A Portfolio of Research Work

Including an investigation of:

Towards a grounded theory of how closeness is conceptualised by a group of mid-life men

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the degree of Practitioner Doctorate (PsychD) in Psychotherapeutic and Counselling Psychology

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September 2018
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Statement of Anonymity

In order to ensure confidentially and anonymity of all clients, research participants and supervisors throughout this portfolio, all potentially identifying information has been omitted and real names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

Acknowledgements

Without my research participants none of this portfolio would have been possible. I am very thankful to them for being instrumental to my personal and professional development. I would also like to thank my research supervisor Linda Morison for her professional and personal support throughout.

Since closeness has been the focus of my research, I am grateful to those individuals who have provided me with this relational experience throughout my training. I would particularly like to thank my husband, mother and fellow trainees.

This training journey involved saying goodbye to someone much loved and hello to a miracle arrival. I would therefore like to dedicate this portfolio to Ed and Pru.
Contents

Abstract 1

Introduction to the Research Dossier 2

Literature review:
A review of literature on men and their close relationships 5

Research Report 1:
A qualitative exploration of mid-life men’s experiences of relational closeness 37

Research Report 2:
Towards a grounded theory of how closeness is conceptualised by a group of mid-life men 85
Abstract

This research portfolio contains three pieces of work conducted during my training as a Counselling Psychologist at the University of Surrey. Initially there is a review of literature on men and their close relationships. This is followed by two qualitative studies, with each based on a group of white British, professional mid-life men. The first of these explores experiences of relational closeness and the second focuses on developing new theory regarding how closeness is conceptualised.
Introduction

From an early stage in my counselling psychology training, I was interested in the links between relational experiences and psychological wellbeing. My research choices of relationship and participant group were motivated by the chance to undertake a qualitative study with fellow trainees in my first year. Discussion within the trainee group, as well as with my partner at home, led to the decision to focus on the close relational experiences of white British, mid-life men from similar mid-high socioeconomic backgrounds. The rationale for selecting this specific demographic was that by virtue of gender, race, ethnicity, and background, this group has been associated with the stereotype of keeping a stiff upper lip (Renton, 2017) hence assumed to be emotionally restrained and self-reliant at times of adversity. If assumptions matched reality, out of all the relational experiences I could explore, close relationships, especially ones characterised by emotional self-disclosure and interdependency, could prove particularly challenging for my research group of interest. I was therefore keen to know more about how this contextually similar group of men understood closeness and how it featured in their everyday lives. Mid-life was the age-range of specific research interest, because Western men have been stereotyped as being susceptible to a psychological crisis (Wethington, 2000) at this stage of their lives. I was curious whether research findings supported this stereotype and the extent to which mid-life men engaged in close relational support at times of distress.

The findings of my first year qualitative study indicated that for the men interviewed, emotionally close relational experiences were infrequent, and at times of distress a number of alternative coping strategies were employed. I explored the topic of men and distress further, and became increasingly concerned about statistics related to men’s mental health. UK suicides rates are the highest amongst mid-life men (ONS, 2017; Scowcroft, 2017), yet British studies such as Sullivan, Camic and Brown’s (2015) indicate that men are far less likely than women to seek out psychological support at times of distress. Reports from the charity the Men’s Health Forum (MHF) (Wilkins, 2010; Wilkins & Kemble, 2011; Wilkins, 2013) highlight the mental health concerns of British boys and men. One of these was produced in collaboration with Relate (Wilkins, 2013) and it specifically focuses on how to improve men’s access to
relational support at times of personal distress.

It could be argued that men from mid-high socioeconomic backgrounds have greater educational status and financial means to access psychological assistance when required, than similarly aged men from less privileged backgrounds. However, I started to wonder whether there was something particularly significant about the social expectations of professional, mid-life men that augmented a desire to be self-reliant and appear to have everything under control at times of difficulty. Both in the media and within my social and professional world, I was hearing about men of a similar age and background to my husband being fine and then quite suddenly experiencing a ‘break-down’ or psychological crisis. The speed and surprise of their deterioration, suggested that these men had been very adept at concealing great personal distress, even from their close family and friends. There seemed to be very little sense of there being an intermediate phase, one between everything being fine to a position of being completely unable to cope. In my experience on clinical placement, I recalled a number of male clients with a clinical history of ‘all being well,’ and then experiencing a sudden decline in psychological wellbeing. One such example is the subject of my psychodynamic case study/process report (Appendix 1c).

Whilst concerned and interested in men in general, as a starting point to research I started with men associated with the stereotypes of keeping a stiff upper lip and a mid-life crisis. Given the psychological benefits associated with close relational support (Mashek & Aron, 2004) the aim of my research has been to acquire a greater understanding of how this contextually similar group of men experience and understand closeness. In line with counselling psychology’s focus on reflective practice, each of my studies is followed by a self-reflective section in which I discuss my active involvement in the research process. Pseudonyms have been used throughout and identifiable information omitted in order to preserve the confidentiality and anonymity of all my research participants.

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1 For reasons of confidentiality, these have been omitted from this e-thesis.
References


A review of literature on men and their close relationships.

[Note: Layout of this report is predominantly in accordance with the criteria for submission to the Counselling Psychology Review (Appendix A)]

Abstract

Purpose: To search for literature on men and their close relationships. To explore the extent to which findings challenge and/or support the stereotypes of men *keeping a stiff upper lip* at times of adversity and being susceptible to a *crisis* at mid-life.

Methods: Key phrases were entered into psychological research databases resulting in a number of peer-reviewed journal and book references.

Findings: Research findings generally demonstrate that men are less likely than women to describe their close relationships in terms of emotional disclosure. Even at times of personal adversity there is a tendency towards emotional restraint and self-reliance, in support of the stereotype of *keeping a stiff upper lip*. There is evidence of context-specific occasions when men do engage in an emotionally based expression of closeness, one that challenges ‘traditionally’ masculine stereotypes. Evidence also exists of an understanding or ‘voice’ of inter-male closeness defined more by shared activities than by emotional expression.

Conclusions: Very little literature exists that explores individual male experiences of relational closeness and the contextual factors that influence these. There is insufficient research on men at mid-life to adequately explore the concept of a *crisis* at this time. Proposals for future research include further qualitative studies that focus on mid-life men’s experiences of closeness within all types of relationships. Understanding how individual men experience and understand closeness could help inform how they are supported by both their social network and professionally at times of psychological distress.

Key words: closeness, *keeping a stiff upper lip*, mid-life, *crisis*, masculinity
Introduction

This review explores literature on men’s close relationships. It starts with a brief summary of approaches to relationship research followed by a look at how relational closeness is currently conceptualised. Links between men’s psychological wellbeing and access to close relational support is then considered, as well as the potential contextual influences on men’s close relational behaviour. Of specific research interest are white British men from socioeconomically mid-high social status backgrounds. By virtue of their race, ethnicity, and background, these men have been contextually associated with the stereotype of *keeping a stiff upper lip* (Renton, 2017), hence assumed to be stoic and self-reliant at times of adversity rather than disclose emotional vulnerabilities and rely on relational support. Mid-life is the age range of interest, since men from Western culture have been stereotyped as being susceptible to a psychological crisis at this life-stage (Wethington, 2000).

Theoretical approaches to relationship research

Freud’s theory of psychoanalysis (1949) in the late 19\textsuperscript{th}/early 20\textsuperscript{th} century could be viewed as the first scientific approach to studying close personal relationships. As a medical practitioner, he based his developmental theories on individual case studies and used detailed case histories to formulate understandings of his patients’ distress. Freud linked early childhood experiences to personality development and the ability to closely relate to others in later adult life (Freud, 1949). Developmental theories based at least in part on classic psychoanalytic principles followed. Attachment Theory proposed that relationship styles in adulthood were primarily modelled on a child’s early attachment with care-givers (Bowlby, 1988), whilst Erikson’s (1968) psychosocial stages of development viewed the ability to closely relate to others, resulted from the successful resolution of an intimacy versus isolation crisis in young adulthood.

Through the late 1950s to early 1970s, a different approach to relationship research emerged through the development of person-centred theory by Carl Rogers (Rogers, 1957; Sanders, 2006). Rogers based much of his theory on therapeutic and parental relationships, and then extended his thinking to include romantic partnerships and those within therapeutic groups. In contrast to psychoanalysis, Rogers’ (1957) focus was on conscious, active relational processes. He proposed that providing authentic, non-judgmental care (referred to as core conditions of congruence, unconditional
positive regard and empathy), was fundamental for establishing the inter-personal trust required for individuals to disclose emotional vulnerabilities within their close relationships.

From the 1960s, the majority of relationship research became empirical, quantitative or deductive in approach, with the focus on testing out theories or hypotheses about relational behaviours. Studies were often based on comparisons between men and women, and a number of psychometric tools were developed and subsequently used to collect relational data. For close relationships, these included the Relationship Closeness Inventory (RCI) (Berscheid, Snyder & Omoto, 1989) and the Perceived Interpersonal Closeness Scale (PICS) (Popovic et al, 2003). Findings that suggested significant gender differences in close relational behaviour were attributed to a combination of biological and social factors, with the former taking greater precedence the younger the age of the sample (Weinberg et al, 1999). The development of gender role theory introduced the concept of socially constructed stereotypical or ‘traditional’ masculine and feminine roles, with a gendered script or set of relational behaviours ascribed to each. Whilst ‘traditional’ femininity was associated with emotional expression and self-disclosure, ‘traditional’ masculinity was aligned with stoicism and self-reliance (Levant et al, 1992; Nardi, 2007). Gender Role Strain (GRS) or Conflict (GRC) (O’Neil, 2015) was the term used to describe the psychological distress associated with adherence to a restrictive set of behaviours associated with stereotypical gender roles. The progression of masculinity research, led to the acknowledgment of multiple social constructions of masculinity (Connell, 2005), and with it an observation of men’s engagement in emotionally close relational behaviour that opposed stereotypical assumptions.

From the 1970s, the introduction of qualitative methodologies to social research provided an alternative approach to learning more about close personal relationships. Inductive reasoning with the aim of generating new theory rather than testing out hypotheses underlay these qualitative approaches with the focus on smaller samples and greater depth of data (Lyons & Coyle, 2007). This new approach introduced alternative theoretical lenses through which close relationships could be explored, including an interpretative phenomenological one (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Adherence to a number of carefully defined criteria (Yardley, 2000) that included being highly sensitive to context, and an acknowledgement of the researcher’s active
role in the collection and analysis of data, provided credibility to this approach. However, as with other research methodologies these qualitative approaches had limitations. These included a high probability of findings being skewed towards individuals willing to engage in more personalised forms of data collection (such as in depth one to one interviews), and an inability to generalise findings, with data limited to the study’s population or contextually similar groups.

**How research has conceptualised relational closeness**

Whilst the body of research is extensive and closeness has been approached from multiple perspectives, a single model of conceptualisation remains elusive. This is perhaps unsurprising given that closeness is both complex and multi-dimensional in nature, with no uniformly agreed defining criteria (Mashek & Aron, 2004). Berscheid and Peplau stated that words including: “love, trust, commitment, caring, stability, attachment, one-ness, meaningful, and significant” (1983/2002, p.12), have been frequent descriptors of close relationships. However, these words have also been used to describe intimate relationships, creating confusion as to whether intimacy and closeness be viewed as identical or distinct relational constructs. An overlap in understandings is illustrated by the conclusion of Gaia’s review of intimacy research, in which “closeness” (2002, p.165) is named as one of the seven defining characteristics of an emotionally intimate relationship.

In their review of closeness and intimacy research, Aron and Mashek (2004) proposed at least two themes of commonality between close and intimate relationships; both involve the self, and both are interactional in nature. Despite overlaps in meaning, Mashek and Aron (2004) highlighted that social researchers have tended to approach closeness and intimacy as separate relational concepts. As a result, separate definitions and/or models of understanding have been proposed for intimacy (Gaia, 2002; Fehr, 2004; Reis & Shaver, 1988) and closeness (Aron, Mashek & Aron, 2004; Collins & Feeney, 2004) respectively. Whilst a lack of consensus regarding definition makes it challenging to assess relational closeness, one of the most frequently used tools in empirical research has been the Relationship Closeness Inventory (RCI) (Berscheid et al, 1989). This was originally developed based on close relationship research by Kelly et al. (1983/2004) and assesses closeness based on patterns of inter-dependence. The RCI asks an individual to identify who they feel closest to and then answer questions regarding the frequency and diversity of their interactions with this person, as well as
the influence this ‘close other’ has on their thoughts, feelings, behaviours, future plans and goals. In their *Handbook of Closeness and Intimacy*, as well as revisiting the RCI, Mashek and Aron (2004) discuss the Inclusion of Other in the Self (IOS) Scale. Based on self-expansion and interdependence theories (Agnew, Loving, Le & Goodfriend, 2004), one of a possible seven images of separate to increasingly overlapping ‘self’ and ‘other’ circles, provides a pictorial measure of the closeness of a relationship. Their handbook also includes a chapter dedicated to understanding adult relational closeness from an Attachment Theory perspective (Collins & Feeling, 2004). This developmental approach (Bowlby, 1988) proposes that the models of attachment experienced in childhood form a template for close relationships in adult life.

**Psychological wellbeing and relational support**

In an attempt to quantify an individual’s psychological wellbeing, both researchers and clinicians have referred to the term subjective wellbeing (SWB) (Deiner, 2000). This refers to individual experiences of positive emotions such as joy, and is a term that is regularly used in psychological literature, including the annually published Happiness Report (Helliwell, Layard, & Sachs, 2015). When evaluating SWB, the aspect of social support considered to be of particular relevance, is having someone to “count on at times of trouble” (Helliwell et al., 2015, p.23). With regard to men’s psychological wellbeing, there has been increasing concern over how Western men express and manage their distress (Galdas, Cheater, & Marshall, 2005; Kingerlee, 2012). Much greater levels of alcohol and drug abuse (Ridge, Emslie & White, 2011; Woodford, 2012) and extreme over-work (Robinson, 2014) are reported in men in comparison to women. Research indicates that men are far less likely than women to seek help at times of psychological distress (Sullivan, Camic & Brown, 2015), and UK statistics demonstrate that British men are three times more likely than British women to take their own lives (ONS, 2015).

A reflection of concerns has been the emergence of charities that are focussed on men’s psychological health. These include the Men’s Health Forum (MHF) and the Campaign Against Living Miserably (CALM). In an overview of influences on masculinity over time, Haggett concluded: “it is the familiar image of the tough, stoic male that remains the dominant or ‘hegemonic’ masculinity in the developed Western world” (2014, p.426). This hegemonic model was described by Donaldson (1993) and refers to a ‘traditional’ masculinity that encourages self-reliance and stoicism,
relational behaviour very much aligned with the stereotype of *keeping a stiff upper lip*.

The phrase *keeping a stiff upper lip* was derived from the physical image of a trembling lip, when someone was either very afraid or emotionally very moved. Despite being predominantly associated with British culture, the term was first reported in the early 19th century in American newspapers, the Massachusetts Spy and the Huron Reflector, and later quoted in classic American novels including Uncle Tom’s Cabin (Beecher Stowe, 1852). Despite its American origins, from the end of the 19th century onwards the phrase came to represent the stoic attitude and emotional restraint of the British nation in the face of adversity. It was associated with a certain type of man: white British, usually drawn from the ‘upper middle to upper social classes’ and a product of the British boarding school system (Renton, 2017). Such schooling was known for its harsh environment and ‘character-building’ rituals, where the ability to cope and appear to remain emotionally in control were virtues to be encouraged and admired. Whilst predominantly associated with Victorian Britain, the phrase continues to reference a cultural stereotype in British literature (Renton, 2017; Wodehouse, 1963) and research (Bennett, 2007, p.347). Though mindful that *keeping a stiff upper lip* makes assumptions about individuals, it does introduce a consideration of how contextual factors such as race, ethnicity and socioeconomic background potentially influence a man’s engagement in close relational support.

Evidence of greater unaddressed distress amongst men in comparison to women (Sullivan et al., 2015), suggests that at times of emotional distress, men are experiencing barriers to engaging with the type of relational support that could improve their psychological wellbeing. The concept of a male ‘mid-life crisis’ (Wethington, 2000) for Western men could simply be viewed as another stereotype. However, mid-life is associated with the highest suicide rates amongst men in the UK (ONS, 2017; Scowcroft, 2017), which indicates that this life-stage could be a particularly challenging one for men. Biggs notes that there is limited research on the use of counselling psychology practice in midlife and he refers to this life stage as a “*period of heightened sensitivity to one’s position within a complex social environment*” (2010, p.355). In his review of studies, he concludes that mid-life is associated with a change in personal priorities perhaps as a result of a growing awareness of ones’ own mortality at this stage of life.

This review asks: what can research tell us about men and their close relationships?
Whilst both *keeping a stiff upper lip* and *midlife crisis* are stereotypes, a review of this type aims to illuminate the extent to which stereotypical assumptions match reality regarding relational behaviour at times of psychological distress.

**Method**

A narrative methodological approach was taken to this review, with a combination of key phrases entered into the following databases: PsycINFO, MEDLINE, PsycARTICLES, PsycBOOKS, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, PsycTESTS. The type of literature searched for was initially limited to peer-reviewed academic journals and book sources, but a limited number of charity-based reports were also incorporated into the final review. Key phrases used in the search were: *mid-life men, stiff upper lip, emotional intimacy, relational closeness, male distress, mid-life crisis, self-disclosure and emotional expression*.

**Results**

The review’s search resulted in a merging of masculinity and relationship literature. Results were divided into studies based on developmental theories, gender comparisons, on barriers to emotional closeness, inter-male friendships, qualitative approaches and male distress and therapy. Unless otherwise stated, all of the research studies cited have originated from researchers in North American academic institutions and the books are publications from American authors.

**Developmental theories**

Two relevant studies based on psychoanalytic principles, though with very different methodologies, arose from the search. *The male mid-life crisis in the grown-up resilient child* (Braverman & Paris, 1993) centres on the authors’ own clinical cases and therefore links back to the clinical origins of psychoanalytic theory. The paper focuses on white, professional men’s relationship difficulties leading to a “crisis” during mid-life. Braverman and Paris (1993) hypothesised that a lack of maternal availability and care in childhood was linked to a subsequent emotional invulnerability or resilience in adulthood. They went on to propose that emotional needs were satisfied through validation from educational and later professional achievements, but that a significant trigger event at mid-life overwhelmed a previously effective resilience. At this point they described their male clients turning unsuccessfully to their
personal relationships for emotional comfort and support. The authors concluded that the mid-life male clients in their study, and contextually similar ones, struggled to engage in emotionally close relationships in their social worlds and form effective therapeutic alliances with psychoanalysts. Whilst it focuses on mid-life men and the concept of a crisis associated with this life-stage, the main limitation of this paper is the extent to which findings can be extrapolated beyond the three clinical cases on which it is based. The conclusions also place responsibility for therapeutic success on the male clients alone and fail to consider the therapist’s role in creating an effective working alliance.

In contrast to a case-based study, Mahalik, Cournoyer, DeFranc, Cherry and Napolitano (1998) took a quantitative research approach when they explored links between men’s psychological defences and their close relational behaviour. The authors hypothesised a positive link between immature and neurotic defences and gender role conflict (GRC) factors and aimed to identify the main influences on GRC at critical developmental periods in men’s lives. They proposed that this knowledge could allow preventative measures to be taken to improve men’s relationships and help them avoid self-harming behaviour. Using psychometrics, they collected data from a sample of 115 men and their results demonstrated an inter-correlation that supported their hypothesis. In terms of methodology, Mahalik et al (1998) can be credited for highlighting the same limitations in their study’s discussion that were picked up by this review. The first referred to their method of data collection. Their use of the Defence Mechanism Inventory (DMI) and Defence Style Questionnaire (DSQ) to collect data, made the assumption that psychological defences are available for self-report. This is questionable given that according to psychoanalytic theory, these defences are based on unconscious processes. The authors justified using psychometric tools by citing research demonstrating a close correlation between the clinical identification of defences and results from these tools. The second major critique, was that the authors drew conclusions about relational behaviour of men in general from a sample based predominantly on young, white American, educated men (median age 26 years). An awareness of restricted sampling and subsequent lack of diversity was demonstrated when the authors advised exploring GRC in men from other “racial groups, socioeconomic status, classes, and educational levels” (Mahalik et al., 1998, p.254).
Gender comparisons

A number of studies arose that compared close relational behaviour between men and women. Stokes, Fuehrer and Childs (1980) hypothesised that there were gender differences in self-disclosure to different target people. Data collected via questionnaires from 54 men and 54 women (all undergraduate students) supported this hypothesis and demonstrated that men disclosed more than women to strangers and casual acquaintances, and that women disclosed more than men to close friends. The proposed explanation for this gender difference was that men felt a desire to be emotionally restrained and preserve an identity of ‘traditional’ masculinity in their male close relationships and that this was less important in their interactions with strangers and casual acquaintances. The stated purpose of the study was for reflections on self-disclosure to be included into therapeutic assessments. This aim was a commendable one, since knowing whom, if anyone, an individual can trust enough to share personal information with, can illuminate understanding of their support network at times of distress. However, incorporating strangers as potential targets for self-disclosure failed to acknowledge potential gender differences in perceptions of physical safety as a result of sharing personal information with untrusted sources. The findings were also based on an undergraduate student group hence their applicability to older men is questionable.

Staying with the theme of gender comparisons, Aries and Johnson (1983) collected self-reports of male and female conversations amongst same-sex close friends and used factor analysis to analyse the data. Results supported sex-stereotypical assumptions that in comparison to men, women were more emotionally expressive and spoke about more intimate topics with their same-sex close friends. Nearly 20 years later, the results of a survey-based study on conversations in close friendships (Oxley, Dzindolet & Miller, 2002) continued to support gender differences in conversational topics. Results indicated that men tended to talk about subjects such as work or politics rather than personal matters, and were also more likely to offer advice in response to problems, whereas the women surveyed tended to listen and comfort rather than problem solve.

Banks and Hansford (2000) continued to explore same sex friendships and specifically turned attention to gender comparisons in engagement in emotionally close relationships. Once again, this study’s sample population was predominantly
young, white American students (324 women and 241 men), with a median age of 19 years, and data was collected via multiple psychometrics. Despite both men and women rating emotionally close and supportive friendships as more enjoyable than others, results indicated that men were far less likely than women to engage in these types of relationships, even with their same sex “best” (2000, p.63) friends. These findings led Banks and Hansford to ask the following question in their study’s discussion: “What is wrong with men that they can’t or won’t do what they enjoy to the same extent as women?” (2000, p.77). On review, this wording was considered unfortunate, since it exposed a negative critique towards men rather than reflect the authors’ expressed desire for future research to move away from a “male-deficit” (2000, p.77) line of enquiry.

The gender comparison studies reviewed, produced data indicating that even within their same sex closest friendships, men are far less likely than women to talk about their emotions and disclose vulnerabilities. Whilst the consistency of findings indicates validity to the quantitative methodologies on which these studies are based, two main critiques arose as a result of this review. The first was the reliability of using psychometrics to quantify close relational behaviour. The second was the restricted male sample populations on which findings were predominantly based. As with Mahalik et al.’s study (1998), the cited gender comparison studies (Aries & Johnson, 1983; Banks & Hansford’s, 2000; Stokes et al, 1980) all drew conclusions about men in general from data limited to young, predominantly white American students.

**Barriers to relational closeness**

The literature search resulted in a number of papers exploring barriers to emotional closeness for men. Over 40 years ago, Lewis (1978) concluded that barriers to greater inter-male emotional closeness included an adherence to a ‘traditional’ role or concept of masculinity, homophobia, a lack of suitable role models, competition and a reluctance to expose vulnerability. These barriers continued to be explored, some, including inter-male competition as a stand-alone entity (Singleton & Vacca, 2007) and others as part of the gender rules of male friendships (Banks & Hansford, 2000; Felmee, Sweet & Sinclair, 2012). These rules referred to a set of behaviours associated with a socially constructed gender role model of masculinity, a stereotype described by Levant et al, (1992) and Nardi, (2007), and also referred to as ‘traditional’, dominant or hegemonic masculinity in Western culture.
One researcher keen to research the influence of social expectations on understandings and expressions of relational behaviour was Gaia (2002/2013). Since closeness and intimacy have overlapping meanings (Mashek & Aron, 2004), Gaia’s (2002) model of intimacy can to some extent illuminate understanding of social influences on expressions of closeness. The social psychological model she proposed (Gaia, 2002) as the result of her review of intimacy literature recognised the influence of gender stereotypes on expressions of intimacy. Her later mixed methods study (Gaia, 2013) went on to explore the social acceptability of expressions of emotional intimacy. Data was collected based on participants’ observations of one of a choice of interactions, each involving a different gender coupling engaged in an emotionally intimate exchange. Part one of the study involved the collection and analysis of psychometric data, and part two involved semi-structured interviews and the thematic analysis of observers’ responses. Taken in entirety, Gaia (2013) reported that her study’s findings indicated that men were more likely than women to judge emotionally intimate behaviour from their same sex peers in a negative way. As a result, she proposed that it was other men who were “the primary enforcers of the gendered limits on emotional expression” (Gaia, 2013, p.599). She concluded that this information could be useful both in educational programmes and for professionals working therapeutically with men in distress.

Gaia’s (2013) study was significant since it focused on the role of the ‘other,’ notably a male ‘other,’ in a man’s disclosure of emotional vulnerability. Research attention on the relationship, especially the inter-male relationship, was a welcome move away from observations of individual behaviour. However, Gaia’s use of a participant group of predominantly white American undergraduate college students (with a mean age of 19 years), suggested that her study’s data and reference to other men as “primary enforcers” (2013, p.599) was representative of a contextually specific group of men. Whilst she did not explicitly refer to this in her discussion, the tentative wording of her findings, that they “offer some support for the idea that social expectations may influence the expression of intimacy” (2013, p.599) suggests an awareness of her study’s limitations regarding sampling.

Inter-male friendships

Levy’s (2005) was one of the few studies reviewed that broadened the scope of men’s relationship research beyond a student-aged population. He was interested in the
same-sex friendships of mid-life men, more specifically a group of married, white, middle-class, men he referred to as “middlers” (2005, p.200). By virtue of their race, class, age and marital status he proposed that this group represented the “normative” (2005, p.200) male, hence were an important point of social reference. As well as focusing on an under-explored life-stage, Levy (2005) proposed moving away from either sex difference or role theory essentialist comparisons of behaviour, and focus on men alone and explore their friendships with other men in terms of gender relations. Levy (2005) hypothesised that men interacted with other men in two main ways, either an activity or group membership-based comradeship or a more emotionally expressive and mutually significant friendship. The choice of interaction was viewed by Levy (2005) as dependent on context and degrees to which each man complied with hegemonic or ‘traditional’ masculinity. The lower the adherence the more likelihood a man would have friendships rather than comradeships with other men. Using a web-based questionnaire, Levy’s (2005) choice of data collection demonstrated some careful reflection on his part. Whilst acknowledging an in-built sampling bias as a result of online recruitment, he also observed that this anonymous form of data collection might result in more accurate responses to emotionally charged questions. Being accessible online also meant the study could be completed at a time more practically suited to each man’s lifestyle and be a form of research participation that some men might prefer to a more personalised method like a one to one interview. Levy viewed his exploratory factor analysis of questionnaire responses as a “productive partnership between quantitative and qualitative methods” (2005, p. 218) and proposed that men’s relationships with other men were quantifiable through different constructs based on words selected as answers from a questionnaire.

Levy’s (2005) findings from his male friendship study in part contradicted earlier gender comparison studies (Aries & Johnson, 1983; Banks & Hansford, 2000; Stokes et al, 1980), ones that had predominantly supported men’s avoidance of emotional closeness in their male relationships. He described male friendship as a voluntary relationship in which each party is equal, irreplaceable and able to express a range of emotions, including both anger and love. In contrast, he proposed that male comradeship represents an alternative, less emotionally based form of male bonding. Whilst refreshing to find research that focused purely on men’s friendships with other men in mid-life, there were two main points of concern regarding Levy’s (2005) study.
The first was the degree to which a questionnaire, and constructs based on words selected from it, could replace men’s own words in describing their relationships. The second was that findings suggested an either/or scenario between *comradeship* and *friendship*, with little sense of any male friendships existing outside of these two constructs.

Greif (2009) also turned research attention to men’s relationships, and based his book *Buddy System: Understanding Male Friendships*, on a qualitative study that explored both men and women’s same-sex friendships. The study involved interviews with 386 men and 122 women that were based on a specially designed questionnaire. This included some open-ended questions so that the men’s own words could be recorded. Thirty-nine student researchers, from a graduate social work course, each conducted ten interviews. They applied content analysis to responses and then discussed and compared findings with fellow interviewers. Based on what Greif (2009) and his students interpreted as being the key themes, the book describes a range of male friendship related topics including; different categories of male friendship, influences of fathers on men’s friendships, differences between men and women’s friendships and changes in men’s friendships over the decades (from their 20s to their 90s). Greif described four categories of male friendship; “must”, “rust”, “trust” or “just” friends (2009, p.4). As its name suggests, the “must” friends were the relationships the men identified as being the closest, those turned to, to share both joys and personal crises. In terms of mid-life, Greif (2009) described two decades that spanned this life-stage. Themes from the data indicated differing friendship needs for men in their 40s in comparison to those in their 50s, with the potential for younger men to have needs more governed by family and work responsibilities, as opposed to older men with potentially more time to pursue friendships based on their own interests.

Greif’s (2009) text on male friendships documents a range of male relational behaviour that challenges stereotypical expectations and provides support for intermale emotional closeness. It also expands upon Levy’s (2005) either/or scenario of male *friendship* versus *comradeship* and by using men’s own words describes a variety of friendship types. Devoting a chapter to nine different decades demonstrates an awareness of life-stage influences on male friendship patterns that is commendable. However, as with any text based on research, Greif acknowledged the limitations of
his study’s methodology (2009, p.11, p.263). These included awareness that due to the majority of male study participants being known to the student interviewers, the likelihood of socially desirable responses was high. He also acknowledged that grouping participants based on their demographic information was difficult. Whilst there was diversity regarding men’s age, the results were predominantly skewed towards a sample of white Protestant East Coast American men, who were married or living with someone, and willing to be interviewed. Reflecting on his methodology, Greif (2009) accepted that the use of multiple interviewers, and in turn multiple viewpoints, probably resulted in a greater variation in key themes than had there been fewer involved. In his introduction, he referred to the study’s data as a “foundation for building knowledge around this most important feature of modern life” (2009, p.11) and that the book was ultimately based on his interpretations of his students’ findings. This was perhaps most apparent when he referenced his own personal network when the “must”, “rust”, “trust” or “just” categories of male friendships were initially introduced.

An attempt to represent the viewpoints of nearly four hundred men in a single publication was perhaps overly ambitious, with the text reading as if based on individual cases, rather than on a wide-scale research study. Greif’s (2009) work is however to be commended for offering a taste of different types of friendships for American men, that could not be found for British men in this review’s search. In contrast to a number of research studies reviewed, his narrative is relatively free of scientific jargon, hence accessible to readers outside of academia. This broadens both its appeal and applicability, with the latter illustrated by a final chapter offering practical suggestions about how men can immediately start improving their current male friendships.

**Qualitative approaches**

Including the qualitative study on which Greif’s (2009) book was based, in comparison to quantitative studies relatively few qualitative papers arose in this review’s search. With the focus on subjective experiences, these studies predominantly collected data on men and relational closeness through one to one semi-structured interviews. Wagner-Raphael, Seal and Ehrhardt’s (2000) study explored men’s close relationships with both women and other men. Fifty-six ethnically diverse, heterosexual American men of varying ages were interviewed over 90 minutes, with a
set of open-ended probes used to elicit comparisons between their perceptions of closeness with women as opposed to their perceptions of closeness with men. Initially men were asked about women they were romantically involved with, and then they were asked about their close male relationships. Transcripts of interviews were analysed for emergent themes guided by the principles of grounded theory analysis. Findings indicated that the men described closeness with both women and men, but this closeness was qualitatively different. Each gender appeared to fulfil a different role for the men who participated, with closeness with other men characterised by feeling relaxed and able to be themselves, whilst closeness with women was characterised by the ability to disclose more emotionally.

In their discussion, Wagner-Raphael et al. (2000) proposed that their study’s findings indicated that men tended to endorse traditional stereotypes by placing an emphasis on sexual intimacy as a prerequisite to emotional closeness with women. The authors reflected on whether the order of questioning, asking about closeness with women prior to closeness with men, had any influence on findings. They did not however comment on why closeness with women was only explored within the context of a sexual relationship. There was no opportunity for their male research participants to reflect on experiences of relational closeness in platonic relationships with women. This could have allowed direct comparisons of closeness between women and men, in the absence of sexual intimacy. Whilst the study’s authors analysed the interview data, there was also no reference to the potential relevance on findings of four other researchers in the team conducting the actual interviews. As with all research studies, this one had limitations, but it was refreshing in its desire to explore men’s actual perceptions of relational closeness, an approach notably absent from the majority of relationship research reviewed.

As with Gaia’s (2002/2013) work, the focus of Patrick and Beckenbach’s (2009) qualitative study was intimacy rather than closeness. Once again an over-lap in meanings (Mashek & Aron, 2004) indicates that findings from their study on men’s perceptions of intimacy can to some extent inform understanding of men’s perceptions of relational closeness. Patrick and Beckenbach (2009) interviewed five men about their experiences of intimacy within their heterosexual relationships, and thematic analysis of interview transcripts resulted in three main themes. The authors proposed that these themes both supported and challenged findings about men and intimacy.
from past research. The first theme related to men’s understanding of intimacy, that it was an experience sometimes difficult to articulate and an awareness of its presence was often only possible in the event of its absence. In contrast to research suggesting men preferred not to share their emotions, findings indicated that in context-specific occasions, notably a sense of feeling “safe” (2009, p.52) men were keen to be emotionally expressive. As in Wagner-Raphael et al.’s (2001) study, the ability for the men to feel relaxed and themselves was identified as being essential to recognise the relationship as being intimate. However, this sense of relaxation was more likely to occur in the company of women they felt intimate with, than in the company of other men, with whom they would “put on certain ‘masks’” (2009, p.52). The study’s second theme referred to gender’s influence on masculinity, with all five men referring to a ‘traditional’ sense of masculinity they had learnt about, and overall said they tended to adhere to. This involved being the “protector, rescuer, and anchor” (2009, p.53) in their relationships with women, and to not expose vulnerability in the presence of other men. The third theme referred to men’s perceptions of the risks involved in engaging in intimacy. These risks included a fear of being emotionally hurt through rejection and a fear of humiliation through having previously disclosed vulnerabilities exposed.

Whilst based solely on their heterosexual relationships, the men interviewed in Patrick and Beckenbach’s (2009) study made a number of comparative comments that illuminated understanding about their relationships with other men. However, it was unclear whether references to feeling inauthentic were with close male friends, other men in general or with more peripheral men in their lives. This needed some clarification because if it was the latter, it would be understandable not to be completely relaxed and themselves with men they did not know very well. In the study’s discussion, Patrick and Beckenbach (2009) expressed a similar concern to Twohey and Ewing (1995), that there was a ‘male voice’ or expression of inter-male relating that was predominantly unheard. They advocated that further research explores the relationship between the social construction of masculinity and emotionally close relationships, specifically questioning how the former influences engagement in the latter. They also acknowledged a need to explore men’s experiences outside of heterosexual relationships, including those within male friendships and within familial bonds.
Both Holmes’ (2005) and Bennett’s (2007) qualitative studies were included in this review, since whilst not based specifically on men’s experiences of relational closeness they provide some insight into the influence of the social construction of masculinity on men’s emotional expression. Holmes (2005) discussed men’s ability for emotional reflexivity within the context of coping with physical separation from long-term female partners. Reflexivity was defined as the ability to reflect on and act on their own, and their partners’ emotions. In the context of the study, this translated into behaviour that included active listening, empathic responding and validating their partner’s emotional concerns whilst spending time apart. Thematic analysis of interview data collected from both men and women in ten couples, indicated variations in men’s ability for emotional reflexivity and provision of emotional care and comfort for their female partners. This reflected a variation in expressions of masculinity, with some of the men adept at emotionally close relating in the physical absence of their partners. As with Patrick and Beckenbach’s (2009) study, its findings were restricted to relational behaviour within the context of heterosexual relationships, hence revealed little about inter-male relationships.

Bennett’s (2007) grounded theory study was based on older men’s emotional experiences of spousal bereavement, rather than close friendship. It was notable that this was the only research study sourced that quoted keeping a stiff upper lip within its text, when describing how male participants spoke publicly about their loss. This was perhaps indicative of the study’s British origin and the author’s awareness of this stereotype and the behavioural assumptions aligned with it. Bennett (2007) coded sixty interview transcripts using grounded theory and content analysis methods, and her findings provided evidence for two main expressions of emotions. She identified techniques employed in public contexts, including “emotional control, rationality, responsibility and successful action” (2007, p.347) and proposed that these enabled a preservation of ‘traditional’ masculinity. She also demonstrated the existence of a private expression of grief, one in which techniques could in part be abandoned for greater emotional expression and exposure of vulnerability. This context-specific expression of emotion suggests that for the men interviewed, a choice is made regarding how they behave. This choice appears to be dependent on asking themselves ‘where, when, how and with whom’ questions. Reference to context also arose in Reddin and Sonn’s (2003) qualitative exploration of men’s experiences of group
therapy. The study’s aim was to identify what is was about the therapeutic experience that was particularly beneficial for the men who took part. A perception of emotional safety as a result of group rules and rituals was an emergent theme of their study. This sense of safety was identified as the main reason men felt able to experiment with emotionally expressive behaviour in an all-male group setting. This finding resonates with Patrick and Beckenbach’s reference to a man’s need to feel “safe” (2009, p.52) as a prerequisite to emotional self-disclosure in male friendships.

**Men’s psychological distress and therapy**

A number of theoretically diverse papers on men’s psychological distress and experience of therapy arose from this review’s search. Amongst these were proposed alternatives to one to one talking therapy. These included the writing of personal journals (Wong & Rochlen, 2009) as a way of encouraging men to notice and identify their emotions in a non-verbal way, and participation in men’s therapeutic groups (Garfield, 2010; Lewis, 1978; McPhee, 1996.). Literature on men’s groups spanned a 40-year period, with findings supporting the proposal that men could be encouraged towards greater self-disclosure, openness and affection with other men, if provided with a supportive and accepting environment, where emotional expression was modelled by their peers (Smiler & Heasely, 2016).

In terms of contextual influences on relational behaviour, Garfield (2010) observed links between men’s socioeconomic background and their ability to emotionally relate to others. Based on his experience running men’s groups, he proposed that: “*men tend to become more emotionally restricted as they achieve educational and economic success, and acquire more power and prestige in society*” (2010, p.113). This proposal was open to critique, since like Braverman and Paris’s (1993) conclusion, it was based on clinical observations, rather than empirical data. Garfield also proposed that given the right opportunities, notably observing a model, men in adulthood were readily able to learn skills to become more emotionally expressive. He observed that participants of his groups tended be: “*white, upper-middle class, heterosexual men from professional backgrounds*” (2010, p.114). However this demographic could simply have reflected the context of his clinical practice, rather than factors specifically linked to men’s ability to emotionally relate to others.

In ‘Men, addiction and intimacy,’ Woodford (2012) advocated emotional development and strength as a key part of recovery from substance addiction. Coming
from a developmental lifetime perspective, he proposed that treatment approaches should take greater account of male-specific neurobiological and psychosocial factors involved in addiction. Acknowledging the difficulty some men had connecting with or talking about their emotions, he offered some practical suggestions for talking therapy. These included practical explanations of brain functioning with regard to emotions (Siegel, 2015), as well as encouraging men to have an embodied awareness of their emotions through body scanning. Kingerlee (2012) also proposed that there should be greater awareness of male specific expressions of distress, and he was specifically focused on the psychological functioning of British men. As a result of a review of literature on men’s mental health, he constructed a model of male psychological distress. This was based on empirical evidence drawn from reviewed studies, ones that in totality indicated that a combination of cultural, developmental and neurological factors were involved in constructing a “male-specific profile” (2012, p.88). This profile linked together male-specific cognitions, behaviours and physiological responses.

Despite being developed from theoretically diverse findings, Kingerlee’s (2012) model of male distress was identified as being a cognitive behavioural one. Whilst appreciating the popularity of this therapeutic approach (Sanders, 2010), labelling as a cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) model, potentially limits its appeal for those working with men outside of this approach. Another potential limitation, one acknowledged by Kingerlee (2012) in his review’s discussion, was that the model only represents ‘traditionally’ masculine cognitions, emotions and behaviours. These include a desire for emotional control, invulnerability, anger, shame, externalisation of distress and an avoidance of help seeking. This restricted approach to masculinity, suggests that the model fails to represent alternative expressions of masculinity. Given concerns about men’s mental health, a model based on the psychological functioning of men is both timely and commendable. If limitations, or “refinements” referred to by Kingerlee (2012, p.93) can be addressed, the resultant model has the potential to provoke a great deal of reflection about different presentations of male distress. It also has the potential to help clarify the factors that inhibit men from accessing relational support (either socially or professional) during emotionally challenging times.

A final addition to this review, one that arose separately to the database search, was a charity sponsored report entitled: *Try to see it my way: Improving relationship support*
for men (Wilkins, 2013). This report was the product of collaboration between the Men’s Health Forum (MHF) a health charity specifically for men, and the relationship charity Relate. The report demonstrates a growing awareness of the significance of relational support to men’s psychological wellbeing and was based on Relate counsellors’ experiences of working with distressed men in couples’ therapy. Whilst Wilkins clarifies that findings from these groups are not research-based, he proposes that the consistency with which key issues arose indicates they require further exploration. These issues include an observation of a difference in men’s communication style (both within their primary relationships and within their counselling one), an awareness that the sex of the counsellor potentially plays a role in influencing professional outcomes, and that men’s expectation of relationships are culturally influenced. Wilkins (2013) uses these findings as a basis for questions and a list of recommendations for relationship support providers, including government departments (Health and Education) and researchers in men’s mental health.

Whilst this report was a timely addition to literature on men’s psychological wellbeing, the addition of findings from the men themselves would have validated, or otherwise, the counsellors’ comments, and provided greater insight into individual men’s experiences of professional relationship support. Equally, findings were based on romantic, predominantly heterosexual couplings, hence excluded men’s experiences within same sex or non-sexual relationships. Despite limitations, charity-based reports (Wilkins, 2010; Wilkins & Kemble, 2011; Wilkins 2013) have placed a welcome spotlight on men’s mental health and no doubt have provided an impetus for further research, as illustrated by Kingerlee’s (2012) reference to Wilkins (2010), when providing a rationale for his review of men’s mental health literature.

**Discussion**

The general consensus from reviewed research is that even within their self-described close relationships men are far less likely than women to talk about their emotions and expose vulnerabilities. Findings indicate that the main barrier to emotionally close engagement is a desire to adhere to ‘traditional’ masculinity (Banks & Hansford, 2000), one that ascribes to a sexual script of emotional restraint and self-reliance (Nardi, 2007), behaviour associated with the keeping a stiff upper lip stereotype (Renton, 2017). Twohey and Ewing (1995) refer to a ‘male voice’ of close
relating, one that they propose is distinct from emotional self-disclosure and interdependency and remains predominantly unheard. A male-specific expression of closeness resonates with Kingerlee’s (2012) male-specific profile of distress and prompts questions regarding the extent to which gender is factored into the development of models of understanding for relationships.

The majority of the studies in this review were quantitative in approach and sourced data from young, white American students. It is questionable the extent to which findings from these can be extrapolated to men of varying ages, and from diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. It could be argued that American research findings be considered representative of British men, and vice versa, since both nationalities come under the same ‘cultural umbrella’ of being Western. However, the sole use of the phrase *keeping a stiff upper lip* in a UK-sourced research study (Bennett, 2005) in comparison to its absence in American-sourced literature indicates that this stereotype is specifically associated with British culture. In comparison to Britain, where the class system is complex but considered very much active (Savage, 2015), American society tends to be governed more by achievement from work than by social class. An intrinsic part of American culture has been the concept of the American Dream (Cullen, 2003), that regardless of background, with enough work anything is achievable. Over-work as a form of self-harm, might therefore be a particular feature of American life (Robinson, 2014). No legal entitlement in America to paid leave (as opposed to a standard 28 days/annum for British men) perhaps best highlights this dominance of work. Therefore whilst research findings are frequently extrapolated from American research to other nationalities, there are going to be cultural differences between Western countries that potentially influence how men think about and express closeness.

In terms of life-stage, more mid-life specific data to review might have illuminated understanding of the potential of a *crisis* for men at this time; both the extent to which this stereotype actually exists and whether *keeping a stiff upper lip* relational behaviour plays any mediating role in how it plays out. Only a limited number of studies were sourced that were based on men at mid-life. Braverman and Paris (1993) specifically referred to a midlife *crisis*. They viewed it as developmental in origin, and representative of a failure to gain relational satisfaction at this life stage. Based on only three case histories, their proposal that overtly successful white, mid-life men
with similar childhood experiences would show similar emotional resilience prior to a crisis lacked validity. Whilst Garfield’s (2010) study was similarly based on his clinical experiences, his proposals concerning men and their relational behaviour were in contrast based on multiple cases and numerous years of working with men’s groups. As with Braverman and Paris (1993) his clinical observations described a link between professional achievement and men’s emotionality. However, rather than refer to resilience, a description that denotes positivity, Garfield (2010) referred to men becoming more emotionally restricted as they acquire greater social and professional power. Both studies suggest that for some men, mid-life is associated with heightened psychological distress and that relational difficulties may play a pivotal role in how this distress is expressed and managed. Braverman and Paris (1993) introduced the concept of emotional resilience and resultant professional success. Whilst in their experience this resilience can reduce in mid-life, it appears to provide the men with a level of protection that enables them to be high functioning up until then. This sense of protection also comes across in Bennett’s (2007) study on older men’s bereavement. Whilst her findings refer to older rather than mid-life men, they demonstrate that the British men interviewed exert some choice over how and when they express their emotions.

As well as a lack of male sample diversity, a further critique of reviewed research has been the accuracy of methods used to elicit information on closeness. A major issue for social researchers has been that there is no single model or list of criteria for assessing a relationship as being close (Mashek & Aron, 2004). Whilst a tool like the Relationship Closeness Inventory (RCI) (Berscheid et al. 1989/2004) has been revisited and considered both a valid and reliable way of measuring aspects of close relationships, it could be argued that closeness is too multi-dimensional a relational concept to be accurately captured through psychometrics alone. The experiential accounts available through qualitative interviews could provide the ‘own word’ rich data required to reflect the complexity of closeness and as a result prove complementary to quantitative findings.

Qualitative studies sourced in this review, have produced data indicating that men are both willing and able to engage in emotionally close relational experiences. This expression of closeness has been demonstrated within the context of men’s heterosexual relationships (Holmes, 2005; Patrick & Beckenbach, 2009; Wagner et al.,
2000) and in all-male group settings (Reddin & Sonn, 2003). Findings indicate that emotional self-disclosure, especially in relationships with other men, appears to be contingent on a need to feel “safe” (Patrick & Beckenbach, 2009, p.52). Whilst the qualitative studies might capture different aspects of closeness to quantitative ones, the former are not without limitations. Findings are dependent on researchers’ subjective interpretations and study samples can be skewed towards participants more comfortable than others engaging in personalised forms of data collection.

**Limitations of this review**

In retrospect, the stereotype *keeping a stiff upper lip* would not have been included as a search phrase in this literature review. The phrase is associated with ex-boarding school upper-middle to upper class British men hence its introduction prompted a consideration of contextually relevant information regarding men’s experience and understanding of close relationships. However, in terms of recruiting research participants, whilst age, race and ethnicity are relatively well-defined recruitment criteria, the ever-changing face of British society makes social classifications increasingly complex. The 3-tier working/middle/upper class system that once dominated British society is pretty much redundant according to the findings of the 2011 class survey (Savage, 2015). Based on this survey’s results, a 7-tier system now exists, one that reflects both extremes of wealth and poverty and the expanded more socially mobile multi-tiered middle-class. Rather than be linked specifically to a social class, it could now be argued that *keeping a stiff upper lip* simply represents a set of behaviours, analogous to traditional’ masculinity (Levant et al, 1992; Nardi, 2007). As such, rather than associate it with white British men from a specific social background, the label could simply be associated with any individual regardless of gender, age, race or background who demonstrates self-reliance and emotional restraint at times of personal difficulty. Reference to this stereotype is further discussed within a self-reflective passage (Appendix B). A future literature search would omit this stereotypical phrase from a database search, and simply enter ‘men’ and ‘mid-life.’

Since emotional closeness was of specific research interest originally, the term ‘emotional intimacy’ was entered as an initial key search phrase. This resulted in a number of studies on intimacy rather than closeness, and in initial review drafts there was a tendency to view these relational concepts as synonymous. Due to an overlap in meanings (Aron & Mashek, 2004), findings from intimacy-based studies have been
used to inform understanding on men and their close relationships. In retrospect, to avoid any confusion and in recognition of intimacy and closeness being separate relational concepts, closeness would have been entered prior to emotional intimacy in the database search.

**Conclusions and suggestions for future research**

Men and their close relationships have been predominantly approached from an empirical research perspective. Findings generally indicate that a desire to adhere to a ‘traditional’ model of masculinity (Banks & Hansford, 2000) prevents men from engaging in closeness characterised by emotional self-disclosure and interdependency. There are very few studies that focus on individual men’s experiences and understandings of relational closeness. Findings from these have highlighted context specific occasions when men challenge ‘traditional’ stereotypes and share their emotional vulnerabilities with others. This has been predominantly reported within the context of heterosexual relationships (Patrick & Beckenbach, 2009; Wagner et al., 2000) and male therapeutic groups (Reddin & Sonn, 2003). Reviewed literature also indicates the existence of a ‘male voice’ (Twohey & Ewing, 1995) of closeness, a relationship characterised more by shared activities than shared emotions.

Suggestions for future research include further qualitative studies to explore individual men’s close experiences within all types of relationships with the potential for closeness. Extending the focus beyond heterosexual relationships to include men’s relationships with other men could provide valuable information regarding Patrick and Beckenbach’s reference to men’s need for “safety” (2009, p. 52) as a prerequisite to inter-male emotional disclosure. Findings from these could indicate the extent to which men are either facilitating or inhibiting each other from seeking help at times of personal distress. Collecting and analysing individual male experiences of relational closeness could make it easier to listen out for a ‘male voice’ (Twohey & Ewing, 1995) of closeness and identify the context-specific occasions when this is expressed. A paucity of research on men at mid-life means that it has not been possible to either support or challenge the stereotype of a ‘crisis’ (Braverman, & Paris, 1993; Wethington, 2000) at this life-stage. Further studies on the close relational experiences of men at mid-life are therefore proposed.
Implications of review findings to psychotherapeutic and counselling psychology

Review findings indicate that there are context-specific occasions when men are just as capable and willing as women to engage in an emotionally based expression of closeness. This suggests that given a supportive and accepting relational environment, a shift can occur towards emotional self-disclosure. However, evidence indicates that men are much more reluctant than women to access professional support when distressed (Sullivan et al., 2015). Therefore in order for mental health services to facilitate this potential shift towards self-disclosure, men need to feel both comfortable and motivated enough to contact professional help in the first place.

A desire to adhere to stereotypical expectations (Banks & Hansford, 2000) was identified amongst reviewed literature as the main barrier to men’s emotional engagement. Initial engagement in professional support might therefore be contingent on it being tapered towards more ‘traditionally’ masculine relational behaviours. This aligns with proposals made by Wilkins (2011) in his report on delivering more effective practices in men’s mental health. Tapering support, could involve marketing professional services in a way that tunes into a desire for discretion, problem solving and self-reliance. Therefore on the surface at least, assistance could appear to focus more on action than emotion. Since help-seeking behaviour does not align with ‘traditional’ masculinity, opportunities could be found within a man’s professional and social worlds where support information could be anonymously obtained. This could involve discretely placed advertisements both in work and social (pubs/bars/sports clubs/gyms) settings. An example of discrete, gender specific marketing is Admedia’s (2018) use of A3 panels in men’s washrooms to promote awareness about erectile dysfunction. The agency responsible for this campaign has also drawn attention to men’s psychological health by using beer mats to highlight the issue of male suicide (Admedia, 2018). Continued use of this type of creative marketing could broaden considerably the number of men able to anonymously access mental health information.

As well as identifying opportunities in men’s work and social settings, attention could also be targeted in healthcare facilities that extend beyond general practitioner (GP) surgeries. These could include dentists, physiotherapists, osteopaths etc. where informational posters could be placed alongside physical health literature, with the aim of normalising access to both psychological and physical healthcare. The offer of a
new patient and/or routine health screen at GP surgeries could prove an opportune time to ask a man about his psychological as well as physical health. As part of an overall assessment, understanding more about ‘how, when and with whom’ men experience relational comfort and/or relief from distress, could help inform how they are best relationally supported at times of psychological distress. Whilst some men might outline a complete preference for a practical problem solving ‘male voice’ of support, others might indicate a need for something more emotionally based. Whilst further research is required to support this assessment proposal, individualised knowledge that attunes relational support in a way that makes individual men feel more accurately heard, could potentially improve men’s uptake and continued engagement in psychotherapeutic services.

References


   MHF Men’s Health Forum/Relate.


Appendix A

Criteria for submission to the Counselling Psychology Review

Information for contributors

1. Length: Papers should normally be no more than 5,000 words (including abstract, reference list, tables and figures).

2. Manuscript requirements:

   The separate cover page should be completed. Contact details will be published if the paper is accepted.

   Apart from the cover page, the document should be free of information identifying the author(s).

   Authors should follow the Society’s guidelines for the use of non-sexist language and all references must be presented in the Society’s style, which is similar to APA style. For an electronic copy of the Society’s Style Guide, go to the Publications page of www.bps.org.uk and then click on Policy and guidelines/General guidelines and policy documents and choose Society Editorial Style Guide from the list of documents).

   A structured abstract of up to 250 words should be included with the headings: Background/Aims/Objectives, Methodology/Methods, Results/Findings, Discussion/Conclusions. Review articles should use these headings: Purpose, Methods, Results/Findings, Discussion/Conclusions.

   Approximately five keywords should be provided for each paper.

   Authors are responsible for acquiring written permission to publish lengthy quotations, illustrations, etc., for which they do not own copyright.

   Graphs, diagrams, etc., must have titles - these should not be part of the image.

   Submissions should be sent as email attachments. Word document attachments should be saved under an abbreviated title of your submission. Include no author names in the title. Please add ‘CPR Submission’ in the email subject bar. Please expect an email acknowledgment of your submission.

   Please make all changes after review using Track Changes and return them to the Edit
Research Report 1:

A qualitative exploration of mid-life men’s experiences of relational closeness

[Note: Layout of this report is predominantly in accordance with the criteria for submission to the Counselling Psychology Review (Appendix A)]

Abstract

Aims: To explore mid-life men’s individual experiences of closeness within their relationships and challenge or support relational assumptions associated with the stereotype of *keeping a stiff upper lip* at times of personal adversity. To explore the existence of a psychological *crisis* at mid-life and any relational factors potentially involved in this.

Method: In-depth individual interviews were collected from four white, British professional mid-life men, asking questions about their experiences of relational closeness within their social network. The interviews were transcribed and analysed for recurrent themes using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA).

Results: Experiences of closeness were restricted to either a heterosexual long-term relationship or a very limited number of male friends. Closeness with a female romantic partner was characterised by complete trust and the ability to confide emotional vulnerabilities. Closeness with male friends was similarly described, but there was an emphasis on a mutuality of emotional self-disclosure. As a challenge to *keeping a stiff upper lip* stereotype, all of the men actively sought emotionally based close relational support at times of personal distress. One of the men expressed an initial preference for self-reliance and described an experience of inter-male closeness that was less emotionally based. There was no evidence of a male mid-life *crisis* but the older men interviewed discussed age-related concerns with close male friends rather than their female partners.

Discussion: Proposals for future research include 1) further IPA studies exploring relational closeness amongst a diverse range of men and women and 2) a grounded theory approach to men and their close relationships.

Key words: relational closeness, *keeping a stiff upper lip*, mid-life, self-disclosure, IPA
Introduction

This study explores men’s experiences of closeness and the extent to which engagement in close relational support is utilised by them at times of psychological distress. Men’s relationships, rather than women’s are the focus of the study due to evidence of a gender disparity regarding how psychological distress is expressed and addressed (Sullivan, Camic & Brown, 2015). Much greater levels of alcohol and drug abuse (Ridge, Emslie & White, 2011; Woodford, 2012) and extreme over-work (Robinson, 2014) are reported in men in comparison to women. Research indicates that men are far less likely than women to seek help at times of psychological distress (Galdas, Cheater, & Marshall, 2005) and suicide statistics indicate that they are much more likely than women to take their own lives (ONS, 2017). Whilst the abundance of research on men’s psychological health is sourced from North America, recent British studies (Kingerlee, 2012; Sullivan et al, 2005) and reports from a British-based men’s health charity (Wilkins, 2010; Wilkins & Kemble, 2011; Wilkins, 2013), specifically highlight concerns over British boys’ and men’s psychological wellbeing.

What is known about closeness and how men experience it?

Closeness has been explored from a variety of theoretical perspectives resulting in an abundance of research literature. This has been subject to multiple reviews in an attempt to integrate knowledge and more fully understand closeness as a theoretical concept (Mashek & Aron, 2004). A major difficulty regarding the conceptualisation of closeness has been a lack of research consensus regarding the criteria for identifying a relationship as being close. Amongst a range of descriptions, words frequently used include: “love, trust, commitment, caring, stability, attachment, one-ness, meaningful, and significant” (Berscheid & Peplau 1983/2002, p.12). In her review of intimacy research, Gaia concluded that “closeness” (2002, p.165) is one of the seven defining characteristics of an emotionally intimate relationship. Despite closeness and intimacy being complex, multidimensional and similar in a number of ways, social researchers have tended to view them as separate relational concepts and researched each individually. As a result, separate definitions and/or models of understanding have been proposed for intimacy (Gaia, 2002; Fehr, 2004; Reis & Shaver, 1988) and closeness (Aron, Mashek & Aron, 2004; Collins & Feeney, 2004) respectively. Similarly, research has developed psychometric tools (Berscheid, Snyder & Omoto, 1989; Popovic et al. 2003), specifically to quantify closeness as opposed to intimacy.
The RCI (Berscheid et al., 1989/2004) was originally developed based on close relationship research by Kelly et al. (1983/2002) and assesses closeness based on patterns of inter-dependence. This measure asks an individual to identify who they feel closest to and then answer questions regarding the frequency and diversity of their interactions with this person. As well as revisiting the RCI, Mashek and Aron (2004) also discuss the Inclusion of Other in the Self (IOS) Scale. Based on self-expansion and interdependence theories (Agnew, Loving, Le & Goodfriend, 2004), it is a pictorial measure of closeness. One of a possible seven images of separate to increasingly overlapping ‘self’ and ‘other’ circles can be selected, each proposed as providing an indication of the degree of closeness in a relationship. Relational closeness can also be understood from an Attachment Theory perspective (Collins & Feeling, 2004) in which knowledge of an individual’s childhood models of attachment can inform an understanding of their capacity for close relationships in adult life.

Whilst the body of research on closeness is extensive, a single understanding of closeness remains elusive. This is perhaps unsurprising given the complexity of this type of relationship. Difficulties assessing or quantifying a relationship as being close means it can be a challenging topic for researchers to explore (Mashek & Aron, 2004). The author’s recent review (Appendix B) explored literature on men and their close relationships. Findings indicated that this topic has been mainly approached from a quantitative perspective with conclusions drawn predominantly from a sample of young, white American men. Closeness has been frequently assessed within the context of gender comparisons of relational behaviour, with findings indicating a tendency towards keeping a stiff upper lip (Renton, 2017) relational behaviour for men. This aligns with stereotypically ‘traditional’ masculinity, characterised by emotional restraint and self-reliance rather than emotional expression and interdependence. A paucity of studies based on mid-life men, makes it difficult to either support or challenge the stereotype of men being susceptible to a crisis (Braverman, & Paris, 1993; Wethington, 2000) at this stage of their lives.

In comparison to quantitative studies, the review (Appendix B) indicated that relatively few qualitative studies on men and their relationships exist. Findings from the latter provide some insight into men’s experiences of relational closeness, and reflect greater gender fluidity by demonstrating context-specific occasions when men challenge ‘traditional’ stereotypes and engage in emotional closeness with others.
Greif’s (2009) book: *Buddy System: Understanding Male Friendships* is based on nearly four hundred qualitative interviews on men’s male friendships. Four categories of male friendship were identified: “must”, “rust”, “trust” or “just” friends, and as its name suggests, the “must” friends are the relationships identified as being the closest. These are male friendships turned to at times of personal crisis hence involve exposure of personal vulnerability. Greif’s (2009) findings provide examples of male relational behaviour that challenges stereotypical expectations and provides support for inter-male emotional engagement. It also seems to expand upon Levy’s (2005) proposal of either an emotionally based *friendship* or activity-based *comradeship* for mid-life men. Whilst not without limitations, his work is a study of a range of friendships for American men that could not be found for British men.

A qualitative study that preceded Greif’s (2009) work was Wagner-Raphael, Seal and Ehrhardt’s (2000) exploration of men’s close relationships with both genders. Findings indicated that whilst the men described experiences of closeness with both women and men, these experiences were qualitatively different. Each gender appeared to fulfil a different role, with closeness with other men characterised by feeling relaxed and able to be themselves, whilst closeness with women was characterised by the ability to disclose more emotionally. In their discussion, Wagner-Raphael et al. (2000) proposed that their findings indicated that men tend to endorse traditional stereotypes by placing an emphasis on sexual intimacy as a prerequisite to emotional closeness with women. Despite limitations, the study was refreshing in its desire to explore men’s perceptions of relational closeness. It also proposed an inter-male closeness that alluded to a ‘male voice’ referred to by Twohey and Ewing’s (1995) in their intimacy review.

Due to considerable overlap in how closeness and intimacy are understood (Aron & Mashek, 2004), findings from Patrick and Beckenbach’s (2009) thematic study on men’s perceptions of intimacy provide some insight into men’s perceptions of relational closeness. The study’s themes both supported and challenged findings about men and intimacy from past research. In context-specific occasions, notably a sense of feeling “*safe*” (2009, p.52) the men interviewed were keen to reject stereotypical masculine behaviour and be emotionally expressive. As in Wagner-Raphael et al.’s (2000) study on closeness, an ability to feel relaxed and themselves characterised a relationship as being intimate for the men interviewed. However, data from this study
indicated that this sense of relaxation was more likely to be experienced in the company of women they were sexually intimate with, than in the company of other men, with whom they would “put on certain ‘masks’” (2009, p.52). All five men interviewed referred to a ‘traditional’ sense of masculinity, one they had learnt about, and overall tended to adhere to. This involved being the “protector, rescuer, and anchor” (2009, p.53) in their relationships with women and to not expose vulnerability in the presence of other men. Patrick and Beckenbach’s (2009) findings also referred to a perception of risk associated with intimate engagement. This risk included a fear of being emotionally hurt through rejection and a fear of humiliation through having previously disclosed vulnerabilities exposed. In their discussion, Patrick and Beckenbach (2009) concurred with Twohey and Ewing’s (1995) concern reading an unheard ‘male voice.’ They advocated further research to explore the relationship between the social construction of masculinity and expressions of emotionally close behaviour, as well as a need to explore men’s experiences beyond heterosexual relationships.

**What is there still to explore about men’s experiences of closeness?**

The main conclusion of the author’s review (Appendix B) is that very little research exists that explores men’s individual experiences or perceptions of relational closeness. Those studies that do explore closeness focus on heterosexual relationships (Patrick & Beckenbach, 2009) rather than a broad range of relationships. The latter could include homosexual relationships, same-sex friendships, cross-sex friendships, sibling and parental ones. Wagner-Raphael et al. (2000) explored men’s perceptions of closeness with other men, but this was in comparison to their experiences with women with whom they were in heterosexual relationships, rather than as a stand-alone phenomenon. Whilst Levy (2005) focused solely on men’s same sex friendships, his use of constructs based on questionnaire responses, potentially precluded men from using their own words to describe their male friendships. This could explain why only two, a friendship or a comradeship, rather than multiple experiences of male friendships were identified.

Findings from the author’s review (Appendix B) indicate that other men could play a key role in how closeness is experienced. Both quantitative (Gaia, 2013) and qualitative (Patrick & Beckenbach, 2009) works suggest that men can either be “enforcers” of emotional expression (Gaia, 2013, p.599), or involved in how “safe”
it feels to be emotionally expressive. Both studies indicate that men have the potential to inhibit each other from exposing emotional vulnerabilities. Conversely, the review also highlights how men modelling emotionally expressive behaviour within a male group setting (Garfield, 2010; Lewis, 1978; McPhee, 1996) can facilitate other men to reciprocate. Further research encompassing or focusing alone on inter-male relationships could explore the extent to which men are either facilitating or inhibiting each other from seeking help at times of personal distress.

As well as studies based on a greater diversity of relationships, greater diversity is also needed amongst the men researched. Contextual factors with the potential to influence men’s close relational behaviour include race, ethnicity, gender, life-stage, socio-economic background and relationship status. Whilst a lack of research sample diversity has been voiced by a number of researchers (Connell, 2005; Gaia, 2002; Levy, 2005) surprisingly few studies have addressed this restrictive sampling practice. In his seminal work on masculinities, Connell advocated a need for research to take account of men’s different “geographical locations and social class” (2005, p. xviii), and in the conclusion of her 2002 review on emotional intimacy, Gaia stated that future research needed to focus on “historically neglected populations” (2002, p.166).

In terms of men’s life-stage, the author’s review (Appendix B) highlights an over-reliance on data collected from young, white American students. Only a limited number of studies were sourced (Bennett, 2007; Levy, 2005) based on midlife or older men. Biggs (2010) noted that there was limited research on the use of counselling psychology practice in midlife, and referred to this life stage as a “period of heightened sensitivity to one’s position within a complex social environment” (2010, p.355). The idea that Western men are more susceptible to a psychological ‘crisis’ at mid-life than at any other time in their lives (Braverman, & Paris, 1993; Wethington, 2000) could simply be viewed as another stereotype. However mid-life is associated with the highest suicide rates amongst men in the UK (ONS, 2017; Scowcroft, 2017), which suggests that this life-stage warrants further research consideration.

This current IPA study aims to address some of the gaps that have been identified in research knowledge on men’s experiences of relational closeness. Since interest lies in personalised accounts of a phenomenon, a qualitative methodology has been applied. Rather than limit men’s accounts to their experiences within specific relationships, this
study asks the men themselves to identify the relationships within their social network they perceive to be close. In terms of research sample, the men of specific interest are white British, professional mid-life men, ones whose data can potentially dispel or support the stereotypes of men *keeping a stiff upper lip* (Renton, 2016) and having a *mid-life crisis* (Wethington, 2000) at times of personal adversity. From the end of the 19th century onwards, *keeping a stiff upper lip* came to represent the stoic attitude and emotional restraint of the British nation in the face of adversity. It aligns with a ‘traditional’ role model of masculinity, one associated with relational behaviour far removed from an emotionally based expression of closeness.

**Why choose interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as a methodology?**

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is based on two theoretical backgrounds that combine phenomenology and interpretation. The first is Husserl’s phenomenological philosophy (Giorgi, 1995); concerned with an individual’s perception of an event as opposed to describing an event through an objective statement. The second is Mead’s symbolic interactionism (Denzin, 1995), concerned with meanings and the interpretation of meanings, with the understanding that these occur and are made sense of within the context of social interactions. IPA was considered the most suitable qualitative approach for this study, because the primary aim is to learn more about men’s individual perceptions or lived experiences (Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005) of a phenomenon. In this case the phenomenon is relational closeness. This approach appreciates that research participants have their own interpretation of a phenomenon, which the researcher then aims to interpret. Hence with IPA, knowledge is acquired through a process of double hermeneutics. As a result, multiple contextualised understandings rather than one objective and quantifiable ‘truth’ can be acquired.

The IPA approach aligns with the author’s epistemological viewpoint that reality is socially constructed, and the dynamic interaction between both researcher and participant is central to capturing the ‘lived experience’ of the participant. Knowledge can be acquired through the collection of a participant’s first-hand account or description of an experience, through a process that is sensitive to how both researcher and participant can be influenced by their context. In line with counselling psychology’s focus on active reflection, it is a methodology that acknowledges and reflects on the researcher’s active involvement in both the collection and analysis of
research data (Lyons & Coyle, 2007). In order to expand on current knowledge in this area, the research question underlying this study was: What are white British, professional, mid-life men’s experiences of relational closeness?

Method

Participants

Consistent with IPA theoretical guidelines (Lyons & Coyle, 2007; Smith, 2008), a purposive sampling approach was used to recruit male participants. Whilst acknowledging the uniqueness of individual narratives, this approach created a degree of sample homogeneity that was important since this study centred on the close relational experiences of a specific group of men. Recruitment criteria were that men were white British ethnicity, able to speak English and mid-life in age (45-60 years old). Whilst appreciating that occupation is an imperfect identifier of social status, recruitment on the basis of ‘professional’ as a descriptor of type of employment, was considered reflective of a level of training and/or educational status perhaps indicative of a similar mid-high socioeconomic background. All the men shared a similar relationship status by being in committed long-term partnerships.

Men fulfilling the above criteria were excluded if currently engaged in personal therapy and/or had worked in the field of mental health either as psychiatrists, psychologists, psychotherapists, social workers or counsellors. The former exclusion was on ethical grounds since intensive questioning on relationships could interfere with on-going talking therapy. Also, being in therapy could potentially influence how the men talked about their close relationships. The second exclusion was on the basis that men working professionally in the field of mental health, through virtue of their training and practice, would have frequent experience discussing relational topics with others.

Recruiting participants

A study information sheet (Appendix D) was distributed amongst known intermediates in the researcher’s social network, and this information was subsequently passed on to men in their social networks (but unknown to the researcher). If having read all the study information the men both fulfilled the study criteria and wished to participate, they contacted the researcher by e-mail or text exchange to organise a mutually convenient interview date, time and venue. Six men
were initially asked to participate, resulting in four in-depth interviews. A small sample size like this was considered suitable for this study because IPA is a methodology interested in rich experiential accounts (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009), hence quality rather than quantity of data.

**Collection and analysis of data**

All of the interviews took place in each participant’s home. Prior to the interview, each man was given another study information sheet (Appendix D) to read again and a consent form (Appendix E) to read and sign. In order to encourage free expression of relational experiences, confidentiality was explicitly communicated before commencing. The interviews were semi-structured in nature, with data sourced through a non-directive dialogue steered by an interview schedule (Appendix F). This schedule was based on six questions, and whilst open-ended in nature these provided some focus to the line of questioning. The initial questions (Q1-3) were general information gathering in order to map out each man’s social world. They also provided some time and opportunity to build some relational rapport and trust, which was viewed as essential for asking later (Q4-6), more potentially sensitive emotion-based questions. Interwoven throughout the interviews were spontaneous prompts to either clarify a response or facilitate a deeper level of engagement. Dependent on the men’s responses, the interviews lasted between 40-60 minutes. This aimed to provide sufficient time both to create a research relationship and gently explore the subject. Each interview was audio-recorded, with a non-recorded debriefing at the end to provide the interviewees an opportunity to give feedback on the research experience and ask any questions. The audio data was securely handled as outlined in the participant information sheet (Appendix D) and in the study’s ethics section (Appendix C).

As well as personally interviewing each participant, the researcher personally transcribed the audio-recordings of the interviews with a sample extract of transcript provided (Appendix G). Taking personal responsibility for each stage of the research process facilitated complete immersion in the data, from collection through to final analysis. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was applied to the data in stages of analysis (Smith, Flower & Larkin, 2009), starting with a record of any initial thoughts and feelings that arose from each interview. This process of commentary continued throughout transcription and initial readings of an entire transcript, with
anything of interest noted in a column to the left of the transcript. The next stage involved further reading of the transcript and the use of the initial notes to develop multiple initial themes. These were not purely descriptive of a phenomenon but also interpretative in nature, and recorded to the right of the transcript. With each re-reading of the transcript, there was a constant back and forth process to see whether later interpretations matched initial ones. The next stage involved looking for any connections between these initial themes, in a process of clustering that led to some themes being discarded and others grouped together as a super-ordinate theme. This entire process from transcription to development of super-ordinate themes was repeated for each of the four interview transcripts (Appendix H). A final stage of analysis involved comparing super-ordinate themes across transcripts to produce a final list of themes that represented the data of all four men interviewed (Lyons & Coyle, 2007).

Credibility

The credibility of this study was maximised by adhering to Yardley’s steps to achieving quality qualitative research (Yardley, 2000). These included being sensitive to the men’s context and aware of any ethical issues that might arise from the in-depth interview process. With regard to data analysis, an iterative procedure of checking and rechecking the analytic procedure was applied across transcripts, with a commitment to rigorously, coherently and transparently engaging with the research data. Safeguarding participant confidentiality, being reflective about the research process and aiming to produce information relevant to psychological research, and counselling psychology in particular, were also essential features of creating a credible piece of original qualitative research.

Ethical Considerations

An application was made to the University of Surrey’s FAHS Ethics Committee and ethical approval obtained (Appendix C) prior to commencing the study. Whilst it was very clear that this was a research interview and not a therapy session, the nature of the interview shared certain similarities with talking therapy. It was possible that the emotional line of engagement, based on a conversation about close relational experiences, could inadvertently touch upon some previously unexplored issues causing emotional distress either during or at some point after the interview process. Anecdotal reports indicate that reflecting on previously repressed emotion could leave
a man feeling unsure what to do with this emotion. The researcher’s placement experience as a counselling psychologist in training aimed to minimise the potential for any distress, but the study’s participants still needed to be aware of the possibility of emotional consequences and be informed of their right to withdraw participation at any point either before during or after the interview. Participants were advised that the interview could either be paused or halted completely and they would be signposted to a relevant support service, should any distress be communicated throughout the research procedure. Personal information was likely to be revealed during the interview so it was essential that participants were aware of the study’s strict adherence to confidentiality and informed that all recorded audio material would be password protected and transcript data anonymised. All details related to confidentiality were noted on the study information sheet, including that any quotes used from the interview transcripts in the final report would not be reported in a way that would enable participant identification.

Results

Table 1: Information of participants in order of interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First Name</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Home-life</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Simon (P1)</td>
<td>White/British</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Engineer</td>
<td>Living with wife and children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derek (P2)</td>
<td>White/British</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Civil Servant</td>
<td>Living with wife and children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philip (P3)</td>
<td>White/British</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Publishing</td>
<td>Living with wife and children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael (P4)</td>
<td>White/British</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Healthcare</td>
<td>Living with wife and children</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2 Pseudonyms used throughout to preserve participant anonymity
Table 2: Compositional structure of final themes (Appendix H)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Being influenced by the past</strong></td>
<td>Referencing the past</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reflecting on it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Linking past and present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Being selective when talking about emotions</strong></td>
<td>Talking about emotions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Identifying close others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Describing closeness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Employing strategies to alleviate distress</strong></td>
<td>Exposing vulnerability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Identifying something as distressing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Recognising how to alleviate distress</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Whilst each man’s narrative was unique, three commonalities were identified as a result of analysis of the four interview transcripts. These superordinate themes, each supported by individual quotes from all four men, are described in turn below.

**Being influenced by the past**

Unprompted references to specific past events were interwoven through all four transcripts. Some were reflections that explicitly linked past relational experiences with present ones, whilst others were more implicit and this link was made in the process of interpretation. Simon talked about his boarding school experience between the ages of 7 and 17 years as being “significant” [Simon L55] and something that probably “molded” [L55] him. He described the experience as probably having had a “detrimental effect” [L59] on how he was as a young adult and accounted for why he felt different to his family and chose to move away from them when school ended. Having introduced this past experience, he reflected on it again later in the interview, and explicitly made links between his separation from his family and the way he currently relates to them.

*I mean I love them dearly but um ... there’s just not that sort of spark between us in a way. I think partly, that goes back to how we were brought up. We were
In the process of analysis, Simon’s use of the word “spark” was interpreted as having an emotional connection. He talked about his parents, siblings, and himself being emotionally restrained as a family unit.

*We’re not a close family ... I mean we’re rather restrained with our emotions. My father is very [Sort of ‘stiff upper lip’] Yes very. (rapid response) and quite cool really.* [Simon L267-270]

Simon described there being “little touching” [L272] between family members growing up, and made a link between this and the “restraint” [L273] he notices in his siblings and in himself. He said he felt less restrained with other people indicating a personal awareness of behaving in a different way with others.

*With other people I’m not, I don’t feel quite so restrained, you know?* [Simon L274-275]

Whilst Philip did not explicitly refer to a childhood experience, the words he used when describing his wife’s frequent communication with her parents in their early marriage (and thereafter) indicated that this was a style of relating he was unfamiliar with.

*I thought I’m not sure that’s particularly healthy because, I wasn’t used to that with my mother, with my father, but um ...”* [Philip L82]

Philip talked about his in-laws “becoming more reliant on us” [Philip L103], and attributed this to them asking for more practical assistance with advancing age. In contrast, he described his relationship with his own parents as “social” [L165] rather than caring, and his weekly half hour visits with them as “it’s only tea and it’s banter” [L176] and “always very upbeat” [L180]. Philip used his parents’ decision not to tell
him about a recent serious health-scare as an example of their independence and stoicism.

*Because my parents ... my parents are very independent. They will not. If there’s anything wrong, they won’t tell you.* [OK] I didn’t find out he had had a heart attack (laughs), none of our family knew he’d had a heart attack until almost the following day. “Oh, by the way I popped down. I thought I’d just popped down” (He quotes his father talking about going to the hospital) [Philip L146-150]

Whilst almost admiring in the way he talked about his parents’ independence, the light-hearted manner in which he recalled his father finally informing him of his heart attack was interpreted as Philip being very concerned, but reluctant to disclose this within the context of the research interview.

The past experience explicitly referred to by Derek, was of a childhood fear of parental loss and being left alone. He reflected on whether this has been the motivation for him wanting to initiate and maintain multiple friendships throughout his adult life.

Yeah, I should have said, I didn’t say that, I’m an only child as well [Oh right] I haven’t got any brothers or sisters but I married into quite a big family. But maybe, as a result of that I, I quite like sort of fostering friendships and things and err, sometimes I get a bit frustrated sometimes if it’s a bit one way but, ... I would say I’m quite good at sort of getting in touch or phoning people up or sending an e-mail or text or something just to say what’s going on.

[Derek L127-133]

With reference to his current relating, his use of the word “fostering” indicated a desire by Derek to nurture relationships. His expression of frustration at a perceived lack of reciprocity was interpreted as relationships holding great value to him, and a sense of hurt if he did not perceive that others felt the same. Later in the interview, Derek referred back to being an early child and reflected on the possible consequences of this.
I can remember irrationally being quite young and thinking: Blimey if I lost my parents or something I’d be by myself. I wouldn’t have anyone I wouldn’t know...and then coincidentally I married into a really big family (laughs) [Maybe there is yeah] Maybe there’s something there, I don’t know...

In contrast to Derek’s imagined parental loss, this had been a past reality for Michael. He talked about both he and his wife being orphaned in their twenties, and as a father becoming aware of having a family that was without grandparents hence limited in size. He expressed concern about how his children would cope if placed in a similar situation of parental loss.

Yeah, yeah, we often say we’re a very tight-knit family, there’s just the four of us um, we’ve sort of invested a lot into that there’s just us four, and that’s kind of placed a sort of primacy on that really in our lives, um, yeah there isn’t an awful lot, we worry a bit about the children in case something should happen to one of us and who would they turn to next” (Michael L48-52)

Michael’s use of the word “primacy” indicated the importance over all others, his relationships with his wife and children. He later reflected that parental loss at quite a young age had probably heightened his level of emotional investment in his immediate family unit.

Yeah, I think I’m probably guilty of throwing everything into one basket really. [Michael L401]

Being selective when talking about emotions

The second master theme was ‘being selective when talking about emotions,’ and was composed of the inter-linking sub-themes: ‘talking about emotions’ ‘identifying close others’ and ‘describing closeness.’ ‘Talking about emotions’ initially emerged as a result of observations made within the interviews about how each of the men responded to the questions. Whilst factual, questions (Q1-3) were answered with relative ease and fluency by all four men, it was noticeable that Philip and Simon took
longer than Derek and Michael to answer the more emotionally based questions (Q4-6). This variation was interpreted as a reflection of how readily, or not, the men talked about their emotions in other relational situations. It was also interpreted as whether relational closeness was something that was familiar for them to reflect on. ‘Identifying close others’ referred to the men’s ability to discriminate close relationships from all others in their social network. Phillip took the longest time to identify a ‘close other’ and required further clarification and prompts before he was able to name his wife.

_Um you’re questioning who I would confide in?_

[Yeah, probably yes, mm]

_Well I’d confide first of all in my wife, definitely. [Mm] Um I think I would only confide with my wife and that’s it. I wouldn’t confide with my friends._ [Philip, L284-L292]

After Philip, Simon was the next slowest to respond, whilst Derek and Michael appeared to answer emotionally based questions with relative speed and ease. This was interpreted as Derek and Michael having reflected on this before and feeling more able to talk about emotional issues. It also became apparent that the men who seemed least able and comfortable answering the more emotionally based questions (Simon, Philip), were the ones who identified the fewest emotionally close relationships.

‘Describing closeness’ represented how the men defined relational closeness. Philip’s was the briefest of descriptions, and simply referred to someone with whom he could “confide in” [Philip L284]. The only relationship he described as being close was his marital one. This was interpreted as meaning closeness for Philip was predominantly based on his ability to trust that his ‘close’ other would not reveal to others what he disclosed to them. Similarly to Philip, Simon took a while to identify who he felt close to, suggesting this was not the easiest of questions to answer. He also referred to confidentiality, using the words “trustworthy” [Simon L307] and “confidante” [L392] to describe a long-standing male friend and his wife respectively. As well as naming someone aside from his wife as feeling close to, he also expanded on Philip’s description, suggesting he was a little more comfortable talking about emotions. Simon talked about his male friendship as being “quite open and honest”
[L331] with reciprocal self-disclosure, including age-related health worries and marital concerns.

... he’s very trustworthy as a friend. Um and he has shared a lot of personal stuff and I share quite a lot of personal stuff with him actually and I, more so with him than anybody else, I’m sure [OK] And, um, so and he probably knows some, most about me [Right] so that’s what. So, you know that’s what probably binds us together the most. [Simon L307-L310]

Perhaps unsurprising given his earlier description of the importance of immediate family to him, Michael initially only identified his wife and teenage children as the people he felt close to:

Close to? Um. Just pretty much my wife and kids really. [Michael L237]

However, as the interview progressed he described feeling closer more recently to his older brother and also named a couple of long-standing male friends. Greater closeness within his sibling relationship seemed to be a result of his brother’s recent willingness to expose emotional vulnerability.

I could probably tell him most things now, because in a way, when you, when you drop your guard a bit like that there’s nothing much to hide

[Michael L242-244]

Michael gave the most detailed description of closeness, one that talked about a sense of something implicit occurring, of non-verbal clues of a connection and of feeling actively listened to and understood.

Um, well just some sense that you’re connecting to the person you’re interacting with. There’s kind of a, there’s a sub-layer going on or whatever that where you’re actually receiving signals or whatever from whoever it is you’re talking to that from their facial expression or whatever that they’re absorbing what you’re saying and it’s registering in an identifiable way that you, um...you can...you feel that they’re relating to you in the way that you’re relating to them. [Michael L251-257]
Perhaps unsurprising given his reference to “fostering friendship,” Derek identified the greatest number of male close friends. He talked at some length about a slightly older male friend he described as being “a bit like a mentor.” Similarly to Simon and Michael’s descriptions, for Derek closeness with other men was characterised by a mutual exposure of vulnerabilities.

...I’m convinced it’s [yeah] because we can offload on each other. We’ve had some quite you know [laughs] deep conversations when things have happened so that’s been quite good. [Good] For both of us [said very quickly] and the, we sort of say what’s in confidence stays in confidence.” [Derek L105-109]

The men who came across the least at ease talking about their emotions within the research interviews (Philip, Simon) were the ones who provided the briefest descriptions of relational closeness and identified the fewest number of close others. Conversely those who appeared most at ease talking about their emotions (Derek and Michael) were the ones whose descriptions of relational closeness were more detailed and emotionally based. Whilst the men unanimously referred to mutual self-disclosure when describing their close male friendships, this was noticeably absent from their descriptions of closeness with their wives. In describing their marital relationships, whilst all four men talked about being able to express emotions with their spouses due to viewing them as confidantes, there was no mention of the reverse happening. In the process of analysis this was interpreted as the men characterising closeness with women as an ability to express their emotions with or without this being reciprocated, and characterising closeness with men by mutual self-disclosure.

**Employing strategies to alleviate distress**

The third and final master theme was ‘employing strategies to manage distress’ and developed from sub-themes of ‘exposing vulnerability,’ ‘identifying something as distressing’ and ‘recognising how to alleviate distress.’ As with the questions regarding closeness, there was a variation both in time and apparent ease with which the men talk about potential problems and what they tended to do to alleviate distress. This suggested that it was easier for some of the men to talk about their problems than others. Despite this variation, the sub-theme ‘exposing vulnerability’ emerged as a result for all four men, with each willing to disclose vulnerability within the context of
the research interview. Cited problems ranged from anxieties related to work and relationships (Derek) (Michael), to more life-stage specific concerns regarding a mid-life decline in physicality and an increased awareness of mortality (Simon) (Philip).

Philip unprompted brought up the failure of his past business. This happened within the first minute of the research interview.

I went through a bit of a difficult time because the company we were running failed [Philip L9-10]

This exposure of vulnerability continued throughout the interview, as Philip mentioned how recurring concerns related to his work situation had stopped him from sleeping.

...I’d wake up at 3 ‘o clock in the morning [Mm], which is the worst time that you can wake up [Yeah]. And they’ll be a problem there. And it will go round, and round and round and round, and I’m not sure if I’d ever get back to sleep [Philip L431-433]

Despite realising talking to his wife could provide rapid relief, his delay indicated his desire to initially try and resolve things alone, a preference confirmed elsewhere in the transcript.

... but we would face that in the morning [Mm] And I’d think, I wasted 4 hours perhaps, no less than that perhaps in worrying about something that could be resolved in a flash. [By?] By talking. (Said very quickly) By talking. (He laughs) [Philip L436-440]

Philip also talked about pub-based meet-ups every 6-8 weeks with two similarly aged long-standing male friends. Reminiscent of his description of visits to his parents, he referred to these evenings as “just a good laugh” [L253] and “not depressing, it’s uplifting.” [L253] He clarified that these evenings had certain rules regarding topics of discussion, as demonstrated in the following:
We don’t talk about wealth, cars, nothing like that, because we decided right at the beginning that we don’t want to talk about you know what car you’ve got? What you earn? We’re not into that. [Philip L228-231]

This was interpreted as a desire by Philip to move away from ‘traditionally’ male conversational topics with these friends, perhaps aware that these subjects related to power and status had the potential to fuel unwanted inter-male rivalry. These men only nights out seemed to be an outlet for Derek to reflect on quite profound concerns as demonstrated below:

…you’re continually examining where your life’s going actually (laughs). This is what we do. This is what we do.” [Philip L232-233]

They were also an opportunity for Philip to talk to other men about age-related concerns.

…we’re all in our 50s and we’ll talk about immortality, no mortality, so not immortality, mortality because no doubt when we’ve got to this age, um, you think should you lose your job, because we talk about economics and which way it’s going, you know and the years go on and you’re more vulnerable in the workplace or employment wise then we were 10 years ago (sniffs)

[Philip L241-246]

Whilst he only identified his marital relationship as close, he described sharing his age-related concerns with his male friends as opposed to his wife.

…I’m possibly feeling a bit more…not vuln…is it vulnerable perhaps? [You’ve mentioned mortality before]. I did yeah, we talk about this, we talk about this, I don’t talk about it to Karen but I talk to the blokes. You are more vulnerable in every sense…in the physical sense and also work. And things you should have done perhaps…You’re on the last sort of third (laughs) of your life [Yeah] and that’s what sort of. I’m thinking about that more and more”. [Philip L318-327]
Whilst he did not identify them as being close, these male friendships were interpreted as an opportunity for inter-male closeness for Philip, a relational experience he accessed regularly to provide support regarding mid-life concerns.

When asked what he tended to do to alleviate distress, Philip’s response was a preference to conceal his emotions and be self-reliant.

> Um I don’t, emotionally I don’t show much. I will just try and deal with it myself. I don’t think I’d confide, I don’t confide with my, I wouldn’t confide in my parents because I wouldn’t want to worry them. [Philip L288-290]

> ...but generally, actually if I have a problem, if I have a problem I would try to sort it out myself. [Oh] I wouldn’t necessarily I wouldn’t necessarily want to burden Karen with it. [Phillip L305-307]

In the process of analysis, this statement seemed a contradiction given Philip’s willingness to talk about anxieties throughout the interview. The latter suggested that within some contexts, this research interview, as well as with his wife and with the two men previously mentioned, there was a desire to communicate emotional concerns rather than conceal them. An interpretation was made that Philip needed to be perceived as behaving in a ‘traditionally’ masculine way, and only expressed vulnerabilities in a limited number of context-specific situations. He referred to social occasions with family and friends as “not the right environment” [L386] to talk about personal concerns. This suggested relationships, even ones with close family, served specific functions. Philip described the benefits of regular solo exercising and as indicated below, this suggested that he had been successful in finding a self-reliant strategy to relieve distress.

> ...your mind can go down, settle down” [L369] and “... you can contemplate things and rationalise things and think, and yeah and you think things aren’t so bad” [laughs] [Phillip L372-373]

In contrast to Philip, the three other men interviewed identified talking to a self-described close other as their first strategy for coping with personal distress.
[The tendency would be to talk about it?]
Yes...yeah...definitely [And that would be helpful?] Yeah” [Simon L410-413]
[You would find talking helpful?]
Talking, yeah, probably yeah. The first thing is to talk really.
[Michael L321-323]

Derek talked about the relief of “offloading” [L381] to his older male friend during their weekly exercise-based meet-ups. “I can’t imagine not doing it,” [L102] indicates their importance to him.

... a real old sort of release to see how the week’s gone and offload on each other. That’s been really quite important to me in recent years I would say. I think he finds it the same thing as well.” [Derek L70-72]

He described how talking and feeling understood by his friend really helped him. In the following quote Derek refers to talking to his male friend about a recent marital concern.

We try and even it out a bit really [OK] Obviously he’s a friend and he’s happy to listen to it and he’d sort of say “I see where you’re coming from, yeah it’s difficult.” Actually just, just talking about, offloading really ...
[Derek L379-381]

Michael also described a close male relationship as the place he would discuss something that might “upset” [L292] wife. This was interpreted as him needing to talk about a marital concern.

I’d discuss anything with Jenny I think really, yeah, unless it was something that would really upset her if she knew about it. [Mm] Who would I turn to then? It would probably be my brother I suppose, I suspect that would be my first port of call and would have been all through really, yeah.” [Michael L291-295]
Simon similarly described his close male friend as someone he could talk to about marital concerns and like Philip, he seemed to talk to his male friend rather than his wife about age-related concerns.

... he’s able to talk about his health... and I’m able to talk about ... you know things that are going on as well for me... as well...you know...kind of have a good laugh about it...you know...old age...you know we talk about it...it’s not...but you know... as we get older these things come like and happening to us and think oh yeah for you as well...” [Simon L376-380]

Summary of themes

The past seems to have influenced current ways of relating, including a desire to replicate parental behaviour (Philip), oppose parental behaviour (Simon), nurture relationships (Derek) and “create a very tightknit family” [L48] (Michael). Whilst all descriptions of relational closeness involved the men being able to express their emotions, some of the men’s descriptions (Derek, Michael) were more emotionally based than others (Simon, Philip). Results suggested a difference in how the men described closeness with women and closeness with men. Marriage (or a primary romantic partnership) appeared to be the only relationship with a woman described as being close. Whilst being able to talk about their emotional concerns characterised closeness with a woman, there was no mention of mutual self-disclosure. The latter appeared to be the defining feature of the men’s close male relationships. Whilst Simon, Derek and Michael described talking to a self-described close other as their primary strategy for coping with distress, Philip’s narrative suggested two alternative coping strategies. One was relational and involved mutual disclosure of concerns within the context of an all-male socialising group, and the other was non-relational and an example of a self-reliant strategy based on physical exercise.

Discussion

For the four men interviewed in this study, three commonalities emerged regarding their close relational experiences. Given the relevance of developmental factors on social processes (Bowlby, 1988; Erikson, 1968; Freud, 1949), it was unsurprising that being influenced by the past emerged as a master theme. Two of the men’s narratives
indicated a tendency in adulthood to relate to others in a style based on a past parental model. For both of these men, the parental model was one that encouraged ‘traditionally’ masculine relational behaviour (Brannon, 1976; Nardi, 2007), which included emotional restraint and self-reliance associated with keeping a stiff upper lip (Bennett, 2007). Whilst one of these men appeared keen to replicate this model, the other seemed keen to oppose it. This suggests that there could be an element of choice regarding adherence to past models of behaviour. Adherence appears in part dependent on whether this model is viewed in a positive or negative way; a viewpoint perhaps based on how each man experiences this model as he progresses through childhood and into young adulthood.

The second theme to emerge was being selective when talking about emotions. Amongst the numerous people mentioned whilst describing their social worlds, the men said they only shared emotions with a limited and specific number of self-described close individuals. This selectivity resonates with the findings of Patrick and Beckenbach’s study that in context-specific occasions, notably a sense of feeling “safe” (2009, p52), men are both willing and able to be emotionally expressive. The characteristic that seems to represent this safety for all the men interviewed is a relational context in which the other person is perceived as being completely trustworthy, someone to whom emotional concerns can be disclosed and are kept confidential. Emotional self-disclosure is the defining characteristic of the men’s descriptions of closeness with both men and women. However, it is reciprocity rather than unilateral self-disclosure that specifically characterises their male friendships as being close. This suggests that for the men interviewed in this study, perceiving their male sibling or friend as being willing to expose vulnerability, is potentially the catalyst for classifying this male relationship as close. Whilst Gaia proposed that other men are the primary “enforcers” (2013, p.599) of ‘traditionally’ masculine behaviour, this study’s findings suggest that they can also be the facilitators of ‘traditionally’ feminine or emotionally expressive behaviour. This aligns with men learning about emotionally expressive behaviour when modelled by other men within the context of men’s friendship workshops and therapeutic groups (Garfield, 2010; Lewis, 1978; McPhee, 1996).

The third and final master theme was employing strategies to alleviate distress. In terms of relational closeness, this inter-links with the first two themes. When the men
were asked what they tend to do at times of personal distress, all identified engaging in emotionally close relational support as either a primary or secondary coping strategy. However, in developing the master theme being influenced by the past nothing in the men’s narratives indicated an experience of an emotionally based closeness with a parental or care-giving figure growing up. Whilst this does not confirm an absence of this model in childhood, since all four men described being emotionally close with their wives, it is possible that a heterosexual relationship was the first place they experienced this style of relating. Only one of the four men interviewed demonstrated support for the *keeping a stiff upper lip*’ stereotype. This was perhaps largely due to his positive appraisal of a parental model of stoicism and self-reliance. Unlike the other three men he did not identify any of his male friendships as being close. However his mutual sharing of mid-life professional, financial and physical health concerns on regular nights out with two other mid-life men, suggest that these social experiences could represent a ‘male voice’ of closeness (Twohey & Ewing, 1995) for him. They seem to allow for a style of relating that enables a preservation of ‘traditional’ masculinity. These get-togethers have a habitual nature to them, with routine consumption of alcohol (that could be disinhibiting) and pre-defined rules of conversation reminiscent of the rituals involved in male therapeutic groups (Reddin & Sonn, 2003).

**Study’s limitations**

Whilst the collection of rich individual data can be beneficial for exploring a relational experience as complex as closeness, an IPA research approach is not without limitations. The themes that resulted can only represent the experiences of the four mid-life men interviewed, and to some extent a group of contextually similar men. Whilst they can illuminate understanding of a relational experience, they cannot be considered representative of how all men experience close relationships. Given the nature of how IPA data is collected, a willingness to engage in a one-to-one interview perhaps skewed the study’s resultant sample group towards less ‘traditional’ men, ones already more likely than others to be willing to discuss a personal subject like closeness. Men less willing or able to articulate their close relational experiences would perhaps prefer participating in an anonymous online questionnaire as used by Levy (2005), rather than a personalised interview. As a result, the themes potentially failed to reflect a range of masculinities. Since IPA is a methodology based on a
process of double hermeneutics, emergent themes reflect the ability of participants to interpret and verbally communicate their experiences, as well as the researcher’s subjective interpretations of these experiences (Lyons & Coyle, 2007). Whilst every effort is made in the process of analysis to bracket off personal thoughts and feelings regarding the research topic, inevitably the researcher’s subjective experiences influence how IPA themes develop.

Aside from limitations of IPA as a methodology, limitations can arise due to specific choices made regarding data collection. In this study, there were drawbacks to recruiting via a known intermediate that a totally anonymous strategy could have avoided. These included the possibility that the men felt a greater sense of obligation to participate, as well as a higher possibility of socially desirable responses once they took part. Whilst it represented the upper age range of mid-life, the 45-60’ age range was in retrospect too broad. As highlighted by Greif (2009), due to a difference in life-stage demands, men in their fifties are likely to have different relational needs and experiences to men in their forties. Therefore in retrospect, recruitment would have been limited to men in their fifties, a mid-way decade that perhaps could be considered most indicative of mid-life.

There were also errors in some of the wording of the study’s recruitment material (Appendix D). Whilst the aim of the language used was to find a way of recruiting men from similar socioeconomic backgrounds, it created some confusion regarding the acceptability of occupations for participation. In retrospect, “high status” would have been omitted, leaving just “professional” with a footnote definition to provide greater clarity and avoid unintended anxiety. The use of “important” and “close” in the study’s description could also have primed the men to consider these relationships in advance, potentially reducing the spontaneity and authenticity of their responses at the time of the interview. However, since half of those interviewed demanded clarification regarding the question about closeness, for these men at least there appeared to be little advance thought about the questions.

With regard to location, all of the interviews took place in the men’s own homes. On the one hand this seemed to be helpful, since being on familiar territory perhaps eased anxiety regarding the process of being interviewed. However, at least two of the interviews were intermittently disturbed by the close proximity and noise of family members. The sound interruption broke the flow of dialogue a little, and in retrospect
greater emphasis would have placed on the need for a quiet, undisturbed space within the study’s information sheet (Appendix D).

**Conclusions and suggestions for future research**

Rather than *keep a stiff upper lip* at times of adversity, the white British professional mid-life men interviewed engage in emotionally close relational support. This study’s findings indicate that in addition to a romantic partner, men’s male friends can be highly influential in determining the amount of emotional support available to them. It appears to be an exposure of vulnerability from their male friends that motivates a desire for the men interviewed to reciprocate. Conversely, there is evidence for the existence of an alternative or inter-male ‘voice’ of closeness, one that allows concerns to be communicated with other men, but in a manner that allows a more ‘traditional’ expression of masculinity to be preserved. In mid-life, this relational support, whilst not characteristically emotionally expressive, or even referred to as close, might be an important place for age-related concerns to be shared. Thus the other men in a man’s social world could be an under-explored or “untapped resource” (Greif, 2009, p.19) at times of distress.

Whilst the study’s findings provide little evidence as to how race, ethnicity, social class and life-stage influence men’s close experiences, it does highlight that emotionally based closeness occurs within a specific relational context: within the men’s heterosexual relationships and/or within one or two male friendships. Further research on inter-male expressions of closeness is suggested, in order to further explore the extent to which a man’s willingness to disclose emotional vulnerabilities to other men is contingent on reciprocity of emotional self-disclosure. This could link into further qualitative research on how the gender of a therapist might influence a man’s engagement in personal therapy. For the mid-life men interviewed in this study, an absence of reciprocal self-disclosure might not be a barrier to engagement with a female therapist, but it could be a significant issue for men working with a male therapist.

Whilst emergent themes did not specifically allude to a *mid-life crisis* (Wethington, 2000), the older men interviewed did talk about health, professional and financial concerns that are life-stage specific (Biggs, 2010). Of note is that these concerns are discussed with other men rather than with their female partners. For this reason, further research on inter-male friendship at mid-life is required in order to continue to explore
how similarly aged men can help each other cope with age-related anxieties. Since this study indicates that all of the men interviewed access emotionally close support from their long-term partners, it would complement existing knowledge to explore experiences of relational closeness for men who are single. Whether single through choice, or due to loss of partner through poor health, death or relationship rupture, the role a primary partnership has on emergent themes would be of great interest. Whilst men have been the focus of this study, women’s experiences of relational closeness could provide a greater understanding of both similarities and differences arising dependent on gender.

To move beyond experiential accounts of closeness, suggestions for future research also include a grounded theory (GT) approach to data collection and analysis. The aim of this would be to explore how individual men come to understand closeness, how the processes underlying closeness develop and how closeness features in their everyday lives. A grounded theory approach aims to develop new theoretical models of understanding, so is particularly suitable for an under-explored research topic like mid-life men and their close relationships.

**Study’s implications for counselling psychology and psychotherapeutic practice**

Standard measures of psychological health used by General Practitioners (GPs) in primary care include the Patient Health Questionnaire 9 (PHQ-9) and the Generalised Anxiety Disorder 7 (GAD-7). Results from these, along with clinical histories and assessments, are frequently used as the basis for referral to primary psychological care, such as an Increasing Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) service. The latter assesses individuals using a Minimum Data Set (MDS) (Appendix I). This often includes, hence repeats, the PHQ-9 and GAD-7, as well as further standard measures such as the IAPT Phobia Scales, and Work and Social Adjustment Scale (WSAS). All these measures require an individual to give numerically graded responses that correspond with linear scales of frequency or severity. In terms of social interactions, there are questions regarding the degree to which social situations are avoided, (A17: IAPT Phobia Scales), the frequency with which social leisure activities are engaged in (Q3: WSAS) and the ability to ‘form and maintain close relationships with others including the people I live with’ (Q5: WSAS).

Whilst these standard measures can provide an abundance of information in a relatively short period of time, findings from this study indicate that opening up a
conversation specifically about the close others in a man’s life could prove beneficial when considering professional interventions. A brief complementary ‘own word’ section (Appendix J) could provide an opportunity for a man to identify close others in his social world and consider what it is about these individuals and these relationships that characterise them as close. Whilst some men might readily complete this section alone, others less familiar with reflecting in this way might appreciate a more collaborative approach. This might require the mental health professional conducting the assessment to provide clarification if the questions on closeness elicit any confusion. Identification of men’s close relationships and their descriptions of closeness could illuminate the type of relational support currently available to them, and whether this is being accessed and/or is beneficial at times of personal distress. Further research is required to determine whether an additional qualitative account of closeness at the point of assessment can help taper professional support more effectively for those men who currently feel their ‘voice’ is unheard.
References


Routledge.


Appendix A
Criteria for submission to the Counselling Psychology Review

Information for contributors

1. **Length:** Papers should normally be no more than 5,000 words (including abstract, reference list, tables and figures).

2. **Manuscript requirements:**

   The separate **cover page** should be completed. Contact details will be published if the paper is accepted.

   Apart from the cover page, the document should be free of information identifying the author(s).

   Authors should follow the Society’s guidelines for the use of non-sexist language and all references must be presented in the Society’s style, which is similar to APA style. For an electronic copy of the Society’s Style Guide, go to the Publications page of [www.bps.org.uk](http://www.bps.org.uk) and then click on Policy and guidelines/General guidelines and policy documents and choose Society Editorial Style Guide from the list of documents).

   A structured abstract of up to 250 words should be included with the headings: Background/Aims/Objectives, Methodology/Methods, Results/Findings, Discussion/Conclusions. Review articles should use these headings: Purpose, Methods, Results/Findings, Discussion/Conclusions.

   Approximately five keywords should be provided for each paper.

   Authors are responsible for acquiring written permission to publish lengthy quotations, illustrations, etc., for which they do not own copyright.

   Graphs, diagrams, etc., must have titles -these should not be part of the image.

   Submissions should be sent as email attachments. Word document attachments should be saved under an abbreviated title of your submission. Include no author names in the title. Please add ‘CPR Submission’ in the email subject bar. Please expect an email acknowledgment of your submission.

   Please make all changes after review using Track Changes and return them to the Edit
Appendix B. Literature Review (Research Portfolio, p.5)

Appendix C. FAHS Ethics Approval (with original study title)

Chair’s Action
Proposal Ref: 988-PSY-14
Name of Student/Trainee: KATE HALLIWELL
Title of Project: To what extent does interpersonal emotional intimacy feature in the lives of middle-aged ‘middle-class’ men who are in committed partnerships?

Supervisor: Linda Morison

Date of submission: 5th February 2014

The above Research Project has been submitted to the FAHS Ethics Committee and has received a favourable ethical opinion from the Faculty of Arts and Human Sciences Ethics Committee on the basis described in the protocol and supporting documentation.

The final list of documents reviewed by the Committee is as follows:
Protocol Cover sheet
Summary of the project
Detailed protocol for the project
Participant Information sheet
Consent Form

This documentation should be retained by the student/trainee in case this project is audited by the Faculty Ethics Committee.

Signed: ______________
Professor Bertram Opitz
Chair

Dated:

Please note:
If there are any significant changes to your proposal which require further scrutiny, please contact the Faculty Ethics Committee before proceeding with your Project.
Appendix D. Study Information Sheet

Introduction
You are being invited to participate in a research study that is being conducted as part of a psychology doctorate. Before you decide to participate it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please contact the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

What is the purpose of this study?
The focus of this research is to gain a greater understanding of how men relate within their social network (i.e. primary partner, family, friends, colleagues, and other types of personal interactions). Of specific interest in this study are those relationships considered to be important or close. These will be explored by asking participants directly about their social network within a one-to-one confidential interview. Participation will take no longer than an hour and the interview will take place at a mutually convenient venue: either a participant’s workplace or a community-based private meeting room. The interviews will be audio-recorded and then transcribed. Upon transcription all audio-recordings will be destroyed. All transcripts will be anonymised, meaning that no identifying information will be stored with them. Sometimes the process of talking about significant relationships has the potential to cause distress for the individual involved (either during or after the event). Participants, should they wish to, can pause or end the interview at any time. There is also an opportunity to voice any concerns or ask further questions at the end of the interview. Every participant will be sign-posted to further information websites should they wish to learn more or seek assistance following participation in this study.

Why have I been invited to take part in this study?
You have been asked to participate because this study is specifically interested in the experiences of men who are in long-term relationships, aged between 45 and 60 and in a professional (high) status job. This group of men is currently under-represented in this area of research.

Do I have to take part?
It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and you will then be asked to sign a form agreeing to take part. If you decide to take part you can still change your mind and withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. A decision to withdraw at any time, or a decision not to take part, will not affect you in any way.
Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?
Yes. All information that is collected about you during the course of the research will be anonymised. Audio-recordings will be deleted upon transcription but anonymised transcripts will be analysed and some direct quotes taken from them will be presented in the final research report. Participant contact details will be deleted following the interviews or at the end of the study if a summary of the research findings, is requested by the participant. Anonymised transcripts will be stored securely for up to 10 years in accordance with the Data Protection Act (1998). It will not be possible to identify participants from material presented in the final report and any of the stored material.

Who should I contact for further information?
Kate Halliwell – k.halliwell@surrey.ac.uk
You can also contact my research supervisor – Linda Morison – l.morison@surrey.ac.uk

This copy is for you to keep. If you decide to participate, you will also be given a copy of the signed consent form to keep.

Thank you for considering participation in this study.
Appendix E. Study Consent Form

I have read and understood the Information Sheet provided. I have been given a full explanation by the researcher of the nature, purpose, location and likely duration of the study, and of what I will be expected to do. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions on all aspects of the study and have understood the advice and information given as a result.

I understand that all personal data relating to volunteers is held and processed in the strictest confidence, and in accordance with the Data Protection Act (1998). I agree that I will not seek to restrict the use of the results of the study on the understanding that my anonymity is preserved.

I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time without needing to justify my decision and without prejudice.

I confirm that I have read and understood the above and freely consent to participating in this study. I have been given adequate time to consider my participation and agree to comply with the instructions and restrictions of the study.

Name of participant (BLOCK CAPITALS)

Signed               Date

Name of researcher taking consent (KATE HALLIWELL)

Signed               Date
Appendix F. Interview Schedule

1) Could you tell me a little bit about yourself?

2) You’ve mentioned that ... Could you tell me about them?

3) You’ve also mentioned ... How do you tend to spend your time with …? And with …? Etc.

4) Out of all the people you have mentioned, who do consider yourself to be close to?

5) What is it about this person and the interaction you have with them that makes it feel close for you?

6) And finally, could you tell me what you tend do when feeling distressed about something?
Appendix G: Extract from anonymised interview transcript

[P3 Philip: L281-L333] (**omitted for confidentiality**)

I: So of those you’ve mentioned whom would you say you feel close to?
P3: (sniffs) Specifically?
I: Mm yeah. If, do you, if you need me to elaborate what I mean by that …?
P3: Um, you’re questioning whom I would confide in?
I: Yeah, probably yes, mm.
P3: Well I’d confide first of all in my wife, definitely [Mm] Um I don’t, emotionally I don’t show much. I will just try and deal with it myself. I don’t think I’d confide, I don’t confide with my, I wouldn’t confide in my parents because I wouldn’t want them to worry. Because I know my mother would worry. Um I think I would only confide with my wife and that’s it. I wouldn’t confide with my friends.
I: So the two guys down the pub?
P: Not if, no that’s not, that’s not the purpose of, no why, why we see one another no not that’s not. [OK] No we would, it depends, it depends what level. If it was about work perhaps. That sort of level, that maybe. Yeah we would to an extent. If it’s a personal matter than no (sniffs).
I: So your primary ‘go to’ would be Karen?
P3: Yeah (said very quickly)
I: And are you able to say what it is that enables that to happen? I know that sounds an odd thing to say but, um what would it, what does it require for you to feel able to do that? Does that make sense?
P3: (laughs) Yeah it does make sense yeah, um, yeah something, if I had something on my mind [Mm] and it was bothering me I would tell Karen [Right] I would confide in Karen [Mm]. But generally, actually, if I have a problem, if I have a problem I would try to sort it out myself. [Oh] I wouldn’t necessarily, I wouldn’t necessarily want to burden Karen with it.
I: I suppose that was actually one of the last things I was going to say, if you are distressed or, yeah distressed about something. What do you do?
P3: Yeah, I, I, a lot of it I’d do. I’d sort out myself.
I: Could you elaborate on that?
P3: (laughs) I’ll try…
I: Is that, are you able to?
P3: Not really um … because sometimes I don’t want Karen to be burdened with it actually. There’s a lot of things that go on in your mind with regard to your…
I’m possibly feeling a bit more vuln…is it vulnerable perhaps?
I: Yes, you’ve mentioned [I did before] mortality before.
P: Yeah, I did, we talk about this, we talk about this. I don’t talk about it with Karen but I talk to the blokes.
I: Yeah, which is not uncommon.
P3: No. We talk, you are more vulnerable in every sense, in the physical sense and all, yeah, physical sense and also um work. [Yeah] And things you should have done perhaps, um, savings-wise, pension-wise whatever, it’s all coming it’s… You’re on the last sort of third (laughs) of your life [Yeah] and that’s what’s sort of. I’m thinking about that more and more [Mm] and that’s why I go to the gym, twice a week (sniffs) without fail.
I: That’s helpful to know though, by saying, you go to the gym. So there’s something about exercise?
P3: Yeah I do, I’ve always, always run in the 80s and onwards. I’ve always run and then I always went to the gym. I’ve been going to this gym for 10 years and before that another for 10 years (sniffs) and I do, that’s a very good outlet, [Mm] especially in my previous job. I make it a habit of going exactly the same time every *** (sniffs) um to have a blast [yeah] to get it out [Mm] Because I find it a good stress buster. [Mm]
# Appendix H: Audit for IPA themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Simon (P1)</th>
<th>Derek (P2)</th>
<th>Philip (P3)</th>
<th>Michael (P4)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Initial themes** | Using humour  
Talking about boarding school  
Being separate=not being close  
Noticing emotional restraint  
Wanting to do things differently  
Needing to justify  
Feeling responsible/concerned about elderly parents  
Having rules of living (shoulds)  
Reflecting like this unusual  
Enjoying empathy  
Enjoying being listened to  
Reassurance-seeking/having self-doubt  
Needing to be easy (contact)  
Being a "typical bloke"  
Being a comrade from knowing a long time/having significance you hold onto  
Boxing of people-Linking emotions with effort/difficulties  
Talking to wife  
Talking to one male friend  
Talking about getting older  
Being trustworthy  
Willing to expose vulnerability (in research interview)  
Wanting not to disappoint | Using humour/coughing/talking quickly when nervous  
Identifying multiple close others  
Talking to 5-6 male friends  
Sharing experiences  
Meaning of closeness: empathic understanding, being honest, being able to offload  
Having responsibilities (work/family)  
Willing to expose vulnerability  
Growing up as an only child  
Marrying into a big family  
Being fearful of being alone  
Relating in the present  
Fostering “friendships”  
Finding it difficult to relax now  
Relaxing in his 20s (listening to music)  
Being in frequent contact with others  
Checking in daily on elderly parents  
Offloading concerns about work/relationship | Answering factual Qs with ease  
Using humour/sniffing when anxious  
Willing to expose vulnerability  
Comparing parental relationships  
Caring versus social  
Being independent = being easy  
Wanting to sort out alone  
Talking to wife helps (?contradiction)  
Thinking ahead  
Getting on with it approach  
Having a purpose (socialising)  
Needing to be “jovial”  
Needing to be “fine”  
Understanding what is familiar  
Struggling to talk about emotions  
Having friends based on children  
Having gender-specific socialising  
Having a routine  
Being a burden to others  
Having difficulty describing closeness  
Being a confidante  
Talking with male friends about mid-life worries  
Being private as a couple  
Finding solo exercise relaxing  
Running out of time  
Thinking over feeling  
Linking emotional talk with problems  
Talking about getting older | Using humour  
Seeking reassurance  
Having lots of responsibility  
Willing to expose vulnerability  
Having a connection  
Having primacy in family unit  
Being close only to wife and children  
Reflecting on relationships  
Losing parents  
Having fear of losing partner  
Having concern for children  
Likes talking one to one  
Likes talking about emotions  
Enjoying being alone  
Enjoying family life |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Simon (P1)</th>
<th>Derek (P2)</th>
<th>Philip (P3)</th>
<th>Michael (P4)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#Clustering</td>
<td>Using humour</td>
<td>Using humour/coughing/talking quickly when nervous</td>
<td>Answering factual Qs with ease</td>
<td>Using humour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial themes into superordinate themes</td>
<td>Talking about boarding school</td>
<td>Identifying multiple close others</td>
<td>Using humour/sniffing when anxious</td>
<td>Seeking reassurance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discarding others</td>
<td>Being separate=not being close</td>
<td>Talking to 5-6 male friends</td>
<td>Willing to expose vulnerability</td>
<td>Having lots of responsibility</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feeling responsible/concerned about elderly parents</td>
<td>Wanting to do things differently</td>
<td>Sharing experiences</td>
<td>Comparing parental relationships</td>
<td>Willing to expose vulnerability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noticing emotional restraint</td>
<td>Needing to justify</td>
<td>Meaning of closeness: empathic understanding, being honest, being able to offload</td>
<td>Caring versus social</td>
<td>Having a connection</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wanting to do things differently</td>
<td>Using humour</td>
<td>Having responsibilities (work/family)</td>
<td>Being independent = being easy</td>
<td>Being close only to wife and children</td>
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<tr>
<td>Needing to justify</td>
<td>Identifying multiple close others</td>
<td>Willing to expose vulnerability</td>
<td>Wanting to sort out alone</td>
<td>Reflecting on relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling responsible/concerned about elderly parents</td>
<td>Talking to 5-6 male friends</td>
<td>Growing up as an only child</td>
<td>Talking to wife helps (?contradiction)</td>
<td>Losing parents</td>
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<tr>
<td>Having rules of living (shoulds)</td>
<td>Sharing experiences</td>
<td>Marrying into a big family</td>
<td>Thinking ahead</td>
<td>Having fear of losing partner</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reflecting like this unusual</td>
<td>Meaning of closeness: empathic understanding, being honest, being able to offload</td>
<td>Being fearful of being alone</td>
<td>Needing to be “jovial”</td>
<td>Having concern for children</td>
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<tr>
<td>Enjoying empathy</td>
<td>Having responsibilities (work/family)</td>
<td>Relating in the present</td>
<td>Needing to be “fine”</td>
<td>Likes talking one to one</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoying being listened to</td>
<td>Willing to expose vulnerability</td>
<td>Fostering* friendships</td>
<td>Understanding what is familiar</td>
<td>Likes talking about emotions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reassurance-seeking/having self-doubt</td>
<td>Growing up as an only child</td>
<td>Finding it difficult to relax now</td>
<td>Struggling to talk about emotions</td>
<td>Enjoying being alone</td>
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<tr>
<td>Needing to be easy (contact)</td>
<td>Marrying into a big family</td>
<td>Relaxing in his 20s (listening to music)</td>
<td>Having friends based on children</td>
<td>Enjoying family life</td>
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<td>Being a “typical bloke”</td>
<td>Being fearful of being alone</td>
<td>Being in frequent contact with others</td>
<td>Having gender-specific socialising</td>
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<td>Being a comrade from knowing a long time/having significance you hold onto</td>
<td>Relating in the present</td>
<td>Checking in daily on elderly parents</td>
<td>Having a routine</td>
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<td>Boxing of people-</td>
<td>Fostering* friendships</td>
<td>Offloading concerns about work/relationship</td>
<td>Being a burden to others</td>
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<tr>
<td>Linking emotions with effort/ difficulties</td>
<td>Finding it difficult to relax now</td>
<td></td>
<td>Having difficulty describing closeness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Talking to wife</td>
<td>Relaxing in his 20s (listening to music)</td>
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<td>Being a confidante</td>
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<tr>
<td>Talking to one male friend</td>
<td>Being in frequent contact with others</td>
<td></td>
<td>Talking with male friends about mid-life worries</td>
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<td>Talking about getting older</td>
<td>Checking in daily on elderly parents</td>
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<td>Being private as a couple</td>
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<td>Being trustworthy</td>
<td>Offloading concerns about work/relationship</td>
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<td>Finding solo exercise relaxing</td>
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<td>Willing to expose vulnerability (in research interview)</td>
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<td>Running out of time</td>
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<td>Wanting not to disappoint</td>
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<td>Thinking over feeling</td>
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<td>Linking emotional talk with problems</td>
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<tr>
<td>Comparing across transcripts</td>
<td>Talking about boarding school, Having rules of living (shoulds), Being separate = not being close, Noticing emotional restraint, Reflecting like this unusual, Wanting to do things differently</td>
<td>Growing up as an only child, Being fearful of being alone, Marrying into a big family, Fostering” friendships, Checking in daily on elderly parents</td>
<td>Comparing parental relationships, Understanding what is familiar, Caring versus social, Being independent = being easy, Understanding what is familiar, Being a burden to others, Needing to be “jovial”, Having a routine</td>
<td>Losing parents, Having primacy in family unit, Reflecting on relationships, Having fear of losing partner, Having concern for children</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Using humour, Reflecting like this unusual, Linking emotions with efforts/difficulties, Talking to one male friend, Talking to wife, Enjoying empathy, Enjoying being listed to, Needing to be easy, Being trustworthy, Talking about getting older</td>
<td>Using humour/coughing/talking quickly when nervous, Identifying multiple close others, Sharing experiences, Meaning of closeness, empathic understanding, being honest, being able to offload, Offloading concerns about work/relationship, Willing to expose vulnerability in research interview, Talking to wife, Talking to one male friend</td>
<td>Using humour/sniffing when anxious, Struggling to talk about emotions, Having difficulty describing closeness, Being private as a couple, Being a confidante, Running out of time, Talking about getting older, Willing to expose vulnerability, Wanting to sort out alone, Talking to wife helps, (contradiction), Finding solo exercise relaxing</td>
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<td>Likes talking one to one, Likes talking about emotions, Being close only to wife and children, Having a connection, Having lots of responsibility, Having fear of losing partner, Having concern for children, Willing to expose vulnerability, Likes talking one to one, Likes talking about emotions</td>
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</table>

- **Being influenced by the past**
  - Referencing the past
  - Reflecting on it
  - Linking past and present

- **Being selective when talking about emotions**
  - Talking about emotions
  - Identifying close others
  - Describing closeness

- **Employing strategies to alleviate distress**
  - Exposing vulnerability
  - Identifying something as distressing
  - Recognising how to alleviate distress
Appendix I: Example of a Minimum Data Sheet used in an Increasing Access To Psychological Therapies (IAPT) primary care psychological service. (Questions that specifically reference social situations are yellow highlighted).

PHQ-9
Over the last 2 weeks, how often have you been bothered by any of the following problems?

1. Little interest or pleasure in doing things
2. Feeling down, depressed, or hopeless
3. Trouble falling or staying asleep, or sleeping too much
4. Feeling tired or having little energy
5. Poor appetite or overeating
6. Feeling bad about yourself — or that you are a failure or have let yourself or your family down
7. Trouble concentrating on things, such as reading the newspaper or watching television
   Moving or speaking so slowly that other people could have noticed? Or the opposite — being so fidgety or restless that you have been moving around a lot more than usual
8. Thoughts that you would be better off dead or of hurting yourself in some way
9. Little interest or pleasure in doing things

PHQ9 total score

If you ticked 1, 2 or 3 to question 9, how likely are you to act on these thoughts (from 0=not at all to 10=will definitely act)?

GAD-7
Over the last 2 weeks, how often have you been bothered by any of the following problems?

1. Feeling nervous, anxious or on edge
2. Not being able to stop or control worrying
3. Worrying too much about different things
4. Trouble relaxing
5. Being so restless that it is hard to sit still
6. Becoming easily annoyed or irritable
7. Feeling afraid as if something awful might happen

GAD7 total score
IAPT Phobia Scales:
Choose a number from the scale below to show how much you would avoid each of the situations or objects listed below. Then write the number in the box opposite the situation.

A17 Social situations due to a fear of being embarrassed or making a fool of myself

A18 Certain situations because of a fear of having a panic attack or other distressing symptoms (such as loss of bladder control, vomiting or dizziness)

A19 Certain situations because of a fear of particular objects or activities (such as animals, heights, seeing blood, being in confined spaces, driving or flying).

Work and Social Adjustment
People’s problems sometimes affect their ability to do certain day-to-day tasks in their lives. To rate your problems look at each section and determine on the scale provided how much your problem impairs your ability to carry out the activity.

1. WORK - if you are retired or choose not to have a job for reasons unrelated to your problem, please tick N/A (not applicable)

2. HOME MANAGEMENT – Cleaning, tidying, shopping, cooking, looking after home/children, paying bills etc

3. SOCIAL LEISURE ACTIVITIES - With other people, e.g. parties, pubs, outings, entertaining etc.

4. PRIVATE LEISURE ACTIVITIES – Done alone, e.g. reading, gardening, sewing, hobbies, walking etc.

5. FAMILY AND RELATIONSHIPS – Form and maintain close relationships with others including the people that I live with

W&SAS total score
Appendix J: Table on ‘close others’ for the client to complete.

Please think about all the people in your life (family, friends, work colleagues etc.) and then complete the following questions. Each question can have more than one answer, and you can use as many or as few of your own words as the space or 5-10 minutes allows.

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who do you feel close to?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What is it about this relationship that makes it feel close?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What do you tend to do when feeling very unhappy/distressed?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Research report 2: Towards a grounded theory of how closeness is conceptualised by a group of mid-life men.

[Note: Layout of this report is predominantly in accordance with the criteria for submission to the Counselling Psychology Review (Appendix A)]

Abstract

Aims: To acquire a greater understanding of how a group of men conceptualise closeness in their relationships. To focus on mid-life, since this is the life stage associated with a crisis for some men in Western culture.

Method: Semi-structured interviews were conducted on six white British, professional, mid-life men. Questions were initially asked about each man’s social world and then focused specifically on relationships identified as being close. Responses were collected and analysed guided by a constructivist version of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014).

Results: From analysis of interview data, a tentative theoretical model (Fig. 2) of closeness was developed. This was based on three inter-linking categorical spectrums: conceptualisations of closeness, degrees of adherence to ‘traditional’ masculinity and typical coping strategies at times of personal distress. The model suggests that for the contextually similar group of men interviewed, closeness is conceptualised in a number of different ways. This ranges from a predominantly practical to a predominantly emotional understanding. At times of emotional/psychological difficulty, there is context-specific evidence of gender fluidity regarding close relational behaviour. The model’s central transitional zone appears to represent a less flexible psychological state, one suggestive of inadequate coping at times of distress hence potentially representative of a state of psychological crisis.

Discussion: The theoretical framework developed reflects multiple conceptualisations of relational closeness for men, and tentatively links these to individualised ways of coping with distress. If supported by further research, this model has the potential to inform how social and professional support can be more finely attuned to men at times of distress.

Keywords: relational closeness, grounded theory, masculinity, gender fluidity, midlife, crisis
Introduction

Following on from a recent review (Appendix B), two qualitative studies were conducted on men and their close relationships. The first of these was an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) of mid-life men’s experiences of closeness within their entire social network (Appendix C). The second was this grounded theory (GT) study, focused on developing new theory regarding how men conceptualise closeness. Both studies were based on a contextually similar group of men; white British, mid-life and from a ³professional background. This introductory chapter provides the rationale for focusing on men and relational closeness, and why after an interpretative phenomenological approach, constructivist grounded theory was selected as a research methodology.

Men’s psychological wellbeing

Evidence indicates that there are significant gender differences in how psychological distress is both expressed and managed. Greater levels of drink, substance abuse (Ridge, Emslie & White, 2011; Woodford, 2012) and extreme over-work (Robinson, 2014) amongst men in comparison to women reflect this difference. A further indication of an inadequacy in addressing men’s distress are suicide statistics that demonstrate men are at least three times more likely than women to take their own lives (ONS, 2017). Alongside these findings, research indicates that men are far less likely than women to seek help at times of psychological distress (Galdas, Cheater & Marshall, 2005; Sullivan, Camic & Brown, 2015). Whilst the abundance of research on men’s psychological health is sourced from North America, recent British studies (Kingerlee, 2012; Sullivan et al, 2005) and reports on men’s mental health, (Wilkins, 2010; Wilkins & Kemble, 2011; Wilkins, 2013), specifically reflect concerns over British men’s psychological wellbeing.

Subjective Wellbeing (SWB) (Deiner, 2000) is a psychological term used regularly in literature, including the annually published Happiness Report (Helliwell, Layard, & Sachs, 2015). It refers to a quantification of a person’s psychological wellbeing, and represents how much an individual experiences positive emotions including joy. Social

³Professional: this term denotes knowledge, skill and experience in a specific job or activity and therefore encompasses a wide range of occupations.
support notably having someone to “count on at times of trouble” (Helliwell et al., p.23), is one of the key ways to assess an individual’s SWB. However, social support is a fairly broad term, one that encompasses a variety of relationships, emotionally close and otherwise. This current study specifically focuses on close relationships, and the role they potentially play in the psychological wellbeing of a group of British mid-life men.

**Understanding closeness**

Relational closeness has been approached from a variety of theoretical perspectives and resulted in an abundance of literature. Frequent descriptors of close relationships include: “love, trust, commitment, caring, stability, attachment, one-ness, meaningful, and significant” (Berscheid & Peplau, 1983/2002, p.12). A number of theoretical models of closeness have been developed (Aron, Mashek & Aron, 2004; Collins & Feeney, 2004), but perhaps reflective of its complexity and multi-dimensional nature (Mashek & Aron, 2004), a single definition remains elusive. As a result, it has been a research challenge both to classify a relationship as close and assess relational closeness. One tool that has attempted to quantify aspects of closeness has been the Relationship Closeness Inventory (RCI) (Berscheid, Snyder & Omoto, 1989). This measure was developed based on close relationship research by Kelly et al. (1983/2002) and assesses closeness based on patterns of inter-dependence. A review of its use by Berscheid et al. (2004) concluded it was a valid and reliable tool that enabled closeness to be assessed within a wide range of relationships.

Based on self-expansion and interdependence theories, the Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale (IOS) (Agnew, Loving, Le & Goodfriend, 2004) is a pictorial measure of closeness. The selection of one of a possible seven images, from separate to increasingly overlapping ‘self’ and ‘other’ circles, is how the closeness of a relationship is assessed. Closeness can also be assessed from an Attachment Theory perspective (Collins & Feeling, 2004), where knowledge of an individual’s childhood models of attachment is used to inform understanding of their capacity for close relationships in adult life.

**Men’s close relationship research**

In terms of men’s close relationships, Levy’s (2005) was one of the few studies reviewed (Appendix B) that broadened the scope of relationship research beyond a student-aged population. He was interested in the same-sex friendships of mid-life
men, and was specifically interested in a group of married, white, middle-class, men he referred to as “middlers” (2005, p200). By virtue of their race, class, age and marital status he proposed that this group represented the “normative” (2005, p.200) male, hence were an important but under-explored point of social reference. Levy (2005) proposed that these mid-life men’s relationships with other men were quantifiable through different constructs based on words selected as answers from a questionnaire. He hypothesised that men interacted with other men in two main ways, either an activity or group membership-based comradeship or a more emotionally expressive and mutually significant friendship. Whilst Levy (2005) described friendships as irreplaceable, comradeships could be considered to be replaceable, because they simply involved following rules of group membership. Levy (2005) proposed that both context and the degree to which a mid-life man complies with hegemonic or ‘traditional’ masculinity, determines the number of friendships versus comradeships in his life. The lower the adherence the more likelihood of friendships as opposed to comradeships. Whilst it is questionable the extent to which questionnaire-derived constructs can replace a man’s own words in describing his relationships, Levy (2005) is to be commended for focusing on men’s bonds with other men at an under-explored life-stage.

Greif (2009) expanded on Levy’s (2005) somewhat either/or scenario of friendship versus comradeship. He identified four categories of male friendship; “must”, “rust”, “trust” or “just” friends. As its name suggests, the “must” friendships are characterised by support and trust and turned to at times of personal crisis. As with any text based on research, Greif acknowledged the limitations of his study’s methodology (2009, p.11, 263). This included findings skewed towards a sample of white Protestant East Coast American men, who were married or living with someone, and willing to be interviewed. He referred to the study’s data as a “foundation for building knowledge around this most important feature of modern life” (2009, p.11) and acknowledged that his book was ultimately based on his interpretations of key themes raised by the student researchers who conducted nearly four hundred interviews.

The few studies that have qualitatively explored men’s close relationships (Holmes, 2005; Patrick & Beckenbach, 2009; Wagner-Raphael, Seal & Ehrhardt, 2000) have tended to focus on experiences within heterosexual relationships. Descriptions of closeness within this context include men feeling supported, understood, cared for and
comfortable enough to disclose emotional vulnerabilities. Only a few qualitative studies have explored inter-male closeness. Wagner-Raphael et al (2000) compared men’s perceptions of closeness with their female partners against their perceptions of closeness with their male friends. Findings indicated that whilst closeness was identified with both genders, it was qualitatively different. Each gender appeared to satisfy a different role for the men interviewed. Perception of closeness with other men was characterised by feeling relaxed and able to be themselves whilst closeness with women was characterised by the ability to disclose more emotionally. Different perceptions based on gender was also found by Patrick and Beckenbach (2009), however for their male participants a sense of relaxation and authenticity was found in the company of women, rather than with other men.

**What more can research tell us?**

Both relationship and masculinity researchers have voiced concerns over lack of research sample diversity (Connell, 2005, p. xviii; Gaia, 2002, p.166). The author’s review (Appendix B) concluded that the majority of studies on closeness have been based on a sample of young, white, American students. In order to address this lack of diversity, a decision was taken in both the author’s qualitative studies to purposively recruit a group of mid-life British men. This choice was originally made in order to challenge or support behavioural assumptions associated with the stereotype of Western men *keeping a stiff upper lip* (Bennett, 2007; Renton, 2017; Wodehouse, 1963) at times of personal adversity and being susceptible to a *crisis* (Braverman, & Paris, 1993; Wethington, 2000) at mid-life.

The findings from the author’s IPA study (Appendix C) challenged stereotypical assumptions. Whilst there was some evidence of emotional restraint and self-reliance, at times of distress the majority of the men interviewed chose to engage in emotionally close relational support with carefully selected people in their social worlds. These included their wives and/or a limited number of male friends. Whilst self-disclosure characterised all their experiences of relational closeness, the emphasis on reciprocity of self-disclosure was only evident in their close male relationships. Findings also supported the existence of an alternative and valuable inter-male closeness, a relational experience that alludes to the ‘*male voice*’ referred to by Twohey and Ewing (1995) in their review of men’s relationships literature. This closeness appears to allow an inter-
male communication of concerns in a way that preserves a more ‘traditional’ expression of masculinity.

Whilst no themes emerged from the author’s IPA study to support a male mid-life ‘crisis’, there was evidence that the older men interviewed (those in their 50s rather than those in their 40s), regularly discussed age-related concerns with their similarly aged close male friends.

**Why choose constructivist grounded theory (GT) as a methodology?**

Reviewed literature (Appendix B) indicates that the subject of men and relational closeness has been predominantly approached from a quantitative research perspective. However, a lack of consensus regarding defining criteria (Mashek & Aron, 2004) means that closeness can be a highly challenging concept to assess. Rich individual narratives that can be elicited through qualitative approaches aim to reflect the complexity of closeness as a relational concept, and as a result complement information collected by psychometrics. A natural succession to the author’s IPA study (Appendix C) is a qualitative approach that moves beyond individual experiences of relational closeness to consider the processes by which men come to understand closeness. Since grounded theory’s main aim is to generate new theory through the systematic analysis of data, it is a methodology that is particularly suitable for a research topic like men and their close relationships, about which relatively little is theoretically known.

Different types of grounded theory (GT) methodology exist, but the one applied in this current study is a constructivist version that follows Charmaz’s (2014) guidelines. This approach is consistent with the author’s epistemological viewpoint that reality is socially constructed, and a result of the dynamic interaction between participant and researcher. It is a methodology that enables knowledge to be acquired through the collection of first-hand accounts, through a process that is sensitive to how both researcher and participant can be influenced by their context. By context, this refers to a multitude of factors including life-stage and cultural socioeconomic background that potentially influences how a man understands and talks about closeness. It also refers to the research context in which information on closeness is collected. In line with counselling psychology’s focus on active reflection, it is a methodology that acknowledges and reflects on the researcher’s active involvement in both the collection and analysis of research knowledge (Lyons & Coyle, 2007) in answering the
following research question: *How do white, British, professional, mid-life men conceptualise closeness?*

**Method**

**Participants**

Since this study’s research question focuses on a specific race, ethnicity, age and social background of men, purposive sampling was used to recruit participants. The selection criteria were that the men were aged between 40-55, were of white British ethnicity and able to speak English. The term ‘professional’ was used in recruitment literature, with the aim of recruiting men from a similar socioeconomic background. ‘Professional’ was defined in this study’s introductory e-mail (Appendix Ei), as “*knowledge, skill and experience in a specific job or activity and therefore encompasses a wide range of occupations.*”

Men fulfilling the above criteria were excluded if currently engaged in personal therapy and/or had worked in the field of mental health either as psychiatrists, psychologists, psychotherapists, social workers or counsellors. The former exclusion was on ethical grounds since intensive questioning on relationships could interfere with on-going talking therapy. Also, being in therapy could potentially influence how men talked about their close relationships. The second exclusion was on the basis that men working professionally in the field of mental health, through virtue of their training and practice, would have frequent experience discussing relationship issues with others.

**Recruiting participants**

An introductory message with an attached study information sheet (Appendix Ei & ii) was e-mailed (via a known intermediate) to potential male participants (who were unknown to the researcher). If having read all the study information the men both fulfilled the study criteria and wished to participate, they contacted the researcher directly for the first time by e-mail or text exchange to organise a mutually convenient interview date, time and venue.

**Collection and analysis of data**

Initially, only two men were recruited and interviewed. The data-collection method used was a semi-structured interview guided by an interview schedule (Appendix Gi) that outlined the topics to be covered. The initial questions were general information
gathering about the men’s past and present social network. As well as allowing an opportunity to map out social circles, it also provided time to build up some relational rapport and trust, essential for eliciting potentially more sensitive information later in the interview about close relationships.

The interview schedule was amended as interviews progressed, in order to account for emerging information (Appendices G ii & iii) and to allow this new information to be validated or otherwise in further interviews. In terms of actual procedure, each interview took place at a safe and mutually convenient location, either in a room in the participant’s home, (with other family members present elsewhere in the house), or at their work place. Prior to starting the interview each participant was asked to re-read the study information sheet (Appendix E ii) and then read and sign a consent form (Appendix F). Depending on responses, the interviews lasted between 40-60 minutes and each was digitally audio-recorded. A debriefing occurred at the end, during which the men had the opportunity to provide feedback on their interview experience and ask any questions. Audio data was securely handled as outlined in the study information sheet and in the study’s ethics section. Charmaz’s (2014) grounded theory guidelines were used to analyse the data starting with an initial coding of interview transcripts. This involved line by line systematically naming sections of text with codes to provide an initial overview of what the narrative account was about. This initial coding was not purely descriptive in nature but provided the first stage of an interpretative procedure in which codes reflected a co-construction between the participant’s spoken words and the researcher’s interpretation of those words. This stage of analysis was theoretically open with initial codes being the first process by which the interview data and developing theory started to connect. Focused coding was the second stage of data analysis, where the initial codes with greatest significance in terms of theory development started to be identified. As stages of analysis progressed, codes moved on from tentative initial ones to more certain categories or theoretical concepts, with the end stage of analysis aimed at constructing a new theoretical model or framework. Memo notes either pre, during or post-interview were written about anything considered pertinent to data analysis (Appendix H).

With each interview, new insights grounded in original data were co-constructed regarding the men’s understandings of their close relationships. In practical terms, analysis of initial interview transcripts informed an adaptation of the initial interview
schedule (Appendix Gi) to reflect emerging information. There was a feedback or constant comparative process at work, and via adapted interview schedules (Appendices G ii & iii) initial concepts identified in early interviews were either validated or non-validated in later interviews. Following the first two interviews, the process of recruiting further participants to complete this feedback process (referred to as theoretical sampling in grounded theory methodology) simply meant recruiting more men fulfilling the study’s criteria. The recruitment procedure was therefore the same as for initial participants. This allowed developing categorical concepts to be constantly compared between transcripts for contextually similar men, aiming towards a time when no new understandings or insights could be found amongst the data, a defining stage of grounded theory analysis referred to as theoretical saturation.

**Credibility**

The credibility of this study was maximised by adhering to Yardley’s steps to achieving quality qualitative research (Yardley, 2000). These included being sensitive to the men’s context, and aware of any ethical issues that might arise from the in-depth interview process. With regard to data analysis, an iterative procedure of checking and rechecking the coding procedure was applied across transcripts, with a commitment to rigorously, coherently and transparently engaging with the research data. Safeguarding participant confidentiality, being reflective about the research process, and aiming to produce information relevant to psychological research and counselling psychology in particular, were also essential features of creating a credible piece of original qualitative research.

**Ethical Considerations**

This study adhered to the British Psychological Society code of conduct and ethical procedures (BPS, 2005) and received ethical approval from the University of Surrey’s FAHS Ethics Committee (Appendix D). A point of ethical significance was that the emotional line of engagement could touch upon some previously unexplored issues hence inadvertently cause emotional distress either during or at some point after the interview process. Reflecting on previously repressed emotion might leave a man feeling ‘stuck’ and unsure what to do with this emotion. It was expected that the author’s 3 years’ experience as a trainee counselling psychologist on clinical placement would minimise the potential for any distress, but participants still needed to be aware of the possibility of emotional consequences and informed of their right to
withdraw participation at any point either before, during or after the interview. A plan was in place should distress explicitly or implicitly become apparent during the interview. This would involve asking the man in question if he would like to pause or halt completely the interview. Prior to leaving he would be debriefed and signposted to relevant support services including the men’s mental health websites noted in the participant information sheet. Since personal information would likely be revealed during the interview process it was essential that participants were aware of the study’s strict adherence to confidentiality and informed that all recorded audio material was password protected and transcript data anonymised. All details related to confidentiality were noted on the participation information sheet, including that any quotes used from the interview transcripts in the final report would not be reported in a way that would enable participant identification.

Results

Fig 1: Information about participants in order of interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Home-life</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4 Nigel (P1)</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Lives with wife and children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edward (P2)</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Company Director</td>
<td>Lives with wife and children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe (P3)</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Engineer</td>
<td>Lives with wife and children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keith (P4)</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Software developer</td>
<td>Lives with wife and children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John (P5)</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Manager</td>
<td>Lives with pet dogs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sees long-term girlfriend 3-4 times/week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack (P6)</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Restorer</td>
<td>Lives with pet dog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Currently single</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4 Pseudonyms used throughout this report to preserve participant anonymity
Constructivist grounded theory collection and analysis resulted in three main categories that have been figuratively represented by inter-linking spectrums within a theoretical model (Fig. 2). The first of these spectrums represents how the men conceptualised closeness, with a predominantly practically based concept at one end and a predominantly emotionally based one at the other. The middle part of this spectrum has been referred to as a *transitional zone*, since the study’s data suggests that it represents an intermediate concept, one in the process of change. This spectrum interlinks with two other categorical spectrums: adherence to ‘traditional’ masculinity, and a spectrum of coping strategies at times of personal distress. The double-headed arrows denoting each spectrum indicates the possibility of movement in either direction, indicating that positions on the model are flexible and open to change.

*Fig. 2: A theoretical model for closeness*
Spectrum of concepts of relational closeness

The data from each of the men interviewed positioned them somewhere along this spectrum. Nigel, Edward and John were towards the left, Keith and Jack towards the right, and Joe in the central transitional zone. Whilst the concept of closeness varied amongst transcripts, the context in which it was described remained consistent. When asked to identify a close other, all the men referred to individuals who offered relational support/engagement they perceived as being helpful in alleviating personal distress/stress.

Practical concept of closeness

Nigel, the first man interviewed, identified a past work colleague, Trevor, as someone he felt close to. He said he appreciated Trevor’s help during a difficult relationship break-up. Talking about this incident, he recalled his friend’s very practical “pull your-self together” [Nigel L477] approach to his distress, one that was “devoid of emotion” [L482] and encouraged him to have a “Plan B” [L414], an alternate outcome and future to the one he had originally planned.

[It sounds quite practical?]  
_It was [Yeah] but that was [And that was helpful?] It was incredibly helpful because it was something to plan and do [Mm] but also helpful as, OK this is not what I want to happen but this is not so terrible [Yeah] I can do this_  
[Nigel L467-470]

A memo, written directly after this interview (Appendix H), commented on how Nigel’s understanding of closeness was quite practical in nature. This research reflection prompted an alteration to the original interview schedule so that the question relating to what being close meant to the men was extended. The purpose of this was to enable a checking back in future interviews, to clarify both the nature of relational closeness (practical or otherwise) and the context in which it was described. This alteration to Q4 was apparent in subsequent interview schedules (Appendix Gi, ii)

The second participant Edward’s concept of closeness involved doing shared group activities, which in his case included cycling, going to musical concerts and couples-based dinners. He said: “I’ve probably got 15 or 20 really close mates...” [Edward L27], and talked about the importance of knowing someone over many years “a real
friend’s quite deep, long-term to me” [L71-72] and having shared experiences. By Edward’s own admission, he said the conversation with these close friends stayed on a fairly surface level, but went on to reflect that regular activity-based experiences with them had a “therapeutic” [L224] function, and provided a relief from everyday work stresses. When talking about the merits of his regular cycling group he said:

...you all lead busy stressful lives and you talk a load of waffle (both laugh) as you go round and by the end of it you feel better because you’ve kind of espoused it all... [Edward L 143-145]

Edward also highlighted his desire to share positive experiences with a close other:

But it’s not always on a negative as well. [Yeah] quite often it’s on a positive because something funny happened or something different happened [Yeah] or you met someone quirky or interesting. [Edward L177-179]

For both Nigel and Edward relational closeness had a practical quality about it, involving doing something, be it coming up with a Plan B [Nigel L414] or doing shared group activities such as exercising or socialising  [Edward L 143-145]. After these first two interviews, there was a strong sense of an understanding of relational closeness characterised by practicality rather than emotionality. Analysis of the fifth transcript (John) indicated a practical concept of closeness that resonated with initial interviewees.’ John recalled that his close friend Bob’s practical financial advice had been very beneficial following his distressing divorce 3 years before. Talking about the immediate aftermath of his divorce he said:

I talked to my friend Bob and I was like ‘I’m really struggling’ and he knew I was like, wasn’t in a good place and he gave me lots of advice and he goes ‘I think your best way is to go bankrupt’ which bizarrely you have to pay for (he laughs)
[John L264-267]
A transitional concept of closeness

Data from the third interview (Joe) continued to provide support for different conceptualisations of closeness. Joe mentioned financial assistance in his description below, so retained a practical component to his concept of closeness. However in contrast to the first two interviewees, he also talked about personal qualities, including being trustworthy and non-judgmental, qualities he viewed as essential for there to be closeness.

... you've got to know that they like you, but not only that um that you can trust them [Mm] and you know that if push comes to shove you know if you needed a hand with something or even if you wanted to borrow some money [Mm] They might say, no I’m sorry I can’t help you but you know they wouldn’t judge you [Joe L158-190]

Talking more about his understanding of closeness, he referred to non-verbal signals and reciprocity; a description that took on a more emotionally based character.

There’s some sort of chemistry there, isn’t there? [Mm] That because we communicate with each other without having to say words [Yeah] so um, but having said that it may be in a drunken moment I might have said (laughs) to one of the guys, but let’s put that aside for one minute ...

[Do we have to?] (We both laugh)

Certainly ...., I would have definitely, I would have said to Brian I can’t remember but we, he’s expressed to me and I don’t know whether I’ve reciprocated it but he has expressed to me that I’m a very good friend by being there for him when he needed me [So he verbally expressed that?] He, he verbally has yeah [OK] and I, I don’t know whether I have reciprocated. [Joe L448-457]

Whilst Joe’s description indicated an appreciation of his friend’s expression of need, the humour that entered the research interaction at this point was interpreted as Joe
being either anxious and/or embarrassed about talking about personal disclosure. This suggested an appreciation and perhaps even desire for emotional closeness, but a lack of comfort or familiarity with the relational behaviour it entails.

**An emotionally based concept of closeness**

In contrast to previous concepts of closeness, the fourth man interviewed Keith, talked about mutual sharing and understanding of emotional experiences.

*A close friend I guess would be someone who you can ... when you talk your experiences are understood ...* [Keith L50-51]

*...you feel understood and their experiences feel understandable to me um and that’s also kind of makes a good marriage as well that sharing of experiences and feeling of being understood and holding those same values and um together, you know the same things are important* [Keith L55-59]

Keith recalled one particular friend as really helping him through an identity “crisis” [Keith L449] in his late 20s, someone he was willing to communicate emotions and acknowledge vulnerability to, and vice versa.

*I think it was based upon a sense of um struggling with life in a similar way* [Keith L65] *...we kind of had that in common and could talk for a long time about how we experienced things, how we experienced life, how we, the things we struggle with”* [Keith L70-72]

**Spectrum of adherence to ‘traditional’ masculinity**

Whilst each of the men referenced ‘traditional’ masculinity at some point throughout their interviews, the content of their narratives and their ease (or otherwise) answering the more personal interview questions, suggested that their degree of adherence to it varied. In the first interview, Nigel made several comments that were interpreted as demonstrating a personal preference for ‘traditionally’ masculine behaviour. This included his perception that his wife would view him more positively if he approached their relationship problems in a practical way.
... probably made me feel/look less feeble as well, which probably made me more attractive to my wife (he laughs) or girlfriend as it was at the time”  
[Nigel L494-495]

Nigel recalled that his friend Trevor’s advice included that he “stop being a wos”, “man-up” [L478] and “face reality” [L478] all phrases associated with ‘traditional’ masculinity. An acceptance of this advice suggested that Nigel considered it to be an expression of masculinity that would benefit him.

Similarly, to Nigel, Edward also made references to ‘traditional’ masculinity and his frequent reference to the word “wired” [L147, L208, L325, L347] when describing men was interpreted as him veering towards a biological rather than social understanding for gender differences in relational styles.

... maye that’s the way we’re wired, but I don’t see yeah, we just communicate different, blokes, definitely [Edward L208-209]

The fifth interviewee John talked about a social perception of men being considered “weak” if they asked for help at times of difficulty. This suggested that he felt some social expectation to be self-reliant, and as such behave in a ‘traditionally’ masculine way.

... I think it’s still that mentality [Yeah] that it is ... you’re being weak if you’re asking for help. [Is that what it feels like a bit do you think?] A little bit, it’s not something that I would think I am, but I don’t like asking for help, I try and solve it myself.” [John L663-664]

Post-interview memos for Nigel, Edward and John, noted that whenever the interview questions approached an emotionally sensitive area, these men frequently introduced humour and down playing language into the research conversation. Nigel referred to his past relationship break-up as a “blip” [L137] despite later in the interview disclosing that “he was in awful state” [L489]. Nigel also talked about men of his age not having the “time or the luxury to sort of indulge themselves.” [L 500]
This suggested that Nigel perceived dwelling on personal distress was not a commendable attribute for a middle-aged man. Similarly to Nigel’s understatement of a relationship breakdown with the use of “blip” [L137], Edward used the mildest of descriptions “poorly” [L139] with reference to his father’s recent episode of serious poor health. He briefly mentioned this in response to a question about challenging experiences but did not elaborate any further.

Whilst Joe demonstrated a willingness to expose and acknowledge vulnerability within the context of his research interview, he seemed to be reluctant to extend this behaviour to his close social network. This finding was unsurprising given his narrative indicated continued adherence to ‘traditional’ masculine behaviour in most social settings. However, quite a revealing revelation in Joe’s narrative was how his close male friend’s exposure of vulnerability left him feeling both “privileged” [L540] and encouraged to reciprocate.

In contrast to the four other men, both Keith and Jack readily talked about past, current and potential problems, and their ways of coping with distress. This suggested a willingness to talk about emotions and express vulnerabilities, and as such a low adherence to ‘traditional’ masculinity and a desire to be emotionally close with others. Jack made a direct reference to stereotypes:

Yeah, stereotypes, yeah I’ve got loads of mates I would call, Doug being one of them [And you could really talk?] Absolutely yeah, say anything I want.

[Jack L297-298]

His reference to talking about things “like girls would” suggested that Jack considered his behaviour was non-stereotypical.

But I definitely have a lot more people that I could call and talk to and have coffee with and talk about girls and life and all that stuff like girls would.

[Jack L303-304]
Keith talked about how he felt men were expected to behave, and advocated emotional expression over restraint.

...as a man you are encouraged to I think give the impression of finding life quite easy, the imperative to be in control and to be quite cool with things is quite strong and that’s almost the reverse of what you need to do to go any deeper within yourself to find any kind of understanding, any deeper understanding, and I think it’s sort of a bit of a cliché but it gets bottled up and can come to a point that it’s no longer under your control. 

[Keith L377-382]

He also expressed concern about some other men his life, ones he felt were suffering due to adhering to a role model of masculinity associated with invulnerability.

In my mind at the moment is a couple of people who I think are going through that and I kind of worry about what [Yeah] how they’ll cope and what will happen because there’s a strong imperative they feel I think to be masculine and not show any sense of struggling. [Keith L384-387]

Spectrum of coping strategies at times of personal distress

By the end of the second interview it was noted that closeness had been described within the context of being helped. It seemed that someone who was instrumental in alleviating emotional distress was not only identified as being close, but the nature of the interaction was used as a template for future coping. As a result, the wording of the final interview questions was altered to create a third and final schedule (Appendix G iii) one that specifically checked back on both these points in subsequent interviews. By the end of the final interview, there was a spectrum of coping templates, and this corresponded with the spectrum of concepts of closeness and spectrum of adherence to ‘traditional’ masculinity, enabling a tentative theoretical model (Fig.2) to be constructed. With regard to the final interview questions, aside from a past relationship incident, Nigel struggled to name any current or potential future challenges or emotional vulnerabilities. When asked what he tended to do at such times, he talked about a need to be self-reliant.
I don’t know what this hypothetical problem would be but it would be something that you would have to get over yourself. [Nigel L 408-409]

Nigel’s delay in responding was interpreted as either anxiety and/or an unwillingness to expose personal vulnerability. In the case of the latter, this avoidance of self-disclosure suggested behaviour aligned with ‘traditional’ masculinity. As a result of Nigel’s delay in answering the final interview questions, further prompts were introduced into a second draft of the interview schedule (Appendix Gii). These prompts were utilised in the second interview, and as demonstrated in the following quote, Edward appeared to be similarly reluctant to envisage potential problems, and talked about having safeguarded himself against problems:

...you’d have to chip away (he laughs) at my entire world to get to that hypothetical situation. [Edward L348-349]

In line with his practically based concept of relational closeness and an adherence to ‘traditional’ masculinity, John said that the practical advice from friends during a past difficult divorce had provided him with the experience that having an action plan was a helpful way to confront current/future problems. Similarly to Edward and Nigel, he said he found stress relief in regularly engaging in group-based activities. In John’s case his main stress-relieving activity was sex-based and he talked about relaxation through being a “swinger” [L76].

[OK right, I see, so it’s a way of relaxing, so in a way you could say that some people might meditate, would you say that you swing?] (Researcher)  
Possibly yeah, don’t get me wrong, the place we go to [Mm] it’s, we don’t have to ‘play,’ it’s just it’s nice because you can chill in the pool, if you want to the tub, or just chat with friends [Yeah] and if something happens something happens. [John L497-501]
Despite being diagnosed in the past with depression and prescribed anti-depressants, John said he preferred to be self-reliant and did not have any therapy, medical or otherwise.

[Would you have wanted anything else?]

*To be honest not really, I would have just worked myself through it, sort of owned up and did it. The only person that can fix it is myself.* [John L367-369]

John said he tended to react to stress by throwing himself into work.

*That means I’d just plough my head into work and don’t do anything else* [Oh you work?] *I just carry on working* [So working?] *Lots and lots of work.*

[John L339-340]

Whilst Nigel, Edward and John’s narratives indicated a preference for self-reliance, they also described some experiences of inter-dependence, with disclosure of vulnerability and emotional support.

*Um, I’d normally talk it through ... yeah I’d talk it through with Ellen. You know it depends on what it is.* [Right] *But first stop’s um first stop’s always Ellen, and then it would depend on what it was.* [Edward L136-138]

For Edward these experiences appear to be restricted to his wife, whereas John’s involve the animal companions he lives with. He said that his two dogs had been his greatest source of emotional comfort and support since his divorce.

[And so that sounds like it was a really tricky time?]

*That was bad yeah, and to be fair if I didn’t have my dogs I probably wouldn’t be sitting here now.* [John L214-216]

For Nigel, Edward and John, current contentment appears to be predominantly sourced and maintained through professional satisfaction, financial stability and a stable personal life:
No, no reasonably happy at work, just had a little promotion, which is nice. Um I enjoy my work, I’m very happy with my family [Yeah] who take up 99% of my time. [Nigel L365-368]

Edward also described a very settled and stable personal and professional situation.

... you know in every bit of my life, in my work and in my private life, I’m doing well. I’ve a lovely stable family and everyone’s fit and healthy [Yeah] run a *** quid turnover business... ” [Edward L301-303]

When asked what he tends to do during challenging times, Joe said he got frustrated, and this suggested his current coping strategies are insufficient. Whilst Joe mentioned some self-reliant strategies including cycling, he candidly admitted that he mainly alleviated distress through drinking alcohol.

What would I do? Um, drink.
[Um, and that is helpful?]
Um only in, only in the short-term. [Short-term, yeah.] Because the problem doesn’t go away does it? [Joe L502-505]

Whilst considering it a “privileged position to be in” [Joe L539] if others disclosed anxieties to him, Joe said he would not initiate contact with a close friend solely to discuss his problems. Similarly to Nigel and Edward he said he might briefly mention concerns to a friend but this would be as an aside to doing a shared activity like going cycling together. Joe seemed to be in a transitional zone between practical and emotional regulation of his distress. A post-interview audio memo note indicated a much greater sense of emotion was detected both throughout and following Joe’s interview than in the previous two interviews with Nigel and Edward. Within the context of the interview Joe came across as willing to communicate emotions and expose vulnerabilities, but seemed as yet unable to transfer this willingness within his close social network. Below he describes helping a close male friend, and reflects that it was his friend’s self-disclosure and trust in him that was likely to make him want to reciprocate.
That he was able to spill his guts, it’s definitely um you know... because obviously knowing things about him that he’s entrusted to me, then it makes it so much easier to entrust your problems with them [Well, yeah] Doesn’t it?

[Joe L 567-570]

In contrast to the four other men, both Keith and Jack readily talked about past, current and potential problems, and their ways of coping with distress. A wide range of emotions, including anger, joy, sadness and fear were all communicated both within the research interviews and described as occurring within their close relationships. This suggested a willingness to talk about emotions and express vulnerabilities, and as such a low adherence to ‘traditional’ masculinity. When asked what he tended to do during challenging times, Keith talked about having acquired certain skillsets including an “emotional vocabulary” [L 550] to talk about his problems with either his partner or a couple of close male friends. From Keith’s transcript it unexpectedly emerged that he had had a past experience of personal and group therapy, something he embarked upon as a result of the “crisis” in his late 20s. He described the need for men to experience a “crisis” in order to talk about their emotional needs.

... I think you need the crisis to sort of understand really what you want to say, what’s wrong and to talk about what the problems are. [OK] I don’t personally see a way around the crisis.

[OK, so if I just finish this up, are you all right Keith?] Sure. [So, what you say, if I can just get this right. There’s still something about … there’s a crisis of some kind that potentially men more than women might face because of the way things still are in terms of exposure of self or vulnerability or …?] Yeah. [Yeah]

Yeah, I think you need to be forced into the acceptance that you need to talk, to express something serious, more serious and deep than you might have models for.[Keith L515-523]

He talked about his need to be a behavioural model for his own son.
what I feel very strongly about is that my son needs an emotional vocabulary which I try to model and discuss with him. [Keith L549-551]

Whilst Keith described the importance for him of talking about emotional needs, he also talked about the stress reducing qualities of exercise and solo meditation. This suggested that Keith had a range of distress coping strategies, both practically and emotionally based, available to him. A memo post-interview with Keith noted that personal and group therapy seemed to have equipped him with skills that enabled him to disclose vulnerability to others and engage in emotionally close relationships with other men.

Whilst not in personal therapy, it emerged within the interview that Jack, the final man interviewed, attended a weekly men’s group as a long-term aspect of his recovery for alcohol-dependence. Jack’s concept of relational closeness very much resonated with Keith’s and involved talking about emotional concerns. In preference to being self-reliant, Jack named at least six close male and female friends he said he felt comfortable talking to about any emotional problems [Jack L297-298, L303-305] Jack’s single status marked him out from the other men interviewed, but even in the absence of a partner, like Keith he appeared to have no difficulty talking about problems within the research interview and he seemed to have a range of distress coping strategies available to him. Checking back on his preferred coping strategy:

[Something that’s come up quite a lot is self-reliance, that seems to have struck a cord quite a lot I suppose, and there would be one or two they would talk, but there was quite a sense of ‘I’ve got to go and sort it out by myself’. I just wondered what your take on that was?]

No, I’d go and talk to people. I’d speak to my sponsor, I’d speak to people I respect. Like when I had my relationship break-up and the first thing I did was find 5 or 6 people that I respect and go and talk to them. [Jack L240-242]

Jack said he had only learnt to talk about his emotions in early mid-life as a result of participating in men’s groups to address extreme difficulties related to alcohol-dependence. For Jack, engagement in emotionally close interactions was a regular and
significant part of his everyday life. He seemed able to both recognise and readily emotionally engage with a select number of individuals in his social world.

Summary of findings

Nigel, Edward and John’s data indicated that they conceptualised closeness in a predominantly practical way. This understanding corresponded with a higher adherence to ‘traditional’ masculinity and in turn lower willingness to communicate emotions and acknowledge vulnerability. In terms of coping templates at times of personal difficulty, this position tended to correspond with a desire for predominantly practically based relational support and/or be self-reliant. There were suggestions that a more emotionally based support from partners and animal companions were exceptions to this, hence context-specific occasions occurred when these men did communicate emotions and acknowledge vulnerability.

Data that predominantly indicated an emotionally based concept of closeness (Keith and Jack) corresponded with a lower adherence to a ‘traditional’ masculinity and in turn greater willingness to communicate emotion and acknowledge vulnerability. In terms of coping templates at times of personal difficulty, this position seemed to correspond with a range of possibilities. These included both emotionally and practically-based relational support as well as non-relational solo coping strategies.

Only one of the men interviewed (Joe) demonstrated neither a predominantly practical nor emotionally based concept of closeness. His concept seemed to be more conflicted with an apparent appreciation and desire for emotional engagement with others, but a reluctance to either initiate or reciprocate this. This positioned him in the transitional zone on the spectrum of concepts of closeness.

Discussion

This grounded theory study resulted in a tentative theoretical model (Fig. 2) made up of interlinking categorical spectrums. Interview data from each man interviewed positioned him predominantly either left, right or towards the centre of the spectrums. Despite interviewing a fairly homogenous group of men, the same race, ethnicity, life stage and all in full-time professional work, their differing positions on the model suggests a wide variation of data regarding their understanding of closeness and its role in their lives. For those men positioned towards the left of the model, closeness is predominantly practical in nature. It tends to be based on action rather than emotion,
and involves group-based socialising or engagement in sport. However, for at least one of these men, there is also evidence of engagement in an emotionally based closeness. This indicates that positions are not fixed on the model, and whilst one understanding of closeness might predominate, depending on context, the same man can choose to engage in an alternative close relational experience. Expressions of emotional closeness appear to be predominantly restricted to heterosexual marital relationships rather than male friendships. This supports Wagner-Raphael et al.’s (2000) findings that men’s experiences of closeness differ dependent on gender, with some men more comfortable expressing emotions to women, than to other men. It also aligns with Patrick & Beckenbach’s observation that the self-disclosure characteristic of emotional closeness could feel “safe” (2009, p.52) for men to experience with women, as opposed to other men, with whom they might feel obliged to “put on certain masks” (2009, p.52).

Because men’s closeness with women has been predominantly explored within the context of heterosexual relationships (Holmes, 2005; Patrick & Beckenbach 2009) rather than cross-sex friendships, it is as yet unclear the extent to which for some men, emotional closeness with a woman is contingent on sexual intimacy. At present there is insufficient information to follow on from Patrick and Beckenbach’s (2009) concept of safety regarding how men choose to closely relate to others. There are however multiple studies, including Bank & Hansford’s (2000) and Levy’s (2005), that indicate it is an adherence to traditional’ masculinity that prevents men from engaging in more emotionally based relationships with other men. A more practical action-based inter-male ‘voice’ (Twohey & Ewing, 1995) or expression of closeness perhaps provides a sense of close support from other men whilst still allowing a social presentation of emotional control and invulnerability associated with ‘traditional’ masculinity. This indication of context-dependent expressions of closeness resonates with Bennett’s (2010) findings of private and public presentations of emotion, where the latter appears to provide a sense of personal protection.

In terms of self-protection, a common thread in the narratives of those men positioned towards the left of the model is stability and contentment in their everyday personal and professional lives. This seems to act as a type of ‘protective buffer’ against distress and whilst this is in place, a combination of self-reliance, predominantly practical based closeness and occasional emotional engagement, is
perhaps more than adequate to alleviate everyday stresses. However, significant gender differences regarding alcohol and substance abuse (Ridge et al, 2011; Woodford, 2012), suicide rates (ONS, 2017), and engagement in psychological therapy (Sullivan et al, 2015), suggest that within Western culture at least, a significant number of men are experiencing difficulty in finding appropriate ways to alleviate their distress.

Findings from this study suggest that the transitional zone of the model represents a state of psychological struggle. For the man positioned there, there appears to be neither the benefit of a ‘protective buffer’ nor a sense that familiar practical coping strategies are still effective. The main emotion noted in a post-interview memo with Joe, is frustration rather than fear or vulnerability. This is perhaps unsurprising given that this zone corresponds with a mid-way position on the spectrum of adherence to ‘traditional’ masculinity, and anger is one of a limited number of emotions socially permitted for this gender role stereotype (Ridge et al, 2011). Whilst no categories emerged from the data that specifically supported the existence of a male midlife crisis (Wethington, 2000), Joe’s interview transcript indicated that at this stage of his life, his current close relationships had been unable to provide him with relief from distress. This finding aligns with the ‘crisis’ associated with relational discontent observed by Braverman and Paris (1993), in their case studies of white, professional, mid-life men. Joe’s reflection that his close male friend’s exposure of vulnerability could motivate him to behave similarly, highlights the potentially significant role male friends can play in broadening styles of close relating. Conversely, Gaia’s (2013) study on the influence of social stereotypes on men’s engagement in emotional expressive relationships indicates that other men in a man’s social world also have the potential to reinforce ‘traditionally’ masculine relational behaviour.

For the men positioned to the right of the model, the ability to be emotionally close with others was attributed to past experiences of men’s group therapy. This resonates with research findings that men can learn to share their emotions with others if this way of relating is modelled to them by other men (Garfield, 2010; Lewis, 1978; McPhee, 1996).

**Study’s limitations**

Whilst grounded theory was considered the most appropriate methodology for gaining new knowledge about a relatively unexplored area, like all research approaches it has limitations (Lyons & Coyle, 2009). It demands both a systematic and
insightful approach to data analysis, a combination that can be difficult to balance. It is a methodology that can be highly time-consuming, requiring a complete immersion in the data from transcription and initial line by line coding through to the final development of theoretical concepts. It also requires a process of constant comparison, with initial concepts identified in early interviews either validated or non-validated via adapted interview schedules. A researcher adopting this approach therefore needs to be able to move flexibly between transcripts, discard some initial concepts as new information emerges and be able to embrace new ones.

For this study, mindful of the time constraints associated with doctoral training, a decision was taken to conduct a smaller scale, abbreviated version of grounded theory (Willig, 2013, p.73). This restricted recruitment and data collection to a fixed number of men fulfilling recruitment criteria. Restricting the sample size to six represented a balance between aiming towards as high a level of theoretical saturation as the data from these six transcripts would allow, and the extensive time involved in collecting and analysing further interviews from multiple sources. Whilst limited in number, prioritising interviews with the men themselves, rather than with others in their social world was considered a reasonable compromise given that the study’s aim was to learn more about a personal understanding of a relational experience. With no time constraints, data would have also been collected from the individuals identified as being ‘close others,’ as well as crosschecked with data from contextually different men. In the absence of the latter, it was inconclusive whether the pattern of variation represented in this study’s results was sample specific, indicative of white British professional mid-life men, or more transferrable to men from a range of backgrounds and of varying ages.

In terms of recruitment, there were some potential participation biases. Some of the men perhaps felt a greater sense of obligation to participate as a result of their close connection with the known intermediate in the recruiting researcher’s social network. There was also the possibility that a willingness to be interviewed, despite the study information sheet flagging up the possibility that participation could trigger emotions, skewed the resultant sample group towards less ‘traditional’ men, ones already fairly comfortable discussing emotional matters. In order to avoid these biases, in retrospect, participants would have been sourced completely anonymously rather than via the researcher’s social network.
Whilst current engagement in psychotherapy was an exclusion factor for participation in the study, little pre-thought had been given to the influence of past therapeutic experiences. In retrospect, in terms of recruitment criteria, all experiences of therapy, past and present, group or one to one would have been included as exclusion criteria. Another change, would have been to narrow the age range of participation further. In line with Greif’s (2009) findings of different responsibilities and in turn relationship choices between men from different decades, the study would have concentrated on men in their fifties. Whilst mindful that mid-life has been defined as being anywhere between forty-sixty, the fifties as the mid-way decade could perhaps be considered the most indicative of mid-life.

**Conclusions and proposals for future research**

The tentative theoretical model (Fig.2) that resulted from this study indicates that closeness can be understood and expressed in more than one way. As a result, it can serve multiple roles, some of these practical and others more emotional in nature. The model allows for flexibility, with context-dependent differing expressions of closeness and in turn differing expressions of masculinity. Whilst the influence of age and social factors on the study’s model remains currently uncertain, what appears to be much clearer is that white British mid-life professional men differ in the degree to which they adhere to ‘traditional’ masculinity. Evidence of variation in adherence, both within the study group, and within the same man (dependent on context) indicates that gender fluidity exists. Differing degrees of movement back and forth between practical and emotionally based close relational support, suggests that an element of choice exists about how this group of men express their masculinity.

All of the men seem to be aware of a practical inter-male closeness; one based more on shared activities, than shared emotions. The former seems to resonate with a ‘male voice’ of closeness (Twohey & Ewing, 1995), and whilst different to emotional closeness, seems of equal, if not greater importance to some of the men interviewed. For this study, exposure to other men behaving in an emotionally expressive way within the context of men’s group therapy seems to have facilitated a movement or fluidity from left to right of the model. In the absence of participation in men’s therapeutic groups, other men in a man’s social world can model alternative or non-‘traditional’ behaviour within the context of inter-male friendships. This potentially
broadens the choice of relational coping strategies available to men at times of distress, hence could be viewed as a form of preventative mental health care.

At present the link between men’s individual concepts of closeness and their coping behaviour at times of distress is a tentative one. Further research that explores this link further could provide greater evidence for using concepts of closeness as a guide to more effectively tapering social and professional support for individual men. Since the model’s transitional zone seems to represent a state of psychological struggle or crisis, it would be of interest to explore this area of the model further. Not only is more evidence required to support its existence, but also the factors that facilitate movement in either direction out of it. Finally, whilst the men positioned on the left side of the model, all seem to be high functioning and keen to present themselves as emotionally invulnerable, a question for further qualitative research would be to explore the concept of a ‘protective buffer’ and how well previously high functioning men cope in the event of professional and/or relational loss.

**Psychotherapeutic implications of study’s findings**

The study’s data tentatively links individual men’s descriptions of relational closeness to their individual coping strategies at times of personal distress. With this link in mind, knowledge of what closeness predominantly means to a man could provide valuable insight as to how best attune social and professional support to him at times when he is experiencing distress. Whilst this link requires validation through further research, its potential existence draws attention away from the very general concept of ‘social support’, further towards the existence of a spectrum of relational support.

Standard measures of psychological health (Appendix J) used both by General Practitioners (GPs) and mental health professionals, can provide an abundance of useful information relatively quickly. However, these measures tend to be non-gender specific and predominantly involve numerically graded responses that correspond to frequency or levels of severity. As a result, very little ‘own word’ experiential information is elicited. Following on from suggestions made in the author’s IPA study (Appendix C), a self-report section (Appendix Ki) reflecting on close experiences could illuminate how a man understands closeness and allow him to be positioned on an adapted version of this study’s model (Appendix Kii). The model allows for more than one position to be taken, and a process of constant checking back by an assessor
would help ensure that the positions recorded accurately correspond with each man’s ‘own word’ account. In busy public service settings, there are invariably time constraints to assessments hence responses would need to be both time and space-limited.

A next step would involve reflecting on whether understandings or concepts of closeness correspond with a man’s preferred coping style; whether it is predominantly practical in nature, emotionally based or a combination of the two. Whilst further research is required to validate the inclusion of these qualitative measures into an assessment, a more individualised approach could enable each man’s ‘voice’ to be more effectively heard.
References


Appendix A: Criteria for submission to the Counselling Psychology Review

Information for contributors

1. **Length:** Papers should normally be no more than 5,000 words (including abstract, reference list, tables and figures).

2. **Manuscript requirements:**

   The separate **cover page** should be completed. Contact details will be published if the paper is accepted.

   Apart from the cover page, the document should be free of information identifying the author(s).

   Authors should follow the Society’s guidelines for the use of non-sexist language and all references must be presented in the Society’s style, which is similar to APA style. For an electronic copy of the Society’s Style Guide, go to the Publications page of [www.bps.org.uk](http://www.bps.org.uk) and then click on Policy and guidelines/General guidelines and policy documents and choose Society Editorial Style Guide from the list of documents).

   A structured abstract of up to 250 words should be included with the headings: Background/Aims/Objectives, Methodology/Methods, Results/Findings, Discussion/Conclusions. Review articles should use these headings: Purpose, Methods, Results/Findings, Discussion/Conclusions.

   Approximately five keywords should be provided for each paper.

   Authors are responsible for acquiring written permission to publish lengthy quotations, illustrations, etc., for which they do not own copyright.

   Graphs, diagrams, etc., must have titles - these should not be part of the image.

   Submissions should be sent as email attachments. Word document attachments should be saved under an abbreviated title of your submission. Include no author names in the title. Please add ‘CPR Submission’ in the email subject bar. Please expect an email acknowledgment of your submission.

   Please make all changes after review using Track Changes and return them to the Edit

Appendix B. Literature Review (Research Portfolio, p.5)

Appendix C. IPA study (Research Portfolio, p.37)
Appendix D: Ethical approval (with study’s original title)

Faculty of Arts and Human Sciences: Ethics Committee

Chair’s Action

Proposal Ref: 1130-PSY-15
Name of Student/Trainee: KATE HALLIWELL
Title of Project: Moving towards an understanding of the professional mid-life male

Supervisor: Linda Morison

Date of submission: 30th June 2015
Date of confirmation email: 14th July 2015

The above Research Project has been re-submitted to the FAHS Ethics Committee and has received a favourable ethical opinion from the Faculty of Arts and Human Sciences Ethics Committee with minor conditions. Confirmation has been received that the conditions stipulated after ethical review have now been addressed and compliance with these conditions has been documented.

The final list of revised documents reviewed by the Committee is as follows:
Protocol Cover sheet
Summary of the project
Detailed protocol for the project
Participant Information sheet
Consent Form

This documentation should be retained by the student/trainee in case this project is audited by the Faculty Ethics Committee.

Please note:
Signed and Dated: _________________

Professor Bertram Opitz Chair
If there are any significant changes to your proposal which require further scrutiny, please contact the Faculty Ethics Committee before proceeding with your Project.
Appendix E i: Study’s introductory e-mail

Dear potential participant,
My name is Kate Halliwell and I am a final year trainee counselling psychologist enrolled in a Doctorate of Psychology at the University of Surrey. The Doctorate involves conducting a piece of original research and the participants of interest in my study are *professional men aged between 40-55 who are not working as counsellors or psychotherapists nor engaged in any personal counselling or psychotherapy. More detailed information about participation is within the attached Participation Information Sheet. My research proposal has received ethical approval from the University of Surrey's Faculty of Arts and Human Sciences Ethics Committee and therefore will adhere to strict guidelines concerning participant confidentiality. Participation should take no longer than an hour and I can meet you at a venue that is most convenient for you, either your home or workplace location. If you would like to participate could you please respond to this e-mail and let me know your availability between August and September 2015.
Thank you very much for considering participation.

Kate Halliwell  MBPsS

Trainee counselling psychologist (Final year)
University of Surrey
k.halliwell@surrey.ac.uk

*Professional: this term denotes knowledge, skill and experience in a specific job or activity and therefore encompasses a wide range of occupations
Participant Information Sheet – July-October 2015
You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide to participate it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please contact the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

What is the purpose of this study? This study is about how people experience their social networks and research information will be acquired by individually asking participants about their different social relationships. These relationships include those with a partner, family, friends, and work colleagues. Participation involves one-to-one audio-recorded interviews between July and mid-September 2015 at either a participant’s own home or their workplace. Interviews will last no longer than 45 minutes with total participation time of 60 minutes. The study is particularly interested in close social bonds therefore it is possible that the interview’s emotional line of engagement might inadvertently trigger some difficult emotions. If this does occur, the interview can be paused at any time or halted completely and the researcher will signpost participants towards the following websites: www.mensmindsmatter.com and www.mind.org.uk for further information and support.

Why have I been invited to take part in this study? You have been asked to participate because this study is specifically about the social experiences of men aged between 40-55 engaged in professional occupations. This is a demographic currently under-explored in psychological research and therefore participation in this original piece of research will contribute to a richer understanding of men’s relational experiences and men’s mental health in general.

Do I have to take part? It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and you will then be asked to sign a consent form agreeing to take part. If you decide to take part you can still change your mind and withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. A decision to withdraw at any time, or a decision not to take part, will not affect you in any way.

Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential? Yes. It will not be possible to identify you from any of the collected material and data will be securely stored in accordance with the Data Protection Act (1998). Interviews will be recorded on the principal researcher’s mobile digital recorder and then directly transferred to an encrypted data stick. Only the principal researcher conducting the interview will listen to the recording. In line with Grounded Theory’s immersive approach to data analysis, the audio-file will be listened to repeatedly for the purpose of transcription and memo writing, and within a 4-week period it will be deleted from the encrypted data stick. The interview transcripts will only be read by the principal researcher and her supervisor. Interview extracts will be included in the results section of the final research report, but will be completely anonymised so that those reading the research will not know who has contributed to it. Anonymised interview transcripts will be securely retained by the University of Surrey for a maximum of 10 years. If the data is to be published, it will be securely stored in accordance with the data retention requests of the publishing journal.

Who should I contact for further information? If you have any further enquiries about this study or would like to make any comments or complaints about the research process please contact the principal researcher *Kate Halliwell directly: k.halliwell@surrey.ac.uk or my research supervisor, Dr Linda Morison: l.morison@surrey.ac.uk

This copy is for you to keep. If you decide to participate, you will also be given a copy of the signed consent form to keep. Thank you for considering participation in this study.
Appendix F: Participant Consent Form

Consent Form – June-October 2015

I have read and understood the Information Sheet provided. I have been given a full explanation by the researcher of the nature, purpose, location and likely duration of the study, and of what I will be expected to do. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions on all aspects of the study and have understood the advice and information given as a result.

I understand that all personal data relating to volunteers is held and processed in the strictest confidence, and in accordance with the Data Protection Act (1998). I agree that I will not seek to restrict the use of the results of the study on the understanding that my anonymity is preserved.

I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time without needing to justify my decision and without prejudice.

I confirm that I have read and understood the above and freely consent to participating in this study. I have been given adequate time to consider my participation and agree to comply with the instructions and restrictions of the study.

Name of participant (BLOCK CAPITALS) ............................................................

Signed ............................................

Date ...........................................

Name of researcher taking consent (BLOCK CAPITALS) ................................................

Signed ............................................

Date ............................................
Appendix G (i)

First interview schedule: Questions that guided the first interview with Nigel (P1)

Q 1-3: Building rapport and gaining general information about his social network

1) Could you just tell me a little bit about yourself?
   *From my previous study, an expectation that this question would elicit factual responses including: age, relationship status, number and age of children (if any), job and home location.*

2) You’ve mentioned that you have a partner. Could you tell me about them?

3) And you’ve also mentioned …. ? How do you tend to spend your time with …?
   ... and with …? Etc.

*Q 2 & 3 were a way of gradually mapping out people in the man’s social world and getting some idea of the nature of these social interactions.*

Q 4: Answering the main research question.

4) Out of all the people you have mentioned, who do consider yourself to be close to?
   *Further prompts: You mentioned close? Could you say more?*

   *Eliciting an understanding of relational closeness was a way of exploring the presence, if any, of emotional closeness within any of the previously mentioned social relationships.*

Q5 & 6: An understanding of what tends to happen when he is distressed and are there any life-stage specific concerns?

5) And finally, could you tell me what you tend do at times of difficulty? Is there anything about this life-stage that has become a concern or anxiety?

6) What would you tend to find helpful?
   *Acquire an understanding of what he tends to do during challenging times.*
Appendix G (ii)

Second interview schedule: Questions that guided the second interview with Edward (P2)

Q 1-3: Building rapport and gaining general information about his social network

Starting with present everyday contact: partner, family, friends, work colleagues and then stepping back to past friendships. Whilst predominantly chronologically responded to, the order was very much led by how each person’s name arose within the course of the research conversation. The time given to these questions was reduced in comparison to the first interview in order to move more swiftly to the main research question.

Q 4: Answering the main research question.

4) (a) Out of all the people you have mentioned, who do consider yourself to be close to?
Further prompts: a ‘go to’ person/ someone you feel a rapport with … and could you tell me a bit about that friendship?

(b) In terms of spending time together, what tends to happen?
Cf. first interview, this was a way of checking back about nature of self-described ‘close’ friendships. Do they tend to revolve around ‘doing’ something?

Q5: An understanding of what tends to happen when he is distressed

5) And finally, could you tell me what you tend do at times of difficulty/when something really challenging happens?
Potential response: What kind of problem?
Potential prompt: Something that might stay on your mind/keep you up at night.
Potential prompts in place since initial participant struggled with this question.

6) What would you tend to find helpful?
Appendix G (iii)

Questions that guided subsequent interviews (P3-P6)

Q 1-3: Building rapport and gaining general information about his social network.

*Time given to these questions was reduced in comparison to the first interview in order to move more swiftly to the main research question.*

Q 4: Answering the main research question.

4) a. You’ve mentioned a number of people. Would you be able to give an example of someone you felt was a close friend, a ‘go to’ person, and tell me a bit about that friendship?

b. In terms of spending time together, it sounds quite….

*Checking back about nature of self-described ‘close’ friendships, are they practical or more emotionally based?*

Q5: An understanding of what tends to happen when he is distressed.

5) And finally, could you tell me what you tend do at times of difficulty/when something really challenging happens?

Potential response: What kind of problem?
Potential prompt: Something that might stay on your mind/keep you up at night.
*Potential prompts in place since initial participant struggled with this question.*

6) You mentioned that you might talk to …., but that you tend to also…

What do you find most helpful?

*Acknowledging that some talking occurs, but also checking back as to whether other things are happening and exploring what is most familiar/helpful.*

Appendix H: Memo notes (Omitted to preserve confidentiality)
Appendix I: Extract from anonymised interview transcript

[P3 Edward: L197-244]

P2: Um Well I think if you, you know it’s a bit of a cliché but if I went out for as I frequently do a 3 hour cycle with my mates and I come back and Ellen goes: “So how’s Bob doing and what’s going on in Mike’s life?” I quite comfortably go: “I don’t really know.” “What do you talk about?” Well we probably talk for a good chunk of that but it’s ….
R: Something different? This is really interesting.
P2: Yeah because you’re talking about, you’re probably do some of the blokey stuff. You talk about sport, we inevitably will talk about, I don’t know, the kids have just had, with the guys I go cycling with the kids have exam results [Family stuff?] we talk about that but quite often that’s more maybe brief I would imagine and maybe if Ellen’s had the same conversation with the wives she’d probably know a little bit more [Yeah] but then in fact maybe that’s the way we’re wired, but I don’t see yeah we just communicate different, blokes, definitely.
R: Yeah, well yes and no, because you did mention that you would talk um to your wife, so there’s a sense that you do but there’s also a sense of something else happening as well maybe within an all-male environment?
P2: Yeah, I just it’s probably more um superficial, blokey whatever you want to call it but it it’s on one level, but it isn’t …
R: Yeah, because it seems to be quite positive as well. [Yeah] There’s something maybe about, I don’t know, maybe I’ve got this wrong it seems quite distracting, don’t know about distracting, but it seems there’s something quite light about it [Yeah] It seems quite light.
P2: That’s probably a good way of describing it.
R: You’re doing the exercise and there’s an interaction around an activity and it doesn’t sound particularly heavy.
P2: No, and I would say it’s probably because you know, work is great fun but work can be quite heavy. [Yeah] You know that’s fine there’s a buzz in that as well but there’s also a desire, probably for activities that are therapeutic. If I’m not going out it will probably be cutting the grass or cooking a meal for everyone you know maybe you’re cooking a meal and listening to music and I don’t know my daughter might come in and put some music on and have a little bit of, you know, you put that one on and I’ll put this on and have that so …
R: That busy kind of family life, a lot going on. So in a sense that kind of answers the question about if something does go wrong, as life does, it seems that there are things in place that you do? Maybe without really consciously …
P2: Yes absolutely.
R: Um I’m just wondering because thinking of social networks, you’ve identified Ellen your wife, as the kind of, if I could mention it as ‘go to’ you know, as the primary ‘go to’, and after her did you mention your siblings, family?
P2: It depends on … I’ve got a brother and I’m very close to him, um, you know and then lots of mates, it depends on, I know it sounds silly but [no it doesn’t] It depends upon what’s happening in a social circle, or if Brian I was just talking about was made redundant by his company, this is more of the social circle you would talk to. He needed some help with **** so then you talk to different people to help him.
R: So you’d do something quite practical to help? [Yeah] That is quite practical. [Yeah, absolutely] You said absolutely, so it seemed quite important to do something, I know that sounds quite odd to say that.
P2: Yeah, well it’s back to the default. Well it depends on, on, I mean you’re always doing something. If someone’s ill, you’re trying to support, or if someone’s being made redundant or marriage, you know you kind of help to arrange something or do something or [Yeah] nice gesture whatever so, there’s probably a practical element in [Yeah, very helpful] in everything.
**Appendix J:** Example of a Minimum Data Sheet used in an Increasing Access To Psychological Therapies (IAPT) primary care psychological service. (Questions that specifically reference social situations are yellow highlighted).

### GAD-7

**Over the last 2 weeks, how likely are you to act on these thoughts (from 0=not at all to 10=will definitely act)?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>Several days</th>
<th>More than half the days</th>
<th>Nearly every day</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feeling nervous, anxious or on edge</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not being able to stop or control worrying</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worrying too much about different things</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trouble relaxing</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being so restless that it is hard to sit still</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becoming easily annoyed or irritable</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling afraid as if something awful might happen</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

GAD7 total score

### PHQ-9

**Over the last 2 weeks, how often have you been bothered by any of the following problems?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>Several days</th>
<th>More than half the days</th>
<th>Nearly every day</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Little interest or pleasure in doing things</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling down, depressed, or hopeless</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trouble falling or staying asleep, or sleeping too much</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling tired or having little energy</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor appetite or overeating</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling bad about yourself — or that you are a failure or have let yourself or your family down</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trouble concentrating on things, such as reading the newspaper or watching television</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moving or speaking so slowly that other people could have noticed? Or the opposite — being so fidgety or restless that you have been moving around a lot more than usual</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thoughts that you would be better off dead or of hurting yourself in some way</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

PHQ9 total score

If you ticked 1,2 or 3 to question 9, how likely are you to act on these thoughts (from 0=not at all to 10=will definitely act)?
## IAPT Phobia Scales:

Choose a number from the scale below to show how much you would avoid each of the situations or objects listed below. Then write the number in the box opposite the situation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>Never avoid it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Slightly avoid it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Definitely avoid it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Markedly avoid it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Always avoid it</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**A17** Social situations due to a fear of being embarrassed or making a fool of myself

**A18** Certain situations because of a fear of having a panic attack or other distressing symptoms (such as loss of bladder control, vomiting or dizziness)

**A19** Certain situations because of a fear of particular objects or activities (such as animals, heights, seeing blood, being in confined spaces, driving or flying).

## Work and Social Adjustment

People's problems sometimes affect their ability to do certain day-to-day tasks in their lives. To rate your problems look at each section and determine on the scale provided how much your problem impairs your ability to carry out the activity.

1. **WORK** - if you are retired or choose not to have a job for reasons unrelated to your problem, please tick N/A (not applicable)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>Not at all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Slightly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Definitely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Markedly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Very severely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>I cannot work</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. **HOME MANAGEMENT** – Cleaning, tidying, shopping, cooking, looking after home/children, paying bills etc

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>Not at all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Slightly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Definitely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Markedly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Very severely</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. **SOCIAL LEISURE ACTIVITIES** - With other people, e.g. parties, pubs, outings, entertaining etc.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>Not at all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Slightly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Definitely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Markedly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Very severely</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. **PRIVATE LEISURE ACTIVITIES** – Done alone, e.g. reading, gardening, sewing, hobbies, walking etc.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>Not at all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Slightly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Definitely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Markedly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Very severely</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. **FAMILY AND RELATIONSHIPS** – Form and maintain close relationships with others including the people that I live with

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>Not at all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Slightly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Definitely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Markedly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Very severely</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

W&SAS total score
**Appendix Ki:** Table on ‘close others’ for the client to complete.

*Please think about all the people in your life (family, friends, work colleagues etc.) and then complete the following questions. Each question can have more than one answer, and you can use as many or as few of your own words as the space or 5-10 minutes allows.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who do you feel close to?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is it about this relationship that makes it feel close?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you tend to do when feeling very unhappy/distressed?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix Kii: Adapted version of Fig.2: completed in collaboration with the client

Responses to the question: *What is it about this relationship that makes it feel close?*

This identifies a position on the ‘concepts of closeness’ spectrum. The model allows for more than one concept, though one might predominate.

Responses to the question: *What do you tend to do when feeling very unhappy/distressed?*

This identifies a position on the spectrum of coping strategies at times of distress. The model allows for more than one coping strategy, though one might predominate.

Prior to an assessor marking a position or positions, a checking back process occurs with the client.

![Diagram of concepts of closeness and coping strategies](image_url)