the diaries showcased the details of everyday living pertinent to and shaped by MDMA use. However, a consequence of this methodological approach was that criteria for inclusion was limited to people currently in a relationship. Joint interviews are, of course, only viable when couples are still together and diaries sought to describe ongoing experience of taking MDMA with a partner. In future research studies, it would be helpful to attain a better understanding of the role of MDMA use in past relationships: how does the current status of a relationship influence participants' reflections on their drug use together? How do (remembered) practices of closeness on MDMA vary within and across relationships which have since been dissolved compared to those still ongoing? These results would extend and contextualise the findings of this thesis further, adding another layer to our understanding of how MDMA use is embedded within relationships, past and present, and how relationships can be (re)formed through the things people do, feel and say on drugs.

Throughout the thesis, the relational nature of human experience has been consistently emphasised (Brown & Stenner, 2009; Whitehead, 1926/1985, 1927–1928/1985). Experiences of intimacy and drug use have been argued to be the product of multiple intersecting processes, such as space, emotion and discourse, which are continually unfolding. Considering this, another fruitful direction for future research might be a broader examination of the social relationships within which drug use is embedded. Many participants spoke of other relationships entangled with the experiences and repercussions of taking drugs: of friends, friends of friends and family. This is also a recurrent theme in ecstasy research generally, with many emphasising bonding with others on the drug as key to the pleasures experienced (Beck & Rosenbaum, 1994; Duff, 2008; Farrugia, 2015; Foster & Spencer, 2013; Hinchliff, 2001). In particular, it might be useful to examine how reflections on MDMA can ripple out into wider social networks, whether they are part of the drug experience or not. For example, how realisations on MDMA might precipitate a (temporary or more permanent) shift in behaviour towards someone. This could be

explored through a similar two-part style of data collection, where interviews provide an overview and diaries produce day-to-day details, would be recommended. As part of the interview process, it is suggested the use of relational maps (Bagnoli, 2009; Josselson, 1996; Roseneil, 2006), a visual elicitation technique, could be an appropriate methodological choice. Visual methods used in this thesis, relationship timelines (see Iantaffi, 2011) and object selection (Del Busso, 2009; Majumdar, 2011) proved helpful in evoking more 'concrete experiences' (Silver & Reavey, 2010) and, perhaps, less rehearsed accounts. Similarly, a relational map, where participants are asked to draw themselves and the important people in their lives (Bagnoli, 2009), could be particularly evocative (Prosser & Loxley, 2008) and access parts of experiences that are hard to put into words (Gauntlett, 2007). They also incorporate spatial (by participants judging relative distance between themselves and the people in their lives) and visual (through drawing) modalities that are not often engaged with in traditional interview methods but have been argued to more keenly reflect the multi-modal nature of our experience (Reavey, 2011).

Finally, I would like to return to the drugs literature which this research has been grounded in, to make explicit how this work might add to and move these ideas on. The findings of this thesis support thinking about drug experiences as continuous with and contextualised by life experiences, while simultaneously providing moments of extension and enrichment rarely experienced in the everyday. For example, MDMA was argued to be viewed as a kind of 'date night', forming part of the spectrum of relationship work practices a couple might engage in (Gabb & Fink, 2015) as well as facilitating moments of total emotional connection and mutual feeling, beyond what they experience together day-to-day. While the idea of drug experiences as part of life does not sound revelatory, it could be argued to feel out of place alongside decades of research performed within the dominant, epidemiological model (Moore, 2008; Rhodes, Stimson, Moore & Bourgois, 2010). This model has been described as cordoning off drug use as a peculiar, often implicitly moralised, category of experience; unevenly constituted of 'harm' and 'risk' at the expense of any of the pleasures or (the spatially situated, embodied, emotional, discursive) things people do on drugs which motivate their use (Duff,

2008). This epidemiological framework has therefore been argued here to 'abstract' and 'cut out' (Brown & Stenner, 2009, p34) drug experiences from their wider scheme of relationality and process. Other studies have also emphasised the importance of context, which have been mostly of a qualitative nature (Duff, 2008; Foster & Spencer, 2013; Farrugia, 2015; Hinchliff, 2001; Olsen, 2009; Solowij, Hall & Lee, 1992) but also quantitative, particularly more recently (Baggott et al., 2016; Wardle & de Wit, 2014; Wardle, Kirkpatrick & de Wit, 2014). However, the key contribution here is the specific focus on romantic relationships; how what couples did and felt on the drug was woven into the fabric of their relationship. Practices of intimacy were continuous with (e.g. talking and listening to one another, physical connection, lightheartedness), intensified (e.g. talking about particularly meaningful or distressing things, focussed on feeling their love for each other without distraction), and also could diverge from (e.g. 'merging' together or feeling emotionally understood by their partner on a deeper, distinct level) how they related to each other on a day-to-day basis. It is hoped that highlighting couples' diverse experiences of closeness in relation to their MDMA use will continue to open up our understanding of the ways drug experiences intertwine with, and might potentially enrich, our lives.

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# Appendices

**Appendix One: Advert – Study One**

Have you taken MDMA with your partner five times or more? If so, it would be great to hear from you!

I'm completing PhD research at London Southbank University, which is looking at people's experiences of taking ecstasy with their partner and how they feel this has affected their relationship. The study is qualitative and would involve writing/talking about your experiences. It is largely UK-based but there are still parts of the research that could be done if you're living outside of the UK, particularly in the EU.

All contact will be completely confidential. If you are interested or would like to know more, please pm me or email me at: anderk10@lsbu.ac.uk. Thanks!

**Appendix Two: Advert – Study Two**

MDMA: the love drug? A qualitative study

The study will involve a joint interview with both you and your partner and the researcher. It will last between 1.5 - 2 hours. In the interview, you will be asked to talk about particular times you've taken MDMA together.

Requirements:

- 18 years or older
- Taken MDMA with your current partner 5 times or more
- Never received treatment for drug addiction

If you think you might be interested in the study or want to know more details go to:

https://www.callforparticipants.com/study/HPXXQ/mdma-the-love-drug-a-qualitative-study

Can be done in person (UK-based couples) or over Skype.

Thanks!

**Appendix Three: Participant Information Sheet – Study One**


**The Experiences of Couples Who Take MDMA Together**


My name is Katie Anderson and I am doing research for a PhD at London Southbank University, with approval from the University's Research Ethics Committee.


I am interested in talking to people who take MDMA with their parter and how they feel these ecstasy experiences have affected their relationship.  Everything you say will be completely confidential.


Before you decide whether to take part, please read the information below. If you have any questions or would like to discuss any thing that you have read, please feel free to ask me.


**Who can participate in the study?**


This study is open to all couples who have taken MDMA together at least five times and have never received treatment for drug addiction.


**What will the study involve?**


- Being interviewed together with your partner
- It would be great if you and your partner could bring along 4-5 objects or photos to help you remember different times when you've taken MDMA together.  I would look at these in the interview with you but you would keep them at the end and they would not be used for any purpose other than to help you talk about your experiences.
- The interview is likely to last between 1 ½ - 2 hours
- It is completely up to you what you would like to discuss in the interview, you will not have to talk about anything you don't want to and can withdraw your participation from the study at any time.

**Where will the interview be?**

The interview can be carried out where you live, in a private space at London Southbank University premises or another convenient location.  Travel expenses and refreshments will be provided.  Alternatively, the interview can also be carried out over Skype (where only the audio would be recorded).

**How will what I say be kept confidential?**

- Audio recordings will be kept on a private computer which no one else has access to and transcribed into password protected files
- Your name will not be linked to what you say in any way
- Any identifying information (name of a place, for example) will be changed in the interview transcripts
- Only I will listen to the interview recordings and only the project supervisors will have access to the full, altered transcripts

Participants should be aware that there will be limitations in maintaining confidentiality in certain, exceptional circumstances such as serious concern about the risk of significant, physical harm to you or someone else.  In the event of a need to break confidentiality, you will be informed of this, unless the urgency or circumstances of a situation make this untenable.

Breaking confidentiality is a very serious matter and will only be undertaken when someone's safety is at risk.

**How will what I say be used?**

What you tell me will only be used for academic purposes e.g. conferences or publications in journals.

**Do I have to take part?**

Whether or not you take part is entirely your choice. You are free not to participate and may withdraw from the study at any time.

**Questions?**

Please feel free to contact me or my supervisor, Paula Reavey, if you have any questions or concerns.

Yours sincerely,

Katie Anderson

Email: anderk10@lsbu.ac.uk

Tel: 07743163223

Professor Paula Reavey

Email: reaveyp@lsbu.ac.uk

Tel: 020 7815 6177

I look forward to hearing from you!

Katie

**Appendix Four: Participant Information Sheet – Study Two**


**The Experiences of Couples Who Take MDMA Together**


My name is Katie Anderson and I am doing research for a PhD at London Southbank University, with approval from the University's Research Ethics Committee.


I am interested in talking to people who take MDMA with their parter and how they feel these ecstasy experiences have affected their relationship.  Everything you say will be completely confidential.


Before you decide whether to take part, please read the information below. If you have any questions or would like to discuss any thing that you have read, please feel free to ask me.


**Who can participate in the study?**


This research is open to everyone who has taken MDMA with their partner at least once in the past 6 months and on at least five occasions in total.  Neither partner will have received treatment for drug addiction.


**What will the study involve?**

- Writing a digital diary or completing a diary by hand in the days before, on and after an ecstasy experience with your partner. The diary will last one week in total and will hopefully include daily entries
- Deciding whether to take part in an optional interview, in which you will have the opportunity to talk about your diary in more detail with the researcher (this should last between 30-45mins)
- Digitally sending your diary to the researcher before the interview takes place

**How will what I say be kept confidential?**

- Audio recordings will be kept on a private computer which no one else has access to and transcribed into password protected files
- Your name will not be linked to what you say in any way
- Any identifying information (name of a place, for example) will be changed in the interview transcripts
- Only I will listen to the interview recordings and only the project supervisors will have access to the full, altered transcripts

Participants should be aware that there will be limitations in maintaining confidentiality in certain, exceptional circumstances. This would include a serious concern about risk of significant physical harm to a) you b) another person c) a child. In the event of a need to break confidentiality, you will be informed of this, unless the urgency or circumstances of a situation make this untenable. Breaking confidentiality is a serious matter and will only be undertaken when someone's safety is at risk.

**How will what I say be used?**

What you tell me will only be used for academic purposes e.g. conferences or publications in journals. You also have the opportunity to read and review what I write.

**Do I have to take part?**

Whether or not you take part is entirely your choice. You are free not to participate and may withdraw from the study at any time.

**Questions?**

Please feel free to contact me or my supervisor, Paula Reavey, if you have any questions or concerns.

Yours sincerely,

Katie Anderson

Email: anderk10@lsbu.ac.uk

Tel: 07444015162


Professor Paula Reavey

Email: reaveyp@lsbu.ac.uk

Tel: 020 7815 6177

**Appendix Five: Consent form**

*The Experiences of Couples Who Take MDMA Together*

Please tick or cross to consent:

- I have read the information sheet on the research and have been given a copy to keep. I have had the opportunity to discuss any details and ask questions about this information ☐

- The researcher has explained the nature and purpose of the research and I believe that I understand what is being proposed ☐

- I understand that my personal involvement and my particular data from this study will remain strictly confidential. The identity of any third parties I discuss will also be protected. Only the researchers involved in the study, Katie Anderson, Paula Reavey and Zoë Boden (all staff at London Southbank University), will have access to the data

    ☐

- I have been informed about what the data collected will be used for (research purposes)

    ☐

- I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time and to withdraw all or any information I have previously given, without giving a reason. I can also refuse to answer any question at any point

    ☐

- I understand that confidentiality may be broken in exceptional circumstances e.g. serious risk to the safety of myself or someone else

    ☐

- I consent to have the interview audio recorded using a digital recorder and transcribed ☐

- I consent to having anonymised direct quotations from the interviews used in publications ☐

- I hereby fully and freely consent to participate in the study which has been fully explained to me. ☐

Participant's Name: (Block Capitals)         …………………………..

Participant's Name: Signature         ………………………..  Date: …………………….

As the Researcher responsible for this study I confirm that I have explained to the participant named above the nature and purpose of the research to be undertaken.

Researcher's Name:    ………………………..

Researcher's Signature: ………………………..  Date: …………………….

If you are at all concerned about any aspect of this research study please contact:

*Main Researcher*

Katie Anderson

Tel: 07444015162

Email: anderk10@lsbu.ac.uk

*First Project Supervisor*

Professor Paula Reavey

Tel: 020 7815 6177

Email: reaveyp@lsbu.ac.uk

*Second Project Supervisor*

Dr Zoë Boden

Tel: 020 7815 5814

Email: bodenz@lsbu.ac.uk

If you wish to speak to someone not directly related to the research, please contact the Head of the Psychology Department at London South Bank University, Anthony Moss: mossac@lsbu.ac.uk

**Appendix Six: Interview Schedule – Study One**


<u>Opening questions</u>


How did the two of you first **meet**?

What was the initial **draw**?

What do you think it **means to be in a relationship** with someone?

- o Tell me about any **expectations** you had for the relationship


<u>Objects/photos</u>


For each item:

- Can you tell me about the experience this **represents**?
- **Who** were you with?
- **Where** was the experience?
    - o Tell me what the xxx was like (sounds/atmosphere)
    - o Tell me about the **surroundings**/the room (or club) you were in?
- Can you describe **how you felt** when xxxx [give specific moment]
    - o Can you describe where that feeling of xxx was in your body?
    - o Were you expecting to feel like that?

Item 1:

- – Tell me what you found **valuable** about this experience
    - o What do you mean by xxxx?
    - o What makes you want to xxxxx? E.g. Talk more
        - ▪ *If vague response about it being 'good' for a relationship* why is it good?  What is it about talking to someone else that is positive?
    - o Were there **times** you felt you were being particularly xxx?
    - o How xxxx are you with each other **in everyday life**?
    - o How much should you **aspire** to be xxxx in a relationship?

Item 2:

- What's **different** about the relationship when you're not on mdma together compared to when you are?

    o   Do you miss xxxx?

Item 3:

- Tell me about how this experience is different from the previous one

- Tell me about a point in the xxxx (last) experience where you felt (particularly) **close** to each other?

    o   What do you think it means to be 'close' to someone?

    o   What kind of things make you feel close to the other person?

Item 4:

- Tell me about why you brought this item along with you?

- Tell me about any times you felt **distant** from each other while on mdma?

    o   What does it mean to feel 'distant' from someone?


Item 5:

- Can you tell me a bit about why you chose this item?

- Tell me about how your experiences of taking mdma together **changed over time**?

    •   Can you remember anything else?

- How did you find the **process of choosing** certain experiences to talk about?

    o   What about finding items to represent those experiences?


Timeline

Now, I'd like you to draw a timeline of your relationship. So, any **experiences of being in a relationship** together that you feel are significant in some way, which can include taking MDMA as a couple but doesn't have to. You can **begin wherever** you like and draw the timeline either **individually** or together. Any questions? Just take as much **time** as you need.

–   Can you **talk me through** your timeline?

–

*For each timeline experience*

- Can you describe this experience in as much **detail** as possible?

    o How was it when xxxx?  What was it like when xxxx?

    o Tell me about how you **felt** when xxxx?

    o Tell me what was **happening** at that point in your life

    o Describe to me **why** you've **included** this experience in particular


*Reflecting back*

– Can you tell me about a **difficult point** in your relationship?

    o Was this resolved? How?

– Describe to me an **MDMA experience** that was **difficult** for you in some way

– Can you think of any times where you've had **things to work through** after you've been on MDMA together?

– Why do you think your **relationship** has **lasted**?

    o Tell me about the things you do to make it last

– Can you tell me how your relationship is **different now** than when you first got together?

    o Tell me about a particular experience that **changed** how you felt about the relationship


*Current experiences of relationship*

Thinking about **how you are together now**…

– Tell me about the kinds of things **you like doing** together

– Tell me about a **time recently** when you felt **close** to the other person

    o Are there particular things your partner does that make you feel closer to them?

– Tell me about a time when you **felt distant** from the other person

– What things do you **disagree on**? (prompts: values/beliefs/domestic work/what you do together)

*The 'fit' of MDMA within the relationship*

- How do you think your relationship **affects** your **how often** you take MDMA?

- What are your plans for your MDMA use in the **future**? e.g. stay the same/decrease/increase

  - o *If different amount:* what are you hoping to achieve by decreasing/increasing the amount?

- Have you **told other people** about your ecstasy use together?

  - o What perceptions do you think exist about couples who take ecstasy together, if any?

- Finally, what has it been **like to take part** in this interview today?

- Do you have any **questions** for me or anything further you want to say?

- **Thank you** so much for taking part in the study.

**Appendix Seven: Written Diary Guideline – Study Two**

Thank you for agreeing to keep a diary. This one-week diary is focussed on your experiences of, feelings and thoughts about taking MDMA with your partner.

Please try to fill in the diary every day; there are questions to think about for each day but feel free to write about anything that feels important to you about MDMA use with your partner. You don't have to answer any of the questions you don't want to. You may want to look back on previous entries but, again, don't feel you need to.

When completing the diary, it would be good if you could write a bit about your physical sensations on MDMA, for example, what does it feel like in your body when you feel a certain way towards your partner? You could also describe the environment of your MDMA experience: the sounds, the visuals and the atmosphere. Don't feel you have to write about these things though.

Please don't worry about grammar or spelling.
Your diary entries and your identity will remain completely anonymous.

**Day 1. Day of the week: _____**

Please write down any thoughts/feelings that you have about the upcoming experience. For example:

• Why are you planning to take MDMA? Who will you be with? How important is it that your partner is there?
• What things are you expecting to happen and how are you expecting to feel?
• What parts of the experience are you particularly looking forward to?
• What parts of the experience are you not looking forward to?

**Day 2. Day of the week _____**

Please write down any thoughts/feelings that you have about the upcoming experience.  For example:

- Why are you planning to take MDMA?  Who will you be with?  How important is it that your partner is there?
- What things are you expecting to happen and how are you expecting to feel?
- What parts of the experience are you particularly looking forward to?
- What parts of the experience are you not looking forward to?

**Day 3. Day of the week _____**

On the day you are going to take MDMA, you might consider:

- How do you feel about taking MDMA today?
- What have you and your partner said to each other about the experience?

If you want to write anything down during your experience feel free, but don't feel you need to.

**Day 4. Day of the week _____**

On the day immediately after you have taken MDMA, consider what the experience was like and note down anything that strikes you.  For example:

- How was the experience for you?
- How do you think the experience was for your partner?
- How did you feel towards your partner?  What do you think made you feel that way?
- Was how you felt towards your partner different from how you feel towards them usually?
- Were there any differences in your sexual relationship with your partner?

**Day 5. Day of the week _____**

In the days after taking MDMA, write down any further feelings or memories about your ecstasy experience, such as:

- Do you feel different in any way than you normally would?  Do you usually feel like this after taking MDMA?

- Are you behaving any differently with your partner than you normally would?

- If you could, would you change anything about the way you were with your partner while on MDMA?

- Would you like to take MDMA more or less often with your partner?

**Day 6. Day of the week _____**

In the days after taking MDMA, write down any further feelings or memories about your ecstasy experience, such as:

- Do you feel different in any way than you normally would?  Do you usually feel like this after taking MDMA?

- Are you behaving any differently with your partner than you normally would?

- If you could, would you change anything about the way you were with your partner while on MDMA?

- Would you like to take MDMA more or less often with your partner?

- Are you planning to take MDMA again soon together?

**Day 7. Day of the week _____**

In the days after taking MDMA, write down any further feelings or memories about your ecstasy experience, such as:

- Do you feel different in any way than you normally would?  Do you usually feel like this after taking MDMA?

- Are you behaving any differently with your partner than you normally would?

- If you could, would you change anything about the way you were with your partner while on MDMA?

- Would you like to take MDMA more or less often with your partner?

- Are you planning to take MDMA again soon together?

Thank you for your participation!

If you would like to, you can note down any further comments you wish to make here: ……………………………………….

**Appendix Eight: Thematic map – Study One, Interview 6**