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Brian Heaphy and Anna Einarsdottir
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What is This?

Scripting Civil Partnerships: interviewing couples together and apart

Brian Heaphy
University of Manchester, UK

Anna Einarsdottir
University of Manchester, UK

Abstract

Couple studies generally focus on heterosexual relationships where partners are interviewed together or apart. This article discusses a study of same-sex couples' Civil Partnerships that interviewed partners together *and* apart. It considers the methodological and analytical challenges raised by our approach by discussing how the different interactional settings of the interviews shaped the stories that couples and partners told, the links between relationship narration in interviews and their 'doing' in practice and the insights generated into the sociocultural factors that shape relationship scripting. The joint interviews produced couple and marriage stories. They illuminated couples' scripting agency and factors that enable and constrain partners' scripting authority in interviews and beyond. The individual interviews produced biographically embedded narratives of 'relating selves'. These contextualized and complicated couple stories of (non-) negotiated relationships. Our approach enabled us to make links between relational scripting in interviews and the flow of power in situated research, relational and sociocultural contexts.

Keywords

Civil Partnership, couples, interviews, marriage, narratives, power, same-sex relationships, scripting

Introduction

Several stories can be told about any one relationship. In the 1970s, Bernard (1972) argued that every marriage could be regarded as two, 'his' and 'hers'. Nowadays, where

Corresponding author:
Brian Heaphy, Sociology, School of Social Sciences, University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL, UK.
Email: brian.heaphy@manchester.ac.uk

same-sex relationships are legally recognized, marriage may also be regarded as 'his' and 'his', and 'hers' and 'hers'. In a study of young couples' Civil Partnerships,[1] we interviewed same-sex couples together and apart to generate three relationship stories: a couple one and two individual ones. In taking this approach, it was not our primary intention to look for contradictions between the stories that partners tell in different interview contexts, although they do exist and can be sociologically interesting. Rather, our aim was to consider the co-construction of the couple narrative of the relationship via the joint interview and to link this to individual partners' socially shaped relational orientations that were explored in the individual interviews.

Our approach to interviewing couples and to analysis is loosely based on interactionist understandings of scripting (see Atkinson and Housley, 2003; Jackson and Scott, 2010a, 2010b; Kimmel, 2007; Plummer, 1983; Simon and Gagnon, 2004; Whittier and Melendez, 2004) and recognizes that partners may not be equally resourced to script their relationships. Scripting here refers to the stories that are told about relationships, but it is also a metaphor for how relationships are 'done' in practice. Plummer (1995) suggests a pragmatic approach to conceptualize the links between personal stories and actual lives. He argues that personal stories can be explored less for their literal truth or aesthetic qualities but for the part they play in the life of the person, relationships and the social order (for overviews of different approaches see Atkinson and Delamont, 2006; Gubrium and Holstein, 2009; Plummer, 1995; Riessman, 2008). From this perspective, partners' narratives could be viewed as a 'cite' for exploring how couples' Civil Partnerships are linked to relational discourse at a cultural level (cultural scripts), involve socially shaped relating orientations and practices (personal scripts) that people bring to their relationships, and how couple stories and practices (couple scripts) emerge through *interaction* in relationships.

However, interview narratives raise specific methodological and analytical challenges that are linked to how the specific contexts of their production shape the stories that emerge (Conway, 2008; Gubrium and Holstein, 2009; Mishler, 1986; Schlosser, 2008; Van Enk, 2009). Understanding the insights that interview narratives generate into actual lives requires careful consideration of the interactional context of the interview itself (De Fina, 2009; Enosh and Buchbinder, 2005; Tanggaard, 2009). In our own case, such attention revealed that interview narratives are not neutral accounts of relational experience, untainted by the researcher (Blaufuss, 2007; Steier, 1991). Yet, this did not undermine the insights that such narratives generated into lived relationships themselves. Indeed, focusing on the interactions in interviews provided opportunities for extending our understandings of the dynamics (sociocultural, interpersonal and power) that shape the scripting and doing of relationships in practice.

In this article, we consider the methodological and analytical challenges raised by our approach to joint and individual interviews. We begin by situating our approach in terms of debates about the value of interviewing couples together or apart and narrative approaches to analysing interview data. We then draw on Gubrium and Holstein's (2009) ideas about narrative fieldwork and analysis to consider the joint interviews, illustrating how couples' relationship and 'marriage' stories were shaped by the interactional setting of the research, their performance for multiple audiences and the interviewees' narrative agency. We also consider how couples collaborated in narrating their relationships

and the apparent links between partners' narrative authority, resources and the scripting of relationships. We then turn our attention to how the interactional context of the individual interviews generated narratives that contextualized and complicated the couple ones about (non-)negotiated relationships. These enabled us to link couple scripts to the (non-)negotiation of socially and biographically embedded 'relational selves', and to the factors that influence 'strong' and 'weak' stories in relationships. We conclude by considering how relational scripting in interviews is linked to power in the research context, in relationships themselves and in the sociocultural contexts in which relationships are 'done'.

Couple studies

Couple studies have remained remarkably unaffected by the 'narrative turn' in the social sciences (Atkinson and Delamont, 2006). This is evident in debates about whether partners should be interviewed together or apart for the sake of accessing the 'true' relationship. Some argue in favour of interviewing couples together on the basis that individual interviews produce 'single' accounts of relationships instead of potentially (and it is implied, more truthful) conflicting ones (Duncombe and Marsden, 1996). Joint interviews also have the potential to aid recollection of events and create space were partners can possibly correct each other (Allan, 1980). Duncombe and Marsden (1996: 145) suggest joint interviews to be most fruitful 'where one or both partners are committed to a degree of "truth-telling" about the relationship', whereas others argue their value for exploring how couples interact (Allan, 1980; Valentine, 1999). Yet, the presence of both spouses may constrain disclosure, and in some cases, an interview is dominated by one spouse (Allan, 1980; Beitin, 2008). Practically, it can be difficult to organize joint interviews since both partners need to be present at once (Allan, 1980; Arksey, 1996; Arksey and Knight, 1999). Joint interviews are also quite labour intensive and costly given the extra planning involved and increased transcription time (Allan, 1980).

Interviewing couples separately appears to offer a partial solution to the problems described above. Partners may find it easier to talk more freely on their own, and from the researcher's perspective, individual accounts can be used for comparison (Beitin, 2008). Being separated, however, has its drawbacks. Chief among these is the problematic assumption that Duncombe and Marsden (1996: 114) suggest underpins much research on family relationships, that the individual is sufficient as the unit of research. In addition, partners may worry about the researcher breaching confidentiality, and even in individual interviews, they may try to give harmonious accounts in the belief that conflicting accounts will be interpreted as a sign of an 'unmatched' couple (Valentine, 1999).

Given that both approaches present clear opportunities and challenges, how is a choice then made in couple studies? Typically, the budget is a determining factor favouring separate interviews with one or both partners, often just the female partner because women seem to be more willing to take part in research. The prospect of discovering secrets within relationships and the capacity to compare different accounts (e.g. of household division of labour and finances) can also give preference to separate interviews (Duncombe and Marsden, 1996; c.f. Morris, 2001; Pahl, 1989). In contrast, joint

interviews tend to be used when studies focus on negotiations between partners or shared relationship construction (Allan, 1980). In most cases, however, the decision to be interviewed together or apart is left to the participants themselves, in good faith of 'empowering' them or in hope of improving the odds of participation. Faced with a choice, however, Morris (2001) found that couples either asked to be interviewed together or expressed no preference at all. This may suggest that actively opting to be interviewed separately may be problematic for couples as this could be viewed negatively by one or both partners, for example, as evidence of partners' secrets. On account of this, a joint interview seems a less-risky choice in terms of how it might be interpreted.

By focusing on how to best to access the 'true' relationship, couple studies tend to overlook what interviews actually produce – situated narratives that are produced in interaction with researchers (Mishler, 1986). In contrast, our own approach placed narratives at the heart of the study to explore the co-construction of couple stories and how they link to individual partners' narratives of 'relating selves'. In doing so, we acknowledged that relationship scripting, and the interactions it involves, needs to be explored in relation to the situated research and sociocultural contexts in which interview narratives are produced (Gubrium and Holstein, 2009; Holstein and Gubrium, 2000; Steier, 1991).

Many researchers have discussed the dynamics that shape the stories told in research contexts (e.g. De Fina, 2009; Enosh and Buchbinder, 2005; Tanggaard, 2009; Van Enk, 2009). We found Gubrium and Holstein's synthesis of debates and ideas about researching and analysing 'narrative reality' especially useful for reflecting on stories generated by our own research (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997, 2009; Holstein and Gubrium, 2000). They encourage researchers to consider specific elements of storytelling, including 'activation', 'linkage', 'composition', 'performance', 'collaboration' and 'control'. When it comes to analysis, they emphasize that narratives should not be disembedded from their social and research contexts nor read as singular accounts (Gubrium and Holstein, 2009; see also Blaufuss, 2007). 'Activation' refers to how stories are provoked and how this shapes story formation: interview stories are not simply there to be accessed but are actively generated (Gubrium and Holstein, 2009: 41–53). Thus, the focus of the study, the framing of questions and the interviewer/interviewee interactions are important in shaping the kinds of stories that research participants narrate (or not). 'Linkage' directs our attention to how stories acquire meaning in social and research contexts but are not wholly determined by them (Gubrium and Holstein, 2009: 55–67). Agency is important and can be explored through 'composition' (Gubrium and Holstein, 2009: 69–79) – the way in which stories are put together to give them meaning – and how stories are performed or staged for listeners (Gubrium and Holstein, 2009: 81–91). Finally, narratives can be analysed for power and reciprocity, both in terms of 'collaboration' (Gubrium and Holstein, 2009: 93–107), and lack of it, 'control' (Gubrium and Holstein, 2009: 109–121). Overall, these concepts alert us to how interview narratives are the products of the dynamic interactions between interviewees and researchers in situated sociocultural contexts. However, we need to be cautious about adopting Gubrium and Holstein's ideas in any rigid or overly schematic way, not least because how we analyse interview stories also depends on the specific questions we aim to address. We will return to these ideas in the ensuing discussion, as and where they link to our own concerns. On that note, we turn

to our own study to situate our concern with how formalized same-sex relationships are scripted.

The study

Our study is researching couples where both partners were aged up to 36 years when they entered into Civil Partnerships in the United Kingdom.[2] Unlike most couple studies, ours involves same-sex couples, and unlike most studies of same-sex relationships, it involves younger cohorts' formalized relationships. The study is therefore situated in distinctive ways with respect to existing research and is exploring relationships that are themselves historically and socially distinctive. The research is concerned with the 'new' relational possibilities opened up by the formalization of same-sex relationships and the historically 'new' experiences of sexual minorities who will have access to more or less full relational citizenship for most of their adult lives. From the outset, we were keen to study these new relationships and experiences in ways that assumed as little as possible about their structuring, organization and quality. Thus, we set out to explore how the transition from being single to Civil Partners is made and experienced; how formalized same-sex partnerships are defined, experienced and practised and how same-sex 'marriages' are influenced by interlinked sociocultural and biographical factors. In essence, we sought to explore young Civil Partnerships as complexly situated relationships by exploring how they were scripted.

Our rationale for interviewing partners together and apart was threefold. First, previous studies have suggested heterosexual marriages to be structured in accordance with gender differences and inequalities (for overviews, see Duncombe and Marsden, 1993, 1996; Dunne, 1997; Jamieson, 1998). In contrast, studies of same-sex relationships suggest them to be highly negotiated and 'more egalitarian' because of the absence of gender differences (Dunne, 1997; Peplau et al., 1996; Weeks et al., 2001; for criticisms see Carrington, 1999; Ryan-Flood, 2009; Taylor, 2009). These studies have tended to rely on couple or individual interviews with one or both partners (for discussion, see Carrington, 1999; Gabb, 2008). We were keen to explore how a combined approach might allow for a more nuanced view of relational power. Second, we sought to study how couples intersubjectively constructed their relationships, and couple interviews allowed us to explore couple interactions in scripting and 'doing' the relationship in a situated context. Third, we sought to embed this in partners' (non-)negotiation of biographically rooted personal scripts for relating, and the individual interviews allowed us to explore these scripts. All three interviews were conducted by the same researcher during a single visit. The interview format was quite simple, starting with the joint interview, which was split in two parts. The first part of the joint interview focused on the couple's relationship story, and the second part followed up questions that arise from this. We then moved on to the individual interviews that focused especially on finances, sexual and emotional commitments and family making/planning. We interviewed 50 couples, 25 female and 25 male. At the point of the interviews, the length of Civil Partnerships varied from 1 month to 4.5 years, averaging around 23 months.

Couple scripting

Here, we examine how couple stories were narrated in the joint interview to illuminate how narrative agency and control, authority and resources feature in couple interviews and in relational scripting (or structuring) itself. We begin by considering how we activated couples' relationship stories, how our interactions with the couples may have shaped their narratives, and how couples asserted their narrative agency by drawing on cultural scripts about marriage. We then consider couples' interactional dynamics in the interviews, how they collaborated in narrating their relationships and how partners' equal or different scripting authority (or 'scripting capital') influenced the composition and performance of their joint stories. Overall, this section illuminates the value of viewing the couple interview method in interactional *and* narrative terms and illustrates the possibilities offered by an interactional and narrative approach to analysing couple interview data.

Activating the story: influence and agency

Couples were recruited with the help of registrar officials across the United Kingdom. Our interactions with the couples began when, prior to agreeing to participate in the study, they received an information leaflet about the study. This information was repeated immediately before starting the interview. At this point, the format of the interviews was also carefully explained to ensure that both partners knew what to expect for the duration of the visit. We explained that the individual interviews would take place in alphabetical order according to partners' first names and clarified that the separate interviews were not designed to 'catch them out' but to explore the approaches to relating that couples brought to the relationship. We then explained that their two accounts would be kept strictly confidential and that we would not share information given in individual interviews with partners. The joint interview then began with the following statement by the researcher:

> This study concerns people who have entered Civil Partnership. We are interested in finding out the story of your relationship from the beginning to now, how you met, what attracted you to one another and how the relationship developed.
>
> We would like to know the ins and out of your relationship and for the first part of this interview I would like you to tell us your own story in your own words from the beginning to now.
>
> I will simply listen, but I may take a few notes so I can ask you some questions when you have completed your story.

This task was fairly open-ended and allowed partners to 'intuitively' detail their story while the researcher was positioned as an active listener (Anderson and Jack, 1991). While the task was partly designed to minimize our influence on the couples' stories, it did not, of course, neutralize this. To illuminate this, it is useful to consider two broad ways in which relationship stories were told that were linked to whether couples had children or not. Children featured highly in the relationship stories of couples who were parents, and the entry into Civil Partnership was often just one milestone in their broader family story.

In contrast, the majority of couples who were not parents sketched how their relationship had developed up to the point of Civil Partnership and often presented this as the final point of their relationship story. This raises the question about why the latter did not usually include discussion of couple life after the moment of formalization. Initially, we were concerned that the stalling of couple stories at this moment might reflect the length of our introduction and the difficulty participants may have in remembering the details of the verbal prompts: 'we would like to know the ins and out of your relationship' and 'tell us your own story in your own words from the beginning to now'. However, the fact that couples with children told more detailed stories of life after Civil Partnership led us to reflect on other dynamics that might be at play. This, in turn, led us to consider what participants might *think* the study was about, how the story was staged for multiple audiences and the tension between the stories we sought and the ones they *wanted* to tell.

In terms of participants' perceptions of the study, we reasoned that in exploring how we activated and shaped their stories, we should consider the information leaflet given to them prior to interview as well as the introduction to the interview itself. The information leaflet featured an image of two rings, which could have possibly signalled that we were interested in the wedding itself. While the text explicitly explained our interest in how couples met, what attracted them to each other, how their relationship developed and 'what it's like to be in a Civil Partnership', we cannot undermine the immediate power of the visual image. Thus, we cannot say that our introduction did not influence how most couples' stories stopped at the day when rings were exchanged. But there also seemed to be other dynamics at work relating to cultural scripts about marriage as the benchmark for 'authentically' formalized relationships; the 'public' nature of interviews about 'private' issues and the couples agency in the interview context. Consider the following quotations:

David: Robert got down on one knee and said, okay, '[…] will you marry me?' It was like 'Absolutely. But I don't want to wait a long time. Let's do it now, let's do it within six months'.

Kamilia: Started to live together and the relationship just got better and better.
Radinka: Yeah.
Kamilia: and then we decided to get married … I think that's about it, isn't it? And now we are together, happy. […]
Radinka: Yes, definitely … it feels different. It's … I'm not saying about security, because basically that's what we shared before but the actual fact that we are committed to each other.

Despite the fact that Civil Partnership is legally *not* marriage, most couples viewed and described themselves as married and were keen to be recognized as such. As the quotations above indicate, interviewees consistently deployed the language of marriage when describing their decision to formalize their relationships, the nature of their commitment and the practices through which their relationships were embedded and given meaning. At the heart of their stories were culturally familiar narratives about romance, love and commitment as the basis of marriage, and of marriage as a key life event and as bolstering couple commitments. In other words, their stories could be interpreted as

performative claims about being in 'real' and 'ordinary' marriages, perhaps signalling the power of marriage as a dominating cultural script for framing understandings of relationships. Alternatively, they could equally be viewed as indicative of couples' scripting capacities and as a testament to their agency in the interview context.

From the latter perspective, 'private' stories about relationships are not simply recounted in interviews but are constructed and performed for different audiences. In the case of couple interviews, these audiences can include the partners themselves, the researcher and broader (imagined) research audiences (see Beitin, 2008). While partners constructed their relationship as a marriage with and *for* each other, they were also performing it as such for 'external' audiences. The stories of same-sex couples who were parents could be read as performative claims to be real and ordinary families by virtue of the presence of children. This may partly explain why their children featured so strongly in their couple story. In contrast, couples who were not parents seemed to emphasize the degree to which Civil Partnership itself was performative of their legitimate status as a married couple and family. This may partly explain why the couple story stalled at the point of entry into 'marriage'. By that point, the meaning-making work of the storytelling was done: the authentic marriage was established.

As interviewers we shaped, but did not wholly control, our research participants' narratives. Narratives generated in couple interviews, like all interviews, emerge through the negotiation of constraints and agency. While the research agenda sets the context for the interview, in light of the discussion above, it would be naive to undermine interviewees' narrative agency. Interviewee's agency in the research context is often evident where, like the couples in our study, they narrate the stories *they* want to tell as opposed to the ones researchers ask them to address. Developing Gubrium's and Holstein's (2009) point about linkages, we can link couples' narrative agency in interviews to relational agency more generally. While cultural scripts are drawn upon in making relationships meaningful, people do not simply *follow* scripts for relating. Rather, scripts are actively constructed and emerge though interaction in situated contexts (Plummer, cited in Whittier and Melendez, 2004). In the next section, we illuminate the nuances of scripting agency and its constraints by focusing on the 'internal' relational dynamics involved in narrating the couple in interviews.

Whose story? Collaboration, composition and resources

Many researchers have explored the interactional aspects of storytelling in specifically situated research contexts (e.g. Conway, 2008; De Fina, 2009; De Fina and Georgakopoulou, 2008; Schlosser, 2008; Van Enk, 2009). Here, we focus on partners' collaborations in composing their couple story to illustrate their interactions in the interview context and the linkages between narrative authority in this context and scripting resources (or capital) more broadly. Most relationship stories began with giggles and laughter as partners decided who would start. The following abstract is a typical example of this:

> *Graham*:   Alright, do you want me to go first [laughs]
> *Andrew*:   Yeah, go on then.

Graham: Well we actually met on Gaydar [a dating website] and we met [laughter] I don't know where to start though…

Andrew: Well let's just say it was a casual encounter, wasn't it.

Like Graham and Andrew, most couples negotiated the telling of their stories from the outset. While couples were normally quick to reach a comfortable rhythm in their story-telling, their collaboration strategies varied. One approach was to offer to 'go first', as Graham did, but in other cases, neither partner was keen to start. Instead, couples spent the first few moments deciding who would start or to 'do it together'. Louise and Kathryn are a good example:

Louise: Ok

Kathryn: Ok

Louise: Do you wanna start?

Kathryn: No, you can!

Louise: Me?

Kathryn: Yeah.

Louise: Ok.

Negotiations like this in the interview context often matched with how couples claimed to negotiate decisions within the relationship (but see discussion of individual interviews below). However, among some couples, no negotiation took place and one partner took the lead. In Amina's and Josha's interview, for example, Amina first suggested joint storytelling, but this collaboration never materialized. This is how their story began:

Amina: Shall we just talk together?

But instead of waiting for an answer from her partner, Amina continued:

Amina: Okay? Well, we met because we were living in the same [place]. And, well I think … we noticed each other, but we didn't really communicate.

Amina then only paused to check at which point they met, before she carried on with the storytelling. It soon became clear that Amina was in control of the couple narrative. Even when they argued, Amina's version of the story carried more weight. Josha's collaboration was often reduced to agreeing with Amina to confirm her version and interpretation of events. There were other cases, like Callum's and Mark's, where one partner took control of the couple narrative. Callum began,

Callum: Well, basically Mark was working, at [name of workplace] that I was having an interview for, and I got the job, I went for the interview.

Mark: you pushed me to get it [laughter].

Like Amina, Callum dominated the telling of the relationship story from the outset. Mark confirmed it or added asides. Methodologically, examples like these raise questions about

the value of interviewing couples together, as they can obviously produce a one-sided story of the relationship. In terms of method, the dominance of one partner is typically avoided by interviewing couples separately (Allan, 1980; Beitin, 2008). However, taking up Gubrium and Holstein's (2009) point about linkages, we argue that joint interviews can be valuable for exploring such domination in its own right and how it is linked to sociocultural factors that influence scripting authority in relationships (see also Allan, 1980; Valentine, 1999). This, in turn, requires making links between *how* couples tell their stories and the *content* of these stories themselves (Gubrium and Holstein, 2009: 37).

In Amina's and Josha's case, it was clear that Amina was not only in control of the storytelling but that, according to the content of the narrative that she and Josha told, the relationship itself was structured according to Amina's self-defined needs. Being the older partner, the home owner, the breadwinner and the one who could draw on previous relationship experience, her position was a powerful one. In Callum's and Mark's case, the content of the story emphasized how Callum undertook most of the relationship planning, organized the couple's social life and took responsibility for organizing their finances. As the primary earner at the time of the interview, he was better economically resourced than Mark. Moreover, Mark was fairly new to the area in which the couple lived. His family and friends lived elsewhere, meaning he had limited social resources. Further, Mark had been badly scarred by a previous abusive relationship which, Callum explained, left him unable to make decisions for himself. In both cases, an obvious factor that influenced scripting dominance was relationship 'expertise' where one partner was more experienced in relationships than another or could claim to be more knowledgeable about how relationships *should* work. Combined with other kinds of resources (economic, social and cultural), claims to expertise could allow a partner to accrue greater *scripting capital* that, in turn, could enable her or him to be dominant in structuring the relationship itself (for discussion of different forms of capital see Bourdieu, 1986; Skeggs, 2003).

As opposed to seeing one partner's dominance in joint interviews as a problem that can be resolved by the 'right' method, we argue that how couples collaborate (or not) in narrative production in interviews can be explored in conjunction with the content of the narrative itself to generate substantive insights. Couple interviews do not 'merely' generate narratives, but situated examples of couples' scripting practices (c.f. De Fina and Georgakopoulou, 2008). These narratives and practices can illuminate how relationships are given meaning and done in situated interactional contexts and how relationship construction is socioculturally influenced and shaped. However, it is also important to acknowledge the limits of the joint interview method. Chief among these, from our perspective, was the limited scope for exploring how socioculturally shaped 'subjectivities' feature in the intersubjective construction of relationships and the negotiations this involves. This was our primary rationale for conducting individual interviews.

The individual interviews: relational selves, and strong and weak stories

Once the couple interview had come to an end, partners were then interviewed in succession by the same researcher. As noted earlier, the individual interviews paid special attention to personal and couple approaches to finances, sexual–emotional commitments and

family planning. These are core areas where previous research has found inequality (linked to limited negotiation) in heterosexual marriages and relative equality (and high levels of negotiation) in same-sex relationships (see earlier references).

The individual interviews began by asking participants what previous relationship experience they had had and were then structured around a discussion of the above-mentioned areas. For each of these topics, participants were asked to describe and provide examples of their personal approach, how their approach is similar to or different from the people they grew up with and their partner's and how they and their partner's approach had developed over the duration of the relationship. In analysis, making links between the individual interviews, and between the individual and joint interviews, enabled us to examine the ways in which biographically embedded personal scripts influence the construction of the relationship.

Given that the couple interviews had taken place before the individual ones, it might be expected that partners would narrate personal stories that simply confirmed the couple one (see Carrington, 1999). This was not the case. While partners' personal stories could confirm the couple narrative, they could equally complicate and conflict with it. This was in large part due to the different interactional contexts of the individual interview (Tanggaard, 2009). Partners were no longer collaborating in scripting and performing 'the couple' but were scripting a 'relational self' in a one-to-one setting with the researcher. The emergence of the relational self in the individual interview was influenced by the questions we asked to activate personal narratives of relating (c.f. Gubrium and Holstein, 2009: 41–53). Moreover, in explicitly asking participants to reflect on the differences and similarities between their own, their partner's and others' approaches to relating, we encouraged them to adopt the position of a reflective self. Most participants took to this position with relative ease and actively collaborated with the researcher to narrate relating selves within a couple (Gubrium and Holstein, 2009: 93–107). In itself, this illuminated the part played by the interviewer, the research questions and the specific interactional contexts of the interview in shaping the focus, form and content of the interview narratives (Gubrium and Holstein, 2009: 109–121; Van Enk, 2009). However, our participants' agency was also evident, not least in their keenness to actively narrate, perform and assert a self that was not reducible to the couple (Gubrium and Holstein, 2009: 81–91). In narrating different selves with respect to the specific areas of relational practice, stories of relational (non-)negotiation came to the fore. In essence, individual interviews offered a different vantage point from which to view the negotiation of relationship scripting and the factors that influence strong and weak stories in relation to this.

Situating relating selves

As we saw earlier, Josha was often silenced by her partner in the couple interview. In the individual interview, she explained the personal implications of being constructed as a 'dependent' self in her relationship. She said,

> I feel guilty …when Amina insists on paying for the shopping … she really doesn't let me do that … which I find annoying sometimes … it's, again, like she's the dominant one in the relationship.

Raising this issue in the couple interview would have been problematic for Josha. Because it involved an area where Amina was unwilling to negotiate, it would almost certainly have caused an argument between them. In this case, Amina's domineering approach to the relationship combined with what seemed to be her frightening temper limited any serious challenge to her control of the couple story. The individual interview therefore provided Josha with the opportunity to tell *her* story of the relationship. While this confirmed Amina's dominance in the relationship, it also allowed Josha to assert her 'self' as an actively collaborating (but not wholly compliant) one in the relationship, in a way that the couple interview did not. In her individual interview, Josha gave meaning to her relational self (and her personal script for relating) by linking it to her family upbringing and community life, where rigid gendered roles were enforced on the basis of social norms connected with religious beliefs. She assumed, and partly subscribed to, the belief couples and marriages 'naturally' involved a dominant and submissive partner, and that the economically resourced one (in heterosexual relationships, the man) had the right to call the shots. This was not simply 'her' story but a strong moral tale about how relationships 'should' be done that was shared within – and inherited from – her family and community.

Narratives generated in individual interviews do not simply confirm or contradict couple ones (c.f. Pahl, 1989). Rather, they contextualize and complicate them. This is not only because they provide additional 'information' but also because different interview contexts allow 'different' relating selves to emerge, who can narrate the relationship from a differently situated position. In our case, individual interviews enabled a different view of the relationship: from the perspective of a biographically embedded relational self who was not wholly detached from the family, community and moral contexts in which their relational orientations and scripts had been formed and developed. Embedded relational selves and moral tales did not only feature in narratives of 'non-negotiated' relationships, like Josha's, but also in narratives of *negotiated* relationships.

Situated negotiations

Making links between couple's individual interviews illuminated how the negotiation of relationships was often more complex than couple narratives and the previous research often suggest (see also Carrington, 1999). In narrating and giving meaning to their personal approaches to money and finances in the individual interviews, Caroline and Edith situated them biographically. When Caroline was asked about her approach, she explained,

> I'm quite sensible … I didn't have any money when I was younger when I was a kid and I was brought up with no money and when you're like that that you do have a bit of a one eye on [spending] … I am careful [even if] I can afford stuff now that I could never afford before.

In contrast, Caroline's partner, Edith, recounted a financially secure background and described her own approach to finances as being 'careless'. Edith had gradually taken up her partner's 'sensible' approach. Getting married had forced her and Caroline to

confront their different orientations to spending money and this centred on Edith's relaxed approach to her debt. On that note Edith said,

> I do forget that that's affectively her debt as well. So I forget sometimes that's kind of an 'us' thing that we're paying for … But I forget that and I know that … makes her nervous.

Edith compromised her approach to the debt. On the surface, her narrative could be taken to support claims about same-sex couples' negotiated relational practices (and possibly indicated 'narrative collaboration' across the individual interviews, c.f. Gubrium and Holstein, 2009: 93). However, taken together, Caroline's and Edith's individual interviews suggest that this would be an overly simplistic view of the dynamics involved. In fact, it was only Edith's approach to finances that was changed through the confrontation and *not* both the partners' approaches: Caroline's more 'fixed' one remained unchanged.

By linking the narratives generated by Caroline's and Edith's individual interviews, we might explain the dominance of Caroline's approach to finances in the relationship in a number of ways. First, Caroline's script for money management is supported by a range of sociocultural scripts about 'good' relationships and marriages: that finances *should* be a joint matter and not an individual one, and that couples *should* manage finances sensibly to avoid debt. Second, this combined with Caroline's articulation of her approach to finances via a disadvantaged classed self-narrative amounted to a powerful moral demand on Edith to reassess her approach. In Edith's individual interview, it was clear that Caroline's classed self-narrative was well-rehearsed within the relationship itself, and that it was a strong one in encouraging Edith to change her ways.

Only relying on the couple narrative or one individual interview would have limited the insights gained into how the self-scripts feature in couple negotiations. The point is not that individual interviews contradict the couple narratives of negotiated relationships. Rather, by generating embedded self-narratives, they enable researchers to explore the subtleties of intersubjective negotiation and the factors that influence this. The latter include partners' biographically embedded biographies and practices, as well as the stories partners tell *to each other* about these. In addition, personal scripts that are supported by culturally powerful moral scripts about 'good' relationships can be especially strong ones in couple negotiations. As we shall see, couple and individual interviews combined enabled the exploration of how moral scripts for relating could be a source of tension and conflict for couples *and* selves.

Strong and weak stories in relationships

Practically, individual interviews enabled us to explore in-depth issues that couples might be more reluctant to discuss in joint interviews (Beitin, 2008). These included sexual arrangements and practices. By the time couples met, some partners had developed habituated 'alternative' sexual practices. In his individual interview, Graham recounted how he had a broad 'sexual menu' before he met his partner Andrew. This menu included phone sex with strangers and he continued to engage in this practice after

entering into his current relationship. Andrew discovered this, and as Graham recounts, 'he just asked me straight out, "have you been having phone sex?"'. The discovery was a 'hard pill' for Andrew to swallow, and he confronted Graham about it. In his interview, Andrew said, 'I just thought that wasn't acceptable … it was just sort of what he was used to when he was on his own'.

Graham and Andrew had, in fact, already raised this issue as a negotiated critical moment in their joint interview. In itself, this underscored that researchers cannot assume what issues are 'sensitive' ones for interviewees (c.f. Enosh and Buchbinder, 2005). Nevertheless, the individual interviews allowed us to explore the negotiations involved from the position of multiply differently positioned 'relational selves'. In Andrew's interview, for example, it was clear that he *had* assumed that a committed relationship would be a sexually exclusive one. In his interview, Graham explained that because he and Andrew had not had a conversation about sexual commitment there was, in fact, no explicit injunction against sex with others. In doing so, he drew on alternative 'queer' discourses that suggest sexual exclusivity cannot be assumed in same-sex relationships but must be explicitly negotiated (Duncombe et al., 2004; Klesse, 2007; Weeks et al., 2001).

However, Graham's narrative was a conflicted one, and his individual narrative indicated that he was aware of Andrew's unspoken expectations and had actively tried to 'cover my tracks'. The individual interview therefore illuminated how Graham was juggling a number of scripts that potentially gave meaning to his practices – alternative 'queer' ones that promoted negotiated non-monogamy in relationships, as well as mainstream ones that linked monogamy to 'authentic' couple and married commitments, which associate sex outside relationships with 'cheating' (c.f. Duncombe et al., 2004). While the joint interview suggested that Andrew's script for doing the relationship won out as the strong one, because of its links to morally weighty mainstream scripts, Graham's individual interview indicated that his narrative was a weak and less-than-robust one, as it was 'internally' conflicted.

Practically speaking, individual interviews provide a context in which tensions and negotiations in relationships can be explored from the perspective of biographically, socioculturally and morally situated selves. By enabling the narration of a reflective self, individual interviews also generate deep insights into couple *and* self-conflicts that stem from negotiating different moral value systems, relational orientations and possibilities. Individual interviews revealed that in scripting relationships, partners not only negotiate relationship scripting with their partner, but they also negotiate with their 'selves'.

Conclusion: interviews, scripting and power

As noted earlier, several stories can be told about any one relationship, and we have illuminated how joint couple and individual interviews generate three differently situated narratives, a couple one and two self ones. In doing so, we have told another story: how narratives of relating were actively *generated* by the research, how their form and content was shaped by the interactions the research involved, and how we have given them sociological meaning by our approach to analysis. We have generated this second-order narrative to comprehend how our methods and their implementation shaped our

'findings' about young couples' Civil Partnerships. All methods shape the 'realities' they document, and this raises issues of power.

In terms of the research context, couple and personal stories about relationships are not simply told in interviews: they are activated, shaped and 'co-produced' in interaction with the researcher. The questions researchers ask, and the ways and contexts in which they are asked, are powerful in shaping and constraining the couple and personal stories that research participants tell. But it is not only the researcher who has the power to shape the narrative. As we have shown, interviewees actively construct and perform their narratives for multiple audiences. They can be agents, and can be constrained, in telling their stories and in assembling stories to give their relationships meaning. Thus, interview narratives are the product of the situated interactional contexts in which they emerge, and involve the negotiation of agency and constraint: put another way, they involve complex *flows* of power (c.f. Plummer, 1995).

While relationship stories as they are scripted in interviews are shaped by the research context, they do not come from 'nowhere'. They are linked to relationships as they are lived, and can be analysed for the intersubjective *and* subjective dynamics that shape the scripting and doing of relationships in practice. As such, interview narratives about relationships can be analysed for the flow of power in relationships themselves and how such power is linked to the sociocultural contexts in which they are lived. By researching couples where both partners were aged up to 36 years when they entered into Civil Partnerships in the United Kingdom, our research is exploring relationships that are historically and socioculturally distinctive. As noted earlier, our research is concerned with the 'new' relational possibilities that have opened up for formalized (or 'married') same-sex relationships. Established research-based understandings of the differences and/or similarities between marriage and same-sex relationships, and of the power dynamics that shape their scripting, are not straightforwardly applicable to these new relationships. Likewise, established methodologies for exploring power in relationships are unlikely to grasp the complex flows of power that these relationships involve and how they are linked to changing sociocultural contexts that are reconfiguring contemporary relational possibilities.

Hitherto, by relying on couple *or* individual interviews, and by focusing on the 'truths' they generate, couple studies have contributed to two strong sociological narratives about relationships: that gender power determines how heterosexual relationships are negotiated and scripted in practice and that the absence of clear-cut gender differences in same-sex relationships is linked to 'freer' and more equal negotiation and scripting. Our joint approach to interviewing young 'married' *and* same-sex couples and our narrative approach to analysis suggest something else: that in light of changing relational possibilities, there is a need to rethink how we conceptualize and study the negotiation and scripting of relationships along with the power dynamics they involve (be they formalized, married and/or same-sex relationships). We propose the value of an interactionist methodology, based on joint and individual interviews and orientated towards narrative analysis, as a strategy for exploring changing relational realities.

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Notes

1. Civil Partnership is the legal term for formally recognized same-sex relationships in the United Kingdom. It affords same-sex couples almost all of legal benefits and responsibilities associated with marriage, and it is commonly referred to as same-sex or gay marriage. Other states have introduced similar arrangements (for an overview see Harding, 2011).
2. This study was entitled 'Just like marriage? Young couple's Civil Partnerships'. The study was undertaken by Brian Heaphy (Principle Investigator), Carol Smart (Co-Investigator) and Anna Einarsdottir (Research Associate). The names used to identify participants in this article are pseudonyms.

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Biographical notes

Brian Heaphy is a Professor and Head of Sociology at the University of Manchester. His research and writing have focused on personal life and sociocultural change, and more specifically on

relationships, sexualities, gender, ageing, living with HIV, theories of social change and qualitative methodologies. His publications include the books *Same Sex Intimacies* (with J. Weeks and C. Donovan) and *Late Modernity and Social Change: Reconstructing Social and Personal Life*. With Anna Einarsdottir and Carol Smart he is currently completing a book *Civil Partnerships* (Palgrave, forthcoming).

Anna Einarsdottir completed her PhD in 2008. Following this, she took up a Research Associate position at the Morgan Centre, University of Manchester working on the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)-funded study *Just like marriage? Young couple's Civil Partnerships* with Professors Brian Heaphy and Carol Smart. Anna is currently in the Manchester Business School, working with Dr Helge Hoel and Professor Duncan Lewis on an ESRC-funded project entitled *Lesbian, gay and bisexual employees' experience of discrimination, bullying and harassment at work.*